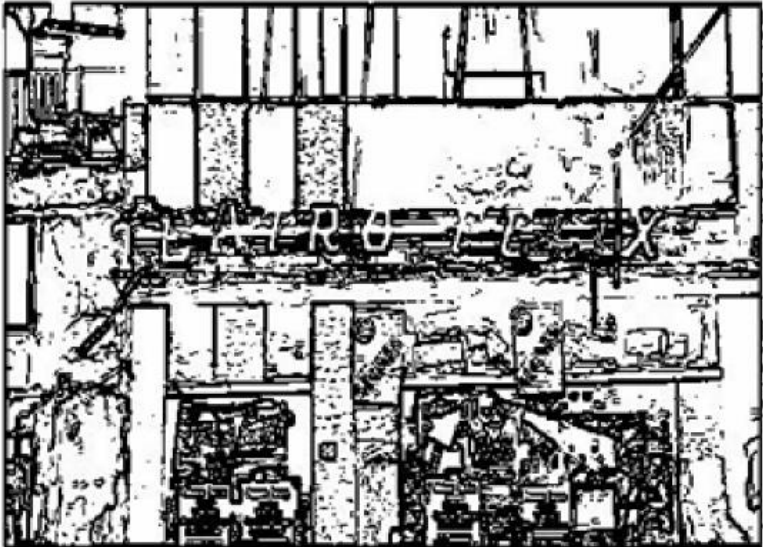


The child and the feather



Massimiliano Canzanella

Time apart

“I want doesn’t exist!”¹

She had already told him a million times before, whether or not we can get something doesn’t always nor only depend on ourselves.

“You say: I would like!”, said his mother.

“Mum, I’d like to go back home and play, with you!”, said Marcello.

Rumours spread around Naples that the Nunziata’s Wheel² had started spinning again but Marcello’s mother was not going to abandon her child. As far as she was concerned, a mother who abandons her child is a mother who decides not to take care of her child’s future anymore. Indeed Marcello wasn’t going to be abandoned in tears on the Wheel’s lap; his mother had struggled fiercely to find a good family for her son; a family who could raise

¹ In Neapolitan the typical reprimand to a child making a demand

² Up until the end of the 19th century from the outside of the church of the Nunziata parents could place their children in a wheel that spun towards the inside so that the abandoned kids could be collected from the inside and looked after by the midwives while parents remained anonymous.

him in the way she wouldn't have been able to.

With his new family Marcello would have a bright future. Meanwhile his mother would remain in a time desperate for hope.

When he was put in the hands of his new family, Marcello didn't recognise the man and the woman standing in front of him.

All his mother had told him was that for a few weeks he would stay with some relatives, in a house not very far from their block.

Marcello didn't weep. He said goodbye to her waving with his wee hand. As he did this she moved away, leaving him without turning round, until she disappeared behind the pillars of sunlight breaching the sky in the flesh.

The new house, it was true, was not very far at all from the block where Marcello was born and raised. It leaned

on top of one of the hills surrounding the bay. Accompanied to the terrace, Marcello immediately ran to the balcony railing and looked down, trying to spot some familiar face. Then he slipped his head through the railings but only managed to see the ring of plump buildings that, so high and wide, seemed to be trying to hide the sea and its voice from the gaze of the people of the block.

That sea stretching beyond the overweight buildings that now Marcello was staring at for the first time had never been so far.

And never again that same sea would seem so close to him, so handy. For a moment he thought he could immerse his arms in the sea to splash water on his face. Then he took his hands off the balcony railings and stepped back. The weather had turned bad.

His school uniform hardly fitted him. In the schoolbag there was a pencil, a rubber and a couple of jotters. The new parents took Marcello to the school gate where the year had begun three months before. The classmates could already read and write the first six letters of the alphabet, in capital and small letters. Marcello would need to catch up.

It was only in the last moment of the day, though, that Marcello started to panic, when the lessons ended and everybody, students and teachers alike, were getting ready to leave. He wished he could have escaped from that classroom, from that school, from that street so far from the way down to the sea. Then, suddenly, something occurred to Marcello:

“Rimane...lloco³, Stay....there!”

In a dream of the previous night Marcello’s mother had replied with these two words, one separate from the other, to a question asked by her son who, feeling very anxious, couldn’t rest. “Stay.....there!”, his mother had said.

