

**GERO MANNELLA**

**A skeleton from the closet  
(but not enough skeleton)**

**Novel**

Humorous 70%

Horror 20%

Acrylic 10%

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## LOGLINE

Forgot your secret lover dead in your closet? Learn how to make his body disappear without your husband knowing.

## SYNOPSIS

While **Jessica** is having sex with a casual lover, she hears her husband **Horace** coming. She runs to him and takes him outside to give her lover a chance to escape. Instead, he hides in the closet, gets stuck by the faulty lock, and dies of asphyxiation.

That night **Bozo**, while burglarizing her apartment, is overwhelmed by the man's naked body, collapsing to the floor unconscious. The noise wakes Jessica, in shock. She doesn't want Horace to know. So, before he wakes up, she asks her friend **Daria** and her boyfriend **Walter**, for help in removing bodies. They leave Bozo in a public park, and Walter takes on the task of throwing the corpse into the river. But, being the young scion of a well-known surgeon and himself a pathology student, he doesn't want to miss the opportunity of a body to dissect in his private clinic.

Horace is an abstract artist, who survives by drawing Picasso-style police sketches. He therefore has an adversarial relationship with inspector **Brumby**, who prefers the figurative style. He's also working on the statue to the Unknown Policeman, a commission of the Police Headquarters.

After last embarrassing sketch the inspector finally fires him on the spot.

Frustrated, in anger he destroys the statue, collects its rubble in a sack, and throws it off the bridge over the river. But he's fined by a Policeman.

From that same bridge Walter had thrown a sack with the human remains.

After the shock, Jessica must also fend off attempts to blackmail from Bozo, who is aware of her secret. As she discusses this with Daria in a confidential place, the riverbank, they make the macabre discovery: the severed head of her dead lover. Horrified, they run away, mad as hell at Walter.

Brumby is an eccentric inspector, who prefers solving crossword puzzles rather than investigative cases, has no deductive logic and cannot stand the sight of blood.

For him the inspection on the found head is a torture, and he gladly outsources it to his trusty assistant **Pussett**, who has a strong stomach.

The latter knows the chief's weakness, how much it repulses him bringing that macabre find to Police Headquarters. Thus, he asks his permission to take it home under formalin, being a serial collector.

Horace is not a lucky man. In fact, from the human remains and the fine for dumping the sack, he is suspected of murder, much to the delight of Brumby.

But Bozo is not a lucky man either. In fact, in a new night raid he goes to steal right into Pussett's house, finds the head under glass, faints again, and is arrested.

In jail Horace and Bozo tell each other their misfortunes, so the artist has the evidence to be released, while Jessica, Daria and Walter are investigated.

After the head is brought back, questioned in Brumby's office, the friends take advantage of his mental fogginess, while confuses crossword puzzle definitions with the investigations report, not to mention the fascination that the winking Jessica exerts on him and Pussett.

Thus, the friends get away with house arrests, while a sheet with Jessica's phone number is disputed between the two inquisitors. Finally, they choose head or tail coin toss. Brumby chooses tails. The coin flies and lands in a large handbag. Pussett pulls it out. Head! But that's not the coin, it's the other head. To Brumby's terror.

## Chapter 1 – The Crime

Let's put it this way. It's night, about three o'clock, and a box for human beings stands silhouetted against its surroundings, wrapped in something intangible that could be called mist if we were in the countryside, or aerosol if we floated in the stratosphere. But more properly we'll call it smog - being an industrial suburb. At the foot of the box, which appears gray and square in the half-moon light, there are other scattered boxes for humans: small, metallic, and on wheels, finally still and silent at this hour.

From the big box, that you use to call condominium to evoke an ideal community, except for each other's stabbing for a parking space or a dripping wet sheet, at this time you can hear creaks and minor buzzings, a tacit revolt of building materials. And you can also spot cracks on the facade, crow's feet on the balconies' sides, hanging plasters ready for the great leap, as if they were bungee jumping.

The bravest in the end succeed, and the next day you can find them lounging in plastic poses on the bonnets of the metal boxes, surrounded by twin-colored barriers and insurance agents.

At this moment, however, the cracks on the big box may also have another origin. His name is Bozo. He's

informally called *cat burglar*. Pale, about thirty-five, in T-shirt and jeans, his hand with swollen veins is wielding a picklock. He has forced the security door, shaking the frame just enough and with the least damage. Lifting the brass knob, he found the right chink to slip inside and prick up his ears.

Silence: the perfect burglary. No one has heard noises, most especially those directly involved, the occupants of the apartment.

They're lying in the bedroom, as is customary at this hour, back-to-back, the woman in fetal position, the man with his arms crossed and stretched up over his head, like San Sebastian the martyr, but undrilled by arrows. The woman inhales silently. She has long brown hair, and appears opulent and curvy: a hottie, in the ordinary sense. The man is a bundle of nerves, unkempt beard and shaggy hair, regular features, and wavy lip by an intermittent snore. The front door nameplate, just lapped by some broken plaster, reads Ferendeles Horace - Durant Jessica. And for the registry office they are *Mr. and Mrs. Ferendeles*.

Bozo, it was said, after putting the picklock away and closing the door, throws a look around the environment, so dark at first as to be breathtaking, then barely in shadow, just enough to find shapes of furniture and the LED in standby of electronic devices, not howling, thank God.

He turns on the torch: at last, we can distinguish his expressions. He's tense, a few trickles of sweat, the

pulsating jugular, the cavernous orbits. He directs the cone of light on the walls and advances cautiously, flying over wallpaper and curtains, shelves, paintings and batik with unlikely colors. At first sight, we would call it minimalist modern furnishing with ethno-bastard inserts.

Our burglar, let's say, has other standards: his aesthetic pleasure reaches a climax with Caravaggio and the Renaissance painters. But unfortunately, museums' alarm systems are disheartening.

Anyway, the living room's impression of modesty, leads him to think the paintings are fakes. Better to focus on jewelry.

From the first drawer, he pulls out a pendant.

Has it a value or is it mere junk?

The doubt corrodes his aplomb as a professional burglar, and his forehead wrinkles. To clear up the doubt he has his usual method: bite the metal with the premolar. He does so with discretion, having smoothed the trinket, applying growing pressure with a grimace.

Sadly, without even giving him time to deceive himself, the bauble breaks as if it was a hazelnut. Disappointed, he spits out the remains and goes on.

Rummaging in another drawer, he finds a ring with stones. He bites with equal caution, but it shatters immediately. This time the fragments leaves his oral cavity with a mumble from the esophagus, typical of a carnivorous reptile of the Cretaceous period.

This looks a bad start, he realizes.

In these cases, you've to breathe deeply and take on a zen attitude.

On the table in front of the couch, he sees a sandwich.

Detachment and dignity, he reminds himself.

But he's hungry. He sniffs it, brings it to the mouth, sniffs it again and finally bites it vehemently.

But it's a fatal gluttony, for that thing turns out so hard and stale that a molar collapses. He sacrifices tooth and blood to the cause, and hisses a vehement "*Fuuuck!*", the first exclamation we perceive clearly. Then he mimes a punch to the jamb of a door, slams the snack on the ground and crushes it with his heel. So sad and uncomfortable seems sometimes the life of a professional burglar.

In the same box for humans, while flying outside the flat on the back of a horsefly, we arrive at a loft not far away, from where we hear moans in baritone and soprano. Soft lights are melted together with modern furniture Ikea style in a uniform ocher.

The naked bodies of Daria and Walter hook up and rub each other on her bed with brief moments of inertia. The girl is exuberant and voracious, pretty and sinuous in the right measure. The boy, handsome and well-shaped like a pole-vaulter, is currently exhausted and is prone neither to the jumps nor to the use of the pole. Daria is above him and pushes her breasts into his mouth.

"Mmm..."

"Hey, you're suffocating me! Can you hear me?!"



“Mmm...”

“Daria, enough! Let me breathe for a second! Air, air! I need some air!”

Walter extracts a breast from his mouth and starts fanning himself.

“What’s up? Don’t you love me anymore?”

“No, of course I do! The fact is that...”

“What?”

“...when I was a baby, I was nearly killed by one of them...”

“It’s called tit”, says the woman between annoyance and astonishment.

“Tit.”

“Killed? What do you mean?”

He starts staring blankly into space, the pose of one who is scraping mnemonic sediments.

“Suffocated by the milk?”

“No, I tied it round my neck. I wanted to hang myself...”

Daria retracts, as a presbyopic that want to stare at a mite.

“Seriously”, he continues, “I suffered from depression.”

“Come on! So young?”

“It’s hereditary. We’re all depressive maniacs in my family.”

She studies him while he exhibits the Saint Bernard dog’s languid eye.

“Uh? Your dad, the eminent surgeon?”

“So what? Depression doesn’t respect social position!”

No doubt, she thinks. But, evoking the image of a gallows and the harshness of a slipknot, something does not convince her.

"I know. Just a question... what kind of breast did your mother have?"

He breathes in deeply and accentuates the poignant expression, for the memory.

"They were long, baguette shaped, with some tattoos."

"What kind?"

"Nipples. Probably to sidetrack me."

Daria sighs, turns away from the mite and puts on a dressing gown. The ideal horsefly, bored by the suspended copulation, is about to take off. It takes a last ride around the light cone on the ceiling and then buzzes away from the window.

Daria reaches Walter with two drinks.

"Wanna drink to get over the shock?"

"Thank you. After I gotta go."

"You're leaving?"

"Tomorrow I've got a surgery trial. If I don't rest, I'll fall asleep with the scalpel in my hand."

She opens her eye wide with a teenager's emphasis.

"Come on, don't say you'll really cut!"

"I am specializing in pathology. Do you think it's so strange?"

Daria shakes her head.

"Brrr, it gives me the creeps! Just the idea of all that blood... I'd faint instantly".

"Nothing more exciting."

"Sicko!"

“You can’t understand, the human body is a universe to discover. If only I could have my very own cadaver...”

“Stop! Enough!”

Walter raises his hand in the air as if he’s cutting with an immaterial scalpel. To someone else, he could look like a man possessed by Toscanini<sup>1</sup>.

“How disgusting! Do you mean if I dropped down dead right now you would slice me open to explore from the inside?”

“Of course, not”, says the young gallant.

“That’s ok then...”

“I don’t have a scalpel with me.”

“Arsehole.”

Out of the big box the horsefly hovers clumsily through currents and rivers of moisture which will soon become dew. When it sees the moonlight casting its shadow on the PVC window glass, it remembers it is spineless and shelters inside the bedroom of Jessica and Horace.

In that room another light, the torch of Bozo, roams over the sleeping bodies. Beside the bed the man checks their regular breathing, then pulls out a narcotic spray. With consummate gesture he presses the top of the can.

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<sup>1</sup> **Arturo Toscanini** (1867 – 1957) was an Italian conductor. He was one of the most acclaimed musicians of the late 19th and of the 20th century.

To his surprise, a white foam flows from the nozzle, and he realizes that asking his wife to prepare the burglary kit is something to avoid in the future.

“Holy shit, what else?” he growls, as he gently removes the shaving foam from the sleeper’s cheek.

As he does so, another thought assails him: what did he use for shaving this morning then? The sticky feeling of something sweetish on his face and a recent escort of midges enlightens him. It was spray cream.

“So, I guess my lady has sprinkled the narcotic in the evening coffee, instead of cream”, he grins maliciously. “Oh well, she also wanted to wait for me, awake.”

He turns off the torch as there’s enough light.

The spouses are lost in the oblivion of REM sleep, the only good news since he crossed the threshold. He rummages in the drawers, throws away lingerie and underwear, finds a couple of earrings and, out of habit, bites them on the aching side.

The scream of pain is suppressed in the silent grimace of a melancholic Batman’s Joker. Then he tries on the opposite side: the earrings pass the test and he puts them in his pocket.

From another drawer he pulls out a dildo. He tries to bite it in vain, then polishes it and finally puts it admiringly in his backpack.

It seems like the beginning of a miraculous catch.

So now, he moves to the big target: the closet. Opening the side door releases only a stench of starch and sweat. Too dark, but the torch lends a helping

hand, so revealing the secret life of plaid shirts and sleeveless vests.

Then he moves to the locked central door.

“This is the right place, I have a sixth sense. If not, why lock it?”

He opens it, the torch shines on the interior and...

Suddenly Bozo’s heart accelerates like the ticking of a time bomb.

In the dimness a stiff corpse, huge and transfigured, stands there, then starts staggering from the open cabinet. He’s naked among a flourish of feminine dresses, rugged, in his thirties, long hair, unshaven, priapic erection, eyes wide open, foaming at the mouth, his hands contracted like a claw as if, locked inside, he has been scratching the door until exhausted and suffocated.

Bozo instantly bleaches, eyes and mouth open, withdraws and turns his back. He starts to walk away, but he is not quick, as if something telluric brakes his movements. The corpse instead starts to bob like a horny Frankenstein monster, and falls heavily on the fugitive’s back.

“*Madre de Dios!*” he hisses as if it were a rugby tackle.

That Spanish-speaking exclamation is a literary convention taken by Zorro, we suppose. In truth, Bozo comes out with something censurable, ruminated through clenched teeth. With the heavy burden on his rump, he stirs all fours trying to slip away from the man who grabs him from behind unaware.

The noise wakes up Horace for a moment. He is groggy, his consciousness is primordial, unable to grasp the world around him. Just one eye wanders over the Chinese shadows of the two men projecting on the wall an apparent homosexual digression. Bozo is motionless, rigid and reluctant about that passive role, eyes fixed on the sleeping man, and a copious sweat dropping from his forehead.

After some seconds Horace imputes the scene to the weirdness of dreams, closes his eyelids, and turns back to sleep with a grunt. At last, the thief is free to growl a madrigal of *Madre de Dios*.

Then he drags himself under the ballast for a few steps, tries to roll away, like a soldier in camouflage hunted by the enemy. But he's clumsy, frightened and tired. As he turns, he hits a marble pedestal on which a small sculpture with uncertain human traits stands. The statue wobbles and falls to the ground in a thud. Then everything calms down.

The thief, unconscious from the impact on his head, lies belly up crowned with shards. By his side the young Frankenstein now looks like a Pompeian man, extinct in 79 A.D. due to an eruption on the skin.

But the noises of the collapse finally wake Jessica, who raises her torso like a sleepwalker and looks around.

And her heart is going "*thump thump, ba boom*".

(Yeah, she suffers from cardiomyopathy).

## Chapter 2 – The Relief

Walter and Daria return to their urogenital skirmishes, now she with her breasts encased in suitable accommodation (push-up, size DD, more or less).

“What do you say? Is this better?”

“Mmm...”

“Or would you rather explore me with a scalpel?”

“Mmm... no, well, is fine like this” he mutters. But phonetics is not the primary function of the tongue in that moment.

“But”, a flash of lightning shakes and stops him for a moment, “we should try it on the operating table sometime. It would be exciting.”

“Ah, yes, daddy’s private clinic. Forget it, not even dead.”

“On the contrary, just in that case...” he corrects her.

In response, the girl’s hand slips between his testicles squeezing just enough to let him withdraw both the proposal and his floppy friend.

Suddenly a knock at the door. Their eyes question each other. Daria puts on the dressing gown, tiptoes to the door, peers through the peephole and hurries to open. Jessica, her constant friend, is there, incredulous, upset and weeping.

“Jessica! What’s happened?”

She's staring into space, grasping the thief's torch as if she needs something to cling to, but certainly in that moment not knowing its use. If she had Kermit the Frog in her hand, she probably wouldn't feel the difference.

"Help me, please! It's a tragedy!"

Jessica is not one of those melodramatic girls with a tendency to exaggerate. If she's trembling and says 'tragedy' then it's serious, thinks Daria as she comforts her and brings her into the house.

Her brain seems to short-circuit, her eyes wander restless, inconsistent, dazzled by the light. When she sees Walter approaching, she stiffens beyond measure. Then, she feels that the immaterial shield that protected her collapses. She realizes she is defenseless, like a snail without a shell, a hermit crab evicted.

"Help me, please! It's a tragedy!"

"Calm down, Jessica! Calm down! What's happened?!"

"What am I to do? My God, what can I do?!" she turns her absent gaze on her friend, on the guy, and still on the empty space, but more on the latter. Daria shakes her by the shoulders.

"Jessica, let me understand..."

"There's a dead man in my apartment, maybe two."

She announces it calmly, as if under hypnosis.

"Sweet Jesus!"

Now it is Daria who is under shock.



Her first thought had been of Jessica busted in abusive sex stories, given her friend's habits, and Horace's existential distraction.

"Jessica ... are you sure?"

She knew it was a stupid question. But how could you have ready words when a tingling of fear is climbing up your scalp?

"Did you test his wrist, the jugular?" intervenes Walter, shaken, but always clinician.

"I haven't touched them. But one is bleached, dead. I do not..."

Then she collapses again on her girlfriend, who hugs her. Walter arches an eyebrow, concerned, even heartfelt. But instinctively he chases the surgical avatar just born within him.

As if in a dream, he projects a white bed with a white corpse onto the white wall. In a white morgue too, for chromatic consistency.

He doesn't follow the woman's whole confused story, but as he listens her repeating the word 'dead', his hand contracts, as if grabbing a scalpel in the void.

The girls notice his repeated spasm. To justify the gesture, he clings to Jessica's pulse. She looks at him with pleading eyes, while he hesitates.

"And now? What do I do? What do I say?"

He has no idea. He acted instinctively, feels an inner '*poof!*', the surgical hologram fading, and the need to explain that grip.

“Come on, Jessica”, he says vaguely, “we're here to help you...”

As he says that, he releases her wrist and feels an uneasy sensation, as when you sign a blank cheque.

Daria gives her a glass of water. Jessica swallows it in one gulp. Then she inhales deeply, using the back of her hand to wipe her eyes, takes the couple's hands and tightens them with an exhausted smile.

“Thank you, God bless you.”

They look at each other clumsily.

Walter, *en passant*, takes a look at Jessica's neckline. He assesses its content and swallows with difficulty, as if suffocating from a fruit's core, perhaps the Adam's apple itself.

A few minutes to get dressed. Then the three of them pass over the debris at the entrance and enter the house of crime. They move stealthily, welcomed by the absolute silence announcing two stalled myocardia, and the other in energy-saving mode.

“Please be careful where you put your feet. If Horace wakes up, I'm done for” Jessica hisses entering the living room.

The torchlight reveals the abstract paintings on the walls.

“What are these doodles supposed to be?” Walter asks spontaneously, evidently ignorant of any deconstruction other than organic.

“Doodles? If Horace heard you, he'd poke your eyes out with his paint brush” Daria warns him.

The boy nods and promises equanimity and discretion for the sequel, while his right hand is still trying to wield a scalpel in the air.

But when, in the middle of the room, he slams his forehead against something halfway between a tapir and a deflated bagpipe, he can't curb the recriminations.

"What the fuck... What is this abortion?"

This time Daria puts aside her equanimity, shines the torch and takes a position:

"Horrendous! What does it represent?"

Jessica doesn't even turn around, she knows it by heart. When she crosses the room, she looks at the ceiling.

"A job for the Police district, it's the monument to the Unknown Policeman. The inauguration is coming up soon."

"Police district? Are you joking?" Walter smiles.

"No. Horace works part-time for them: he draws sketches."

"Okay, but... have the policemen already seen this... ahem... sculpture?"

"No, it'll be a surprise."

"Oh, oh! Then call me for the unveiling. I don't want to miss the show."

Daria tries to fulminate Walter with her gaze, but in the dark her eye's limbo twitches in vain.

The three friends proceed cautiously, bypassing the remains of the granite sandwich.

Entering the bedroom they find a glacial atmosphere, of lethal origin, and smelly, of fecal origin.

“What a stench! Do you have rotten eggs in your pockets?” Walter asks.

“Horace suffers from flatulence” Jessica says.

“An advanced stage” he declares like a perfume connoisseur. “Have you ever tried infusions of fennel?”

The two women look at him as you do with an alien, and draw his attention instead to the two lifeless bodies.

Infusions of fennel, ah well!

The bodies are there, in front of the closet.

Daria brings a hand to her mouth. Jessica turns toward Horace sleeping. Walter turns knees and feels the burglar’s jugular.

“This one’s alive. He’s only knocked out by the blow.”

“He’s a fucking thief” Daria announces, bent over his body.

She shows the earrings sprouting from his pocket.

Then Walter switches to the other man.

“This one’s dead.”

The girls hold on tight, mute.

“If we were in the operating room, I would open him and I could tell you what...”

“Forget it” Daria stops him.

*Dead.* At first you don't believe it. But, no matter how far it is from our common feeling, human nature takes so short a time to get used to such things, that the

surges of blood in the temples run out of pressure in a heartbeat. Just like the goose bumps.

And this would be the argument for an ethical excursion, if we were at a congress of moral philosophy, and not here and now in this box for humans.

Therefore, if the word *dead* at Daria's home sounded far-fetched and shocking, now that you stand before death, you simply accept it, ignoring the mystery of our final destination.

Instead, you focus on the body's secondary details: the posture, the expression, the length of the hair, the length of the penis.

"Look! He has a hard on! How is it possible?" Daria asks, barely suppressing a scream.

"Rigor mortis" Walter replies academically.

The girl turns to Jessica, an eye on the erection.

"You were with it? ... ahem... him?"

"No, with the burglar" she answers sarcastic.

"Did you know him long?"

"No, I only know his name. It was the first time we had met here. Horace was supposed to come home late..."

On that suspended sentence, her mood collapses again, despite the self-control training she did with her friend before going there. Her voice chokes, her hands move inconsistently, like somebody who's going to drown or is skating on ice for the first time, or perhaps both (if for example you are on Lake Baikal in

October, with fresh ice sheets that break under your feet).

Jessica becomes gloomy and moans in low voice.

“We were here. When we heard Horace come in, I told him to go out to the balcony! But he chose to hide here. I couldn’t imagine it!” she says with strangled voice, pointing to the closet.

“Classic situation” Walter says staring at the corpse “he shows signs of suffocation.”

“And who locked him in?” her friend asks.

“Nobody. You can’t open the door from inside.”

Jessica shuts her eyes, clenches her fists, clutching them to her temples.

“No, no, I can’t believe it! Christ, my head is bursting!”

Daria puffs impatiently, while Walter continues to stare at the dead man.

“I asked Horace to take a walk outside. I was sure he had escaped by the balcony.”

A glance at Horace, and Daria can’t refrain from the trivial question.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t tell him?”

“Daria, are you joking? Do you think telling Horace would bring him back to life?” she hisses resolutely in a burst of self-preservation.

Walter supports her.

“Shall we stop asking stupid questions? We’re here to help her, aren’t we?”

Daria stares at him with a hostile look.

“You’re suggesting to wake Horace up and tell him out of the blue: look, I have a lover, but he’s occasional,

don't worry. The problem is that he died. The other man is passed out, and I don't know who he is. But don't worry: he's just a thief.

Can you tell things like that to someone just as he wakes?"

Women shake their heads.

"... or should we bring him coffee first?"

"I have only decaf" says Jessica in a peak of frustration.

"Okay, let's all calm down" Daria agrees.

"The first thing is to make these bodies disappear before Horace wakes up."

"Where can we take them?" Jessica asks.

"In my car, for now" Walter proposes "but we gotta hurry, we're risking jail."

The three friends look mutely at each other in their complicity, shifting their gaze in sync to Horace's unperturbed face, like a mouse cursor on a screen.

Walter, the most enterprising, tries to click on a virtual button. The sleeper turns in response and scratches his forehead.

The girls look at him askance.

Daria stops his hands to prevent further clicks.

### Chapter 3 – The Inspector

That same night in a city park, in the feeble light of a nineteenth-century-style street lamp, a middle-aged man in a trench coat, tall and lanky, looks around, making sure he is not observed. Then he bends over a body lying on a nineteenth-century-style bench under a linden tree. The man lying down looks short, with a nineteenth-century-style shape too (and here we should ask ourselves what is a nineteenth century style), stocky, slightly younger, cerulean face, wrapped in a raincoat unbuttoned on his chest.

The tall man feels his wrist and brings it to his ear as if to hear the ticking, compresses the thumb on his jugular for half a minute, and finally holds a small mirror under his nostrils to see if he is still breathing. Suddenly the lying down man snorts and opens an eye. “Inspector, just in case, do you want to try it with a stethoscope?”

The speaking man’s name is Pussett, and he is the assistant of inspector Brumby, the lanky man described above.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve already made three checks. Aren’t they enough? With all due respect, inspector.”



“Pussett” the other puffs, “how long have you been working with me?”

“Inspector, if I remember well, about...”

“I don’t care, it was a rhetorical question. You should know by now that during the simulation everything is simple for me. As long as I do not see the blood...”

“I know, inspector” he stands up from the bench, “so please, let me take a look at the corpse. I have no stomach problems.”

But his boss is honest and duty-bound. His sensitivity to blood, a problem that induces instant vomiting attacks, sooner or later will be overcome. He just needs to go step by step, as the ancient king Mithridates had done with poison, taking it a little at a time. A drop today, a wound tomorrow, a massacre the day after.

Sure, it would be better to avoid that scarlet vision. But we know truculence is innate for Homo Sapiens, it’s in his genes, in his blood. Indeed.

“Did they say what was the cause of death?”

“Kalashnikov.”

“Then there is no hope.” He distorts his mouth.

“Okay, Pussett, it’s my turn. I’ll examine the stiff.”

So, they turn their eyes beyond the small park, to the ancient building that houses the corpse.

At this point we could imagine the flight of a pigeon that takes off from the two men, moves away from their heads, over the linden’s foliage, projects itself

from the park to the front of the palace, and finally lands on the flashing Police cars parked there.

A slow video shooting, a breathtaking sequence shot worthy of Kubrick, if the idyll hadn't been interrupted by a bad word growled by the inspector.

