

Coffee for Chocolate (Freedom Fighters)

by *Orazio Longo* © 2009 Translated by Adriana Tonon

Matteo Gualberto was well-liked in Comelico (*northeastern Italian Alps. TN*). By everyone. He knew. He had soon realized it. At ‘The Bridge’ bar where he often used to go and have a coffee, he always met someone proposing him to join in a card game.

“Fancy a hand, marshal?” (*in Ladin language in the text*: «Maressiall, fasedi n' scartu?» TN*).

He didn't balked at the idea. He looked at his watch and answered yes most of the times.

“Just one though, ‘cause I'm on duty” – he always added.

“A chair for the marshal, then” (**Na cariéga par al maressiall, allora.*)

Gualberto still found it hard to become accustomed to the rules in use in Comelico. After all, he, who had learnt to play cards from his grandfather Mimmo – of Sicilian origins, from Calascibetta, now become almost a small ghost town somewhere around Enna – played without ‘signs’: exclusively relying on his memory for discards and his ability to follow the game on the table. “Otherwise, how could you ever call it *scientific?*” – the *maressiall* pointed out the first time he sat to play *scopone* (*Italian card game. TN*). But there was little to protest about. In Comelico there is a sort of unwritten code, strict you might say, which governs the ‘signs’.

So, a punch on the table starts and commands the game; the ‘goody’ sign in reply means that it's ok; if the card whirls it means there are two of them or *denari* is the suit. Then he knocks, turns his card in reply; if he discards it with a throw it means that the suit is not good. And so on... Then you have the “Q-signs” which are the false ones specifically made to muddle your rivals up, but often unluckily misunderstood even by your own playmate.

“You can be even a *maressiall*, marshal, but here you must play according to the rules of our *dolomitic* tradition”. His table companions answered him underlining the word

dolomitic.

“If it suits you fine, otherwise...” (*S’ al sta bèn, snò...*).

“Tonino, could you bring me some *coffee for chocolate*, please?”. Agatino, called Tino, Tinuzzu actually, Sicilian from Campofelice di Rocella, janitor at the primary school as well as the usual playmate of the marshal at the card table, spoke Italian with the strong accent of the parlance in Palermo. During those three years spent in Comelico, in the Dolomites of the Belluno province, he became used to everything; to the ‘dolomitic’ scientific *scopone* as well as that sort of ‘coffee for chocolate’, none other than a junk drink – as everybody said – served only at ‘The Bridge’ bar, a tavern actually, and called that way both because of its brown colour and its taste, far more similar to a nasty chocolate rather than a decent coffee. Moreover, it was not exactly a typical speciality from Comelico. Not at all, actually. But after all, neither Tonino, ‘The Bridge’ bartender who in a few years, not entirely undeservedly, had picked up the reputation of being “lazybones and boaster”, was originally from Comelico. On the contrary, he wasn’t even from northern Italy.

“You’ll see, Agatino, we will win hands down – in the meanwhile the marshal was telling the janitor – Tonino, could you fetch us other four coffees for chocolate, please?”. He was treasuring the last ‘seven’ card, obviously the precious *denari* suit one, when a boom was heard. Massive. Along with a sudden light. Something had exploded. A huge bang. Everybody turned and saw a high voltage pylon suddenly collapsing. The one just behind the old school. There, a stone’s throw from the pub. Everybody stood up. Frightened. Some of them were stunned. There was someone who started running. Not the marshal. He stayed still. Motionless.

It was Agatino, called Tino, Tinuzzu actually, who realized what had happened first and gave the alarm. He saw the marshal’s head bent on his neck, dangling. And a hole on his forehead. Right between his eyebrows. They had caught him. And a trickle of blood was now running down his forehead and his nose. There was a leaflet on the ground: ‘Freedom Fighters’.

Corporal De Maria who arrived soon after, could do nothing except certifying that the marshal “died a violent

death presumably by firearm” so he wrote on his notebook. But there was little to presume. And so he saw to ‘seal’ the area all around the marshal - the “crime scene”; a term he had never used because there had never been a murder in Comelico since he was in the corps and neither previously, as far as he knew. But now, this legal *slash* investigating technicality gave him a sort of sense of satisfaction and importance as well. Like in the television series of superheroes and American style detective stories he used to watch. “As in Mary Higgins Clark’s suspense novels”, he thought. He had read them all.

