

- Prologue -

11:30 - Milan, January 2003

I was in a hurry. It was a rainy Monday in Piazzale Susa neighbourhood. I remember it was Monday, because if there is a day of the week during which pizzeria-restaurants are closed in Milan, it's on Monday, and I was desperately looking for one that was open.

I had given myself thirty minutes to find it. At noon I had a lunchtime appointment with a very important person. Too important to waste even minutes of his precious time in search of some place to eat.

The person I'm talking about was a man named Giovanni Porzio. As a special correspondent for the weekly magazine *Panorama*, Porzio has followed wars for the last twenty-five years. He's fluent in at least five languages, Arabic among them. One thing that has always struck me about him is the accuracy he uses in writing his reportages from the frontlines.

My interest in war writing was rather newly founded. I've never been much of a reader.

When the school teacher asked for book reports to make sure we read the books assigned to us, I used to limit myself to copying the summary on the back cover. My sole meagre attempt at originality involved replacing some of the words with synonyms. 90% of the time I got away with it and so I cruised through school and entered university using this technique. After focussing on mathematics in high school, I spent a year in an exchange program at a tiny school in Ohio where I happily avoided mathematics. I then passed my final exam in Italy scoring 60/100. The minimum.

The irony of it all is that I had the highest number of starting-points in my class, a well-earned 15/20. This high point level was due mainly to: the experience of one year abroad, the 10/10 for good behaviour I earned by sleeping in class and not making noise, and lastly, due to the fact that my grades had impressively improved in my later years at school. During my year in the U.S. I studied very little and for the first time since I was ten years old, which was 5th grade, I was again among the best pupils in the class. Once back in Italy, I didn't feel like underachieving anymore, so I began studying a little more than usual. I even received praise from my Italian professor for not having skipped a single day of school.

But it was at Milan's State University that my interest in education began to collapse, like heavy rocks tumbling down a crumbling mountain. Instead of studying the expensive books that professors, or more precisely, that publishers recommended to professors for our reading lists, I used to hide behind the pages of shady war correspondent books. I was fascinated by the writing of renowned personalities such as Tiziano Terzani, Mimmo Cándito and above all Ettore Mo and his adventurous reportages from Afghanistan. I read while forcing myself to sip whisky. People say it's not possible to understand Jimi Hendrix guitar playing, if you're not high. I was doing the same thing with Mo's books. So, instead of the contemporary history and statistics lessons, I skipped class to sit in the first rows of the book signing events at the Casa della Cultura in Piazza San Babila (at least it was near my university) or in the various Milanese bookshops.

With great rapidity I was escaping more and more from what was supposed to be the main goal of those years: a degree.

But war-journalism and the daily conferences were not the only reason for my increasing separation from the university life. The questions that I had categorically forbidden myself to ask of my past, were starting to obstruct my future. I was no longer at peace with myself. I had lost my cool. I was feeling a rage that I could barely keep under control. Struggling.

I think that in order to avoid feelings of anger towards myself, I became angry at the world and its injustices. The important thing for me was not to ask myself too many questions regarding my origins.

I knew I had spent my first nine months (which later will become almost eleven) in an orphanage called Poupunniere in Lomè, Togo, on the coast of West-Africa. I knew I had been adopted by the people who became my parents, when they had been working for a Milanese humanitarian organization for two years in a Togolese hospital in the early eighties. I knew that on our flight back to Italy, I had cried non-stop during the whole journey. And I knew that when I was little, I wasn't able to detach myself from my mother's braids or my father's nose which I was continuously shoving into my mouth (I used the same technique to impress Elena, my first girlfriend. When I was fifteen I put an entire apple into my mouth at the dinner table).

Speaking of food, I also know that I ate like a pig. Once in Italy, my mother had to get used to feeding me with two spoons. The fact was that in using only one, I'd start screaming bloody murder in between spoonfuls. My mother's friends were invited to see this show.

But I didn't know anything about my birth. I didn't know who had brought me to the orphanage. I didn't know where I was born. And above all, I didn't know which woman had brought me into the world. These very important question marks didn't occur to me until I reached sixteen years of age. Till then, in fact, I was considered to be the "perfect-child".

Apart from school, I was more than diligent in everything else I did. I used to help out a lot at home. I used to take such good care of Luca, Sara and Maddalena, that my parents stopped paying our babysitter, because my brother and sisters would only listen to me. It was like that up to the beginning of the high school. Some psychologist-friends of mine have remarked that trying to be the "perfect-child" must have been an unconscious devotion to my parents resulting from my adoption. They probably saved me from a quite uncertain destiny.

I started getting into trouble around high school and especially around girls. I was spending my afternoons at Milan's Sempione Park with different groups of people who had only one thing in common: smoking marijuana. I was a committed sportsman and, above all, a big fan of my older cousin, my mentor. I admired the fact that he was a sportsman and didn't smoke, I decided to do the same. My parents didn't really believe me though. The fact that they didn't trust me, made me trust them less.

