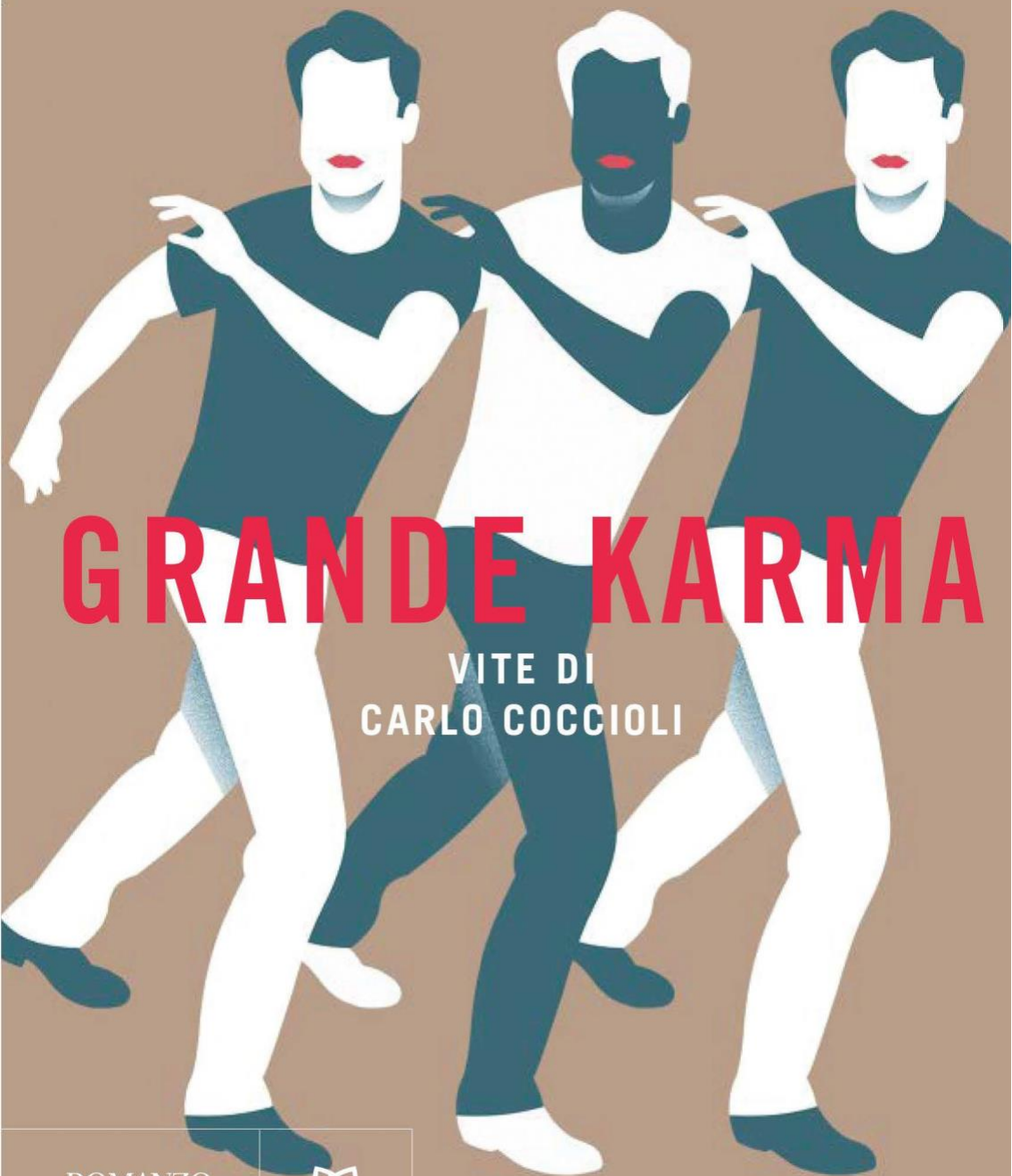


ALESSANDRO RAVEGGI



GRANDE KARMA

VITE DI
CARLO COCCIOLI

ROMANZO
BOMPIANI





ALESSANDRO RAVEGGI
GREAT KARMA
THE LIVES OF CARLO COCCIOLI

translated from the Italian
by Sarah Victoria Barberis

SAMPLE COPY

BOMPIANI

Be evanescent, fleeting as a cloud
Jean CoCteau to Carlo CoCCioli

The purpose

...because one runs away from so many, so many things already. One escapes domestic seasons that have turned into a lukewarm soup; one escapes the habits of a bus stop, knowing timetables and delays by heart; one escapes the tedium of a father's desk, even when one has been playing around there since childhood. And one flees adventure, love, even death. Decisions that are too big, those taken for granted. Is that why I flee from our maps?

