

Il rumore della pioggia

The Sound of the Rain

by

Gigi Paoli

Partial English translation by Vanessa Di Stefano

The wind's bite struck him.

Then came the rain, cold and sharp.

And this is supposed to be the most beautiful city in the world?

The man shook his head and tugged on the small umbrella sticking out from his briefcase.

He looked up.

Everything was dull and grey. Above and below. At a quarter past seven of that November morning, there was not even a single tourist in sight.

Not surprising, with that weather.

The last thing he needed was the rain.

And that small, damned umbrella would never be able to stop his trousers from getting instantly soaking wet.

He turned the corner onto the Santa Trinita bridge and automatically lifted his eyes to meet the silent gaze of the Primavera statue, with her long, long neck.

They broke off your head, didn't they pretty lady? he sneered while panting up the bridge whose corners were dominated by statues of the four seasons.

Every day for the past 30-odd years, he has filed past the Primavera, which was fished out of the Arno river after the war, just like her marble sisters. She, however, was found headless. Only years later, when a fisherman chanced upon the head in the river, could they re-attach it.

A pretty rubbish transplant job, he thought.

As always, he did not even glance at Ponte Vecchio, with its little windows all lit up like a nativity scene.

He no longer noticed it.

He no longer noticed many things.

In fact almost nothing, after all these years of taking the same route and doing the same job.

When old Loris died a couple of years earlier, his widow thought of burying the shop together with her much-loved husband. Who, instead, loved only the shop.

But not him, he did not want to bury anything. This place was his whole life. And he had told her. "Don't worry Tecla, I'll keep it going. Alone. It'll be just like before, I'll look after the shop."

It took a while, but eventually old Tecla, by then slightly senile truth be told, had consented. The money that came into her bank account each month gave her a good enough reason to keep quiet. And so the religious antiques shop “Loris Cantini” kept going.

And likewise he, the salesman, kept going.

Well, kept surviving, actually.

Which is something else entirely.

“Good morning Paolo,” he said, entering the bar with the same name as the bridge.

“Good morning. The usual?”

The usual.

Coffee without sugar, half a glass of still water at room temperature.

Half, though.

So that he did not have to pay for it.

“Did you see last night? We won. We’re at the top. Perhaps this year we’ll finally win a cup or something...” the barman suggested, trying to make conversation with who, given the hour, was the only customer in the place.

The man smiled. “We’re great, yes, we’re great.”

He paid and went out.

He has been having his coffee in that bar every morning for years and that idiot has still not realised that he could not care less about football.

But he nodded and smiled. The perfect salesman.

Which was precisely why old Loris had always wanted him by his side.

Well, not only because of that, but actually mainly because he saw everything but talked little, hardly at all in fact.

Least of all about football matches.

He walked along Via Maggio, the famous street of antique dealers, the jewel of the Oltrarno quarter. *Jewel?*

It may have been a jewel once, he thought, but now it just seems more like bijouterie.

A very long and narrow road, but not narrow enough to stop the local council from allowing cars to park on one side and buses to pass on the other.

It would have been very pretty too. Too bad it was a gas chamber thanks to the traffic that, at all hours of the day and night made the windows of the shops and houses rattle.

In the sixteenth century it was called “Via Maggiore,” when the great Florentine noble families competed as to who could construct the most imposing, the most austere building. Basically they competed as to who had the biggest building.

The thought made him both smile and tense up. The anguish suddenly returned and tried, unsuccessfully, to spread across his lower abdomen.

Yes.

They had had a lot of fun together, him and old Loris, much more than their wives would have ever imagined. But for Loris the party was over. His life was over. For Loris, in fact. Not for him. Not yet.

It was not a good street for claustrophobics.

Beautiful, yes, but the heavy, grey buildings, seemed like they could fall on you at any time.

And some of them did fall, had fallen: the proof was in the work sites that cropped up every one hundred meters or so and blocked the sidewalk, in a pathetic attempt to restore some former glory to those crumbling and worn out façades.

The store, however, was located in the most beautiful building on the street. And it had the same effect as a bright flower did in a field of synthetic grass: it was incongruous, almost absurd.

It sat exactly at the midway point of that long, double row of identical stone buildings, the same in shape and in color, and boasted on its façade a spectacle of decorations. They were called *grottesche a graffito*, the sales clerk recalled as he slowly moved closer to his destination.