For at that moment, we see him bowing his head and wiping a handkerchief over his forehead.

"Pigeons' shit?" Pussett asks.

"Shitty pigeons" Brumby specifies.

Given the accident, we infer that for descriptive flights in Literature it is better to ask other birds, such as swallows or magpies.

Anyway, the two are soon on the place.

If you can, as you enter the palace, imagine a giant doorway with a coat of arms at the top and an indecipherable date on the granite base at the center of the threshold, and a sentinel who brings his hand to his cap, as you pass.

And then a vestibule dark at that hour, or perhaps in its very nature. And finally steep marble steps, art nouveau banisters, and on the doorstep a doormat with high and soft bristles, that you would like to caress, as if it was a dog.

Brumby's habit is to wipe his soles but, as he treads on the doormat, it snarls against him showing sharpened incisors.

"Attention, inspector! It bites."

"What the fuck!", our man exclaims, looking wrong at us, the narrating voice.

The hall already speaks of boundless finance, with its hand-decorated ceramic floor, the tapestries, and big baroque picture frames surrounding eighteenth century marine paintings.

"We only miss the armor with halberd and we'd be done", notes the assistant in a low voice.

A forensic technician in white gloves is bent over the outspread corpse on the floor, making his preliminary report. Brumby takes a look and flaunts familiarity, then turns discreetly to his attendant.

"Such luck, Pussett. Not even a drop of blood!"

"Strange. They spoke about a Kalashnikov... how did he die, otherwise?"

"He could have swallowed it, couldn't he?"

Brumby has read lot of curious things in the section "*Strange, but true*" of his favorite crossword magazine, *The Enigmatic Week*.

"Oh yeah, may happen, you know, like sword swallows. Probably it was poisonous, could be the paint they use: you know, it's full of lead."

The forensic technician turns for a moment to the inspector, looking at him as if he were a rare aquarium fish, before returning to his task.

"Inspector, can we turn it to the other side?"

"Sure, it's your job."

The body of the unfortunate rotates on the imaginary axle of the spine, like a kebab on a spindle.

But on that side, it's so riddled with bullet holes that the blood squirts with parabolic splash typical of the Trevi fountain.

Brumby's face is hit by a thousand vermilion sprays, so his sudden whitening is barely perceptible.

He stands back up, and takes a lost look at the technician, immaculate because out of range.

"Inspector, I don't understand... I swear he's been dead for quite a while. Perhaps his pacemaker still doesn't know".

The detective feigns nonchalance as long as he can, while evoking a catatonic Vincent Price<sup>2</sup> with blood mask to epitomize his wickedness. He disguises his discomfort, overflying that sense of sticky, that organic fluid so similar to a plastering varnish.

Then the room starts to revolve, without notice, from mere gravitational attraction, as if he were a dense body. And while turbulence threatens his esophagus, his limbs become too heavy to move.

"Inspector, you look bloody awful. How do you feel?" asks Pussett, beret in hand out of respect for the dead man.

The inspector's hands mime a curt assent, which admits no insinuations.

But a moment later, one hand goes to cover his mouth while the other searches his pocket in panic. The room spins, the view is blurred, the vomit has reached the terminus. There's little to do.

In desperation, he grabs Pussett's beret, turns his back and bows his head.

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<sup>2</sup> **Vincent Leonard Price Jr.** (1911 – 1993) was an American actor, known for his performances in horror films.

The assistant raises his eyebrows and sighs. He would pat the boss's arched back, but he knows he would hate him. Instead, he waits until he composes himself, shiny-eyed, a trickle of slime on his mouth, as he returns his loaded cap, concave in the center.

"Take it, Pussett, thanks. You have my permission not to wear it for the rest of this shift."

The poor man takes a look inside.

"Ahem... thanks, inspector."

Outside it is night, but not so dark. The lumps of suburbia lose their depth, color and perspective in the feeble streetlamp light, like comics drawn with cheap ink. As they cross the neighborhood by car, the boxes for humans stand out in homogeneous gray, pierced by a few small lights.

A more intense light comes from below at times, reminiscent of headlights on the cobblestones of older towns. It's the unstable glow of tire bonfires, revealing dizzy heels and fishnet stockings, ready for the next catch.

Walter is driving slowly. Jessica and Daria are on the back seat.

"Where are we going to leave them?" the latter asks.

"In different places" Walter prescribes, "the thief doesn't have to see the dead man, 'cause he could have strange ideas."

Jessica nods.

"Do you have any place in mind?"

“A park would be all right for him.”

“But... if he remembers? He could tell the Police...”

Jessica insinuates with cracked voice.

“I don’t think he’ll tell the Police he’s seen a dead body in the house he was ripping off.”

Daria’s objection silences any replies.

The car stops close to the bombardier pigeons’ park.

The three friends get out of the car, open the boot, lift the burglar, drag him, and lay him slumbering beneath the linden tree.

“He’s sleeping like a little angel” Daria notes, “but... look! He’s still got a hard-on!”

“Eh! You got a bee in your bonnet?!” her boyfriend blurts out as he’s catching his breath.

“Anyway, it was not him, it was the dead man.”

“True! How is it possible? Is the hard-on contagious?”

Daria asks.

“Not the erection, but the idiocy is! It’s time we stopped dating.”

The *‘idiot’*, mouthed by Daria’s lips, is inevitable.

“Idiot me? You’re the one who talks like an idiot! He was probably dreaming.”

Jessica thinks this is no time for fractures, and calms her down.

“Okay, as long as he forgets about this story and doesn’t bust our balls”

From the linden, we watch the three friends go back to the car, while Bozo is lying down in the grass with his eyes closed, under a leafy branch.

The car roars and crunches away. The thief raises his eyelids. His smile is arcane and allusive.

Lying in the grass, like a god Pan, he has been listening for some time, feigning unconsciousness. And a plan to take advantage of the situation is already making his mouth water (besides causing the above erection).

The parabola of his smile stretches for a while. Then, as the car roar weakens, his grin fades under a brownish stamp dropped from above.

“Pigeons’ shit” he snarls through his teeth.

“Shitty pigeons” he concludes, wiping his forehead.

Crossing the street from the park, as we said, you can spot the building where a very different drama is in progress.

The commissioner enters the house museum in a hurry, with his bright eye and clenched jaw. He nods to the policeman at the entrance, contemplates the scene, and goes straight to Brumby, who’s still trying to clean the blood stains from his face with a damp towel, and Pussett, holding his concave cap, with the air of a beggar.

“Brumby, right you.”

Three atomic thoughts arise spontaneously in the detective’s braincase, each prefixed by emphatic epithets:

“Holy shit! If the commissioner is here, it’s a very serious matter.”

“Fuck! Look what a mess I’m in!”

“Christ! Why doesn’t Pussett empty that fucking cap?”

Doing the honors is not his strong suit, especially with a bloody face, but hierarchy has its own protocol.

So, he welcomes his superior with a smile, even as he moves like a poorly assembled robot.

“Good evening, commissioner. It’s a surprise...”

“Leave it. It’s a pain in the arse.”

The newcomer is grizzled, with mutton chop sideburns, waistcoat and baritone voice.

“It’s a big name” he begins, confidentially lowering his voice. “I need efficiency and discretion. Our public face is in your hands.”

To emphasize this last concept, he brings his own face closer, tobacco breath included, to show him a sample of face.

“Don’t worry, commissioner.”

“By the way, what’s up with your face?”

“Blood, I was cleanin...”

But the commissioner is under pressure himself, he has no time for answers, and his eyes dart restlessly like aquarium fishes.

“And you?” to Pussett, abruptly “what’s up, is your duty cap optional?”

“Well, me...”

“Put it on immediately. Reporters are coming.”

“But...” the man hesitates while waiting for support from the inspector who, just in that moment, has turned his gaze up to the rococo stucco ceiling like a fine art connoisseur.

“Put it on! It’s an order!”



Brumby invites him to obey, approaching him discreetly while the commissioner bends over the deceased.

“It was only chicken broth” he reveals.

He would also like to describe the recipe, saying for example that he takes the skin off the thighs. But he holds back.

It’s a fact that the drama in that place has been consumed, and everyone is aware of his own role for the follow-up.

Something parallel is happening to Jessica and her accomplices, riding through the deserted city, collecting yellow traffic lights.

Daria expounds a sudden proposal.

“What do you think about throwing the body in the river? We could hide it in a sack.”

“And if they find it?” Jessica asks.

“If nobody has seen him with you, they can’t trace it back to you, right?”

That argument gives Jessica a warm feeling.

“Girls, listen. The body is my job, okay?” Walter breaks in without diverting his attention from the road.

“You, alone?”

“Yeah. You have to go home. Horace could wake up any time now.”

“There is still the broken statuette in the bedroom. We must eliminate any traces” Daria agrees.

The guy's generosity lightens the weight on Jessica's soul and dilutes her anxiety. But a woodworm is still inside her.

"Yes, but... where do you think of...?"

Through the rearview mirror, the future luminary attempts a facial expression intended to instill peace of mind: a wink, a raised eyebrow and protruding lips. But human mimicry is hard to interpret: to Jessica, it looks like the typical expression of a possum after an hour at the gym.

That's why, not being fully confident of his subliminal message, he adds: "You're in good hands. Now just forget everything."

After those words, Jessica feels a sense of warmth once again.

Walter notices.

"I'm sorry, the thermostat for the air conditioning is broken. You should open the window."

From the car window, you can again see improbable half-naked fashion models along the sidewalks. They too are reached by a certain warmth, in this case from tire fire.

When our heroes arrive to their box for humans, whose feet are still surrounded by a herd of multicolored cans, they get out of the car.

Jessica embraces Walter.

She wants to find the words to say thank you to someone she barely knows, and who takes such a risk for her.

But, having no ready words, she simply hugs him tight and for a long time with her DDD cup bra, re-awakening his childhood traumas.

And Daria kisses him as a hero, like an Achilles, Spartacus, Mermaid Man or Barnacle Boy.

## Chapter 4 – The Sketch

Anyone familiar with expressionist paintings - an aesthete, or a painter, an auctioneer or a fence - will notice how the colors of Brumby's office, the portraits and mugshots on the walls, do not recall such style at all.

The office is small, with a window, Venetian blind, an angular desk with a pc desktop from the Jurassic period, a filing cabinet, a paper agenda and a calendar updated to the previous month of the previous year.

Brumby is sitting at his desk and stares at an indefinite point on the face of Pussett, who is standing in front of him.

"How would you define a quarrel that finishes with a multiple homicide?" he asks thoughtfully.

The short man hesitates.

"Aberrant?"

Brumby makes a bothered gesture.

"No moral judgments. I'm interested in a technical definition, a synonym."

"Ah, well... ahem... unpremeditated?"

"Hmm... good. That should be fine."

"Are you writing the report about last week's slaughter?"

Brumby is bent over the paper, meticulously inscribing the letters with a biro.

“Uh? No, it’s the *Enigmatic Week*. Un-pre-med-itated.”

A tense silence falls in the office, typical of the crossword solver in the balance between missing and superfluous letters.

Finally, the boss’s expression becomes relaxed.

“Yeah, that fits. Thanks, Pussett. Now you can go.”

The assistant is gratified by his role. He reaches the door with head held high, aware that a Police station, no less than an academy, is a place of culture.

On his way out, he meets a man whom we have previously seen only in horizontal pose and dormant. Horace Ferendeles looks inside from the threshold of the office, his outfit is neglected enough to suggest an artist on the one hand, yet passable to allow him to roam in a Police station on the other.

Brumby raises his eyes from a charade puzzle.

“Ah, our artist! Please, sit down.”

“I got your call. It’s about the monument to the Unknown Policeman?”

“Uh? Oh, no. There’s still time for that, the Police district centenary celebration is still a long way off”.

“I’m well underway”.

“I hope then that at least you’re sticking to something figurative. Nothing eccentric, okay?”

‘*Figurative*’ is one of those adjectives that a visionary artist like Horace hates – just as much as cages, straitjackets or Inquisition benches.

He sometimes wonders what's the diaphragm that separates the objective world we perceive, the one imprinted on our retina when we open our eyes, from the inner one reproduced by a brush or a chisel.

Can the proto-bull engraved in the caves of the Paleolithic be described as figurative?

And, how much of the described world is a mirror of the sensitive one? How much is left to the artist's imagination?

These are long-standing issues, we agree, even older than a proto-bull. Maybe as old as Methuselah.

By the way, it's strange to notice that no graffiti depicting Methuselah, or at least a proto-Methuselah, have ever yet been found in the Paleolithic caves.

They don't even earn a mention in the section "*Strange, but true*", in the *Enigmatic Week*.

So, coming back to Horace, Brumby's aesthetic indifference cannot but touch his nerves. However, he doesn't have the character of Don Quixote – he prefers to gloss over, and avoids pointless battles.

In response to Brumby's sullen look, as he questions whether the statue of the Unknown Policeman is definitely figurative, Horace decides to nod vaguely and to divert onto other topics.

"So, excuse me, why did you summon me?"

"We have urgent need of your services. Who knows, perhaps for the last time."

The phrase is cryptic, it can't fall on deaf ears.

"What do you mean, inspector?"

Brumby gets up and starts walking with precise gait from side to side of the room, causing Horace a stiff neck in his attempt to follow him. After the third change of direction, his tongue springs from the lingual bed with a snap.

“Mr. Ferendeles, how many years have you been sketching criminals for our department?”

“Hmm... three years, I would say. I suppose I’ve made about thirty sketches.”

“Thirty-two, to be exact. And, tell me, do you know how many criminals we have captured thanks to your sketches?”

Horace guesses his meaning, and has a bad feeling.

“Ah! I would be telling you a lie...” he smiles with feigned amiability.

“Then don’t say it. I’ll tell you: the answer is zero. Nobody. Understood?”

“I don’t believe this is the issue here...”

“Then what is it? Mr. Ferendeles, you must stop with your abstract drawings!”

“Damn, here he goes with his bullshit again” he realizes in an inner landslide. These speeches crop up every couple of months. They generally coincide with the inklings of important investigations.

According to the ritual, Horace deploys sandbags around his trench. He tries to lift a finger, but by now the inspector has taken a running start, as if all that walking has charged him up.

“Well, I think...”

“Mr. Ferendeles, that’s enough! Maybe Picasso is your role model, but I cannot accept any more sketches with three eyes and two noses. Okay?”

“But...what about my freedom of expression...?”

“Freedom, my balls!” he says, pointing choreographically that anatomic part, “we have to capture criminals, not make art shows! You’re getting paid for this!”

The inspector says it in a minor key, hoping it goes smoothly.

“I’m still waiting for my back-pay, actually.”

Okay, it hasn’t gone smoothly, but this need not deflate his holy fury.

“Forget your back pay, for now. Now listen to my words and look me in the eye please”, he orders pulling out a hypnotic look.

Horace follows his directions.

“You’ve got a sty on your right eyelid.”

“Really?”

Instinctively the inspector touches his eye, then decides he cannot interrupt the pathos in this way.

“Okay, look me in the other eye.”

“It looks swollen. Do you feel pain?”

Shit! The magnetizer's effect has gone.

“Okay. Just listen to me” he exhorts impatiently.

“We are looking for a murderer, and we have a valuable witness. You have to produce a decent sketch or you’re fired. Okay?”

Horace nods. His shoulders shrink a couple of sizes from sheer frustration. Instinctively, he avoids recommending a remedy for the sty.



“Pussett! Let the Kalashnikov murder witness enter”, the boss shouts toward the door.

Through the frosted glass, you can discern the familiar square figure, and another in tow, slender and petite.

“Inspector, the Commissioner is urgently looking for you” Pussett announces.

The angry grimace printed onto Brumby’s face is scarcely human: rather, it resembles a scallop reluctantly extracted from its shell.

Anyhow, our man is a diligent and respectful guy, especially with the Commissioner, and more especially after he had made an ass of himself with the Kalashnikov affair.

“Damn... Pussett, please question the witness and check the sketch coherence” he demands as he dons his trench coat.

“Don’t worry, inspector.”

That same day, in the lazy hours of early afternoon, when pigeons are almost the only bipeds to grace the streets, Walter gets out of his car, parked close to a grand building. He looks around, opens the boot and, in great fatigue, loads a wrapped carpet, tied at the ends, onto his shoulders. It’s a bulgy carpet, and has a tendency to flake like a tulip whenever the corpse inside changes position.

Staggering from the effort, the young man crosses the threshold.

One whole floor of the building houses his father’s private clinic. The absence at that hour of the

doorkeeper suits him well. To his relief, the lift arrives empty. He slips inside, dragging the tottering carpet behind him.

He hears footsteps at the entrance and rams a finger on the button, but that damned sliding door is slow, and the newcomer squeezes in.

“Look who’s here! Walter!” says an old nosy tenant.

“Uh, hi” the student greets him, clinging to the bundle.

“Hmm, a carpet for your daddy’s waiting room?” he insinuates while taking a look.

“No, errr ... I mean yes.”

“Original Persian, right?”

Walter nods uncertainly, watching as the floor display streams uphill, and counting the seconds between him and his liberation.

But the old man goes on, he’s a curious pain in the arse. He approaches the carpet to admire the workmanship, even to touch it.

"Must be expensive, right?"

Walter sweats, interposing himself to block the assault, and managing a clumsy sneeze that irrigates generously the interlocutor’s face.

“Atchoo! Oh sorry! In truth it’s not Persian, I took it from a junk dealer ... Atchoo! Oh sorry! ... ”

The other withdraws as our artist adds further sneezing attacks and scratches himself vigorously.

“And I fear it’s full of fleas ...” he adds with discretion.

When the old man reaches the opposite corner of the lift, Walter allows himself a Machiavellian revenge. While the door opens, and the man hurries to get out,

he leans toward him continuing the sadistic sequence of sneezes, with copious spray and scratching of his epidermis.

“Bye, sir ... please don’t tell dad, it’s a surprise ... Atchoo!”

Back in Brumby’s office, an established ritual of the investigative process is beginning: the sketch drawing. Pussett welcomes the witness: small, nervous, in his forties, glasses and sober suit, a typical math professor. “Please sit down in front of the draftsman.”

Pussett considers Horace a nice guy, though a bit strange, with his mania for the artistic sketch. Every time the boss turns up his nose at a finished job, he feels a bit sorry for him. At the earliest opportunity he will buy one of his paintings, if he will just put eyes and nose in the right place.

“Horace, please be good. This time avoid strange things” he recommends quietly, handing him sketchpad and pencil.

Then he turns to the witness.

“We’ll start with the outline of the face. How was it? Round, oval or square?”

“Oval”, the little man says fast, as if he were answering a TV quiz.

“Face shape oval” Pussett announces solemnly, while Horace’s hand glides over the paper with quick curvilinear motion.

“Eyes?” back to the witness.

“Two”.

“I didn’t mean the number. But the color, eyebrows, and anything else remarkable. A precise description, please.”

The witness takes on the glowing expression of someone invited to a wedding.

“Well. The eyes were two ellipsoids on whose curved surface there were concentric circles, the external one of which was cinnabar in color. About the dimensions, we could calculate them...”

Pussett looks at him with a mixture of admiration and annoyance. The latter sentiment prevails, so he raises his hand to stop him.

Then he turns to Horace and proclaims: “Eyes two”. He repeats each phrase, both for formalize officially and to draw the attention of the artist, who is used to sketching while listening to loud music on his headphones. When Horace rhythmically nods his head, you never know if he’s understood the witness’s words or is just following the beat.

“And what about the ears?”

The small man inhales deeply, closes his eyes, and reverts to his analytic singsong.

“Well, the auricula extended for about the third part of the lobe section’s diameter, whose surface...”

Pussett clasps hands to temples, as if he’s got a sudden migraine.

“Okay, okay” waving his arms like a traffic cop in stress.

Then he translates to the artist: “Ears two. Okay?”

Horace gives a thumbs up, then turns to the witness.

“Please keep your chin up. Good, like that.”

The assistant, dreading other deadly answers to his questions, tries to lighten them up with Perry Mason’s rhetoric.

“And what could you tell me about his nose?

Ahem... you can invoke the right to silence...”

But the witness is ruthless.

“Sure. The bending of the dorsal cut of the nose is derived from the equation of the parabola...”

“Son of a bitch...” Pussett whispers.

When the nutcase begins to summarize the theorems of a certain Euclid, surely a clinical case like him, Pussett growls: “All right sir, everything is clear.”

For a while, the statements of the witness, the nervous motion of Horace’s pencil, the theatrical gestures of the Police officer, and the swing of the headphones to the hip-hop beat follow each other in a loop.

At the same time, the mounting pressure of migraine tightens around Pussett’s temples, like a torture instrument worthy of Edgar Poe.

Then suddenly everything ceases. With resolute gesture Horace removes the headphones, stands, and places the sketch on the boss’s desk.

“Finished?”

The artist nods satisfied.

“Mmm... two eyes, one nose, one mouth” Pussett checks. “Beautiful job! Much better than those doodles!”

“Leave it, that was *art brut*, you don’t understand...”

“I’m sure the boss will like it.”

“By the way, what about my back pay?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll talk to him” Pussett assures him unconvincingly.

Only when Horace closes the door behind him, does our man turn to the cause of his recent torture.

“Sir”, he says extending the floppy hand we reserve for ball buster mathematicians, “we warmly thank you for your collaboration”.

“Could I take a peek at the drawing?”

“No, I’m sorry, there is a privacy law” he lies.

The witness lifts his hands: “Of course, of course. Goodbye.”

“Fuck you” his reply echoes around the epiglottis.

Left alone, Pussett throws a last glance at the sketch and leaves it on the boss’s desk. A moment later, he meets him face-to-face in the doorway.

“Just in time, inspector. The sketch is ready.”

The inspector analyzes it carefully, as you do the watermark of a suspected banknote. Then a distorted grin, as if he had a toothpick between his teeth, introduces his satisfaction.

“Finally, a good drawing. See? The threats are useful!”

“Inspector, Horace is a smart guy, and maybe we could give him...”

As soon as he smells a sponsorship, he glosses over the topic.

“Well. Now it’s our turn. Pussett, go and look for this man immediately!”

The order falls on the assistant like a cold shower.

Come to think of it, you wouldn't know where to start... he had only checked that that the drawn face was a real face, the eyes, nose and mouth in the right place: nothing more.

He made no comparisons, not with his mental archive nor with the world around him!

So, he feels unprepared at the moment, but no problem.

For him it's enough to look at the sketch carefully, and dig into memory.

“Inspector, to be honest that man who just left resembled him quite a lot.”

“Uh?”

“In fact, I'd say that it was him!”

“Him?! Are you sure?”

“Yes, inspector! It's him!”

“Shit! And you let him go away?”

And there it was, how to make an ass of yourself in a few seconds.

Pussett's figure is resized instantly, tumbling him down the rankings to novice level again, losing in a moment all the bonus earned through the vomits in his cap.

“But, inspector... you weren't here... I didn't know...”

“Fuck! Should I tell you everything?! No initiative, good heavens!”

Brumby takes a look at the assistant's contrite expression, like a gavia that has lost a couple of incisors, and decides not to insist.

“Now go. Go catch him.”

Meanwhile he thinks of searching the archive for a zoological card of the gavia for a lineup.

“I’m running, inspector! Don’t worry!” he assures him from the doorway.



## Chapter 5 – The Adulteress

That box for humans, scene of the burglary, puffs away in the early evening, casting disturbing shadows on the other boxes. Its unstable points of light grow in number till a certain hour, then slowly thin out until absolute darkness reigns, more or less (each night has some insomniacs).

From a fair distance, the silhouettes at the windows are indistinguishable from the funfair's teddies, except for the absence of linear motion.

Let us zoom in slowly on a couple of those teddies, until we see the alleged fur disappear, and discover the physiognomy of Horace and Jessica Ferendeles.

Horace is sitting at table, while Jessica is standing at the stove. She's nervous, her gestures are rigid and mechanical like those of the aforementioned teddies after endless gun shots.

Daria hasn't called. Nor has Walter. How did it end up with her unfortunate one-night lover?

"How was school today?"

The question interferes with the background noise in Jessica's mind.

"What? School? The usual. I'm so tired. The kids are little pests."

“You take your job too seriously, I’ve told you thousand times. Even those private lessons, you shouldn’t...”

Really, right now, her last wish is to talk about her role as an educator.

“Private lessons? Yes, sometimes...” she answers vaguely.

“Sometimes? Every day, I’d say. I wonder why these boys don’t come here.”

Jessica swallows some saliva and lowers her eyes.

“They’re too young, they can’t get here.”

“Not so young to be up late...”

One more lump of saliva, this time the consistency of a walnut.

“Oh, don’t worry about me, I’m just tired... Eat up! It’s getting cold”.

Horace looks down at the plate.

Somehow, in that invitation, the young man perceives about her mental absence, her thinking of anything else.

On the table in front of him is an empty plate. Eat what?

At that same hour, if we were flying over the suburbs like a blackbird, and were to enter a top floor apartment through the balcony, we would witness the following scenes, in this order:

- the blackbird’s head bumping into the glass of the PVC frame, permanently closed

- a man wandering in the dark, slowly and inexorably pointing a knife like a bayonet.

In the darkness, we can distinguish only the venous network on the back of his hands: the left hand holding a torch, the right one the blade.

The man is panting.

The scene is too disturbing even for seasoned narrators like us. So much so that we prefer to fly away with the blackbird (who has recovered from the impact) and go back to the Ferendeles' kitchen.

There, the siege on Jessica's stability has not ceased. The first sentence we perceive from Horace is something like: "By the way, I'd like to know what it is that you do with those kids."

"Christ! Maybe he has grasped something!"

Jessica can't stand his gaze.

"Wh... why?" she stutters, collecting some crumbs.

"I don't know. Most of the time you come home untidy, hair messed up, make-up smudged..."

