

NICOLA ACCORDINO

WHEN
I WILL TALK
ABOUT
YOU

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*To my nephew David, who arrived suddenly
to brighten our lives.*

Prologue

I slowly crossed the living room, heading towards the exit. The silence in which the house was immersed was something foreign that didn't belong to me but that, I felt, would have been part of me for a long time. The same silence that had enveloped us in those last days, in which we dismantled all the happiness we had built up in those years. What I would have done with my life from then on remained a mystery. What was certain was that I could no longer stay, although only God knew how much I wanted to.

*"You can't leave!" the desperate scream came straight to my ears
"you can't do this!"*

I wanted to run and hug him, to dry his tears, to make him understand that I would never have done it if it had been up to me... but it wouldn't have done any good. I would have only prolonged an agony that was excruciating for both of us. So, hiding my tears, I went out, closing behind me the door of that castle of which I was king, prince and queen.

The return

It had been a slow two years since that day.

The board at the entrance to the huge waiting room in Fiumicino indicated that the luggage for the flight from Los Angeles would be delivered in twenty minutes. I sat waiting patiently, while other passengers piled along the stationary treadmill, as if being there in the front row added or detracted from their existence. I thought back to what had happened in my life over the past few years, how everything had collapsed in an instant, like a house of cards in a room where a rushing wind comes in through the wide-open windows.

I had waited in vain for a year for him to come back, but when it became clear to me that all was lost, I jumped at the chance to run away, seeking refuge in the land of opportunity, in that California so far away and different from the places where I had lived. All in vain: the pain chased me, tormenting me. After a year of useless pain, defeated, I decided to return. It had seemed like a good idea at first, but now that I was there, anxiety was gripping my heart in a vice.

Beatrice was waiting at the exit of the gate, holding a sign saying "*Welcome back uncle*". Francesco stood next to her and his face lit up as he met my gaze. I approached, weighed down more by the memories than the baggage. Despite their presence, the feeling of loneliness did not leave me. I stood still in front of my friend, eyes to eyes; when I dove into her safe arms, she welcomed me with a smile. Our bond, despite the passage of time and distance, had never loosened.

"How was your trip?"

"Fine," I said trying to smile, "But this little man can't be Francis!"

"What did you bring me from America?" he shouted, jumping up and down.

"Francesco, don't you think it's appropriate to say goodbye first?"

Beatrice resumed, contrite. He thought about it for a while before hugging me, placing a kiss on my cheek.

"Welcome back zione!"

We headed for the exit, immersed in the chaos of the airport. We walked in silence, dragging our trolley noisily. Beatrice was always ready to pick up the pieces of my existence whenever they fell apart. I had lost count of the number of times she had saved me.

Our friendship, born in elementary school, had never ended, even though she initially tolerated me more than loved me: for five years I had tormented her with letters full of hearts and drawings, phone calls home and other such things, ignoring her annoyed air and pleas to leave her alone, a new Romeo in search of Juliet, as if the rest of my life depended on this search. I was a very precocious child who played at love without yet understanding its rules. And who knows how much I was influenced by the soap operas of the eighties that I watched in the afternoons at home with my mother and from which I took ideas to torment my friend.

Luckily for her, my fixation disappeared in middle school, when I turned my morbid attention to someone else. Beatrice and I became friends, she listened to me and advised me, helping me to decipher the world around us, which I perceived as so alien to who I was. She protected me from others and from myself, always ready to immolate myself for anyone who showed just a little more kindness to me. Beatrice prevented me from embarking on empty adventures with people who were only ready to take advantage of my good nature. She was the only one who stood by me when, at the dawn of adolescence, I shut myself away and managed to make everyone dislike me, provoking the school bullies to get their reactions and play the victim. She often understood me more than my mother, more than my brother who should have been my accomplice, given the bond that existed between us. But only Beatrice had the patience and courage to listen to me and knew how to calm me down in the moments when the weight of my diversity was unbearable.

Our friendship underwent its strongest shock at the age of fifteen, when, to follow his father who had been promoted to Marshal, he moved to Genzano. I lived through that separation with immense

pain: we didn't have today's technologies yet and we wouldn't have been able to see or hear each other very often. The distance was short, but it seemed insurmountable, and I experienced it with immense pain. We filled that gap with letters and long phone calls that made our bond survive, but despite these palliatives, I began to feel the loneliness, especially when I realized that something in me was not going as it should. I was forced to face the changes in my body and the first sexual desires alone. I could confront my brother, of course, but I wasn't sure he would understand, I was afraid that the attraction I felt for boys could create problems. I kept silent with everyone, even Beatrice, for long years.

With her we would meet every summer for two weeks at the villa that grandmother Adele had bought in Ladispoli when grandfather Matteo, who suffered from a strong form of asthma, needed the sea air to cure himself. There we spent carefree and cheerful days, telling each other about our adventures in our respective cities. But even though we shared everything that was going on in our lives, I kept my secret to myself.

