

Marco Archetti

Jet lag

I knew nothing about it. As usually happens.

I was away. I'd been away for eight days inclusive of multicolour aperitifs on terraces set on fire by all the various colour tones of the tropical sunset, shining beast, wild burst of flame.

In other words, I get off the plane and I don't feel I've arrived at all. Rather, I'm split right in two and still elsewhere.

I collect my luggage and I'm talking to this guy Patrizio who'd been sitting next to me – great name and a whacking great watch – and we were just saying, bloody hell, those women from the Republic of Dignified Poverty, you know what I mean.

He was still wearing, and so was I for that matter, the tourist village cap, the one from the last night, which had been a theme evening, and the theme had been crazy hats.

So I was talking about women with This Patrizio guy, when from under the brim of my cap, the crazy one, who do I see but my brother-in-law Cinzio coming panting towards me holding a blue jacket and saying, "bloody hell you're impossible to find now come here get this jacket on and get into the car grandma's funeral is in an hour"?

First thing: the grandmother was mine. Not his. I've always hated this habit of misappropriating relatives that people tend to have with wealthy acquired relations (although I already hated Cinzio before that).

Second thing: is that the way to address someone who, as I said, was still split right in half? Caught in a flash and taken away, uprooted from the elsewhere I had been for eight days inclusive of smiles in the village

discotheque. Crazy hats and tips to all those girls that, as That Patrizio had said, weren't exactly black, and were beautiful precisely because they were like blacks who'd stopped just that instant before being completely black.

"Take off that ridiculous hat," was the only thing Cinzio had said before adding a final "you drive, I'm whacked," and loading me into a Panda stuffed with relatives all dressed in black. All of them. Apart from me, of course, who knew nothing about it and had a dark oversized jacket kindly offered at the airport by Cinzio, the welcoming committee, and, underneath, a big white T-shirt saying Bienvenidos; the writing strung between two palm trees with, nearby, two swaying, brown but fairly lightbrown, local beauties, not exactly black because they had stopped just that instant before becoming unappealing to Patrizio.

It was one of those unpredictable, continental spring days. Days that offer exceptional opportunities for discussion about the imprecision of the universe as regards proper seasons and the fallibility of one's own judgement about the right clothing to wear.

Barometric minimums and maximums danced silently over our heads, chased one another across our destinies and flew over our wretched circumstances, giving rise to incandescent nerves of lightning from heat or storm, abundant downpours and unexpected sunny inventions.

When we arrived the funeral had just finished and we were heading for the cemetery.

I was driving slowly behind the hearse in somewhat gelid silence. Sitting behind, fellow lodgers in a Panda whose engine cut out regularly and that was bursting at the seams, my father (gaze spread out of the window),

my mother (not particularly grieving but in full wrinkle camouflage), aunt Fulvia (tiny and out of it, too much space between her upper lip and nose, the usual horse-like air and sulk. She'd been like that for years, set in her equine simile), Cinzio (who was staring into the void and saying no to the void in a highly oppressive manner, his hair in wings from the desperation that radiated right down to his scalp) and, next to me, aunt Rosa (a sombre galleon of chains, earrings and pendants).

I wasn't feeling comfortable at all.

As it was, I had this burden of being elsewhere pursuing me and I couldn't shrug it off. Then, as if that weren't enough, we had arrived at the funeral desperately late. By the time we had got out of the car they were loading the coffin into the hearse.

I was surrounded by a galaxy of aunts, uncles and grandparents who had greeted me with seeming participation but who were actually suspicious and rather detached. But then I was detached too, a geographic disaster in actual fact, a bit here and a bit there, a bit on the plane and a bit on the terrace.

(I particularly remember aunt Caterina and aunt Miriam, pale desperation and bloated desperation. Aunt Erminia too, one sob after another, a glut of funeral mawkishness.)

They were all dressed in dark clothes and lined up for the crying competition. It was all a blowing out and breathing in through tissues; all a huge contraction of lungs and stomachs; all this jolting sufferance; and then black, black, grey, at most brown, but dark. All in all, everyone was colour-rhymed with everyone else, black with black and grey with grey, and I thought: oh God, what am I doing here? This isn't the place for me,

all this similarity, these messages and this uniformity.

I thought: this precision in the text, me excluded.

Luckily we had got back into the car almost immediately. On the way to the cemetery, seated next to me, aunt Rosa. And on the seat right next to me the most crushing violation of the principle of non-contradiction was taking place.