Oh God! Now she is short of oxygen and turns back to the stove. Acting indifferent like a sphinx just doesn't work for her. Looking at the wall tiles, she inhales deeply and pretends to be natural.

"I told you... they're little hooligans."

"I see."

"But they're adorable... that's why I give them so many hugs and kisses, and the make-up, you know..."

"And probably one of them is a smoker."

"Wh... Why?"

“Last week your clothes stank.”

When Jessica sketches the tale of the precocious boy who smokes in secret from his parents, and sees a distorted smile on his face.

The air is heavy. She must change the subject, perhaps with a succulent proposal. “Honey, would you like a dessert?” she invites him, placing the dish on the table. But something about her state of mind still doesn’t seem right, he thinks as he looks at the plate. There is no cake in the plate, only a sponge with a rough back and some dirty soapy water.

His baby is a bit exhausted.

Nonetheless, he doesn’t want to hurt her sensibility. As an artist, he prefers to fantasize on her figure, simulating for the sake of peace the pleasure of slicing that strange tiramisu.

Back up in the loft, the mystery man keeps wandering in the dark, blade in hand, with a wheeze that seems to come from a broken woofer, almost a death rattle. We sense little of his face, the shadow of his nose cast on the walls, the hunched silhouette, a certain nervous gait, that disturbing metallic appendix that announces him to the environment.

The scene is quite static, the man is slow, there’s no tension. If it was a TV thriller, we’d have changed the channel by now.

That’s why we gently ask the blackbird to stretch its wings and fly back to Jessica’s building.

Except that the bird, that doesn't want to be used as a narrative funicular, tells us to fuck off.

We return the greeting and go back to the old horsefly, slow certainly but less hubristic.

“And... how was your work today?” Jessica asks, trying to ease the pressure.

“I’ve made a Police sketch. Realist this time.”

“Well. Maybe we’ll see some money.”

She sits at the table and starts caressing his hand.

“I was inspired, and I tried to isolate myself. But that’s not my natural environment.”

“Why?”

“You understand, I’m focused on my work, and this man is there yelling out stupid physical details. How is it possible? Imagine if Michelangelo sculpting his David had someone waltzing around him suggesting the shape of the nose or the ears! He would have hammered his head!”

“I understand, but being a Police sketch...”

Horace pierces her with the look of a vindictive Van Gogh.

“Jessica! You sound like them! Art has no limits! Understood? It’s limitless!”

Jessica nods like a child reproached for her mischief, but inside she’s in triumph at having stopped the inquisition.

“Anyway, I did a good job. It’s a major crime.”

“You’ll see, the copies of your sketch will circulate, maybe on TV, some art critic will have to notice you sooner or later.”

One more twitch of impatience, he wants to wring the sponge cake to relax his nerves, but the dirty water puts him off.

“No! No! Even this matter of serial copies, I can’t bear it. The artwork should be unique!”

“And how would they distribute your sketch to the Police stations in town?”

Jessica is resigned as she goes to take some water.

“They could move the original, as museums do with paintings and sculptures. Simple!”

“Oh, right” she nods taking a glass.

“By the way, where is the statuette that was in the bedroom?”

Oh, God! What kind of questions are these?!

She had recovered her breath, but now her cheeks blaze again. Her hands itch as she looks for a credible response.

We do not like this embarrassment. We're almost sweating in her place. Better the suspense of the dark scene.

And therein, the hand with the torch projects a circle of light on the wall, revealing a flowered wallpaper dotted with the bloody corpses of mosquitoes.

The man is closer, his face transfigured, silent, almost mystical, in contrast to the blade that comes out of his hand. He evokes the austere expression of an ancient icon painted on a wooden panel.

Really, his interest lingers in fact on another panel, of which the torch lights all the details. It's an ordinary

panel, of no value to thief or black market, which would find artistic credibility only in certain contemporary art installations.

The tip of the knife approaches it in the darkness. The panting becomes a grunt and we can finally see the blade cutting the air, as it flicks the lever of the central switch.

The room lights up.

That's just the way electric light panels are.

They all look more or less alike, as the boxes for humans in the neighborhood do. And when the light returns to brighten the house, they don't raise interest any more. They disappear before our eyes.

Meanwhile the lit chandelier reveals the identity of the man with the big knife.

He is inspector Brumby: he has swollen red eyes, is no longer gasping, but coughs and collects the spit in a handkerchief.

"If there's one thing I hate", he sighs, "it's blackout while I'm cutting onions."

At this point, we don't know about you, but as narrating voices we feel betrayed by the suddenly deflated pathos. We would like to abdicate, fuck up everything, go back and send resumes, even as non-narrating voices, maybe as choir voices or street voices.

Now, we must confess that we are nostalgic for that scene of Jessica's anxieties, so we come straight back

to her without even the aid of blackbirds and horseflies.

Therefore, this time we move on foot, crossing the neighborhood at this late hour.

Walking takes its time, you know, but we'll make sure the narration doesn't suffer much from this, filling the void with the punctuation: common custom of real epic novels.

(...)

She is standing at the sink, with her back to Horace.

"You didn't answer me. I asked about the statuette".

"What... that statuette? You mean the one on the column? Ahem, I wouldn't know..."

"What? Are you saying it has disappeared?"

"No, really... me..."

She fiddles nervously with her glass while a new gust of fog clouds her mind. She's not good at improvising.

It's not easy to make up stories on the spot.

So she stays there tinkering, while the glass falls and shatters.

"Hey! Be careful!"

But ah, here is the inspiration!

"Okay, the statuette ... it's broken...I'm... I am sorry."

"Whaaaat?"

Horace's face contracts so as to concentrate the eyes, nose, mouth, into a single point of such density, that it seems close to bursting in an anatomical big bang, dispersing its substance in plasma, mitochondria and ribo...such-a-fuck-up.



“Forgive me, Horace. I bumped into the column while I was shagging... I mean sweeping... and it fell” she confesses as she picks up the pieces of glass.

Her husband holds back the pain, avoids an explosion, and stares resignedly into the void.

Jessica strokes his head. Then she retreats to the bathroom exhausted and upset from the inquisition. That fatal night, the search for help, the two bodies, their concealment and the desperate search for a new existential balance. Those are things she still feels on her skin, as well as the distressing nighttime awakenings for imagined noises.

Moreover, there is that niggling worm, which Walter’s disarming generosity has not managed to dispel.

Where is the body of her one night’s lover now?

That guy is an angel, Daria is a lucky girl. But she wants to be sure that his exhortation to forget it all rests on solid ground, and that the body (she can’t call it a corpse), may he rest in peace, lies in the place they agreed.

Only in that way, her nerves might find relax. She wouldn’t waver on Horace’s arguments, but be present in mind and body. And we might add that she would offer real tiramisù, not a cleaning sponge with rinsing of dishes.

In the bathroom, Jessica turns on the shower to cover her words.

“Walter?”

“Hi Jessica, how are you?”

“Excuse me, Walter, but I wanted to ask you about that job.”

“Yes, no worries. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. You know, I’ve got the fixed thought.”

“I know, but try to think about something else, okay?”

“I’m trying ... but... where did you...?”

“The river. Jessica, careful, we’re on the phone.”

“Okay. Sorry to bother you, Walter. Thank you again, bye.”

“It’s ok. Put your mind at rest. Everything’s fine.”

After closing the conversation, the thoughts of the two diverge like particles of equal electric charge and opposite polarities. While she devotes a grateful thought to the generous and easygoing young man, imagining him for a moment naked and regretting an unlikely *tête-à-tête*, Walter at the same time is having a real *tête-à-tête* with a naked man.

For the content of the Persian carpet is finally lying before his eyes, on the operating table of his father’s private clinic.

Hanging up the phone, he holds the scalpel under the lamplight with an ambiguous grimace, much like the lugubrious Dr. Phibes<sup>3</sup> in a horror cult movie.

“River, sure” he tells himself, “but there’s still time...” While he mimes a devilish grin towards an imaginary camera, we realize he lacks only the perfidious moustache.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* is a 1971 British comedy horror starring Vincent Price.

Jessica puts down the phone, her soul pacified, and enters the living room where Horace is sculpting and caressing the statue of the Unknown Cop.

A wave of tenderness comes over her as she watches him in ecstasy in front of that mineral - half shapeless at the start and totally shapeless at the finish of his job, like an asteroid after an impact. Such a tenderness that, after the solace of the phone call, she feels like hugging him, smoothing his hair, pulling his ears.

## Chapter 6 – The Dismissal

Anyway, a dead body is a dead body, and hiding it is not enough to extinguish the heavy burden of guilt, that a benign judge would call negligence, and a severe judge manslaughter.

Then there's the story of the statuette, and Horace's suspicions.

In short, she feels like a besieged fortress, a sensation that causes her stomach cramps when she wakes, for which her job gives no relief nor distraction.

Jessica is a teacher in a primary school that seems sometimes a kindergarten, when the students show themselves naïve, and sometimes a high school, when they turn out to be allusive.

She teaches without particular passion or aptitude, floating on swamps of boredom and lack of communication, disarmed by the stupidity and lack of discipline, feelings that often give her a migraine.

Day after day, she finds herself at her desk without understanding the real purpose of remaining seated on a wobbly chair, opening that dark object of deterrence called *school register*.

The children are cackling as usual, scuffling, throwing small paper planes, and expressing the first pearls of bullying.

She watches with indifference for a while, as you do with the shadows of dreams, staring at the empty space.

Then she shakes herself, returns to the present, and beats her hand energetically on the desktop to call them to order.

“What was your homework?”

“The human body! Ma’am!”

“Well. Each of you has to describe an organ. Right?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Well, let’s see...You, Gabriel, which organ have you chosen?”

“The lungs.”

“So, let’s talk about the lungs.”

Gabriel is round with red cheeks, apron in order, and eyes jumping on everything that moves in the room.

“The lungs serve for breathing. They take in air, and they throw out the... di... diiodide?”

“Dioxide.”

“Yes, the carbon dio... diiodide!”

“Are they very important then?”

“Yes, if someone doesn’t breathe, he dies. For instance, if someone is shut up in a closet...”

“Closet?”

The woman quenches the blossoming of vacuous thoughts that usually cover the childish recitative.

He really said *closet*?

No lateral thinking, okay? Let’s shut that snotty kid’s mouth.

“That’s enough, Gabriel. You may sit down.”

A big boy in front of Gabriel turns around and says loudly “Ah, ah! Locked in the closet! What a jerk!”, provoking a general laughter.

“And you? When are you gonna come out of the closet?” Gabriel zaps him.

There’s an even louder laugh and the boy’s face turns red.

Jessica beats the desktop with a forced smile.

“Okay, let’s see someone else. Camilla, which organ have you studied?”

Camilla seems like the top of the class. She has the look of a little femme fatale, thanks to her long and wavy hair, which she runs her fingers through as she shakes her head.

“The head” she answers obviously.

The boys whistle. Some imitate her movements.

“The head holds our intelligence, our thoughts and our memories!”

“Right. And what else?”

“Naturally the eyes, the nose, the mouth and the hair”. She blinks, touches one nostril, protrudes the lower lip, and finally waves her hair like a shampoo model.

“The head is the most important part of the body” she concludes.

But another pupil, Fred, reddish and freckled, obvious rival to her premiership, raises his hand to interrupt.

“Ma’am, it’s not true! The heart is more important. I’ve written about the heart!”

“No, the head is the most important. Isn’t that so, ma’am? If the head stops, the heart stops too” Camilla protests.

“Ah, ah, that’s rubbish!” Fred replies “it’s the heart that stops when the body dies!”

Jessica is confused. Her recent experiences in anatomy have been limited to the genital area. She does not want to let this escalate.

Camilla, hands on hips, turns to challenge the healthy carrier of freckles.

“Ah, ah! Let’s see! If the Statue of Liberty fell on your head, wouldn’t you die?”

“Yes of course, stoopid!” Fred imitates Camilla’s voice and movements, “but if a little statuette fell on my head I wouldn’t die. Maybe I’d pass out. Right, Ms. Ferendeles?”

Laughter erupts. Jessica is breathless.

Fred seems to be staring at the teacher in an ambiguous way, while she can’t meet his gaze, and the pupils look at her with curiosity.

“Did he say statuette?”

She brings a hand to her chest, and tries to put a blind trust in a random choice of words.

He could have said brick or pot, but he said statuette. The class stands by and watches her curiously. An itch on her hand reveals the teacher’s inner cyclone.

She would like to have misunderstood, she would like to blot out that word: *statuette*.

Meanwhile her shocked face hides flashbacks that flow like a commercial TV montage: statuette shards, thief's head, shards, Frankenstein monster, shards, closet, shards, erection, shards, the broken glass.

So what? She finally convinces herself. He said statuette because he must have an artistic nature. That's all.

"Enough, children. That's enough! Let's move along with the lesson."

The children smile strangely. A wink, a scoff, an insinuation. Little bastards.

Soon, those faces begin to sway before her eyes. While headaches grow, they sway, overlap, crumble, fill with color until they burst into evanescent fragments.

In other words, she incidentally experiments with the set of effects of a PC graphics program.

While she swallows a migraine pill, and gives a good massage to her temples, a colleague knocks at the door.

"Excuse me, Jessica. The principal wants to see you, urgently."

"Oh, God, what else?"

"If you need to go, I can cover for a while."

"You're very kind, Kate. I hope he doesn't take long" she says as she goes out.

The newcomer is now sitting at the desk.

"Well, what were you talking about?"

"About a stiff in the closet" Gabriel says.

"Not true! It was about a man who fainted from a whack on the head!" the shampoo model specifies.



Our heroine hears the argument from the hallway. She reopens the door impulsively and leans in.

“We were talking about human anatomy” points out with a pleading expression, dreaming of a world of aphonic children.

The colleague nods, surprised, and invites her to go.

The principal is a grey man both in character and clothes.

In the bright light through the translucent glass door, the only chromatic discontinuity is in his shiny tonsure.

He is sitting at his desk watching the PC screen carefully, with an astonished expression typical of some aboriginal masks from Polynesia. When he hears the knock, he recomposes himself into an official posture, opens a register, and welcomes the visitor with an appropriate modulation in his voice.

“May I come in?” Jessica forces a smile that looks like a short version of those masks.

“Come in, Ms. Ferendeles. Please sit down. I’ve an important and delicate argument.”

The sketchy smile fades fast, as if the principal’s sentence was quick-setting bleach.

“Please, tell me.”

He gets up and begins to walk around the room: a bad omen for the listener.

“The thing is serious, very serious” are the opening words followed by a calculated pause.

“You know I am rigorous when it comes to morality. In an environment with so many young minds it’s easy to set a bad example. I have always taken a firm line against vulgarity and indecency, because for me school is like a mission...”

As the principal expounds, Jessica’s thoughts overlap his monologue.

“Oh God, here goes the preacher!”

The tone is similar to the solemn Sunday Eucharist of her childhood, a duty she abandoned as a teenager. Now as then, at the mention of principles and moral values her instinct to escape is irrepressible, like breathing deeply after suffering an apnea.

But the opening statement about a “delicate argument” keeps her thoughts on a leash, to listen the bald man’s boring dogmas.

So, she pretends concentration, punctuating his sermon with occasional “yes, of course, you’re right” on autopilot.

*[To underline her thoughts we’ll use square brackets, as a convention.*

*We could encase them with the sign '%', but we would be embarrassed if the principal, who has a solid foundation in accounting, used the percentages in his speech.]*

“Because...see, Ms. Ferendeles... it’s in children’s nature to assimilate any form of immorality”

*[Shit! The sermon again]*

“...in particular words and gestures” he specifies, crossing her with an oblique glance.

*[Gestures? No, is not possible. I have always been careful.]*

“...and I know from irrefutable sources that you’ve infringed even the most fundamental norms of decency...”

Jessica blushes, for the umpteenth time in that shitty morning.

*[Fuck! I bet that stupid substitute teacher has been talking about what we got up to during break time]*

“Mr. Principal, I don’t understand what...?”

“...The school rooms are made for teaching in, and not for licentious acts...”

*[The classrooms? Then it’s not him... we did it in the bathroom]*

“Mr. Principal, I can assure...”

“What surprises me is how lightly...” the little man walks descriptive semicircles ever closer around her chair “you decided to have intimate relations...”

*[Could be the father of that new pupil, who came to the parents’ meeting?]*

“...during the lesson time.”

*[Lesson time? So, it’s not him...]*

The boss observes her clenching her jaws.

*[But then who...? Maybe the quickies with the school janitor?]*

“Mr. Principal, they must be lies ...”

“I don’t think. You were also surprised while having...I’m even embarrassed to say... anal coitus...”

*[Anal?! Then it’s easy! It’s the gardener who came last week.]*

“...before the eyes of an innocent!”

On last fatal sentence the drama reaches its climax. The old man stands like an inquisitor, tight-fisted, straight arms leaning on the desk. A pose that some zoology manuals attribute to the orangutan before a territorial dispute.

*[Whaaat? Innocent? Impossible!! I had locked the door!!!]*

“No, no, sir, please let me explain...”

The principal pulls out some color photographs from his desk drawer.

“These photos were taken by Father Innocent, from the monastery across the street, and they show you in activities that leave no doubt.”

*[Ah, that Innocent! Fuck...]*

“He was cleaning the church windows at the time. He was so shocked that he almost fell off his ladder...”

“Cleaning the windows with a camera?”

“Ahem... do not digress! The matter is your deplorable behavior.”

*[Shit, a horny monk, to add to my troubles! I should have pulled down the shutters.]*

Jessica is against a wall: her anxiety peaks, her pulse rate approaches the frequency of caesium.

"It's true, Mr. Principal, my behavior may not always have been ideal. But I can assure you..."

"The only assurance I expect from you is the avoidance of scandal. I have prepared this resignation letter. You have only to sign."

"Mr. Principal, please. I swear it won't happen again..."

But the bald old man has his principles. Hard as a rock, he's unavailable to indulgences.

"I can do nothing else. Please don't force me into disciplinary actions that would be worse for you - and for the reputation of my school."

Thus, the anguish mounts her livid cheeks as another piece of her existential domain collapses. Scarcely able to hold back her tears, she takes the pen and paper from the principal. With a shaky hand, she runs over the words "voluntary" and "personal reasons", and lands on the space for her signature.

Misty-eyed, the girl tries to inscribe her autograph with dignity. But the pen doesn't write.

The principal, impatient, rummages in his drawer.

"I have at least a dozen pens", he snorts, "but just when you need one..."

"Don't worry, I've got one in my bag", she says with disguised superiority.

*[Shitty manager, you don't even have a writing pen. Now I'll leave you a fountain pen as a souvenir, so you'll be haunted by remorse.]*

Jessica begins to rummage in her handbag, one of those shapeless leather sacks similar to a bagpipe, with zips and studs, completely free of internal pockets.

Like an astronomical black hole, it attracts objects (handkerchiefs, keys, mobile phones, snacks, and much more) and seldom returns them. The only way to find the pen is to pull out all the things in hindrance. So, from the Pandora's box her red nails extract personal belongings, parking them on the desk, reciting "not this, not this..."

"I'm sorry", the man is embarrassed, "but I hope you'll understand. I can't tolerate obscenities in my school." Then he stands silent and turns his gaze to the ceiling as his desk accumulates sexy lingerie, colored condoms, dildos of various shapes, latex corsets, and whips.

Finally, from the hellish sack there emerges a familiar shape which seems noble by comparison.

"Here it is" says Jessica, displaying it eagerly.

Then she dares a last imploring glance towards the principal's vitreous face.

Without any result.

The moment she shuts the door behind her, he shakes his head with blame and turns back to the PC screen.

The browser is on an escort website. A naked girl with big boobs winks at him with a "Call me!", and a phone number.

Instantly the bald man's face reverts to the aboriginal mask.

That same day, at the same time, the investigation pool's embarrassment over the Kalashnikov affair has reached its climax. Brumby is managing the misunderstanding over the witness arrest. After an adequate bollocking from the commissioner, he feels turning on a spit.

Along with Pussett, he's waiting for the witness, to make amends on behalf of the Police district. But, above all, he's itching to twist the neck of that damned fucking draftsman.

When his guest enters, the inspector jumps from his chair and goes to meet him with a smile and a generous handshake to ingratiate him.

"Dear sir, I apologize, I am so sorry. Unfortunately, there was a misunderstanding."

"Do you call it a misunderstanding? You jailed me for two days because you thought I was a murderer!"

"You are right, I'm sorry..."

"I not only came of my own accord to testify, which is uncommon and virtuous behavior..."

"True. You are a model citizen."

"... a model citizen..." Pussett echoes him to strengthen their consideration.

“But I’ve even been taken for the murderer himself! Shot at and missed, shit on and hit. Right?”

“In a certain sense...” the inspector smiles guilty “shit on and hit...”

“... and hit...” the assistant conforms.

“What is? A parrot?” the witness asks.

The detective gives his man a death stare.

“Pussett, stop repeating! Okay?”

“... peatin... Eh? Excuse me”.

“Anyway, we’re mortified. We don’t know how to make it up to you. If there is anything we can do for you...”

“What could you do, now?”

“Anything, to make amends: an armed escort, surveillance of your worst enemy, a city tour with Police sirens blaring...”

“Anything?” the little man strokes his chin with his index finger and thumb.

“Anything, you have my word” the inspector brings a hand to his chest.

“Mmm... could you help me dispose of a dead body?”

“With pleasure! Where is it?”

“In my house. I was just taking care of it that evening, when I interrupted myself and came to testify.”

“You are a model citizen...” the inspector repeats like a broken record.

“...tizen...” Pussett gets sucked in again for a moment, but promptly raises his hand like a footballer admitting a tackle foul.



“And whose dead body is that?” our man asks discreetly.

“My wife’s.”

“In the sense the dead body belongs to your wife?

Or that the dead body was your wife?”

“The dead body was my wife.”

“Oh, I am sorry. My deepest condolences” the other shakes his hand.

“Thank you. I was sure that testifying would be only a matter of minutes. But now, the dead body has been there for two days.”

“Surely it’s gonna stink” the assistant warns him.

“You’ll have to air the room before you can stay there” Brumby prescribes, remembering some spray insecticide commercials.

“I know, I’ll do it” the mathematician agrees.

But a modest flicker of curiosity is growing.

“May I ask, what was the cause of your wife’s death?”

“Oh, a domestic accident.”

“Electric shock?”

“No, stabbings.”

“No kidding. Really?”

“Yes. Besides being a teacher, I am a knife thrower in a circus.”

Brumby looks him up and down puzzled, trying to imagine him in action, and feigning interest.

“But I also perform at home, upon request.”

The witness hands over a card.

“This is my business card. I give discounts for parties, military personnel and senior citizens.”

“Thanks, I’ll tell my friends, definitely.”

The little man realizes from the inspector’s suspended glance, undoubtedly curious, that he should clarify the circumstances.

“As I was saying, I usually practice at home with my wife. Probably this last time I was particularly nervous...”

“It can certainly happen. Did you hit her in a vital point?”

“Yes, in ten vital points, to be precise.”

“Ten? Don’t tell me! Do you mean you can throw ten knives all at once?”

“Noo! What do you think I am? The octopus man?” he smiles. “At home I use only one knife. I throw it, then I recover it from the deadly wound, and then I throw it again.”

“It must be tiring, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ten times back and forth it’s hard, you lose your concentration. Moreover, my wife after the first mortal wound, begins to get floppy, so she moves...”

“I understand. Well then, if you allow me, to make amends I’d like to give you a set of ten sharp throwing knives. You can train yourself to throw them all at once”.

“Oh, thanks. Very kind! So, for the disposal of the body, shall I wait for you?”

“Yes, I’ll send a couple of officers immediately.”

The witness rises to say goodbye, satisfied, and receives a warm handshake.

“It has been a pleasure. Never falter in your duty as model citizen. We need people like you.”

“Of course” he replies as Pussett escorts him out.

Left alone, Brumby breathes heavily, scratches his forehead, and throws away the knife thrower mathematician’s business card.

Let us now change the scene and visit a public place. Post Offices are crucibles of variegated humanity. There people feed a Leviathan called a "queue", which loses its head at regular intervals, and changes its skin entirely over longer periods, as many reptiles do.

In one of these offices, queued up to the "Delivery" window, the reader might recognize a familiar physiognomy, if only he had seen him before.

He is Bozo, the thief who fainted at the Ferendeles’ house, and whose swoon lasted beyond the measure we would have expected, for a project that we shall soon learn about.

He gives a letter to the clerk.

“Certified mail, or registered mail?” he asks.

“Blackmail.”

The window clerk weighs the letter and checks the price list.

“Twelve dollars.”

“What? Last time, I paid...” Bozo protests.

“There’s a new tax on blackmail. You know, financial laws change...”

“Leave it. Please gimme back my letter.”

“Fucking thieves!” he erupts in the doorway.

If, meanwhile, you have any idea of the abruptification state of a terrestrial predator in a caravanserai, you will be able to understand Brumby's mood after saying goodbye to the witness.

"Pussett, did you call our fucking artist?"

"He's on his way. Please inspector, relax."

"Relax? Do you realize how far in the shit he has dropped us? I could twist his neck!"

As he reveals his warlike plans, he moves the sketching easel to the center of the room.

"If I may ask, what are you going to do, inspector?"

"I'll put all of our artist's drawings there, one on top of the other."

"But he asked to have them back for an exhibition."

"Really? Instead, I'll put them on this easel. Maybe I can't?"

Pussett raises his hands.

"Can you bring me the drill from the utensils room?"

"Immediately, inspector."

Shortly they hear a knock at the door. Brumby rubs his hands together, with an imaginary soap that we suppose made of sulfur, for his face has the diabolical grimace of Beelzebub.

"Speaking of the devil..." he grunts.

"Come in, please!"

"Good morning, inspector. Did you call me?" Horace asks.

His "Yes, please sit down" has an ironic ring to it.

"Is it about the Unknown Policeman?"

