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A New Translation with Commentary of Alberto Moravia's "Romolo and Remo"

MISHA HARDWICK

Umberto Eco once remarked about the screen legend Totò, whose quotes and gestures have become a part of Italian slang: "How can two peoples ever come to understand each other when one of them is ignorant of Totò?" Alberto Moravia might be a similar case. If remembered at all in the English-speaking world, it's largely through screen adaptations of his work, some of the more famous being Godard's *Contempt* and Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. But he was once a perennial nominee for the Nobel Prize, and is still recognized within Italy as one of the central figures of modern literature. Naturally it's his literary writing on which, at bottom, his reputation rests. But Moravia's body of work also included a lifetime of journalism for the *Corriere della Sera*, the founding of *Nuovi Argomenti*, one of the premier literary journals in Italy, and a stint in the European Parliament under the banner of the Italian Communist Party. Even on a social level, as the husband of Elsa Morante through the forties and fifties, partner of Dacia Mariani through the sixties and seventies, and career-long friend and collaborator of Pier Paolo Pasolini, the full dimensions of Moravia's influence on the Italian cultural ferment are difficult to overstate. This imbalance in fortune across cultural frontiers happens to many writers for many reasons, some of which are justified, some of which are accidental. Some of his key novels are still available in English, thanks largely to the salvaging mission of New York Review Books, and Moravia hangs on.

But a small renaissance of anglophone interest in Italian literature has been spearheaded in recent years by the American writer Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri, having won the Pulitzer Prize in English, now writes almost solely in Italian. Her ambassadorship for the country's literature, to this point largely vocal and symbolic, in recent months became editorship, and produced an important object in May this year: *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*. In this English language anthology she clears a special place for Moravia, describing his collection *Racconti romani* (1954) as "a cornerstone of the twentieth-century Italian short story tradition" (Lahiri, xvii). The fact that a full translation of this collection has never appeared in English is evidence of Moravia's ill-favour on the international scale. Angus Davidson's partial translation, which appeared in the 1950s, is out of print and didn't include the story featured here. Time will tell what effect *The Penguin Book* will have on the fortunes of the forty featured authors. It may be that Moravia will remain an Italian's Italian, one of those symbols of perplexity that consign us to the differences which, as Eco saw it in the case of Totò, sometimes feel more species-to-species than culture-to-culture. In any case, it's possible to view the stories of this collection like a little organ chart (admittedly far from comprehensive) of a certain kind of post-war Italian consciousness.

The drama of so many of the *Racconti romani* turns on a central character's inability to come to terms with forces beyond their control. These forces, in the meantime, drag them further into problems, failure and self-betrayal. For Remo, the protagonist in this story, penniless starvation is the first of these forces. But, as he works through his plan to scrounge a meal off an equally-destitute friend, the subtler forces that are Moravia's more natural subject begin to emerge — that is, the internalized expectations of behaviour that regulate us and prevent us from pursuing what we need,

even as we're dying of hunger. In other words, the always partially failing struggle to adapt the interior to the exterior.

This drama could be thought of, in a way, as a drama of translation: outer to inner and vice versa. Moravia, who considered himself an inheritor of Dostoevsky's existentialism, found realist aesthetics limited and philosophically contradictory: "For Tolstoy, a tree is a tree" (qtd. in Carratoni). Scholars in recent decades have targeted a similar naïveté in Western traditions of translation, the prevailing ethic of which has been summarized as "faithfulness" by Vermeer (Lefevere 18) and "invisibility" by Venuti (1). When Susan Bassnett talks of "the absurdity of any concept of sameness between texts," (26) her phrase could be used as a gloss of Moravia's comment about Tolstoy. But, that said, Moravia's work doesn't invite a translator to slash away freely in the hope of approximating something turbulent and interior; among the qualities which make his writing compelling in the *Racconti* are the lean, precise details and realist atmosphere, qualities which seem to call for more literal treatment. So what balance does the translator strike? For me, always an uneasy one, always practice-led and hard to consolidate with reference to clear principles. And always underpinned by a sensation of adoring deviance, a sensation captured nicely by Bassnett's concept of translation as "collusion" (26). If the language of literature exists only insofar as its field of association is limitless, how could any single method of translation ever consistently succeed? Like the post-war underworld of Moravia's stories, there is something about translation which calls for double-dealing and, for me at least, flies in the face of premeditated theory: "When we collude with something, we go along with it, we agree with it, but only to a certain point" (Bassnett 26).

