

Gabriele Reggi

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*LIBERACI DAGLI SBIRRI*  
novel

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A substitute teacher at a school in the deep South of Italy, the main character of the novel soon realizes he has landed in a doomed village, reminiscent of a Stephen King book or an Italian B-movie, rather than Ignazio Silone's or Ernesto De Martino's novels. This is not just because mafia is so pervasive that everyone, grown-ups and youths alike, pray every day: "Free us from cops". Not just because the gang masters force all the women in the village to work in the fields, guarded by fierce Kapos. It is mainly because there is a tribal ritual that seems to keep the community together: a gory replica of the crucifixion that marks the fate of the village year in, year out. The teacher's fate, however, is sealed from the very beginning: madly in love with the wrong woman – the Boss' girlfriend, beaten and battered, he plans a great escape.

**Gabriele Reggi (1961)**

Was born in Roseto degli Abruzzi, Italy. He graduated from the Accademia delle Belle Arti. He is currently living in Rieti. He was a substitute teacher in a town in Southern Italy in the early Nineties.

*...the strain  
the  
foot  
glass in the nerve  
one  
united*

Tristan Tzara

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Gabriele Reggi  
Isbn Edizioni  
(pp. 7-17)

### **ONE**

It was raining. On the right, casabianca written on a sign and further on the right, holes, unfinished buildings. We stopped in a deserted clearing while the rain was diminishing.

I got off. Nine in the evening. The black smoke from the bus barking on top of the climb. It felt hot. I took off my jacket, and took a look around. A dog, a cat. Nothing. I was tired, my legs kept bending. I started walking on a pavement and it stopped raining. I stared at the houses I was passing by: shutters barred, street lamps dripping water.

A square. Nobody around. On the left, the President bar closed. Behind me a blind parallelepiped of total white, among the buildings, as absurd as a Magritte painting.

I laid down my bag in the water, on the lamp lights, staying still to catch a movement or a sound. It seemed impossible that there was none. I was alone, a thousand eyes were spying on me from behind the shutters, I saw them, they were aiming a gun at me, they would shoot me in the back. There! A sudden flash, the roar of an engine and two drunken lights coming towards me. A veering, and then a woman got out shouting: «Stefano!» and that she had dropped by before, but only dropped since she had the parent-teacher meeting and she could not leave the headmaster her colleagues the secretary for long, had I been waiting a long time? And why two hours late?

She was so different from what I had imagined on the phone, Elsa Fioravanti; so restless, with her shabby clothes and shabby talk, an improvised accent and over-streaked hair and lips too red on her acid milk foundation. Forty? Fifty years? Hard to say, definitely grotesque and anything but desirable. She was pointing to the white building which she called Villa and keeping on saying it was very much like a sculpture by some artist she could not remember the name of, that white parallelepiped without windows placed in the middle of town like a church, wasn't it? The parent-teacher association the headmaster her colleagues the secretary...

«What's that?» I inquired.

«What.»

«That.» I meant the Villa.

She hesitated, as if she had just realized what that object really was.

«A jail.»

My hair in the damp light of streetlamps, thin on the temples. I was thinking of how much I had lost on that trip, without complaining at all.

She was pointing to the President bar, Elsa, they made such good taralli<sup>1</sup> in there, I could not possibly imagine. And then: it had been raining for a month, the headmaster did not understand, the secretary did not understand, eight coffees in a day or how could she hold on? Her soul was perforated like the grating of a baroque confessional.

Then, in her didactic-scholastic zeal, Elsa thought I might be tired and she drove me quite upsettingly, past holes in the street and repair works, to a guesthouse on top of a one-way uphill road.

I got out of the car with my head full of headmasters and secretaries. Elsa waved me see you tomorrow at school. I heard she was driving on to death before putting into second gear, while I was pushing the glass-door of the guesthouse, a serigraphy of Magda on it.

There was a smell of coffee and burnt tangerine in the hotel, a lady in black behind the reception desk was slowly flipping through a register, posing, as if she had seen me getting out of the car and had stood there waiting for me, or she had been previously informed by Elsa; visitors from the North were not that frequent down there. She was looking at me, that lady. I went closer to the desk, I laid down my bag on the carpet and asked for a room. The lady looked through the register to finish off some thing, I guess, then she turned her head to the key showcase. She had black hair gathered into a bun, a sad man's face on a pendant on her chest.

«With bathroom?»

