

1

In Short

1

In short, I killed my wife because the noise she made when she crushed plastic bottles to save space got on my nerves.

And I'd told her plenty of times. I'd explained how that noise, so startling and unpleasant, gave me the sensation of one of my leg bones suddenly crumbling under my weight, or of those teeth that shatter in your mouth in certain recurring dreams. And in fact, a shudder would run down my spine each time, making my sphincter contract together with the muscles of my neck while my hands would clench into fists and my vision went foggy for several seconds.

She continued to crush them, though, perhaps out of habit or out of absent mindedness, but at the time - when, to tell the truth, I wasn't quite right in the head - I was convinced that she did it on purpose to annoy me.

Moreover, Margherita was an extremely quiet, unassuming person. Many times I would think I was alone in the house and instead find her sitting on the sofa reading a book or in the kitchen fiddling with the cooker. She had a unique ability to ring the doorbell gently. Being operated by an electric mechanism, it should have always made the same sound, but she alone was able to make it produce a faint trill, a pleasant prelude to her arrival. In the summer she walked around the house barefoot with a step so light that her feet seemed barely to touch the floor, dressed in light-coloured slips that made her look ethereal. And then came that noise, contrary to her docile nature, of bottles being crushed violently on the kitchen table, even more unexpected and annoying than it already was.

2

When I'd told the story of the bottles to the prison governor, poor fellow, he bit his cheek to try to repress the irreverent expression that had inadvertently

appeared on his face. Not out of any small-minded male complicity, I imagine, but out of the melancholy satisfaction of realizing he was not the only one to have let something unusual senselessly ruin his life.

The episode that led Doctor Resipiscenza to voluntary exile in the penal colony of Is Arenas is too ridiculous for anyone, he included, to try and hide it, and in fact everybody knows it but no one ever brings it up gratuitously or maliciously.

About fifteen years ago, just after he'd finished graduate school, he was given the job of running a small prison with a hundred prisoners on the outskirts of a city in the Po Valley – I don't remember which one, but it doesn't really matter. At the time the governor was young and good-natured and had revolutionary ideas that he applied with the energy of an enthusiast.

He soon turned it into a model institute. He promoted numerous initiatives that engaged the inmates in re-socializing and productive activities which resulted, among other things, in a financial self-sufficiency which was much appreciated in the offices of the ministry. But above all he looked after the inmates, avoiding the utopian goal of finding them a purpose in life and pursuing the more pragmatic one of teaching each one a useful, simple skill adequate to his propensities and to the specific social reality to which he would return as soon as he finished serving his time.

At least in part he succeeded, because it became the institution with the lowest percentage of reoffenders in Italy: the prisoners left prison in perfect physical and mental shape, but above all able to do the job that the governor had made them learn inside the walls.

Doctor Resipiscenza received many awards and the interest of the institutions who sent officials to analyse his model and try to replicate it. Word also spread in criminal circles: many felons, knowing that a sentence was hanging over their heads, went to hand themselves in at his prison.

Until the day he was invited by a professor of penitentiary law to a conference on the usual theme of the re-educational effectiveness of imprisonment.

That morning, hundreds of students crowded the university's lecture hall while the speakers' desk was graced by distinguished professors, the university dean and a dashing undersecretary from the Ministry of Justice.

Doctor Resipiscenza prepared himself properly: he converted the data of the institute into numbers and then into percentages which he transposed into graphs that would demonstrate the effectiveness of his 'theory of professions' in prison. He put all the material into a PowerPoint presentation file which he illustrated with photos of the work carried out by inmates within the institution.

The professor gave a short introduction and then introduced the prison governor enthusiastically to the students. A pleased Doctor Resipiscenza stood up and, after having given the usual thanks, pressed the key on his computer that was supposed to reproduce the graphs and photos which he intended to accompany the report on the big screen behind him.

What instead started playing were images from an appalling porn video – the one he had started watching the night before in a desperate attempt to fall asleep but which he had immediately paused because it had disgusted even him and had therefore entrusted himself to a more traditional camomile.

And since fate had already made its decision that morning, it so happened that, under the excessive pressure of Doctor Resipiscenza's frantic reaction on its keyboard, the computer froze, preventing him from stopping the images of a shapely naked black woman who, amidst the unsparing laughter of the students, was spanking a group of equally undressed and consenting Japanese.