In the middle of so many sad, neutral building fronts, that one was simply marvelous, and each time he looked at it he could not help but feeling that in some way it also belonged to him.

Now that he was the only one left, maybe it was in some way his, as well. Old Loris, a long time ago, had managed to convince the *Curia di Firenze* to rent to him the store space that sat right next to the enormous and very imposing front door.

A rental contract that was like a life-sentence: there was no end.

But inside that store, prison could be beautiful.

(...)

I wanted to be *All the President's Men*, but ended up being *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

Nice try.

That is what I was thinking that November morning, putting myself down while impeccable but dejected in a blue shirt and tie, carrying out the role that suited me oh so perfectly lately. Dish washer.

The night before I had collapsed on the couch, exhausted by a maddening day at work in the newsroom. Six articles and their related headlines to write, a couple of telephone tête-a-têtes with particularly verbose readers, an epic fight with some guy from administration who challenged an expense receipt for 25 euros, a trade union meeting announcing a protest.

Golly, we were protesting.

A truly trade union expression, that one, convincing me once more that we journalists were heading towards extinction.

From Tyrannosaurus to Reportersaurus.

Years of evolution only to end up the same. Useless, therefore repressed.

That is what was happening to my newspaper, I reflected, as I attacked the knives and forks. It happened to all the newspapers, in reality. Readers were slowly leaving us, feeling more and more like it was a waste to spend €1.30 on something that more and more often could be found for free on the internet.

That was the case with the young readers.

With the elderly, by now our target readership, the explanation was much simpler. They were old, then they died, then they no longer bought the newspaper. The result: we lose readers, the publisher loses money, and the journalists, the few remaining, lose their enthusiasm because they are forced to produce ever more anonymous and shallow articles.

Plain and simple.

Within the chaos that the over 100-year-old Florentine daily newspaper, *Il Nuovo Giornale*, had become, it was increasingly hard to meet my very personal level of writing and independence, while trying to escape from the chains that increasingly tied colleagues to their desks.

But I have had these chains for years, after all.

I thought about this, while scrubbing the accursed bottom of a pan that was poisoning my mood at nine in the morning.

I was late.

I should already be in court following the public prosecutor's final address in a corruption trial that I had been following too little and badly, but which today could have given me some headlines to sell to my boss.

Too bad the head of *Nuovo's* court reporting was, in that moment, in his beautiful single-man's mansard with his hands deep in washing up liquid.

There was a problem though, in that beautiful flat for singles.

I was not single.

"Daaaaaddy..." her dulcet tones had entered my left eardrum at about three in the morning. "I beel bick" had been the second sentence, but for me it had been the first, given that the preamble had superimposed itself upon a dream with Catherine Zeta Jones in underwear, giving me heart attack.

"I beel bick" was automatically translated by my brain, by now trained to go from 0 to 100 like a Lamborghini, into "I feel sick" and, in the shadows of the bedroom lit only by the bedside alarm clock, the small, round face of my daughter appeared.

Donata, 10 years old, sixth grade, was the light of my life but also, and most of all, the seconds of my minutes, the minutes of my hours, the hours of my days.

She was also a permanent guest on my sofa in the evening, which was when I could have been relaxing and watching a bit of TV after having carried out the duties of a dishwasher and, if necessary, of a washing machine. A shame that the children of today are able to make the remote control disappear in a way that not even Houdini could have managed in his heyday.

So the night before, exhausted, I found myself having to sit through teenagers croaking into a microphone.

"What is this stuff?" I tried to ask Donata, who was glued to the television.

"It's fantastic, daddy. You don't understand."

"But do you really like them?"

"Yes," she replied with that voice typical of North Korean dictators.

Thus, the discussion cut short, I started fiddling with my phone. Among the messages received was one waiting for a reply from that afternoon: "What's happened to you?" The sender was Olga, a criminal lawyer with whom I was trying to maintain my very personal Maginot line regarding women. It had gone wrong with my wife, it had gone wrong with the next woman I had

lived with, it had gone wrong even with the one after that. Now it no longer went wrong, because I simply kept them at a distance. Set aside, as Totò would have said.