Until, after a painful journey, the psychologist I had to turn to advised me to confide in the people I loved the most. And Beatrice was the first on the list.

I remember it was hot and we were just lying on the beach. I had been trying to talk to her for days, but I didn't have the courage. Suddenly I looked into her eyes and the words came on their own.

"I need to tell you something..."

"Go ahead and shoot," he replied, looking at me intently.

"I'm gay, at least I think so..."

A long silence descended, interrupted by the sound of the waves breaking on the shoreline. Beatrice got up and headed towards the sea. I feared that she was leaving, that she didn't want to know me anymore, that she wanted to give up our friendship. Then she turned around and smiled at me.

"So that's what's been bugging you for days... Well, I guess that means I'll have one more reason to hang out with you!"

"Maybe it bothers you?"

"Well, it's not that light..."

"I shouldn't have told you, I knew it. I was afraid it would end like this. You wouldn't want to be my friend anymore. But I get it, I'm not good like this either. I'm wrong, everyone's right..."

She widened her eyes, which filled with tears. Then she took my hands between hers, squeezing them tightly.

"You've got to be kidding! I'll never leave you, you're like a brother to me!"

"Really?"

"Did you have any doubt that was the case?" he said with a sigh "you are not wrong and never let anyone tell you that you are. It's not important where you find love, what's important is knowing how to recognize it."

I smiled at that memory as we went to meet Fabio, Beatrice's husband and my twin brother. It was a joy for me to know that, after years of acquaintance and simple friendship, an unthinkable passion had broken out between them. He had confessed this to me on the way back from one of the trips that the three of us used to take together, at least once a year. He was afraid that this might bother me, but the news made me happy, not only because two of the people I loved the most were in love, but because that union sealed a ten-year friendship, bringing into the family the person I had always considered a sister.

On the drive from Fiumicino to their home, Beatrice and Fabio tried to fill the silence with the latest news from the city, while Francesco proudly showed me a coloring book depicting his favorite characters. It took us almost an hour to reach our destination, near the *Opita Oppio* metro stop on *Tuscolana*. I followed them as they thoughtfully showed me where to set up, and I felt gratitude for how much they were doing for me at such a difficult time. I also thought of my parents, who were partly unaware of what was happening: my father hadn't spoken to me in years and my mother... well, despite the fact that she had once said that "*a son is always a son*", she continued to have masses celebrated for my soul and to light candles to Our Lady. They still knew me in America, or at least, my

mother did. I doubted very much that Dad cared about what was happening to me.

While I was unpacking, Francesco told me in great detail about his school life, his friends and his problems. Listening to him, I thought about how time was passing and running impetuously, overwhelming emotions, dreams and desires. Fabio, on the other hand, went straight to sleep and I thought it was better that way; I still didn't feel comfortable talking open-heartedly in his presence, even though I had never lacked his support, not even in front of Dad's diktats. And that was very important to me. It was just me, Beatrice and Francesco.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know yet, I have to regroup even though I already have some ideas."

Tears were knocking at the doors of my eyes and my breathing became heavier as I collapsed on the bed. Francis sat next to me, hugging me.

"Uncle, can I sleep with you tonight?"

"Uncle is tired, maybe tomorrow..." said Beatrice.

I understood that in that moment he was unconsciously reaching out his arms towards my tortured heart. In his eyes I saw so much sweetness and affection: he perceived my pain and that was his way of helping me. I looked at Beatrice and then at him in a movement of immense love that I thought impossible to feel.

"Sure, as long as you don't kick me," I replied, smiling, as he went skipping off to put on his pajamas.

I entered the kitchen in silence. Grandma was in her rocking chair on the balcony. I walked over and sat down next to her, giving in to the lure of that placid sunset.

"Do you like this house?" he asked suddenly.

"I've had so many good times within these walls."

"I thought I'd leave it with you when I'm gone."

"Come on, Grandma, don't say that! Besides, you know I'm leaving soon, what good would that do me?"

"I want these doors no one can slam in your face. Ever."

"What are you talking about Grandma, who should do this?" I asked in amazement.

"Your father, when he finds out about you, you'll see. I know him all too well."

He had it all figured out, but the flowery smile on her lips melted away all fear.

"I may not be there physically to help you, but this house will be your home base and I will always be waiting here with open arms."

When I woke up the next morning, it took me a while to understand where I was, then I remembered everything. The journey, the tears, the goodbyes... Smiles lost in time, faces never forgotten. I immediately thought back to the dream. It was no coincidence. Grandma Adele was watching over me, I could feel it, and she was inviting me to return to the only place I could truly call home.

In the kitchen Beatrice was preparing Francesco's backpack and was surprised to see me.

"Good morning, we're early risers! Did you get a good night's sleep?"

"Quite."

"I can imagine...Francis sometimes kicks like a mule! He's always had that propensity."

Just then my smiling nephew walked in and sat down next to me. I was happy with how close we were, despite seeing each other so infrequently.

