

Professionals in Tommaso Landolfi

Five Stories Translated from the Italian

Roman D. Guglielmo

Vassar College

ITAL-303: Senior Project

Advisors: Simona Bondavalli and Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld

Second Reader: Eugenio Giusti

May 18, 2020

Contents

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Wedding Night | 2 |
| The Thief | 6 |
| On a Roll | 10 |
| The Writer's Morning | 22 |
| High Hopes | 29 |

Wedding Night

At the end of the wedding banquet, the chimney sweep was introduced. The father, to be friendly, and because he thought it nice to celebrate such a ritual as the cleaning of the chimney on that particular day, gave the order to bring him out; but he wouldn't show himself, preferring to stay in the kitchen, with the grand hearth. In truth, some of the guests, still saying their toasts, were inwardly displeased by the sudden interruption; nonetheless, since the children were making a racket, they all began to get up from the table.

The bride had never seen a chimney sweep: she was at boarding school whenever he came. On entering the kitchen she found before her a tall and rather portly man, in a velvet suit as dark as boiled linseed oil, with a hefty gray beard and hunched shoulders; a hunch balanced by the weight of the two enormous alpine boots of a sort that seemed able to keep his whole body erect; the skin of his face, although just thoroughly washed, was deeply blackened, like numerous assorted-size blemishes had rooted themselves into it; a black deposit, amassed between the wrinkles of his cheeks and forehead, endowed his countenance with a wise and thoughtful quality. But this impression quickly dissolved, and the man's great shyness became obvious, especially as his features rearranged into a sort of smile.

He nearly spooked the young bride, as he was situated behind the door, yet himself appeared startled, as if discovered up to something unseemly and owing a justification for his

presence in the room. Addressing the bride directly, he started to repeat some phrases which she either couldn't hear or didn't understand. On he went stammering persistently, and demonstrating a conviction that his chatter concerned her closely; and looked at her meanwhile with punished eyes, yet with intention. To the bride, from the first moment, his vile nature had been unmistakable.

He took off his jacket and began unbuttoning his waistcoat. The bride slipped out the other door, but remained intent as to what was going on inside; she had a feeling something improper was about to happen, and figured her presence ought to cause him some discomfort with his practices, indeed she felt ashamed for him of the whole affair. But unable to hear a sound, she went back inside. The children had run off and the man was alone; just then, he was climbing a ladder positioned under the cowl. He was barefoot and down to his undershirt, a brown shirt over which some straps held a tool against his chest, something resembling a bench knife, whose purpose the bride would never discover; he wore a black mask of sorts that covered his mouth and nose and rested on his ears. But the bride didn't see him ascend into the chimney's throat, as she had already shied away.

When she entered a second time, the kitchen was perfectly empty, and filled with an odor—a strange and terrible odor. Looking around, the bride at first suspected the man's enormous boots, set in a corner beside his bundled garments; instead it was the deathly odor of the soot amassing on the floor of the hearth, descending intermittently, to the rhythm of a dull scraping, that gnawed at the house's marrow and echoed palpably in the bride's bowels. During the pauses, a muffled chafing revealed the man's strenuous ascent.

There came a moment of absolute silence, excruciating suspense for the bride. She fixed her eyes on the mouth of the shaft, at the bottom of the black tapered cowl; not a square mouth, but a dark, narrow slit.

Then without warning, a guttural, inhuman screech resounded in the walls, in the bricks, in the souls of the kitchen utensils, and in the bride's own chest whose whole body shuddered. The beastly howl of agony soon transformed into a joyful cry: the man had popped out on the roof. The muffled chafing resumed more quickly; finally a blackened foot emerged from the slit feeling for a surface, like a hanged man's. The foot found the first rung of the ladder and the bride ran off.

Sitting on a millstone in the courtyard, the old nanny, for whom anything was news, charged herself with informing the bride; she went back and forth delivering reports with an air of mystery: "he's cleaning the chimney now..." And the bride imagined him brushing the soot off his clothes, adding to the pile, like a gravedigger on a mound of earth. "But what could he wear on his feet to cling to the wall?"; and she ran inside to ask him: "good sir, what do you wear on your feet to cling like that?" Then came a cheerful response that was hard to hear. "Now he's having breakfast"; the nanny lingered inside. Then she reappeared holding a few small edelweiss; she said that the man had pulled them from a pristine little case and that he offered them to the bride.

A while later he came outside himself, redressed and with a pannier on his shoulder. He was crossing the courtyard to make his way home, when the father stopped him and began to question him cordially about his life. The bride approached him as well. There in the dim winter sun, his face begrimed, his beard stained black, and squinting in the light, he resembled a giant

moth, a night owl stunned by the day. Or rather an enormous spider, or a louse; in truth, as long as the light outside is bright enough, the view from under the fireplace hood isn't entirely black, but a slimy, seeping gray glow.

He said for 35 years he had travelled the towns cleaning chimneys, that the next year he would bring along his son to teach him the trade, that picking edelweiss had been prohibited and that he had been able to gather those few in secret, and other inconsequential things. From which it was clear, however sly or contemptible he may have been, that he wanted to hide behind his words, to let them fall like a curtain, as a squid enshrouds itself.

He had known all the family's departed members, yet no one had ever noticed him!

By now the bride no longer felt ashamed for him, but rather of herself.

Once he had left, she placed the delicate edelweiss under the portraits of the departed.

The Thief

For two hours, hidden in the cellar, the thief had listened to those footsteps tracing relentlessly across the room above. The ancient trusses trembled and creaked, shedding crumbs of mortar in stops and starts. “Don’t they ever sleep?” the thief wondered. And amid the silence of the night, he was frequently joined by the sudden outbursts of a furious, or sardonic voice; then, after long pauses, there were cackles, shrill and sinister, bloodcurdling.