Basically, women and I had a problem of diplomatic relations. Certainly the role of single father stimulated the female hormones, also because inside every woman lives a little Red Cross nurse, but only in the short term: when it turned into even only medium term, the logistic difficulties of my life, between the newspaper and Donata, conflicted with the demands of a relationship. And I, thank you very much, had finished with relationships.

I had had several coffees with Olga in the courts, messages on the phone, two lunches, and even an aperitif. That is all. Nothing else. No close encounter of the fourth kind, not even of the third or second kind. It was not the right time.

However, out of politeness, I sent her a reply. The standard one, which, like the colour black, goes with everything: “Very busy at work, sorry.” Maybe that would be enough to explain why I had not be in touch for three days.

Maybe not.

“Do you know these super guests?” Donata made me jump as I pressed send.

“Super...what?”

“Super guests, them, daddy. The guys that are singing. They’ve just introduced them. Du... Du...”

I looked up and saw five postal clerks, with their stomachs relentlessly squashed by a body belt, shouting and sweating with microphones and guitars. I was hit by a wave of old-age despair.

“Yes. They’re Duran Duran, one of the most famous bands from the 80s.”

“Ah, stuff from your era.”

“Yes.”

“Like One Direction now?”

“Something like that.”

“And did you like...Duran...?”

“No, I preferred the other famous band of the 80s, Spandau Ballet.”

“Never heard of them Who are they?”

“Stuff from my era, very good, they did amazing so...”

“Oh daddy, you *are* old...”

She laughed, the youngster.

“My dear daughter, you have the sensibility of an Ikea bedside table” and I got up.

“What? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to take a bath, and maybe I’ll drown myself in it listening to *Through the Barricades*.”

Later, immersed in boiling water and foam, I started thinking again about the situation I had ended up in.

“I’m leaving, Donata stays with you, you’re her father,” my wife, from whom I had separated a year after our daughter was born, said to me one morning five years ago.

She had decided to leave, to follow a new job or a new love. I had not yet understood.

What I had understood was that my life, that had been destined to leave an indelible mark on the magnificent fate of Italian journalism, had instead turned into a survival course for Navy Seals.

To begin with I had taken a month’s leave in order to systematically study the situation, occasionally coming to the conclusion that the best solution would be to jump on the first plane to New Guinea. But I did not do it, and so one fine day I found myself at my ex’s house, which had once also been mine, with my little five-year-old looking at me from the bottom up with those green eyes and a huge pout.

“Mummy says that from today we’ll be living together,” she said to me, clutching a little Nemo cuddly toy, her favourite cartoon.

It’s also my favourite, I thought.

Because in it the mother dies within three minutes of the first part.

Let me just say: I do not like children, I never have, and I have always said I prefer cats.

And in fact I have a cat, ehem, excuse me, a black female cat.

Donata arrived by mistake, if you can talk of mistakes when you conceive children.

We separated straight away and initially I was a weekend parent: “cinema, pizza, bed, breakfast, lunch, kiss, redelivery to the professor.”

I was a substitute teacher, if you like.

But from that day I was allocated the professorship. And I had to learn.

And fast.

So I tried to like the school Christmas carols, the carnival parties with children who by large would become football hooligans, birthday parties where I often went alone and the mothers of

other children asked me where Donata's mother was. Once, to a particularly unpleasant mother, I replied: "She's in prison, she killed another mother at a birthday party with the cake knife."

Only after enjoying her expression, she grins while looking over the top of an orange juice glass: "I'm joking."

But she did not let me cut the cake, even though I was the only father present.

Let me just be clear: all this happened for years while holding down a job that was not simple and was very demanding.

But my priority had become Donata, and slowly, slowly I changed my mind. That is, I decided that I liked children and that, rather, it was women that I liked a lot less.

So it was that I turned down other job opportunities and a couple of promotions, continuing to live in the small town ten kilometres from Florence, where I went to work every day.

Court reporting had become my anchor and also my playground. In essence, I did more or less what I wanted, because my boss left me free, and in the meantime I watched Donata grow.

But there was another rather big problem.

My life was like a game of monopoly and, no matter how hard I tried, I invariably ended up in front of the Counter of the Unexpected every single day.

Like that damned morning with that damned pan and its damned encrusted bottom.