One day, tired of having to justify my every move, I made up an excuse to go out:

"Mom, I'm going to Luigi's to study science. We have some research to do together. I'll be back for dinner!".

"Is that so?" my mum asked incredulously.

"Yes!"

I've spent the rest of my life wondering whether I could have come up with a less believable lie. At the time I was practically not studying at all, and Luigi wasn't famous for his scientific skills either. Convinced of the fact that my sweet mum didn't suspect a thing, I left my house all smiles, toward the intense autumn-greyness of Sempione. As agreed, I got back by dinner-time. My mum asked: "How'd it go at Luigi's?", I replied "Fine!"

My heart began to beat heavily, and my blood became ice-cold when, as I got to my room, she screamed: "Liar!"

My sweet mummy, had phoned Luigi's mother, who unwittingly reported that she had not seen any dark little man getting scientific in her house. Busted!

I realized what a big mess I had gotten myself into.

And now comes the worst part: "Just you wait 'till your father comes home!" Then I started thinking it was the right time for me to go back to Togo.

Without taking my jacket off, I remember sitting on my bed waiting for my father to come home, when the door bell rang.

He and my brother were back from a Saturday afternoon spent at the shopping center. Luca, who was thirteen by then, ran happily into the room with the intent of showing me the gifts that dad had bought him. He was sitting on the bed next to me, and while I was staring at that ridiculous smile of his as he opened the parcel containing the latest Adidas shorts, I probably began thinking that this was all his fault. I would not have been there risking my very young life had he decided to appear two and a half years earlier. In fact the main reason why I'd lived my whole life in this foreign land, was due to the fact that my thirty year old parents had not

had a child yet. If Luca would have been born earlier... But at the time I actually still didn't know about this, so when my dad's first scream came from downstairs, I just told my brother: "Better if you go because he's going to slaughter me..."

My father, a former rugby player, was the kind of guy whose punishments were short, but harsh. Let's say that I had reason to be worried.

"I'm going to kill hiiiim!!!" he suddenly thundered.

In the mean time I could hear my mom trying to calm him down: "No, please Gianfranco..."

Once he got up the stairs, he appeared before us in his underwear. As a remnant of his years in Togo, my father, now orthopaedic chief of staff at San Raffaele Hospital in Milan, usually wears the African bubu dress when he gets home from work. That evening, because of his rage, he didn't have time to put it on.

To my surprise he had tears in his eyes. He was only yelling at the wall. He didn't look at me once.

And to my great satisfaction, he left the room without even touching a hair on my head.

I decided not to eat that evening. In those days, not eating could have only meant that something terrible had just happened or was going to happen. I consider now that moment as the very first sign of rupture between me and my parents. It was bad enough that my mum didn't trust me, but on top of it all, I felt my dad's reaction had been exaggerated. It was one of the first times that I had seen him crying. It was one of the first times that I started to be aware of his sensitivity.

Oddly, I was not sorry for what I had done. I was angry!

For me his reaction was really too much. And since I'm the kind of guy that hardly forgives, and certainly never forgets, from that day on I felt I could do whatever I wanted to: "...they're not even my *real* parents!" came out of my mouth for the first time.

And so I began having an excuse for everything: bad grades in school, late-night parties etc. Now I didn't lie anymore, but I was doing exactly what I wanted, detaching myself more and more from my parents. Fortunately I wasn't dumb enough to begin smoking or commit other, more self destructive acts, but I had very few limits. I used to earn some money doing a little of everything. I couldn't accept money from my parents, and that was giving me further excuses to spend it as I pleased. One day I left on my own for Dublin, sure that if I liked it, I would spend the rest of my life there.

Those weren't my real parents. They couldn't do anything to me, I could hear myself saying every time.

My mum tried to get me to go to a shrink, but didn't succeed. This is how I spent my teenage years.

Probably tired of doing everything I wanted, I started being interested in reading. My big cousin read, why didn't I?

I tried, and I read "Talo's shield", picked randomly from my bookshelf, within five days. For my standards that was a record

time. In the end, adventurous tales like the greek mythologic legends, were exactly the stuff I needed to escape the reality of those boring times, between one poor university exam and another. I even once started to read the second Harry Potter book (did that to impress another girl) and ashamed of what I'd done, I scrapped it before the end of the third chapter

Soon, I moved my attention to something more real.

I got my hands on an article by Tiziano Terzani. I was impressed that a human being would risk his own life, not to fight for a war he believed in, but simply to tell the world about it. I would understand the significance of that act, later in my life. I met Terzani in person some time later when I decided to attend the Mantova Festival of Literature on the 7th of September 2002. Thanks to him I also decided that it was my time to "change the world", so I gathered a small group of friends under the name "Scinteia" ("Spark" in Romanian). We met every two week to discuss the big issues that were, in our view, making this world more and more complicated. The group lasted one year, and ceased to meet a little before Terzani's death at the age of sixty-six, after thirty years spent as the Asian Correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, the renowned German weekly magazine.