The thief was an amateur with no interest in scandal or violence. He only hoped to find perhaps some housewares or a bit of nourishment, nothing of value to the old house’s rich owner, but enough nonetheless to sustain him and his small family for a while. What an existence for a poor gray-haired old man! As an amateur would, he’d taken two hours to figure out that those footsteps above belonged to just one person: the gentleman of the house, of course. But who was he talking to? Was he getting angry, or laughing?

Regardless those constant rhythmic footsteps were beginning to make the thief rather uneasy; hell, in a stranger’s house, scrunched between two casks... He was timid and well-meaning, and it showed. And the outbursts were truly horrendous; let alone the cackles! This had all become intolerable. Despite his resolve to begin his work only after the house was thoroughly asleep, he decided to go and see, carefully, what was going on. What’s more, he felt compelled by a strange curiosity, frightening and beyond his control.

He was vaguely familiar with the house; shivering, he squeezed out from between the casks and climbed a stairway to the courtyard where a faint light escaped from a glass door. He wanted to get closer, but the outbursts had resumed, this time even louder. But now he could hear better: the man inside carried on talking, or arguing, incessantly, with someone (indeed, at times, the thief believed he could hear a second voice, although a bit softer); the tone fluctuated: high to low, hissing to murmuring, but always frenzied. Occasional surges of sarcastic laughter interrupted the discussion. Without a doubt, these convulsions were from the main and more impassioned speaker, and they were particularly terrible to hear in the night. Finally, the thief gathered his courage, and under cover of darkness, he approached the door with catlike footsteps. Crouching below its window, he could peer inside remaining unseen. And peer he did.

In the kitchen (as the vast room inside turned out to be) shone a dusty light bulb, emitting a yellowish glow. The hearth was cold, burned out on its own, it seemed. And beside the stove, pacing back and forth, there was a man with gray hair like the thief's. He walked with a bizarre ape-like posture: doubled over, arms dangling limply, his legs wide, and his toes turned out—it was a disturbing sight indeed. With his gloomy, thick-browed eyes, the man glanced frequently in the thief's direction, but stared straight passed him toward the outside. And standing with his curious posture, he chattered incessantly.

Oppressed by a horrible suspicion, the thief looked around for the interlocutor, who was nowhere to be seen. Then, he came to a petrifying conclusion: the man was talking to himself - modulating his voice, as if to converse with another. Doubled over in the pale light of the empty kitchen, before the dormant fireplace, he trudged, chattering tirelessly, and frantically.

“Look at you,” he said, “so friend, I see this become your natural posture. You’ve grown old, my poor fellow,” he added, changing his expression. “And what else can you expect? Your house is empty, your hearth is cold, you traipse about this place like a dead man in his tomb—that is, in his tomb still alive... so enough bloody chattering!” he yelled violently.

“Silence, silence, silence for eternity...” he chanted lyrically, enunciating every syllable.

“But remember, you have your family, your friends, your son,” he went on, switching tones again. “You’re loved and respected, my good sir, even feared by many, I guarantee you that indeed. Not to mention your wealth, that is—ahem—your assets, shall we say. My point is, you’ll be free of any hardship for all your bloody old age! Isn’t that right?” he demanded furiously.

“My family... my family...” he muttered. “My son...” Suddenly, out came one of those blood-curdling, high-pitched laughs: “ha ha ha!”

“Where is my son? Tell me, I pray you (he actually said *pray*), why would he ever worry about me? How could he, even if he tried? Feared, yes, feared.” He started chanting to a crude little song known among students. “*Feared like scabies, rot, or a carcass,*” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “*Hurray! Rhyme, sweet rhyme!*” he continued with lively uncertainty, “*La-di-da!*” He then began to babble almost uninterruptedly: “*la-di-da, here and there, bah bah, this and that, up and down, boo-boo boo-bah.*” And all the while he seemed intensely pensive.

The man went on repeating the scattered lyrics as he angrily paced the floor. The thief, trembling in his hiding spot behind the door, gripped by a deep pity. The thief had forgotten all about the mission that had brought him to the house that night; he’d forgotten his own suffering and only wanted to help the man, even give him a hug perhaps.

The thief made a sudden movement, then gasped; the man abruptly straightened his back, threw himself against the door, and opened it.

“It’s the old dog, just the old dog,” he said.

But instead he found the thief, down on all fours in the gloomy light, looking up at him.

“You, you...” the man said, a little disoriented, and not angrily, but sadly.

“What do you want?”

The thief stood up slowly without responding.

“You came to steal from me, eh?” the man said, not derisively, but with a melancholy cheerfulness, almost.

He stared drearily at the thief, whose eyes began to shimmer with tears as he stood frozen, trembling slightly.

“Well, come in dear friend,” the man said suddenly. “Come inside. You must be poor,” he added earnestly. “Your wife and children are hungry, aren’t they? Please come in.”

He pulled the thief inside by the arm.

In the murky light of the kitchen, the two men looked deep into each other’s eyes. Now the man’s were filled with tears as well; he smiled sweetly. One extended his arms, and the other threw himself at the invitation without restraint. They stood there holding each other, crying, sobbing like children. And their tears showed no sign of stopping. They flowed and flowed, washing over their faces and soothing their hearts.