³ Stay there in Neapolitan

Assured, the child dropped off, he drifted into a sleep as deep as the cheeks on his face, happy to have heard the desired answer.

Marcello, now reassured, didn't run away from school because he thought he owned the answer that would have erased, like a magic rubber, the fears and the sorrows of that moment.

“Stay.....there!”

Although this answer comforted him in that moment, what soon started to confuse Marcello was the bizarre fact that he couldn't remember what he had asked his mother in his sleep. While going back home with his new parents, the child was grabbed by a thought: could his unremembered question have had more importance than his mother's answer?!

Having finished his first week of school, the headmaster summoned Marcello's new parents to tell them that the boy was worrying all the teachers. For a

whole week he hadn't uttered a single word. The headmaster told them that the boy had been spotted speaking Neapolitan to a classmate.

"Only the camorristi ⁴ and the illiterate speak in such a way!", the teacher shouted at Marcello. She also said that speaking Neapolitan in school was not allowed for any reason.

And since then the child's lips remained sealed. His mouth had opened only to breathe and to release yawns.

Marcello's new parents returned home ashamed.

"Please, promise you will behave and speak Italian in school!", lamented Marcello's new mother.

"It's for your own good, do you see?", added his new father.

Marcello bowed his head pretending that he had learnt the lesson. Then he made his way to the terrace where he found shelter between the balcony railings.

⁴ Mobsters

Marcello's first cradle was an old courgette crate. His real father had a small greengrocer's. Around the block there had never been a shortage of work and customers. The fishmonger, the butcher, the wine shop and all the other shopkeepers had never had anything to worry about. That was until the day when, what Marcello's father had baptised "the scary shop", opened its gates.

It was a market as big as a field of wheat that sold a bit of everything and where you could save so much that, buying a crate of fruit, you would get another free.

Then, not long before Marcello's mother gave birth to her son, Marcello's father noticed that all his lifetime customers started going to buy at the "scary shop". What upset Marcello's father most was that people may have thought him tight fisted because he wouldn't lower the prices and give away free crates of fruit like the scary shop.

When the baby was born, not having enough money to purchase a cradle full of ribbons, rattles and small toys for infants, Marcello's real mother didn't get discouraged. Instead she emptied a crate of courgettes to prepare an even nicer cradle, ornate with enlaced cherries and pumpkin flowers (if the crate had bent on one side and broke, the baby would have fallen straight into the arms of the softest broccoli all around it).

In the shop the crates were piling up rotting the vegetables and dehydrating the fruit. But Marcello was still the luckiest baby in the city. He would have a new cradle each day and every now and then get a different toy.

Once a peach to lick and bite, some other time a carrot to learn how to hold and squeeze with the tiny fingers of his hands.

As the vegetables in the shop were rotting, so the health of Marcello's father weakened. So much stress and anxiety without any support caused his heart to decay. And when Marcello was hardly three years old, his father's heart

had to be discarded, just like the artichokes.

The day that followed the cortege, Marcello's real mother locked up the small shop for the last time and handed the keys to a youngster with a frown and an official document in his hands.

Marcello's cradles were taken away.

The scary shop, then, notified all its customers that the celebration of free crates of fruit had come to an end.

Prices grew very quickly, but the people, feeling too embarrassed to cry misery, went on spending and buying at the extortionate scary shop which, revealing its cruel real visage, had furtively become the first, last and only shop on the block.

6

“Get up, it's seven o' clock, Marcello wake up!”

“And who are you?”, asked the child who got up at once.

“I'm the new housemaid”.

“I’ve got the exam in school today”, said Marcello stretching and rubbing his eyes”.

“I know, that’s why I’m telling you to hurry up...you’ve grown up quite a bit, haven’t you?!”

“Why, do you know me, miss?!”

“I’ve known you since you were born”.

“And where are you from?”

“I’m from the same block as you, the one you can see from the terrace out there!”

“Come on, go and get ready now!”, ordered the maid.

Marcello got washed and dressed in five minutes like a little soldier, then combed his hair, brushed his teeth and clutched the schoolbag in his hand as if it was the precious luggage of an emigrant.

“And the laces?!”, asked the maid.

The child had put the socks and the shoes on but the laces were loose like four restless snakes escaped from the wicker basket of a charmer.

