

Cristiano Cavina

# The Casablanca

Our grandfathers had fought in the war and they were proud of it.

They used to talk about it all day seated under the magnolia outside the Ferrini laundry, and they would emphasise their most daring deeds by waving their walking sticks in the air, as if to chase away some maddening flies.

Because not everyone had had the good fortune of a Duce who sent you to beat people to a pulp right and left we had to do as best we could, coming to blows on the dance floor of the Casablanca at Borgo Nero, where we went en masse every Saturday evening to sniff popper, impress girls and pass the time away.

It seemed like fun at the time.

The Casablanca was a reversible disco, like some of those smuggled winter jackets made in Poland that my uncle Palota used to sell in Italy. On Tuesdays and Fridays it was an ordinary dance hall, where the top groups of western Romagna used to play ballroom music; from the Renzo il Rosso ensemble to the Castellina-Pasi orchestra, who were made to play the signature tune of Lupin, a hit written by Castellina in 1981, until they collapsed from exhaustion.

Sometimes the musicians fell off the stage in a faint, landing on a sea of raised arms that carried them out like battle heroes.

On Tuesdays or Fridays Bruno La Rocca and his Band were often on the bill. He played a tenor sax with magic keys that never got caught up in the long black beard he wore down to his belly button.

On Thursdays instead selections for 'The Golden Peacock' were held at the Casablanca. This was a singing competition sponsored by the Banca Popolare di Ravenna which was regularly won by the son of some big businessman from Faenza.

The winners of 'The Golden Peacock' were elusive.

You saw them on the stage as long as the song lasted and then you heard about them again the week after when, to celebrate their victory, they would organise a party at the family villa with friends and relatives.

However much we were kept down a year or we changed schools, we never managed to end up in class with any of them.

They all went to the classical lycée at the Salesian Oratory.

The building was as old as the hills and it was worth more than the whole of our commune put together. It was surrounded by a wall that was one metre thick and three metres tall, built by Giovanni dalle Bande Nere to resist the siege of the Malatesta at the end of the sixteenth century.

The pots of boiling oil had been replaced by CCTV cameras and the monitors were watched by some nasty novices in their last year at the seminary.

We only got in when we played against OR.SA, their very proper football team coached by the choirmaster of the basilica of Faenza, a devout trainer who would rub and kiss a small holy picture of St Vicinio, bishop of Sarsina, before the match.

All this smothering with kisses can't have aroused any particular interest in St Vicinio, because we always thrashed OR.SA.

The last match had ended 4-0 to us. Our massage therapist was my uncle Palota, in Italy to clinch one of his deals. In the changing room he smeared our nostrils with a miraculous ointment imported from China that

he kept locked up in an old briefcase.

We played the whole match with our jaw muscles locked tight and an odd blood-red mist before our eyes.

Foam ran down the sides of our mouths and the Oratory priests at the edge of the pitch crossed themselves constantly throughout the match. I can't remember anything about the goals because I only came round after the shower.

On Saturday nights the Casablanca was turned inside out like a glove and transformed into a discotheque.

The rooms were lined with old posters of the film with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman that all the clients used to sneer and shake their heads at.

A load of people used to go to the Casablanca, all of them with the air of one who would have willingly gone somewhere else if there had been anywhere else to go.

The evening started with a vocalist, almost always the DJ's cousin, who on the notes of Libera nos a malo by Ligabue used to shout "Welcome to the Casablanca!". Then he would shut up for the rest of the night, busy cadging as many free drinks as he could.

The owner of the disco, Tariq Hamad, used to stand motionless next to the console wearing his grey dustcoat and borsalino hat pulled down over one eye.

Nobody knew how a Moroccan had managed to own the place.

They called him Bogart and he stared at everyone sideways, partly because he didn't trust anyone, and partly to avoid the smoke from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth from going into his eyes.

But despite his inquisitive stare, we always managed to hide in the toilets to sniff popper.

I used to go with one of my female friends to buy the popper at the sex shop Malizia, in a suburb on the southern outskirts of Ravenna.

My friend's name was Simona Neri.

I had a lot of female friends at that time.

Just friends, I mean.