On a Roll

There. The vendetta was finished; and so was the crime, a vendetta in itself, a nemesis, really. So the killing was committed (that is, accomplished) not exactly by the rules, so to speak, but breaking every rule in the book, to make it perfect, the murder of every self-respecting criminal's dreams. Every precaution had been taken, from the most elementary to the most complex and, dare I say, refined. This killing wouldn't go unpunished for some lucky turn of events (as is always possible) but quite simply because the mastermind had made himself impossible to discover. Once he had placed the weapon in the hands of the suicide, as a final touch, anyone would have had to conclude, with all their faculties, that the incident had been a suicide, which the killer himself had presciently set up using his covert involvement in the suicide's finances and emotions. To complete this last operation, the final decisive touch, and to make a safe getaway, he had plenty of time: 10 precious minutes before the night watchman would return, and what can't be done in 10 minutes!

To be exact, the suicide already had the murder weapon in his hands, this was one of the most prudent precautions, because you never know, had the shot been taken from barely the wrong angle, the usual boastful detectives perhaps could have figured something out. So, the assassin had first stunned the suicide, and, from behind his back, forced him to shoot himself in the mouth with his own clasped hands. Yet by chance, as the suicide fell limply backward,

convulsing, arms extended and distorted, his hand stayed clamped on the revolver, his right, to be precise—perhaps the wrong one, given the particular direction of the gunshot; what’s more, the hand had settled in a noticeably forced and unnatural position. After all, it’s one thing to do it of one’s own accord, and another to be partially (or totally) unconscious, and controlled by another’s hands. It would have been easy to position the hand and body. With a bit of effort, it would have been perfectly possible to replace the corpse exactly as it was at the moment of the suicide-homicide. But the killer was quick to rule out that option: he knew everything about him and the circumstances of his death, but he also knew how uncertain and unpredictable such reenactments (or stagings) could turn out, no matter how well calculated, and for whatever reason, there was always something that didn’t add up. No, the corpse had to remain exactly where it was and how it was, and the killer could only intervene as far as choosing the correct hand and adjusting the position of the gun. Nothing difficult, he told himself—and got to work.

But then, suddenly, the killer was gripped by a feeling of terror. Choose the correct hand! Easier said than done. He realized, or just then recalled, there was more to this decision than the trajectory of the gunshot and all those technical details, rather it was an essential and critical decision. Let me be more clear: the suicide, the killer recalled, was left-handed. And at the same moment, another recollection swept through him like a chill... I’ll try to be clearer still. In one of his marvellous writings, Gaboriau tells of a killer who, just like ours, had staged a suicide, and would have been perfectly successful in his intent if not for a minor detail. And there, like here, the suicide was left-handed; so, of course, the killer had placed the revolver in his left hand. The detectives, however, unaware of the suicide’s handedness, grew suspicious of the seemingly abnormal scene, that is, of what was, in fact, perfectly normal, which eventually

led to the killer's arrest. For now, we'll neglect to admire the finesse of such a narrative assumption (which, from a misunderstanding, ultimately creates an instrument and almost an embodiment of truth, and on the other hand, goes to show not only the disadvantages of being meticulous, but indeed how improbable the truth can appear, or really be) and we'll return to our story.

Our killer's bewilderment, thrust on him by the abrupt memory of Gaboriau's tale, was compounded slightly by this clear memory that the suicide had always been ashamed (for some inexplicable reason) of his left-handedness and sought to suppress his peculiarity, so it was extremely unlikely that anyone was aware of it, let alone that the information would make its way to the inevitable detectives. Their intelligence and acumen, or lack thereof, would play a role as well. No, not "as well"—this was the crux of the problem: the detectives would be meatheads, sure, but among them could always be someone keen enough to... to what? What good is keenness if they ignore—utterly *ignore*—the fact of the suicide's left-handedness? But wait, this argument is still, incorrect, since...

Just as suddenly, the killer began to sense his window of opportunity growing terribly short. Indeed, it's one thing to put a prior decision into action, and quite another to make the decision itself: the former might require a moment, but for the latter, even eternity may not suffice. Insufficient for two distinct reasons, one internal, the other external: one could suppose a fundamentally and subjectively impossible decision, which, however improbable, often comes with great confidence regarding obvious matters requiring no real judgement, or one could suppose an objectively impossible decision, that is, an unsolvable problem. But then there's another possibility: is any problem really insoluble, or is it rather an illusion of insolubility due

to improper planning, insufficient information, or both? Which would lead to the conclusion, with appropriate reconsideration... Just listen to his leisurely pondering, and at the expense of precious time! It was no idle speculation, though, since he had to decide, and to decide he had to think. But on the other hand, there was no time to think, so there was no time to decide. But he had to decide nonetheless, and quickly; so... so what? So inevitably he had to think, or perhaps decide without thinking? Oh boy, he sure was a logician, wasn't he; otherwise he wouldn't have found himself in this mess to begin with, that is, he would have picked another crime to commit and entrusted himself largely to fate like all the other killers. He had everything to lose: his self-respect was at stake; he had to safeguard his masterpiece, to act at random would be to gamble away his dignity. But anyway, as the minutes passed, like many others did before him when they found themselves in dire straits, he went on wasting time with calculations, specifically with the process of deciding, practically defeating the purpose... It is true, however, that in this case, and perhaps always, the processes of deciding, and thinking in general, were—or are—the decisions and the thoughts themselves, just as the right preparation for a problem is as good as a solution, and that the result can't be distinguished from the process, neither temporarily nor consistently, like a preliminary, chaotic phase thereof; that is to say, then, that calculations are most important. No, indeed the only important thing... Oh enough!