“Do your laces or else you’re going to fall and bang your face on the ground!”, the woman suggested to him. But since

Marcello wasn't making a move, the maid understood that the boy couldn't do his laces by himself yet.

"Such a big boy, and you still don't know how to do your laces! Goodness, how can that be?", said the woman, bothered by that task still to be fulfilled. "Come on over here! I'll do them for you! But look carefully how I do it so you learn".

That same morning Marcello did the best exam in the whole school. The child succeeded in writing all the letters in the alphabet, then counted from one to ten and also wrote the most beautiful composition, according to the headmaster.

However, later on he had to tell Marcello's new parents that nobody among the teachers had been able to understand how the boy had composed his thoughts. It was as if he had begun once again to think in Neapolitan. The headmaster had had reasons to believe that this problem had been well overcome.

Overhearing this comment, Marcello got angry.

“What’s that got to do with me? Why do I always have to take the blame?” thought the child, he was fed up.

All because of the maid. She had spoken Neapolitan to him, mixing him up and distorting his tongue.

“I won’t listen to that woman ever again!”, grizzled Marcello, fuming with anger.

So I heard

Her name was Dolurata. Sat down on the sand, by the sea, Marcello's real mother was waiting for the *cavallune*, the giant horses ⁵. Already separated from her son, on that same day she also had to leave the small flat where she had lived all her life. Now she lived on the sand, by the sea.

In the evening a little chubby red moon appeared in the sky resembling an unripe strawberry. Dolurata was desperate to see the giant horses. She waited and waited for them, then she started calling out for them, then suddenly she leaned her head on her knees and closed her eyes.

“Hello there! Wakey wakey! I've got a message for you, said a little bird while he was having a seat on a light stone beside the woman.

“Holy God, and who would you be?! What do you want from me?”, screamed the woman as she got up and pushed the sand off her clothes.

⁵ The word *cavallune* (literally giant horses) in Neapolitan also refers to high waves.

“Don’t be afraid, it’s not that I’m a bat, am I? I’m a bird! I’ve got a message for you from your son”.

“My son Marcello! How can it be? Do you really know my son Marcello?”

“Birds don’t have a clue about what names are all about! I know that a little one has got a message for you, I do know that this boy is indeed your son, but I don’t know what his name is”.

“I can’t quite understand, are you just visiting me in my dreams or am I going completely mad?”

“You’re not going mad!”

“So tell me, what is this message from my son Marcello?”

“Your little boy wants to know when and where you two will be able to meet again”

Dolurata started crying, hiding her face in the palms of her hands.

“I really don’t know!”, replied the woman.

“Is that what you want your son to know then?”

“No, but I don’t want to tell him lies! I don’t know when we will be able to see

each other again...and what if I didn't answer his message? What would happen then?"

"Absolutely nothing would happen, but your son wouldn't be able to dream again. I'm telling you, he wouldn't live in peace anymore!"

"Why, can you not live in peace without dreaming?!", replied Dolurata.

The bird first inclined his little head, then he got close to the woman and whispered in her ear: "I know why you're here by the sea...for the giant horses".

"That's not true, it's a lie, and who are you anyway, go away from me!", shouted Dolurata finding herself stuck in a lie".

"Alright then, I accomplished my duty by delivering the message. See you!" said the bird.

"Hold on, did you just say that my son wouldn't be able to dream anymore?"

"That's what I said 'cause that's how it is!"

"Well, would you tell my son that...oh, to hell with that! I don't even know what I would like to tell him!"

“Right, tell me something, when would you like to meet your son again?”, enquired the bird.

“*Dimane* ⁶, tomorrow!”

“And where would you like to see him?”

“*Lloco* ⁷, here!”, answered Dolurata staring at the empty air in front of her eyes ⁸.

“There you have it, sweet bird, that’s the message you should send to my son Marcello. Take these two words, quick, and let him dream, before he wakes up, before the sun rises and tomorrow comes”.

“I would be happy to carry these words of yours with all my heart. The trouble is, though, that we birds have got feathers but don’t know how to write!”.

“Well, then, what are we going to do now?”, asked the woman.

“Well, you are the only one who can write them down!”, stated the bird.

⁶ Tomorrow in Neapolitan.

⁷ Here in Neapolitan.

⁸ The words “*Dimane lloco*” (Tomorrow here) and “*Rimane lloco*” (Stay there) in Neapolitan are pronounced exactly the same way, and this causes that Marcello misunderstands (page 6) his mother’s message in the sleep.