“Only the autopsy can give us more accurate answers about the marshal’s death” – he had decisively said to the reporters who had rushed to the scene immediately after the incident. There were just two of them actually, and one of the two, at the time of the bang, was few metres far, already sitting at the other table of the bar smoking a hyper-nicotine non-filter ‘Alfa’ cigarette. But De Maria wanted to follow the protocol all the same. Now, the corporal only knew that he had to prevent anybody from leaving what had become the “crime scene” – and he said that with great pomp – without letting them come too near to the ‘red zone’, in short the one he had just finished to mark off with some scotch tape, plastic tape as in the movies... there had been half a roll of it at the police station for years now, practically uncut... with the dead inside, he thought while he was waiting for the magistrate, the forensic experts and the coroner to come - “as in *Columbo* tv crime fiction” of which he had seen all the episodes at least twice.

De Maria knew well that he had to move fast because the first hours immediately after the “criminal act” were the most important for the investigation, and the crucial ones to catch the murderer. So he was taught well at the training course he diligently attended since he decided to wear a uniform thirteen years before. But, to tell the truth, demanding that nobody left the scene was definitely pointless. Sure enough, nobody would have ever taken a step away from ‘The Bridge’ and the square, that afternoon. Indeed. Neither if forced. On the contrary, rather it was a downright pouring into the square and the bar, that such a huge number of people, coming from every corner of the village and gathered on the scene in a few minutes, could almost compete with the attendance at Saint Plonia feast

(*village feast of the Patron Saint in Dosoledo during the carnival festivities. TN*). They were tremendously curious to see the blood. Violent blood. Shot blood. Never before in Comelico.

“Like in Naples” – somebody whispered. “As it happens in Naples, with the Camorra” (*Neapolitan Mafia. TN*). “Yes, like in Sicily, too” – echoed somebody else, who in a low voice, started to tell, word for word, Michele Corleone’s mafia saga; the Mario Puzo and Francis Ford’s ‘The Godfather’ plot thoroughly.

All the people were standing and watching for long, commenting without raising their voices, not to be heard and attract attention, but widely waving their arms while it was now getting dark. The ENEL pylon (*acronym for national electricity board. TN*) which had collapsed, even caused a black out all over the village. Only generators illuminated the square.

Also ‘The Pass’, a pub opposite ‘The Bridge’ that was on the left side of ‘La vie en rose’, another one being renovated for two years, was illuminated; and the chemist’s too. From some rooms of the flats around, only feeble lights from candles and emergency lights filtered out. Apart from that, it was dark all around.

“A murder? Here? It’s not possible! And the marshal, then? And why? (**Na mazàda ? Chilò? Ne né pussibal! Ma pò! Al maressiall? E parché?*) – everybody was wondering. From dawn to dusk there had been obviously just one subject holding the stage while everybody was steadily busy to build more or less daring theories like newly Maigret inspectors. Also De Maria had focused his investigations on those presumed terrorists who had left that strange note with ‘Freedom Fighters’ written on it.

It was his uncle Steno who first told him about the Alto Adige issue. He, Steno, was a non-commissioned officer based in Bolzano in 1958 and he had seen all sorts of things. “That – he told him – was an armed gang which was really frightening, my dear son. God forbid! Hope that the bad all days won’t ever come back...”

But, instead, it seemed that, for some time now, somebody had started fighting again, raising the Alto Adige autonomy as a battle flag. “As in the past – uncle Zeno said to him – during the war of the pylons. God forbid!”

But this time there were serious doubts that the so

called 'Fighters' were really linked, even if only ideally, to the old signs. And there were also serious doubts whether they were utterly and genuinely from Alto Adige. One of the hypotheses spreading among the investigators, on the other hand, considered it as the act of a mere armed gang of common organized criminals concealed behind the flag of terrorism. It was sure that, in committing their criminal acts, the so called 'Fighters' had spared human lives, so far. Robberies, arsons, to the point of the most banal copper thefts. In Pusteria Valley and north of Veneto Region. There had been some injured people, actually, but unintentionally, consequentially you may say. But no fatalities. That's why corporal De Maria couldn't figure it out. "Why now, out of the blue, they have decided to change strategy and raise their aim? What happened? Besides, why have they decided to target marshal Gualberto himself who, in the main, has never coped with the Alto Adige issue?"