I bunked off school every Friday, and with the best pusher look I could muster I would slither onto the train.

As far as I can remember, I never went to school on a Friday in my third year at secondary school.

The mechanics teacher, who had two hours on a Friday, saw me for the first time at the end of term parents' meeting.

My mother was dragging me by the sleeve of my jacket and he came towards us with his hand outstretched.

"Casaccia, I suppose", he said shaking mine with a smile: "We meet at last".

He was full of good intentions but he lost them all that year.

We did feel a bit guilty when in our fourth year they told us he'd given up teaching to go and dig water holes in Cambodia.

On the way home my mother booted me out of the car and I had to walk the last six kilometres home.

The owner of the Malizia was full of resources. He would throw you a smile like a knife slash to the face, and you knew for sure he, for example, would never have given everything up to go and look for drinking water in Cambodia.

He had an impressive supply of popper.

He kept them at the back of the shop in a fridge papered with old Camel Trophy stickers wedged between a metal shelf full of broken old video cassettes and a cupboard stuffed with hundreds of boxes of vibrators.

There were various types of traditional popper, lots of small phials lined up like tin soldiers, or miniature Coca-Cola bottles.

The colour of the labels decreased from bright red to pale pink, passing through fist-in-the-eye purple and livid orange dawn.

The bright red one had miraculous properties and the owner of the Malizia guaranteed it would resuscitate a cat run over by an articulated lorry.

The pale pink was for the faint-hearted and it needed to decant for a long time before you could feel any effect from it.

He recommended the orange for an 'after dinner with friends' and the purple for the spicier and more intimate evenings.

"For you two perhaps, eh?" he smirked every time, giving me a dig with his elbow.

I would look at Simona Neri, her long adolescent legs that I would have travelled willingly along for the whole of my life, her breasts that had kept on growing since the fifth year of elementary school, and I knew with mathematical certainty that she would never have gone out with someone like me.

I would shrug my shoulders and shake my head, pretending to be amused.

In the end I always took the red one.

That Saturday though he showed us a new arrival.

A speciality imported from Brazil, straight off a cargo ship that had docked the day before at the port of Ravenna, where it had unloaded a

mountain of unrefined sugar in front of the Eridania refinery.

It was a plastic tube the size of my mother's hair spray.

The label had a picture of a completely naked bodybuilder with abdominal muscles that you could have appreciated even better if he hadn't had an erection that partially covered him right up to his pectorals.

The owner gave me another dig with his elbow and even went as far as a wink, as if it weren't obvious to him that I could never have reached those heights.

Carefully unscrewing the cap, he offered us a sample, slowly wafting the air at the neck about with his right hand like the chemistry teacher did when we had to analyse a potentially toxic solution in the lab.

The bottle was called 'Macho' and it was half a litre of the most powerful popper I'd ever laid hands on.

We started sniffing the 'Macho' while we were waiting for the latecomers to arrive at the bar.

We carried on in the car and handed it round in the toilets of the bars dotted along the Via Emilia before reaching Borgo Nero.

We did in stages, just like the Via Crucis.

By the time we arrived the veins in our necks were swollen and taut like a ship's ropes.

There was just time to hear the DJ's cousin shout "Welcome to the Casablanca!" to the opening guitar strums of Libera nos a malo before we started brawling on the dance floor.

None of those present knew why.

That Saturday was to change my life.

Tariq Hamad aka Bogart caught me an hour later while I was lounging around in front of the DJ's console and told me it was just not on.

He harpooned me by the shirt collar.

I had a spot of blood above my shirt pocket and the veins in my neck were swelling up like the ropes of a ship again.

"This is not on" he said.

The smoke from his cigarette was climbing up his face and his eyes were like gemstones glinting in the shade of his hat.

He took me by the arm and escorted me to his office.

It was the first time I'd seen him move from his post, and he seemed to be making a noise like a monument starting to walk.

"You're not as smart as you think" he muttered, leading the way.

He'd been keeping an eye on me, Bogart.

Hidden by the shadow of his hat, he'd been following my comings and goings to the toilets and he'd carefully made a note of each and every fight.