Dolurata then felt deeply humiliated. She felt ashamed because she couldn't read nor write. At the age of eight she was already working in a shoe factory to give her contribution to the family running and bring a few coins home. But her desire to go to school had never died: Dolurata was a gifted girl.

Take one of my feathers”, said the bird.

“One thing though, take it very easy!”

“You're asking me to take a feather off you? But I don't know how to write, I would hurt you for nothing!”.

“No worries please...hey, do you really want to send your son a message or not?”, said the bird raising the tone of his voice in sign of firmness.

“Of course I do, I'd really love to!”

“But what are you thinking on your mind? Is it *I would like* or *I want*?”

“I want doesn't exist. At least that's what they taught me. *I want* is used by those who don't have manners. I taught that lesson to my son as well: whether or not we can get something doesn't always nor only depend on ourselves.

“Yes, but here you are on your own!” explained the bird.

“To send a message to your son in his dreams, you have to want it, you have to want it at all costs!

I’m going to ask you for the last time: do you want to send your son a message?”

“Yees! I do!, shouted Dolurata with all herself”.

Then very gently, just like the bird had asked her, she got close to him and pulled a feather off his body.

“Did I hurt you?”, she asked quite concernedly.

“I didn’t feel anything, not to worry!”

“And now? What do I have to do to write the message?”, Dolurata wished to know while she was making the effort to hold the feather in her hands just like the kids in the school that, often, on the way to work, had observed from the window outside.

“Now you have to chase me!”, the bird answered while he was cracking a smile.

“You want me to chase you?”, Dolurata replied with her eyes almost out of their orbits in disbelief.

“Yep, you have to chase me! Run close after me. Wherever I go, you go. And try not to get lost, you hear me?”

“Yep, I heard you!”, Dolurata replied.

So it happened that the woman started chasing the bird while holding the feather with three fingers of one hand.

Dolurata chased the bird everywhere it went: if it went up the way, the woman would go up the way, and when it went down the way, the woman would follow him down the way, and if he took a jump, the woman as well would take a jump after it.

Dolurata was running and smiling altogether as if that instant could walk over time. Then suddenly the bird stopped running and with a last jump it returned to the light stone on the sand where it first met the woman.

Dolurata too stopped chasing and sat beside the bird opposite the sea.

“So? When are we going to write the message?”, asked the woman as she stared at the feather.

In that instant the bird closed his eyes and the feather that it had given to the

woman started shrinking turning smaller and smaller.

Dolurata tightened her hold on it so that she would not let it go but then, in a split second, the feather vanished leaving on her palm only a fist of warm sand that then she made fall by shaking her hand.

The bird then made its way back to its path and then suddenly disappeared.

You wouldn't tell

School and springtime ended leaving the sky and Marcello both in the nude. The heavy heat had arrived earlier than usual. All the flowers in the pots out on the balcony were sun burnt but they didn't fade out.

Marcello was trying to find shelter from the sun all the time but on his face and on his back his skin still peeled off.

It was so warm and damp that the clothes would stick to his skin so much was the sweat. Marcello was only wearing shorts and shoes without any socks. The laces were not done, but not because of the heat: the child had not learnt yet. Time and time again the maid had shown him how to roll and fix the laces but the snakes of the charmer had not yet got off the child's feet. He had mosquito bites everywhere. His legs were so swollen that they looked like two peppers and in many parts, scratching with his nails, Marcello was bleeding that sweet blood that mosquitoes loved so much.

The little boy was growing up. His head wouldn't fit between the balcony railings anymore and most of the bay that before he could see in front of him had been chopped off.

So thin and so long, shaped as a horse shoe, the bay had turned into two slices of sand with a drop of sea in the middle.

It was late at night. Marcello was already supposed to be in bed. But recently he had encountered a few problems to get to sleep, he would stand in front of the balcony with the shorts and the shoes on with the laces undone.

Up in the sky the moon had some red cheeks and underneath it, on a wee beach, somebody was launching a kite.

"So it seems!", thought Marcello between him and him.

In the dark, it looked like somebody was running after a kite that was chasing the wind.

"The wind?!", thought Marcello.

But how could you play with a kite if there was no wind that was blowing?

