

Marco Mancassola

## Me and Devil

I climb the stairs. Maybe it's an effort but it's difficult to say. The music from the dance-floor follows me up the first flight, along with the odd flash of the strobe and the cloying humid greenhouse air. I tell myself I should put my t-shirt back on and am amazed to have such sensible thoughts. Then, as I turn up the second flight, I hear a rhythmic, rather scary booming as if a raging giant were bashing the walls in the basement. I don't turn round, I carry on climbing. Other people perch on the steps like climbers who've given up the ascent. They raise their startled eyes as if at the passing of a ghost. But I am arms, I am hands, sunken eyes and sprouting beard, numb legs and trainers moving forward in the wan grey light that now floods in from the entrance on the ground floor. It must be about midday. At first blush the external world seems like an overexposed video projected onto the vertical screen of the door of the club. Now there's just a rope barring my way and someone sitting on a stool offering me a flyer about next Sunday. Everything alright? he asks, before unhooking the rope. Outside I take a couple of slow faltering steps like an astronaut getting used to his weight once more. After being attuned to electronic bass-lines for hours, my ears have trouble readapting to the sounds of reality. If I had the strength to summon up a feeling I think I would hate this noise of traffic, the raucous voices of others who've also just emerged as they linger on the pavement and those of the waiting cabbies who ask me where I'm going. No thanks, I answer, and I head for the bus stop. I walk. In the barely warm air under a bleached sky I meet few pedestrians, a couple of joggers. According to the timetable fixed on the stop my bus won't come for ten minutes. I close my eyes. I know about eternity: it's a long wait that can't, cannot, be filled. I am so empty, like a car with a punctured fuel tank. I

threw away the flyer about the night-spot somewhere behind me. It's against my principles, but it's well known that an exhausted body can't even hold onto principles. I start walking again. Further on, if I recall rightly, there's a stall where you can buy fruit juice or a yoghurt drink. And even further, beyond my bus journey, beyond my return home, all I can picture is my pleasant ritual chillout: hot bath, Chinese green tea, a soft CD; an afternoon on the sofa watching the odd video and waiting for the amphetamine to fade out till sleep spreads through me like a minor infection.

Then a violent noise. Voices yelling, clanging rolling shutters, metallic thuds which bring to mind, no doubt about it, bodies smashed against car bonnets. I'm suspended half-turned towards the mouth of the alley I just went past, from which come the sounds of brawling. Born out of nothing like a sudden burst of guitar in a piece of ambient music. I look over towards the bus stop where a couple of people wait motionless. Perhaps they're too far off to hear. I move a few steps forward, up to the corner. Another step and I'd see into the alleyway. I can hear hefty blows as if knuckledusters were demolishing a wall. If I lend an ear, I can make out the grunting undertones, the dull blows of kicks as on a padded bag, the gasps and moans, all the animal sounds proper to a fight. There must be quite a few of them. Despite my exhaustion I am as tense as a sprung cable. I rest a hand on the yellowish wall of the building, a few centimetres from the corner. This capable sensor which is the palm of my hand transmits the roughness of the wall to me. Then it slips forward with a slight burning sensation till the fingertips poke beyond the corner. I've made it. Every noise of fighting stops as though my fingers had pressed an invisible silencer. I wait. I can't measure for how long. A succession of breaths and saliva swallows. I realise some time has past when two passers-by glide past me. Unaware. Normal. They don't look into the alley. There's me, the person that heard, clinging to a

dirty wall. Finally I lean out: the alley is empty.

I advance a few steps. The alley isn't very deep, a hundred metres at most.

There's a closed-up garage at the end. The only escape routes are a few doorways to homes and store-rooms, the backs of the odd restaurant. Parked cars and a broken easy-chair next to a line of crates. I stand in the middle of the alley looking for signs of the brawl. There are dented cars but that doesn't mean much in an area like this. The plaster flakes and broken glass lying at the foot of an abandoned building could be natural, like dried leaves at the base of a tree. Now I feel at ease. There's no-one here. Nobody. My thoughts are sharp and clean-swept by the wind. I am calmly confident, expecting to find the answer soon. It will be clear, obvious. Breathe deep, think straight...