Another two minutes had passed: effectively five remained; four and a half, since it would take at least thirty seconds to traverse the vast atrium, to reach the service stairwell, and from there the street, that is, the dark alley out back. Fighting back panic, he tried hurriedly to rethink everything from the beginning. But if there's any activity that abhors haste and incitement, it's thinking. Imagine racing through Venice with nothing but a walking stick:

what's the point? The only difference: there you won't delay the steamboats, nor speed them up, much less the motorboats. Meanwhile, thoughts are like those hysterical people who only get slower and clumsier the more you urge them to hurry up. So after all, the killer's hasty reconsideration only landed him in deep confusion, in darkness, actually. He checked his watch: another minute had passed! So with hostility toward himself and his very nature, he sought to stand naked before his problem, so to speak: to place—to *force* himself into a verifiable and familiar mode, without letting the consequences unravel dizzily in his brain, and above all attempting to dissect the problem into its elements. But it wasn't easy (especially placing himself, etcetera); and damn it there was no time; and anyway, how does one dissect, etcetera, without first...?

Let's see. A problem, we said, is only unsolvable for improper planning or insufficient information: but can one ever be sure these aren't one and the same? And how could one possibly distinguish between them, that is, determine which begets the insolubility? After all, it's hardly intuitive to compare the two causes, or at least difficult to describe them in similar terms: in fact, regardless of their intrinsic differences (one being a matter of judgement and the other of simple fact, if we may borrow such terminology), the second is the determinant of the first, where the first is not of the second. That is, a lack of information prohibits not only proper planning, but any planning whatsoever, while improper planning does not create a lack of information. Gah, what an idiotic argument!—built on such delicate word play. Indeed, such a matter can't be described in merely dialectic terms. We'll need to turn to mathematical concepts. Consider a function: one thing is a function of the other. Sure, but which one of which? Fine then, let's call one a constant and the other a variable in the problem... Ah! What nonsense

have I lost myself in, and with only minutes left! Look, there go another thirty seconds; now three minutes would have to suffice to decide and take action. No—unacceptable. I need to clear my mind, put everything to rest. So, quickly now: I need a plan, but the time for planning has passed, and besides, any useful plan would build upon the facts, or else send me swimming in a sea of possibilities. The facts then—ah, now this would require some thought! For the love of God, someone tell me, how do I identify the facts of the matter; one would almost think the facts depended on the planning, and not vice versa (no matter if I somewhat contradict myself). What am I saying! On the planning: on the solution no less. It's only in anticipating and formulating a solution that the facts make themselves evident and jump out decidedly at the mind; which I'll venture to say would mean a solution should never rely on logic, or on logic alone; or other lovely things that, for brevity... (I'm not giving a lecture, damn it! I'm...) Okay, okay, "anticipating" and "formulating" aren't quite right: "presenting" is the word. On the other hand, "the facts" doesn't make sense either: you would need to say "facts," without the article, since each of the infinite solutions has its own unique facts; since, to be honest, the facts themselves are hypotheses, a problem has no facts, facts don't just reveal themselves. And infinite solutions, certainly: no problem exists that allows only two solutions. On the contrary, such a problem never presents itself: if nothing else, the ways to avoid or dismiss it would be infinite, and these, like it or not, are still solutions. Actually, I would say that a theoretical problem with two solutions would offend the very concept of a problem, it would be a choice rather than a problem, it would be... it would be a risk, just as well left up to fate, a roll of a die, at that. In fact, it's implicit in the notion of the two solutions that each has equal weight, in other words, the inquirer sees two simple and opposing possibilities, whereas a problem must be

unbalanced by nature, and to resolve it means to discover which way the balance leans—a balance with innumerable pans. Hm, is all that true? Doubtful. Right now I'm of the mind that each and every problem is inherently unsolvable. But of course. And I'm convinced, at the very least, that the possible solutions are all incorrect, or worse, correct. No, the latter is just a convenient excuse: all solutions are incorrect. Not even incorrect, since the problem of the problem, that is the questions thereof, doesn't even present itself in such terms, in terms of solvability or insolvability, in terms of success or failure of the inquiry. A problem is not something that can be investigated, but rather identified, at most; a problem is something that interrupts the natural order of thoughts and actions, a sort of disease. No need to seek one out, but if such a misfortune befalls us, we can't do a thing about it. Everything goes smoothly, until one presents itself, and by the time it does, there's nothing to be done, it's already too late for everything...

Oh God, where am I going with this?... I'm left with less than a minute in which to decide and act based upon... Decide: perhaps mine is an unsolvable problem, like all the others, yet the situation burdens me with all its weight, with all its terrible urgency, and it demands a decision! Decision, the horned and foul-smelling monster, the dark beast, the bane of every decent soul... How is it possible that I can't manage to think like everyone else, you know, crudely, plain and simple, like this night guard, this grotesque, pure-eyed hulk, who in a minute and a half exactly will arrive at this threshold with his robotic footsteps?... Calm down calm down: one minute is plenty for an infinitesimal calculation, with the help of an epiphany. An epiphany: a mere triviality!

Reasoning simply: now, my problem has a variable. Well, there's a revelation! Wouldn't this involve the fantastic acumen of the aforementioned detectives. Dear me, what a deceptive point of view... Let's try to remember what set loose this hell of useless reasoning (Useless? Reasoning is never useless; it exists, after all). Gaboriau's detectives were obviously sloppy, since, upon examining a suicide with a revolver in his left hand, before concluding that something in the scene is out of place, it helps to consider the possibility that he might be left handed: right. Right? Not so much: one could just as well assert the opposite, that the scene is unusual indeed, unless someone or something were there to tell us the suicide was left-handed. The burden of proof, then, one could argue falls on the suicide, or someone on his behalf, not on the detectives; and in that case no one would find it strange to see the revolver in the right hand, or perhaps find it very strange, or perhaps not... and back and forth, etcetera, so the detectives couldn't or shouldn't necessarily be called *sloppy*; in other words, for a solution to my problem, I don't have so much as a first clue to go on, or, simply put, the fundamental datum, the variable, if you will, is not the detectives' intelligence, nor their sensibility, or lack thereof. So then what or where is it? Well, it's within me, I suppose. Yes, yes we all know it by heart, but that tells us nothing: everything internal is indeed always external; take it easy now, that's not to say all our relationships are really internal, rather that the relationship isn't everything, the relationship doesn't negate or substitute those external things, far from it: it affirms them; a relationship is not self-sufficient. And even if it were, I have no relationship to this matter here. But how couldn't I! Is that a joke? Anything but; please, let's let this go, and get back to Gaboriau's detectives. Detectives: call them literary characters - rather deceptive ones at that. They have me thinking about those who challenged the great chess masters who played—no, invented—the famous