I don't think of Bassnett's "certain point" as actually very certain, conscious or consistent (is a tree ever really a tree?). But, at the risk of oversimplification, it might be helpful to take as an example the different ways in which Moravia, professed existentialist, levers between exterior narration and interior response. I suggested above that this levering could be thought of as a drama of translation; in a sense, two stories form which, diverging and overlapping, create wakes of displacement. There are times when these effects are fairly straightforward. Moments of divergence are often cruel: "Romolo era forse piú affamato di me e io, in fondo, ci avevo gusto" [Romolo was perhaps hungrier than I was and, at bottom, I was savouring it] (323).¹ Moments of overlap are often candid and compassionate: "Questa volta tacque, limitandosi a sorridere: un sorriso proprio straziante, che mi fece pietá" [This time he was silent, limiting himself to a smile: an agonizing smile, and my heart went out to him] (323). But crux moments when this divergence and overlap are almost simultaneous present the biggest challenge to the translator. Here Moravia's language takes on more complex syntax, and the mood is less reducible: "sentivo che facevo una gran cattiva azione; però, quasi quasi, mi faceva piacere di compierla" [I felt I was carrying out a terrible action; but it would've been difficult to say that I wasn't enjoying carrying it out] (323).

Looking over my translation of this last sentence, which is far from literal, the sensation of collusion runs high. In other places I paid special attention not to iron out modal verb phrases like "avrei voluto rispondergli" [I'd have liked to respond] (321) or "non potei fare a meno di pensare" [I couldn't help but think] (324). Moravia's syntax is always carefully restricting what Remo views as possible and it's important to preserve the enfolded phrasing so as not to lose any impression of opportunities opening and closing in his mind. But, in the above example, where guilt and pleasure derive

¹ All translations from or into Italian are by the writer unless otherwise stated.

from the same source, it's one tiny repeat phrase "quasi quasi" [almost almost] which renders the whole sense of uncertain wavering between contradictory states. The most sensible and conservative approach would probably have been to use a single "almost" and settle for a flatter meaning — "and I was almost enjoying carrying it out". But I felt an extra degree of ambivalence in the original and the need to preserve it. In this case, I imported one of those modal verb phrases — "but it would've been difficult to say that I wasn't enjoying carrying it out" — in the attempt to produce something that Moravia himself might plausibly have written. I admit that the strongest compromise may have been beyond me and it's consoling to mention the colloquial eloquence of Moravia's *quasi quasi* which, sadly, I wasn't able to convey in my translation.

These challenges stem largely from the fact that Moravia is a writer who generates complex meaning with plain words. This kind of writing first invites the translator then betrays them, and in Moravia's attitude to what he called the "linguaggio 'basso'" ["low" language] (*Racconti romani*, v) of the *Racconti* are hints of this same deception: "when you use dialect for the first time, you have something like a sense of liberation, but then dialect becomes an even worse limitation on the language: you realize that in language you can express much more" (vi). His existentialist's intuition of the vanishing horizons of language, and the fallacy of equivalence, self to world and word to word, is as binding for the "translator" as for the "writer".

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Romolo e Remo
By Alberto Moravia