It takes a thousandth of a second. The perception of colour is enough, the flash of dark red in the still life of crates and plastic bags on that side of the stage.

There's a raw gash in the body of the alley the colour of blood about to clot. I know nothing of what will follow. Sorry waits and silent adorations. Even before I focus on the gloved hand lying inert on the paving I understand whose it is.

Though I haven't spoken nor read his name in years. I draw nearer. I crane over the rubbish bags as over a theatre back-drop. Behind a crate on the damp pavement lies a man dressed in red. Sheathed in his body-suit with two Ds on his breast, the red mask covers his eyes as well, preventing me from seeing whether he's animate or unconscious, alive or dead. Devil, I try to whisper after looking about. He's lying to one side, one arm's flung up, the other hand's on his belly as if pressing on a wound. I bend down. There's not much to observe on that mostly masked face: a veil of blondish beard on his square jaws. His half-open mouth seems about to say something. Devil, I repeat.

I am transfixed. Crouched beside an insensible superhero, not knowing what to expect. The Red Devil seems to be in hibernation. The body is free of all

movement, not even the slightest, the least perceptible flicker. If I could only know that he still breathed. So I bring up my finger, this flexible probe, to his nostrils. He starts. Maybe his nostrils suddenly tensed like an animal testing the wind. What I see is the marble arm jerk up as if perfectly sprung, his hand darting to squeeze my wrist. The claw-like grasp shoots a stab of pain up my arm, an electric discharge that dulls my whole body. Somewhere distant, in the depths of some nervous cell in a peripheral vein, I feel a vibration as of boiling molecules, the last traces of my chemical night. An adrenalin echo, a vague wave of heat. Then I'm left naked, paralysed. Without anaesthetic or protection. I know he can't see me but I also know that, in that instant, he senses and comprehends me like no human eye could. Me, the frightened lad, scanned like a page of biochemical formulae. Nothing escapes him: heartbeat, pheromone discharges, skin moisture, the rustle of my hair, the smell of my saliva; my every tremor and the secret inner map of my hot organs. No screen of skin nor fleshly emotion can resist examination by his supersenses. Like radar with infinite range, his supersenses can find the dimmest traces, the vague smells of something just born; like a freshly-conceived tiny foetus they can detect the promise of the feelings I will have for him. He lets go. As I massage my wrist, Devil is motionless as if struck by doubt. When the pain recedes in waves I could almost ask myself if he ever moved. Yes. Dare Devil, the Red Devil, the Man Without Fear moves his parted lips. Slow, uncertain as if emerging from centuries-old silence, his lips tremble and finally emit the whisper they seemed to restrain. I listen. I get up, I feel vertigo. Help me, he said.

Key to lock. Door handle. Tottering with his arm around my shoulder and him stumbling, almost fainting, we enter my home. Devil is tall and bulky, his weight takes my breath away, makes my legs wobble. It was agony loading him onto a

taxi and getting him out again under the impassive eyes of the driver. We collapse, one very nearly on top of the other, onto the sofa in the sitting-room. I draw breath. I get up again. I go up to the window to draw the curtains. I don't know how to keep still: my utter exhaustion has suddenly vanished thanks to a mysterious fuel injection. I drink a glass of water in the kitchen. Into another I pour an energy drink and mix in a sachet of multivitamins and some painkiller. When I go back in, Devil is stretched on the sofa. The red of his suit looks darker in the low lights of the sitting-room as if it has soaked up all the shadows of the world. Wait, I say. I put down the glass and help him sit up. He leans his head back against the rise of the sofa exposing his throat between the top of his suit and his chin, white and bare, with nothing but that veil of light-coloured bristle. He swallows. I hold out the drink to him. He doesn't seem to see it straight away and only after some ten seconds does he raise his head slowly, cautiously as if it contained a fragile composition that shouldn't be shaken. Drink, I say, and Devil stretches out his uncertain arm with a gesture that seems magnified by the time it takes. I place the glass in his outstretched hand. He doesn't seem to be able to support it unaided and I accompany his movement. Up to his lips, to the light knock of glass against teeth, to his throat which swallows in spurts as if each mouthful burnt. He has finished. It'll do you good, I say.

