

The Sky and the Killing*

by *Orazio Longo* © 2011

Translated by Adriana Tonon

He had had a tormented night. Full of nightmares and fears. A long tormented night, in brief.

A ray of sunshine obliquely piercing from the window, snatched him from his feverish sleep. The window in front of him. The one facing east. Where the sun rises. That's why it catches the morning sunbeams earlier. And maybe it was either for this reason – for the too strong and intense light hitting his face – or for the chaotic amount of nightly thoughts still pestering his mind that he had, at first, a sort of estrangement feeling. He felt as if he were still so lost that he couldn't tell for sure whether he was really awake or even in the place where he thought he was. But where was he, then? He still wondered for a while. And the hope that he had imagined the whole thing became more and more real, as time was ticking away. And now that the blue sky, which could be spotted outside through the gratings of the only window in the room, was sending back the smell of the breaking dawn – yes, now – he was almost sure that it had all been just nothing but a bad dream.

*Reset**.

He had had a tormented night. It had been said. Chilling. Full of nightmares. The most dreadful ones. The most frightful. They seemed so real. What if they *were* real? He wondered again. Nonsense! A deep sigh, in the sunlight, gave his reality back to him – fully confident and certain – and all the rest was left behind, as in a far away echo. Gone. That's it! He told himself. A white blinding light was now passing before his eyes. Strong. Blank. And it was as if he had, together with that light, found himself suddenly plunged into the void. This was what was going on in his mind. The void. Thinking of the void... can it be possible? What is the void like? He thought. He had been told, once, that the void was like the infinite. But what is the infinite like? He was now thinking. While he was, little by little, trying to take control of the situation again; while he was carefully watching his fingertips crossed before his nose.

They were his. He could tell it for sure. His nails, still dirty with mud. Could it be possible for that moment to last forever? He had had this thought for a fleeting moment. A mixed feeling, while the fear inside his head was slowly coming back, prevented him from moving and even from thinking of turning the other side. But what is the void like? He thought then, again.

Reset.

It has already been told. He had had a tormented night, that night, it's true. One of those nights he wished he would have never been through. Full of nightmares. Dizziness. Full of pains. Just only perceived, though. Hard to swallow. But sensed as if they were real. A night full of desperation.

Redde rationem **, as the Latins said. And the Romans, first of all. Or at least he thought so because he had always been fascinated by Roman history. And the image of the defeat – which at last had suddenly revealed itself – would have taken its toll and closed the loop. Again. As it had happened once, at last, to the Romans. Or at least he thought so. Slippery ground, now under his feet. A pole with no supports. And a door with no walls. Last images, in his head, of a rather blurred freedom.

Redde rationem. He had been told. But now, nothing was happening as time flowed fast and the silence was all around. The sun was heating that single-windowed room, now, and he – clung on those kind of thoughts – felt that hope was growing stronger again. The hope that he could go back again. Back to his reality, safely. Having it all faded away, instantly.

Sure that once he had turned the other side, he would have seen the others, materialized once again, scattered like ants in the large Room One – the operations room – among all sorts of papers and shelves filled with useless bundles. Everybody being there, busy, with him. United. Like him, ready to fight, again; ready not to surrender, until the end. As ever. Loyal. And drawn-faced. Yes, it's true, he had really had a tormented night, as never before. But he was now sure that he would have laughed about all those fears, very soon. Sure. As it had happened all the other times he had dreamt about death which, every time, had coupled with the image of the defeat: total, final and absolute, in all its forms.

Redde rationem, as the Latins said. And the Romans, first of all. He was told. Or at least he thought so. *End of transmission**. Game over, then. And defeat was more frightening than death. He thought so, Little Manfred, caught in a whirl of obsessive thoughts. And he had no doubts. 'Cause he had been taught so. 'Cause he had always believed so. Always. Until that morning, at least. It had been so. Or he believed so, at least. But not now, any more. He knew. Because everything had suddenly changed, now. And everything was different.

He had got it, at once. Now that the nightmares had gone. Now that the light from outside was getting stronger and stronger. Now that he was wide awake and had finally turned. He had no more doubts. Because, by now, there was nobody left there, any more. Crystal clear. Nobody had fought. Nobody had stayed until the end. Indeed. Fighting for freedom. As they had claimed. For freedom. Rather claimed than done, actually. At least once. Because it was all over, instead. And there was nothing left. Absolutely nothing. Just ruins. And nobody paying for it.

He was still shivering. He had lived the whole thing, again. In his mind. He had cried and cried. He was trembling with cold. But not just with cold, actually. He knew. Now. Because the night was over. And all his nightmares had gone. And he had turned, now, even the other side. He knew everything now, Little Manfred, even that it was late, too late, while in the meantime he decided to stay still, motionless – holding his breath – uncomfortably lying in that rusty camp bed, creaking at every little breath; the rusty camp bed which was set against the white, almost yellow, dirty and scraped wall. His face pressed on his pillow. The bright light spreading all around his bed. Yellowish light piercing through the gratings, up above, from the only front window in the room. Oblique sunbeams. Merged with the sky blue of the morning. Of a bright morning. Sweet-smelling. Of a spring which, despite its delayed beginning, had finally come. One beautiful morning, clear.