“No, I simply wanted you to see my artistic performance - you being a fine connoisseur.”

“Really?!”

Brumby raises his eyes from the desk to confirm.

“What a surprise, inspector!” the other rejoices, sensing a possible redemption “Are you going to use my easel?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll assist with great pleasure. If you need advice...”

Brumby enjoys his euphoria and looks forward to the capital gain effect, after he will come into action.

“Tell me, which tool do you generally use for your scrawl... hem... sketches?”

“Well, I start with a simple pencil, then a brush.”

Brumby brandishes a collection of brushes and pencils.

“Like these?”

The young man doesn’t have time to recognize them, as he starts to break them one by one.

“But... what are you doing?! My brushes!!”

“Give up your brushes, they’re ancient stuff! Come on, Ferendeles! An innovator like you!”

Horace returns his gaze, as if seeing him for the first time. A restlessness, whose outcome he’s not able to anticipate, starts pervading him.

When Pussett hands the drill to his boss, the guest doesn’t know why, but he begins to smell the stench of Gestapo.

“Have you ever used a drill to express yourself?” our man asks.

The young man is unsure whether to answer. Is it a provocation, or has the troglodyte really been enlightened?

If so, it often happens that the neophyte, without any basic technique, wants to jump the gun on getting directly into abstract art, perhaps using unusual tools for shocking effect.

“N...no”, he answers meekly.

“Well, you’ll see it now. Are you ready?”

When the drill starts to rotate, Brumby moves the tip toward the easel, sinking it in with the malevolent sneer of the iconoclast. A disturbing black hole soon appears in the center of the panel, that increases gradually and, contrary to what happens in space, it does not attract matter but expels it.

Vortices of mangled colored paper fly to the floor. A puzzle of multiple eyes, noses with clustered nostrils, swirled ears, and ironed mouths looking like ocarinas. Finally, the shreds come to land at the artist’s side, revealing the nature of the slaughter.

“What the fuc... what are you doing? Are you crazy? My drawings!!!” the artist rushes towards the possessed man, who points the rotating drill at him.

“Don’t come any closer! Don’t interrupt the artist in his performance!”

Horace is annihilated and powerless. He can only bring his hands to his temples and wait until the end of the apocalypse.

The elderly detective, with the dynamism of a teenager, in the end kicks the easel and jumps on it to complete his job.

Then, red-faced from the effort, he tucks his shirt into his trousers, adjusts his hair, and glares at the artist with an air of challenge.

“What do you think? Am I post-modernist enough?”

“You are seriously crazy” Horace hisses exhausted, as if the blows to his works had pierced his body.

“And you are a fired draftsman.”

“What? How... fired?”

“Fired. Dismissed, sacked. We don’t need your services anymore.”

“But you can’t...”

“Why can’t I? You’re a loser! And with your sketches we’re losing face in public.”

“You have destroyed my artworks” Horace points a trembling index finger at him, his nervous mouth exposing late-expressionist tooting, his eyes like blades.

“Your works belong to the Police district. Besides, they’ve let me express myself in a live performance. By the way, if you want to collect the remains of my masterpiece, you’re welcome.”

“You have to give me my back pay...”

“Back pay? Ah, ah... Please, go away while I’m in a good mood. Otherwise, with your sketches I could jail you for insulting the authorities.”

Horace is now in a corner, dazed and almost knocked out.

All that’s left him is to withdraw to a low profile, and assess the extent of his Waterloo.

“And... and the statue to the Unknown Policeman? I have been working on it for two months.”

“I can suggest a place to put the statue, but it wouldn’t be polite. Naturally that commission is revoked”.

Ah, finally the inspector has pacified himself! After the anxiety of the last few days, after having settled the score now he feels light as a hummingbird.

“Pussett! Please escort this gentleman out”, he orders with stentorian voice. The short man enters and, with courtesy, invites Horace’s shadow to go with him.



## Chapter 7 – The Cop

When a cataclysm upsets the course of your life, you feel the need for another point of view. You cannot think of yourself as locked in a box for humans, on the outskirts of a town that haunts you with anxieties and noise.

The ideal would be a hot air balloon that allows you to distance yourself and to see, after all, how vain your labors and many of your thoughts are.

But hiring a balloon is very costly. So, you just have to imagine that escape, probably while lying in bed looking at the ceiling.

And therefore, on this night, a fly of few words and free from commitments would find Horace and Jessica with their eyes fixed on the sphere of the ceiling light, where it has alighted to smooth and clean its legs. The two are silent, batting their eyelashes in sync as their minds wander around recent events, before they open their mouths.

“I’ve been fired”, they say in unison, as if they’ve been rehearsing that sentence for hours.

After these words, they turn to each other, hoping they have misheard.

“Whaaat?”

Then they stay mute and confused for a while.

“But...why?” the man asks first.

“Why? Ahem... maybe because of my didactic methods...”

After that, she can't refrain from a sideways glance to see if she sold it.

“Absurd! You sacrificed your free time, you spent your nights with them...” the growing outrage and the ceiling light's round shape suggest the periphrasis

“...you worked your ass off!”

“Exactly that...”

Horace's questioning look is a pressing solicitation.

“I mean as a metaphor.”

“And what about you? What's happened?” she asks.

“I told the inspector to fuck off.”

After that, he can't refrain from a sideways glance to see if he sold it.

“But...why?”

“He's a hysterical dickhead.”

“Had you done anything wrong?”

“Nothing.”

But Jessica's questioning look is a pressing solicitation.

“Okay. What can I do if both criminal and witness look alike?”

“Come on, it was not the job for you.”

Horace sighs.

“And now? Both without a salary. How are we going to get by?” she queries melodramatically.

He is silent. She moves to a pragmatic level.

“Do you want to ask your grandmother?”

“There she goes, I knew it!”

“Sure! She's full of money, damn it! And she lives as...”

“... as a cootie, I know this song by heart...”

“Okay, you’re her only heir. One day our fucking life will flip over like an omelette...”

He nods and pierces a mold stain on the ceiling with his gaze.

“Finally, I’ll have a real atelier! Indeed, with all that money I’ll buy a museum, you bet.”

“Meanwhile...”

“Meanwhile I live on my resources! I won’t ask her for anything. You know she’s stingy. I’d only lose face, and then maybe she could change her testament, who knows?”

“Oh well, let’s wait till she kicks the bucket then...”

“Let’s leave it like that. Case closed.”

“Meanwhile she’s the picture of health, and we...”

“Let’s talk about something else, please?”

“Okay, what about your drawings? You wanted to exhibit them.”

“Destroyed. Lost! Brumby is a crazy furious.”

Jessica for solidarity has a grimace of disdain.

“And the statue to the Unknown Policeman?”

“Ah, that!” Horace feels a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You’ve reminded me. I have something to do. I’m back soon.”

Horace gets up from the bed, leaving Jessica staring at the light’s sphere.

In a corner of the living room, the statue to the Unknown Policeman stands covered with a cloth. He will destroy it, it’s decided.

He removes the cloth, takes a hammer, breathes deeply, and is about to hit.

But it's not easy. His arm becomes heavy as lead. A hidden river of moods and recent memories flows under his skin.

He drops his arm, breathes again and tries to focus, squeezing his nose between thumb and forefinger.

Then he tries again. But his arm feels like a puppet's arm, with braked movements as it nears the marble.

It hurts. He must not see the massacre.

The only way is to cover the statue with a cloth, and to achieve the necessary detachment by picturing it as a damnable figurative one. Only then, can he find the strength to hit.

At last, he does so, repeatedly and violently, feeling the mineral splinters darting away unseen, scattered on the floor.

Then gently, he raises the cloth to verify the devastation.

Unfortunately, the worst nemesis, the fruit of his casual strokes looks surprisingly similar to Myron's discus-thrower.

"No, it's not possible!" he howls like an amateur werewolf.

He covers the statue and gets back to hammering out in anger, until he feels his palm pulsating.

When he uncovers it, and Michelangelo's David appears, he realizes that the sciences of stochastics, statistics, chaos theory and the expansion of the

universe are mere bullshit. Everything is equally likely: destruction and creation alike.

He is tempted to use dynamite, but condominium regulations will surely ban it. So, he covers the statue yet again, and starts to hit with the utmost violence, gripping the hammer with both hands.

He feels the mineral decreasing in height and width under the sheet. This time he doesn't expect surprises, unless he finds garden gnomes.

He lifts the towel. Rubble at last.

He's exhausted, satisfied, and depressed in equal measure.

He goes back to the bedroom. Jessica is still lying there.

"What was that noise?" she asks.

"Nothing. Last finishing touch to the Unknown Policeman."

It's evening when the phone rings at the Ferendele's house.

Neither of them wants to answer. It's one of those grey times when all foreign elements in their daily lives seem to carry negative portents.

The perverse thought of a lifeline, however, a friendly voice, or the simple coveted news of a dead grandmother pushes Jessica to pick up the handset.

"Am I speaking to Jessica?"

"Yes. Who am I speaking to?"

The start is immediate cause for anxiety: no greeting at all.

“Who’s speaking?” she insists after a few seconds of silence.

“Where did you put the dead man in the closet?”

For a moment, she thinks her heart has stopped. Instinctively she goes to put down the receiver, but she knows that would not help.

Any man who reached her like this could do it in another way, perhaps less discreet.

“But ... who are you?” are the only words she can muster.

“Someone who knows...”

A sentence said in this way adds nothing to the previous phrase: indeed, the tone is so free from declinations it might as well be a motto taken from Plato.

Unfortunately, he continues with “... and can talk.”

This marginal note sounds particularly unpleasant, for her interlocutor doesn’t seem to be alluding to the aptitudes of a speech therapist.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

What to do? Ask for details over the phone to make sure he’s not a mythomaniac?

No, absolutely not a good move.

Especially since the man seems hasty. He doesn’t give her a chance to think about it. He demands an appointment. In her interest, he adds.

“And don’t try to screw with me, I don’t think it would be smart, I know a lot of things.”

The woman collapses, clinging to the handset.

To calm her new inner perturbation, Jessica takes a sip of cognac and dips into the bathtub, under a blanket of foamy water only a few degrees Celsius lower than boiling point. For this kind of temperature, in the presence of submerged humans and adequate spices, Amnesty International would denounce the conditions of cannibalism.

After a while, in the sea of still, fragrant water, two small tributaries join together, flowing directly out of her eyes. They are a mix of tears and makeup, dissolving into an image spirited and sad, very like Batman’s Joker, or some heavy metal idol.

The phone in her hand hangs out of the bathtub edges, while the other hand holds a cigarette between two trembling fingers, and switches to the glass with the amber nectar.

From that same phone, which has just brought her such anguish, she now seeks out the comfort of a friendly voice.

“Daria, help me! I need you!”

“Jessica? What’s up?”

“I’ve been called by a bastard who knows everything!”

Daria falls silent at this news.

“Daria! Are you there?”

“Do you know who he is?”

“He must be the thief! Who else?”

“Shit. What does he want?”

“He wants to blackmail me, Daria! He wants to speak to me personally. He says he has proof!”

“And you believe it?”

“What should I do? Don’t go? I can’t imagine what he can do.”

“Stay calm, you’ll see it’s only a bluff. I’ll go with you.”

“He wants to speak to me alone.”

“Okay, then I’ll keep an eye on you from a distance. Just remind yourself he can’t do anything to you. Anything he says you simply have to deny. Show him you are safe and strong.”

“I already know I’ll be scared as shit. He says he saw the cadaver...”

She articulates the last word distinctly.

“Shh! Don’t talk about it on the phone, okay?”

Right, she hadn’t thought about that! By now, privacy no longer exists. We’re surrounded by spying bugs. Who knows, maybe even now.

With that awareness, she recomposes her narrative register on the fly.

“Yes, yes, I understand, it’s obviously a joke ... sure ... a joke, ah, ah!”

“For sure.”

“I probably misspoke. Sorry! You probably understood *cadaver*, err, err ... but I meant *get over*!”

“Right, Jessica...”

“I meant I must get over my stupid fear. Hmm, err... it will be a joke! There’s no cadaver...ha, ha!”



“Okay, Jessica, let’s hang up now. Come round to my place soon, so we can talk about it.”

Jessica submerges her head in the bathtub, stays under in a state of apnea for a while, then comes up still holding her breath.

Meanwhile the undoing of her makeup completes the metamorphosis: her tearful face is far from the beautiful brunette we have known, but rather resembles a creepy mask. You know the diabolical look of Gene Simmons, the bass player from Kiss in the ‘80s?

Yeah, just that.

That same night a tired man, hollow-eyed, three-day beard, and prone to soliloquy, drives slowly in an old box on wheels along a peripheral road of the city. We see him hunched over the steering wheel, one eye on the road and the other on the dashboard, where he nervously pushes at the buttons of the stereo, in search of a sound that may appease his temporary mal-de-vivre.

“Fuck off everyone!” he ruminates equanimous.

“That shitty policeman, the school principal, the statuette, this asshole flashing...”

And he reacts with an inelegant gesture towards a big black car that roars past him.

“No more Unknown Policeman! Better this way. I created it and I destroyed it with my own hands. To hell with them!”

Horace's car stops at one side of the bridge over the river.

No signs of human life anywhere. Just the cyclical changes of urban automata: the green pedestrian at the traffic lights, the sliding displays of time and temperature, the *coming soon* in technology store windows, where the same bloody scene bounces from one flat screen to another. Plasma on plasma.

Now is the moment. He has already grabbed the door handle and is about to get out when he suddenly stops. He can see from a distance a human form, awkward and staggering, dragging a burden in a black sack towards the bridge.

"Incredible! There's a queue... someone else has had the same idea."

The man reaches the parapet with asymmetric movements.

"Who knows? Maybe he's a misunderstood artist too", he thinks.

If Horace decides to stay and observe from afar, we narrators do not abdicate our prerogative to mind his own business, and so we approach the parapet to see the stranger's face. Well, well, the man drenched in sweat, his tongue kneading in a rosary of bad words, is Walter.

He has the haunted expression of a werewolf, which prompts us swiftly to consider the phase and size of the moon above him.

After lifting the sack, and letting it fall in the river, he runs back to his car and drives away.

Watching the scene, Horace feels a nervous hilarity, and an awareness of not being all alone in this world.

“Who knows if he is an abstract or a figurative painter.”

Then he drives to the center of the bridge. He gets out, opens the boot, pulls out a bulky black sack and drags it toward the parapet. He pauses for a moment of concentration, like a weight lifter. Then he bends to lift it, staggers under the weight for a few steps, and finally lets it fall in the river.

You can hear the loud splash, after which he collapses for some seconds upon the parapet to recover his breath.

“No more sculptures on commission” he promises to himself.

While he's resting, he listens to the placid water stream flowing under his feet and watches the moon stamp over his head.

For the viewing angle, the lights, the silence and the prospect, he feels for a moment a metaphysical verve, like being inside a frame by de Chirico<sup>4</sup>. Too bad the only frame to be seen is a bicycle frame, ridden towards him by a district policeman.

He's round, middle-aged, in faultless uniform, with the frown of a man who wants to break your balls.

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<sup>4</sup> **Giorgio de Chirico** (1888 – 1978) was an Italian artist and writer. He founded the **Metaphysical School** art movement, which profoundly influenced the surrealists.

“Evening copper, tell me...” Horace starts, after muttering a *‘shit’* between the tonsils.

“Copper?! Who’re you calling copper?” the other replies harshly, clarifying the roles.

“Sorry. I meant... co-operator...” our man raises his palm in a sign of peace.

“Ah, well. And what are you doing here at this hour, if I might ask?”

The tone is obviously less curious than distrustful.

Staring at Horace’s poorly ventilated expression, the man approaches and inhales, thinking perhaps to detect possible alcoholic euphoria.

“It looks like you’re out of breath. You’re sick?”

Horace seizes the opportunity.

“Yes, right... I didn’t feel well... I thought I might throw up.”

“Ah! But you couldn’t?”

“Ahem... no... I feel a little better now...”

“Strange, because I heard you throw something big – very big, judging from the noise it made falling in the river...”

“Well, yes, sorry! Actually, I did throw up... quite a lot...” he confesses with his head down, looking like an altar boy caught smoking crack.

“You’re right, it was noisy... at dinner I gorged myself: stuffed chicken, pork rinds, baked peppers...”

“...garbage bag...”

“...garba...what?!”

Horace draws back to look at the officer in the moonlight.

“Hey, youngster! Are you taking the piss out of me?!”

Does it say *Imbecile* on my cap?

Horace does not care to contradict him, so he leans forward.

“No, I can’t read anything.”

The policeman takes a camera look like Oliver Hardy: rhetorical questions always have a boomerang effect.

“Less talk, young man! You vomited a giant envelope of rubbish! Or do you think I bought the story of pork rinds and chops?”

“Okay, okay, I apologize. You know, the dustbins were full. I regret...”

“Too easy to say I’m sorry” the other admonishes as he pulls out his notebook. “Congratulations, great sense of civic duty!”

He takes his pen and looks into the eyes of a deflated Horace, looking like an amoeba.

“If you do not mind, what did the sack contain?”

“Oh, nothing. Personal effects.”

At that, the cyclist, as if he was on a mountain bike, shifts to a harder dialectical gear. “Maybe I was not clear enough. It was not curiosity. You must tell me the contents of the sack.”

“Ah, well... you’ll never believe it...”

“How so?”

“It contained a sculpture devoted exactly to you.”

“Ah, very funny!”

“Seriously! I’m an artist.”

“Don’t piss me off, okay? You don’t even know my name...” the policeman says, vaguely flattered.

“Oh, I didn’t mean you personally... what’s your name?”

“Ahem, Benjamin.”

“I didn’t mean you Benjamin. I meant you in your public role.”

“Uh?”

“It was the monument to the Unknown Cop...”

“Cop? How dare you fucking call me that!”

“Sorry, I meant Unknown Policeman.”

“Ah, well.”

“It was to celebrate your protective role” he proclaims, pretending to believe it.

“And why did you throw it away?”

“Ahem... the statue didn’t come out right.”

Meanwhile the draftsman focuses his mental energies on policeman's notebook of fines, like a Uri Geller<sup>5</sup>, trying to exorcise it so that it closes without damage.

“Listen, young fellow, what you did is serious. And, given the hour and circumstances, I could take you to the Police Station for questioning”.

Horace raises his eyebrows in a look between the merciful and the transcendent, like a Renaissance crucifixion.

“But you’ve found me in good mood, so I’ll simply issue a fine for infringement of the legal provision...”

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<sup>5</sup> **Uri Geller** (1946) is an illusionist, magician, television personality known for his performances of spoon bending and other illusions.

“Fuck, shit, asshole” are just the start of a theory of mono and duo-syllabic words coming to his mouth, not uttered.

“Thanks, cop...” he says through his teeth.

“You say cop to your fucking face, okay?”

“Oh, I was saying... ahem, copy... may I have a copy of this fine?”

The young man surrenders and, under the low light of the streetlamp, he counts the zeros of the fine in its becoming.

“What’s your name?”

We abandon the scene as Horace disclaims his generalities with his head down. With a progressive reverse zoom worthy of Kubrick, our view pans back to spacing out, capturing the glimmer of the celestial body closest to us, the unnatural absence of any human manifestation beyond that dispute, and the incidental dripping of excrement from sleepless pigeons, which land on the handlebars belonging to our guardian of civic order.

## Chapter 8 – The Blackmail

The night has a thousand eyes. This striking phrase is the title of the background song played by John Coltrane in an outdoor bar. But the title is misleading, because it's afternoon and the number of eyes barely reaches the hundred, though all the tables occupied.

This is the scenario for Jessica's insidious secret meeting with her most recent nightmare, after the special training done with Daria on posture, detaching and dialectics.

Her strategy is clear: no concessions, no weakness, and above all deny everything. As a last resort, take him as a mythomaniac.

The remaining part of the job will be undertaken by that angel of her girlfriend, who is monitoring the meeting from a distance, with the purpose of following the blackmailer and discovering his identity to defuse him.

An outdoor bar, with its busyness, the clucking from the tables, the calls, exchanged glances, puts her both in the center and the periphery of the human universe. It promises a minimum of discretion, but also salvation as needed. Undoubtedly, it's a deterrent for interlocutors with aggressive intentions.



The man of the appointment is the thief, no surprise: he has decided to show his face, considering the cost of a threatening letter for a blackmail.

Daria is watching from a table not far away.

“So, what do you want from me?” Jessica hisses hard-nosed.

“30,000 bucks for my silence.”

Jessica has a smile ironed on with excessive starch, her lips are stiff, almost livid, and her incisors peek uninvited.

“Are you crazy? Where do I get thirty thousand dollars?” she replies loudly, so as to be heard.

People do in fact turn toward them and stare in curiosity.

Bozo feels at the center of an unexpected and sticky ophthalmic network, a horsefly caught in a spider’s web.

“Bitch” he thinks, “if she wants to piss me about, she’s miscalculating.”

She looks at him defiantly, and people at the tables watch them all the more intrigued after this blatant declaration of financial exorbitance.

To avoid embarrassment, he pretends to be an interior decorator.

“But, ma’am... 30,000 dollars is the minimum for renovating an apartment like yours...” he answers at equal volume, simulating a smile.

The people at the tables lose interest, probably disappointed by the ordinariness of the contention,

having most of them conflicting relationships with their decorators.

Taking advantage of a new privacy, he leans toward her with harsh voice.

“Remember that I saw everything. The corpse in your closet.”

But Jessica, trained for just such an approach, doesn’t even blink. She replies aggressively:

“Are you crazy? Which closet are you talking about?”

Again, heads turn in their direction.

“Um... don’t you want the wall closet?” he improvises, “it’s a fashionable solution, ma’am”.

And his eyes are wandering around looking for agreement.

The bar customers, disappointed again, turn back to chatting of their own affairs.

Despite appearing to save face, Bozo wants to clarify who’s calling the shots.

“Look, don’t howl, and don’t piss me off. Because – if there is someone here who has something to lose, that’s you!”

“What are you saying? Are you joking? Losing what?!” the brunette replies more vehement still.

This time the waiters stop to look at them too.

For Bozo, the weight of those looks is too much.

“Ah, didn’t I tell you? There is a water pipe in the kitchen that’s losing pressure.”

The bystanders are annoyed now. They puff and murmur, thinking that those building disputes could be done in a private place.

“For the last time, I’m not kidding” the man grunts with a stereotype smile, “and keep your goddamn voice down!”

Jessica feels revitalized, however. She’s enjoying herself, watching him transfigured at every answer, looking for plausible arguments.

“Down what?!” she bursts with lyrical tone “I absolutely don’t want...”

The waiter rushes to implore discretion, and a sweaty Bozo takes up the slack for the last time.

“Down?! Yes ma’am, the attic should go down by half a meter...”

Now the looks are more hostile than curious, so Bozo rises quickly from the table with a warning through his teeth.

“Bitch, you’ve put me in a crap situation. 10,000 dollars. That’s my last offer. You better have it by next week.”

Then he defiles among the tables, much to the peace of the onlookers, the waiters’ relief, and Jessica’s fresh gloomy collapse.

Put aside the brazen pose, her face is now sad and wrinkled, as if she’s suddenly aged.

Out in the street, the man bursts into a litany of invective as he crosses the crowd, almost bumping into Daria, who has just got up from her table.

Bag on shoulder and smartphone calling, the girl starts to follow from a distance.

Jessica answers almost voiceless, watching her friend go.

“What did he say?” Daria asks.

“He wants money, a lot of money, as I thought. I did as you said...”

“I saw. Too much so. A little bit more and they would have thrown you out.”

“He’s a motherfucker, he doesn’t give up.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll try to follow him, and I’ll keep you posted.”

“Don’t do anything dangerous. Please be careful. I’m going to the riverside – you know where. My head’s splitting.”

The blackmailer catches a bus, and Daria keeps on his trail.

Once on board, the man’s anger subsides. Standing squashed among fat matrons with fat handbags, Bozo suddenly feels the call of his roots, for old time’s sake. With his blackmail business temporarily suspended, he revisits for a fleeting moment his first love: the deft art of the pickpocket.

Sadly, however, he has lost his touch. His chosen victim recovers the loot, and starts beating Bozo’s forehead with it – a leather bag with painful metal studs. The other travelers help her and push him away. Bozo jumps off cursing, still followed at a distance by Daria.

We know that to soothe the anxieties of daily life it is often best not to focus on ourselves, but rather to

widen the viewing angle. In short, to have a confrontation with transcendent or perennial things. For example, if you're lucky enough to live in a city with a real river, not just an open-air sewer, it is a pleasant thing to sit upon its shore and to stare at the immutable course of the current, thus losing yourself in the macrocosm's phenomena.

Only in such a moment your personal dramas, that suck you into an endless vortex of negative thoughts, suddenly – *poof!* - (if you snap your fingers the effect is more impressive), can fade away in comparison with the immeasurable indifferent stream of life.

Thus, we find Jessica, sitting on the polished pebbles of the river bank and staring at a single frame, always repeated, from the water's endless movie, while her hand sinks into the wet sand and filters it like the funnel of an hourglass.

The current hypnotizes her and sometimes makes her levitate, inducing a drowsiness from which strange creatures of uncertain identity peep in, elves and fauns and the like.

At the same moment, the adrenaline in Daria's nature is finding its course.

She hunts her man from a discreet distance along side streets, slowing and stopping as needed.

The alleys of the old town become narrower at every step, dark and deserted, with a stagnant impression of decay and delinquency, and a stench of piss and hydrocarbons in perennial suspension.

Before long, a tension starts snaking through her nerve endings, the feeling of exposing herself too much, and with no protection.

She's tough, and does not give up. But when it's just two of you in the street, and the other is a delinquent, it's a good plan to stretch the privacy distance.

Too bad that at the following corner she realizes her man has disappeared.

"Noo! All this risk for nothing?!"