I go to the bathroom. In the glowing mirror I see a neutral inexpressive face. I rinse myself with cold water and rub myself with the flannel, then have another look at myself for a few moments, waiting for the emotions to surface. If Devil could see me, I tell myself, and I imagine the moment when he'll spread his antenna-like fingers on my face. Then I turn on the shower and, like hypnotic music, the jet overwhelms my every thought.

Devil is sitting stiffly with his hands on his knees and his head lowered like a patient in nervous expectation. Can you manage to undress? I ask him. He

doesn't react. I've no idea how to take off that clinging body-suit. He brings a hand up to his breast, he's still hesitating. Then he runs a finger straight down like a blade from his sternum to his stomach. A slight metallic hiss brings to mind a tiny zip. The latex of his suit opens slowly like a wound separating to reveal the white of his flesh. I help him remove the suit. The inside seems glued: peeling off that rubber is like stripping a layer of skin. Beneath are the bruises, dark and frightful like monsters bobbing up from the depths of his body. Beneath that are the smells, of petrol and sweaty rubber. Devil lets himself be undressed. Only when it's time to take off his mask and hood does he start violently. Then he holds his head to one side almost as if he doesn't want to expose himself too much. Holding the light damp suit in my hand, I ask myself if he is really unaware that I know him. His story, his secrets, his identity. There he is, mute and naked, sitting on my sofa. Over there, at the bottom of the wardrobe in my bedroom or on top of some old piece of furniture must be the hundreds of comics I collected as a boy which all bear his name on their covers.

I take him by the arm. As he steps into the shower he sobs almost as if he were coughing. Or maybe he's relieved to be immobile with his arms held low whilst rivulets of hot water flow down him like a new beneficial network of veins and arteries. Then he leans his hands on the tiles and, as I hold the telephone of the shower, he lets me massage his shoulders and back with the jet. I follow the contours of his broad white, freckled shoulders from outside, wet with splashes, my nostrils filled with steam. The regular line of his spinal column, the landscape of bruises which I carefully avoid. When I turn off the water, he seems surprised as if suddenly woken from a deep sleep. I wrap him in a bathrobe. I rub his hair with a towel. Me and him breathing calmly in the quiet house.

There's nothing left but to lay him out between the sheets of the bed I rarely touch. A few moments suffice. His relaxed trusting face like after the easing of a slight

cramp. I switch on the TV in the sitting-room looking for the news. I wait till the signature tune is finished for news of a superhero battle in the city. Maybe later. Maybe they don't have any footage. Over there in my bed is the superhero I've touched and to whom I offer my care, his bruises and flesh, his substance and his breathing. By the stereo I look for a CD that will accompany our sleep. Then like a little boat that's lost power, I go back to base. To the soft welcoming sofa on which I sleep every morning, onto which I now collapse as I did earlier with him. I should have known that last loan of energy would run out from one moment to the next. But I've done my duty, I tell myself. A last look at the open door of the bedroom, at that rectangle he crossed through which the voice of Jeff Buckley now reaches him at low volume, like that of a mournful mother.