L'urgenza della fame non si può paragonare a quella degli altri bisogni. Provatevi a dire ad alta voce: "Mi serve un paio di scarpe... mi serve un pettine... mi serve un fazzoletto," tacete un momento per riflettere, e poi dite: "Mi serve un pranzo," e sentirete subito la differenza. Per qualsiasi cosa potete pensarci su, cercare, scegliere, magari rinunciarci, ma il momento che confessate a voi stesso che vi serve un pranzo, non avete più tempo da perdere. Dovete trovare il pranzo, se no morite di fame. Il cinque ottobre di quest'anno, a mezzogiorno, a piazza Colonna, sedetti sulla ringhiera della fontana e dissi a me stesso: "Mi serve un pranzo." Da terra dove, durante questa riflessione, volgevo gli occhi, levai gli sguardi al traffico del Corso e lo vidi tutto annebbiato e tremolante: non mangiavo da più di un giorno e, si sa, la prima cosa che succede quando si ha fame è di vedere le cose affamate, cioè vacillanti e deboli come se fossero esse stesse, appunto, ad aver fame. Poi pensai che dovevo trovare questo pranzo, e pensai che se aspettavo ancora non avrei più avuto la forza neppure di pensarci, e cominciai a riflettere sulla maniera di trovarlo al più presto. Purtroppo, quando si ha fretta non si pensa nulla di buono. Le idee che mi venivano in mente non erano idee ma sogni: "Salgo in un tram... borseggio un tale... scappo"; oppure: "Entro in un negozio, vado alla cassa, afferro il morto... scappo." Mi venne quasi il panico e pensai: "Perduto per perduto, tanto vale che mi faccia arrestare per oltraggio alla forza pubblica... in questura una minestra me la danno sempre." In quel momento un ragazzo, accanto a me, ne chiamò un altro: "Romolo." Allora, a quel grido, mi

Romolo and Remo
By Alberto Moravia
Translated by Misha Hardwick

The urgency of hunger can't be compared to any other need. Try to say aloud: "I need a pair of shoes... I need a comb... I need a tissue," then be silent for a moment, take a breath and say: "I need a meal." You'll feel the difference. With anything else you can think it over, look around, decide, you can even go without, but the moment you confess to yourself that you need a meal, you can't waste any time. You need to find that meal or die of hunger. On the fifth of October this year, at noon in piazza Colonna, I sat on the fountain banister and I said to myself: "I need a meal." I'd been gazing at the ground as this thought came to me and, raising my eyes to the traffic of the boulevard, it was foggy and trembling: I hadn't eaten for more than a day and it's well known that the first thing to happen when you're hungry is that things look famished, that is, staggering and weak as if they themselves, no less, were starving. It occurred to me that I needed to find this lunch, that if I waited any longer I wouldn't have the strength to even think about it, and I began planning a way to find it as soon as possible. Unfortunately, when time's against you, your thoughts are useless. The ideas that came to mind were less ideas than dreams: "I get on a tram... I pickpocket a guy... I slip away," or: "I go in a shop, approach the till, grab the cash... I slip away." I felt panic start to rise in me and I thought: "If it's come to that, I may as well get arrested insulting an officer... at the station they always give me some stew." Just then a man beside me called out someone's name: "Romolo." At that shout I remembered another Romolo who'd served with me in the army. In those days I'd suffered the weakness of telling him a few lies: that in my village I was well-

ricordai di un altro Romolo che era stato con me sotto le armi. Avevo avuto, allora, la debolezza di raccontargli qualche bugia: che al paese ero benestante mentre non sono nato in alcun paese bensì presso Roma, a Prima Porta. Ma, adesso, quella debolezza mi faceva comodo. Romolo aveva aperto una trattoria dalle parti del Pantheon. Ci sarei andato e avrei mangiato il pranzo di cui avevo bisogno. Poi, al momento del conto, avrei tirato fuori l'amicizia, il servizio militare fatto insieme, i ricordi... Insomma, Romolo non mi avrebbe fatto arrestare.

Per prima cosa andai alla vetrina di un negozio e mi guardai in uno specchio. Per combinazione, mi ero fatto la barba quella mattina con il rasoio e il sapone del padrone di casa, un usciere di tribunale che mi affittava un sottoscala. La camicia, senza essere proprio pulita, non era indecente: soltanto quattro giorni che la portavo. Il vestito, poi, grigio spinato, era come nuovo: me l'aveva dato una buona signora il cui marito era stato mio capitano in guerra. La cravatta, invece, era sfilacciata, una cravatta rossa che avrà avuto dieci anni. Rialzai il colletto e rifeci il nodo in modo che la cravatta, adesso, aveva una parte lunghissima e una parte corta. Nascosi la parte corta sotto quella lunga e abbottonai la giacca fino al petto. Come mi mossi dallo specchio, forse per lo sforzo di attenzione con cui mi ero guardato, la testa mi girò e andai a sbattere contro una guardia ferma sull'angolo del marciapiede. "Guarda dove vai," disse, "che sei ubriaco?" Avrei voluto rispondergli: "Sì, ubriaco di appetito." Con passo vacillante mi diressi verso il Pantheon.

