

Franco Alesci

THE VERTIGO
GAME

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Cover: A skull made of interconnected vectors.
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To Serenella,
the tuning fork of my soul.

Let thoughts thaw, get them moving again, have them rise like flying carpets and wander wherever they wish.

[Franco Alesci]

1. THE SHOT

3 January.

The shot rang out in the street and is reverberating between the buildings, echoing like in a valley. It rises overwhelmingly from the pavement, rattling windows, piercing eardrums and breaching the skin on the body, vibrating like a loudspeaker's membrane. It comes out, floats and rises like a falcon over the forest of the unstoppable white noise of the city, capturing everybody's fears: men turning into scared mice.

The shot is like a falcon circling on high over one of those rocky deserts, with some basic and primordial forms of life below, from the insects living in the subsoil to the little superficial creatures like snakes, lizards and mice that are part of the open pantry for ravenous birds. These "moving mouthfuls" are essential food that sometimes catches fire, suddenly rising up or rolling over, having been pushed by those strange African sirocco gusts known as *ghibli*, *gebli* or *kibli*, depending on the area: the same hot, sand-carrying wind regardless. The falcons' eyesight is also eight times better than that of a human: like the Almighty, they can see all from on

high, and are pitiless.

The neighbourhood is empty: there's nobody talking any more. There are just rustles, crackling and some gears engaging in the distance.

Previously scampering not far away in their confusion and with deafened ears, some blackbirds and a magpie have risen in flight, wildly beating their wings. They quickly disperse in all directions.

A few moments later, a passer-by yelled at the top of their lungs to break the silence.

'Bastards!'

There follows a pause, with everybody having heard that word shouted and reflecting on it. They're murmuring. The neighbourhood is a world in and of itself — one of the many this EARTH contains — and in wait for the sentence to clarify what was meant.

And so, it comes.

'They've killed a man'. The voice gave out as if its sounds were the feathers of a paper fan having been torn for being too often unfolded, but it communicates to everybody what has just transpired metres away from their cosy, orderly homes.

A dark soul has taken a life away.

Some people have now peered over from their apartment windows and understood what's happened. Some of them came down with others to unravel their fears and dissolve them as if they were poison pills amongst the stream of words flowing forth. Others still have double-locked their doors and turned the sound up on their TVs. Many have called the police and

somebody has gone looking for an ambulance, not accepting that a single shot, deafening as it was, can take a life away.

Lying on the pavement, face-down and street-lamp-lit, is the corpse of a man. Not ten minutes earlier had they shot him in the head from behind, which you can easily tell by looking at the hole at the back of his neck. He died not noticing a thing, having been walking when the gunshot turned him into an inanimate fleshly object.

In the meantime, passing motorists coming home from work are stopping to see what's happened; there's someone taking photos and filming the murdered man on their smartphone. They'll be posting the pictures online or sending them to friends on WhatsApp.

Several cars have stopped, moving into the second lane. There's one behind the other, with their hazard lights flashing, seeming to go with the Christmas theme at the end of the season. The crowd of onlookers and the snake-like trail of lights draw other cars in and soon, a small gathering around the victim takes place.

The crime has taken place at Carpenedo, a tranquil part of Mestre; for those who know the city, it's connected to Venice by the Ponte della Libertà. This "asphalt thread" lies at the bottom of the lagoon with a few rail tracks and some highway lanes, this being the physical connection between the Venetians of its historic centre and those on the mainland, like an artery between heart and stomach.

In this area, the most serious incident in the past year consisted of an argument between two neighbours, who

weren't even particular close, because one of the two hadn't taken care of clearing away his poodle's business from the pavement in front of them.

It's not even seven yet on this third of January evening.

It's been quite cold today, the temperature being a few degrees above zero.

The man was shot as he came back home from shopping, with a white nylon bag with the supermarket written on it beside him. Out of this came some items: a boxed whole-wheat spaghetti, some bananas, several pouches of cat food and two glass bottles that had been broken in the fall; from one, milk came out and from the other, red wine.

Also mixing together with the milk and wine is the victim's blood that keeps on coming out of his head, dripping out regular as clockwork.

Following the asphalt's slope, the milk, wine and blood have closely mixed to create a stream of pink trickling down from the pavement and going onto the highway.

The pink stream will be collected by the tyres of the cars passing by, about to spread it everywhere.

Before the attack, the man was wearing a cap with its brim similar to those of baseball players that, in the fall, ended up not far away from the body. He was holding his mobile in his hand, nothing remarkable, with a keyboard made of unusual characters: it seems like one of those calculators only able to do the four basic arithmetic operations.

Was there maybe someone following him and he was trying to make a call for help?

He's got thinning white hair slicked back and has unremarkable clothes on: faded jeans, a blue supermarket- or outlet-bought jacket worth a few dozen euro and trainers. Judging by the skin on his face, he had to be a man of advanced age. He apparently would look like an innocent pensioner.

Amongst those to have rushed to the scene, nobody knows the victim, but the man mustn't have lived very far away, as he was coming home on foot with the shopping bag in his hand.

His wallet, clear to see in the back pocket of his jeans, also makes it clear this wasn't a mugging here.