Then the CD ends and I ask myself in confusion why it's already got so dark. I look at the time, I don't understand. I take a while to distinguish: sunrise or sunset? I get up. Like every time I wake, I move like a robot: to the bathroom with stumbling legs and heavy head, aching bones, the body crying out for more sleep, more, more. I flick the switch in the bathroom, the crude light hits me like a dose of caffeine. The noise of the flush also washes out my thoughts and, when I return to the sitting-room, I'm ready to use my intuition and sift the evidence: the suit has vanished, there's a draught blowing from his room. The sheets have been straightened, the pillow puffed. I feel a shiver by that seemingly untouched bed. My mouth is dry. I have no heat. There's a hole in my stomach as I lift that sheet and look vainly for the imprint of his body. I sniff the bed looking for a trace of him. But I don't have a bionic sense of smell or hearing. I can't hear your voice, Devil, wherever it may reverberate in the city. I look out at the dim view from the open window. Buildings in semi-darkness, evening traffic.

Under the shower I let the water flow down my back, scalding like a river of lava. Reddened flesh, thoughts that burn. Then I turn off the water and there is only the

sound of the telephone from the other room, ringing like a distant echo. I'm not raising my hopes. But my deluded hand trembles as it lifts the receiver. Naked, dripping, in the cold air of my sitting-room. Marius' voice. In the background, the usual minimalist bar, the buzz of voices, a CD playing Indian dub. He tells me he has something. A pirated copy of a new database programme. It's no use to me, I say. Are you sure? he asks. Then he pauses, and I imagine him tossing his head back and drinking the umpteenth Red Bull. I should say goodbye to him now. Hang up, stay alone, trembling in my damp towel. Like a few hours ago... Marius, I say instead. Yes? After hearing the brief account, his tone sounds resigned. Like someone who has to explain something patently obvious against his will. Alright, he says. This morning, think about it. This morning... Distance yourself from the after-effects. You were high as a kite. You find someone in a latex suit who's worse off than you lying in the middle of the garbage, probably after a mugging or something like that. You take him home. Great. It must mean you like the type. I try to break in at this point, but by now there's no stopping him. As for superheroes, he insists. What the fuck... You're 25 years old, you know. He drinks. Listen, he resumes. You've suffered a lot. Why don't you change lifestyle? Try and sleep a bit more. If you stopped getting smashed on speed...

I say goodbye. I don't know why I bothered. Such a waste of breath. For the rest, it's only time that's dragging. A pre-cooked plate of noodles warmed in the microwave, the burbling of the telly.

Later I search for those old albums in the bedroom. I give up after a while, with a feeling near panic like someone who realises he's left without a photo of his beloved. My weary journey: rake through the empty flat, return to that sofa. Sink in with my laptop on my knees at the time I usually begin working. I should now open the usual programme, go back to using the old words: <HEAD>,

<TITLE>, <BODY>, <FONT>... I stare rapt at the screen, searching for a message in the lay-out of the icons. I know where to look. I link up to the net and tap on the search engine the only word which has any meaning tonight. I find websites of publishing houses, comics, famous comic-strip artists and superhero fanclubs. Few have what I seek. An age goes by before I find an old realistic portrait of Frank Miller. Devil stands on the edge of a rooftop listening out with his bionic hearing for the sounds of the city at night. He seems about to leap, to swoop into one of those streets where someone is certainly calling out his name. The drawing makes his muscles bulge in his suit and the red reminds me of lips. I swallow. He could almost move, turn his head... I know now that you're out there and that, from the top of some skyscraper, you can sense my every pulsation through the open window. My solitary breathing, the sound of my fingers on the keys as I save the image, your image, on my little computer. Then I switch it off and stay there, curled up, with that still-warm shell on my lap.

And I get up again. An afternoon of shivering light, the sky bluish like a low voltage neon. A glance at the outside world, at the febrile traffic that makes you feel empty. Then I redraw the curtain and avoid looking at the time. Tea, sugar, a handful of vitamins and energy peps. Choosing a CD seems complicated. I walk barefoot in the sitting-room in my pants, the floor's so cold it hurts my skin. An envelope has been slipped under the front door. There's no decision to make: only to go and pick it up. Maybe I should wait, prolong this last instant of not knowing. But it's bound to happen anyway. Marius' post-it says, why don't you look for him here, your man in red latex? Stuck to it is a flyer for a club. It bears the words: The Naked Garden. And below: dress code leather, military, fetish, rubber, naked, pvc. The photo shows a man with an all-over black mask without slits, only a kind of funnel where his mouth should be. It's for tonight. I sit down.