His office was a boxroom with a desk, two chairs, a filing cabinet, a large calculator and two Vileda mop buckets.

The music from the dance floor came through muffled, like the tam-tam of cannibals in the forest.

I got ready for the usual sermon.

At school I had learned to listen, head lowered in contrition, and I got myself into position.

"I left Morocco when I was twelve" he began.

I looked up.

It was the first time I'd heard a sermon start from such a personal piece of information.

Bogart was standing in front of me on the other side of the desk with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his dustcoat.

He managed to surprise me.

I couldn't believe Bogart could come from anywhere.

I thought he'd been planted next to the console.

"I lived in the country and at night I used to go up on a hill to see the lights of Casablanca harbour".

I don't know why but I couldn't keep my head down. I couldn't look him in the eye either, though.

I don't know but it was as if I were ashamed of something.

"I came to Italy as a bricklayer. Next I was yard foreman. Then I set up a small cooperative of Moroccan bricklayers and then..."

As he was putting his cigarette out in an old Martini & Rossi ashtray, his eyes darted around the boxroom walls and his gaze took him beyond them to embrace the whole of the surrounding premises, far away, right to the boundary of the car park.

I suspect that at my age he wasn't locked in a toilet sniffing poppers, but shooting from one piece of scaffolding to another on some building site.

"I've never seen Casablanca" he confided, carefully lighting another cigarette.

"I'm not talking about the film" he said "I know that by heart. The real Casablanca, the one twinkling from the hill".

This time I managed to lower my head.

"Never seen it" he said.

I thought about all the pictures and posters that papered the joint.

I felt the urge to confess they made nearly all the clients laugh.

But I knew he didn't care.

I don't know why but I remembered when I used to go and play football as a kid at that jewel of a place, the Salesian Oratory, against the offspring of the well-to-do Faenza families.

They all made fun of us because we came from a small mountain village.

Our clothes were ages old and our team's kit was falling to shreds.

We didn't even notice.

We beat them by four goals and came home as if we'd just broken the bank at the casino.

I had never felt like that again since.

What happened to that feeling? I wondered.

The Casablanca year was a special one for me.

The previous summer I had asked Simona Neri to go out with me and she, without batting an eyelid, without even pretending to think about it, had replied that she preferred me as a friend.

I'd felt like a potato, as in: "I like chips but I prefer them as a side dish".

I'd cried in secret for four days. Then when I realised that if I went on like that I'd have died of dehydration, I put it out of my mind and turned myself into a sort of clown.

If I kept still I felt like crying, but if I talked rubbish non stop I didn't think and that was the end of it.

A while later I had asked another Simona if she wanted to go out with me, and it turned out she didn't prefer me as a friend.

Or as a boyfriend either, to be honest: she found me slightly repulsive and just thinking about it made her laugh.

"You and me?" she'd answered.

Ha ha.

What a laugh.

To tell the truth, although I hadn't checked the situation in the mirror for a while, I knew I had a load of stuff on my face that wasn't doing the business at all.

And it wasn't just those Turkish adolescent tufts of moustache at the corners of my mouth.

I didn't know what to do.

I would spend the entire day in bed staring at the ceiling.

I was getting a belly and I looked nothing like that skinny midfielder I'd been aged twelve.

It didn't seem possible that he could have turned into me.

I tried to reorganise myself, thinking that the answer was to aim even lower.

At a swimming-pool party I came across Giulia Sartoni, who I hadn't seen since the third-year middle school play where she had been a witch and I a hunchback monk, and just to raise my spirits I asked her to go out with me.

She burst out laughing.

She gave me a couple of affectionate slaps on the back and said it was the best joke she'd heard in her whole life.

At fifteen.

How foul.

Not even a regional record.

"I'm serious" I answered, even ashamed of feeling offended.

"So am I", she said, and it ended there.

In a quarter of a summer I had blown three of my possible futures with an equal number of girls.

Privately, I was planning revenge.

“One day I’ll show her” I thought.

It never occurred to me to wonder why it was that nobody wanted to go out with me.

So I carried on playing the clown and crying off and on as I stared at the ceiling in my room.

Who knows what I thought was written there.

The popper gave me a generous helping hand.