De Maria knew that his colleague had followed several tracks since he was relocated; important assignments, he guessed by the mid-sentences the marshal sometimes let slip and by his frequent trips to Lombardy, surely to the command station in Milan. But, it was sure, the tracks weren't related to terrorism in general and terrorism in Alto Adige in particular and neither was he dealing with ordinary criminality which, instead, had been assigned to De Maria himself.

After three days, at the serviceman's funeral at Saint Nicholas church, everybody rallied around his young widow Giulia. In his funeral oration however, father Antonio expressed harsh condemnation against the acts of terrorism of any kind. The theory that what happened had to do with common criminals, in fact, didn't persuade him at all, and most of all, he realized that it didn't get along with the sermon he had so accurately prepared. The marshal's friends as well as his simple acquaintances, instead, didn't save their moving words in memory of such a man "profoundly upright and devoted to his duty".

A majestic funeral, performed in Comelico as requested by authorities themselves, at which also the executive officer of the Corps and the ROS chief (*Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale - Special Operational Group. TN*) assisted; all the local televisions brought it live from the front line, while, on the front pages of the

newspapers there was no lack of opening headlines in addition to reportage supplements, a tearful interview with the widow Giulia and more or less ‘profoundly indignant’ editorials by newspapers’ editors and leading-edge leader writers who had, immediately and beyond a shadow of a doubt, embraced the theory of the terroristic conspiracy. So, all things considered, it became in a short time, a case of utmost importance in the management of the domestic murders.

A case of such a great importance, that the investigations were assigned to the Bomb Squad, which had stationed in strength and based in Cortina; the most appropriate location for that kind of investigations. And it didn’t take long to come to a turning point.

Only a few days of wide-ranging investigations, 24 hours actually, were enough to achieve the results everybody expected.

De Maria, in spite of everything, hadn’t dropped his track and ‘discreetly’ had persisted in carrying out his inquiries in the shade of the Three Peaks of Lavaredo mountains. He was sitting at ‘The Bridge’ when he heard the news on the local news broadcast special edition.

The inquiry had been closed. A gunfight somewhere around Sesto in Pusteria had thrown light on the attack against the pylon in Comelico. Three terrorists had been killed by the police. Three previous offenders of little worth. Three racketeers, in short. Among their belongings, besides some drugs packed in plastic bags, there were some pre-printed leaflets signed ‘Freedom Fighters’ probably ready to be spread, claiming the responsibility of the pylon attack and the marshal Gualberto’s death. “Justice has been done” - the journalist said in conclusion of his jumble of words definitely jumbled up.

While, with timely Swiss clockwork precision, congratulations to the security force on the brilliant result achieved, arrived from Rome. De Maria bitterly smiled. And switched the TV off. After all, he was the only customer in ‘The Bridge’ at that time in the afternoon.

“Inquiry closed”, it was told. But he, in spite of everything, didn’t trust that things went that way. There was one thing in particular he still couldn’t understand, it’s to say, how the leaflet signed ‘Freedom Fighters’ could have possibly ended up under the marshal’s chair right after the

pylon explosion. It was a fact that he still wanted and absolutely needed to clear up. For this reason, in those days, he had commissioned his subaltern to manage the routine office matters while he went on inquiring, as we said, ‘discreetly’.

“You know, corporal what I’d like to tell you...” – Tonino, ‘The Bridge’ barman *slash* bartender said as he was serving him the second ‘coffee for chocolate’ which, since it had gone cold, it was nastier than usual. De Maria had suddenly resurfaced from his thoughts.

“No I don’t, Tonino. What would you like to tell me?”

“Have you ever read Sciascia?”. (Leonardo Sciascia [Sicily 1921-1989] was an Italian writer, novelist, playwright, essayist and politician. Some of his works have been made into films, including ‘Open Doors’ (1990) and ‘The Day of the Owl’ (1968) [TN]).

