

Twenty Cigarettes in Nasiriyah

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The first thing that comes over you is a sensation of lightness.

In the space of a single moment, everything disappears: the carabinieri's recon car, the flash of sunlight across its hood, the machine-gun fire whistling past your head. The last freeze-frame of your life.

Maybe a bullet hit you. In the back of the neck. Exactly. That's how you die when they shoot you in the head. You lose your ability to see or hear, and you feel light, as if you were flying. Maybe your spine has been shattered. But, really, it's not all that bad.

You tell yourself that your blood is making its final journey around your body and that before long you'll cease to exist. And your last thought isn't some flashback of your entire life, the way it always is in those classic scenes in films and books. Your last thought is: Okay, doesn't matter. When all is said and done, it was my stinking life and I lived it.

Just a few more seconds and even this thin cord linking you to existence will disappear. You wonder how the battle is going.

Really, though, today's not such a bad day to die: you don't have any secret drawers for anyone to rummage around in once you're gone, nothing to tarnish your posthumous reputation. And what's more, no regrets. You're calm, peaceful. You're sorry for the innocent victims, for everyone who had to get mixed up in this. You're sorry for your parents. And you're sorry for how fucking much your shoulder hurts during these last few seconds of your life. Maybe you got shot there, too. Strange, though. If your spinal cord has been severed, you shouldn't been able to feel it—your shoulder, that is. Maybe you're not dying. After all, that would be pretty screwed up: to die on your first day in Iraq.

Suddenly your body is slammed, violently, over and over again. Some bastard is stomping on your corpse. Or maybe not.

You feel the dirt as it scours your right eye. You're rolling, sliding. Now things finally make sense: There was no bullet, it was a grenade. And it wasn't that you felt like you were flying, you were flying. This is the landing.

You open your eyes. The right one is gone, but you can see, more-or-less, with your left. Flames. You're surrounded on all sides by a huge black cloud. One

eye is swollen up and you're covered in blood. But your heart is beating. You're not dead, at least not yet.

You're alive. And since you are, you'd very much like to stay that way. You've spotted a tanker truck and you try to take shelter beneath it. You make an effort to run, but your right foot is dangling from the end of the tibia like a sock that someone slipped on the wrong way. The pain smashes you back down to the ground. Slithering like a snake, moving forward on your elbows, you manage to reach the truck and to hide underneath it along with the two soldiers from the Sassari Brigade who arrived in this miserable military camp along with you. So there you are, waiting for the attackers to hunt you down, one by one, and finish the job.

With your clothes in shreds, your eardrums on fire, the first thought of your new life is: Not on a military base. The only thing that comes to your mind is: Don't let me die here. I've never once put on a uniform. I've never even been drafted. Less than thirty hours ago, I was building a wooden shed in my grandmother's garden.

1.

Go back a few days. Go back to Valentano, a village in the northernmost reaches of the Lazio, to me sweating like a horse, sawing and nailing and screwing pieces of wood together to build this little shed for my grandmother's cats. Fifteen cats, to be precise. It runs in our family, this absence of all sense of proportion.

Go back to me sleeping barely an hour before I have to rush back to Rome, because the production company wants to talk to me. To me driving with my eyes half closed, thinking I'll spend tomorrow and the day after that in bed, asleep, so I can arrive in Iraq rested and full of energy. Go back to when they tell me that there's been a change of plans, you don't mind do you? You're leaving tonight.

That fanatic, half-dead from lack of sleep who stays in the office until seven at night to wait for the director so he can discuss (pointlessly) the terms of his contract, that's me. The one who gives the art director a funny look when he quits the project (justifiably) and leaves in a rage because they refuse to pay him a decent wage: That's me, too.

At the end of a long negotiation, what's written down on paper is that I won't earn one single Euro, not even half a Euro. Aureliano Amadei will provide his services without compensation. Of course there's the understanding that, should the film be acquired ... and should there be any ... and in the event that things turn out ... and etc., etc., then Signor Amadei will have the pleasure of earning "the minimum union scale appropriate to the circumstances."

You might not believe it, but that zombie-like creature smiling and shaking everyone's hands as if he'd just signed a contract to direct his first three films, that guy, once again, is me. The reason is that I love making films overseas. I

love living five or ten weeks in foreign countries, coming back to Rome for the editing, and then leaving again right away for the next destination. What's more, I'm delighted to be working with Stefano Rolla.

2.

Stefano is a sixty-five-year-old who can't manage to stay still. When he was young, he was a deminer in the Army. He's been making films forever, and he met Adelina, his current companion, on a movie set. With her, he wrote the film I'm about to work on.