Since nobody wanted to keep it in their homes during the week, I had become its official keeper.

I hid it low down in a corner of the fridge covered in mould, behind some jars of jam that had gone off and glinted sinisterly.

I usually checked I’d put the cap on properly, but sometimes I came home too drunk and it was hard enough just to get it into its hiding place before running out with my hand over my mouth.

I only realised I’d forgotten the day after, when grandad had strange pains in his heart after taking a whiff of the cheese.

I was the one who distributed the popper at the Casablanca, and when some girl younger than I was begged me to give her a sniff, I would make her repay me in kisses. French kisses, of course.

So, although I didn’t manage to go out with anyone, I still got to do some regular petting every weekend, and with a load of different girls to boot.

It was enough to make me feel like a womanizer, or a bit anyhow.

Once I got off with a married woman who was twice my age and had two children.

The next day, while I was telling my friends about it, I suddenly caught my

reflection in the window of the bar.

I was standing straight, chest puffed out like a turkey. You'd think I'd made a porn film.

These poses never lasted more than a day though.

When I talk about then with my friends, those years seemed like fun and we see them as a sort of golden age.

But memories are a fraud.

Whole chunks of life are missed out and they manage to only give you back the sparkle of the best moments.

Often when I was locked in the toilets of the Casablanca, I would look at the pictures and posters that Tariq Hamad aka Bogart had hung on the walls.

Some were torn or scribbled on: there was a picture of Ingrid Bergman, all askew so that she stared intensely at a corner of the wash-basin, usually blocked up with paper towels.

They made me feel dejected.

I can never talk about this when we look back to those times.

I'd seen the film and I couldn't really remember what it was about.

But it didn't matter; all those faces in black and white, those faces of the dead just seemed like the eccentricities of a Moroccan immigrant crazy about the film.

Like every Saturday while I was sniffing my wonderful popper, I thought about Tariq Hamad, motionless in front of the console watching over the Casablanca disco-dancing, his dream, and I felt useless.

Can I tell my friends?

They weren't there in the boxroom that Saturday night.

They wouldn't understand.

They would shrug their shoulders and this would hurt because I received an important lesson that day; one I was not to understand until years later.

The sort of lesson a man comes up against sooner or later in his life.

The one to teach me it was Tariq Hamad aka Bogart, with his impeccable dustcoat, hat over one eye and cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

I've never forgotten it.

Every man needs his Casablanca.

I used to cry in secret because girls didn't want me and I dreamed of a vendetta that never happened.

But it wasn't the girls' fault.

The two Simonas and Giulia Sartoni had seen clearly.

There was nothing in me.

Nothing I could give them.

I sniffed popper every Saturday night, and every time I leant over the bottle I forgot that that fantastic pounding of my heart, strong as a nuclear submarine engine, would only last a few minutes.

A flash, compared to all the hours spent staring at the ceiling.

Bogart used to watch us impassively during our fights on the dance floor.

We were indistinguishable one from the other.

We had no style.

It took time for me to realise but when I did it was an illumination.

Everything fell into place.

My uncle Palota was a total delinquent. He used to wander round Europe like a bandit, but he would never have made even the slightest change to

his life.

It was his vocation and he cultivated it with the patience of a Benedictine monk.

Perhaps, I thought three days after my evening in the boxroom, our grandfathers were not old fools that couldn't get up off the bench under the magnolia outside the Ferrini laundry.

All of a sudden I spent time listening to them carefully, and I discovered that they talked about wartime as though they were seeing it sparkling in the distance.

Perhaps from the top of a hill, I thought.

Every man needs his Casablanca, right?

Like my mechanics teacher, who left everything to go and look for water in Cambodia.

I stopped going to the Casablanca when my seventeenth birthday came round.

I also dropped the popper.

I didn't see the posters on the walls or the pictures of the actors hanging in the toilets anymore.

When I happen to talk to others about what might have become of Tariq Hamad aka Bogart, I just smile, recalling the dustcoat and the hat over the eyes.

What an odd guy, we say.

I act as if nothing had happened. I smile and think about those eyes as he watched his discotheque, motionless next to the DJ's console.

The eyes of an inspired man.