“Sciascia? Yes, I have. Sometimes. Why?”

“Because I have no doubts: the marshal’s murderer was a crime of passion. Listen to me... And those so-called ‘Fighters’ are even taking the blame. No matter...”

And he burst into a belly laughter.

“And what do you know?” – De Maria asked him.

“Me? I know nothing, corporal. But, you know, there are rumours around here saying that the marshal was rather... how can I say... too much ‘cheerful’. Clear enough? Apparently he had ‘interests’ in Danta. Near here. Remember? After all, the *maressiall* was a man of good taste. And – still according to the rumours, corporal – he went ahead... you know... regardless of them being engaged or married... you see? And things like that. He liked it that way, I take it. Maybe it was the thrill. Who knows... do you, corporal? Mysteries. That beautiful woman, his wife I mean, Mrs Giulia knows nothing about it, corporal, that’s all we need! Yet, could you honestly deny that she, perhaps wandering here and there, happened to catch his ‘cheerful’ husband with one of them? And what if it was someone from the south? What do you reckon, corporal?”

De Maria knew that Tonino wasn’t exactly the most reliable source of information you could find but he wanted to play along with him, all the same.

“But what do you mean, Tonino? Is there something...”

“Nooo! Not at all. I said nothing, corporal”.

“You see, I just thought you meant something, instead...”

“I did not, corporal! Coincidences. Like the pylon. Coincidences. But you, instead, should know what southern people are like, better than me, shouldn't you? Aren't you from Barletta originally? On your father's side? Did I get it wrong?”

“No, you got it right...” – De Maria answered without concealing a certain uncomfortable feeling regarding the detailed information his interlocutor had about his Apulian origins.

“It's a question of honour, isn't it? – Tonino went on, just like that – So, since I think that, all in all, it's the same the whole world over... What do you reckon? Can't it just be?”

“It may be, alright – De Maria answered looking at Tonino with renewed interest – but it isn't always necessarily so, though”.

And he had one more sip of ‘coffee for chocolate’.

“Yet, what's honour got to do with it, anyway?” – he said then, almost lost in thought.

“What *has* it got to do with it? Hey, are you shitting me? (*in Sicilian in the text: ‘Che fa mi coglionia?’ TN*) Corporal, let me tell you, honour matters. Always, don't ever forget about it”.

De Maria remained silent.

Tonino changed subject. “By the way, corporal, is it true that you've been transferred?”

“You know anything, don't you Tonino?! Well done! Yes, I have. I'm leaving for Gorizia next week. I gained a promotion. Why? Are you sorry?”

“What's up, corporal, are you upset? It's a small village, you know, news spread. One of your colleagues told me, you see, and he also told me that a new marshal is coming and perhaps another corporal, as well. Anyway, my congratulations on your promotion. Yet, did you ever request a transfer?”

De Maria looked at him. Doubtfully. He had requested a transfer, of course – he thought without answering – but two years before...

He had the last sip of coffee for chocolate and, already standing, turned to Tonino. After all, he was now off

the case, and maybe, who knows, it was even much the better for him. “Well then, Tonino... – De Maria decided to give him tit for tat before packing off – I understand you are familiar with southern people, aren’t you?”

“Me? Eh, I’m definitely Sicilian, sure. From a small village near Caltanissetta. But when you say that I’m rather familiar with southern people it’s too much, corporal! I can get a sense of some of them, alright... I’m an ex-farm worker, after all, so it’s not that...”

“Well, an ex-farm worker charged with some tiny crimes against property, I take it. What about that, Tonino?” – De Maria had cut in bluntly.

“Corporal! Now you are offending me. Eh!? Those are bullshits, corporal. Bullshits. I had also told the marshal, of blessed memory, once we happened to talk about it. Those are bullshits, drop it. Drop it. Hear me out. So what are you going to do now, prying into this kind of things? Don’t you know what it’s like? Corporal? However, you know that everything is alright now, otherwise I couldn’t possibly be here and run this pub, could I? And, if you don’t mind, your coffee is on me today”.