As those of his childhood. In Comelico, among the alps, up in the Dolomites. That's what he was thinking of, Little Manfred, as in a rewind film. That's what he was thinking and he knew now that it was all over. Once and for all. Badly for him. Because no joy could ever come out of it.

And no celebration either. Not any more. No victory to recount. Because the end had come. Sure. But on the wrong coordinates. For him. He had fought. He said. Until the end. For freedom, he was told. But they were wrong. And so was he. And now he would have paid. As it happens to be in the 'cause-effect' principle. Without being very subtle about it, a perfunctory judgment on the ragged edge of the most raging rage.

Redde rationem. He had been told. *Hic et nunc* **.

Manfred was there, now, lonely and thinking hard. His head was getting heavier and heavier. And the walls were spinning round, fast. So the first tears dropped and wet his cheeks again. Fiery-red cheeks. And his no-case pillow was damp, too. He was thinking about Lalla, now, and about Peter, too. His mother and father, whom he used to call by name. 'Typical high-placed people's eccentricity', said who hardly knew them. He wished he could have had them there, close to him, Little Manfred. To hug them. To hole up, again, in that house, the usual one, which he had never really left. His room was still there. Neither could dust have taken possession of his things, of his armchair – the velvet green one – of his orange coverlet, of his books – badly placed on his narrow hanging bookcase – as well as the ones still open on his bare, old wooden writing table. He wanted to see them now, Lalla and Peter. Mary had gone, instead. At once. She had disappeared. 'Cause it had to be so. In such a manner.

Needless to say that she was beautiful, Mary. 'Most beautiful', Little Manfred actually thought the first time he saw her. And she had left him the very last day, the day of the end. As soon as she had figured it out. As soon as she had realized it. And she had denounced him. That's why she had saved herself. She had led them to him. Yesterday. Just yesterday. And he would have never expected such a thing. It had lasted three years. Three years of war. And it was her, definitely her who, at last, had betrayed him. *Sic* **.

Little Manfred is now trembling. He's got shivers. But it's not cold. The sun hangs a bit higher in the sky. The light is brighter and hits straight his eyes, dazzling them strongly. He can hear birds, out there. Chirping endlessly. They seem to talk to him. They have woken up, too. And today is a beautiful day for them, too. At last. The few actually, but large raindrops of the previous night had dried up swiftly.

And Little Manfred is, now, still crying. But he can't be heard by anybody. Since there's nobody there any more. He knows that the time is almost up and terror – he is already aware of that – is overwhelming all his thoughts again. As the *take-all ace* when you are playing cards. What was it about...the *take-all ace* thing? He's thinking. He tries to remember. But he can't.

It is now that he sees Valerio, standing in the doorway. He stands still, Valerio. He is there, at the entrance of the tiny room, the one beside an old barn. Where there used to be also a pig, once. And he is there now, instead. Sitting on a camp bed. He is there, Valerio, and Little Manfred is now carefully looking at him. They had always been friends. Valerio and he. All along, until the last day. The day of the end. Two career young men. It was Valerio who had noticed her, the first time: Mary. Blonde. Long and curly-haired. Still with the English accent of the time of her transfer. And high-heel shoed. He had tried to make a pass at her, Valerio, discreetly. But then Mary had chosen him: Little Manfred. *The Manfred*, she said. Valerio took it badly, of course, but he eventually gave up. As usual. Because Manfred was handsome. Sharp and blue-eyed. No chance for others. Peace made, then. One more time. Because it was well known, at last, that they would have always been friends, since fighting for a woman wasn't really worth it. It is common knowledge. "Come with me", Manfred told him that day. The last day. The day of the end. He was sure they could have it made. And he would have saved him. Him, too. Even this time. But Valerio had gone. He had not followed him. He had got rid of Manfred, leaving him on his own way.

They had always been friends, Valerio and Manfred. Always. But they had once, though. Not anymore. Because everything is different, now. And everything seems so far away. As never happened. Since Valerio is now there. On the righteous' side. While Manfred is not, instead. Not any more. Valerio has won and denies that Manfred has ever been a friend to him. He claims that Manfred is a wicked person. That Manfred has done all the bad things. That he has to pay and ought to be ashamed of himself. That he is worse than an animal. Than a pig. And he spits on the ground. Manfred goes on trembling and looks at him. He knows that Valerio is weak but not evil. That he's telling

those things because he is frightened, too. He can understand that. He's looking at him with his eyes in tears. Valerio is standing in the doorway and doesn't say a word. He looks at him hatefully. He holds his rifle over his shoulder. And he despises him. While Manfred wishes he could tell him that it isn't so; that he has just fought. For freedom. So they said. That he didn't do anything but fighting. He'd like to remind him of it. To explain it to him. To shout it to him. Even though, to tell the truth, he is aware that Valerio knows it already.