Sometime later, a different kind of bang, albeit very strong, produces a shock wave like the one made by supersonic aircraft when one breaks the sound barrier flying at low altitude. It's come from the apartment of the man who's just been killed on the third floor of a building with six, just a few hundred yards from the site of the attack. The boom strikes terror into the heart of the residents; not understanding why there's been an explosion, they rush out of their apartments, pouring - as if an avalanche - down the steps.

Having been left too long on the hob, an old pressure cooker blew up, turning into a small bomb. The pot lid was launched into the ceiling it later bounced off violently, hitting the kitchen window and smashing through. That meant, beyond the powerful sound waves, there was a hellish sound of shattered glass

falling into the street. Shards of glass have showered down, having followed the steel lid's trajectory, and kept on spinning through the air of its own accord, reflecting the evening lights like a mirror. The whole movement was like a comet's, complete with trail and coma. Finally, the lid ended its course smashing through the windscreen and sticking to the driver's seat of a car below that, fortunately, had nobody sitting in it. Meanwhile, the clustered pieces of glass rained down onto the pavement and the lane of the highway, causing neither damage nor injury.

The fire brigade came in a few minutes, their siren sounding at full whack.

The victim lived alone or, rather, not together with other human beings: in a Persian cat on whom he lavished all his affections, he had a flatmate of sorts.

And it was on that day he'd started burning some of his minestrone by using that old pressure cooker, the only one he had. Like many other times, the man was planning to go shopping in just over half an hour at the supermarket close to the neighbourhood and come back home in plenty of time to have his dinner almost ready.

The cat hid under the settee. He hisses at a "strange dog", having perhaps mistaken the valve's whistle for a yelp and the explosion for a mastiff's bark. Out of emotion, his tail is greatly enlarged and the hairs on the back of his neck on end; his heart, meanwhile, is beating strongly, as if he'd climbed to the top of a tree. It's said that even animals, particularly those of a certain age, might die of heartbreak in the face of sudden and

particularly intense emotion. This cat is nearly fifteen, to boot.

As soon as the firefighters arrived, they turn off the gas and cut off the electricity to all the flats as a precaution. They unravel a long extendable ladder, then pointing it to the kitchen window of the apartment that, after the explosion, has been left without any glass at all.

They go in.

A pungent smell tainting the air — almost enough to make you sneeze — greets the firefighters who've just come in: a coloured liquid mush has spread all over. It's a mishmash of celery pieces, beans, peas, carrots and ... crushed potatoes. On top of the small wall-mounted LCD television is also a clove of garlic that, miraculously, has been left intact.

The minestrone came out of the pot, powerful and unstoppable like a geyser jet, spreading over the floor, walls and ceiling of the kitchen, sticking like glue. The merry dance of odour goes through the crack at the bottom of the door, has also spread along the stairwell at the block of flats.

The name on the front door is the same that the police read not long earlier on the identity card of the man who'd been shot in the street.

The firefighters closely inspect the apartment, verifying according to their procedures that this is not a dangerous situation. They've immediately understood the cause of the problem and at once, they can reset the alarm.

Not long after, they leave the apartment, but the poor

cat silently hidden and immobile under the settee was barely breathing so as not to be heard by those intruders dressed like extra-terrestrials. Nobody notices him.

2. *ELECTRIC DANCE*

4 February.

In a side street off *piazza* Ferretto in Mestre, well within the pedestrian area, different people are talking at the same time, but can't hear each other; they are one in front of the other, but can't see each other. It's as if they were invisible. Nobody can either see or hear everyone else: it's a group of people imprisoned by the solitude in fear, with words rising like smoky figures from a fire and riding the air molecules that bounce all over like the ball in a game of squash.

Advanced in her years, a woman coming home on her electric trike keeps going round and round in circles, turning in on herself. The lady's torso heaves forward as her head swings uncontrollably: they have just driven a large steel nail into her neck with a nail gun, almost piercing it from one side to the other, killing her instantly. The nail head is protruding from the skin, reminiscent of an unlikely piercing. She was a very thin lady; as much may be understood from the sunken face, the neck and hollow wrists emerging from her jacket.

Someone is thinking of connecting this attack with

the murder of the other elderly man that took place a few miles from here: the other victim had been shot in the head.

At last, a man comes out of that throng of people and turns the electric motorcycle off, stopping for a moment and taking a deep breath because he also wants to do something else, something harder: he puts his hand over her face and closes her eyes.

At the same time and a few yards from where the crime took place, a gospel choir concert has started at *piazza* Ferretto. The boundless and deeply delicate energy of dozens of people is conveyed in the voices that, in unison, reach the same heights at the same time, flying through the air as if this were a huge swarm of birds.

These voices are directed by a portly gentleman wearing a long white scarf about the neck. He's moving his baton quickly, energetically, whimsically, powerfully and without stopping, making one think of a middleweight boxer as they're landing a combination of hooks and uppercuts. Around the stage, a large and orderly audience listen to them, involved. The choristers are all Italian and white, although singing in English, putting great passion into it, sounding like black singers.

The lyrics speak of God, the Earth, loss ... and death.

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