

Giovanni Montanaro

Your light

The day I saw Chiara again after three years was the last of the Week. It was hot and windless and every corner of the city was penetrated by a pale blue light.

I was late. And I was tense. I felt something was going to happen, although I had been thinking of something connected to the concert rather than what actually happened.

I was walking fast, mentally going over the notes I was to play. When I went out on the Rudolfskai, the embankment, surprised by a gentle puff of air that rose up from the water, I looked up and saw her on the bridge, leaning on the railings.

I recognised her right away.

As beautiful as ever.

I felt bewildered.

I had not seen her for such a long time and there she was on the Salzbach, in Salzburg.

A roll of film.

My father came and gave it to me. He said he had found it in the attic this morning.

My first thought was to destroy it, like the others. Then, who knows why, perhaps just out of curiosity, I asked him to take it to be developed.

I loved Chiara.

When I met her she was twenty-two and I twenty-five. In Florence. I had

moved to the city from the Maremma to attend the Conservatory. Those had been hard years of intense study. The only distraction I used to allow myself was going for walks. I especially liked going through the Boboli Gardens. In silence. So almost every afternoon I would betray Schumann, Bach and Honninfjord-Dervinskij and go for a walk.

One day near the Vasca dell'Isola, I saw Chiara. Brown jacket, beige scarf, a pair of jeans.

And a Nikon F1 round her neck.

She raised it. Removed the lens cover, brought the camera up to her eyes, waited a few seconds to focus and pressed the shutter.

Then she turned towards me. I was staring at her as if bewitched. She was the first to speak: "Haven't you ever seen a woman take a photo before?"

I smiled: "One like you, no."

It was a wonderful afternoon.

We talked about everything, as if we had known each other for ever. And she struck me more and more by the minute. Whatever she said was what I thought too, and vice versa.

It was incredible: from a passion for Yann Tiersen to a piece of chocolate for breakfast, from Doisneau's photo The Kiss to a fear of sitting in the window seat on the plane.

"I'll teach you light today."

"What?"

"I'll teach you light."

"Photography course?"

"Lesson one. The most important. The only one."

“Ok, I’m paying attention, teacher...”

“Actually there’s only one thing to know, and to remember always, about light...”

“And that is?”

I called her. She turned. It was her.

Again. After three years.

“Ciao Chiara.”

“Edoardo...”

“How are you?”

“Well.”

The instant she said it, a man appeared behind her. He drew her to him as if to protect her. He was tall, imposing and bald. He looked me up and down and, more surprised than we were, murmured: “Edoardo...”

“Good day, signor Spina.”

What was she doing in Salzburg? And with her father, too.

“We’re on holiday for a few days. And you? Concerts? You’ve become the new Glenn Gould...”

“I’m on my way to the Mozarteum” I said. “The afternoon session is starting soon and it’s my turn. There’s an international Week for young pianists...”

“You’ll win a prize for sure...” She broke off and added: “Always selfabsorbed”, but not in the bitter tone she would have used a few years earlier.

I decided to invite her: “Do you want to come? I mean, do you both want to come and hear me? I can keep you a couple of places if you like...”

“We’ll think about it” said signor Spina.

It was after five on the clock. “I’ve got to go, I’m sorry. But we’ll speak...”

“Always the same. Only time for you.”

I was late. I played very badly.

I had never played so badly.

I had thought of her all the time.

Chiara did not come.

What is over is over, I told myself.

Yet I was not entirely convinced any longer.

I detest light.

Light that prevents you from resting, that does not let you ignore, that does not allow you to forget.

I never thought I would hate light.

Long for darkness. Oblivion. The end.

Hoping is torture.

I do not know what my future will be. No one can know. No one can tell me.

I wish it were all over.

Four years. Anything and everything, together.

Four wonderful years. The best of my life. Ended like that. For no reason really if I think of it.

I had started to travel round Europe with my music. We were seeing less and less of each other, and every time there was an argument, constant accusations of inattentiveness, omissions, absences. She would stay out of touch for whole days and I could not work out whether it was indifference or jealousy. I began not to care. I thought only about myself.

And my career. Chiara had become quiet, elusive, hostile at times. In the end she decided to move to Rome for her doctorate.

We realised we were only hurting each other and we split up. It was painful. Slow. What we had shared would never come back with anyone else, we both knew that.

But we did not feel we had any alternative.

We gradually started contacting each other less.

Until we stopped completely.

Three years of complete silence.

Neither of us knew what had happened to the other. Although we probably thought about it all the time.

Then all of a sudden, Salzburg.