"It's time", someone else says. Behind his back. Manfred is rooted in his bed, petrified, and doesn't make a move. He shouts and says no. Then he weeps again, copiously, desperately. He gives a groan and asks for help. "Mummy" says he – 'mummy', this time, instead of Lalla – and shouts. At the top of his voice. "Mummy, daddy, help!" And he is now running out of breath. "Leave me alone!" He's shouting with his eyes in tears. Wide open. Wide-eyed. He is frightened, Little Manfred. While he is staring at each one of them, straight in their eyes. He knows them well, one by one. He moves. He fights. He wriggles. He is terrorized. His head is spinning, heavily.

And then again. Four people are needed to catch him and finally having him pinned down and dragged him outside. Bodily. He feels his legs weakening. They drop him down. They say to him: "Be a man!". But Manfred can't bear it any longer and his only hope is to black out. But he is not capable even to do so, anymore. He slowly ploughs through, now. He staggers and leans on his avengers. He knows them, one by one. He's crying buckets now, and his head is in a whirl. He weeps like a man regressed to his childhood. Become grown up. Too grown up, perhaps. Too fast. Whereas, on the other hand, he doesn't think about Mary, anymore.

Redde rationem. The Latins said. And the Romans, first. He was told. He remembers. But now everything is different. He is walking, Manfred. The sun gets higher and higher in the sky. The air is fresh. The sky is blue. And the fields eventually show off their springtime vivid green. Bold green. It's beautiful. It's a fine morning. It's still early. Birds are fluttering and singing louder than before. Manfred can hear them and weeps harder and harder. He just can't help it. He is not able to stop. He's walking on a dirt road. On the

march, while the sun is shining and his soul is dying. There's a house in ruins aside. And many barns rising higher in the background. Like in a painting. Manfred is walking through the fields. The church is faraway. The one of his childhood. While there, only an altar has been left, a table which comes out of the ground among the remains of an armoured car and hand grenades Under a tree. Head on, you can see it clearly, there's the Sentry Pass. But it is far away, in the background. Like in a painting. Which is not an actual painting, though. Because this is the real showdown.

Redde rationem. They told him. *Hic et nunc.* There is someone sitting on one side of the table, under the tree. Manfred doesn't know him. He's got an ordinary face and wears a one-colour shirt with pips. He is watching something written on a workbook. On the title page, there's one single word: "Traitors", and then he puts a sign on his name.

Everything is running fast, now. Impersonally. Unmercifully. Manfred feels heavily dizzy. If only he could kneel down on the ground and beg them... but he cannot; he is paralyzed. He would shout. He needed to tell him that he had really fought; that he had not surrendered. For freedom, they said. And he said that either. He knows, now. Nothing is for nothing. And freedom has its cost, too. But which freedom? He can't tell it now, not anymore. But he hadn't betrayed anyone. He would tell him now. Weak, perhaps. Yes, he had been weak, maybe. But that's all. He was not a traitor. He was not a deserter. He had just loved life. Could you call it being weak? He had only pursued freedom. And justice. Long since forgotten. He wants to tell them. One by one. But he doesn't do it. Since, he reckons, they already know. Thus, it doesn't matter any more.

He is crying for help, now. Only now. He's begging for mercy. Forgiveness. He's begging them to let him live. Just that. Just that, at least. Nothing else. He is looking at them while he shouts and cries but they push him away. There are eight of them. He is twenty-two years old. He's still wearing what is left of a combat jacket deprived of its flags. His trousers are wet by a badly-managed bladder. Cold shivers and swollen eyes. Puffier and puffier. Insomuch as he is prevented from seeing them anymore. He can only perceive a strong gunpowder smell. Boom! Then the smell, of the blue sky. In a spring day. It's a beautiful

day. Full of sunshine. And many barns illuminated by sunbeams, in the background. Like in a painting. Which is not an actual painting, though. ‘Cause this is just a showdown.

Redde rationem. He was told. In Latin. In his Latin. Harsh. Before the end. Before the verdict. *Hic et nunc*. A perfunctory trial for desertion. For treason. A Pyrrhic victory for the executioner. But it’s all over now.

He is the number-eighteen victim; it’s been a while since the dawn broke and another brand new day is just about to begin beneath the Sentry Pass. On the opposite side, though. So far away. In the background.

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Notes

* In English in the text.[TN]

** In Latin in the text:

Redde rationem – literally ‘to account for sth. to sb./showdown’;

Hic et nunc – ‘Here and now’;

Sic – ‘Thus/in such a manner’. [TN]

The characters, names and incidents portrayed here are fictitious so any similarity to the name, character or history of any actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Places are real.

Picture “The Sentry Pass” by Stefano Zandonella Golin ©2010