I finished washing the dishes and glanced at the clock. Very late.

At half past seven I had phoned Anna, my babysitter, or rather my guardian angel, to whom I had delegated the daily care of my little tot while I was at work. She was a lady of a certain age, incomparably sweet and with an extraordinary simplicity.

Once, in fact one of the many times that I was running late at work due to a nasty robbery in a jewellery shop in the centre of town, I called in a mad rush as I left the newsroom: "Anna, I'm so sorry I'm late, but I had to do a robbery with a machine gun." Meaning that I had to follow the story for the newspaper.

But the silence that followed made me realise that the message had arrived a bit distorted.

In fact, given how much she cost me, sooner or later I would actually have to carry out a robbery.

She had told me that she could not come before than nine. Donata had a fever and could not go to school. I, however, could not go to work until she arrived.

In short, a mess.

Outside of the large French doors that opened onto my balcony, the rain was trying to destroy my Jasmine creeper.

I picked up my mobile and looked for Nicola Losito's number, an older colleague from Naples working for our competitor. Only he was not a competitor. He was a friend who had taught me all the tricks of court reporting: how to suck up to the judges, how to tickle the vanity of lawyers, how to find the news and even, all things considered, how to write it.

I was good at writing, I knew that by now, but court reporting had been a whole new kettle of fish to me when my old boss had ordered me to deal only with that from morning to night.

The traditional old-style newsroom approach: go and swim, if you drown, so be it, we will find someone better than you. Now it was the opposite: whoever arrived first was tasked with the important jobs and no one cared if he or she knew how to do it. The important thing was to fill the pages. The how was secondary. Perhaps that was also why we were losing readers, not just because they were dying.

I did not drown, though, thanks to Nicola and our unique relationship. Besides exchanging news, if one of us wanted to write something solo and out-do the competitor, we waited until the other had a day off. Between his sources and mine, nothing happened in court that we did not know about.

"Nicola, are you already in court?" I asked him even before he could say "Hello".

"Hey Carlo, don't you think it's a little too early to get worked up? It's only Monday morning."

"Yes, I know, but the Carotti trial is on, that corruption case, and the public prosecutor will be giving his final address this morning. And I..."

"Who's the PP on this case, I don't remember?"

"Bartolozzi."

"Oh no, he's an idiot! He couldn't win a case even if the accused confessed in court..."

"Nico', you're right, but I've already told my boss about this story and he wants a page on it."

"So, what's the problem? He wants the story dressed up in high heels and a short skirt? We can do that. He wants it with cream on top? We can do that too. They're all the same these bosses."

"Yes, but my daughter's sick and I can't leave her alone so I have to wait for the babysitter to arrive before I can leave. If you're already in court, maybe you could cover for me until I get there."

“Relax Carlo, I’m just parking up in front of the courts. I’ll take care of it and wait for you inside. Do you know which courtroom it’s in?”

“No. But I think it’s the first criminal division court. Look it up.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you there. But the child’s okay?”

“It’s just a little fever, no big deal. At least I hope so.”

“Okay, give her a kiss from Uncle Nicola.”

I thanked him, we said goodbye and I went into Donata’s room.

She was hidden under the covers and you could only see her hair.

I caressed her.

Her maths book was on her bedside table, and it made me smile.

A few days earlier, while I was deeply engrossed in reading the sports pages of the paper, Donata had come into the living room with that book open in her hands.

“Hey Daddy, you couldn’t by any chance explain...”

I had raised my head in time to see Donata looking at me, then looking at the book, and then again at me, before concluding: “What’s the point? You don’t understand anything about maths, it’d be better if I call my aunt.”

She had turned on her heels and gone back to her room.

I had not liked children.

It has been years now, since I have changed my mind.

Half an hour later I was thinking about how much I would have loved to be driving a tank.

Entering Florence in the morning from the motorway was the best test invented by man to see whether someone could become a serial killer.

Especially when it was pouring like that morning.

I could put up with anything, but I hated queues. I hated being shut up in the car surrounded by dazed people going at two kilometres an hour. People who did not care at all about being late for work. Because in any case they did not like their job.

I liked my job, though, very much. I loved to write, I would not have known what else to do in life.