‘Immortal’ game; indeed the masters could never, ever have played or invented anything immortal whatsoever if they hadn’t indeed encountered some absolutely unworthy opponents. Bah, what a silly comparison, which would seem antiphrastic: what would come out of it? So if the detectives had been worthy of the assassin, he would have had to triumph and they surrender? But in a sense, that’s just the case. And besides, none of this gets us very far in the present situation, it’s not the issue at hand. In fact, for argument’s sake, suppose the detectives were sloppy and could be called as much: come on, what could we deduce either way? But I’ve asked the wrong question; what could we deduce, I should have asked more pertinently, if the detectives, for whatever reason, didn’t realize that the suicide was left-handed, that the staging of the suicide was perfectly normal and so on? And the answer is, again: absolutely nothing. For which I can list at least three reasons off the top of my head. First, and this alone may suffice, as the first response from his gunman sufficed for Napoleon: the staged suicide was what it was, and that’s that. Second: it’s impossible to deduce a norm, especially not a truly behavioral one, from a chance event. This point, or rather this statement, of course, would require some elaboration, but there’s no time; so for now suffice it to say that the detectives’ actions, that is, the case in which they find a revolver in the hand...etcetera, etcetera, would turn out to be neither incontrovertible nor inevitable. Indeed, the position of the revolver bears no connection to its investigation. Third: whatever their actions, they occur in a subsequent phase relative to the event in question; how could they possibly exemplify, predict, or inform a previous phase? On the contrary, they’re entirely unrelated. See what I mean? Problems can be more than just unsolvable, indeed unimaginable. Like a blow to the head. I’ve said it before, and I’ll leave it at that.

Now reflect for a moment, lend me briefly your attention and make what you will of a mess like this: the subsequent phase I mentioned is, indeed, the future relative to me now, nonetheless, the previous phase, which, of course, has already passed relative to the posterior, is occurring in the present for me... Well, don't you see anything odd? Just think, I mean, about the meaning of the words, linger on each, ponder them one by one, and you'll see, some oddity will jump out at you. Good heavens! Who am I talking to? Who am I talking to when I should be... I can't think, that's the real problem; even with all my degrees I can't think. And by now it's over, nothing's left to do but...

These sorts of cerebral circuits (you wouldn't call them thoughts, which have nothing to do with this), as we've seen, are faster than lightning and light itself, but still not enough to liberate them from the bondage of time; and indeed the killer noticed he had scarcely had a minute, not counting the half he would need to get away safely. He was overcome by panic. A half-minute is still a long time for someone with a clear mind and their head on straight, but by now he knew, there was no more denying it, he'd fallen prey to his own—the reader can define it as they like, and he'd lost all hope. He thought disgracefully of running away, abandoning his unfinished—that is, irreparably compromised in its very essence—his masterpiece (which indeed with that final touch would have acquired such meaning and splendor). An unexceptional crime; this is what had become of his masterpiece?... But then suddenly, a phrase burst into mind, from somewhere within him: “Take the risk! Leave it to fate!” Yes, yes, there was no doubt, this was it and how could it be that this was the solution he had sought for 10 long minutes (and if there was any doubt, undoubtedly there was no time to resolve it).

He searched his pocket frantically, pulled out a coin, and tossed it: for heads he would place the revolver in the left hand (taking every appropriate precaution); for tails, in the right. The coin flew, hit the floor loudly, rolled under the desk, and finally fell flat. Unable to see the result from his position, he threw himself avidly to his knees in the direction of the coin: thrilled that someone (but who?) or something else had made the decision; above all thrilled it was made at all; and blindly trusting it to be the right one... He was almost halfway there when suddenly he sensed he was being watched. Not watching him, exactly, but his rear, protruding from under the desk. He turned around abruptly.

It was the nightguard at the doorstep, dominating the killer with his stature; his watery blue eyes watching with astonishment. —But sir...—he stuttered unassuredly, almost as if he were at fault. Then he saw the body; and still, among the emotions could now be seen in his eyes, his astonishment prevailed.

In the meantime the killer had stood back up. Silently, more with his eyes than with his body, he pointed the guard toward a bundle of cash and bonds on the desk. The offer, the deal, that is, was clear; but the guard, now silent himself, shook his head, smiling slightly. A smile that clearly couldn't be trusted; indeed, he raised the pistol already in his hand, aimed at the killer, and made a signal that was at once an invitation and a warning. The killer understood; he extended his arm, stepped aside leaving a path for the guard to reach the phone, but taking care to stay within striking distance. Indeed, he thought, what can you expect from a brute like this!

“But at least tell me, John,” said the killer as the two sat on their hands, face to face, waiting for the police, “aren't you about a minute early?”

“Of course I am,” the guard responded with a fleeting glance at the clock on the wall. “Of course: I heard a coin drop and roll across the floor. So, you understand sir, I tiptoed over here in a flash...”

See just how deep we can get in those foolish deliberations? And then see what comes to determine our fate? Meanwhile, he could have just as easily flipped the coin onto the carpet rather than the pavement—problem solved!