It would be a wasted effort. What with me so busy and tired of going to places I don't believe in. Tonight he will be in his kingdom of rooftops and alleyways, ready to fight. And me, where will I find the right space, my real stage? Blow over afternoon. Blow over evening, blow over obsession. Leave me stranded, worried, dressed in an old pair of amphibious leather trousers that I haven't worn in years. I venture down the stairs. Every club in this city has stairs you have to go down, steps that vibrate, the growing stomach-wrenching boom. A half-light in which to disappear, a mass of shadows to mingle with. Me, with a beer in my hand amongst those people smelling of rubber and leather. The club is tube-shaped with a low ceiling and concrete walls like a bunker. Along the walls are little illuminated niches for bondage and torture. Towards the back, beyond the door for the toilets, the crowd thins out and I can move quickly, almost running like I've been pushed. There, gathered around a pair of low sofas are the superhero lovers.

Dazzled, I gasp for breath. Those latex suits, those violent-coloured capes that capture every last bit of light. At the beginning they all seemed real, standing in little groups, tensed as if expecting a decisive battle. Then came the giggles, glasses with straws in hand, oblique looks in my direction. Wonder Woman is very popular but there are lots of Robins too. And there are at least a couple of plump and ridiculous Devils. I turn round. My face feels hot, maybe I'm blushing. There's what feels like a fishbone in my throat that I'd like to spit out onto the palm of my hand, together with all the pointlessly prepared words. And the stupid offers and infantile requests. Another beer will swill the fishbone back, cutting, lethal. Maybe next time I'll have no voice to ask for your forgiveness, Devil. But I really didn't believe it. I swear to you that I didn't for a moment think I'd find you here.

I wait at the bar. The barman doesn't want my money. It's already dealt with, he

says as he passes me the beer. I look at the bottle in confusion as if the label could give me an answer. I drink a drop. Cheers, says the Devil beside me, one of those I'd spotted not long ago. Thanks, and I make as if to leave. He grabs my shirt. I am sucked backward like a returning wave. What does he want? It's me, he says and, in the din of the club, I look at the small mouth with no lips like a cut in his flaccid face. The folds under his chin, his belly stretching the suit. Sorry? You were looking at me before, he says. You fancy me, don't you? You like to do it with Devil. I shake my head. I like the real one, I say, and now I really must go. But it's me, he insists. His gaping mouth is like an abyss. Can't you see me? He's still holding my shirt from behind, and the collar's beginning to pinch. Please, I have to go. He doesn't let up. For one thing, Devil's blind but you have slits for your eyes. I swallow. I met the real one, I explain.

Ah. He lets go of my shirt. His watchful eyes. Another one, he says at last. What do you mean? They often come, he says. I don't understand, I say. Now he stares into the distance as if lost in some evaluation. Not everyone is brave enough to help him, he resumes. I'm breathing hard. I lean against the bar. Does that mean you know him? He doesn't answer. I'm still uncertain, my head is spinning. In this instant dividing time when I must decide to stay or go. My eyes are glued to the man's suit, the colour of a cooling brazier. Is he in trouble? I ask. He looks about. Police, he says. His face so close. His words have the weight of sinking corpses. When they touch bottom, I feel myself freezing. I'm looking for him, I plead. You should look carefully about you, he says then. Do you think that's all there is to it?

He goes off. I follow. In amidst the now half-naked people and the pounding music. The man walks resolutely. Me, I'm panting and my chest is tight. Down to the end again, to the furthest extreme of the club. The group of superheroes splits in two at our approach like a well-trained court. Beyond there's nothing but

the wall. No. A little low door in wrought iron which I'd never have noticed. If the man hadn't shown it to me, if he wasn't now pushing it. It opens onto total darkness. The man motions me to enter. Now this is all there is. Me before that opening. I lower my head, and go in.