Sapevo l'indirizzo, ma quando lo trovai non ci credevo. Era una porticina in fondo a un vicolo cieco, a due passi da quattro o cinque pattumiere colme. L'insegna color sangue di bue portava scritto: 'Trattoria, cucina casalinga'; la

to-do, when in fact I wasn't born in any village but in Rome, in Prima Porta. Now, though, this weakness suited me nicely. Romolo had opened a *trattoria* in the same neighbourhood as the Pantheon. I would go there and get the lunch I needed. Then, when the moment for the bill arrived, I'd bring out the friendship, the military service, the memories... In short, Romolo wouldn't have me arrested.

First thing, I went to a shop window and looked at myself in a mirror. By chance, I'd had a shave that morning with the razor and soap belonging to my landlord, an usher at the law courts who rented me a basement. My shirt, without being properly clean, wasn't indecent: I'd only worn it for four days. My grey twill suit was like new, given to me by a nice woman whose husband had been my captain in the war. My tie was frayed though, a red tie which I must have owned for ten years. I turned my collar up and redid the knot, but one end came out enormous and the other hung short. I tucked the short end behind the long one and fastened my jacket to the breast button. As I turned from the mirror, maybe from the effort of staring at myself with such close attention, my head started spinning and I bumped against an officer standing at the corner of the footpath. "Watch where you're going," he said, "What're you, drunk?" "Yes, drunk with hunger," I'd have liked to respond. With faltering steps, I started for the Pantheon.

I knew the address but, when I found it, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a little door at the end of a blind alley, a few steps from four or five teeming garbage bins. The ox-blood sign read: "Trattoria, Home Cooking." The window, also painted red, contained, in grand total, an apple. I say an apple and

vetrina anch'essa dipinta di rosso conteneva in tutto e per tutto una mela. Dico una mela e non scherzo. Cominciai a capire, ma ormai ero lanciato ed entrai. Una volta dentro, capii tutto e la fame per un momento mi si raddoppiò di smarrimento. Però mi feci coraggio e andai a sedermi a uno qualsiasi dei quattro o cinque tavoli, nella stanzuccia deserta e in penombra.

Una stoffetta sporca, dietro il banco, nascondeva la porta che dava sulla cucina. Picchiai con il pugno sul tavolo: "Cameriere!" Subito ci fu un movimento in cucina, la stoffetta si alzò, apparve e scomparve una faccia in cui riconobbi l'amico Romolo. Aspettai un momento, picchiai di nuovo. Questa volta lui si precipitò di fuori abbottonandosi in fretta una giacca bianca tutta sfrittellata e sformata. Mi venne incontro con un "comandi" premuroso, pieno di speranza, che mi strinse il cuore. Ma ormai ero nel ballo e bisognava ballare. Dissi: "Vorrei mangiare." Lui incominciò a spolverare il tavolo con uno straccio, poi si fermò e disse guardandomi: "Ma tu sei Remo..."

"Ah, mi riconosci," feci, con un sorriso.

"E come se ti riconosco... non eravamo insieme sotto le armi? Non ci chiamavano Romolo e Remo e la Lupa per via di quella ragazza che corteggiavamo insieme?" Insomma: i ricordi. Si vedeva che lui tirava fuori i ricordi non perché mi fosse affezionato ma perché ero un cliente. Anzi, visto che nella trattoria non c'era nessuno, *il* cliente. Di clienti doveva averne pochi e anche i ricordi potevano servire a farmi buona accoglienza.

Mi diede alla fine una manata sulla spalla: "Vecchio Remo," poi si voltò verso la cucina e chiamò: "Loreta." La stoffa si alzò e apparve una donnetta corpulenta, in grembiale, con la faccia scontenta e diffidente. Lui disse, indicandomi: "Questo è Remo di cui ti ho tanto parlato." Lei mi fece un mezzo

I'm not joking. Things began to dawn on me but, since I'd come that far, I went in. Once inside, everything was clear, and for a moment my hunger doubled with the disappointment. But I pulled myself together and went to sit at one of the four or five tables in the half light of the deserted little room.