Despite the floral grace of her name, aunt Rosa was starting to stink.

It was the smell that made me lose my head.

The sun had really come out and, for an instant, there I was back in elsewhere; the salty perfumed skin of Daymi-almost-black. And there I was, telling her I was a famous singer but only in Italy. And I had started singing a Tozzi song she didn't know, while a real and violently wonderful sun had been drawing a semicircle of flames on the horizon.

It was pretty hot, aunt Rosa was wearing a lot of clothes, layers of jumpers, plus those hormone problems we all knew about.

All of a sudden, an appalling, unbridled stench started to fill the car.

Unbelievable to think that smell came from a living person.

The only advantage was the fact that my father's play-acting acquired a more Beckett-like feel, face more alienated, eyes ever vaguer beyond the still waters of the window which, like everyone else, he didn't dare to open for fear of offending her.

Everyone pretended nothing was wrong; everyone, but I could see their feelings. It only took a glance in the rear-view mirror. I could see the effort.

And despite it all, all five were absorbed and contained. It was summed up on their faces, in their appropriate mono-expressions.

At a certain point my head started spinning, making me feel like a blender, and the ingredients in the blender were the Republic of Dignified Poverty and its calming version of terrace plus girl I was singing Tozzi to. Then grandma in the coffin, the sun, Patrizio and his little watch, I who was back but I wasn't. And I felt removed, cerebrally detached from myself. In other words I must have got distracted. I don't remember now what I was thinking but I know what it led to – a torrent of insults – when I changed down to second gear, indicated left and turned the radio on as I overtook the hearse.

We reached the cemetery with Cinzio darting looks of hatred at me every time I caught his eye in the rear-view mirror. Everyone was relieved to be able to abandon the stinking car.

As he got out of the car Cinzio said: "You idiot".

My father kept quiet because opening his mouth might have altered the colour he'd managed with great effort to achieve on his face - a dark blue that really suited him, very smart: seven plus.

My mother seemed indifferent and frozen, a freeze-frame.

Aunt Fulvia was completely unaware of anything and was neighing meaningless little laughs.

We waited in the open space in front of the cemetery while everyone arrived.

The cars stopped on the gravel in a silent murmur. Doors opened and the various branches of our family tree got out; the Bisighelli family in its entirety, divided equally into three parts: furniture maker branch, underpants factory branch, have-nots branch.

First the rich branches.

Out of a long, wide BMW came the jewels of the underpants factory branch - three, four, five asexual androids decked out in their finery, designer hats budding on their heads.

Then the furniture factory branch; well clipped the ones that had come from Abruzzo - clean shaven, monsoons of aftershave, and a frisson of the special occasion that ran right through them all. Less formal the ones from Umbria.

Then came the have-nots, the only ones I could claim had a vague liking for me.

(At one point I had been struck by a hedgerow of middle-aged women, all with identical frizzy, rough hairstyles.)

Every so often someone looked at me. I didn't know whether it was because I'd overtaken the hearse or because of the way I was dressed, but I thought perhaps they saw the elsewhere I couldn't shake off and which kept itself closely wrapped around me. Perhaps it was coming out of my eyes. Perhaps my gaze burned like the sun on that terrace. Perhaps I was being accompanied by a Tozzi soundtrack that only I couldn't hear. Or who knows what else.

All I know is I felt uncomfortable.

Then we all went into the cemetery, including two little kids with squints. I didn't know who they were but they had said hello to me. One of the two only had a slight squint, but you couldn't pretend you didn't notice the other because his eye was wobbling in its socket, almost completely free of gravity.

A few people murmured, a few made comments. I didn't know whether it

was about me and my Bienvenidos T-shirt or my grandma's death.

For a moment I thought about making a run for it. It wouldn't have been hard to escape the general attention, free myself of the jacket that was making me sweat because the sun had come out, even if it was already going down now.

While I was pondering the idea, walking as if on glass and using only the outside part of my feet, my cousin Alecsia came over to me, saying: "Marco, I am sorry," as if it weren't her grandmother too, and the grief was only mine.

