

EZIO SINIGAGLIA

Eclipse

NUTRIMENTI

would break only for a second revealing a beam of light for a moment, mocking us. Kurtli explained in his best English, which was just about comprehensible, that they were used to cloudy skies there, it seemed the sun had been covered for centuries.

The first three days had been surprisingly pleasant even exciting. Akron had decided to give himself that voyage as a six month early seventieth birthday present. His last voyage he said to himself. His last chance to escape the loud and busy world to go out into the silence. And in that instant he went from an old tired man to a young boy again going on an adventure. His heart began beating faster with excitement and his eyes, already misty from the cold, began to well up, soaking his eyelashes like a spring shower in your hair. The humidity was what got to them. However, Akron was well protected by a heavy parka, windproof trousers and yellow wellington boots. He had a woollen hat that made his hair stick to his forehead when he removed it, giving him the appearance of someone who had applied far too much hair product. He also had different layers of tops and t-shirts underneath that he was able to remove or put on throughout the day depending on the temperature. It was the humidity that they needed to protect themselves from, more than the cold. The wind was surprisingly mild and the temperature changes went relatively unnoticed. It was a strong wind that blew up from the south-west causing the sound of slapping waves on the shores. There was a bitter-sweetness about the island like a goddess who is enemy and accomplice all at once. The air was fresh and clean, crisp almost like mineral water. I noticed the mist gathering on the chimney, wrapping around it. Yet everything was clean, even his bedroom with its wooden planks. The clouds, even the grey, mud colour of the sea, the earth with patches of melting snow, everything clean, to the point that the idea of dirt was a remote concept. Traffic was almost non-existent with just a distant rumble of trucks in the distance or the hum of boats passing to overwhelm the morning silence of the evening birdsong. The houses stood out around the port like coloured cubes of a child's game.

He walked on the bare ground, the uneven pavements and the grass, which in the rare bursts of light, gleamed like varnish on a wooden floor. Akron climbed up the rocks, so high as though he were trying to reach the birds. The strong wind exciting him and bringing tears of joy to his eyes as he started at the long distant, paths and the grass that disappeared into the horizon. Then he climbed down the other side, taking a different path where he could see a small village, a small group of multicoloured houses, built around the water's edge like teeth in an open mouth.

He felt tired and sat drinking hot coffee that was as light and clear as tea and for a moment longed to pick up his old habit of smoking. He asked a grumpy islander if there was a route back down that was longer but less rocky and dangerous, taking note of the sounds of his voice as he spoke in sharp and fluent English. His eyes were grey like the sky and his orders were dry and precise, 'on de right, de verst sdrit, nefer de levt, sdret on, you kant ket vronk.' The return journey was much shorter than expected. Akron was so comfortable there, that when the excitement had passed he went and sat in Min Hval's, waiting for a beer or smoked herrings, possibly roast lamb or cod. Without any company of distraction he started wondering, what was happening to him? He wondered if he had answered what he had gone there in search of.

Am I free?

I

His project, which was inexplicable even to him, was pointing into the darkness in order to be able to gather light. It was the most difficult and specific projects he had ever done in his life.

The event was due to occur on Friday morning, but Akron had made sure he arrived on the island on Sunday afternoon, well before the wave of amateur astronomers and tourists. He had to prepare everything carefully. First of all, he had to get his bearings and understand the development of the place, learn its climate and its capability to light up being about to turn total strangers into family, the unimaginable into the norm. And then, of course, he had to organize the outings, while guaranteeing himself absolute certainty the sight of those three minutes in dark and silent night.

His second request had been fulfilled with unexpected ease by Monday morning. His landlady, Mrs Hagan, had listened intently to his requirement and directed him to her uncle explaining in her very broken English that her uncle Kurtli was, 'the man from him.' And she was right.

Kurtli had a boat, like most men on the island, but he considered himself too old to take it out into the open sea every day like the others so it was one of the best along the small coastal, which tourists were often attracted to. In the winter the tourists never made it this far down the island especially in the evening, but Kurtli was already well informed on astronomy and did not seem at all surprised by the thought of all of them. Akron's program was approved immediately and finalized in detail. They agreed on a very reasonable fee, and scheduled the departure and return time: starting Friday at half past seven, and returning after noon.

They stood on the dock staring at the boat that they would travel in to a different jetty and an uncertain fortune, in roughly nine hours time. The sea's waves were light and would only be able to move the lighter boats. The red and blue fishing boat before them lay still in the water giving an occasional creak of wood and rope. Kurtli's eyes were like a mirror looking to the sky with its grey clouds blocking the blue sky. At time the clouds

That could not be the question. The key question that he had been searching for, rummaging through books and through his soul, hunting high and low through different networks. Surely he could not be so self-centred and petty. It was a mysterious question. Whose answer was, perhaps, hiding on the dark side of the moon.

Am I free?

Surely that could not be the question. It was a fair question to which a fair answer could be: it's not out of the question.

The anguish that every day for three years, had had him in a chokehold and woke him at night grabbing him by the throat, like a murderer, had subsided after a few hours of being on the island, and he had disconnected from everything complete. The very memory of Irene had eased a little, as if that island populated with men had taught him to comfort himself from his pain. Before that image had haunted him: it had not possible to escape even for a moment, because it had settled inside him in the form a merciless Fury, who would not forgive him for being alive. Now, for two days, Irene showed the first signs of surrender. They were strong symptoms, fast moving, that predicted an impending separation.

On Wednesday afternoon, while gazed from the top of a rock towards the indecipherable horizon that ran through the Atlantic along a northern route headed west, as if in search of Iceland that was nowhere to be seen, farther away than the Moon, Irene had appeared to him. She broke through one of those rare moments of joy like a dancing figure painted onto the side of a glass lamp. It was her, unmistakably, but she seemed unusually happy, inviting, even, her supple limbs healed. Akron smiled, but soon the tears, burdened by the unbearable weight of grief, began to fall, travelling down his cold cheek and falling to the ground.

Akron was fine. The only threats to his project were the clouds. But this was a threat he had expected, as the clouds, it is well known, are completely unpredictable. His only hope was that the sky on Friday morning would be calm. In the sky, the basalt raft was flung from side to side in the ocean towards the arctic. The weather changed ever hour, even every minute, from rainclouds to rain, to sun, to snow, to sleet and to light, like a game. If only there were a glimpse of blue sky on Friday morning, which it was clear, was quite unlikely as the weather forecast had been very vague. High winds from Thursday to Saturday it had said, just in time for the eclipse. It was at least reasonable to hope that the clouds would be clear and thin, but it was not worth getting anyone's hopes up. Everything now just depended on the kindness of the sky.

On Wednesday evening, about thirty-six hours to go before the big event, another unexpected and menacing threat appeared between the chairs and tables of Min Hval: it was Mrs Wilson.