Who knows, maybe on the other side of the bay the weather was a different story! Perhaps on the other side the heat was not as oppressing and there is so much wind that they use the extra air to play.

2

Marcello stood up all night long. He collapsed as the sun rose. Around midnight the maid started setting up the table out on the terrace. Three school mates of Marcello's were coming for lunch. When the time was due, the maid placed four chairs of iron painted white around the table and unfolded a linen table cloth. Right in the middle, at last, she positioned a vase full of basil leaves.

"I don't like basil!", Assunta moaned as she sat with her other pals.

"Me neither!", supported her Aitano.

"The basil is not to eat, it's for the mosquitoes!", clarified Lucia.

“Do mosquitoes eat basil?!” Assunta e Aitano asked in unison.

“Mosquitoes fear the smell of basil and they run away”, said Marcello.

The four children were in the same class and they had started seeing each other since their parents had begun to hang out together.

Assunta’s father and Aitano’s mother owned two factories of cardboards in Poland and in China. Their company’s name, ASSANO ltd, was made up of one part of the two kid’s names. But their real names, apart from the trade, were not fashionable anymore. Wherever they went, Assunta e Aitano were supposed to be called Susy written as in English and Caetano or Cae.

Lucia’s mother on the other hand sold cars. And she would manage to sell so many that, since the space where to let them drive was running out, sometimes Lucia was afraid of ending up in the street with her entire family.

“Not to worry! There’s always plenty space!”, Lucia’s mother would always say to reassure her daughter when she was worrying too much for no reason.

Well, she was so right that soon they began to dig underground, pave new streets, raise buildings that reached the sky, cover the pavements where people once used to walk on: all this, so that the space that was missing to sell more cars and all that was sold through them could be finally found.

Marcello didn't really know much about the jobs of his new parents.

From what he could understand, his new mother worked in a museum and his new father was a journalist (not knowing yet whether he was one of those who sell papers or one of those who write them). ¹

3

From the terrace of the new home you could see all the planes coming to and leaving from Capodichino ². Funnily

¹ in Neapolitan the word *giornalista* indicates both who sells and who writes newspapers

² Naples City Airport

enough, the cemetery was right next to the airport.

And the very first time that Marcello saw an aeroplane from close was when his real father was buried.

In the church, at the end of the ceremony, Marcello's real mother asked for the favour to let the cortege with the coffin pass by the wee shop in the narrow street opposite. The woman raised the shutter and pushed her hands on her hips to stop her tears from erupting. Then she took a heavy breath, picked her baby in her arms and dried, one caress by one, his chin wet of little tears. The child turned around on the other side of the wee shop where a small cage was hanging from a hooked nail. Without letting his mum see, Marcello opened the cage door a little bit and stared at the little bird inside waiting to see it fly away.

Instead the little bird didn't make a move, stayed exactly where it was. As she recovered from her deepest sadness, Marcello's mother lowered the shutter and started walking down by the Vico Lammatore. The woman and

her son, holding hands in grief, had to walk a very long way. They reached the *Virgene* first, then *Furia*, *Carlo III* and they went up the *Ruanella*⁹ feeling extremely tired.

Capodichino square was full of sunlight making the wood of the coffin shine. On the corner of the downhill street leading to the cemetery there was a kiosk. Marcello's mum sat his son on a reddish plastic chair with a table beside and agreed with the man of the kiosk, through gestures, that he would look after her little boy while the woman was away to the burial. Marcello's mum knew the man of the kiosk very well. He had always been a regular customer in the *Sanità*, even after the opening of the *scary shop*.

“Mum, I want to come with you!”, said Marcello.

“Stay here, I'll be right back!”, replied his mum making her way towards the cemetery.

“You'll be thirsty, here!”, the man of the kiosk said to Marcello while he handed

⁹ all sites in the city centre of Naples

a mug to the child. “I’ve just squeezed them”.

The child was being polite.

“Come on, drink up, these are the oranges I bought in your dad’s shop just last week!”.

The man of the kiosk put the mug down on the table and went for another orange: he peeled it, he stretched it properly so that he could put it in his sandwich, a crunchy piece of white bread, not too hard. Not feeling shy anymore, the child took the mug and drank the juice in one sip licking his whiskers at the end in delight. Though little, Marcello was already able to peel oranges by himself, but when the skin was too tough, his dad would always take the first one off for him.