In primary school I created the class newspaper with cartoons cut out from Mickey Mouse comic books, at secondary school I created a monthly newspaper for the school, and at high school,

finally, I started to write some pieces for the glorious *Nuovo Giornale* newspaper, writing about American football, which today, at more than forty-years old, is still my favourite sport.

I was not normal even back then.

But if I were normal I would not have become a journalist.

However, was I still a journalist? Or was I a cross between an employee and a housewife?

The image of Robin Williams dressed as a woman in *Mrs. Doubtfire* floated in front of my eyes again.

From Pulitzer to housekeeping.

Great story.

The triumphant beginning of the *Star Wars* theme tune, my mobile phone's sober ringtone, echoed in my car just as I was about to summon a thunderbolt from Zeus to launch at the green Yaris that was blocking the exit from the traffic jam on the right.

I answered with my headphone in and without looking at who was calling me, and with a tone I used for people who called me on my cell phone but whose names were not in my address book.

An abrupt "Yes", the kind a doctor would give in the middle of performing open-heart surgery.

"Houston, we have a problem!" the happy voice chimed; it was not at all put off by my threatening tone.

"Apollo 13, it's Monday morning and it's pouring down rain. Stay where you are. It's not worth coming back."

"You are almost more lame than I am," laughed Alessandro Della Robbia, head journalist for street news at the *Nuovo* and above all, my table-mate in the open space of our editing room.

We had been working side by side for years. Alessandro Della Robbia on crime, Carlo Alberto Marchi on judicial. That is, the "next-day crime" as the crime journalists would say of us, working on judicial with our nice suits and trips to court while they battled it out on the streets, down and dirty with the cops and the detectives.

Della Robbia was nicknamed the Artist years ago by a colleague who had by now retired, but who had then desired to define in one word his colleagues capability of avoiding the news all together.

The nickname was not a secret, however, like the ones that hung over many of the heads of our colleagues in the newsroom. The Artist liked his nickname and didn't have a problem with anyone using it whenever they wanted to.

He did not have a problem with many things, to tell the truth, seeing that unlike the rest of us he was from a noble family, he was a *marquis* for God's sake, and on top of it all he had serious money in the bank.

So, he was a journalist just for fun.

But he was good. After years on the crime beat he knew every thing and every one. And when he wanted to, every other day or so, he would do whatever the heck he wanted and could still squeeze news out of a stone.

He was about ten years older than I was and he had befriended me right off. We were a great team. A *de facto* couple.

Or as he said, a *de fective* couple.

Still, nine-thirty am was a strange hour to be having a conversation with the Artist, who was famous for showing his face at the office closer to mid-afternoon and angering the boss to no end by keeping his cell phone turned off. Because, amazingly enough, he was sleeping.

However, once in the newsroom he made three phone calls in ten minutes and was able to tell us everything that had happened in Florence while he was in the arms of Morpheus.

Exactly that: he was an artist. The Artist.

"Listen dear, maybe there really is a problem. And not in Houston, but here," he continued.

"No, please. It is still Monday morning ..."

"Where are you?"

"Late and on my way to court. Donata was sick last night and I had to wait for the sitter this morning before I could leave. What's up?"

"Something is going on near Via Maggio. I don't know what, but a friend call me to say everyone is headed over there. I'm still trying to figure out what's going on."

"From your bed?"

"Ha-ha, funny. Try to catch some one in the DA's office, would you? Who's working right now?"

"I don't know, I have to check the schedule. Ottaviani had the weekend, but I don't know who came on this morning at 9 am."

"OK. Catch you in a bit. Whoever finds something calls the other."

"Yess Boss."

"If I *were* the boss ..."

No way, a Monday morning problem, no. Please.

I already had enough to do that day. Including a press conference at noon with prosecutor Loi about the security measures put in place by the police force for the Israeli president's visit the coming weekend.

It was going to be an infernal weekend. And I was working both Saturday and Sunday.

While I thought about all wonderful free time enjoyed by land registry clerks, the inimitable silhouette of Florence's new Palazzo di Giustizia suddenly appeared in the windshield of the car.

The more I looked at those law courts, the more they made me think of an alien spacecraft. Or the towers from which the eye of the villain in *Lord of the Rings* blazes forth.