The Writer's Morning

The writer woke at dawn, and still in bed, he stretched thoroughly, thinking to himself. Sometimes he found himself feeling furious with everything and everyone, but today not particularly, and a certain physical feeling reassured him that he was even in decent health, more or less. All in all I feel all right, he decided, and for a man of my age I can still content myself. The Springtime dawn was radiant: a sparrow tweeted persistently, and, as the writer continued his gymnastics, a swallow started for the gaping bedroom window, then flew abruptly backward on seeing him. His eye fell on a wheat field in the distance; undulating in the gentle morning breeze, it resembled the legs of a crawling millipede. Ha! Still have my sensibility, he told himself. Without washing up, to keep his momentum, he made straight for the studio, and put pen to paper; only, not exactly.

He was working—for two days now—on a sonnet of which he'd only established the first and last couplets. We'll see, with a bit of goodwill, this could be the morning I get out of my slump. The four lines so far established were: *Ashamed in April are those who languish And those abandoned and those with no lady*; and, at the end: *And April thus its radiant visage*

Disguised (alas, fleeting) in a veil of rain. But in the middle? The sonnet was supposed to express his (indeed sinful) indifference toward the Springtime, like a withered spirit, no longer deluded by hope, and at the same time maintain a certain tone: classical, fantastic, almost facetious, so the reader could better imagine the hopeless abyss in which the poet had lost himself; it should seem like a prayer to the the impetuous month of April. Well, easier said than done; and besides, by now he'd lost the sentiment. He'd have to try and revive it, lest he leave those four lovely bounding verses disembodied; he had no choice but to press on by virtue of technique and experience, for lack of other motivation. Experience... Hell, then why choose that *languish*, which barely rhymes with four other words in our language. Inevitably he'd have to use the word *anguish*, too old-fashioned, really. But there was no way around it. The writer even considered breaking a word apart, but still the only one that came to mind was *anguine*, equally unacceptable in a contemporary sonnet, at least not in his concept of modern poetry. Entirely fed up with this futility, he left the problem unresolved, and in the meantime examined the verses he had jotted down as possibilities. Indeed the third and fourth could be: *Painting as you go, solar eye, With blood and fire before the call of dawn.* Eh, even that's a little much, really, with that *painting as you go*. The rest perhaps could stay, in fact that reference to the dawn (which is like the youth of a day, as is April of a year) and that *solar eye* (given the part about April's *visage*) worked absolutely fine, and *painting as you go* could be deleted after all. Moving along: *From your fire escapes the Anguish That to man foretells of love and fame.* This is where it gets difficult. Of course, we'll get rid of that consonance: *from your fire*. And then (the rest of the verses were written haphazardly along with variations): *Fraternal November, face exsanguine, Better suits with sheen of grame Those vainly left in life for shame.* Well, it's

redeemable at best, but again, rhyming with *-ame* is not the challenge: if there were only some way to break apart that *anguish!* Patience now, let's deal with the triplets. Here it would be nice to follow the strictest scheme with two rhymes only, in hope to show some colleagues (who, after much deliberation, gave up on rhyming just because they couldn't do it properly) that there are still some out there, thank God, who can write a proper sonnet, the old fashioned way. But to find the other two words he needed with *-ain* would be no easy task: there's *lain* or *sustain*, for instance he could say life lays down as it comes to an end (no, *its* end sounds deeper and more elegant); then maybe *grain*, with some emphatic imagery, like: *Don't till (or plough) your grain just yet.* Hm, something to think about. And for the other two lines with *-ace*? Well, one could certainly be: *Let sleep what lies below the surface.* Anyway... all right let's see it all from the top for good measure.

After an hour racking his brain, he was still a ways from a finished version, and beginning to tire, also because he had smoked a great deal on an empty stomach. How about a nap? he thought; then, with a fresh mind... But something better came to mind. It's quite important to know that the writer, old and no longer particularly vigorous, as an outlet, and by now a guilty pleasure, would practice drawing nudes which he just as quickly tore to pieces. So he put himself to work and enjoyed it for a while. But he would have liked to achieve a better likeness in his female figures (the only ones he cared for), he wished, with their sculpted curves, skillful shadows, and delicate hairs, they would speak directly to the senses, with no need for intermediary imagination; but for that he knew too little of art. So after a while, he tore them all up, and a bit discontent, but not overly (wise, isn't he) he sat in his armchair, book in hand, where he soon fell asleep.

It was almost 10 o'clock when he woke. After another stretch, he went down to the garden for a walk. After careful self-assessment, it was clear this wasn't the morning to insist on productivity. On the other hand, what to do until noon (not a moment later he would be off to lunch)? Perhaps an article: of course, just the article they needed at the magazine, about the last book by—He hurried back up to the studio and handily composed his brief review, expressing one of the author's fundamental points with, he thought, particular acumen. But noon remained still an hour away. Nothing ever happens in this God-forsaken town, he muttered, and there's never anything to do. Perhaps he could have thought about his novel, a grand aspiration of his. But no, unfortunately all day he'd been a bit absent, so to speak. On the other hand, he still hadn't lost the whole morning, so if he wasn't quite pleased with himself, there was no need for disappointment. In the end, the time was best used to review some documents just in from his grower (the writer owned a bit of land, as well).

He opened the documents: how come the oil crop was so spare this year? He would be sure to address the matter with the grower. And even between the oil and the rest of the harvest, he'd garnered such a meager sum that he couldn't very well be pleased. Bah, nevermind, no sense in choking on lunch over it; at this point, after all, it was half an hour at most until noon would come at last. In fact, a chat with the kitchen maid would be opportune: you never know, with these humble folks: sometimes their silly ideas provide a helpful spark.