The projection lasted a couple of minutes, which in some cases can be a very long time. And in fact, it was.

3

In jail, not all crimes are the same. There's shit and shit. For example, prison opinion considers my crime one of the worst. Not the murder itself – that can

happen. What's serious is the fact that the victim was a woman. You don't touch women and children.

Unlike the things we see in American films, where unfortunate white-collar workers are often subjected to humiliating harassment, exponents of so-called civil society who unfortunately happen to end up in prison are usually treated with respect and curiosity here.

Some inmates like boasting about being on friendly terms with the politician, even if he is corrupt, or with the catastrophically bankrupt entrepreneur, or with the scapegoat who ended up in jail for one of those crusades, driven by some news story, upon which public opinion embarks from time to time. Others hope to get some advantage out of it or just to break the monotony.

But if the crime is bad, it doesn't matter who you are, you have to be careful. The first few years I was saved by protective custody but above all by my submissive attitude. I never tried to defend myself or to play down my guilt; on the contrary, I always made it clear I was willing to sacrifice myself, to voluntarily surrender myself to anyone who wanted to carry out the punishment that the unwritten code of prison behaviour reserves for people like me. But no one ever did. No one bit the defenceless throat that I obediently proffered. Then, over the years, I acquired seniority and also became famous. Partly because, apart from the foreigners who arrive and leave unnoticed, the inmates of our Sardinian prisons are more or less always the same: every now and then someone leaves, but then comes back or even comes back with a brother or a friend who already knows everything about you. Partly because of the thing with the bottles and partly because everyone knows about my torment over not being able to remember that damned minute in which I killed my wife.

Sure, it's easier to talk about it now that it's about to end, but it was hard learning how to live in jail. It took a while to realize that I wouldn't have to stop living. Being in prison isn't a parenthesis of your existence: in prison you have to live the prison – the world shrinks, joys and pains take on the dimensions of the walls, and the expectation of a feeling becomes the feeling

itself. You have to create a bonsai forest for yourself in which your passions are proportionate to your new universe. The visit of a relative moves you, your team scoring a goal excites you, the smile of a nun touches you, the stupid severity of a guard outrages you, separation from a good cellmate saddens you, you fall in love with a TV star and hope your trial turns out for the best. When you're in the right mood and something very funny happens, you laugh, hoping someone will follow suit.

And you count: every morning, as soon as you wake up, you realize that another day has passed and you calculate the new 'end of the sentence' and the proportions of what's left and what you've already served.

I've done twelve years net, fourteen years ten months and forty-five days gross. Yes, because if you behave yourself, they take forty-five days off your sentence for every six months served, and since I have never been reported for anything, I only have a month and a half to go now. But in a few days the supervisory magistrate should grant me the forty-five days of the last semester and so, as soon as the communication arrives, I will be free.

2

The Trial

1

My life was snuffed out on the night of the murder, when the carabinieri took me to the barracks in a squad car. A bored, easygoing sergeant with a moustache sat me down in front of his desk and, struggling with a computer with which he proved to be unfamiliar, asked me for my personal details.

"Emiliano Bardanzellu, born in Cagliari on the 10th of April, 1974, residing in via dei Villini number 10".

"Educational qualifications?"

"Degree in Political Science."

"Profession?"

"Waiter."

"Marital status?"

"Married."

"You're not actually, Mr. Bardanzellu. Not anymore!"

"You're right, I'm sorry. Widower."

"Would you like to appoint a trusted lawyer?"

"I don't know any."

He asked me if I would like to inform anyone of my detention and I gave him my father's number. He printed out the report and made me sign it.

After getting my fingerprints, taking the mugshots and making me blow into the breathalyser, which gave a negative result, he took me to a room where I sat waiting for several hours on a briar root chair, handcuffed and supervised by a very young corporal who looked at me shyly with boyish eyes, curious to observe the face of a murderer. I am sure that, as the time passed, a small part of his expression filled with Christian compassion.

It was late at night before they took me to the Buoncammino prison where I was handed over to the prison officers who took me to the processing office, which is sort of like the prison reception. I repeated the process of personal details, photos and prints, handed over my shoelaces, my belt, my watch, my phone and my wallet. Eventually they assigned me a solitary cell in a block frequented by inmates who were still awaiting trial.

