

by Andrea Zappulli



IGNAZIO, GOING HOME

Banco dei Poveri, patrimonial no. 617, folder 4

A resident of this Royal Hospice for the poor, Ignazio Iorio, having reached the age of 18 years old, made a formal petition to the Illustrious Delegate and Governor of this charitable institution, Don Antonio della Rossa, General Director of the Police, requesting permission to leave the Hospice, in accordance with the rules of this charitable institution..

Following that request, the respectable Delegate has ordered the local officials to justify and explain the request. Because the above-mentioned Mr. Iorio was received in this institution, and because the honourable Governors of this Banco de' Poveri have made the request, I am writing to you in order to inform the honourable Governors that I crafted the request appropriately, in the knowledge that Mr. Ignazio Iorio is absent from the Royal Hospice in order to stay with his sister Maddalena Iorio. I remain in full esteem and respect for Your Illustrious Signoria .May 11, 1803 Your devoted servant Giuseppe Vecchioni [under the direction of] Signor Don Nicola Pappadia, secretary of the Royal Hospice for the Poor

He never went to his sister's house. At least, he didn't arrive. You might presume that I had not thought it through, that I had taken his side too hastily. But if you do the work that I do, and if you are like me, it's easy to become enthusiastic about such things. Caring about people is a beautiful thing. Feeling like you are a part of something, I mean, while your days pass by, turning pages like dried colorless petals - the countless hours between a signature and a number, behind a desk examining requests, charitable contributions, and donations. Boredom and writing. It's easy to get emotionally involved that way. I didn't think it through. Ignazio is a dark-skinned young man, with curved shoulders and a smile that cuts through the dust in his path. He is like many others, with his ruffled hair and thin body. Usually, almost always, the scribes for the bank don't deliver their requests. They let more important people do that. They are only names, numbers. Only writing on paper. But Ignazio put his scraped knuckles on my desk: his jacket was rumpled but his eyes were sharp. I don't have a good memory, and I am not particularly good at remembering faces, even worse at remembering precise words. But those words, and those scrawny fingers with their scraped knuckles, I remember very well.

I want to go home, he said.

Maybe it was because the morning was hot and humid, invaded by that fine dust that turns to gold as the sun beams through the windows. When the day already presents itself as boring, despite your inattention, it fills your mind, dragging you toward those slippery and inconclusive thoughts. Maybe it was because I had awakened that morning with the idea of changing something. I noticed those words and that face, and, going against all of the orders and principles of my profession, I listened. Ignazio was 17 years old, just a few days shy of his 18th birthday, and he had become obsessed with the idea that he had to escape. He was one of the inmates, one of the 'guests' if you prefer the word, at the Hospice for the Poor. He was one of many, among the names written at the bottom of the pages of recommendation requests, of pleas, of supplications which came to me, day after day, from that place. But he also had a face. And I listened to his story - all of it - without saying a word.

He started at the very beginning, and went off on a tangent almost immediately, without ever sounding hurried or losing control, and he never gave me the impression that he was delirious or crazy. Ignazio had come to the Hospice voluntarily when he was just a little boy. That strange and sinister place had been the final destination of his journey, of a flight from something, but now he wanted to be free. He had not been poor, he had not been abandoned, and he hadn't even detested his parents. Nothing like that had made him run away. He told me about a large dirt courtyard, recounted scenes of dusty happiness among the chickens feeding in front of a house made of yellow stonework. The simple joys of a daily life which was now so far in the distant past. He had a family, he kept saying. He made that clear with growing emotion, absent-mindedly exploring the imperfections of the desk with his fingers. He had a family; he was not an orphan, and there was no reason to keep him at the Hospice any longer. His family was still there, among the twisted silver olive trees he told me about, among those leaves. I especially remember his description of the leaves, of their timid green color. They were green, tinted with yellow; the yellow of the sun, of summer reflections and of tranquillity. He had a family, and a house, too, so there really was no obligation to stay closed in the rooms of the Hospice. But what about your family? I asked, interrupting him. For the first time I had spoken up, in the middle of that torrent of words. He spoke right over me, without changing direction. His family was still there, he repeated. His sister, in particular, was his family.

Do you know how much you can love a sister?

I didn't. I couldn't, because I had never had a sister. Or a brother. No. It was enchanting, listening to him talk about her. He painted a picture of her for me, and I could almost see her image in the dusty ochre of those memories, among the roots of the trees that he had evoked in my imagination. I could see him lying in a grey hammock; how calm he felt when she looked at him, how she was the family he wanted to return to. He spoke about her for I have no idea how long, but I didn't interrupt him. He remembered specific, apparently unimportant and irrelevant details in his nostalgic memories. He listed them and added to them so naturally and lucidly that it was impossible to interrupt him or question the veracity of his words. I was there; I was transported to the places he told me about. I was ready to swear to it. I saw the little cat meowing sweetly, clinging to the hands of the sister he couldn't stop telling me about. I could almost glimpse its innocent little yawn, its tiny face, white with dark stripes and a little brown around its large, tender ears. Only seven years had passed - almost eight. Ignazio finally wanted to go home now. He wanted to go back to his sister and his origins, to his dusty yellow courtyard, full of light. To find his family again.