She goes on uphill, picking up pace: you cannot vanish like that, unless you slip into the main door of a building that looks uninhabited. Some of them are even cordoned off.

The fear that the man may have seen her and that he's setting her up for an ambush is gaining on her. And the echo of her lonely footsteps on the pavement threatens to give her a nervous breakdown.

Compared to Daria's shaded and choked alleyway, the light that spreads on the riverside is dazzling. It allows Jessica even to distinguish the details of an abandoned boat on the other side, and to tidy up some things in her mind.

Looking at her sitting on the bank, we could think her almost an automaton, as she dips her hand into the sand to filter it unaware. When she finds the end of a hair between her fingers, she stops roaming for a while and fixes her attention on that. However insignificant, it proves to be a testing ground for her mood, still poised between curious and disturbed, as she tries to

pull it and feels its resistance. What's holding it back?

A stone, a crab, or perhaps its legitimate head?

Okay, that's enough. She won't let a stupid hair spoil the sense of reconciliation with herself. Better to let it go immediately and lift her eyes to the sky to seek oblivion.

A glider, or a glider-shaped bird, cuts it in two along a slightly tilted line towards the horizon. The two edges of blue thus separated recompose instantly, like a wound that heals in a miracle.

A far rumble reveals the glider as a twin-engine plane, or a twin-engine-shaped bird, which hides as a dot behind the cathedral's bell tower, dazed by the bells' tolling.

It then appears on the other side of the tower, again as a point but moving in zigzag, as if gripped by a St. Vitus dance.

Her immobility contrasts starkly with Daria's frenzy, though they are both of them restless. While the girl walks down the last lonely and gloomy alley of the Old Town, she wonders if she should retrace her steps.

Her face is tense. Her eyes rotate like radar for 180 degrees. What most baffles her is the clicking of her shoes, rich with echoes which reveal her passage to anyone who's holed up in these slums.

Step after step the thing becomes unnerving. More so as she tries walking on tiptoes. In short, a bad feeling is coming over her.

Finally, she takes her eyes off the road for a second and checks her shoes. The nightmare is confirmed.

She's wearing sneakers! Where the hell is that heel clicking noise coming from?

She starts walking again, with a stealthy step. Unbelievably, the synchronous ticking starts again. Whenever she speeds up, the noise does the same. What is this? A trick of her nerves?

The girl is now paralyzed. Normally she is tough. She's ready to fight the human weakness that makes us thieves or blackmailers, according to need. But faced with this she goes haywire – her senses covered by a veil between the turbid and the torpid.

Without further thought, she starts running backwards.

She barely sees closed front doors and abandoned balconies: everything sways and bounces on her muffled yet noisy steps.

Then, in a courtyard she glimpses a movement and stops abruptly. In the threshold of an old workshop, the vintage silhouette of a cobbler is repairing a pair of boots.

Daria takes a confused step towards him as he's hammering a sole, and recognizes the sound that's been upsetting her. Another step, another stroke, same sound. Then, as she accelerates, he unwittingly increases the frequency with his hammer.

Phew!! The girl draws her breath.

Shit! He was the conductor of her soundtrack all that time! A special effects wizard!



With heart rate settling, she approaches the old man with respect, as you do with the endangered species.

“Excuse me, I am looking for someone.”

The cobbler raises his dulled eyes behind their thick lenses and slowly scans the newcomer.

“He’s tall, in his thirties, thin, and with an earring in his left ear.”

The man remains motionless with his glue tube suspended in air and his mouth half open, like a puppet waiting to say his lines. Then, he unlocks himself when a thread of drool is about to overflow.

“Ah, Bozo the blackmailer” he says amiably.

The revelation put the girl at ease.

“Yes, that’s him. And he’s also a thief.”

“In the sense that he asks too much money for his work?”

“No, in the sense that he goes out at night to steal from apartments.”

Daria bites her lip. Maybe she’s violating his privacy. Or worse, the old man might be his relative.

“Ah, yes, that too!” the other reassures her.

“That job however is only part-time, never invoiced. But I think he’s booked up until the end of this month.”

The woman remains open-mouthed in her turn, hanging on the old man’s withered lips and lonely teeth.

“What do you need from him? Theft, or blackmail on commission?”

“Excuse me, but who are you?”

“I’m his agent” he says, holding out his hand fragrant with mastic.

“Ahem... I wouldn’t know. I need to know what he charges...”

The old man hands her a card.

“Correct. This is his business card. There is also his website where you can find services and rates.”

She takes a look at the stylized graphics on the satin card, personal data, VAT number.

“Right now, we’re offering a three-for-two deal”, he tries to seduce her.

“Three for two?”

“Yes. Burgling three apartments but fencing the goods only from two of them.”

“Ahem, interesting” she pretends. “I’ll think about it.”

Then she holds out a flabby and glacial hand, like a Baltic octopus, as you do with people you don’t expect to meet again.

“Thanks. See you.”

The old man gives her a colorful smile, ochre from the tint of his teeth, and russet from the tacks sticking out of them.

Daria retraces her rubber steps, this time jumping lightly as a Ginger Rogers, trying to catch the fucking cobbler out of time, but without success.

On the riverside we find Jessica sitting, headphones on her ears, legs bent like a car jack, one arm resting on her knees and the other dangling, as its hand still filters the sand.

She is struggling again with that single hair: now she pulls it from the sand without breaking it, and is amazed by its resistance.

She is no more relaxed, partly because of the music that crowds her eardrums: heavy metal with distorted guitars.

How bizarre is human nature! She doesn't want to turn off the music, nor give up pulling that single hair. Perhaps it's because of the primitive attraction to puzzles and mystery, that our species feel inexorably since the late Neozoic, more or less.

Quite the contrary: the sound that besieges her is transmitting urgency and panache, the challenge that release her adrenaline.

That's why she grabs that damn lonely hair again, digging towards its root.

While she does so, we notice a shadow behind her, approaching with the slow and cadenced step of Boris Karloff<sup>6</sup> in *The Mummy*.

And right then and there we want to shout, to warn her of that disturbing presence, of the imminent danger.

But being us simple narrating voice, you know, we have our duties, contractual constraints. In short, our hands are tied.

Besides, we are also a little hoarse.

That shadow, we were saying, is becoming a person.

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<sup>6</sup> **William Henry Pratt** (1887 – 1969), better known by his stage name **Boris Karloff**, was an English actor who was primarily known for his roles in horror films, like *Frankenstein* and *The mummy*.

And when a hand leans on the brunette's thin neck from behind, her eardrums suck the last peak of decibels, dragging it up to the coronary arteries.

"Ouch!" Jessica jumps. Her heart takes a break for a few seconds, and turns on its emergency warning lights.

"So? How do you feel?" Daria asks.

"Fuck it, Daria! You gave me a heart attack!"

The blonde apologizes, caressing Jessica's hair, while she takes a deep breath, slips off the headphones and places them with the audio player on the sand.

"Did you find anything out?"

"Everything under control. Now we've all the info: address, phone number, website."

"Great! What would I do without you?"

Her friend crouches down and watches her with the care that we reserve for a frail child.

"And what about you?"

"Same as ever" she shrugs, "Do you think he will try again?"

"He's a klutz. We can keep him under control."

"I thought maybe I should go away, make a radical change."

"Don't talk bullshit. It's just a dark period. With a shock like yours, it's normal to be depressed."

"You want proof?"

"Of what?"

"Look at this one hair", Jessica says, pulling it. "What does it make you think of?"

"Huh! Someone who lost it. A brushing..."

“Not me. At first sight I thought it belonged to a head buried in the sand.”

“Oh, mother! You really need a vacation.”

Jessica starts digging again.

“Please, lend me a hand. I’m curious: what could be holding it back?”

“No, let’s talk about serious things instead.”

“Come on, come on, please. Just a minute.”

Daria crosses a suppliant face with raised eyebrows, familiar from some early Christian hagiography’s paintings.

“You’re becoming paranoid, I swear! Come on, move.”

She tries an energetic tug without effect. Then she digs in deep, raising heaps of sand over Jessica’s music player, without their seeing it. She carries on, her hand going deeper and deeper.

“It’s quite long”, Daria mutters with a puzzled expression.

“It seems like something is blocking it. Maybe a crab?”

“No, it’s not a... Oh! I’ve grabbed a wisp of hair.”

“Wisp? Very energetic brushing, then!”

“Could be alopecia?”

Daria immerses her entire forearm and pulls, pulls, until in a whirl of sand and gravel she reaches the root of the hair. She finally grabs and pulls out...

“Oh, merciful mother!” Daria screams, standing up brusquely when she realizes she’s grasping a human head.

“My God! My God! It’s not possible!!!”

Jessica gets up, holds her face in her hands and starts jumping on the spot as if she's been bitten by a tarantula.

The human head that her friend has just dropped on the sand seems to have been severed around the carotid artery. It is covered largely by thick hair, and has something like dried blood in the neck area.

The two girls draw back in fear, and engage in a trembling embrace. Now the early Christian icons become two, with mosaic effects drawn on their skin by the cruel light of sunset.

In short, you're there and you can't believe it. You've the urge to run as far away as possible, but at the same time you badly want to see it. Maybe it's a mask, a mannequin of who knows who.

"Ca...calm, Jessica. Stay ca...calm."

"His face!! Have you seen his face?!"

"No, stay away. I'll try."

Daria bends down. With unstable hand she tries to free that face from the sticky hair.

"It's him! It's him! Him!" she repeats like a mantra.

"He's your... the man in the closet!"

The two girls come closer.

If we were the head on the sand, from that point of view we would see how the mix of fear, horror and disbelief that the two women externalize with the blatant expressions of amateur dramatics, soon gives way to grimaces less explicit.

They show a growing anger, whose intensity soon overcomes horror and pity. The hands of the two women move from their faces to their hips, assuming the vague shape of an amphora.

“But Walter what...?”

“Fucking maniac! Imbecile! Crazy surgeon! This time he will hear me!!”

“I told you I didn’t feel safe with him!”

“I can’t believe it! How could I imagine I’m the girlfriend of such a shithead?!”

And thus, the two women leave the shore with the setting sun. They walk nervously, looking around stealthily, their shadows stretching on the sand, recriminating and gesticulating. The head, for its part, remains there, staring at the rising moon.

Among the gusts of wind that draw up vortexes of sand and oligocellular organisms, we hear the harsh tone of the accomplices moving away, step by step.

“Do you realize how he tricked us!? Arsehole!”

“This time he will hear me! Shit! I swear he will hear me!”

## Chapter 9 – The Head

In the afternoon of the next day the head is still there. Not many people walk along the riverbank. Someone seeing it might have thought it a plaster copy of questionable taste. Until we find a keen observer, a model citizen of strong stomach, who calls the Police. As is usual in the Police station, everybody passes the buck. Between the skeptics, who see mythomaniacs everywhere, and the perpetually engaged, who ‘I would have gone willingly but I am following another case today...’, the man left holding the baby is Brumby.

At that moment, he is committed to solving the Puzzle of the Sphinx of the Enigmatic Week, ritualistically licking his finger to turn a page.

For him it’s enough to disguise reality a little bit, tell him that it’s an ordinary inspection, death by natural causes. Just avoid talking of blood, cuts or knives, and you’ll see he’s ready to go.

You can see him putting the magazine aside, calling the faithful Pussett, and facing his mission diligently. Probably he asks along the way, with the necessary discretion and detachment, some information to help him solve the last vertical definition.



Once on site, and he sees the scam, it's too late. He cannot give up and risk the allegation of neglect of duty.

On the riverbank then, sharing the enviable corner view of the severed head, you'll see in the foreground Pussett's tweed trouser lapels. Far behind there are Brumby's moccasins, with the soft cotton folds of his trouser. The first pair of legs is firmly planted, the second restless ones make frantic steps back and forth.

"Inspector, how do you feel?" a neutral voice thunders from the assistant's rib cage.

"Well...uhm...ah, uhm...well...ough" is his boss's baritone answer, barely audible through the grid of fingers over his mouth.

"What?"

"Well, well. Don't break my balls, do your job".

This time the exhortation comes with clear voice, as his hand slightly shifts from his mouth.

"Well, in case of stomach problems, don't worry". The assistant indicates the miner's helmet on his head.

"Pussett, I told you. That's not regular."

"Yes, but it's vomit-proof. My regular cap is still in the launderette."

Indeed. Brumby has not forgotten making a fool of himself with the Kalashnikov affair – first because of the vomit in the beret, and second because of the innocent witness. Goddamn fucking artist!

“Anyway, let’s get on” he orders, as he takes the helmet. “Examine the head, come on.”

If Pussett wanted to stick to his job description, he’d have to stiffen up and say that the examination is not his duty, but the inspector’s. But he knows the lanky one’s weaknesses. And, after all, he’s waiting for a pay rise. So, he bends down promptly, not without restraint, to examine the head closely.

The inspector meanwhile, feeling a flood of saliva in his mouth, turns his back to reflect, dig into his memory, in particular to find the natural predator of barracuda, with one L and one P.

“Well, it’s a man in his forties - head severed with precision, probably with a scalpel. The head has traces of blood...”

He declaims aloud, glancing in disgust at the anatomical finding, and reporting into a microphone pulled out of his pocket.

“Pussett, for pity’s sake! Could you kindly avoid explicit terms?”

“But, inspector...?”

“Do you want me to fill the helmet up right now?”

Not for the helmet, Pussett thinks, but for his pay rise. Okay, does it have to be more delicate? No problem.

“Well, it seems he’s a man in his forties, with the head not perfectly placed in its natural position...”

“Much better. Carry on, with a more neutral voice, please.”

The assistant begins to grow into his role. Since his boss has encouraged him, he gets up, spits the toad from his throat (there is a pond nearby and these amphibians have a perverse attraction to the human oral cavity) and, looking at the severed head, he poses like a Hamlet:

“The cold dull limbs rest elsewhere, while the ashy face is enveloped by indomitable and tired hair...”

“Good, more pathos” comments the inspector feeling himself theatre director.

“The languid iris is turned to the cloudy sky in everlasting indifference...”

“Yes, I like it! With a deeper voice.”

After that, the assistant falls into a stage trance and continues in a crescendo, losing a bit of his self-control.

“...under the neck, the diaphanous severed jugular, with the pendulous veins and...”

“Hey! Not like that. Lighter!” the other breaks in, raising his hands.

“...the truncated vertebra with the dried reddish-purple blood...”

Pussett is now immersed in his recitative. It brings out the Lawrence Olivier in him, a dream that dates back to his school recitals.

“...from the vacuity of the pierced skull the gaudy glories of grey matter diffuse like earthworms...”

Brumby goes visibly pale and brings his hand to his mouth.

“Not like that! Imbecile! Damn ham! Groogh!”

Such severe judgment from a theatre critic silences him immediately. The subordinate stops at the height of pathos, the histrionics dissolve in acid, and he comes back to his ordinary (and convex) profile.

“I’m sorry, inspector. It was for the official report!”

“Okay, okay... go on” his boss sighs with resignation, “but with a neutral voice.”

While Pussett goes back to his sad litany, the inspector moves a few steps away and, for his inner peace, puts fingers to his ears and sings the refrain of *Gangnam style*.

In the background, words are scrolling such as "bloodstained", "carotid artery", "skull base", "hemorrhage" and "lamellibranch". The latter, far from coroner’s rhetoric, might be better kept for future solutions in the Enigmatic Week.

That same afternoon, two volcanoes overflowing with magma, and an oblivious, absent-minded volcanologist beside them, are walking among the bins of a peripheral boulevard, with the aforementioned boxes of twenty floors standing out behind them.

The two women are shaking nervously, stamping their heels in anger, as only metaphorical volcanoes can do.

“You made a fucking mess! Congratulations!” Jessica hisses staring at him through eyes of fire. She suffers from conjunctivitis and currently has no eye drops.

“A fucking sadist, that’s what you are!” Daria adds acidly, “a fucking liar and sadist!”

Walter tries shyly to lift a finger, as you do in school to ask permission to use the lavatory, but he's ignored. "Why didn't you warn us of your intentions?" Jessica presses "Why?!"

On the question's echo, lasting for a few seconds, Walter finds a way to break the dam and to be heard.

"Warn you? Come on! And would you have let me do my experiments? I doubt it."

Now Daria takes her turn with the killer look.

"Experiments? Fucking butchery, you mean."

"But... could you explain to me what's your problem? I promised I would throw away the body, and I did! What's the difference to you, whether it's whole or in pieces?"

The women put their hands in amphora pose, and look at one another in disbelief.

"Have you heard? He asks the difference" Daria says.

"I can't believe it"

"What difference?! The same difference that exists between an accidental death and the monster of Milwaukee!"<sup>7</sup> She stretches the final 'ee' of the town's name.

"You're not a doctor" she points at him with a trembling finger, "you are a monster!! Monsteeeer!!"

As her boyfriend's bronze face looks at her with compassion, the blonde storms in, punching him on the chest.

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<sup>7</sup> **Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer** (1960 – 1994), also known as the **Milwaukee Monster**, was an American serial killer.

The Volcano Jessica is less eruptive, in view of her relative lack of intimacy. She thinks it's appropriate to intervene as peacemaker at this point.

"Daria, please, stop it."

"Daria, calm down!" the pathologist exhorts persuasively. "I know you won't understand me, but it was a unique opportunity! I am doing an experimental thesis on anatomy, and if I succeed..."

Daria, shocked and indifferent to such arguments, plugs her ears.

"I don't even want to know about it! You are a monster and a liar!"

Ascertained that the delights of anatomy are an unlikely common denominator, Walter tries at least to set their minds at rest on the legal aspect.

"Really, I don't understand! That dead body, now in pieces, can never be linked to you!"

"That's not the point!" Jessica replies didactic, feeling like a teacher again. "It is not very pleasant to find your dead lover's head in your hands. It's a shock, do you understand?!"

Walter nods.

"You just had to tell us, and we would have understood", she concludes with a bitter smile.

"You should have told me! Fucking stupid!" Daria agrees, from a different dictionary, "if you love someone you have to share everything!"

"Even a necropsy?" he points out.

"Yes, even a nepso... nesco...whatever the fucking thing is!!"

“Okay, I apologize. I’ll remember, next time.”

The two volcanoes are running short on lapilli. For her part, Jessica cannot forget what they both did for her when she was on the verge of a breakdown. She wants to make the effort to pacify them, so grasps their hands and pulls them towards each other.

“Come on, come on... now let’s make peace”

“No, I can’t. I’m still pissed as hell.”

The brunette insists on the sensory track, however. She’s sure that is only a momentary disenchantment for Daria. So, she pushes this unlikely Dr. Frankenstein, awkward as a beginner in a paso doble, toward his lover.

“Come on, Walter. Hug her, take her hand.”

Daria is shaken, it’s true. But that fanatical arsehole who sometimes talks like an idiot and sometimes disarms her with his candor, well, she knows, she can’t do without him. After all she expects a conciliatory gesture. So, in her indifference she looks at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Okay, no problem” he says, feeling himself demoted to an inept kid.

For his part, Walter too is aware of his appeal to the brunette: she’s angry, but her eyes betray her.

And he knows that his easygoing tone gets a hold on the girls, dissolves their tensions, sometimes frees them into an irreverent laughter. He has only to recover the tuning.

And now that he's ready to offer his hand, damn it!, he has a last desecrating flash of stubbornness. He cannot resist: linear and predictable things are not for him.

She's there waiting for him, as he pulls a hand out of his jacket pocket and shyly holds it out. She stares him right in the eyes, wanting to read that right mix of compunction and devotion, while her slender hand with its thin fingers and red varnished nails floats in mid-air, ready for the shake of forgiveness.

At last, she shakes that blessed hand, and immediately her boyfriend's face turns radiant, too radiant. And she smiles accordingly, even though she doesn't understand. But only for a second, because something else doesn't add up.

She feels that hand cold, wet, knotty, almost as if...

And then Walter laughs and takes one step back, leaving his hand still in her shake. Then he takes two steps, then three. Too far. Not even an orangutan has an arm as long as that...

"Oops ... it was left in my pocket!" he adds, like a TV magician.

Daria finally lowers her gaze at the hand she is shaking, and starts screaming like one possessed.

"What a fuck...?! Bastaaaard!! Monsteer!!!"

From her hand is hanging the right limb of our friend the corpse, severed at the wrist.

The girl, almost maddened by disgust, gets rid of it only after a few moments, throwing it against him.



Pissed off black, she jumps on the place hugged by Jessica, and pulls out such a chain of inarticulate curses and noises, that it seems unlikely they can all come from her small rib cage.

Walter lifts the severed hand from the ground, dampens his smile, and remains disarmed.

It takes little to realize that he feels like a bloody dickhead again, and how abysmal is the gap between his sense of humor and others', especially the female one.

At first, it had seemed a hilarious prank. Idiot.

He tries to construct a small dam against the flood of insults, with a "honey, it was just a joke...", but the row of "manic, lunatic, motherfucker, you've lost your mind, you're dead to me" reduces him to impotence. His passion for anatomical jokes is recalibrated forever.

By the way, talking about anatomy, if on one side somebody is getting angry because of a severed hand, on another side somebody else is discussing around a severed head.

To be precise, in that same moment, Brumby is pulling his fingers out of his ears completing the last refrain of *Gangnam style* and dancing discreetly, while Pussett has just finished dictating to his recorder the report for the Police district.

Sadly, however, his professional ethics force him to a question that will be unpleasant to his boss's just liberated ears.

“Inspector, maybe we should be looking for the rest of the body now?”

“Do you think so?” he asks, hoping his assistant is joking. But, faced with his neutral and unpleasantly zealous expression, the inspector surrenders.

“Bollocks! Well, be quick then. Try digging with your helmet.”

Probably, yes, the official procedure would require waiting for the appropriate tools to be delivered, but he knows too well the slothful pace of Police department bureaucracy. Better a Do-it-Yourself approach – especially if the ‘Yourself’ does not happen to be you.

Pussett starts to dig in the area near the head, partly with his hands, partly with the helmet. Brumby, standing in front of him, looks at his face, trying to catch from his expressions the proximity to their goal. After a while Pussett stops with a questioning frown.

“Have you hit something? The human trunk?” the boss asks swallowing a toad (and intending as soon as possible to request the drainage of that pond).

“I wouldn’t know. It’s surely something small. I’m afraid the body is not whole, but dismembered.”

“Shit! We’ll be here until night-fall.”

Then he crouches to participate, at least emotionally, in the efforts of his assistant. He stares at him while he digs and pulls out something, and grinds his teeth.

“I don’t understand what it is” Pussett says.

“You’ve the disgust written on your face.”

“Really? Please inspector, can you give me a courtesy mirror?”

Brumby extracts a small mirror from his pocket and passes it to Pussett, who looks at himself immediately. On his forehead, in childish handwriting, he can read the word DISGUST\*T.

“Ignore it. It’s my child, he’s learning to spell” he reveals wiping it with the back of his hand. “Sometimes while I’m asleep he writes on my face with invisible ink. It comes and goes with the tides.”

Brumby is fascinated by the intersection of such phenomena from micro and macrocosm. But, just as with crosswords, it’s important for him to make ends meet.

“By the way, there’s only one T in disgust.”

“Ah, thanks” says Pussett, adding this note to the bottom of his report.

“And let’s hurry, ‘cause I’m reading from your face that the tide is rising.”

In the aforementioned suburban street, where huge square Lego-style blocks stand smoking, our three accomplices continue their animated discussion.

“Enough! I’m finished with you” Daria says hoarsely.

“Seriously.”

“But... Daria, it was just a joke! Jessica, please, try to convince her.”

“What kind of a joke...” she condemns.

All the same, with Daria has collapsed after the outburst, Jessica wants to try one the last time. After all, she feels more confident if she knows her accomplices are in harmony rather than in grudge.

“Come on, Daria. He’s a fucking fool, but you know he loves you. And he’s generous.”

“But... Jessica”, the blonde protests, with the modulated voice of Billie Holiday in *Lover Man*, “do you think he’s a normal person?”

The brunette goes back uncomfortably to the aspiring Dr. Frankenstein. She puts on the decommissioned dress of a school teacher.

“Walter, come on. Look me in the eyes. Promise me you won’t do these pranks anymore.”

The student promptly lifts his right hand, leads the left hand to his heart, and seals off the severed one in his pocket.

“I promise.”

“And now I’m waiting for a kiss of reconciliation.”

The guy kisses Daria chastely on her cheek.

“Forgiven?” he asks.

“Forgiven” Daria confirms.

“And now let’s all go for dinner together. I’m starving.”

At last, the volcanoes have stopped erupting. They don’t even smoke.

Matters of principle have been set aside in favor of a healthy realpolitik.

The young man has recovered some of his appeal – graduating in the girls’ ranking from "crazy maniac" to "likeable rascal". He’s between them now, a reassuring guy with his histrionic gesticulations, as they resume their walk.

“Walter, where are we going for dinner?”

“Mmm, let me think ...”

“And please throw away that hand!”

“But...” he hesitates.

“Throw it away!! We’re not the Addams family!”

Along the street, they find a restaurant with a pointing hand sign, wooden: it’s probably a rustic and modest place.

“Do you think this would do?” he asks.

“Okay by me,” says Jessica staring at the sign. “It should be ha...”

“No, please, don’t say!” Daria tries to block her mouth.

“...handy!”

They all burst out laughing, and the girls follow the sign.

Walter holds back a while, then climbs up on a garbage can, removes the wooden hand, and replaces it with the severed one, having first arranged the index finger to point in the right direction.

Then he reaches the girls. Damn Doctor Frankenstein!

Meanwhile on the riverside, Pussett goes on digging deeper using his helmet. Brumby is standing, scrutinizing his expressions.

"I'm curious" he says, "where did you get that helmet?"

"Oh, it's a family heirloom. It comes from the good soul of my grandfather, a miner."

Sparked by the lanky man's interest, he opens his box of memories.

