

Davide Longo

The Devil feathers his Nest

Cesare dropped his bag to the ground, slipped his hand in his pocket and stood motionless at the door. She sat at a small distance from the table.

She was sewing with white thread, marking the turn-up on a pair of trousers. Her dress was faded, even the yellow looked dull. She wore clogs of wood and leather on her feet.

Cesare let his eyes wander up the peeling walls, onto the chairs, the underside of the furniture marked by cats' claws and along the sink with its chipped edges.

Warm fragmented beams from the single window shone into the kitchen. A green oilcloth was laid on the table.

'You've got a lot thinner.'

Cesare found her staring at him.

He nodded, then in two steps he was at her side and gave her a quick peck on the forehead.

'It suits you,' she said touching the sleeve of his jacket, 'it's a cold year.'

Cesare went to the window, opened it and lowered his gaze on the alley pierced by the October sun. The odd basil plant, a geranium, a vase of laurel stood on the neighbouring windowsills. He realised his mother had no understanding for the seasons far from the sea.

One of the neighbours, a fat woman with thinning hair, leant out to check on the new arrival. A white sheet with a patch the colour of tobacco in the middle of it hung off her balcony.

'Marco?' asked Cesare without turning round.

A ginger cat leapt onto the railing.

'He went to sea.'

Cesare turned round: the woman had brought a new thread to her lips.

'He went to Marseilles. He called after a week to say he'd found work. It's four months he's been away.'

Cesare shifted a chair and sat down. She darted him a look.

'He's already sent money twice. He says they pay him well.'

Cesare removed his jacket and let it slip onto the back of the chair. He drew a deep breath and his broad skinny shoulders stretched the grey wool of his jumper. Street smells filtered in through the window. Now the kitchen felt colder and more immediate.

'Are you making coffee?'

The woman rose without looking at him, moved over to the sink and started filling the moka.

Cesare noticed that the years had not changed that movement of hers and, for a moment, he imagined her as a young girl: black indomitable eyes, nimble feet, the dark and glossy skin of the Arab people from whom she was descended.

Those eyes and that skin must have been potent bait for his father. They must have gnawed at his innards to the point of making him leave his olive groves to go casting nets, forsaking that feeling for the land which was the only good thing about his race.

He reflected he would never do the same.

The hiss of the match split the silence in two, then the pleasing smell of burning wood and sulphur spread through the room. She placed the coffee-pot on the blue of the flame and remained standing with her back to him as though reading something on the wall.

A cat poked its pointed face around the door.

Cesare looked at it: it had one green eye, the other straw-coloured.

He let one of his hands slide to the floor and the cat came up softly and started

licking it.

The woman filled a cup and dropped a cube of sugar into the black coffee.

'It's time you thought of making a life for yourself too,' she said.

Cesare looked down at the cat.

Its rough tongue had stopped on his missing finger, as if it knew the fingers a man should have.

He slept the entire afternoon and dreamt of night-time happenings which were clearly visible in the moonlight.

He saw his brother Marco with the face of a cat staring at him through a mirror of water, and a fat man hiding his hand behind his back with him realising -because of the moon - that something harmful was in that hand.

He saw Adele, her legs dirty with blood, walking on a thread suspended over the river and not managing to let herself fall. And everything he saw was seen from above and in absolute silence apart from the throbbing of a heart which belonged neither to him nor to another.

At five he went out and made his way down to the cathedral.

The town was ripped up with its entrails on show and the metal pipes glistened from the earthworks. Wafts of briar rose, excrement, geranium and stagnating seawater mingled in the street. White laundry hung out on the balconies waved like the talismanic ribbons on the door of a house stricken by disease.

Once in the piazza he sat down on the church steps.

A few youths in heavy shiny jackets came and went outside the bar on the corner.

The girls wore their hair flattened on their foreheads as if wet with oil. On the grey rolling shutter behind them, someone had painted a celtic cross, the words 'jews' and 'juve', and a snake rising to eat a nail.

He glanced at the bell tower to check the time, put a smoke in his mouth and

headed for the Workers' Union.

Ermanno was sitting under the pergola: he poured some red wine into a glass on seeing him.