They consisted of a huge building, a city within a city. Eight hundred thousand square metres of space, more than two hundred metres long and almost as wide, with lofty towers of up to seventy metres. A collection of interrupted geometric shapes stretching into the void, sharp corners, sloping, giddy lines, towering edges, all coated with huge windows and rectangular panels of concrete.

Its creation had unleashed an uproar: that thing in the most beautiful city in the world? That thing that is as tall as Brunelleschi's Dome or as the tower in Palazzo Vecchio? That thing was, in addition, a 30-year old project, but precisely because of its enormity, it had never been realised. Until a few years ago.

And now, for the last few months, that secular cathedral, which in the mind of the architect should be seen from every corner of Florence in order to give the sense and certainty that everything was just, had in fact become my home, because every blessed morning I was there gathering news before going on to the newsroom.

Before the new building was built, the Florentine courts were scattered in nine different locations in the city centre, much to the joy of all their frequent visitors, journalists included, who would saunter through those marvellous streets between the courts and the prosecutor's office.

The move had stirred up a hornet's nest.

The building was ugly. The building was far. The building was inconvenient.

The building had become the sum of all the evils of Florence.

I, contrarian by nature, liked it.

For one thing, everything I needed was concentrated in one place, and secondly I really liked the structure.

Bold, singular, and very far from the image you might have of the most beautiful city in the world. Because to me, Florence was not of the Renaissance. Or at least not only.

To me Florence was different, perhaps also because over the years I had encountered her darker aspects. The courthouse was a gothic cathedral in a gothic city.

And that day in November, with the rain that seemed to never end, and the icy wind that bit my face as I ran across the square, confirmed my feelings.

I entered the courthouse showing my press card to the guards and slipped quickly down to the basement, where a wretched adjustment to the original architectural plan had put the criminal courtrooms, my favourite hunting ground.

There was a ghostly corridor from which the doors of about thirty courtrooms opened: for us reporters, that place had already earned the nickname The Farewell Chapel. Everything about it, in fact, made it feel like a morgue: the gloominess, the colours, the faces, the prospects.

At least upstairs there was a large central corridor dividing the two main areas of the building which was covered by huge panes of glass. There was light. And a huge central walkway, called the Parvis, connecting the various judicial offices in separate blocks that were thirteen floors high. It was a gothic cathedral in that sense, too.

Down below, though, no. Down below was always dark and claustrophobic.

I started wandering through the courtrooms looking for the one hosting the trial that interested me.

In one I saw Olga at the defence table. Standing in her robes, she was cross-examining a witness. From the back of the courtroom, behind her, I could only see her long black hair and her hands moving rhythmically to accompany her questions. I stopped to listen as I liked her voice, a paradox given that, mostly through my own choice, we communicated almost exclusively by text. One of my many quirks in my relationship with the planet Venus.

Olga finished and sat back down. I took the opportunity to slip out quietly from the courtroom. I was not in the mood to justify my recent silences.

In the corridor I greeted some lawyers and bumped into one of the magistrates I knew well, Deputy Prosecutor Simonetta Vignali, who had just finished hugging a colleague.

“Good morning PP, everything okay?” I asked, overtaking her.

“So-so. Did you see his face? Giancarlo’s wife died a few days ago. Did you know?”

Giancarlo was Giancarlo Vannucci Toscano, assistant prosecutor.

“No, I didn’t know. I’m sorry,” I replied.

“Me too, he’s a good man,” she shook her head.

“Simonetta, sorry, but do you know where the first division corruption trial is taking place?”

“I think in number 12, at the end of the corridor. Come and find me after, as I want to tell you a story.”

A story.

I lived for that, at the end of the day. I lived for the stories that they might tell me, and that I could then write up for the *Nuovo*.

But now I desperately wanted a coffee and I, too, cursed that gigantic and oppressive building which did not even have a bar because it was still waiting for permission to open.

While I resigned myself to vending machine coffee, the *Star Wars* theme tune started up again.

This time I looked at the display. It was *The Artist*, again.

“Tell me.”

“There’s a dead man on Via Maggio.”

“A dead man? Dead how? Come on, don’t mess about, it’s Monday morning. And maybe he’s simply collapsed.”

“Um. It could be that he felt bad, now that you mention it, yes, it could be. In fact, almost certainly. Between one stabbing and another, it makes sense.”

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