Some dirty fabric behind the bar covered the door to the kitchen. I struck the table with my fist: "Waiter!" There was immediate movement in the kitchen, the fabric was raised and, seeing a face appear and disappear, I recognized my friend Romolo. I waited a moment, then struck the table again. This time he rushed out, hurriedly buttoning a worn and shapeless white jacket. He came up to me: "At your service," and that phrase, considerate, full of hope, sent a pang to my heart. But by now I was at the dance, and I had to dance. I said: "I'd like something to eat." He began dusting the table with a rag, then he stopped and, observing me, said: "But you're Remo..."

"Oh, then you recognize me," I said with a smile.

"How could I not... weren't we comrades-in-arms? Didn't they call us Romolo, Remo and the wolf after that girl we were both chasing?" In short: the memories. It was clear that he was wheeling out those memories not from affection for me but because I was a customer. In fact, seeing as there was no one in the house, *the* customer. He must have had very few, and these memories could serve a good end in making me feel welcome.

He gave me a final slap on the shoulder: "Old Remo." Then he turned toward the kitchen and called: "Loreta." The fabric was raised, revealing the wary, unhappy face of a chubby little woman in an apron. He pointed to me: "It's Remo who I've spoken so much about." She gave me a half smile and a

sorriso e un gesto di saluto; dietro di lei si affacciavano i figli, un maschietto e una bambina. Romolo continuò: “Bravo, bravo... proprio bravo.” Ripeteva: “Bravo” come un pappagallo: era chiaro che aspettava che ordinassi il pranzo. Dissi: “Romolo, sono di passaggio a Roma... faccio il viaggiatore di commercio... siccome devo mangiare in qualche luogo, ho pensato: ‘Perché non andrei a mangiare dall'amico Romolo?’”

“Bravo” disse lui, “allora che facciamo di buono: spaghetti?”

“Si capisce.”

“Spaghetti al burro e parmigiano...ci vuole meno a farli e sono più leggeri... e poi che facciamo? Una buona bistecca? Due fettine di vitella? Una bella lombatina? Una scaloppina al burro?”

Erano tutte cose semplici, avrei potuto cucinarle da me, su un fornello a spirito. Dissi, per crudeltà: “Abbacchio... ne hai abbacchio?”

“Quanto mi rincresce... lo facciamo per la sera.”

“E va bene... allora un filetto con l'uovo sopra... alla Bismarck.”

“Alla Bismarck, sicuro... con patate?”

“Con insalata.”

“Sì, con insalata... e un litro, asciutto, no?”

“Asciutto.”

Ripetendo: “Asciutto,” se ne andò in cucina e mi lasciò solo al tavolino. La testa continuava a girarmi dalla debolezza, sentivo che facevo una gran cattiva azione; però, quasi quasi, mi faceva piacere di compierla. La fame rende crudeli: Romolo era forse più affamato di me e io, in fondo, ci avevo gusto. Intanto, in cucina, tutta la famiglia confabulava: udivo lui che parlava a bassa voce, pressante, ansioso; la moglie che rispondeva, malcontenta. Finalmente, la stoffa si rialzò e i due figli scapparono fuori, dirigendosi in fretta verso l'uscita. Capii che Romolo, forse,

gesture of hello; behind her the children appeared, a young boy and girl. Romolo continued: “Bravo, bravo... really.” He repeated “Bravo” like a parrot: it was clear that he was waiting for me to order. I said: “Romolo, I’m in transit through Rome... as a salesman, I travel... since I had to eat some place, I thought: ‘Why not go eat at my friend Romolo’s?’”

“Bravo” he said, “So what’ll we do for you: spaghetti?”

“Naturally.”

“Spaghetti with butter and parmesan... it’s out quick from the kitchen, and it’s lighter... what then? A nice steak? A couple of slices of veal? There’s beautiful sirloin? Or a cutlet in butter?”

It was all simple stuff that I could’ve cooked at home on a spirit burner. I said, out of cruelty: “Lamb... do you have lamb?”

“It hurts me to say... but we do it for the evenings.”

“Well, alright... then a fillet steak with an egg on top... á la Bismarck.”

“A la Bismarck, certainly... with potatoes?”