"He had a sensitive soul. He wrote poetry – even at the bottom of a mine."

"Really?"

Brumby is fascinated.

"Digging through deep rocks is like probing the recesses of the soul", he muses in philosopher's pose. He has recently discovered the term "*recesses*", eight letters, in a vertical solution to the crossword puzzle.

Truly, it's a common view that the poets, either miners or not, perceive existence as a journey of initiation, an immersion in the human experience, a constant sensation of crossing and be crossed: by words, visions, feelings.

In comparison, other mortals stop on a lower floor. Their feelings of crossing are limited to the cutting weapons, colon cancer and tapeworms.

Moreover, it's difficult for us, we who are so used to our smooth desks, halogen lamps and ballpoint pens, to figure how a miner could write in those days.

Down in the bowels of the earth, with only the faint light projected by his helmet.

"I guess such a light could not have been comfortable."

"That's right, inspector. My grandfather used to say that writing among the rocks is crazy. You tilt your head to illuminate the paper, but you can't see closer than your thighs".

"I can imagine: the helmet is made to illuminate at a distance."

"Every time that inspiration struck, he found it almost impossible to write in the dark."

"Couldn't he adjust the light direction on this helmet?" Brumby asks, checking out the heirloom.

"No, that's an old model, fixed light. The closest illuminated point was the crotch of his trousers ..."

"Poor man..."

"He was so frustrated by the light stopping on the zip of his trousers that, try today, try tomorrow, he became an ... ero..."

Pussett hesitates: "how do you say?"

"Ero...? Maybe you mean hero?" his boss suggests, recalling the romantic figure of Lord Byron.

"No, a longer word".

"Ero...ero... maybe erotomaniac?"

"Yes, just that."

"Ahem, what a pity. What kind of poetry did he write?"

"Love poems, dedicated to my grandmother Luigia: she was a beautiful woman then. Today she's an old pain in the arse."

"I'd like to read one."

“His most famous is *To Luigia Pallavicini Who Fell from Her Horse*.<sup>8</sup>”

“Did she hurt?”

“Femur bone broken.”

“That’s bad. And did she heal?”

“The truth is, it was my grandfather’s femur that broke, not my grandmother’s” Pussett points out shrugging his head.

“I don’t understand...”

“And it was my grandmother who broke it.”

“But...why?”

“She was never on horseback. And moreover, her surname wasn’t Pallavicini.”

Brumby sighs and raises his eyes to the heavens.

Meantime Pussett goes on digging.

“I’ve got some bad news. It’s not a human trunk. It should be a part of the body.”

“Shit!” What is it? A femur? An ulna? A radius?”

Pussett grabs and extracts something from the pit in a vortex of sand. “Incredible! You almost guessed it! Not exactly a radius, more of a radio – some kind of music player...”

Brumby feels proud of his intuition. These are exactly the fragments of glory that reconcile him to a shitty job like his.

“Does it work?” he asks.

“It looks new.”

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<sup>8</sup> Famous poem by **Ugo Foscolo** (1778 –1827), Italian writer, freemason, revolutionary and poet.



“Well. Keep digging, please, and see if you can find the headphones or the speakers. Better the headphones. In the Police Station they complain if my music’s too loud.”

Pussett hands the music player to his boss, and goes back to digging with hands and helmet.

“Come on, go deeper!”

“No dice, inspector. There’s an obstacle in the way.”

“What kind of obstacle?”

“It seems like a human trunk.”

“Fuck off” he exclaims dusting off the music player.

“Now what can I do without headphones?”

“Don’t worry about that, inspector, I’ll have a look for you in the flea market.”

“Good of you. Look, let’s suspend our searches and go. To be honest, it’s starting to get cool.”

Pussett thanks his stars, and stands up, shaking the sand off.

The head is still there. After recording the report like an experienced actor, the assistant nods his head toward the severed one.

“Boss, where should we put it?”

“Put it in its natural place, the helmet. And please, don’t let me see it!”

While the river’s wind blows vehemently, raising spirals of sand mixed with paper tissues, used condoms and bivalve organisms, the two policemen move slowly towards the setting sun.

Brumby is tormented by the head dangling in the helmet.

"Inspector, you've the anxiety written on your face."

"Really? Where did I put the courtesy mirror?"

"It's a metaphor" says the stocky man. "In your case, you've no kids at home."

"Oh, right. It's more than anxiety. It's the nuisance of keeping this trophy with me in the office until the case is declared closed. As if we were head-hunters."

The assistant looks at the head in the helmet with a dreamy expression. He's about to open his mouth, but refrains.

"Mmm, I know you have something on your mind, haven't you?" the inspector asks.

Pussett hesitates.

"Come on, shoot."

"Please inspector, may I take it home?"

"And why? What would you do with it?"

"I'd start a collection, preserved in formaldehyde."

"But weren't you collecting beer bottle tops?"

"Yes, inspector. Don't remind me. I had a thousand of them, from all over the world! But my wife threw them out!"

The inspector is shocked by the poignant episode of domestic life, that should make us think, for it could happen to any of us. But the man's impassive face shows that he has overcome the trauma by now, even if it costed him a fair few psychotherapy sessions.

"What a pity."

"Sure. With human heads instead, I'm safe. She wouldn't touch them."

Brumby stops to think it over.

“Well, okay. Take it home until the investigation is over.”

Pussett is happy as a child.

“Thank you very much, inspector! Oh, and as for those headphones, no problem, I’ll find some as soon as possible!”

The two Police officers walk slowly along the riverside, reconciled with their personal sense of universal order.

Behind them, the sun casts shadows of two small bodies with very long legs like mantis, two oval heads as tarsier, and the severed head in the helmet in the shape of a cephalopod whose name we’ve currently forgotten.

## Chapter 10 – The Burglary

These days it is not easy for a freelancer to make ends meet. Using a commonplace, better to dance at two weddings than sit still.

So, once you realize that blackmail does not pay - or it takes longer than the frequency with which you empty your refrigerator – it is better to go back to your first love: theft without dexterity, possibly in an apartment. Thus, Bozo finds himself by night crossing an unknown threshold with the canonical crowbar.

After entering, the usual ritual: put the crowbar in the backpack, wear the gloves, turn on the torch, swear because the battery is almost dead and the light is flickering.

At first glance, the house has that stench of old age and tastelessness. But Bozo knows this doesn't exclude the possibility of hidden joys (earring or bracelets, possibly diamond).

He moves in the gloom towards a large space whose contours he can vaguely discern, from the drapery of curtains to the edges of furniture.

The silence is broken only by the ticking of a grandfather clock.

Looked at closely, the decor appears retro, lacking in taste, a combination of improbable and unpredictable.

He finds a mother-of-pearl figurine and a silver ashtray, and slips both in his backpack. Then he finds a pendant: as usual, he bites with the premolar to check the authenticity.

But the repeatedly postponed dental appointment cries out for revenge: his open mouth by pain, he succeeds in not producing sounds.

When in doubt, he slips the pendant in his pocket.

Then, while his torch scans around like a control tower's radar, another light beam crosses his.

"Fuck..."

Instinctively, his hand slips to his pocket to grab any tool which may defend the right to freedom of burglary.

But his choice not to bring any handguns with him sometimes pays the price. The only thing he finds is the deck of business cards provided by his agent cobbler.

He's expecting a scream from that light. A "*who's there?*", or maybe a shot. Really, he should hide, or escape.

But he loves the risk. He's a gambler, not used to giving up. So, he finds himself stepping slowly and silently towards the light, surprised that he doesn't hear voices, and... at the end, once in a lifetime, he gets away with.

The glow doesn't come from warlike humans, but from the lamp of an old helmet resting on a cabinet. Who knows, a faulty contact perhaps?

“Strange” Bozo turns off the light on the helmet.

“I can’t believe it. I’m robbing into a miner’s house” he mumbles, doubting the wealth of the spoils “with all due respect.”

In truth, he doesn’t know, we would say that it’s much worse, considering that he entered Pussett’s house, and he’s confronting a family heirloom.

But he can’t back off by now. The dancing floor and the DJ are all for him.

He approaches the sofa, smoothing its back in the penumbra, and glimpses a slice of pizza on a plate on a coffee table. Yes, he knows, he should focus on his work and be quick, but his Gandhian empty stomach causes him to salivate like an infant. He gulps it down in one bite.

Indeed, he does more: he drinks from a glass at his side in which ice cubes are joyfully floating.

Rather unpleasant drink, the thief remarks, vaguely reminiscent of mouthwash. His mouth still holds the liquid, ready to slide into the esophagus when, staring at the glass in backlight, he realizes that the ice cubes are not so joyful, and not so cubic.

In the liquid he identifies the unequivocal shape of a denture, an ashen and sinister evocation of decadence. Bozo spits out the mouth contents immediately, and smooths his tongue with the back of his hand, like a cat.

And a moment later he grasps that the couch is occupied by a desiccated old woman, the sleeping owner of the denture. Exposed to the antiseptic

shower, she wakes suddenly, gesticulating with the over-emphasis of the silent movies.

“Who’s there? Who are you?”

We imagine to see the text panel in old Garamond font, and a honky tonk piano sound in the background.

Bozo, surprised at first, then ready to react, crouches and takes her hand.

“Um... don’t worry, my lady. Everything is under control. You simply fainted.”

“But...who are you?”

“Me...who am I? I am... I am the doctor, don’t you remember?”

“What doctor are you talking about?!” she asks aloud

“I know my doctor very well!”

The woman is composed of outdated bones covered in spotted skin, like a salamander, whose elasticity coefficient seems so low that if you pinched it, it would stay fixed like plasticine.

“Shhh! I’m from the emergency medical services...you didn’t feel well.”

“But...what are you saying?” she replies annoyed “I’m healthy as a fish!”

Bozo has his doubts about the fish metaphor, for the only natatorial appendage of the lady would seem to be precisely the dentures. But his priority is to activate the silencer, before someone rushes in.

“Shh! Please, lady! Are you sure you’re healthy? I see a worrying bulge on your forehead...

“Really? Where?” she touches the point indicated with distrust.

“Let me see” he approaches the old woman.

She exposes herself to the examination. The man bows his head, takes a run-up and gives her a head butt.

She passes out, and Bozo lays her down on the couch.

“Everything happens to me” he sighs, passing a handkerchief over his forehead.

Then he goes back to fathom the living room shelves and drawers, collecting in his backpack any small objects of uncertain value, porcelain and crystal, which might be bonbons worth a few dollars.

In a drawer, he finds a ring that seems to be gold.

Automatically, he brings it to his mouth, but the molar twinge stops him just in time. He contemplates it doubtful, as suddenly a Machiavellian idea enlighten him.

He returns to the old lady’s glass, takes the denture and, holding it like a puppeteer, uses it to bite. The false ring doesn’t stand a chance.

“Where the hell I ended up?” he growls, trampling on the fragments.

On the contrary he’s admired by the denture, he caresses its reliefs and seeks out the brand among the molars, before letting it fall into the backpack.

He wanders a little more around the arid house, beginning to regret the warmth of his long-abandoned blankets.

Now it is the turn of the bookcase. Discouraged, he runs his eyes over the shelves from bottom to top, as



he's used to doing in the supermarket, searching cheaper products to buy (to keep company with the stolen ones).

Fake books, fake antique vases, fake memory albums, but real miner's helmets.

"It's a miserable house, holy shit..."

Then next to a wedding photo in a silver frame with acanthus leaves he sees a beautiful glass jar.

Now imagine yourself in his place.

You wouldn't believe the contents at first. You'd think it's a joke. You'd crinkle your eyes, and smile with a comment like: "Come on! It looks like... ah, ah, come on! It's not like we're in a horror movie!"

You breathe deeply and, on second glance, your mouth opens spontaneously, your scalp starts to tingle, your limbs become rigid, the blood flow rises, and your pupils dilate from sheer shock, as if you are in the dark.

In front of Bozo's rigid mask, a severed head floats in formaldehyde, almost smiling, its eyes turned upward as in mystical ecstasy, and its long hair lying in the fluid.

It's just him! That fucking Frankenstein monster in the closet!

He is paralyzed, incapable of sound. He feels dizzy, his look darkens, a solid mass drains his thoughts, and we can hear the loud thud of his fall.

Mr. Pussett sleeps curled up in his bed wearing yellow pajamas too tight for his prominent belly, and a tasseled cap, Foreign Legion style.

Such clothing is a rare expression of his free will, arising from the temporary absence of his wife, supreme interpreter of the homely good taste, both for the furniture, accessories and clothes.

His domesticated ears hear an odd noise from the living room and his limbs react instantly. He lifts the blanket, takes the gun from the night table, gets out of bed and tiptoes through the living room, adjusting the tassel of his cap.

He moves with abrupt and guarding motions, like a Starsky or Hutch with sciatica, bumping his knee against the edge of a chair.

The unconscious burglar is lying in front of the couch, close to his grandmother. With one hand, Pussett points the gun at him, while he slaps him with the other. The burglar wakes up.

“Who are you? What happened?”

“Uh?”

His brain has booted in safe mode. For a few seconds the sounds from his mouth are not dissimilar to those of a wild boar. Then, after another slap, his tongue comes back to spell out syllables.

“Eh? I’m sorry, I fainted from the shock.”

“Shock? What shock?”

Pussett looks around, and his gaze rests on his grandmother.

“Oh, I understand. She’s no oil painting. She’s almost ninety years old.”

“No, I didn’t mean her. I meant the head on the bookcase.”

“Ah, that! It’s a gift” he points out with a touch of pride “a small gratification from my job.”

“Like a bonus?”

“Something like that.”

“So, what’s your job? Headhunter?”

“Not exactly. But we could say that I am a heads’ questioner.”

“You what?”

“Head as witness. For Police sketches.”

Bozo stiffens on this revelation.

“You’re a po...poli...policeman?”

“Exactly. Popoliceman” our man shows a hard face in a yellow pyjamas.

“And I suppose...” the man lying down swallows.

“You suppose what?”

“...you’ll want to know what I’m doing here at this time...”

“Oh, yeah. If you want you can tell me here. Or later in the Police station.”

The removal of the gun and the more confidential cadence give a little respite to Bozo, who takes the invitation literally.

“I’d prefer here”, he says. “But really it’s difficult to tell...”

“Why?”

“I mean, to describe myself in a few words... it's embarrassing.”

Pussett shows a grimace of impatience.

"If you prefer, I'll help you. It's one word."

"Oh, thanks."

"Well, let's spell the word. It starts with B."

"B?...mmm... I wouldn't know."

"Okay, the second letter is U." the landlord incites didactically.

"B-U?... maybe you mean builder?"

"Wrong answer!" Pussett decrees, aiming the gun at him.

"Try again. The third letter is R."

"Bursar?"

"Wrong again!" the policeman hisses, pushing the gun under his chin. "I'll give you a last chance. The fourth letter is G... and I don't mean Burger King delivery man!"

"Burg...? Do you think I'm a burglar?"

"What else?"

Our intruder is sulking now. It was inevitable.

He fears scant respect for his profession from that man in yellow.

"I'm sorry you have such a poor opinion of me. Really, I think you're over simplifying."

"How?"

"First of all, I am a blackmailer" he says proudly. "The burglary is just a part-time job. And, as it happens, I don't even invoice for it."

"Ah, in that case I'll arrest you for blackmail."

We note in passing that the activity of blackmailer, besides not having a professional register, still sounds almost illegal.

“Excuse me, why? Did I blackmail you?”

“Well, not really...” our man admits, disarmed (though still holding his gun).

He is about to apologize when they hear an annoying noise from the couch.

“You have a creaky sofa.”

“Yes, I must change the shock absorber.”

“If you also need an upholsterer...” the visitor proposes, and he rummages in his pocket in search of a business card.

The squeaking goes on, growing in intensity, until it sounds like a psalm from the Way of the Cross.

Both men consider that a sofa capable of sacred sound deserves some attention. They notice, not without disappointment, that the old woman has woken up.

“Granny, what do you want?”

“Ouch! My forehead hurts. Someone gave me a head butt...” she covers her eyes with her wrinkled hand.

“Yeah, sure”, he says impatiently. “Please, go back to sleep, it’s still nighttime.”

“I’m telling you someone has bashed me on the head.”

“You dreamt it. Granny, please don’t break... ahem...I’m busy.”

“Don’t you believe me?! He was tall, with hair...”

Pussett has been the victim of her talkativeness for years, since he has harbored her, rather than park her in a care home. Once she starts, there’s no stopping her. She endlessly repeats the same old story.

“Hang on a moment, please” he says to the burglar.  
Pussett crouches in front of his grandmother, as the burglar did before, and takes her hands.  
“Well, granny, where does it hurt?”  
“I’ve already said. On my forehead.”  
“Where? Here?”  
While he asks her, he bows his head, takes a run-up and gives her a head butt, as the burglar did. The old lady faints again, and her grandson turns back to the burglar.  
  
“My grandmother Luigia. That’s the only way to shut her up.”  
“I know”, the thief says like a worldly man.  
“How do you know?”  
“I used the same method just now.”  
“Oh! So, you are the man!”  
“Yes. It’s a pleasure.” Bozo extends a hand for the official greeting.  
The man in yellow ignores the hand in mid-air, as an idea crosses his cornea.  
“Ah, so I’ve found the charge on you: assault on an elderly woman.”  
“Assault? How so...?! You just did exactly the same!”  
“So what? I am her grandson.”  
Bozo is perplexed. He tries to follow the syllogism with his stalled brain.  
“You mean I can only head-butt my own granny?”  
“Well, maybe an aunt too, if you wish. You should check the Civil Code...”  
“Oh, well. It’s a bit restrictive, though...”

“The law is the law.”

Pussett is pumped up. He is beginning to taste the glory of the arrest, like a headhunter bringing the trophy to his tribe.

“Now, if you will give me five minutes to get ready, I’ll take you to the Police station.”

“Oh, please don’t bother. I’ll get there by myself. I know the way.”

“I’d prefer to accompany you. I’ll earn points for my bonus.”

“One more severed head?”

“No, a Christmas cake. Heads only crop up from time to time.”

The Police officer handcuffs the thief to a leg of the table. As a precaution, he handcuffs the latter to the leg of his grandmother, and goes to the lavatory.

Bozo’s face betrays affliction mingled with indifference. He is used to succumbing to bad luck.

At least, he already has experience of jail. He will try to recycle himself as an apprentice upholsterer or a stage improviser.

Meanwhile a morbid curiosity, only partly curbed by repulsion, lingers in his mind for that damn head floating indifferently in the glass jar on the shelves.

He tries again to glance through the gaps between his fingers, as you do with horror movies, just in case he was mistaken earlier.

But no chance. The swollen face is there, mocking and cruel, all the more so, with the blood coagulated over the severed veins.

“Shit! It’s definitely him!” he has time to think before he turns away. He’s bleaching already, eyes rolling to the ceiling as his sight darkens. At the end he abandons consciousness again, this time collapsing on top of the bony old woman.



## Chapter 11 – The Inquisition

We would like to write something else about that familiar box for humans. As, for example, that at that late hour only one light peeps from the west façade: an unstable glimmer of about 40 watts, coming from Horace's bedside table.

He's currently stretched out in bed with Jessica. Together with her, he stares at the ceiling and speaks from time to time.

"So here we are. Both sleepless. What's up with you?" Jessica asks.

Horace draws doodles with his eyes around the usual damp patches near the ceiling light. He grins.

"I'll be rehired by the Police district."

"Really? Did they call you?" she asks turning her head 60 degrees towards his profile.

"I've received a summons."

"And do you think it's for that?"

"What else? It's certain, they won't have been able to find another sketch drawer after sacking me. We're almost an extinct species now."

Jessica goes back to looking at the ceiling.

"Well, I hope for the best. At least for the money."

"I can't wait to see Brumby's face when he'll be forced to hire me again."

“Please, honey, don’t assume anything. Be concrete.”

Then she twists her face with impatience.

“On the other hand, we can always wait for the billions from your granny... That’ll be the day!”

The young man stretches his cheeks with a Japanese macaque’s smile, and rotates his pupils like a chameleon to scan her galactic hills from the side.

“Don’t worry, darling. I’ll only request a reasonable pay rise. And he’ll have to give me my back pay, plus cover my lost work for the Unknown Policeman.”

“Come on, let’s hope.”

To tell the truth, from Horace's tales, she dislikes the inspector as well. So, she caresses his head vaguely while he lights up and looks at her, finally present to himself, and not prey to abstract digressions.

“Yes, enough with depression! I feel excited now, full of energy.”

He stretches to reach those hills, but his hand is immediately blocked.

He has been thinking about it. It’s been a long time that they’ve barely touched each other. Now could be the moment.

“Please, Horace, this isn’t the time...” the owner of the hills freezes him.

“The fact is, you know, adrenaline for the job...I’m feeling creative and excited... and I mean...”

“Horace, this is not the time!”

Horace removes his hand reluctantly and goes back to staring at the ceiling.

Okay, that's the way it works, it's a matter of oxytocin. We need to try again.

And he looks away, back to the ceiling's damp patches, re-framing them with a theme from Pompeii's brothels.

He would like to give her some pampering, but he can't find a verbal formula without sounding ridiculous.

Can one ask "Would you like any cuddles?", as if it was a yogurt?

Much better to let his own testosterone do the job. Formulas are superfluous, just as in art.

In short, he has to go easy, maybe a light caressing touch, whispering something exciting. For sure avoiding attacking immediately the main target.

The new approach is strategic in fact. A slow progression and an inexorable tactile game, which finally meets no resistance.

Still looking upwards, he injects the right words, fast-setting evergreens. No answer from Jessica. Good sign: she's softening as the outposts are advancing.

The caresses become bolder, persistent: he is excited to try it blind, caressing while his eyes are diverted to the ceiling. Again, the aim is the hills that now swell to the touch, almost elastic, and with an unusual smell.

Do you see? It's only a matter of *savoir-faire*.

She remains still, preferring to leave the initiative with him. This way, he'll only have to turn around in a whirlwind of sheets, grip her tight, and change to a higher gear.

And that's exactly what he does: jumping on her with a lascivious mask that doesn't properly suit an artist - more a horny wild boar.

"I knew you wanted it too..." he grunts in the hand-to-hand.

Nevertheless, something doesn't feel right.

A sinister creaking, a gummy consistency and a hissing of compressed air disarm him instantly.

Within seconds, both the libido and the cavernous tissues deflate when he feels by his side not Jessica's warm breath, but rather the aseptic texture of an inflatable doll: shiny, swollen and open mouthed.

Like Jessica moments before, the doll stares into empty space.

"What a bitch!" the former boar murmurs.

Caressing the rubber silhouette, however, he recalls that much of contemporary art uses such material instead of marble.

Not bad, he thinks. At least, in case of destruction he won't risk a spinal disc herniation.

For his part, the iconoclast Brumby has regained a vague cheerfulness, since he sacked the annoying abstractionist. He frowns less, and sometimes he even has the impulse of offering coffee to the vending machine.

Fortunately, the vending machine doesn't accept it. So, he brings his coffee cup back to his desk and takes a sip, burning his tongue.

As for the sketches, well, these remain an indispensable support for his investigations. The place left by Horace can't be vacant much longer.

For this reason, the very next day, a queue of young people of various shapes and extractions, whose sole desire is to secure a job at the Police district, parades in and out of his office, bearing credentials and references.

The aspirant of the moment is a guy with a flowered shirt and casual look, who speaks fast while the inspector skims through the pages of his portfolio.

"Do you consider this draft a face identikit?" he asks skeptically.

"Not exactly. That's a still-life with watermelons and coconuts."

"Oh, I see."

The examiner turns the page and focuses on another sketch with an expression between the incredulous and the discouraged.

"And is this a sketch of a face for you?!"

"No. That is a Descent of Christ from the Cross."

"Descent? Like a deposition?"

"Yes, it's a sacred theme..."

"Mmm... interesting"

The young man is relieved and seems more relaxed.

"We're involved in depositions too, but..." he states, to dampen any premature enthusiasm, "the deposition occurs later, in court".

The other nods open-mouthed.

“Our main mission is to catch criminals. Understood?”

The young man in flamboyant shirt looks at him uncertainly.

“Dear young man, as an artist I suppose you’ve never had any dealings with the Police.”

“Not exactly. In alphabetical order: assault, bankruptcy, burglary, drug trafficking, extortion...”

Brumby raises an eyebrow. The artist goes on.

“... homicide, kidnapping, urinating in a public place...”

“I meant professional relationships with Police” the inspector clarifies, with a cockeyed look.

“Ah yes, like corrupting a public officer?”

Our man’s earlobes start to rustle, unequivocally betraying his nerves.

“Okay, leave me your CV” he says eagerly “we’ll be in touch”.

The aspirant is an optimist by nature. As he leaves, he tries for a bonus.

“Thank you, boss. May I start calling you that?”

“Of course, you can. Or you can just call me daddy.”

As he’s saying goodbye, Brumby sees in the hallway a familiar and neglected silhouette approaching with a slouching pace.

He had hoped not to see him anymore. But here he comes, crossing his path once again. The novelty is that this time he doesn’t welcome him with a grudge,

but rather with a mincing smile, in which a careful observer would find a Luciferian tinge.

“Ah, Mr. Ferendeles. Come in, please.”

Horace stands in a pose he has rehearsed the night: aloof and affable, but not forgetting the affront in that destruction of his portraits.

This is what his crossed forearms intended, while he waits for the inspector’s words. Nevertheless, with his serene gaze he also wants to show understanding for human weakness, and willingness to lend a hand to the repentant.

“I received your invitation.”

“It’s called a summons. Please sit down.”

Horace sits, finding in that clarification one of the worst aspects of the lanky man: his petulance.

Of course, he called him to recruit him again. Where is the sense in quibbling if it’s an invitation or a summons?

In truth, he hadn’t even read the letter brought by the bailiff.