I nodded silently – what do you answer to "I'm sorry"? "Thank you"? – then I noticed that she was smartly dressed in dark clothes too. She, who was always dressed in rags like a circus clown and spent her time with her gothic friends sitting on the steps of something, statues, abandoned theatres, deconsecrated churches. Now she was normalised, uniformed and matching, part of the anguished parade of aunts and relatives. Here she is, I thought, as she stood before me in her dark grey suit, with her new mentality, completely forgetful of the beads of saliva she used to spit as she pronounced her hostile 'p's – capital, property owners, proletarian oppression – and the days when not washing your hair was a political stance and black roots a question of principle.

It was all up and down, hills and mounds.

Burials by era, probably. Every era with its own level.

I remember thinking that the cemetery reminded me of Lisbon (but I had to stop thinking about that, otherwise my mind would get trapped in another elsewhere, and that was all I needed).

A serious problem arose while a priest – dressed in black too, at which

point I realised there was a conspiracy against me – was grinding out Our Fathers, Ave Marias and Glorias as if they were a task to free himself of as fast as possible.

I noticed slightly late, having drifted back into myself. Or rather having drifted away, far away, very, very far, to my elsewhere, to my collection of elsewheres. But when I did realise I could only freeze with embarrassment.

To cut it short: grandma had no intention of going into the burial cell.

Dismay and uncertainty spread among those present.

“The burial must go on,” Cinzio said after a while, loosening his tie as the cemetery staff kept trying to angle the coffin and check whether there was something in the cell that was blocking my grandmother’s entrance into paradise.

My aunts were all atremble, aunt Erminia refused to watch, aunt Fulvia was neighing again and had exploded into a hysterical laugh. I was saddled with the job of taking her away – helpless with laughter – putting her back in the Panda and locking her in.

My mother would have taken notes if she could, to tell her friend Nunzia in explicit detail. Nunzia didn’t have a great mind but when she picked up the scent of gossip down the phone, she didn’t miss a trick.

When I got back from my jailer’s task – my aunt had allowed herself to be bolted into the car with what can only be described as post-comic resignation as the laughter had suddenly sapped her strength – I found myself faced with the sight of Cinzio on his knees with his jacket off, scraping a planer along the side of the coffin, and my father, still fully dressed, helping him.

The cemetery staff had pitched in. They had got hold of more planers,

and, turning to all the others who were idling, had said “anyone who wants can come and do some planing too, ladies excluded”.

One of them was sweating away with a chisel. His strokes were followed by the ominous sound of cracks opening in wood but he continued obliviously.

In short, there was a great levelling and hammering, jackets hanging on the trees, a chirping of aunts, drenched foreheads – my father managed, despite the effort, not to lose the same expression he had had on his face for the past two hours – and Cinzio, crouched on his heels with his arms going back and forth, worked the short refrain of his carpenter’s plane.

Then, under the blows, the coffin did what it shouldn’t have done. It suddenly went out of control: a well-placed blow of the hammer helped along by a particularly forceful swipe of the plane by Cinzio sent it bouncing up in the air and skidding away at a pace. The funerary torpedo shot off towards the nearby slope, rolled into the ditch and grandma slid like a ghost out of an opening in the side of the coffin.

Added to this was the sound of the Panda’s horn which started to blare uncontrolledly: aunt Fulvia had regained her strength and had no intention of missing the show.

At that moment Cinzio turned to me - I hadn’t noticed him immediately because I’d been flying off towards the Republic of Dignified Poverty and he was many miles away - and went “psss!”. When I looked at him he hissed: “Are you a fool, or what? Can’t you hear the horn? Go and get her, kill her, do what you want but get her to stop.”

I said yes as he raced towards the slope and disappeared up to his waist.

What was I supposed to do?

I left him there, sleeves rolled up and the rain starting to fall as he pulled

grandma up by the armpits from the gravelly river bed.

When I got to the car I could see that aunt Fulvia had obviously had a fit of hysteria because the inside rear-view mirror of the Panda had been ripped off, the seat belt had come unrolled and she was lying in a state of confusion on the back seat with the flap of her skirt gaping open.

There in the open space I turned back towards the cemetery and my head brought the blender back, and in the blender there was Patrizio and his little watch, the terrace and the girl who thought I was Umberto Tozzi, the airplane and my grandma who wasn't ready to go for ever yet, my relatives and their ultimate carpentry. In short, a complete mess.

I got into the car, turned the key in the ignition and, to the sound of neighing by aunt Fulvia, the horse-aunt with too much space between her upper lip and her nose, I slid the car into first and we soared off.