So, while I was sinking my deep anger into these kinds of books, another kind of anger, not caused by my adoption, started to take over my consciousness.

This new anger was the result of little acts of racism that I would encounter on a daily basis, and that I started noticing very late. My adoption, even though I suffered as a result of it, was something very personal to me and not something I was ready to confront. Racism on the other hand was a different matter. There were no excuses for that. It wasn't my fault if I found myself as a black man, in a white country.

My Italian-Togolese friend made up a great adjective to describe the acts of racism, typically Italian on my point of view, that makes me smile to avoid crying: "Embarracist".

The face of Kossi Komla Ebri was found by my mother on the back cover of his first book, in a picture with his usual nice smile. After years without hearing from him, my mom invited him, his Italian (white) wife and their two kids over for dinner. We found out that, apart from the fact that he was working as a medical doctor in Erba, Kossi had become a writer. I had discovered someone who could finally understand me.

His little book which seeks to tell daily-life-examples in a nation like Italy, so unused to Italians with different colored skin, was a big success. Enough so to warrant a second book: "New Embarracist Acts".

We began talking to each other. Thanks to his book and to an article that I wrote for the *Corriere della Sera*, we were invited to participate in various TV shows that sought to discuss this difficult, and easy at the same time, important contemporary issue. Adoption on one hand, *embarracism* on the other.

I had nothing to lose: not a family, nor a country.

It's sad to say, but that's how I was feeling. And it was with this state of mind that I was ready to call Giovanni Porzio on his cell-phone.

It was fate that at that time his daughter was my brother's classmate. Let's say I'd forgiven him for being born so late the minute he gave me the piece of paper with Porzio's phone number on it.

I had unwittingly crossed paths with his daughter when I was working as a consultant for the organization I spent my year-abroad in the US with. I had to interview potential candidates and judge their probability of success.

It never crossed my mind to ask to the girl in front of me whether her last name was that of one of the three best Italian war-reporters.

"He said to call him. He agreed to have a pizza and a little chat." Luca told me like it was no big deal.

I had the number in my hand. It was a little like when you're about to ring the doorbell of the girl you have a crush on to confess that you love her. Suddenly, you think to yourself just as your about to pushed the button, "What the hell am I doing?"

But it'd be cowardly to run away. Giovanni Porzio was now waiting for my phone call. And so I didn't.

It must have taken three hours. Looking for the right words, and delaying about fifteen minutes each time. I knew that I wouldn't have gotten away with a simple: "It's me, Matteo!" I needed to explain to him who I was and what I wanted as fast as I could, to avoid wasting his time.

I took a deep breath:

"Yes!" answered a firm voice on the other line.

"Good evening, sorry for disturbing you..." - with the sweat coming down my temples - "It's Matteo, the brother of your daughter's..."

"Yes, sure! Listen, let's meet on Monday at noon, in Piazzale Susa, I'll call you once I get there, is that ok?" Jesus. I didn't have to say a word!

"...ah...ok. See you tomorrow then!" I answered smiling.

"Why tomorrow?!" My smile suddenly became a grimace of pain, afraid I'd said something wrong.

"...ehh...tomorrow is Monday..." I replied, as sweetly as I could.

"You're right! See you tomorrow!" he said, sheepishly.

"Excuse me, one last thing..." I was feeling stupid as I was thinking about the question, but I've seen this kind of *embarracism* too many times and I didn't want it to happen with him, so I asked:

"Do you know that I'm black?... " ...five seconds of silence.

"How black?"

"Black..."

"...but what do you mean by black?"

"Black, dark-skinned, black!"

"Aaahhh!!! Ok, wonderful, it'll be easier to recognize you!"

I couldn't believe it.

Me and him, alone, talking about journalism. My first meeting with a real war-reporter.

So I got there half an hour earlier, and by the fourth attempt, I found the perfect pizzeria. Only two tables were taken. While checking I asked to be certain that the restaurant would remain open for at least two more hours. The waiter looked at me as if I was odd and I got out to wait for Porzio.

He called me on my cell-phone on time, like a swiss watch. As I told him where I was, he appeared waving at me from the other side of the road. The black-dude thing had worked well, I thought! Timberland, jeans, a sports jacket and umbrella, he confidently crossed the road. You could see from far away that no one and nothing could have killed him! He was just a little shorter than how I had pictured him. I saw him on the internet during a video interview about the first Iraq war in '91. He was describing how opening a tank's trapdoor, he found himself in front of a nauseating scene: "...the soldier's body was entirely splattered on the cockpit's surface." He was telling this to a video camera. What does a man who has seen something like that, even just once in his lifetime, look like?

Well, more than ten years later and many wars in between, he was coming towards me smiling. And with an admirable humility, he gave me a strong, welcoming handshake saying:
"Giovanni, pleasure to meet you!"

Special thanks to James Terjanian

(from: *THE 19 DAYS OF LOMÉ* - Confessions of a journey in search for one's own identity, by Matteo Frascini Koffi)