

The Rose of the Cretto

The old lady was wandering inside the *Cretto*¹ while spreading the notes of an obscure lament. Her tunic, black and spectral, stood out on the cement like a lightning in the night. It was the only thing to enliven the hill, so cold and forgotten, that it was impossible not to see it.

I had walked up that street, attracted by the insolent curiosity that surrounds the ruins. That earthquake had hit Gibellina squashing it like a molesting insect. I could not remember. I was only a child, then, but I knew about the unusual sculptures, erected on those places, and that day I had come to observe them. I had left Santa Margherita with an astonished and confused mind. That sight had touched me. It was incredible how everything had remained in its place. The whole town, completely robbed by the seism, was still there, firm in its restless fixity, surrounded by the severe voices of the silence. Only the birds would at times animate it with short movements and the wind, a strange wind that seemed like the breath of its ancient inhabitants. Downwards, at its feet, stood the new city, an anonym-

¹ Visionary and imposing work by Alberto Burri, erected on the ruins of the town of Gibellina.

ous aureole of houses placed along a perimeter with no history.

«You have to go to Gibellina» a boy had answered to my impertinent questions. Only a young person could have done it. Whoever was still holding vivid memories would have left me to my embarrassment, but as it was, my job as a reporter had faded any trace of discretion in me. Therefore, without hesitation, I had followed that advice finding myself naked in front of the mystery.

The *Cretto* had been described to me as an immense cast of cement, poured on the debris of the old town. «The usual modern sculpture!» I thought while walking along the twisted and breathless hairpin turns. I could have never imagined, still the desolation that crowded the landscape should have alarmed me. I noticed the first signs at the sight of the ruins that emerged here and there from the countryside hidden behind the tight locks of the bends. A sense of deep uneasiness echoed in their presence amplifying their sinister abandonment, but as it suddenly appeared I stood speechless. Silently I kept on observing its solemn desperation. Empty and, at the same time, packed with the dreams that the earthquake had broken, it went far beyond imagination. I stared at it for a few minutes, following with the eyes its long, twisted paths that fringed it on the inside. It was imposing and incredibly alive.

I noticed her for a moment then she slowly disappeared from my sight. What the hell was she doing up there? Intrigued by her, I walked up towards the inside. The grey and imposing walls were leading me to a precise point. When I reached the top of the hill there was no sign left of the woman, as if swallowed inside the cusps of memory. In vain I tried to find her winding the look

along the bright white mortar labyrinth. The shadows were bending along passages opened by cross roads, vanishing in a pale and vague distance.

«That woman is Licia Russoni» murmured Antonio in a low voice, «and every first of May she walks up to the *Cretto* to visit her rose.»

«What rose?»

«The one that grows along the eastern axis. It's incredible how it always blooms in the same point...»

«I don't understand.»

«It's not just any rose, but her rose.»

«What's the difference, anyway... she's such an old lady.»

«She's fifty-six!»

«What? She looks older than seventy.»

The man gave me a severe look than got up from the chair, his forehead degraded by sweat.

«I've seen things in my life...»

«...I understand.»

«My friend if you really want to understand go and talk to her.»

«...and where the hell am I supposed to find her now?»

«On the *Cretto* of course...»

«How do you know my name?» the woman asked, amazed.

«I'm Gabriele Cedretti, the reporter with...»

«I know who you are» she added, surprised.

«You see, I caught a glimpse of you this morning and I was wondering...»

«Leave me alone, it's almost dusk.»

«Come on, just a couple of questions.»

«I told you to leave me alone.»

«...what have you done the whole day up here?»

«It's none of your business.»

«...is it because of that rose?»

«Don't you dare touch it.»

«I don't even think about it.»

To that sentence the woman shut up. She peered sidelong at that flower that incredibly emerged from the cement and a small teardrop slid on her face.

«I have never come up to here» I added in reply.

«So, what the hell do you want from me?»

«Just understand.» The woman stopped and gave me a severe look. Time was sliding without a sign to animate her body. Only that bud bent to the warm breaths of the wind while the air became imbued with an intense scent of citrus fruit.

«She's a poor mad woman» I burst out brusquely opening the bar door. Antonio kept on sipping his wine then, slowly, he got up from the chair.

«Is she...?» answered he, amused.

«...she can only be pitied: she lost her daughter in the earthquake.»

«Yes» he carried on with a funny sneer.

«I don't see what's so funny about it.»

«Have you ever wondered about that flower?»

«It doesn't mean anything...»

«Sometimes things aren't what they look like.»

«That's just idle talk, the truth is that her story doesn't interest

me.»

«The truth can only make you richer» ended he, seraphic. I observed him walk away slowly while uncertainty overflowed within me. Disappointed, I went out of the bar nervously and took the way back home. Hunted down by a growing anger, I couldn't believe I had listened to the rambling speech of an old countryman.