Our paths crossed for the first time a few years back at Saxa Rubra. He was involved in the production of a film that my mother was working on as well. After that brief meeting, Stefano often arranged for offers of work to come my way. At the time, though, the only thing on my mind was becoming an actor, and I had the idea that any other activity, no matter how interesting it might be, would only waste my time and distract me from my goal. And then I, too, fell in love with the world of film.

One of the things I like about Stefano is that he is an extremely practical person. When it comes to elegance, to appearances, he couldn't care less. He goes around Rome on a dilapidated scooter—the kind that if you left it parked without a chain and a lock, the worst that would happen is that somebody would take pity on you and slip five Euros for gas money under the windshield wiper. He wears military pants, or the kind that fishermen wear—pants with dozens of pockets out of which he pulls an enormous quantity of pieces of paper, receipts, photographs, street maps. Between the stuff he keeps in his pockets and the papers bursting from his briefcase, Stefano is more than a director: he's a living, breathing archive. Truly, the amount of material that Stefano manages to carry on his person isn't normal. If he ate mothballs, he'd be the spit-and-image of Mickey Mouse's sidekick in *The Man of Tomorrow*, Eega Beeva.

The stories that Stefano tells—his wild experiences traveling all over the world—are another thing that's incredible about him. He has a speech defect that turns every “s” into something halfway between an “f” and a “z.” The effect, to put it in Disney-esque terms, is that you feel like you're talking to Donald Duck. If you had a voice like that, the last thing you'd ever think of doing would be to stand in the center of a room and harangue a crowd. And yet, incredibly, Stefano can cast a spell over anyone with his very first sentence. When he talks, he unleashes an avalanche of words, without ever making what he's talking about entirely clear. The exact sequence of expressions that cross the faces of his listeners is this: at first, a smile; then intrigue; finally, unanimous agreement.

When Stefano finishes talking, it doesn't matter how long he's kept you from whatever else you were doing: you're convinced he's right about absolutely everything.

Ready to vote for him. Ready to sign your house over to him.

That's exactly how it was with me.

Go back a few more days, not even a whole month ago.

During a stopover between one film shoot and another, I'm at home in Rome, looking look over the materials for a documentary that's was shot in Brazil. My mother calls on the entry phone to tell me to come downstairs. She's run into Stefano in front of our house, she says, and he wants to talk to me. He's organizing a film shoot in Iraq.

Four flights of stairs later, Stefano has already gotten a five-thousand-dollar loan from my mother. He enthusiastically describes the project to her. From his bag, from his pants pockets, he pulls out scores of pieces of paper covered with numbers.

As far as my thoughts on the matter are concerned, my mother informs me that I'm already signed up. I'll audition actors, act as an interpreter, and scout new shooting locations. As a question of principle more than anything else, or just to spite my mother, I immediately begin formulating my no. But Stefano has no intention of letting me get a word in edgewise: I absolutely need to see this other documentary filmed in Afghanistan, *Clown in Kabul*, plus it's a thousand Euros a week, and I can't imagine what the desert is like at night. In short, between claps on the back and handshakes, I find myself in the production offices where I learn I'll be leaving the following Wednesday.

3.

Aside from the small detail of the thousand Euros a week that have turned into "services to be provided without compensation" or for the "union minimum," there's also the fact that Wednesday has become Monday, today, this very evening. I'm to leave in a few hours.

While I rush to get packed, cramming my bags full of all kinds of stuff I don't need, my mother passes me the telephone. It's Rosangela, my Brazilian fiancée. She's sobbing and I can't understand a word she's saying, except that she doesn't want me to go. To give you an idea of what kind of conversation it is: While I'm haphazardly stuffing shirts and T-shirts into my bag, I tell her, in my best Portuguese, "I'll miss you, too."

"That's not what's wrong," she says. Then what is it? "I had a premonition. Don't go." A premonition of what? "A premonition, *meu amor*, something's going to happen to you. Don't go."

I'm using my right hand to spear articles of clothing and jam them into the suitcase. My left is propping a raving Rosangela against my ear. I admit it: I ask my mom to hold the receiver briefly while I take advantage of the momentary freedom to scratch an itch.

From across the ocean, Rosangela's voice says, "*Meu amor*, don't go. Please don't go." And the line goes dead.