Why had he left, then? He didn't give me time to ask him that. Speaking mostly to himself, perhaps solely to himself, he gave me the answer before he had even heard the question. With a wave of frustration, squeezing his eyes shut and tilting his head down toward the floor he spit out a hard, dry truth. He had run away because he had been unhappy. Because on the day of his tenth birthday, he had seen the sun hidden behind a large cloud, and had heard something whispered between the yellow stones of a crumbling wall. Finally, he confessed at the end of his long, impassioned speech, that he had been afraid. Afraid to stay forever in that courtyard and to live the same life as his parents, to stay forever near that hammock to play with the cats and the grass, hot in the summer sun. Who knows what Ignazio had run away from, from what image or what sadness, had made him start his journey toward the city?

But now, suddenly, it was time for him to go back. To return to his sister, embrace her and the little cat and the silent olive trees. All he needed was a small personal recommendation. A brief letter, like the ones his "roommates" at the Hospice had received, which were of value both as a testimony and a certificate. He was almost eighteen years old, and he was on his way to be with his sister. He had had a complicated life, which had always been uncertain because of his bizarre mood swings. He had come to ask this one thing: a short letter. Someone to write for him, in the correct form, about his coming of age and his dignified life at the home of his adored sister. So that no one would look for him again.

Why not write it? Why not believe him? For a myriad of reasons. Because after eight years, the name of that sister had been lost. Because there was no beginning to the story, or even a believable main character. But those eyes looked at me, burning and feverish. It had been a boring and empty morning until that moment. All my life, perhaps had been boring and empty. Orderly and clean, up to that moment. To the sudden arrival of that boy with the light blue jacket and anxious eyes. When I signed the letter - I'd be lying if I told you I remembered the content - his laughter woke me up from what seemed like a long, heavy, fitful nap. He grabbed my wrists, squeezed them, and left, walking quickly towards his bright memories. I placed the letter among the others and

stared at him as he walked out. For the rest of the day, I thought of nothing else but that encounter.

I looked for that farmhouse, those olive trees and that courtyard. I started adventuring out, day after day, as soon as I left the office, to look for that name and those memories. Professional diligence. Stupidity. It was much more than that. I walked among the farmhouses and asked strangers if they were reminded of any place or person by the description Ignazio had given me. I could find no serenity, and no rest. I had to know, to discover the truth of that story. Had I changed something? Had I made a mistake? My errors have always haunted me. Perhaps he too had made too many errors! Is it possible to be filled with remorse at the age of ten? Or maybe that happened later...

When, finally, I found it, the sun had almost disappeared. The afternoon had been transformed into a quivering grey above the open sea to the West. There was no grass, nor were there chickens. There was land, and the olive trees were where I had imagined them. Their branches reached out as if to embrace the lone traveler, but in vain.

I want to go home.

The hammock was ragged and still. There was no sister, and no parent. The entire house was silent and empty, like a moment which has been interrupted for all eternity. I wandered around in the shadows for awhile, trying to compare the reality of the place to the story Ignazio had told me. With his intrusion and the inexplicable flash of curiosity which had interrupted my daily routine, he had described the place down to the tiniest detail. It was right there in front of me, exactly as he had described it. But there was no *light*. Where had Ignazio gone? Where had he gone to find his home? Had I committed the crime of false testimony, believing the delirious rants of an idiot? He had not found his tranquillity. But no, I still don't believe he was lying, or hiding something. And my serenity? I climbed into the hammock, and lay back, doubting its ability to hold me. Naples was hazy and far away, a mirage of lights and smoke in front of the sea, hidden under the horizon. Where had Ignazio run away to? And what had he run away from? My jacket was covered with dirt and the evening began to invade that voiceless courtyard. Now I wanted to go home. For the first time that day, I remembered that I had a place to return to. A place where my questions could find rest. Just then, as my boots touched the ground and my thoughts turned back to reality, I heard a mewling cry beneath me.

The kitten was minuscule, and as light as he looked. Just as I had imagined him in the words and the bright irises of that young boy, in the hand of his sister. I think he was smiling, that in that moment he saw me smiling, knowing that I had decided to take him with me forever, in that precise instant. The kitten meowed again, in an almost human, inconsolable voice. I held him against my chest and took him with me. I took him home. I took him to our house, to try and find some tranquillity together. Obviously, I called him Ignazio.