A long silence follows. Horace ponders his arguments and economic demands, while waiting for Brumby to stop leafing through a dossier, and pretending to be busy.

After all, he thinks, it must be very difficult for a man like him, so dry and presumptuous, to recite a *mea culpa*.

“Mr. Ferendeles, we made a mistake with you. We shouldn’t have let you go.”

His ironic tone doesn't reach Horace, who's focused only on himself.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. The main point is that I am here now."

"Ah, sure! So do you know the reason for this summons?"

"I can guess it" he almost winks.

The young man forces himself to avoid an easy smile, so as not to embarrass the other party.

The boss looks at him with surprise, but today is no day for contortions. He's weird, and it's his own fuckin' business.

"Oh, well! That will save us some time. Have you anything to say?"

"I have brought my pencils and brushes. I'm ready to start."

This time the inspector cannot disguise his curiosity. He stares for a few seconds at the eccentric subject, to understand what kind of game he's playing. Then he decides to take him at his word.

"You mean...? Are you ready to draw a self-portrait?"

Now it's up to Horace to interpret the detective's bronze mask, and to figure out his meaning. To draw himself? A self-portrait? Perhaps the inspector fears he is no longer capable?

"A self-portrait as a test? No problem" he thinks.

"I've been getting back to figurative art lately" he points out to flatter him.

"It doesn't seem a bad idea."



Meanwhile he hands him a small mirror thinking “no doubt, he’s out of his mind.”

That said, now we would like to make a point about how the lives of human beings, even those who bind themselves as mates for life, sometimes take divergent paths, rather than tangential. Often without paying the toll.

Not far from there, in fact, in another of those concrete boxes, which flaunts the variegated manifestations of the ordinary, we move into an apartment with lowered curtains. In the room we find a scene that has little unusual, as it repeats itself on the earth since the Pleistocene, or perhaps even before, since the Pleonastic.

It tells of a heterosexual intercourse between two of human kind.

The bodies that cling and rub and twist under the sheets belong, for the female part, to Jessica and, for the male, to a guy who for now is difficult to pinpoint. But we have some idea.

The difficulty comes from the fact that Jessica is above him, and we are behind him, and we can see only his scrotum and the soles of his feet. Moreover, we’d like to remark our reluctance in the role of voyeurs overwhelmed by our duty to report, and honestly we’re not in the mood to circumnavigate the bed. That’s all.

Jessica, however, at some point dismounts from riding, lies down beside her man and changes from the

monosyllabic phonetic of the groan to the richer expressiveness of a typical evolved primate: a balanced mix of consonants and vowels (in the case of a Polish Primate, instead, consonants are 90%.)

“Hey, don’t you feel guilty?” she asks point-blank.  
The man raises his torso, finally allowing us to identify him: he’s Walter, the pathologist-to-be.  
He looks at her as if to say “please not now, we’re in the thick”. Then, he jumps on her and restarts the well-known mimicry.

“Hey, can you hear me? Don’t you feel guilty?”

“Because of your dead lover?”

“Because of Daria. She’s your fiancée, and my friend.  
I feel guilty.”

She changes position, while maintaining the thread.

“Hey, come on...yeah, this way, come on... I feel guilty... yes, yes, deeper... Don’t you?”

Walter is concentrated, all inclusive, just like certain trip offers, and he’s delayed of some paragraphs.

“Mmm...uh? Guilty? Mmm...for the corpse?”

“Again?” she stares at him sternly. “I’m talking about Daria, your fiancée.”

“Fiancée! What a big word! We’re dating, that’s all.”

And he submits his tired tongue to some further stretching.

“Well, I can’t relax. I feel guilty.”

She runs a hand through her hair, pensive.

In the end, he exasperated pauses and becomes more formal.

“Okay, Jessica, you’re right. Let’s stop then.”

The woman looks at him surprised and reflective, as one does in the minute's silence during a match. Then she reconsiders the topic.

"Okay, I only mentioned it, it was just to share. How touchy!"

The ball is back in midfield. There's still the whole second half, extra time, and possibly penalties.

A different match, much more tactical, is taking place at the same time, at the Police station.

Horace interprets the invitation to a self-portrait as a provocation, but he decides to play the game.

Bumby avoids controlling him. He knows that an outside eye may annoy any artist, no matter how insignificant.

Sitting in silence, he leaves him to draw, while he goes back to thinking of the blank crossword's last solution – a challenge just suspended by that idiot.

Horace completes an unusually accurate self-portrait in just a few minutes. He gives to the inspector, who contemplates it admiringly under the lamp light.

Nothing to say: a perfect figurative.

Being a fair-minded and balanced person, the Police officer doesn't spare his compliments to his recent enemy.

"Very well done. I would say it's a perfect likeness."

"Yes. Recently I have sharpened my technique in realistic portrait."

“I’d call it an identification. You know, here in the Police district we sketch suspects’ faces. We don’t paint portraits.”

“Ah, sure. But in my case, it’s a portr...”

“It’s an identification! Here we identify the suspects” Brumby specifies dourly, looking him straight in the eyes.

“Dickhead! Stubborn shit” are the thoughts that pass through the young man’s mind.

“Sketches of criminals” the inspector goes on, staring at him harshly, “of murderous cynics, even of sadists that chop up their victims’ bodies...”

“Yes, it can happen.”

“... and maybe they throw everything into the river under the eyes of a cop...”

“You say cop to your fuck... Oh! I’m sorry!”

For Horace it was mere reflex, a piece from a recent nightmare. But this flashback is a key to interpret the inspector’s words.

“River, policeman... But... is it a joke? You don’t want to accuse me of...?”

“Exactly! Mr. Ferendele. You are under investigation for murder, dissecting, and unauthorized disposal of a human corpse.”

Now, we know that Horace, though bizarre, is a meek person who wouldn’t hurt a fly. These words cause him an inner collapse and instant dizziness.

“Whaaat...?!! Homicide?!”, he rolls his eyes. “No, no! It was that damn statue of the Unknown Cop!”

“You say cop to your fuck... Oh! I’m sorry!”

The inspector, not without deep personal satisfaction, feels himself suddenly a Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor. He finds himself growing in authority and even in size: statuesque, inexorable, gothic.

“The Unknown Policeman. Ah, ah! Very funny. Tell that to the judge. He’ll die laughing.”

The young man is getting goosebumps. Just a few seconds to pull himself together, before Pussett enters. Horace almost doesn’t recognize his own voice as he asks “Whom would be the man I am said to have killed and dismembered?”

“You’ll know in good time. We’ll have an identification parade.”

“That is?”

Here’s another thing of that good-for-nothing he hates: trick questions. But Brumby is above all that now. Unassailable and invulnerable: he’s Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, ten letters.

“I don’t know exactly. That’s what they call it in detective films.”

“It’s a line up” Pussett intervenes.

And there’s another thing that our man hates: showing off.

“Pussett! Who gave you permission to speak?” he says nervously. “It was on the point of my tongue. It’s a police lineup. Sure!”

“Sorry, inspector.”

Horace is prostrate. He would like to rewind the tape of time. He wishes he hadn’t accepted the call, and

before that he wishes he hadn't thrown the fucking Unknown Policeman into the river, and that he hadn't drawn sketches for the Police.

"Pussett, escort Mr. Ferendeles!" Brumby orders.

"Yes, sir" the subordinate responds with a martial tone.

"Hey, Pussett! Not outside this time, but inside!"

It's a joke, sure, the inspector thinks. But these are priceless moments of glory, the ones that make you not regret a different job, the ones you'll remember after retirement, and will warm your heart more than a wood burner.

Meanwhile, Pussett accompanies his artist friend and, out of his boss's sight, comforts him with a pat on the back.

How strange life is, is it not? Two people, who some years earlier decided, by some chemical magic, to knit their paths together, at that very moment are getting an emotional overload of similar strength but opposite sign.

While Horace is slipping into a drama that resets his life, Jessica is riding Walter and pushing her breast into his mouth.

"Hey, you're suffocating me! Can you hear me?" the pathologist mutters as if in a *déjà-vu*.

"Mmm..." is the woman's answer.

Walter extracts a breast from his mouth, glances sideways at Jessica, and starts fanning himself.

"Hey! Let me breathe for a second! What the hell!"

"What's up? Don't you like me anymore?"

The brunette is incredulous. A needle punctures the balloon of her libido.

“Of course, I do! The fact is that...”

“What?”

Meanwhile, in his head he feels the theme of a well-known refrain, sung with a *chansonnier* style.

“...when I was a baby, I was nearly killed by one of them...”

“It’s called tit”, says the woman, caught between irritation and astonishment.

“Tit.”

## Chapter 12 – The Autopsy

The next day, in the Police district the mood is high because the case has been practically solved with little effort, thanks to the zeal of a bike cop. When even the terminal ganglia of the public order, Brumby thinks, do their duty all the way, the investigative mechanism draws a benefit too.

“That cop, whose name I don’t know either, should be rewarded” he confides to his assistant.

Pussett almost suggests a statue, or maybe a monument to the Unknown Policeman, but he bites his tongue.

“Pussett, I need to ask you a favor. Please bring me back the head.”

“The head? Which head?”

“The one I gave you!”

“But... inspector... it was a gift!”

“I know, I’m sorry, but now we need it.”

The assistant doesn’t want to give up without fighting for his rights.

“But ... I’ve become attached to it by now. Besides, it’s been useful as a burglar alarm.”

“How?”

“The burglar I brought in yesterday fainted after seeing the head.”



“I understand. But now we need it.”

Pussett looks like a kid whose favorite toy has been confiscated. He even twists his lips as to avoid crying in anger.

The boss gets involved in his own personal drama. Just this once, he is forced to justify himself.

“Pussett, please be good. Ferendeles needs to know his presumed victim. I have to show him the head. Or should I not?”

“Why? Doesn’t he trust you?”

“Obviously not. He’s a skeptic.”

“What a pain in the arse!” the assistant exclaims. “With all due respect.”

The investigator, with an unusual gesture of collegiality, puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Will you go and dig on the riverside?"

“Inspector, I already told you.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about the headphones, I’ll pick some up at the flea market...”

“It’s not for the headphones. It’s for the victim’s body. At this point we need to reconstruct it.”

“So, it’s a serious matter for the commissioner?”

Brumby nods.

“I’ll even have to attend the autopsy.”

“Attend the autopsy? In that case the miner’s helmet won’t be enough.”

With the boss's hand on his shoulder, Pussett feels ironic and informal.

“If you want, I could find my grandpa’s wheelbarrow.”

Brumby observes him with a bronze face. He is not amused. He tightens his jaw like a melancholic alligator.

“Very funny. Pussett, have you ever heard of offense to a superior officer?”

“Offense? Yes, try *in-sul-ts*. Crossword puzzle?”

“No, seven days in solitary confinement.”

The boss’s inexpressive look shows he struck a nerve. So, the subordinate recomposes himself quickly, salutes him militarily and moves toward the door.

At the last moment the detective, aware of how precious his assistant is, dilutes the intransigence and throws the hook.

“Please, Pussett, find the rest of the body. When the case is closed, I’ll give you back the head.”

“Promise, inspector?”

“Promise” he proclaims, solemnly crossing his fingers.

We were talking about Horace, whose life has just taken a sharp turn.

While his experience as detainee awaiting trial is certainly depressing, it can also be a time to look inward and reflect, to dwell on his real needs before dealing with other matters.

In short, no matter how traumatic, to live this experience the right way may be a palingenesis.

He soon has realized that the little universe of the prison, frequent object of derision among those unfamiliar with it, contains human specimens not unlike himself. They may live dreams, suffer noble

tensions, and incubate them for a long time within those walls, without being suffocated by the infection of the outside world.

Take his cellmate, for example. Out of there nobody would have listened to him. But there he proves to be a mild type, positive, with cloudless existential horizons and an aptitude for precision verging on mania.

His name is Michael. He's a civil engineer, but he poses as a surveyor, a sin of vanity that comrades willingly forgive, captivated by his gentle ways.

He's in jail for failure to respect the anti-earthquake regulations. And also for another matter, if we want to split hairs: having walled up alive four people inside concrete pillars, one for each pillar.

In fact, only three of the people he walled up alive were his acquaintances. The fourth man, who was completely unknown to him, had been walled in the concrete for his obsession on symmetry.

It was just this personal predilection toward a universal order that got him into trouble with the law. Since the building regulations, as we well know, allow a maximum of three people to be walled alive for any one construction site.

Michael is very precise even in geometric design.

The hopscotch in the center of the prison courtyard has been drawn by him. You can see the accuracy of

the sign in the equidistant numbers, the well-marked boundaries, the route of increasing difficulty.

That is a challenging invitation for a man as irreducible as Horace. By now it has become a ritual.

He focuses for a long time, inhales deeply, looks away over the fence and watchtower, and finally tracks in his mind the jumps, the inertias, pirouettes and landings.

Every time, a circle of detainees gathers round him. Some encourage, others stare at him in silence, others place bets.

Hopscotch, you know, is a proof of redemption. Getting out of it clean means triumphing over your limits, cultivate self-esteem, escaping space-time cages, and somehow coming back to childhood. But, above all it means to win your fellows' consideration.

Horace compresses the tip of his nose between thumb and forefinger in a last effort of concentration. Then he leaps into the first square and lands on one foot. Lifts his ankle and projects himself toward the second one. Then a side jump, three pirouettes, a leap forward on the other foot. Finally, the triplist's kidney stroke, unscrewing and exit landing with airplane arms.

There you go!!!

The burst of liberating applause is the seal for his performance.

He raises his fists, shakes their hands, takes pats on the back, and glows in the looks of admiration.

Of course, even in the moments of glory you find a thorn in your side, a scream of some decibels rising above the hosannas.

“Hey! You've stepped on the line, it doesn't count!!”

He's Hugh, the Miracled.

In prison, there are no names, only aliases. You are baptized according to your appearance, attitude, or from memorable episodes. Hugh for example is dubbed Miracled as a result of an accident.

The year before, he had been crushed against the wall by the refectory's truck, without losing his life. When they reached him, expecting to find a sea bream in striped suit, their eyes popped at seeing him still in one piece, though dazed.

In infirmary, he was kept under observation by an oculist occultist, who listened attentively to his delirium, so as to extract lottery numbers for nurses and prisoners.

After a week, he was brought back to reason by the raindrops on the windows, the beaming smiles of a couple of kids, and the velvet touch of a woman caressing his cheek while shedding hot tears.

He opened his mouth and asked: “Who the fuck are you?”

The woman looked at him apparently surprised, then summoned her children.

“Sir, please do not pay any attention.”

“To what?”

“We are the relatives of your roommate, the one operated on for appendicitis.”

“So what?”

“My husband is still under anesthetic effect, that’s why...ahem...”

“So?”

“If you don’t mind, we would like to practice a festive welcome on you, before he wakes up...”

Hugh’s reaction was immediate. He gave her an unmistakably lewd look and simulated a massive erection with his forearm under the sheets. The woman and kids vanished immediately.

When he finally left hospital and resumed his active role as a prisoner, he was given the nickname Miracled.

As we said, this quirky Hugh is a rancorous guy. He does not accept the superiority of his opponents and clings to every pretext. Just the previous day he had protested by invoking de Coubertin, demanding the disqualification of Horace because he had a sponsor’s logo on his prison suit. And now he’s there complaining, and trying to invoke a line judge from the guard tower.

He’s just a loser, Horace thinks as he undergoes the anti-doping test.

Anyway, yard time is not just leisure and desires of elevation, but an opportunity for new acquaintances and introductions.

There’s a man who has been staring at our young abstractionist for a while, waiting for the opportunity to hook him.

Since at the moment there's a queue for the antidoping test, we shall come back to this later. For now, we prefer to fly over and take a look at the last stage of the investigation.

Here we find Brumby again, struggling with his demons: the challenge of attending an autopsy without vomiting.

About the city hospital, using a commonplace we could say that it's a piece of history. To be precise, the length of time that elapsed between the laying of the foundation stone and its completion, some years ago. In this sense, you could object that any building is a piece of history. And even we humans are too, if we consider the flow arising from the primordial soup, and the period of time during which our heart pumps blood.

So, it is no surprise that the city hospital is a piece of history, according to the stereotyped literary canons.

And from our side, we have no reason to waste time with these cloying preludes, being pragmatic narrating voices.

What's more, we parked for a fee (because we drove Brumby to the hospital).

After entering the So-and-So<sup>9</sup> hospital, Brumby wanders uncertainly through the corridors, wearing his

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<sup>9</sup> The original name was "Louis Pasteur", then it was renamed "Alexander Fleming", while the current management is agnostic.

usual trench coat and carrying Pussett's miner's helmet.

The hospital, conforming to the standards, is minimalist in furniture, with white corridors and cold neon lights.

"Excuse me, where do they carry out autopsies?" he asks a passing nurse.

"Down this corridor, first turn on the right, then second left, after the Burns Unit."

Brumby goes down the corridor, nervous and careful, ready to turn his gaze away from impressionable scenes.

If a stretcher comes toward him, he sticks to the other side as far as possible, and strictly avoids looking. But we'd be lying if we said his gaze is diverted altogether. Curiosity and piety in these circumstances engage in an arm wrestling match against repugnance.

Each time he takes a quick morbid look. But if he sees scarlet patches he immediately leans against the wall, and frantically presses all the buttons of the lift that start from the esophagus, to find the stop before the top floor.

Thus, the ceaseless traffic of stretchers and his inner tug-of-war combine to give him the curvilinear gait of a drunkard.

When he finally passes the entrance to the Burns Unit, he sighs and tries to pull himself together.



There he meets stretchers bearing patients with half the torso hidden by bandages, then others entirely bandaged, like Egyptian mummies.

Finally, he sees six porters entering a room with a sarcophagus on their shoulders.

He looks up at the door sign. There he reads "*Userkaf, V dynasty, 2400 B.C.*"

"Gosh!" he's going to exclaim "where the hell did I end up? A hospital or a museum?"

The answer lies in the medical record charts at the foot of the beds. Some of them display the usual diagrams with the hospitalization status, while others expose hieroglyphic ideograms.

"Excuse me, is this the Burns Unit?" he asks another passing nurse, who notices his astonished expression.

"Certainly, it is. But it's also a branch of the Egyptian Museum."

Besides wearing official uniform, she has the exaggerated makeup of Cleopatra. She shows herself only in profile, no matter how the inspector circumnavigates her.

"Really? How come?"

"An arrangement between the So-and-So hospital and the Egyptian Museum. There was no more space in the Museum, so they decided to display some mummies here, among other bandaged bodies, by thematic affinity."

"But how does it work? If I want to visit..."

"The Museum? Easy: there's a single ticket. If you buy a ticket for the Museum, you also have the right to visit

a relative in this department. At the same time, if you have any relatives hospitalized here, you can entertain yourself with a couple of original mummies while you're waiting."

The two-dimensional nurse flips her profile to the other side.

"Yes, but... how can you distinguish someone's mommy from a mummy?" our man says, looking smug about his joke.

"The mummies are sterilized and better preserved. Besides, the patients don't have a dynasty", the nurse answers aseptically.

"Die... what?"

"Dynasty."

"By the way: and what if a patient dies?"

"We have a special offer: cold mummification for free."

"Which is?"

"Evisceration, dehydration and integral bandaging. It also includes a pedicure."

Brumby would like to quibble with the Late Egyptian nurse for longer, to figure out finally if she's a hologram or a disguised sea bream.

But the autopsy is about to start. He must hurry.

"Very interesting... ahem, for the autopsies am I going in the right direction?"

"Other side of the corridor, then left."

Having fulfilled the formalities of the anti-doping test, Horace takes a walk in the prison courtyard, before the siren calls everyone back to their cells.

The man, who has been staring at him, finally takes the initiative. He has the sticky ways of a door-to-door salesman, of encyclopedias or vacuum cleaners, those who aspire to make you aspire. But his approach smells like smuggling.

“Hey, psssst! Are you interested in a file?”

“I don’t have a computer with me.”

“I mean an iron file.”

“To saw the bars?”

“No. For fingernails” he says, taking a manicure kit from his pocket.

“I’m not interested. But just in case, I could need one to saw the bars...”

The man is not discouraged. He has several arrows in his quiver.

“And what would I do with those?” Horace responds abruptly.

“I’ll give you a good price”.

“I don’t care. They’re useless for the bars.”

Hereupon the man puts aside his arrows and quiver, and pulls out a saw.

“How about this?”

The man is our old friend Bozo. Having removed the unsuccessful clothes of blackmailer, and worn the striped ones, he has recycled himself as a retail salesman.

The saw in question, just to be clear, does not seem to resemble the familiar hand saw. It's a challenging article, not suited to every budget: a circular saw operating at 1200 watts, with interchangeable blades. Bozo has pulled it from his faithful backpack, companion of many shitty figures as a burglar. Horace is speechless.

"How...how can you...?"

"Today is market day. The new manager doesn't want prisoners to buy online."

"Interesting..." Horace comments as he handles that technological wonder.

"...but I'm afraid it's too noisy".

"Well, if you need it, I've also got a low noise power drill for the wall."

While he's talking, Bozo leaves the saw with Horace, and pulls out a big hammer drill from his Pandora's box.

"For heaven's sake!" Horace raises his hands solemnly, just as an exorcist who intimates Vade Retro at a victim possessed by the devil.

"That drill brings back ugly memories."

"What memories?"

"Brumby, a fucking inspector out of his mind! He drilled through all my sketches."

"Sketches?!!"

For a moment the seller withdraws as if he had seen a tarantula.

"Brumby?! Don't tell me you know Pussett!"

"Of course. He's not a bad person..."

“If you say so...”

“But Brumby is completely insane. He destroyed two years of my work, the bastard! If I had the chance, I’d rip his head off.”

The purpose is unnatural for such a peaceful man as Horace. But he knows that is a wound that will never heal: his drawings were his own creatures.

“Oh, don’t talk to me about heads. They’ve been my undoing”.

At the memory Bozo diverts his glance, letting it fall for a moment on the boundary wall’s dick graffiti, but in fact just staring into space.

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that I lost my senses.”

“Uh?”

“Have you ever found yourself in front of a head in a jar?”

“A canned head? No, never. Only tomatoes.”

And with this last question, to which we hope only a few of us would give an affirmative answer, we get back to the concurrent story of our detective.

Brumby enters the autopsy room with caution. You can hear a subdued murmur and a buzzing, which come from people in white coats and naked machinery respectively. This is the worst thing his job can offer, he thinks.

If he could blend in with the environment, maybe take the appearance of a resuscitation machine, and thus be

indifferent to the sight of blood, he would do it without hesitation.

Provided, of course, he could still come back to being Brumby (as a resuscitation machine it's difficult to solve crosswords).

As he enters, his oblong and hunched shape doesn't escape the eye of an insider.

"Oh, inspector, finally! We were worried about you!"

The surgeon in white coat, portly and ceremonious, welcomes him with a warm shake of the hand.

"Good morning. Forgive me for being a little late. Is it ready, the...?"

He lacks the word. He would have said the human mosaic.

"The dissected corpse, do you mean?"

It must be his daily bread, our man thinks. That man must have cut up more corpses than the crosswords he solved.

No, perhaps he exaggerated. For sure, more than rebus puzzles.

Then he lingers, watching the simulated bonhomie on his host's face, inexplicably joyous, before confirming "Yes, that one."

"It was hard work putting it back together. But luckily, I'm good with jigsaw puzzles".

The inspector lets the tasteless joke fall into the vacuum.

"The main problem is that the head is missing."

"Oh, I'm sorry. My assistant should have brought it."

As he apologizes, a flash of hope lights up on the inspector's face.

“So that we can't proceed without head, right?”, he asks.

“Sure, we can! Don't worry.”

A forced smile and a mind-scanned "fuck!" accompany that reassurance.

“By the way, I'm Dr. De'Ath, but you can call me Mort.”

“Mort?”

“Short for Mortimer, my name.”

Brumby holds out his hand, as the pathologist hands him a surgical mask and gloves.

“Could you wear these, please? The operating room is an antiseptic environment.”

Seeing himself in the mirror, in surgical gown with cap and protective mask, Brumby barely recognizes himself.

“My mother, bless her soul, should see me now”, he muses. She had always dreamed of her son becoming a doctor, possibly even a surgeon.

During his teenage years, however, she had had her first serious doubts about his vocation. While his companions clandestinely swapped glossy magazines exhibiting female anatomy and physiology, he stood on his own.

When one day she discovered the secret hiding place of her son's magazines, the flush tank in the bathroom, at first, she smiled with pride and tenderness for her little man.

But, having wrung and dried the magazines, she received such a disenchantment that she hardly recovered.

Not a boob, an ass, a blowjob, nor even any intercourse: only a grid of black and white squares, with numbered definitions beside them.

An enigmatic son, facing fake enigmas, who has turned into a detective, facing real enigmas.

“Are you ready?” Dr. De’Ath says, handing him a creepy and sparkling metal tool.

“Here’s the scalpel. The first cut is yours.”

Brumby remains speechless.

The doctor speaks seriously, not a shadow of a smile. This seems to be the tradition in the So-and-So hospital.

Resolutely our man puts his gloved hands forward, and wags his finger in refusal.

“No, no. I thank you, but I cannot accept.”

“Please, inspector, for me it’ll be an honor.”

“I am touched, but I’d rather not.”

“Ah, no, inspector! Do you want to offend me?”

Shit! That man is embarrassing. His face is hard. What a fucking barbaric custom!

“I thank you again, but... you are the pathologist, after all...”

“What are you trying to say?” he answers with a touch of resentment. “Nobody was born a pathologist!”

“For heaven’s sake, I didn’t want...”

“Okay, if that’s what you want...” Dr. De’Ath mumbles, taking back his scalpel.



Our man feels bewildered, like the honorary citizen whose keys to the city have been revoked. But in the end, that's the least of his thoughts, since he absolutely doesn't want to visit such city.