«With bathroom» I nodded while inspecting my face on a mirror in front; it was not that bad, watched from there; my eyes less dull than I thought, my hair less thin in that fake lamp light. A Madonna rested on a small altar with an electric candle fixed to the wall and something written below. I slipped my Id card out of my wallet and put it next to the register. She touched the keys, there were four of them. She took number three.

«First floor, on the left» the lady told me showing me the stairs at the end of the corridor, her pronunciation occasionally cleared of local accents, as it sounded to me, northern sounds heard from some emigrated relatives, possibly, or had she been to the North as a young woman, maybe? She was looking at me, when I said: «See you tomorrow».

In my room there was a stagnant smell of wicker and naphthalene, the headboard was wrought iron, and there it was the electric Madonna hanging on the wall and the postcard with the image of the Pope on the bedside table. I got in the bathroom and turned the tap on; a needle of water, the hollow of my hand under the cock for three minutes. Then on my face. I looked at the mirror: drops of water on my nose, on the

1. Bisquits, typical of South Italy.

cheeks and chin. For a moment, I got the impression I was not alone. I got back to the bedroom, drops falling on the carpet, I looked under the bed, in the closet, behind the curtains. I was struck by a suspicion. Why was I there? I mean, that place had a jail as a souvenir. My eyes willing to close up. I flung myself onto the bed, my arm stretched out to look for the switch on the bedside table close to the pontiff.

## TWO

When I opened my eyes, the light was on, my arm stretched out and tingling; the room was filled with noise from cars and diggers. I got up and slowly opened the shutters: motorbikes, people walking. I got the impression I was elsewhere, surrounded by noises, far from the place of the previous night; that was encouraging, people around, I mean.

That would be my first day at teaching, I pondered with hammer drills in the background. A teacher. Like that. All of a sudden. I thought it was the easiest thing to be made a teacher, while I was getting downstairs with a long beard, not even a trickle of water, that morning. It was seven forty. I was eager to get to school in advance, on my first day at work. Teaching.

Downstairs the lady was busy at the coffee machine; water cans arranged on a shelf beside the spirits. On the right there was a man leaning on the counter, staring at me insistently.

I came closer.

«Coffee?» the lady asked me with her hand on the machine lever.

I was not even thinking about it.

«Yes, please.»

That looked quite rude, as if she had already made it, in a certain sense, and she didn't need to be asked.

They had taralli, the lady showed me. She had made them herself, she rejoiced at it. I took the largest one. A Madonna hung on the wall with save us from the cops written below.

The lady served me the coffee asking if I was going to leave the room. The man resting on her chest, he was not that sad after all: jacket, tie, forty five-fifty years old, his stare above the objective, far away, where he was now, apparently. I said no, I was staying some more time.

The guy at the counter drank his coffee and got out of the hotel. He glanced at me one more time through the window.

I put some sugar in my coffee, I needed something liquid to swallow the biscuit; not coffee though. I brought the cup to my lips, I blew, pretended I was tasting some, I took a look at the Madonna, at the inscription below. It was cops. Mobs had nothing to do with it.

When I was a child priests used to say that coffee pierced your soul, spoiling it, for that reason Fathers Somaschi did not drink any; they drank barley coffee instead, which did not stain, they said, or it did invisibly like invisible ink. And when as a child you are told such things, as a grown-up you end up believing they are true, you do not feel like going around with your soul disfigured; the immaterial part of you eternally stained. With holes in it. That's why I would not drink coffee and would not have coffee-filled chocolates, for it was apparently very hard to breathe in the afterlife, with

holes in your soul, you were not able to fly either, priests used to say. Hard enough to explain to the lady, though. I put the cup down on the saucer and I asked her where my school was. She didn't know. I mentioned the address. She looked at my cup, still full, as did the man on the pendant, it seemed to me. She told me it was not far, she gave me directions. She was still staring at the cup when I left.

Outside, a membrane of dew covered the cars and leaves on the trees. Diggers were crumbling the asphalt like wet taralli. I turned right and went straight on. I was following the lady's directions; hammer drills, motorbikes. Further on and then back. I had gotten lost. I turned one more time, walked on to the Villa which suddenly appeared to me, a white solid among the houses.