Shortly afterwards Fabio arrived, ready to leave. He would have accompanied him to school, thus leaving Beatrice time to be with me. He knew how much I needed it. Before leaving with his backpack on his shoulder, my nephew turned around with lively eyes and, looking at me intently, asked me:

"Uncle, why are you alone?"

I knelt down trying to hide the pain of that answer I owed him.

"Unfortunately, the others couldn't make it this time..."

"And when will they come?"

"I don't know honey" I replied hugging him to hide my tears.

Characteristically, Francis was the picture of his mother. When my

brother, two weeks after my arrival in Munich, told me that I was going to be an uncle, my heart exploded with joy. I was so elated and happy about that happy event! It was a bolt out of the blue: they were not yet married and this really upset my father while my mother, who knew how difficult it was to raise a child, especially in such a "particular" situation, feared the worst misfortunes. The fact that they were not married was at first a source of shame in front of the bigoted population of the country. But then, in a few days and after endless discussions about a possible *reparatory marriage* to which the boys were strenuously opposed, tempers calmed down and we all began to look forward to the arrival of the new member of the family.

My parents went into grandparent mode pretty quickly. Especially my father who did nothing but tell everyone with pride. This sudden change didn't surprise me too much: Fabio was the favorite son. He could have even become a serial killer and always been justified by my parents. I wasn't angry with my brother for this, he himself would have gladly done without that privilege that in the end had ended up nailing him to responsibilities he didn't want, becoming with time the only depository of their trust, of course, but also the first person they turned to for help.

None of us was happier with Francesco's arrival than Grandma Adele: she longed for a great-grandson to pamper. She couldn't enjoy him for long, but I knew that from up there she was always watching over him.

When we were alone, Beatrice sat down next to me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," I replied wiping away my tears, "now I just have to face my mother."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I have to. I've put it off long enough."

I dialed the home phone number with a trembling hand, hoping and fearing that Dad would answer. His harsh voice still echoed in my head, his rejection and anger tormented my soul.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom," I said in an uncertain voice.

"Ah, is that you? How are you? Isn't it the middle of the night at your place?" I sensed he was stepping outside, perhaps to get away from prying ears.

"It's okay, I'm with Beatrice."

"I didn't know they were planning to come to America!"

"Mom," I sighed, "it's me at their place."

"Well, and you tell me just like that?" I could feel her holding back the joy of that news; after all, she was still my mother and knowing I was so far away didn't please her.

"And how long will you stay? Will we be able to see each other?"

"Very long, maybe forever."

She sighed. I knew that at the first opportunity she would come to see me. Our meetings were always fleeting and clandestine. She usually moved to Rome, to avoid that someone could see us together in the village and tell dad, who surely wouldn't have taken it well. For him, I had lost any right to set foot within ten kilometers of home.

"Are you staying with Fabio?"

"No, I plan to fix up Grandma Adele's house."

"It's not going to be easy. It's going to take time and money."

"Fortunately, I don't miss either."

"All right. What do you need?"

"Dad has the keys, do you think you can get them for me?"

"That's going to be hard, I don't know where he hid them. You might want to break down the door and amen."

My mother had been living in a precarious balance for years, trying to save goats and cabbages. Dad wanted nothing to do with me or anything to do with me, including his own parents' old house. Mom had to keep in touch with me in secret, risking her wrath if she was found out. Our relationship survived in a strange dichotomy: on the one hand, her strong maternal instinct pushed her towards me, but a bigoted religious idea pushed her away. It wasn't long before she, too, denied me. When I had told her about the emotional tsunami that had overwhelmed me, I knew that in her heart she was thanking Our Lady for having heard her prayers and that, as soon as the communication was over, she would have run to light yet another

candle to the statue she kept in her room, perhaps hoping that I would finally come to my senses. That's how she was, divided and torn between the desire to hold me close to her and her duties towards a god she couldn't see but worshipped. In those years of loneliness I missed her support, her embrace, her smile, but I tried not to pay attention to it, now strengthened by the trials I had faced and the much evil received from those who had promised to love me.

We talked for a while longer and I waited for him to tell me something about Dad, but his silence was more than telling.

I put the phone back in my pocket, sinking into the couch. In that house, within those walls, sweet and sad memories assailed me. I saw children playing and chasing each other happy and carefree, I felt in my hands other hands to hold. I cried at the memory of happy moments that seemed to belong now to the life of another.

"I had so many hopes and dreams...I imagined graduation day, the pride with which I would tell other parents about it. But instead now...do you think I'll ever see him again?"

"I think so," said Beatrice hopefully.

"What if it doesn't?"

"You'll see that as soon as he's old enough to understand, he'll come looking for you."

"I hope so my friend. The way she looked at me when I left.... I'll never forget that. Do you think I should have fought harder? Did I give up too quickly?"

"Sometimes you have to retreat when there is no other way left."

I knew this, but it was no consolation. Beatrice hugged me and I melted into a painful and liberating cry.