A cloud of smoke had just lifted shaking in the air along the half-open window. Its pungent touch had immediately insinuated in the room obliging me to breathe heavily. Irritated, I had pushed away the chair making the mail fall down inadvertently and, while I was bustling to pick it up, my eyes stopped on a newspaper. It was the usual periodic I gloriously used to throw away every Thursday, a foul mass of facts, put together by a poor and identity-less glue. By instinct, I threw it into the bin and, after a couple of brief glides, the sheet landed on the floor showing pleased the picture of the *Cretto*.

«This is a persecution» I burst out restless carrying on peeking. Suddenly a wave raised in my head breaking it with doubts and questions. I tried in vane to drive it away, but the queries were becoming powerful stemming the rocks of will. «I have to understand» I burst out to myself, listening to those voices. I brusquely left the office and, groping in restlessness, I headed again for the *Cretto*.

When I arrived there the sun was still hot and shining. Without thinking, I slipped into its hollow and hallucinated passages, penetrating the eye of the cyclone. Quickly I reached the rose and scanned it defiantly. That flower kept on swaying regardless of my perturbation. Resentful I got close to the wall and

after laying the magazine on it, I jumped on it sitting on its edge. The sun had moved obliquely throwing darts of burning light and only the buzzing of the insects was mildly resounding in the air. With my legs dangling, I opened the page I had marked, plunging into reading.

...wrecked by the earthquake its ruins lie upturned in a silent moan of smoke. Gibellina has disappeared, bound by the arms of the seism whose enormous prints dissolve into a growing sense of death. The houses, the streets, whole quarters still shout their disdain. An excessive grasp is pincering our hearts, a mixture of anger and astonishment that nothing will ever dissolve. Like an immense sudarium, the Cretto immobilizes the present projecting in an obscure and timeless future. The lime labyrinth covers every street vainly twisting along the old urban assets...

Tired, I stopped reading and stood up abruptly to observe. A cascade of shadows was rapidly flowing back towards valley, marking the shapes of ancient dwellings. It almost seemed like touching them, those houses raped by the seism, whose heart like a trunk pulled off from its stump, was still living and pulsing. Forgetful of their end they were rising from the immense gravestone and composed silence. A strange perturbation pincered my throat until an anomalous lashing of wind blew from the plain, dusting the memories. Suddenly I saw the worn out figures of old people plodding in the streets, children darting in the yards and acute bell tolling echoing between the sordid stone walls. I opened my eyes wide, restless, looking for an explanation but that buzzing was growing louder tapping my ears in a crescendo

of passion and emotion. was on the edge of the enigma and perhaps now I was beginning to understand.

"...she was running with short steps in the sunny streets. That day, it almost seemed like touching it, so hot and intense it was, it could melt the clouds and the sky. The countryside was pulsing with joy and its fresh smell was gently knocking on the houses doors. No one could deny her a smile. She was only eight years old and her plates were showily falling on her shoulders. After turning around the corner, she had walked towards the little stray dog that every day used to wait for a stroke and a piece of bread. A little bit of wheedling and she had immediately slipped in. An inviting smell was exuding from the thick lime walls making that recurrence even stronger. It was her birthday. She lent on the red brickwork window-sill and waited for her mother to come back. Seeing her through the glass, the little dog started barking and growling nervously and endlessly. The child began to imitate it reverberating her voice against the window. Fascinated by that game she gave body to her breath until the tremor propagated through the room shaking it with violence. Scared, she shut up, but the witchcraft had already bursts out freeing its immense power. The walls vibrated furiously, accompanied by sinister and grave creaks. A desperate weep insinuated into that rumbling while a thick cloud of dust was beginning to cover the village. With a petrified look she observed the first houses fall down slipping in a dark and endless silence..."

«Roseee!» shouted the woman at the end of her story. Like a thunder in the night, that word rolled in my mind over-

flowing the canals of my thoughts. Suddenly Antonio's words resounded gravely, "it's not just any rose but her rose" and things seemed clear. Rose was her daughter's name and now by a funny and incredible chance, just where her house used to rise, was a bud, candid and light like the flying of a butterfly.

«Many people think I'm crazy but I'm sure it's her» carried on Licia in a voice broken by commotion. A swallow was flying about between the walls constantly lapping on their sharp edges. With her crying eyes the woman was still staring at me inundating my thoughts with piety, such a faded emotion that I could hardly distinguish its contours.

«Why?» I hint at shyly.

«She still needs her time» she ended in a calmer tone. I was keeping on looking at her and I immediately got inundated by her infinite love. Uselessly stopped by the borders of time, that feeling was pushing her up there, careless of any logic and reason.

«Thank you for taking me here» I said visibly touched.

The woman smiled at me sweetly and disappeared between the white wounds of the *Cretto*.