The town centre was full of people by then: pedlars, students, Moroccans pushing trolleys selling Moroccan things. High-powered cars with drivers, still, waiting by the Villa, others manoeuvring. Others. Eight thirty. Panic. First day of teaching, and I was late. I asked a man walking by where the street of my school was, he slowed down, he repeated the name taking some more unintentional steps. Somebody asked him from a distance if he had taken his coffee. He nodded he had taken it. Then he remembered. I had to go back and turn and go down and. I went back and turned and went down and. The school was not there. I went along the last stretch of road again, a dead end descent. Everything was there, the barbershop on the corner, the mechanic at the end of the bend... No way. Parked cars were there, ok, motorbikes, yes, but what about the school? Nine o'clock. I shouted out asking the mechanic whether a school was there. The man stopped screwing in his screws, took the cigarette out of his mouth. He was looking at me, puzzled. Then he made an unmistakable gesture with his arm, there, can't you see that, you're in front of it!, he seemed to be meaning. I took a look in front; four pillars, plants, hills on the horizon. That was all. I turned to the man again. Again his arm, his hand, «Down, below!» he shouted at me. I got near the pillars, side of the road past the cars. Below, in a precipice, there was a building; pillars being the tips of the iceberg that was the school. Underneath, three floors, one of them collapsed, to judge by the windows emerging from the ground.

How could it be that they had planned the school like that; underground, dead, you would tell. Pillar-supported stairs descended as in a circle in Dante's Inferno down to the main entrance, twenty metres below. I nodded in understanding to the mechanic. He nodded back. I got down. The building had no plaster, and looked miraculously installed in the ground as if it had fallen from above, as if someone had given it a shove and made it tumble down to the lowest point of town; something to feel ashamed of. That was it. A school-dump.

The entrance was wrought iron and glass, graffiti on the wall saying Fioravanti's a bitch, ac/dc, Gigi D'Alessio<sup>2</sup> and that sort of things. Quarter past nine. I pushed the door: sneers, kids running here and there. Elsa was on the landing, posting sheets of paper up the notice board. A man clinging to the radiator was giving me a dirty look. The caretaker? He made a sign to me to get in and close the door as there was a drought. It was pretty chaotic in there, as if that was the break or a short interval between lessons, it would be hard to say; or maybe that was my class. Elsa called out telling me to reach her, for she would see me to the headmaster.

2. Pop singer, very popular in South Italy

The headmaster was speaking on the phone receiver in his armchair behind the desk. He was holding a fidgety pen between his index and middle finger.

The room was dark and full of scattered objects: magazines, hunting trophies hanging on the wall. Behind him there was a poster of San Francesco from Stimate and la piaga<sup>3</sup> stamped on it.

The headmaster was annoyed because he had to attend a refresher course in Liberateo for a whole week, middle of November. He wasn't able to end the conversation.

«Now the course... that's all we needed!» he exclaimed as he hung up.

«Sir. This is Derzi, Decorative Techniques» Elsa said.

«Prossore.» The headmaster looked impressed while he was shaking hands without too much of a grip. Some relatives of his were in the North, he confided to me. He gazed at a timetable he kept right under his nose. He asked Elsa if I had been put in.

«Yes, the last hours» Elsa declared.

«Fifth and sixth!» the headmaster exhorted me. «Class 3B.»<sup>4</sup>

He would make this official as soon as possible.

Right. I looked at Elsa.

We were going to meet outside, she waved me.

I opened the door.

«Prossore!» the headmaster called out.

I turned.

He asked me if I had a car.

I said no.

«Whom are you going with?»

«Where?»

«To Stimate!»

I looked at Elsa.

So did the headmaster.

Elsa looked back at the headmaster.

«Your school is in Stimate» the headmaster specified.

I read again «San Francesco da Stimate» on the poster behind him below the inscription la piaga.

«Mind the figs» he then tried to be ironic.

I got out into the corridor.

I heard Elsa give excited instructions about the weekly arrangements in my timetable, which had somehow to be planned so that I could possibly ask Melo Risa for a lift. I read on the notice board; teachers' names in the timetable. I stared at Elsa's name; her false, annoying attitude, the despicable way she had of persuading people. It occurred to me that she had called me the previous week to convince me to leave, cataloguing the extraordinary qualities of Casabianca: the school, the climate, the white monuments, the huge sunflowers... No mention of Stimate. Her hypocritical voice getting an accommodation for me in Casabianca and arranging my timetable to make me travel with Melo Risa. But I did not turn to her, I was staring at Melo Risa's name on that day's notice board; Photography, that was what he taught, six hours a week.

### 3. *The Sore*

4. In the Italian school system, this is third year of secondary school, kids attending being 13 years old.