As I try to pull together my toothbrush, toothpaste, and similar items, I explain to my mother about the phone call, just so we can have a laugh about it, but the look on her face is extremely serious. My impression of Rosangela in tears and the story of the premonition haven't been quite the success I was hoping for. Not even a little. "Maybe you really shouldn't go, Aureliano," she says.

"Mom, what are you talking about?" I ask her.

"I'm saying that there isn't any money anyway, so what does it matter? Why not let this one slide?"

"But you were the one who got me this job. You know Stefano will figure everything out in the end, he'll find the money. Where's the shampoo?"

"Stay here. Listen, Aurè, what exactly did Rosangela say?"

"That she had a premonition. Can I take the fingernail scissors?"

"Aurè, you're not listening. This is starting to scare me."

"Don't tell me you've started believing in premonitions, too? Karma and the third eye weren't enough for you?"

In the middle of this surreal conversation, just as I'm doing my best to close my first bag, my cell phone rings. I say "Hello?" and am instantly back to having a single hand free to jam things into my backpack.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Rosangela is still crying and telling me not to leave and etc., etc. On this side of the Atlantic, my mother is saying, "Let me talk to her. I want to talk to her." Trying to figure out what to do with a couple of CDs (they end up in the front pocket of my backpack), I hold up a finger to tell her no. Covering the phone, I whisper to my mother, "Do we have any sun screen?"

From a phone booth in Salvador de Bahia, Rosangela's voice is blathering something about coffee grounds and who knows what breed of Brazilian magic. For the hundred and sixth time, she says, "Don't go." Truly, it's just not possible to have both your hands full and pay attention to this kind of conversation at the same time. Just as a practical matter, just because of the time, I hang up.

A few minutes later—my mother is helping me drag my bags out the door, my friends are waiting downstairs to take me to the station—Rosangela calls back. "*Meu amor*," I say. I say, "I lost the connection. The battery is...." And I hang up.

I start to put the big suitcase, the two shoulder bags, and the toolboxes into the elevator, but my mother grabs me by one arm and says, “Just hold on a minute. There’s nothing forcing you to do go. Not if you don’t feel up to it.” Which is her way of saying that she doesn’t feel up to it. That she doesn’t want me to leave. I’m trying to find a way to stack the bags in the elevator that still leaves room for my feet, bemoaning the fact that there’s no way to hang up on a face-to-face conversation. I tell my mother not to worry. That everything is going to be fine.

My mother reaches down into the depths of her sudden anxiety attack and pulls out her most terrorized face. Taking hold of my arm again she says, “Please listen to me. Don’t go. I’m really worried.” I glance at my watch, try to wiggle out of her grasp, stick one foot in the elevator door. “Mom,” I say, “in Salvador de Bahia people have a premonition every twenty seconds.”

This is the point at which every conversation with my mother turns into an episode of *Your Horoscope Today*. The point where we seem to find ourselves in the studio audience of some talk show on some local TV channel where the psychic of the day is ranting about forces, Saturn in Sagittarius, voices from the beyond, and garbage of that nature. On the landing, where I’m desperately trying to get the doors of the elevator to close, my mother cautions me: There are some things you shouldn’t joke around with. Premonitions, presentiments, for example—they are all a form of energy and certain spiritual forms, when conditions are etcetera, they can sometimes etcetera, etcetera. All of this is meant to be taken absolutely seriously, and the point is: Don’t go.

You don’t know my mother. An argument like this could go on for hours. So it’s solely for practical reasons, only because time is short, that I tell her, “Twenty eight years ago, on a beach in Colombia, I almost died of sunstroke while you and Dad were tanning your asses with your hippy-freak friends. I was nine months old. Dad still has the pictures of me where I’m phosphorescent red. All I’m saying is, if you weren’t worried when I was so little, Mom, why are you chapping my ass now?”

And then finally, miraculously, the doors of the elevator slide shut.

I find them all glancing at their watches and laughing. A group of some fifteen friends for a last drink before I go. Even Claudia, my ex, is there. It’s not just her presence that’s important: she was the one who made all the calls and got everyone together for this mini-celebration.

We say our goodbyes in a wine bar near San Lorenzo, halfway between my house and the train station. The beer begins to flow, and my party-animal friends invent one new toast after another, all of them along the lines of: “To our friend, Aureliano, who rests in pieces in Iraq,” or “Here’s to what remains of our friend, Aureliano, who stepped on a mine in the line of duty, without compensation.” You’d recognize me, in the midst of all that: I’m the guy with one hand under the table, where I’m secretly cradling the family jewels. It’s a coarse gesture, but right now I’ll take all the supernatural protection I can get.