“With salad.”

“Yes, with salad... And a litre of wine? Dry?”

“Dry.”

Repeating: “Dry,” he went to the kitchen, leaving me alone at the table. My head was still spinning from weakness. I felt I was carrying out a terrible action, but I was very nearly enjoying carrying it out. Hunger makes you cruel: Romolo was perhaps hungrier than I was and, at bottom, I was savouring it. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the whole family came together conspiratorially: I heard him speak under his breath, urgent and anxious; the wife responding discontentedly. At last the fabric was raised and the two children ran out toward the exit. It occurred to me that Romolo, quite possibly, had not so much as a slice of bread in his trattoria. As the

non aveva in trattoria neppure il pane. Nel momento che la stoffa si rialzò, intravvidi la moglie che, ritta davanti il fornello, rianimava con la ventola il fuoco quasi spento. Lui, poi, uscì dalla cucina e venne a sedersi davanti a me, al tavolino.

Veniva a tenermi compagnia per guadagnar tempo e permettere ai figli di tornare con la spesa. Sempre per crudeltà, domandai: “Ti sei fatto un localetto proprio carino... beh, come va?”

Lui rispose, abbassando il capo: “Bene, va bene... si capisce c'è la crisi... oggi, poi, è lunedì... ma di solito, qui non si circola.”

“Ti sei messo a posto, eh.”

Mi guardò prima di rispondere. Aveva la faccia grassa, tonda, proprio da oste, ma pallida, disperata e con la barba lunga. Disse: “Anche tu ti sei messo a posto.” Risposi, negligente: “Non posso lamentarmi... le mie cento, centocinquantamila lire al mese le faccio sempre... lavoro duro, però.”

“Mai come il nostro.”

“Eh, che sarà... voialtri osti state sul velluto: la gente può fare a meno di tutto ma mangiare deve... scommetto che ci hai anche i soldi da parte.”

Questa volta tacque, limitandosi a sorridere: un sorriso proprio straziante che mi fece pieta. Disse finalmente, come rammentandosi: “Vecchio Remo... ti ricordi di quando eravamo insieme a Gaeta?” Insomma voleva i ricordi perché si vergognava di mentire e anche perché, forse, quello era stato il momento migliore della sua vita. Questa volta mi fece troppa compassione e lo accontentai dicendogli che ricordavo. Subito si rianimò e prese a parlare, dandomi ogni tanto delle manate sulle spalle, perfino ridendo. Rientrò il maschietto reggendo con le due mani, in punta di piedi, come se fosse stato il Santissimo, un litro colmo. Romolo mi versò da bere e versò anche a se stesso, appena l'ebbi invitato. Col vino diventò ancor più

fabric lifted again, I glimpsed his wife at the stove, reviving the weak flame with a fan. Then he came out of the kitchen and took a seat opposite me at the table.

He kept me company, buying time until the kids came back with the shopping. Again out of cruelty, I asked him: “You've got yourself a cosy little place... And so how're things?”

He answered, lowering his head: “Well, it's going well... of course there's the crisis... today, as well, it's a Monday... but usually you can't move in here.”

“You've set yourself up, eh.”

He gave me a look before responding. He had the fat, round face of a restaurant-owner, only pale and desperate, with a long beard. He said: “You too, you've set yourself up.” I answered nonchalantly: “I can't complain... my hundred, hundred and fifty thousand *lire* come in each month... tough work, though.”

“Nothing like ours.”

“Eh, can't fight fate... you restaurant people are on the easy wicket: people can do without everything, but they have to eat... I bet you've even got a bit put away.”