The main thing, Dina, is that finally someone or something, before me, runs away, gets blurred. I think I shouldn't let go of it, I have to run into this kind of unknown night.

I go after Him, because He's deliberately chosen to escape.

Although there is no grace - perhaps mad devotion - in his escape... An absolute need to stumble, to stutter, wells up within him - they say, that he really stuttered, with his words, as well as with his body. He is a man insanely determined to fail, to constantly fall. This is what fascinates me most, the self-harm of the Man, reflected on everything he has done, said, written, touched and spoiled with his own hands: his hands - like those of an African child - , hands scratched by the brambles like those of a broken Italian partisan, the hands emaciated and euphoric of a French writer, those relaxed and placed in a meditative pose, joined thumbs with index fingers, the Mexican Buddhist, and especially those of the lover ...

*Placed on the chest, feeling the heart. Which, at a certain moment, gives in. Carlo Coccioli, you asked? He's all this and more, a thousand con-
versions.*

But then he did something permanent, not stammering, thing that we all have to do in the end: he gave in. He died about ten years ago, August 5, 2003, because of a complication in his already complicated heart.

"How come you're chasing the dead, at this point?" you'll ask.

(I imagine you, in front of your veranda, with the countryside watching over you, doubting of you, while the laurel leaves imperceptibly crumple up. You're just waiting for my holy answer, let it come as sure as winter will come).

"...chasing the dead, the ghosts, at this point, eh?," you'll repeat in awe before that green wall that protects you.

"And where is your holy philology?" You'll think of me as a fool, Dina.

Today, I feel like this, very foolish, to believe in certain reincarnations, to want to run into this dark night of mine, which is called: Carlo the Madman, Carlo the Guru, Carlo the Heretic, Carlo, Coccioli.

I surely am foolish now, because I'm writing to you about this, lightly and poorly. Because I insist on sending you handwritten letters - indulging in just a few vague messages on the phone - letters as messages in a bottle, using the very slow Mexican Mail: two months at least, they told me, at least, to deliver a letter, if they don't lose it...

You run away from so many things, love, or, better yet, things sometimes run away from you.

The risk is ending up alone, even if surrounded by a thousand attentions. As he was, and so am I - my folks waiting for me, the rest of you on the other side of the valley, far away and waiting, but you are present, the only certainty, you, asking me to take a step that is enormous and is mine at the same time. He was instead a lonely man, who has taken many enormous steps. A man who wandered in a stereoscopic solitude, thinking that was the face of freedom. Far from his roots, uncatchable. Or as he wrote to his nephew Marco, in a dedication: "anywhere out there in the world."

I'm in that "out there". I compare my anxieties to the sangfroid of the world.

Yours, Enrico

E. C.

a

D. B.

Gardens of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México,
Ciudad de México, 13/09/2013

THE DOG TRACK

I've been driving indolently for an hour on the motorway towards the city of Querétaro: I'm expecting to see a dead dog on the road. If it's lucky, I'll avoid it. Otherwise, somehow, I'll interrogate it. The sun cuts the horizon in two exact copies, one made of misty sky, and the other of asphalt mixed with dust. So I expect to see a dog carcass at every side of the road, but this does not define my state as euphoric, nor as introspective. I only coldly follow the dog track, which is a spotty trail among the clues that Carlo left me. I'm looking for his former assistant Javier. I wander around, as if digesting the route, stopping at the refreshment points, located near the small villages along the highway. I'm really careful not to plow into the campesinos, who climb faster than me over the very low guardrails, trespassed by animals of all sizes, to reach their fields and cultivate: sack of potatoes or tools on their shoulders, baseball cap placed on the hooked nose, contemporary Aztecs.

Javier, where are you? In addition your stray dogs are out of sight, Javier.

Chickens, foxes, desert rodents splattered on the asphalt aplenty, but you can't see the dogs.

It's as if they vanished into thin air, poof.

- Like angels... creatures hovering between heaven and earth... innocent and captured in all their pain - Carlo would have said, if he were still alive. Poor buggers.

- Angels flying away, poof. From this *Kaliyuga*, from this entangled world - he would have added, in his orange Hare Khrisna robe.

- No pureness ... in this infamous world, equals that of the meek and gentle eyes of a dying animal ... - he would then continue, quoting one of his most successful books. That book of his, handed down for quite a while from reader to reader, his *Requiem for a dog*. It is dedicated to one of his dead dogs, to the memories, forlorn and magnificently naive, flowing out of their relationship of fidelity and spiritual communion.