They drank: over his glass Cesare noticed that Ermanno had yellowed, that the light and colour had faded from his eyes.

'What about the mimosas?' he asked.

Ermanno turned towards the sea. A napkin of blue water could be made out from the terrace of the tavern.

'It's a good crop.'

Cesare looked out too: a cargo ship moved in the distance. Two sails were gliding straight up the coast, making the most of the land wind.

'Is it possible to get through?' he asked.

Ermanno took a cigarette out of his breast pocket and lit up.

'After what happened to you, no-one dared have another go. The only ones who get through are Ferrinda's people. One trip by one of their men yields a hundred times what our wretches can and the gendarmes get their cut.'

A small silvery mouse wriggled amongst the crates of fruit stacked in the corner of the terrace. Cesare watched till it found a drain hole and dropped in.

'I'll take the high paths, above Col del Lup.'

Ermanno gave him a steady look.

The sun was beginning to go over. You could see it from the yellowness shrouding everything.

'What if it was me who stitched you up that night?'

Cesare inhaled the smoke slowly and waited for it to sink to his belly and mix with the wine. He stared at his hand, motionless on the formica table-top, looking like an instrument missing a string.

The wind brought a soft tepid smell from the old fig tree.

Cesare emptied the remaining red down his gullet and stood up.

‘Spread the word,’ he said, ‘I’ll be waiting.’

At six he went down to the beach and sat on the pebbles.

The sea was still and without substance.

Just beyond the saffron splash of a mimosa tree he could see the port of Menton, the buildings of Montecarlo in the haze and the dark curve of the Cap d’Antibes.

He lit a cigarette and undressed whilst he smoked.

He walked up to the water’s edge crushing underfoot dried algae bursting with sea-lice, and entered in. For a few minutes he stayed with the water around his waist, his feet in the sand, tracing the airplane trails as they slowly thinned out and the setting sun lit them like embers.

He thought of the two Tunisians that night.

The head of one of them was blown clean off at the first shots, the other had slowly collapsed to the ground as if run through by a sword.

When he heard the gun being reloaded, he’d thought it was for him: he’d stopped and waited with no self-pity.

Instead they’d surrounded him and, before his eyes puffed up, he’d seen the insignia on their uniforms glinting like diamonds in the dawn light.

In the end they’d cut off one of his fingers on a stone with a small knife and a sharp stamp of the heel onto the blade.

At the police station the inspector had spoken to him calmly: on leaving he was going to have to forget those two Tunisians, and he would have to change jobs.

Then he’d called for a new pair of trousers so that Cesare could change out of the ones he was wearing which were soaked with urine.

The sun disappeared behind Menton’s hill and the beach fell into shadow.

Cesare looked up: a broken line of four seagulls with a fifth not far behind was

following the coastline like a track.

He dived in and rediscovered all his muscles. Like the components of a pistol secreted for ages in a cloth which, on being reassembled, click with a loud magnificent clunk.

He carried on in the same way for the whole week.

In the mornings he'd get up late as he had got into the habit of sleeping by day when he was in his cell. Then he'd eat in the kitchen whilst his mother chatted to him about the weather or the geraniums or something bought with the money sent by his brother.

Lunch over he would go out. He'd smoke as he made his way up the alley to the town walls where he'd sit and watch the seagulls. Or else he'd go down to the river to toss bread at the geese.

The geese were sleek and fast, the swans clumsy, the seagulls spiteful as souls with sins to expiate.

He preferred the geese to grab the morsels.

At five he'd go back up to the old town and exchange a few words at the bar.

Nobody asked him about before, and he said nothing about after.

Towards evening he'd walk down to the sea, to Malachia beach where he'd bathe. It was a cold but cloudless October. He'd dry himself with his sweater and change out of his trunks behind a boat.

For dinner he'd eat soup and bread, and drink some cognac which some visiting relative had left. Meanwhile his mother sat chatting with the other women around the fountain.

They spoke of men who were no longer there, the dead, and the husbands and sons far out to sea or down at the beach putting out to fish.

It was late by the time he made his way back up to the walls, he'd watch the

lights setting out to sea, estimating the angles between them to reckon the size of the nets and what they'd catch.