When Giulia came back to Sicily, Fredo picked her up at the airport – which simply, was still in Punta Raisi. A kiss on her forehead and a strong, long and tight hug before giving way to her.

“How are you?” – he asked her, attentively.

He had looked at her tenderly. She was beautiful. Even now, destroyed by pain. With her hair tied back and a puff of make-up on her cheeks. He had always loved her. Even when she was crazy enough to marry such an undignified man. A man in uniform. That was the mistake. He knew it. He had warned her. But now they were still in time to put things right. Because now things had been put right.

“Did you have a good journey?”.

“Yes, I did. Thank you” – she answered in a faint voice. Giulia had her eyes still swollen with tears. She was leaning on Fedro’s arm. And they slowly made their way towards a car waiting outside the airport.

Also Agatino, called Tino, Tinuzzu actually, went back to Sicily on the same flight from Venice. By sheer coincidence he had travelled next to the lovely widow.

“Well then?” – Fredo asked him as soon as he had the

opportunity. As soon as they were alone.

“Everything went smoothly, Doctor – answered Agatino, Tinuzzu, actually – you can tell the Honourable Gentleman that he doesn’t have to worry about that bastard anymore. *“E chiddi a fine ru surci ficiru!”* (In Sicilian dialect: “And those – *the so-called ‘Freedom Fighters’* [writer’s note] – died like a rat in a trap”).

“And the papers?”

(In Sicilian dialect): *“Na bella storia di film giallo era. Chiacchiere. Nenti. Nenti di preoccupanti. Ma comunque adesso sunnu in buone mani... – and he said that almost in Italian to underline a veiled threat – l'avemu nuautri, nun s'ava a preoccupari 'cchiù vossia... e l'amici nostri di Dusseldorf mancu... nun 'ci nnè problemi, nun 'ci nne 'cchiù ora, ciu' po' diri, tutto a posto ora è... puru 'cu d'appuntatu, 'dautru curnutu, 'ca ci stava scassannu a minchia già... e ora putemu iri avanti... Eh... a proposito dotto', ciu' facissi sapiri all'onorevole, ciu' ricissi, puru, 'ca i quarerni 'ora sono in buone mani', po' stari tranquillu ora... 'ca l'avemu nuautri, tutti! chi dici lei? Nun semu tranquillu ora?! Ah!? Ossequi dottò, e sempre a vostra disposizione!”¹.*

And he burst into laughter while in the background the radio was singing “It was the year of the World Cup...”, and the airport of Palermo was simply still the airport of Punta Raisi.

Notes:

1

In Sicilian dialect: **“It was a good detective story. Just rumours. Nothing to worry about. But now they are in good hands, anyway** (he is referring to the papers kept by Gualberto, promptly vanished after his death and evidently full of important information about connivances and dangerous collaborations between Mafia and politics all over the country; papers that Gualberto had not been able to deliver to the right person to continue the investigations [WN])... **we’ve got them, and you** (the courtesy dialect form ‘Vossia’ is more appropriate than ‘Lei’= you and is used addressing a particular person when a deep sense of respect is requested..[WN]) **don’t have to worry anymore... And neither our friends in Dusseldorf...** (evidently Gualberto had also discovered a sort of plot among organized criminal groups, perhaps in view of a coup d’état also involving German groups passing across Veneto - where Gualberto

was carrying on investigating in order to collect tangible evidence also attending 'The Bridge' bar as much as possible; he had, in fact, detected it as a temporary gangs base, there, far from the control authorities' attentions and from Lombardy too, where he often used to go as corporal De Maria had previously told us [WN]) **there are no problems, not anymore, you can tell them (friends from Dusseldorf [WN]), now everything is fine... even with the other corporal, the other bastard who didn't want to mind his own business... and now we can go on... eh... by the way, doctor, let the Honourable know, do tell him that the papers are in good hands now and he can relax (but here some irony and insinuation are meant [WN])... because we have them all! What do you say? Can we *actually* relax now?!** *(the stress on the word 'actually' is meant to make the last given words far more definitive, it's to say: "Now the Honourable has really much to worry about, since we have him in our grasp"[WN]).* **My respects, doctor, and always at your disposal!"**

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Ink drawing "The Sentry Pass" by Martina Zandonella.