After that day we started sending the odd text message again. Saying hello, insignificant sentences, thoughts interrupted by more important commitments. It frightened us to get close again.

Chiara did not abbreviate words anymore, who knows why. I suppose she wants to play the mature woman, I said to myself.

At times keeping up that kind of relationship made me feel stupid. It could not take us anywhere; where there has been love, everything remains, or else nothing should remain.

Then I received the photo.

As soon as my father came out of the photographer's he called me.

He described a photo to me, so I would remember them all.

Edoardo is on the shore.

He's wearing a pair of shorts and a light blue shirt. Barefoot. He's squinting as if he was trying to look at the sun.

He looks handsome, says my father joking.

A photo brings back my smile.

We had had two copies made.

It was our photo.

A kiss. In Venice. Abbazia della Misericordia.

Why had she sent it to me after all that time? What was she trying to tell me? What did she want from me?

I wanted to see her again.

I'm having the examination tomorrow.

I'm told the clinic is a tall white building on the outskirts of Salzburg. The best in Europe for this type of disease.

I'll get the results in a few days.

The truth.

We decided to meet in a café in Florence, the Kamp. Tables in the open air facing Santa Croce. She was waiting for me, seated. My heart was beating faster than usual, and I did not want to ask myself why.

I went up to her. We said hello. I was momentarily embarrassed. I did not know whether I should kiss her or not. How do you kiss a woman on the cheek when you have always kissed her on the mouth? The result was that she did not move a muscle, and I chose the chair farthest away from hers.

“A pear juice.”

“Iced coffee.”

I sensed her rigid, ill at ease. As if she regretted coming. She said right away: “Sorry if I keep my sunglasses on but the light’s so strong... and I’ve got such a headache...”

What kind of a way was that to start a conversation? Or had she been crying? What could be making her so unhappy?

It was pointless fooling myself: I knew nothing about her anymore.

There was a long pause.

“Well?” I said.

“Well you...” she answered “It was you who wanted us to meet. I imagine there’s something you want to say to me.”

“What a welcome” I replied sarcastically. “Aren’t you pleased to be here?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“And what are you saying?”

“I’m saying it isn’t easy meeting you again. I don’t know why you insisted so much...”

I was taken aback. Why was she talking to me like this? “I wanted to know why you sent me that photo.”

“I wanted you to have it. Nothing else. I don’t know what got into your mind. Nothing has changed since the last time.”

“Alright” I said, irritated. What was she playing at?

“It doesn’t seem so hard to understand.”

“It is for me.”

“What?”

“Why did you send it to me...”

“Who else would I send it to?”

“I thought you wanted to keep it. Or that it meant something...”

We were tense, like the last day we had met. Why ever had we decided to see each other again?

“Am I supposed to keep it in my purse all the time?”

“Do we have to fight?”

“Certainly not over a photo.”

“It’s not mine. It’s yours too” I insisted stubbornly.

“Just because I took it?”

“You didn’t take it.”

“What do you mean, I didn’t take it?”

“A Chinese guy took it.”

“A Chinese guy?”

“Yes, a Chinese guy. A Chinese guy who was the spitting image of Elton John. I remember him perfectly.”

“What photo are you talking about?”

“The one you sent me. Our Venice photo.”

Chiara did not reply. She began to tremble. I saw tears rolling down her cheeks.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing...”

“Look, first you send me a photo...”

“Shut up!” she shouted.

“What ever...?”

“Shut up shut up shut up. You don’t understand...”

“You seem to be the one that’s confused. First you send...”

“Christ Almighty, Edoardo, will you shut up? I didn’t send you anything.”

“Do you regret sending it to me?”

“You don’t understand... I can’t send...”

She continued to cry.

I was getting more and more confused.

“What’s he done? Why does he want to make a fool of me?”

“What did who do?” I tried to understand.

“Leave me in peace” she whispered.

I stood up. I couldn’t bear seeing her in such a state. I thought I ought to hug her. But when I was near her and my hand grazed her cheek, she withdrew sharply. “Go away!” she shouted.

The sudden movement made her glasses fall. She covered her face with her hands. I stood completely still. I did not touch her but I did not want to move away.

“Chiara, what’s the matter?”

She was sobbing louder and louder. “I can’t even fake it anymore...”

A lot of people had turned round to look at us. I didn’t care. It was only when I heard the sound of a table being moved suddenly that I turned around.

A man was coming towards us.

Her father. Again.

Since when did she go on dates accompanied by her father?