From up there, the coast was a snake of street-lamps all the way to France and the cars ran along it silently like fingers on fabric.

On Sunday the telephone rang and his mother said it was for him. He got up from his bed and took the receiver. The woman lowered her head and went out.

'Yes.'

'It's Ermanno.'

'Yes.'

'There's a job on.'

'How many?'

'Two.'

He looked for something to smoke in his breast pocket but didn't find anything.

'Where are they from?'

'Eastern Bloc.'

He calculated the movements of the moon and told himself that it would enter its first quarter the next day. Ermanno was still waiting at the other end.

'Tonight.'

'Alright,' concluded Ermanno.

Coming back into the room, he met his mother's eyes as she stood in the middle of the kitchen.

He was conscious of the pain of growing old and the smell of empty houses.

He gave her a weary smile, then lowered his gaze and went to find the cigarettes he'd left on his bedside table.

It was past ten when he walked into the bar and the bar was already empty.

Adele had her back to him as she cleaned the coffee-maker. The sea moved in the blackness beyond the big window.

'Un pastis, s'il vous plaît.'

Adele picked up the bottle of 51, then she turned, tossed two cubes of ice in the glass and poured, her movement fading to a halt.

She brushed aside her barely blonde hair with her hand. Cesare swept back his short dark hair with his.

She smiled.

'Short hair doesn't suit you.'

'I know.'

She served him the pastis.

'Help yourself to something too.'

Adele poured some cognac into a low glass and started swishing it around without raising her eyes.

The two youths at the pinball machines gave them a look every now and then.

'Who are they?' asked Cesare indicating them with his chin.

'Slavs.'

They drank.

'What's up?'

'You haven't changed.'

'Yes I have.'

A customer walked in. He ordered a caffè corretto. Cesare went on drinking his pastis.

The man said something about being the last tourist of the season. She smiled too broadly. One of the Slavs came to get some tokens. Then they were alone again.

'I don't know what to say to you,' she said looking into her empty glass.

'It doesn't matter. I didn't come for anything.'

She parted her lips without smiling, showing her uneven teeth.

Her shoulders had grown thin like those animals which get glossier and more alert in the times of trouble. Cesare lit a cigarette. A few elderly couples looking sad walked the promenade.

'D'you want another?'

She turned to get the 51 and Cesare could sense her small hard breasts beneath the taut shirt, her flat belly and bony flanks inside the blackness of her short skirt. All that body which he knew well.

Now they were playing a French song on the radio which sounded like two different songs.

They drank, wiped their mouths, drew a breath, then Adele switched off the radio.

'It would be easier now if I'd come to see you down there.'

'It would be the same.'

The Slav youths looked towards the bar, said something to each other and went out of the bar leaving behind their whiff of tobacco and leather.

Cesare took the vespa up the last bends of the little road at top speed.

The night was dense. The lights of Camporosso quivered below them. Above, the limestone bulk of the mountain looked like a fluorescent god who's been asleep for centuries.

'It's here,' said Adele, 'the little lane after the trees.'

Cesare turned into the dirt track and stopped before a gate barring the way.

They went up the steps.

At the door, Cesare entered second and brushed against her or else it was her smell that was so strong as to give him the feeling that he had.

She switched on the light: it was a small narrow room. A red sofa. Photographs on the walls.

She poured something to drink then unbuttoned her shirt, peeled off Cesare's blue sweater and pressed up to him until her pelvis ground his.

They remained standing, glasses in hand, their skins as separate as molten metals that can't mingle.

Cesare drew the line cast by a beam of light along her lean stomach to the rise of her flanks.

'You can't stay till tomorrow morning,' said Adele smoothing his face with her hand.

Cesare placed one of her fingers between his lips and felt the cold of her wedding ring on his tongue.

'I'll be away much before then,' he said.

At two he was at the old mill.

He left the vespa in an olive bush and climbed up to the antenna. The leaves shivered inexplicably in the gloom. There was no wind.

Ermanno was waiting for him with his back to the low wall. On seeing him, he stepped forward two paces and clasped his hand.

'They'll be waiting for you at six at Castel.'

Cesare nodded and zipped up his jacket.

Ermanno whistled softly and the leaves behind them moved.

