

Excerpt from Leonardo Gori's *L'angelo del fango* (Rizzoli, 2005)

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1.

Como, the Morning of November 4, 1966,
Friday, Armed Forces Day

The girl slipped the 45 rpm into the portable record-player's slot:

Ma non vedete nel cielo
quelle macchie di azzurro e di blu?
È la pioggia che va
e ritorna il sereno.

The old man passed through the living room, cursing under his breath. He stopped in front of the door to his granddaughter's room and stuck his head in. The girl was stretched out on the sofa, surrounded by records and comic books. There was no school that day, November 4, but she had gotten up early just the same. The man was about to say something over the din, but he gave up and shut the door instead, slamming it hard. Even so the music could still be heard [...]

The old man cursed again and went toward the telephone. [...]

Finally the racket stopped. Holding the receiver, the old man listened closely for several minutes. He murmured "yes" a couple of times, then hung up. He searched his jacket pocket and took out his leather appointment book: he kept certain phone numbers noted only there. He put on the glasses he wore for farsightedness, bringing into focus the numbers that were written in pencil beside an acronym. He dialed the number, and waited four or five rings. A male voice answered. [...] Hurriedly he repeated what he had just learned:

"The Arno overflowed in Florence. It's a disaster."

On the other end of the line, the voice said something that irritated him. He reacted by shouting.

"Of course it concerns us! We have to move immediately, there's a job to be done. We must see each other at once. Not here in Como, better in Bologna. Inform the others, I'll call you back in one hour."

2.

Florence, the Morning of November 5, 1966, Saturday

The firemen attached two chains to the rusted bars of the grating, struggling to run them through the dense tangle of branches, brushwood and debris of all kinds. The chains strained and vibrated beneath the rumble of the diesel engine, until finally a wrenching sound was heard.

The unknown man's body sprang out of the opening like a life-size jack-in-the-box, followed by a powerful jet of yellowish water, streaked with dark red. The arms and legs moved disjointedly, and for an instant one had the impression that the man was still alive. The extremely fine mud, combined with a nauseating oily substance, splattered all around, ending up on the coveralls, raincoats and rubber boots of the exhausted, frightened men.

The idling engine of the amphibian ceased its screeching, and the chains fell soundly on the sludge of the Arno's embankment obstructed with detritus. Two men approached, overcoming their disgust: the dead man

was covered with naphtha, the dark viscous substance that the flood waters had released from the underground home fuel deposits, and that now – more so than the mud, much more so than the water – was fouling all of Florence. He was a robust young man, well dressed, wearing a jacket and tie, and a raincoat that had gotten wound around his legs. They carried him onto the steps and threw a bucket of clean water over his face: none of the employees of the National Library, who had been there since six in the morning, recognized him. The firemen said that he had probably been walking through the piazza along the Arno's bank, at the very moment when the river overflowed its banks, initially rushing into the library's immense basement, crammed with books and documents, with the force of a thousand furies. The current must have driven the body through some opening, then wedged it against the grating of the window that provided light to the basement, along with brushwood carried by the river. But the employees, and the director himself, shook their heads: the room where the body had been trapped was always kept locked and it did not have any other entrances, nor any windows without gratings. Two carabinieri from the frogmen unit, who arrived by rubber dinghy along the muddy waters of Corso dei Tintori, dived into the flooded basement and in fact found the door closed and intact. The corpse, upon a cursory preliminary examination, did not appear to have any wounds and, on the contrary, showed clear signs of drowning. They searched the man's clothes, filthy with naphtha and mud, but did not find any documents or other effects that might identify him. A non-commissioned officer in camouflage coveralls asked the employees a few other questions, but they all reiterated that they had never seen the dead man before.

Anna Gianfalco shivered from the cold, but most of all from fear. She adjusted the strands of red hair that stuck out from beneath her large kerchief and joined the other employees who had formed a circle around the director. He was an old man, and he was crying silently behind the thick, blurred lenses of his glasses: the rampaging Arno had devastated his Central National Library that was Italy's historical memory, with its over four million volumes, eighty thousand periodicals, four thousand incunabula and inestimable collections. A first glance had been enough to realize that the collections of periodicals and oversized volumes, kept in the basement, could be considered lost or in extremely critical condition: large geographic maps floated in the pools of filthy water, and some of them had been sighted as far as Piazza Santa Croce. The number of employees was certainly not sufficient for the recovery operation: the Army would send units of conscripted soldiers, but already a campaign of private aid had begun, with volunteers coming from the unaffected areas of the city and from outside the city as well.