This time he was silent, limiting himself to a smile: an agonizing smile, and my heart went out to him. Finally he said, as if imploring me: “Old Remo... you remember when we were together in Gaeta?” In short, he turned to memories because he was ashamed to lie and because, perhaps, that had been the best moment of his life. This time compassion got the better of me and, to oblige him, I said I remembered. Immediately he perked up and began talking, giving me a clap on the shoulder every now and then, even laughing. The boy re-entered on tip toe; in his two hands, carried like a sacrament, was a brimming litre of wine. Romolo poured me a drink and, when I offered, served himself without hesitation. With the wine he became even

loquace, si vede che anche lui era digiuno. Così chiacchierando e bevendo, passarono un venti minuti, e poi, come in sogno, vidi rientrare anche la bambina. Poverina: reggeva con le braccine, contro il petto, un fagotto in cui c'era un po' di tutto: il pacchetto giallo della bistecca, l'involto di carta di giornale dell'uovo, lo sfilatino avvolto in velina marrone, il burro e il formaggio chiusi in carta oliata, il mazzo verde dell'insalata e, così mi parve, anche la bottiglietta dell'olio. Andò dritta alla cucina, seria, contenta; e Romolo, mentre passava, si spostò sulla seggiola in modo da nasconderla. Quindi si versò da bere e ricominciò coi ricordi. Intanto, in cucina, sentivo che la madre diceva non so che alla figlia, e la figlia si scusava, rispondendo piano: "Non ha voluto darmene di meno." Insomma: miseria, completa, assoluta, quasi quasi peggio della mia.

Ma avevo fame e, quando la bambina mi portò il piatto degli spaghetti, mi ci buttai sopra senza rimorso; anzi, la sensazione di sbafare alle spalle di gente povera quanto me, mi diede maggiore appetito. Romolo mi guardava mangiare quasi con invidia, e non potei fare a meno di pensare che anche lui, quegli spaghetti, doveva permetterseli di rado. "Vuoi provarli?" proposi. Scosse la testa come per rifiutare, ma io ne presi una forchettata e gliela cacciai in bocca. Disse: "Sono buoni, non c'è che dire," come parlando a se stesso.

Dopo gli spaghetti, la bambina mi portò il filetto con l'uovo sopra e l'insalata, e Romolo, forse vergognandosi di stare a contarmi i bocconi, tornò in cucina. Mangiai solo, e, mangiando, mi accorsi che ero quasi ubbriaco dal mangiare. Eh, quanto è bello mangiare quando si ha fame. Mi cacciai in bocca un pezzo di pane, ci versavo sopra un sorso di vino, masticavo, inghiottivo. Erano anni che non mangiavo tanto di gusto.

more talkative; it was clear he also had an empty stomach. Chatting and drinking, we spent a good twenty minutes until, as if in a dream, I saw the little girl re-enter. The poor thing: bundled on her chest, in the clamp of her tiny arms, was a bit of everything: the yellow steak packet, a roll of newspaper around the eggs, bread in brown tissue, butter and cheese in grease paper, the bundle of green salad. I thought I even saw a small bottle of oil. She went straight to the kitchen, content and serious, and Romolo switched chairs as she passed to block my view. So we poured our drinks and he began again with the memories. In the kitchen I heard the mother say something to her daughter, and the girl excuse herself, answering softly: "They wouldn't give me any less." In short, poverty, total and absolute, maybe even worse than my own.

But I was hungry and, when the girl brought me the dish of spaghetti, I fell to eating without remorse; in fact, the sensation that I was scrounging off people as poor as me actually heightened my appetite. Romolo watched in envy as I ate and I couldn't help but think that, for him as much as for me, a dish of spaghetti like this must have been a rare thing. "You want to try some?" I asked. He shook his head as if to refuse, but I took a forkful and forced it into his mouth. "Tasty, no denying," he said, as if talking to himself.

After the spaghetti, the little girl brought me the fillet with an egg on top and some salad. Romolo, maybe ashamed to sit and count my mouthfuls, went back to the kitchen. I ate alone and, eating, I realized that I was almost drunk from such eating. Isn't it a beautiful thing to eat when you're hungry? I'd lob a piece of bread into my mouth, pour a gulp of wine down after it, chew, swallow. It was years since I'd eaten with such relish.

La bambina mi portò la frutta e io volli anche un pezzo di parmigiano da mangiare con la pera. Finito che ebbi di mangiare, mi sdraiai sulla seggiola, uno stecchino in bocca e tutta la famiglia uscì dalla cucina e venne a mettersi in piedi davanti a me, guardandomi come un oggetto prezioso. Romolo, forse per via che aveva bevuto, adesso era allegro e raccontava non so che avventura di donne di quando eravamo sotto le armi. Invece la moglie, il viso unto e sporco di una ditata di polvere di carbone, era proprio triste. Guardai i bambini: erano pallidi, denutriti, gli occhi più grandi della testa. Mi venne ad un tratto compassione e insieme rimorso. Tanto più che la moglie disse: “Eh, di clienti come lei, ce ne vorrebbero almeno quattro o cinque a pasto... allora sì che potremmo respirare.”