He came up to us. He looked at me miserably, indicated to me to move aside and embraced Chiara. When she felt her father’s body, she threw herself against his stomach: “Why did you do it, dad? Don’t you love me either?”

“What are you saying? I wanted...” murmured her father.

“It’s your fault. You shouldn’t have done it. I didn’t want him to see me cry.

Why did you do it?”

“Edoardo loves you, Chiara... You mustn’t lie to him...”

“I hate you” she said.

This was not the Chiara I knew.

She was angry with her father but she did not leave. She was asking to be protected.

I felt uncomfortable.

“I... don’t understand... Perhaps I’d better go...”

Chiara moved away from her father and looked at me. I will not forget that instant for the rest of my life. Her gaze, set on me. Her eyes had become enormous. “Do you really not understand? Are you so stupid, Edoardo? Do you still not understand? I can’t see, and thanks to my father now you know too.”

Marta is asleep in my bed. It is not the first time we have slept together, and it is always wonderful. Feeling her warm body. Her breathing. Staying in each other’s arms all night. I do not want to wake her, although she will have to get up soon. I have just kissed her on the forehead. She went on sleeping.

I am in the living room and I am holding Chiara’s photo.

A long time has passed since that day at the Kamp.

I smile.

I think of her.

She is in the United States.

A new therapy based on stem cells.

Leber, optic neuropathy. *A hereditary disease transmitted through the mother.*

Although it can appear in childhood, it generally develops between the ages of 20

and 30. Its evolution is still subject to study, and can lead to conflicting outcomes:

from improvement to restoration of reasonable visual capacity, or from degeneration

to total blindness. There is currently no known cure.

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Marta cannot wait to throw her arms round her mother again.

And Chiara wants her close as well.

One afternoon I started seeing badly.

I thought it would pass.

But I didn't get any better. A few days passed. I started to get scared. My

sight was getting worse. I would open my eyes and the world seemed

wrapped in fog. I cried all the time. And when I stopped, everything would

be out of focus.

The doctors couldn't understand it.

I felt lost.

It was unbearable at the beginning.

Chiara often told me she had agreed to see me again that day at the

Kamp because she had deluded herself that I would not notice anything.

She wanted to stay the same, at least for me.

*There comes a moment when you suddenly realise you have to react.
That your life's challenge is not becoming a professional photographer.
The challenge is starting to live normally again.
And you start to be really convinced.
And day after day you gradually take possession again of your
surroundings. You cannot be in a hurry. Bit by bit you begin to feel that
things are not threatening but protecting you. Slowly, you learn to make
them yours. You touch them instead of seeing them and you realise they
are still the same. You pick up a photo, feel the glossy paper, and see
what is on it.*

At the beginning it was hard and frustrating. I tried to stay close to her, but she complained all the time. She said no one could help her. She made me feel useless. She would tremble. Have panic attacks. She used to keep silent for hours. As if she blamed me for seeing.

Until one day she picked up a camera. She pressed the shutter release button by mistake.

She took a photo.

"Didn't you notice anything?"

"No."

"How can that be?"

"There was nothing to notice."

"What do you mean?"

"To me there was only you, Chiara."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Yes."

“Well, you’ve managed again.”

When she decided to get that roll of film developed, something must have already clicked in her head.

A desire to start anew.

In a moment of cheerfulness she had asked her father to send me the photo of me looking at the sun. Just so that I would have it. But her father decided to send me the one of our kiss, which she kept along with all the others.

He wanted us to meet.

I will never be able to thank him enough.

We were married a year and a half later.

She wanted a resplendent white dress.

I teach music. I do not give many concerts, but I do not care anymore.

During these years with Chiara I have come to understand things so important and so obvious that I cannot even give them a name.

The only one that already had a name was Marta.

We adopted her two years ago.

She is a lively, intelligent child.

And, who knows how, she looks like Chiara.

We would like another child. Perhaps we will not adopt it.

Because I love Chiara, if possible, more than before. I love her silences, the way she smiles in the face of effort, how she tries to imagine something and how she asks me to tell her about it. I love it when she is sad and instinctively tries to catch my eye. How she entrusts herself to me, and how it never crosses her mind that I would lie to her. I love the

fact she has started taking photographs again, and that her photos are always perfectly focussed. The way she says to me: "I can't bear to look at you, aren't you going to have a shave?" I love how she caresses Marta, even though she has never seen her.

"You must understand the sense of light, what it is for. Light can sometimes be a risk. It can be violent, blinding. There are lights that deceive. Light, Edoardo, is not what you see."

"No?"

"No. Light is what allows you to see."