When asked about the town's current events, the maid responded, as usual, that there weren't any, but little by little she got more conversational, revealing bits of uninteresting gossip. Meanwhile, the writer, who had plopped down in a chair, examined the maid's feet, which to him seemed unusually small for a woman with her robustness: the maid was sixty years old, and

large and ungraceful, but in her youth, who knows?, he wondered. Anyway, passing to another train of thought he told himself, I can't say I've wasted the morning: I've written an article, I've worked on the sonnet, I've reflected... hm. And then he started to think about his life as a whole, which perhaps wasn't so miserable after all. He had no woman and in a sense, he couldn't hope to anymore, he was alone, and would stay that way, it certainly seemed, but instead he had freedom and countless other privileges, so really he had nothing to desire. Indeed, as soon as the magazine paid him for his latest series, he could take a trip somewhere to relax and work on his projects, Venice let's say; and then, if everything had worked out... then we'll let time run its course, he concluded vaguely. Only, he suddenly thought, if I get something out of this chat, what will I do right after lunch? Certainly not go back to work (on what exactly anyway?) and that damn cat who still hasn't come back (he would play various games with her, train her to retrieve treats from hard-to-reach spots, climb ladders, etcetera).

The maid continued her uninteresting stories. At one point the writer was reminded of a middle-class woman whom he'd caught a glimpse of at a relative's house only days earlier; he'd been struck by her slender hands and flirting gray eyes, still wholesome in spite of her age. Thus he'd imagined she had a lovely personality, or once did anyway, and decided to mention her to the maid.

Sure enough, she knew her. Indeed the woman, it turned out, had been her childhood friend.

"She's never been particularly choosy when it comes to men," said the maid. "Even now, at her age, if someone's looking... But, I've heard, in the past, she was the mistress of... (a local man)."

“Sure, but meanwhile of countless others too, and then she told the children they were his, so he found himself with a brood of children out of nowhere. All that aside though, she’s a good woman. She says it herself: I wouldn’t have been a whore if I hadn’t had a heart.”

A quote worth remembering, the writer thought.

“And now what’s she doing?” he asked.

“She’s a maid now for that man’s daughter, his real daughter, who’s been alone since he died. She doesn’t want to leave her, meanwhile, the daughter she had with him is a maid for...” Excellent, thought the writer, excellent! This kind of woman, and these complications, with her parochial background of gloomy, provincial life. How long has it been since I’ve written a story: what a great opportunity. And something like this, part fiction, part documentary, it’s exactly what the magazine wants, and incidentally what they pay better for, exactly what our readers want too.

“And her, what does she have to say about it?”

“What do you think she says? She tells it like it is. She says: God won’t forgive me. But, take comfort, I tell her, Christ forgave even Mary Magdalene; she hardly needs comforting, anyway, only now and then. In fact sometimes I blame myself for being too serious. Her heart is true; when I was sick, she always came to be with me. And she says: you’re my friend, but you don’t share my sins.”

Another nice quote, the writer thought; and nice as well was the way this poor zealous maid thought about such things, that is, her natural, accepting instincts. Yes, I could get a story or something out of this, I wouldn’t need to add a thing.

Eh, let's see where this is going, he said to himself with a certain satisfaction; in truth, I'm not as dull as I seem.

"It's just that..." said the maid in turn with a timid and almost teasing smile, "it's just she claims having a heart makes you a whore, but it seems to me that I have a heart, yet I haven't become a whore myself. On the contrary, it seems I'm destined to die an old maiden.

Well, no use trying to explain the concept of commutativity, or *non-commutativity* in this case, the writer thought, not without priding himself on the swiftness of his inward remark; so he tried to explain to her that even if every easy woman in the world had a good heart, it wouldn't mean that every good-hearted woman were necessarily easy.

Then he added: "well, drop in the pasta, why don't you?"

He went to smoke one more cigarette before lunch, and realized he'd misplaced the pack, perhaps left it in the studio. But he didn't find it on the desk. Wait, maybe in the drawer? He opened it: not there either.

Instead his eye fell on the pistol he kept in there: an old drum revolver, gently sparkling in the light.

And looking at it, he suddenly realized that his entire life had a simple, definitive meaning. As simple and definitive as what he had to do next, right away. He grabbed the pistol and spun the drum: not a single missing bullet, he just had to pull the trigger.

As if to complete a daily chore, whose time presents itself without any particular forethought, he raised the pistol, placed it on his temple, and pulled.

High Hopes

The manager (who was also the head editor or something like that) looked kindly at the writer and told him, again:

“I understand your impatience, I acknowledge your situation; but, you see, it’s not all on our end, we’re being influenced by... and we have to wait until... Eh, I wish we could manage our resources as we like!... In a way you might be right, I mean, of course you are: we owe you for your series on the social role of creativity. But, as I said...”

The manager’s expression was beaming and almost affectionate, indeed almost empathetic. And every so often, his nose displayed its comical softness, responding to the slightest distortions of his features. Fleshy and pointed, even vibrating, it often descended over his mouth; so simian, just like a proboscis monkey in fact. Meanwhile, as he observed these peculiarities, neither entertained nor interested, the writer said to himself: “Look at him... the fact is, this is how you have to comport yourself with some people—better yet, with everyone: friendly, half sincere, half dishonest, slightly devious, very easy going, always knowing what to say in unfortunate circumstances, sufficiently energetic, or maybe eager, or even utterly

passionate perhaps, willing to play any mind games, and follow any promising opportunities. But in the end, none of that mattered in the slightest.

“Don’t worry,” concluded the manager. “As soon as we have the letter, we won’t keep you waiting.”

“And when will that be?”

“Who knows!”

The letter: what letter? From whom? It wasn’t even worth asking. The whole dispute was amusing, actually; what a comeuppance: a writer’s fate left up to some ambiguous letter.