Two figures came out: one was very small and thin, the other thinner still but very tall.

'Come tomorrow for the money,' said Ermanno but Cesare was already off and the two men after him as if pulled by wire.

They marched in silence like blind beasts guided by smell; when they were in sight of the hills above Menton they stopped.

Cesare motioned for the two men to sit down, pulled some cognac out of his jacket and passed it around. For an instant the two stopped panting, then started up again more rhythmically.

Beyond the hill, the lights of the coast pressed against the sky as if to pierce it.

They'd be able to see the sea within half an hour.

In that instant he heard something moving above them.

He flattened himself down and the illegals did the same. He realised they must be soldiers because they hadn't hesitated.

They remained motionless.

Only the shriek of a far-off bird from the next ravine.

He wondered whether he hadn't been mistaken, but then he saw them.

There were two of them and they were coming down the hillside carrying something on their backs.

There'd been a fire on the hill a few years earlier so now their forms stood out clearly between the naked summit and the sky, which wore a different shade of black.

Cesare reckoned the trajectories and realised the bullets would finish up in his gob.

He could feel the blood rising to his temples, pressing to burst.

His thoughts raced fast as a dog: grabbing the two, he raised them to their feet and hurled himself beyond a line of low shrubs.

He heard the thud of his own body and then another two thuds: he realised the two illegals had jumped. He raised himself up and ran headlong down the mountainside until the first shot raised a puff of earth in front of him. Then he dived to the side.

There were another three shots, then his breathing became so heavy that he couldn't hear any more. He sensed a ditch ahead of him and made to jump, but the stones slipped under his feet and he fell on his side.

A stone lodged itself in his ribcage. He screwed up his eyes from the pain and, on re-opening them, saw the outline of the taller one sprinting over him and disappearing into the darkness.

He heard steps coming closer.

He flattened himself on the bottom of the ditch. He felt for his knife in his pocket and eased the blade out with his fingers so that it shouldn't make a sound as it flicked open.

He wasn't losing blood from his side but the pain stopped his breathing.

As he looked at the still-black sky, he regretted having chosen a moonless night.

He saw an arm stretched over him wielding a pistol.

Grabbing it, he tipped the man forwards and tried to stab him.

He felt the knife pierce the fabric and stop against something solid, then he heard the body hit the ground and the metallic echo as the pistol struck a distant rock, after which a crashing silence fell on that corner of the earth.

The man was on the ground, blurred in the darkness.

Cesare stepped forward, his knife clenched in the palm of his hand. He bent down.

There was a streak of light and his cheek tore open as if his tongue had ripped it from the inside in an effort to burst free.

He fell backwards and, when he got back on his feet, he saw the man had got up and was standing before him like a mirror image. He must have been badly wounded in the thigh as he was bending over to one side.

He brought a hand to his cheek and felt the line of his gash to his ear.

What was coming out of it didn't feel like blood, but like the smelly viscous liquid

in the bellies of big fish brought to shore.

The other plunged at him.

Cesare felt the metal blade sink into his arm to the bone, then an electric shock coursed through his marrow and a river flowed over his skin.

He took a few steps back as if to distance himself from the pain.

He could feel the man's blood lust like you can sense a familiar object in a dark room. A very pure desire, just like his own.

He swallowed hard and lunged. The man dodged and fell to the ground.

Cesare lost hold of the knife, leapt forward and was upon him. He rained down blows aiming for his face and felt the man's nose break under his knuckles.

The man shook and tried to throw him, but Cesare had put all his weight in his hands and he tightened them around the man's neck.

It was then that he smelled blood and his hands seemed to empty.

He took a couple of steps back and looked at the body before him.

The light had grown brighter than a glow and the contours of things were emerging out of the gloom.

He sat down. The tops of the olive trees to the east were tinged with silver. He fished out a broken cigarette from his jacket and put it in his mouth.

Marco was looking at him, his hand clutching his thigh. He wore his hair short like his and had grown a moustache like their father.

Two thrushes flew off some brambles and twittered in the air.

The sea was violet and distant below them.

The small boats were coming back in, heading for the ports. Their lights were no longer any use now that it was morning, but it struck Cesare that they looked beautiful.