The director was flanked by two Florentine ministers, who had fortuitously arrived from Rome the day before, as soon as the gravity of the disaster that had struck Florence had become apparent. Anna Gianfalco heard them reassure him about the imminence of governmental assistance. The following day the president of the Republic himself would actually arrive for a visit, with a retinue of high-ranking functionaries from the Ministry of the Interior, prominent officials and various VIPs.

Anna looked at the dislodged grating of the basement window, from which the drowned man's body had emerged, and then at the sea of mud in the piazza. She tried to take heart, outlining a plan for the next few hours. It was better to remain at work with the other employees, who stood beside her with pale faces, staring at the mud. Certainly they were thinking about the library's ruin and the general tragedy of Florence, two thirds of which had been devastated. But they were also thinking about their own personal tragedies: almost all of them had suffered serious damage, especially those who lived in the low-lying houses in the outskirts of the city or on the plain invaded by the waters. She felt an intense envy toward them, because unlike them her mind was not on her house in the city center, now under sixteen feet of mud and water, nor on the enormous job that awaited her. Instead she was thinking that she might die at any time, in the upcoming hours, and that the only possibility left to her was to play her cards without committing the slightest error.

3.

Incisa Valdarno, at the Gates of Florence, the Morning of November 5, 1966

In the north lane of the Autostrada del Sole, closed to traffic, in the vicinity of Incisa Valdarno, two cars were stopped, escorted by a high-speed police car belonging to the carabinieri. It was cold; behind the clouds, the winter sun was still low. A fine rain, driven by the wind, beat against the Giulia's metallic blue exterior. The flashing lights revolved silently, giving off shafts of bluish light. At that point the road was nearly at the same

level as the river, at the foot of a low hill, and it was again blocked, after a day and night of flooding. The cars, having come from Rome, had been waiting for hours for the fire trucks to remove the obstruction resulting from a landslide. In the first automobile, the functionaries of the Ministry of the Interior kept the windows closed and the heat turned on. The carabinieri and the secret service men, on the other hand, were out on the road, pacing back and forth continually, speaking into large two-way radios.

A colonel of the carabinieri got out of the lead car that was almost touching the landslide that obstructed the roadway. He was a lean man, and wore a pale-colored civilian raincoat over his black uniform. He walked quickly, alone, towards a captain who was listening to a distorted voice on the radio. The young officer snapped to a military salute.

“At your command, Colonel sir!”

“Never mind the formalities. Were you speaking with Florence?”

“Yes sir. A helicopter should arrive within a few minutes, it’s already left Bologna.”

The colonel gave him an unwavering look that was somber but not harsh. Only up close did the few deep wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead, the rough, dry skin of his face, and the low, somewhat hoarse tone of voice, give away his advanced age. From a distance, one would have said he was a man of fifty, or even less. Instead, he had already passed retirement age by a good bit. His hair was still quite dark, pasted to his head with brilliantine.

[...]

Ten minutes later the roar of the approaching helicopter was heard, and in a short while the aircraft began to make a vertical descent. The noise of the rotary blades eclipsed every other sound, and when the vehicle set down on the asphalt, it kicked up a spray of mud and water. A group of men, bent forward, holding onto their hats so they wouldn’t fly away, ran toward the helicopter. Colonel Bruno Arcieri of the Defense Intelligence Service, his pale-colored raincoat blown up by the blades’ turbulence, got in first, settling himself next to the pilot. Lorenzo Graziosi, of the Ministry of the Interior, Dino Carraresi, an awkward, middle-aged undersecretary whom the carabinieri had to help on board by lifting him in their arms, and the young captain to whom Arcieri had spoken a short time earlier climbed into the other seats. After a moment, the roar of the engine became deafening, and the helicopter lifted off again, disappearing from view in the direction of Florence.