He left the office, as usual, under the immortal sunset... How many times had he swallowed his hopes (once concrete aspirations, but now obscure vanities) under those violet city sunsets. But in that same despair he’d once found inspiration, a sign of light—happiness: perhaps a single meaningful word would have clarified—illuminated the landscape, and the whole world, or at least allowed him to look on it with in internal fondness, like curling up in a warm blanket during a stormy night or a dreary rain.

But enough of that. Now, what time was his train? After all, he’d come quite a ways to get this far, and meet such a brilliant fate: the writer’s friendly foe never responded whatsoever to his associates’ letters, especially not the sensitive—this was one of his insolent habits. Well, for better or worse it was time to head home. Oh God, but empty-handed? The writer was seized by the acutely torturous thoughts of his hungry, toy-less children, and his accusing wife, who had silently oppressed him through the entire dialogue with...

The other: that’s what the writer called him internally, not without a certain satisfaction. But, clearly, the other was no different from the other others—*all* the others, none of whom ever

provide much comfort. The other, incidentally, couldn't care less about anyone's problems (save his own, of course). To the other, the troubles of his so-called friend, the writer, were foreign, indifferent, and indeed incomprehensible. Nor did he bother himself, ultimately, to take responsibility for anyone else's irredeemable failure—complete and total, yet long expected failure.

So he headed home, but only to go back out soon after: if his hopelessly gloomy family life wasn't enough, his stomach was unbearably empty, a feeling he always got from being broke. He headed for his hometown. He'd done it once before, back when he was about to graduate high school; he had dropped everything and fled there to rekindle, with some hunting and plenty of leisure time, the motivation he'd exhausted in his evidently absurd and fruitless academic efforts; motivation, or perhaps faith in some kind of established system, which, precisely by rejecting it, he had indeed rediscovered.

This time was different; this time he would take the opposite route: wishing decidedly to rid himself of any lingering faith or motivation, or even better, present himself to the inevitable resolution... He'd been forced to concoct that nonsense about society, and not even that had gotten him anywhere? But this present situation was just the straw that broke the camel's back. The time had come to see if right there, in his town, he would finally carry out his matured and coveted intention; but of course anyone, who for whatever reason decides to end it all, would be expected to choose someplace they feel at home, and to choose the most congenial course of action: his was perhaps a form of renewed disdain, as if, even having fallen so low, he sought to fall lower still.

At the very top of his mountain, there used to be, and there still is, a natural well of sorts, or a sinkhole, one of those bottomless fissures in the rock, “gutters,” as the shepherds called them, who would throw in the carcasses of their animals that died of diseases. Come to think of it, he could just let himself fall in: clench his fists and teeth, close his eyes, and the rest is up to nature, which never fails to annihilate that which it’s created as soon as the opportunity presents itself (Mother Nature, after all, benevolent as she is, will gladly expedite her ultimate purpose). Such a death, then, would have a clear advantage: no one would find the shattered, disfigured corpse, no one would have to reconstruct it, all the while shivering and trembling, and in so doing, glimpse the sordid human essence, and endure the disgust it produces.

Similar thoughts, naturally, kept him still clinging to life, to some weakness that he hoped to overcome as quickly as possible. But aside from that... What about the possibility of jumping into that well and surviving the fall? What a terrible agony: broken, mangled, suffering, beyond earshot, and eyes forever fixed on the damp, rubbery walls, spotted with ominous vegetation creeping up from the depths, and on a faint pinhole, inaccessibly high above, the only remnant of light or the world. One could lie there for days on end: it’s a stubborn thing, the human carcass... The aspiring suicide recalled a story he’d heard from his housekeeper: one fine day, the sick retiree on the sixth floor, no longer tolerating his misery, threw himself down the stairwell. Even with the marble floor, he didn’t die on impact, but only later at the hospital; rather, he carried on screaming horrifically until the ambulance arrived an hour or so later. No one ventured to touch him, unseamed and practically dismembered as he appeared; and he yelled until everyone lost their pity. According to the housekeeper, his feet were completely twisted—something out of a hellish nightmare.

No, he wouldn't allow himself to meet such an atrocious end, or run the risk. Let's see, wasn't there a way, or a place, to end it quickly at least? Perhaps there was: Gaeta. The nearby city of Aeneas' wet nurse, the city of dukes and consuls, and, as we all know, of the great fissured mountain where the Grotta del Turco lies, such an obvious place, though; but, at the end of an ancient street, behind the military prison, there's also a jagged cliff with a magnificent drop. An enormous drop, if he remembered correctly; who could imagine, let alone fear, surviving the fall? To Gaeta then, just the place to fulfill his destiny. The vision fixed itself within him, typical of these cases, and even became a caressing and consoling presence: his body shredded by the cliffs, reduced to tatters, and at last erased from existence.

But as they say, these details are just conjecture. He might instead turn inside out on the way down, in which case it would end just as soon, only he'd remain in one piece, and thus be left to the mercy of the investigations and the eulogies. That is to say, his treasured vision didn't quite meet his expectations.

But then the writer thought, demanding too much would preclude convenience, no endeavor would be without risk, etcetera; and going on preaching to himself, he was sure to reach a decision eventually. So there was nothing left to do but to take his final, resolute action: a peaceful yet irrelevant instant.

Right, but when? When would the long-awaited end arrive? And why did he continue traipsing around those hills, contemplating, ruminating, chewing and swallowing over and over, rather than heading right away to his fate?

Once there was a carpenter who summoned Death; when Death appeared, the carpenter asked for help to replace his bundle of wood atop his shoulders... This is the singular problem, a

true dilemma: one may keep Death near and dear all they like, but not necessarily because they're ready to accept it.

But without a doubt, he would defeat that instinctive aversion, sooner or later.