I spent the night sleepless and dazed, sitting on the bed in the same clothes I was wearing at the time of the murder, engaged in the pointless effort to remember or at least become aware of what had happened. They kept a guard on me because they thought I might commit suicide.

The next morning my defence attorney, Marco Fanni, an experienced professional who dad had in the meantime been busy appointing, arrived. He was a handsome man - tall and lean but well built with thick raven hair, a square jaw and lively eyes behind a pair of rimless glasses.

Perhaps because he was exhausted from hearing the lies of his clients after so many years of doing his job , it seemed to me that he entrusted his sensations more what he observed than what he heard. I told him the truth, that it had certainly been me who killed my wife but that I didn't remember how I had done it. I explained to him that there was a gap in my memory, a blackout that went from the moment I heard the noise of a plastic bottle being crushed in Margherita's hands to the moment I typed the emergency number into the keypad of my phone.

He asked me a few questions, some exploratory and others tricky, at the end of which he didn't even pretend that he believed me. He told me that the judge and the prosecutor would come to question me in the afternoon. He advised me not to answer their questions and to limit myself to declaring that I did not remember the dynamics of the crime but that given the circumstances I couldn't exclude the possibility that I was the perpetrator. I did as he said.

2

The trial took place a year later in a courtroom with very high ceilings and a gallery which is now disused but which had hosted large audiences when the Sardinian bandits were kidnapping people. I took part sitting on a wooden bench in a cage where my wrists were freed of handcuffs only after the entrance gate had been locked.

The presiding judge was an elderly gentleman, austere, silent and tanned, though certainly not out of vanity. He wore mountain boots and under his magistrate's toga you could glimpse a traditional woollen or perhaps dark velvet waistcoat. He had a resonant voice and spoke with a very thick Sardinian accent, proud and brazen, which amplified the synthetic and legendary sarcasm that sometimes even slipped into the folds of the invincible logic of his explanations of his sentencing. Bolstered by thick hair and an unkempt grizzled beard, his authoritative figure was enough to ensure the trial was conducted in an orderly

fashion, and a glance from him sufficed to dissuade the lawyers from any unorthodox initiatives.

The associate judge was a pleasant-looking young woman but with a face that always looked tired. At a guess she must have been the top of her class and perhaps even of her university course, but her reserved and elusive manner suggested that she had not yet acquired the certainty of possessing the human depth necessary for becoming a good judge.

Then there were six jurors: a guy with a gut and a man's bag, an elegant and bejewelled lady, a man who attended all the hearings wearing his wedding suit. I don't remember the others and I doubt I would recognise them if I met them now, but they were all very proud of the sashes bearing the red, white and green of the Italian flag that they wore. It was obvious that the two professional judges would not even bother to listen to their opinions.

The prosecutor was a young man undergoing his first experience in the Court of Assizes. Taking advantage of the excessive power which gave him a procedural position very similar to that of someone about to take a penalty kick at an open goal, and ignoring the rule of experience according to which in life, but especially in court, there is often a second round, he bullied my defence lawyer, who elegantly endured the excesses of the young prosecutor of the Republic under the sympathetic gaze of his friend the judge.

At the far end of the desk, in an asymmetrical position with respect to the judges, was the chancellor, an elderly man with an expert bearing whom everyone affectionately called Filippo. He took care of the minutes but also of the logistics and general functioning of the hearing.

In the far corner at the end of the area reserved for the public, beyond the balustrade, there was my father, almost hidden from the view of the Court but favourably exposed to my view. He never took his eyes off mine, ready to provide me with comforting looks each time I caught his eye.

Finally, without any right to be there but with the tacit approval of everyone, an elderly reporter sat on the rearmost bench taking notes with the stub of a

pencil in a gridded notebook. At the first hearing he also brought an old camera which he aimed at me and waited for the right moment to take a picture until, fed up, I turned towards him in a pose so that he could do what he had to do and get it over with. The photo found its way into the pages of the local crime section of the *Unione Sarda* newspaper for the duration of the trial, followed by the report of the hearings. It showed me inside the cage, my hands clutching the bars, an angry expression on my face and a threatening gaze directed towards the camera. I really did look like a killer.

3

The presiding judge took a brief roll call of the two sides and then read the accusation:

“Bardanzellu Emiliano, accused of the crime referred to in articles 575 and 577 of the criminal code for having caused the death of his spouse Martinelli Margherita by stabbing her in the back with a knife. Offence committed in Cagliari on July 15, 2005.”