The helicopter flew over the deserted highway, headed north. The countryside around Florence, in the level areas, was completely flooded. On the roofs of the houses there were people waiting to be rescued: even entire families, out in the cold and without food for twenty-four hours. In the sickly morning light, the first morning without a downpour in over a week, a couple of amphibian vehicles ploughed the yellowish expanse, leaving long wakes. [...]

The city appeared soon afterward. The helicopter made a wide circle, swinging over Piazzale Michelangelo that was filled with cars and bewildered crowds leaning over the railing. The hills offered the usual panorama, intact and idyllic, but the damage appeared in all its gravity as soon as the aircraft passed beyond the esplanade. A portion of the Arno’s embankments had given way, sweeping away the roadway as well, and signs of devastation covered all the streets and piazzas. Arcieri asked the pilot to fly over the Lungarno Acciaiuoli that looked like it had been bombed, half the street having collapsed on the river’s pebbly shore. But the greatest destruction was in front of the National Library, that had suffered incalculable damages. [...] Arcieri ordered the pilot to increase his altitude again and to fly around the city following the route of the circle of boulevards known as the Viali di Circonvallazione.

“If they reopen the highway, what route is it advisable for the presidential motorcade to take?”

The pilot did not respond right away. He descended again and flew over the industrial outskirts, an area that was also mortally wounded, then headed for the steep slope of mount Uliveto. He pointed to the uninterrupted stream of cars that formed a column.

“If they are able to stop the traffic in the unaffected area, the best route is from Certosa, through Galluzzo and the Viali dei Colli.”

Arcieri turned toward Lorenzo Graziosi.

“What time have they decided to leave?”

The Ministry of the Interior executive, a tall, lanky man with a thick head of stark white hair, was sitting with his legs jackknifed to his chest, beside the undersecretary Carraresi.

“At seven. The president wants to arrive at mid-morning at the latest. Is the route the pilot suggested secure, in your opinion?”

Arcieri watched the roads jammed with the cars of those Florentines who were more fortunate. Perhaps they were trying to rescue relatives and friends, or were looking for water and food, or maybe they were just curious.

“We’ll study the situation as soon as we reach the Military Command Center. Was the idea for the trip really the president’s?”

Graziosi opened the leather case he held on his knees, took out a small pair of binoculars and aimed them out the window, at the spectacle of a stunned Florence.

“We certainly were not the ones who advised it. This is definitely not the best time for an impromptu visit. We have a host of problems...” [...]

“I imagine you’re alluding to the Chinese nuclear tests...”

“They are certainly not making anyone sleep easy in Moscow. And then there are the demonstrations against Russian historical revisionism...”

[...]

“I very much envy my colleagues from beyond the Iron Curtain, Colonel. They certainly do not have the problem of internal opposition!”

“There’s dissent in the Communist countries as well.”

“Of course. But they treat it unceremoniously, as you have surely seen.”

“They’ll pay a price for it, sooner or later.”

The pilot barked something at the radio, that exploded in incomprehensible squawks. The helicopter began the landing maneuvers. Graziosi made a vague sign with his hand.

“That may be, but neither you nor I will ever see that day. For now it is the West that shows signs of collapsing. There are quite a few people, not only in the East, who are very pleased to hear the creaking sounds.”

Arcieri watched the ground approaching down below inside the Fortezza da Basso, the old Renaissance fortress near the railroad. The copter blades swept the water off the ground in a large circle. A couple of soldiers, down below, were signaling something to the pilot.

“For now we have this disaster to think about. Politics has nothing to do with this, fortunately.”

“You think so, Colonel? Florence’s flood makes us weaker from an objective standpoint.”

Arcieri looked at him with an astonished expression. Graziosi smiled.

“A protest demonstration, a sign of discontent, could open the door to God only knows what. It is always prudent to keep your eyes and ears open and anticipate scenarios that might weaken us.”

“I understand. You are certainly right: on the other hand, that’s your job, you’re the analyst.”

“Let’s say that I am rather skilled at making the primary asset of your work return a profit, Colonel. Intelligence.”

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