“Perché?” domandai facendo l'ingenuo “non viene gente?”

“Qualcuno viene,” disse lei, “soprattutto la sera... ma povera gente: portano il cartoccio, ordinano il vino, poca roba, un quarto, una foglietta... la mattina, poi, manco accendo il fuoco, tanto non viene nessuno.”

Non so perché queste parole diedero sui nervi a Romolo. Disse: “Aho, piantala con questo piagnisteo... mi porti iettatura.”

La moglie rispose subito: “La iettatura la porti tu a noi... sei tu lo iettatore... tra me che sgobbo e mi affanno e tu che non fai niente e passi il tempo a ricordarti di quando eri soldato, lo iettatore chi è?”

Tutto questo se lo dicevano mentre io, mezzo intontito dal benessere, pensavo alla migliore maniera per cavarmela nella faccenda del conto. Poi, provvidenziale, ci fu uno scatto da parte di Romolo: alzò la mano e diede uno schiaffo alla moglie. Lei non esitò: corse alla cucina, ne riuscì con un coltello lungo e affilato, di quelli che servono ad affettare il prosciutto. Gridava: “Ti

The girl brought me the fruit and I asked for a piece of parmesan to go with the pear. Once I'd eaten everything, I lay back in the chair with a toothpick in my mouth, and the whole family came out from the kitchen and stood in front of me to watch, as if I were a precious object. Romolo, maybe because he'd been drinking, was now in high spirits and telling some story about women from our time in the army. His wife on the other hand, her face as soiled and greasy as a fingerprint, was seriously unhappy. I looked at the children: they were pale, undernourished, their eyes bigger than their heads. Compassion gripped me suddenly and, with it, remorse. Even more so when his wife said: “Oh, it's guests like you, we'd just want four or five a service... then yes, we could breathe easier.”

“Why?” I asked, feigning innocence, “people aren't coming?”

“There are some,” she said, “mainly the evenings... but poor people: they bring food in paper bags, order wine, small stuff, a quarter-litre, a half... then the mornings, I don't even light the stove since no one comes.”

I couldn't say why but these words got on Romolo's nerves. “Ey, cut out that whining... you'll jinx me.”

His wife responded immediately: “You're the one, you're our jinx... it's you who's the jinx... between me slaving and wasting away and you not lifting a finger, spending all your time remembering how you were a soldier, who here's the jinx?”

As they said all this I wondered, half-deranged from so much well-being, about the best way to pull off the matter of the bill. Then, on cue, Romolo had an outburst: he raised his hand and gave his wife a slap. She didn't hesitate: she ran to the kitchen and came out with a long, sharp knife, the kind used to slice prosciutto. “I'll kill you,” she screamed and ran at him with the raised knife.

ammazzo,” e gli corse incontro, il coltello alzato. Lui, atterrito, scappò per la trattoria, rovesciando i tavoli e le seggiole. La bambina intanto era scoppiata in pianto; il maschietto era andato anche lui in cucina e adesso brandiva un mattarello, non so se per difendere la madre o il padre. Capii che il momento era questo o mai più. Mi alzai, dicendo: “Calma, che diamine... calma, calma;” e ripetendo: “Calma, calma” mi ritrovai fuori della trattoria, nel vicolo. Affrettai il passo, scantonai; a piazza del Pantheon ripresi il passo normale e mi avviai verso il Corso.

Terrified, he bolted around the *trattoria*, bundling through tables and chairs. Meanwhile, the girl had broken out in tears; the boy had been to the kitchen himself and was holding up a rolling-pin, I’m not sure whether in defence of his mother or his father. I realized that the moment was now or never. I stood up and said: “Calm down, for God’s sake... calm down,” and repeating “calm, calm,” I found myself out in the alley. I quickened my step and slipped away; at Piazza Pantheon I slowed to a walking pace and headed for the boulevard.

From the original:

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