Before the trial began, Margherita's relatives had let me know that they would initiate no civil case against me if I renounced any relationship with Umbertino, to whom I would have had to sign over all my assets, which consisted of the share of the apartment where we lived, and consented to the adoption of the child by my sister-in-law Elvira and her husband. It seemed to me the proper solution and I agreed to it: it would have made no sense to tie the creature to the man who had killed his mother and who, if by pure chance he didn't kill himself, would have to stay locked up in prison for who knew how many years. Better not tell him anything and let him lead a normal life, away from me. The first witness for the prosecution, like all good witnesses, was holding a rolled up newspaper in his hand. It was the carabinieri who had arrived at the apartment a few minutes after I had called the switchboard of the barracks and announced that I had killed my wife.

"The front door of the apartment was open onto the living room which was dark at that time: there was a shaft of light from the half-closed kitchen door. I entered and found the accused sitting on the ground with his back to the wall and his head in his hands, his torso swaying as if in a catatonic state. The victim's corpse was lying on her stomach on the ground in front of her husband, her face turned to the side with her eyes open and her feet pointing inwards. A smooth-bladed kitchen knife was sticking out between the shoulder blades of the woman, who was clad only in a petticoat. The refrigerator was open and there were some beaten eggs in a pan on the kitchen worktop. There was a surreal silence in the house. Only after a few minutes did we realize that a newborn was sleeping peacefully in a cot in his bedroom."

There followed the extremely professional technical testimony of a Carabiniere from the Forensic Services Unit, a handsome man but a little less charming than he thought, who took more than a quarter of an hour to illustrate the ways in which he had ascertained a self-evident fact, namely that my fingerprints were on the knife.

It was then the turn of the coroner, who said that there was no trace on the victim that would suggest a scuffle preceding the single stab wound that had caused death. The blade had penetrated the rib cage, going directly to the heart. Death had come almost immediately. He specified that the wound had been inflicted with great force.

Then it was the turn of Elvira, my sister-in-law. She was a stout woman; one of those cases when parents distractedly and unfairly distribute the graces between daughters, and every now and then it happens that one, in this case Margherita, gets the share of both. Elvira told with emotion and bitterness how Margherita fell in love with me during a summer vacation on the island of San Pietro.

"When she returned home, she informed the family gathered around the table for Sunday dinner that she intended to go and live in Sardinia, where she would marry a man with whom she had fallen madly in love. The news took everyone by surprise, especially because for over ten years Margherita had been the fiancée

of a former schoolmate and we had all believed that sooner or later they would start a family. With a coldness and determination she had never shown any sign of previously, however, she dumped her boyfriend, left her job as a cook in our father's restaurant and arranged to move to Sardinia, where she got married at the end of the year." Elvira paused for a moment, just long enough to turn around and deprive herself of the satisfaction of seeing me behind bars. "The wedding was the best day of her life and things continued to go well afterwards. Margherita adored Sardinia and Cagliari and the new house near the Poetto, where she took long walks in the company of her young husband who seemed charming and caring. One night she sent me a long and moving message that I still have where she wrote that she was happy, that the days went by pleasantly in a warm autumn with sepia hues, like in the old Pippi Longstocking TV show which we liked so much as children and where everyone, even the sweeper who cleaned the dung of the white horse, was happy."

Taking a deep breath, Elvira tried to hold at bay the emotion which revealed itself through a couple of coughs followed by tears. The presiding judge told the stenotypist to note on the record that the witness was crying. The chancellor handed a handkerchief to my sister-in-law who resumed speaking in a pained tone of voice. "Things changed drastically when Umberto was born. Margherita had abandoned everything to move to a city where she didn't know anyone except her husband. In my opinion, Emiliano was unable to accept that someone else to love had insinuated themselves into that perfect, exclusive relationship, and not being able to take it out on Umberto, he blamed his wife for neglecting him, not loving him anymore and even betraying him. My sister told me that she noticed in her husband's eyes an expression of increasingly severe reproach and an unnatural tension in his face, as if he were about to burst at any moment. Everything about her annoyed him, from the way she dressed to her Romagna accent, from her perfume to the smallest and most involuntary noise she made."

Elvira ended her testimony by recalling her phone call that had informed her of

h
e
r