"Please, don't be offended, doctor. Next time, okay?" he attempts a reconciliation as he follows him into the operating theatre.

The chubby doctor summarily introduces the newcomer to his staff. They present themselves with mumbling from behind their masks.

The only operator without a mask mumbles in the same way, so as not to belittle the others.

"Okay. Are you all ready?" Dr. De'Ath prepares his colleagues.

Another doctor, entering the room, raises both his hand and eyebrows behind the mask.

"No, Mort. You were the one to cut last time. It's my turn now!"

The newcomer is tall and sturdy, probably of equal rank, and not less bumptious.

"Forget it. You're a disaster with a scalpel."

"That's why I use this", he answers showing his laser as a weapon.

Quite a competitive environment, Brumby thinks.

The first pathologist looks at his rival defiantly, crossing scalpel against laser, as if in hand-to-hand combat.

The dispute between the surgeons risks to degenerate.

“Remember, there is fresh meat on the other operating table”, the rival reveals in a low voice.

On that statement, which Brumby prefers not to elaborate, De’Ath lowers his scalpel and gives way.

The second surgeon, for his part, reassures the guest.

“Inspector, using the laser we will be more precise. You’ll smell only a light stench of burning.”

The staff adjust their surgical masks, surround the operating table and begin their preliminary operations. Brumby nods and repeats in his mind the theme song of *Gangnam Style*.

Meanwhile, back in the prison courtyard, the revelations between our two inmates are getting down to detail.

“Honest to God! What’s more, I already knew the owner of that head! I saw him dead, rigid, with a hard-on, in the house of a horny nymphomaniac...”

“Nymphomaniac?”

“Yeah. She probably crowned her husband king of the cuckolds. With horns sprouting from his head like a moose.”

In saying it, he mimics the animal, with the posture of a reporter for National Geographic.

“So, I open the closet” he continues “and her dead lover falls on me. I try to free myself and a marble figurine falls on my head. Shit!”

On the word *figurine* Horace suffers a jolt: primarily as a misunderstood sculptor, and then because italicized words always conceal a mystery.

It's amazing how a seemingly insignificant event, such as being hit in the head by a figurine, might open your mind, change the course of things, just as the apple did for Isaac Newton.

"Fig...figurine? Mar...marble? Hea...head?"

"You missed *Fa...falls...*"

"Do you remember the figurine?"

"What can I say? It was rubbish."

Hearing such an unpleasant aesthetic judgment, Horace's lips ripple with blame. For the sake of solidarity with the eventual colleague, and reserving an option to get furious if the colleague turns out to be himself.

"And...do you remember the lady, at least?"

"Sure. Brown hair, big boobs, with a siren tattoo on her wrist."

"How do you know it was a siren?" the artist asks (he has always confused it with a codfish).

"When I tried to take her ring off, it started ringing."

"The lady's name is Jessica, isn't it?" he says with a bitter smile.

"Yes, but how do you...?"

Then the flash of the agnition forces his eyebrows to raise by a full half centimeter.

"Don't tell me that you...?"

"Yes, I'm the moose."

The silence that follows this revelation might be well depicted by a decadent expressionist such as Munch. Two faces stretched in pain and embarrassment, until they look like masks.

Then another siren breaks that paralysis. It signals the end of yard time, and the closure of the open-air market.

Bozo, with brotherly impulse, pats the artist on the back.

“Don’t think about it. It had to happen sooner or later. At least now you’ve got the evidence to get yourself out from here.”

“Right.”

It’s true. He hadn’t thought about it. Everything happened so fast: the dismissal, the charge of murder, Jessica’s betrayal. So many shocks to absorb within days. Even a lifetime would not be enough.

Stepping in the cells, his new friend takes him by the arm.

“Hey, I’ve got something else that could be useful...” he says confidentially, pulling out a huge pair of shears from his backpack.

“You can use these to cut the horns on your forehead. My personal gift.”

Horace looks at the utensil, somewhat disoriented. He feels suddenly flabby, as if someone had pulled out his backbone for a joke.

Right at that same moment Brumby is testing his personal backbone. He wants to prove to himself that

blood is just a fluid like any other, and that his reaction is little more than a stupid habit, probably dragged from childhood. He simply never seriously applied himself to a dignified removal.

And, you know, the habits of years can encrust, calcify, and become integral to your personality. Instinct fights against reason.

With this acute awareness, he submits himself to the test, experiencing this alien routine just for once in his life.

It must be said, the halo of sanctity that emanates from a surgical team, either to save a life or to investigate a death, is something you feel on your skin.

The experience will be the testing ground for his redemption, just like the deep sea for a novice swimmer.

He stands as a guest spectator, alone in the front row. His eyes are darting everywhere: on surgical gowns and caps, on the flashing lights of machinery, on the concentrated faces of that handful of masked heroes, on the mobile trolley from which they grab their instruments.

“Something else to watch out for?” his restless eyes seem to ask.

“Well, there’s always the operating table” an unidentified voice bursts in, infiltrating the apologue.

“Okay, maybe later. It seems there is still other stuff to peer at, the lights on the ceiling, or the fire extinguisher over there in the corner...”

In just a few minutes, the inspector soaks up the climate, the shapes and the colors, postponing only that intimacy with the red vermillion.

All in good time, he considers in retrospect: at the end of the day, he's a reformist, not a revolutionary. And he learned to float close to the shore.

Then, when he feels the laser's ultrasonic hiss and peeks a puff of smoke rising toward the spotlights, he's convinced he's already made a big step forward. For the future, who knows?

As a spectator, he sets the popcorn bucket aside, takes a final sip of Pepsi, and drops his eyelids to give rest to his tired eyes. At his age, after all, with high blood pressure, better not to risk.

In the dark, and amid the vacuum of thoughts, the olfactory sense takes the proscenium. The smell of burning is growing stronger, evoking lifeless torn flesh, exposed nerves and scarlet rivers, clotted or fluid.

He tries to escape the image, and he tightens the miner's helmet wrapped in its cellophane. In the worst case, would vomit be considered aseptic?

He thinks not. If that happens, he'll have to call a timeout.

But it's better to abandon these subversive anxieties and let the mind wander...

Thus, he focuses on certain relaxing bucolic scenes of his childhood: harvesters, gleaners, rice workers, waves of wheat and lavender fields.

Around here, however, the only kind of lavender you can find is the gastric one, a painful lavage, which again overloads his thoughts as they're taking off, forcing them to a crash landing on the bloody operating table.

The hiss is stronger and the smell of burning pervasive: that's enough to remind him hunters with rifles, or ancestors with bows and arrows, depicted in the style of cave graffiti with scattered letters, as in the rebus puzzles. And, as the upshot of all this, a strong aroma of skewer assaults his nose.

Fragrances of thyme and rosemary, a nice oil dip to anoint it from time to time.

Such sensorial digression overlays the autopsy nightmare. You seem even to feel those smells, those delicate aromas, your nostrils inhale greedily, and finally they make your mouth water.

The wonders of *synesthesia*, he thinks. Eleven letters.

In the end, he cannot hold out much longer with his eyes closed.

He feels his stomach gurgle and...

"How long to go now?" he asks the staff. "This smell makes me almost think of a barbec..."

Once his eyes are open, his tongue hangs out, as he sees a column of smoke rising to the ceiling.

"It's half done" says the surgeon. "I've just turned the sausages over, to make them golden-brown all over."

"Golden-brown what?" the inspector asks, fearing the synesthesia has infected the surgeon's speech.

But then he looks around beside the operating table, and notices an authentic barbecue set, on which the staff are roasting various cuts of meat.

In short, it works like this: the pathologist who wins the surgery works with the official staff, while the loser prepares a barbecue with the reserve team.

Everything is designed to save time, as is the tradition of a multipurpose complex such as the So-and-So: hospital, museum, restaurant.

And soon to be a betting center as well.

Wide-eyed, the inspector can finally drink in the view of succulent grilled meats, right up close to the operating table: lamb chops, strips of steak, T-Bone, back ribs and sausages.

All under the watchful eye of the paunchy pathologist and his faithful colleagues, strictly protected by their antiseptic masks.

An assistant, having noticed the copious drool, which thickens around his masked mouth, hastens to offer him a sausage and a glass of wine.

“Hey! Save some for me!” screams the operating surgeon.

“I want that one, the biggest, put it aside” he adds pointing out a sausage with the laser light.

Brumby swallows the bite, tucking it under the mask. The operation of drinking is more complicated, however, since he must force the red liquid into an unnatural Fosbury jump around the shielding, giving an unusual shade of lilac to the surgical gown.



But the embarrassment is short-lived. Those color spots turn out to harmonize beautifully with the brocade walls on which, he's only just raised his eyes to realized, huge stuffed heads of deer and elk stand out. They are the perfect hooks for stethoscopes and dialysis pipes.

"How long will it take to write the autopsy report?" our man asks as he devours a rib.

"No problem, inspector. It's already done. I wrote it up yesterday" answers the barbecue surgeon.

"Can you pass me the report, please?" he asks one of his assistants.

The latter, moving awkwardly between gauzes, sausages, bandages, charcoal logs and glasses of wine, accidentally spills it over the report.

"Hey, stupid klutz!" the doctor shouts at him, checking the document, "now it's illegible!"

He shrugs his shoulders and apologizes to our man.

"You needn't worry, inspector. I can confirm that the man's death was by natural causes."

Brumby nods and receives the dripping document.

"May I give you some more sausages to take with you?" asks the physician.

"It's genuine meat."

"Yes indeed, with pleasure."

"Please do not remove the mask until you leave: the operating room must remain antiseptic."

His assistant makes a paper cornet with the unreadable report, puts some lamb ribs in it, and hands it to our hero. For his part, he is deeply satisfied at having

overcome such a tough test without needing the miner's helmet.

## Chapter 13 – The Punishment

Brumby didn't exactly jump for joy upon the consequences of Bozo's revelations.

For him, the only worthy epilogue of the investigation had to be Horace behind bars. Regardless of everything.

In that way, Horace might have deflated his mania for abstractionism, scratching away at the cell's walls with his chalk for a few years.

But now that the cards are re-shuffled, he cannot pretend that nothing has happened. Everything is already under the Commissioner's eye.

So, within a few days of putting an end to the case, he has three new subjects to be questioned.

Jessica, Walter and Daria are sitting in front of him, and their faces express variegated feelings ranging from anxiety to dissimulated dismay: that's evident in seeing them swinging on the chair at different frequency.

If we could give voice to the thoughts spinning in a loop inside their heads with no way out, like hamsters in a wheel, we would transcribe the following quotes: "I knew it would finish this way. I knew it." [*Jessica, fatalist*].

“See? This is what you get from helping your friends! These two bitches have set me up! Me, with such a brilliant career ahead!” [*Walter, recriminating*].

“See? This is what happens when you date a fucking doctor Frankenstein.” [*Daria, classificatory*].

All three of them, however, express in words their dismay and surprise over a convocation they consider incomprehensible. They openly complain, overlapping their vocal pitches and timbres and, in some cases, pulling out tough terms like “abuse of authority” or “persecution”.

“Silence, please! You may speak only if I ask you a question!” Brumby breaks in, slightly raising his eyes from the paper where he’s been meticulously writing, with long pauses.

“Yes, sir” the three reply in unison, instantly re-sized. Then our man sets aside his pen for a while, and finally focuses on the three who have been summoned. He attacks directly, without preamble, staring them in the eyes one by one.

“Do you know what it means to conceal a dead body, eh?”

The three suspected look at each other, as if they wanted to coordinate a single answer.

“In truth, inspector, we didn’t want...” Daria says.

“No, tell me, do you have any idea?” he persists more vigorously, slamming a fist on the desk.

“It was not our intention...” Jessica justifies in a whisper.

The inquisitor points his finger on the page in front of him. He stares into their eyes again.

“We’re talking about hiding a corpse, here. What would you call a thing like this?”

Walter is submitted. With bowed head, he tries to be co-operative.

“Concealment?” he suggests.

The inspector observes him, mysterious, inscrutable.

Then he transcribes "*Con-ceal-ment*".

After the last syllable, he looks up from the sheet.

“Yes, it fits. Good.”

Then he closes the crossword magazine.

“That’s done”, he comments with satisfaction. “It wasn’t easy, some of those definitions are a little tricky.”

Walter decides to seize his opportunity.

“Me too, I’m fond of puzzles. Though I’m surely not as experienced as you...” he says with an apple polisher tone.

“Eh, yes! I must confess I’m not at all bad at crosswords.”

“I’m good at solving rebus puzzles” Daria bursts in with the air of someone who doesn’t want to miss the party.

“I love charades” says Jessica fluttering her eyelashes, like a hummingbird’s wings.

Then she completes the subliminal signage by staring at the inspector with a Mona Lisa smile, and adjusting

her generous breast that peeps out from the wide neckline.

Brumby takes a glance and swallows. Pussett, standing, does the same from a better vantage point.

“Okay, let’s get back to us”, the inspector shakes himself.

“What you did is serious, very serious! How would you define it?”

The three friends look at him and raise their eyes to the ceiling in search of definitions.

“Abject?” proposes Daria.

“Abominable?” suggests Walter.

“Aberrant?” conjectures Jessica, showing off even more of her front line.

“Ab...bundant?” murmurs Pussett, hypnotized.

Brumby looks at him obliquely.

“I am talking to these people.”

Pussett lifts his hands to apologize.

Then the boss comes back annoyed to the suspects.

“I haven’t asked you for a solution to my crossword. We’re talking about a man, here, who’s been killed and torn apart.”

The three friends lower their eyes.

“What can you say in your defense?”

“It was a fatal accident...” sketches Jessica.

“...a mishap...” strengthens Daria.

“...an experiment...” sighs Walter.

In front of them stands the impassive and austere face of the investigator. In the neon light of the office, his immobility seems to belong in a waxworks museum. The heavy silence is interrupted again by our man, with a *coup de théâtre* worthy of Nero Wolfe. “Now I’m going to show you someone you should recognize”.

“Please, come in!” he shouts in peremptory tone towards the door.

Peeping from the door is an old acquaintance of the three defendants: Bozo the blackmailer.

The three accomplices swallow lumps of saliva. They look in panic at each other, and begin to sweat.

At the inspector’s invitation, Bozo enters and approaches the desk. Pale, he watches the three people familiar to him, without saying a word. Then, at his host’s nod, he leaves and shuts the door behind him.

He does all of this with the movements of a model, wearing a high fashion suit, totally unedited for him: a double-breasted tweed.

The three friends look at each other interrogatively.

“Do you recognize him?” asks the inspector neutrally.

In the beginning, the suspects are reticent, as if on lawyer’s advice. Their mouths seem sewn shut, fearing a trap.

Then, Walter breaks the ice.

“Armani?” he suggests.

As soon as Brumby shakes his head, the girls try in their turn.

“Versace?” says Daria.

“Ralph Lauren?” asks Jessica.

“Mr. Right Price?” is the out-of-control attempt by Pussett.

Brumby gives his man the death stare. Then he shakes his head again to them.

“It seems to me that you’re all confused. Remember, you have the right to remain silent. But anything you say can and will be used against you in court.”

As his guests stiffen in their chairs, he turns back toward the door.

“Please, come in again!”

Bozo the blackmailer returns, wearing a trendy bathing suit with a singlet, Bermuda shorts and swimming cap, dragging a bathrobe as if it were a stole. After disappointing results as a pickpocket, burglar, blackmailer, upholsterer and street vendor, he’s excited about a modelling career and plans to update his business card.

Brumby gets up and remains hard-nosed in front of the three investigated, at the same time profiting from the best view of Jessica’s sill.

“Now do you recognize him?”

“Calvin Klein!” they answer in chorus.

The detective wears a suspended, puzzled, irresolute expression, while the accomplices lose a few years of life for waiting.

Then he smirks.

“Right. What do you all think about it?”



"I believe it would look very nice on you" Daria hastens to please him.

"...it would make you look younger..." Walter adds.

"...you're such a fascinating man..." Jessica concludes, winking with the frequency of caesium.

Brumby, who is normally a man of upright character and strong convictions, is hesitant this time.

"Pussett, what should I do?"

"With these three?"

"No, with the bathing suit."

"I already told you, inspector. Take it. It's perfect for you."

Our man takes a last look at Bozo in bathing suit. He looks as though he's made up his mind. Then he dismisses him, watching him walking and swinging his hips as he reaches the door.

"And with them?"

"My suggestion for the court would be house arrests."

"Mmm... house arrests, you say?"

"And... in case the lady had nowhere to stay" Pussett adds pointing to Jessica with his head, "I would make my home available..."

The motion is immediately rejected by his boss.

"Pussett! You've already taken the head. Now the lady?" he protests. "Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?"

"Inspector, really I did bring back the head", he replies venomously, "as you asked me."

“Mmm, we will talk about it. But you have your grandmother living with you! Not to mention your wife!”

“No problem, inspector. I’d put the old bag on the balcony. As for my wife, she’s gone with my son to stay at her mother’s. On account of the head. It always happens when I start a new collection.”

Brumby stares at him dull-eyed, as if to say “forget it!” Then he remains thoughtful. Someone knocks at the door, and he opens it.

It’s our artist, Horace, finally in civilian dress.

He can well see the others in the room, but he behaves as if the inspector is alone. He enters, carrying a sheet of paper.

“Inspector, I need your signature on my release form.” His inexpressiveness is calculated.

While he crosses the room, we see Jessica hardly holding back her tears, devastated by remorse. By instinct, she hastens toward him, taking his hand and trying to embrace him.

“Horace, darling!” we report faithfully, “you’re finally free! You can’t imagine how much I suffered...”

Horace, glacial and immovable, looks straight at the inspector and doesn’t respond to her solicitations. For him that person no longer exists.

“Horace, forgive me, forgive me, forgive me!” she insists, squeezing him in the grip of her breasts, trying to smooth his shaggy face. This last operation is unsuccessful because the ex-prisoner withdraws the

target, and avoids all contact, moving his head like a slalom skier.

That dynamic cannot last long, however, for he risks a fast-setting stiff neck. So, he stops, and blocks the woman's pulse, thus acknowledging her existence.

She stares into his eyes and accelerates her blinking.

"What do you still want?" he hisses.

"I was wrong and I regret it, my love".

She stares at him straight in the eyes, twisting her lips as she cries, just like a child.

"Ah".

"Really, I'm devastated and repentant!"

"Ah-ah".

"I swear that from now on, you'll be the only man for me!"

And so on with suchlike affectations that we, pragmatic narrators, refuse to report entirely, preferring to ignore what follows.

In short, Horace begins to falter and stares at her uncertainly.

The scene is a cliché in couple dynamics. It replicates since a century in the cinema with few variants, and it's the daily bread of romance novels.

If it be possible, since we appreciate the average reader's sensitivity, until Jessica exhausts all her effusions we would prefer to discuss something else. For example, how about the giant anteater? \*\*\*

*The giant anteater (Myrmecophaga tridactyla), also known as the ant bear, is a large insectivorous mammal native to Central and South America. It is one of four living species of anteaters*

*and is classified with sloths in the order Pilosa. This species is mostly terrestrial, in contrast to other living anteaters and sloths, which are arboreal or semiarboreal. The giant anteater is the largest of its family, it is recognizable by its elongated snout, bushy tail, long fore claws, and distinctively coloured pelage. It can be found in multiple habitats, including grassland and rainforest. It forages in open areas and rests in more forested habitats. It feeds primarily on ants and termites, using its fore claws to dig them up and its long, sticky tongue to collect them. Though giant anteaters live in overlapping home ranges, they are mostly solitary except during mother-offspring relationships, aggressive interactions between males, and when mating. Mother anteaters carry their offspring on their backs until weaning them. Giant anteaters are good swimmers and are capable of moving through wide rivers. [...]*

Meanwhile Horace's inner vacillation is now evident, and is transmitted to his figure. In fact, from the earlier granitic sphinx he's gradually changing into a kind of giant roly-poly toy, exposed to shocks of increasing intensity.

And, with the same skeptical expression of that toy's face, he now addresses the bystanders.

"What should I do? Should I forgive her?"

Fortunately, the standard equipment of the Police station allows it to address the most diverse eventualities. In fact, Pussett provides each of the participants the jury score cards typical of a TV game show.

Brumby kicks off, and we await the verdict.

Horace reviews the voters one by one: Daria and Walter lift green cards, Pussett a red card, Brumby a joker.

Forgiveness is granted according to the canons of modern western democracies. Jessica raises her fists triumphantly and seeks the hand of her beloved.

He accepts her embrace, but he warns her against ever touching his figurines again – not even for dusting.

At this point, the inspector nervously scratches his signature upon the release warrant for the artist. As for the three others under investigation, he opts for indulgence: the Lord will reward him.

“All right, I’ll talk to the judge. I’ll propose house arrests for everybody, okay?” he announces.

“Thank you, but I can’t accept” replies Walter, who has shortcomings with regard to the Criminal Code.

“Well, I don’t think you can refuse... Anyway, is on me.”

“Ah, in that case I’ll take two.”

Finally, it is time to say goodbye.

The three former suspects take leave of the inquisitors, with gratitude painted on their faces, even without the help of illiterate children, invisible ink and tides.

Brumby notices a large bag left on the chair, and addresses Jessica.

“Madam, you forgot your bag!”

“Inspector, that bag is mine”, Pussett intervenes.

“Pussett, you shouldn’t leave your belongings in my office.”

“In truth, in the bag there is the...”

“Okay, okay, never mind.”

Brumby wants no distractions; his attention is all caught by Jessica's hips, as she heads for the exit.

Being an old-fashioned man, he addresses with her an unprecedented hand-kissing.

“In future, please be careful. No more cadavers in your closet” he recommends.

“Not even skeletons?” our heroine points out.

“Skeletons? And who hasn't got a skeleton in the closet, dear lady?”

The three friends, with Horace in the lead, reach the door.

Jessica, the last to leave, lets her handkerchief fall to the floor, and closes the door behind her. Brumby and Pussett jump to pick it up. The latter grabs it, reads something on it, sniffs it ecstatic, and puts it in his pocket.

“Give me that handkerchief.”

“But...inspector...”

“Give me that handkerchief!”

Pussett reluctantly takes it from his pocket and hands it over to his boss.

“Well, well. Her mobile number” the latter smiles.

Pussett seeks hormonal solidarity.

“What a woman, inspector!”

“A Venus, Pussett, a Venus” the other agrees, as he pockets the handkerchief.

“But...inspector... her mobile number was for me!”

“What makes you think that? Didn’t you see the looks she was giving me?”

On that note of conceit, the assistant’s face can barely conceal a grimace of disbelief.

“Inspector, come on, I don’t think you... ahem, I think you need a strong stomach for that kind of woman.”

“So what? How dare you! Are you saying that I...?”

“No, no, absolutely...”

He raises his hands as if someone is pointing a gun at him.

“... Anyway, with your permission, let’s play it man to man.”

Brumby looks at him, raising an eyebrow.

The ecstatic mask imprinted on his face after Jessica’s sensual exit has given way to the fierce expression of an adult warthog in courtship.

“A sword duel?”

Pussett smiles to belittle.

“No, a coin toss. If you agree.”

“Okay, I choose tail.”

The chief puts his hand in his pocket, but his search for a coin is unsuccessful.

“Don’t worry inspector, I’ve got it” says Pussett.

Then, in the solemn manner of a referee at the crucial moment of the match, with a sly and devilish look Pussett moves towards the leather bag on the chair.

“So, head for me, right?” he asks superfluously.

“Yeah. What the hell kind of question is that?”

The assistant pulls out the coin from his pocket and tosses. It hovers in the air and, while the inspector follows the parable with his mouth open, it lands inside the bag.

“Inspector, you promise me that if I show you the head...”

“Pussett, are you doubting my word?” the inspector is annoyed.

“Go on, get it out!”

Captivated by the solemnity of the moment, the assistant puts his hand slowly into the bag.

The investigator watches his rummaging with apprehension, just as he did on that damned riverside, when they were looking for the body. And, now as then, Pussett’s facial expression reveals the moment of grasp.

“Are you ready, inspector?”

“Pussett, you’ve broken my balls. Come on, get it out!”

He barely has time to wonder why to use two hands to pick up a coin, that the answer is there before his eyes.

“Head! Head! Check it out!” screams Pussett triumphantly showing the jar with the well-known severed head.

“I won, inspector! That phone number is mine!”



The stocky man abandons the posture of subordinate for a moment, and triumphantly lifts the jar. The head dances a macabre pirouette in the formaldehyde.

“Ah, damn!!” recriminates his boss, immediately looking away.

But the esophageal elevator, summoned suddenly and treacherously, is already booked for the top floor, and it's too late to change the program.

Pussett abandons for a second the exalted pose of the center-forward after scoring the goal. He looks on with compassion when his boss grabs a handkerchief from the desk to cover his mouth.

“Inspector, I'm very sorry! I told you it was for strong stomachs!”

But the other man is not listening to him anymore. He clings to the door handle, then slips away, overturning the clothes stand as he goes.

Pussett is still holding the jar with one hand, while from the other he's sniffing the disputed handkerchief in ecstasy.

Then, almost immediately, the triumphant expression fades, diluted in the doubt that his libido may have pushed him off course.

He puts the jar in the bag, looks at the handkerchief from which Jessica's number is no longer clear.

What is clear is that he will have to say goodbye to his head collection and salary increase. Maybe to something else.

Meanwhile we can grasp only the sound of a last sign of surrender from the inspector: a "*Fuuuck!*" both stifled and shouted along the corridor.

And it is just this one last exclamation that we'd like to transcribe as a narrating voice.

In perfect symmetry with the homologous one of Bozo at the beginning, it closes this uncomfortable novel.

P.S.

If you do not find it uncomfortable, you could try reading this novel in a closet, standing on one leg. And then we'll talk.

But just in case, make sure the closet door is not defective. Otherwise, you risk the sequel to this novel.

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