- But be careful not to run them over, holy mother of God! - would now scream instead, with absolute animism, revealing a Florentine accent as if it were a Menelik's language. He would point out to all that animality, which, seen from inside this rental car cockpit, surrounds me, swarming: the ants, the scorpions, the worms, the snakes, the various earthworms, that my wheels are bursting into a thousand sizzling pieces. No spiritual communion for me.

- You animals, my dearest, have not been poisoned by the fruit of the Forbidden Tree...

The face of Carlo Coccioli, that appears before my eyes every now and then, as if floating in the scorched air of Mexico. Tears in his eyes under the wide lenses, which reflect them as if they were big boundless lakes.

Surrounding the road I drive, I am magnetically drawn to the heat and the barren, light coffee-coloured landscape of provincial Mexico. At times it reminds me of the Sardinian backcountry. The sun now spreads everywhere, like an icing reflected by the few marshes. The sky

beneath it is wider, it's an American sky, stereoscopic. Almost a week ago the rainy season ceased, and perhaps the brightest and most significant period of the year is approaching, where, having left behind the Mexican capital, the skin burns and the typical colors of these areas, the colors of the houses, which are those of craftsmanship - which are those of the fabrics of the markets, and those of fruit and sauces on chicken and tortillas, and toys sold at traffic lights by the very poor vendors ... - stand out and blend together with the arrival of winter.

A suspended time, terribly bright, here.

I'm convinced that Javier, Carlo's last assistant, has saved many of his dogs, these days.

And in much worse times, under the Mexican summer rains that now, with autumn, are finally over - strange asymmetries of tropical countries. I am convinced of this, because I could tell he was very busy, distracted, abrupt on the phone. Until the moment when he practically interrupted our already precarious communications. The young recorded voice announced to me coldly that his cell phone number was... non-existent. Nonexistent? I was beginning to wonder if Javier himself was like a ghost, non-existent, flimsy.

- Javier, can you hear me, huh?

- *Ahorita no puedo, querido. Hablamos luego...* (And then nothing)

Luego, he sends me back to "luego": which here means, I learned the hard way... in two minutes, in my next life, maybe never. *Hasta luego*, which really means "See you in hell".

I can see him now, the Inexistent Assistant Indio Javier, at his impromptu, clandestine operating table, unaware that I'm looking for him. He's bandaging a bloody paw for a labrador, he's giving a schnauzer the lethal injection that will save him from a death of gloomy suffering, dozing him off in a milky sea of divinity and non-being (Coccioli talking in my head, with his sophisms, again).

Meanwhile I stop, park, stretch my legs a bit swollen by the almost circular monotony of the journey.

I enter a refreshment point, a typical shabby Mexican diner whose atmosphere is apparently dominated by reddish plastics, apathetic jugs containing water sweetened with tamarind, watermelon. The smell in the air though is that of the enfrijoladas sitting on the display case, rotting. I learned to recognise it after these inertial months, struggling to pick up the scattered fragments of a life, dangling like a mouth full of rotten teeth, here and there: Carlo's life.

I ask the lady at the counter for a Tecate in a can, a modest beer, a favourite of sportsmen and American football fanatics, from El Paso upwards. - How far is the ranch de la Favorita, *señora*? - I ask the bartender, her Navajo face, her low, wedged eyes, her bison eyes, her non-existent breasts, nowhere to be seen.

- *Quince* more... - she reasons - fifteen kilometers, then you take the little *carretera* de Santa Maria Xolotz to the right... - and she throws a nahuatl name in my face, which I can hardly pronounce, because of the ics and the numerous Z's, as if they were shattered in my throat into sharp little shards.

But I celebrate, with another sip of a really bad Tecate beer: I managed to escape from the Capital, as I wanted. It's not an easy feat, not even that one.

Above all, I escaped from the ghosts of a seemingly innocuous, tacky and old-fashioned house. Carlo Coccioli's house-museum, crammed with ghosts, as if it had been built for that purpose.

Calle Obrero Mundial.

Go to number 165, if it's not closed, or already dismantled.

And perhaps I am still there, held hostage by some exalted people who rave about God as their principal. And this is just me ranting. I am telling my story only to save my life, or to justify it, so as not to take the next false step.

After many magnetically wasted months in Mexico - quite easy, here, to waste time, it's made of steps that seem to be taken backwards, coincidences and other people's nicotine, dialogues twisted with mescal... Now: I have decided to get on one miserable trail! - and I should say it, with capital letters: The Dog Trail, and it would certainly please Carlo if I obsess about it a little bit too.

As if Carlo Coccioli's novels had already shown it to me, traces on the mud, or among the hair of his own dogs, written in a flea ballet: - Follow the dogs, all the dogs you find in my books, and you will get to Javier. And with a little luck, even for the final purpose of this journey of yours - Carlo whispers once again in my ear. The Great Karma.

So I should follow them: Fiorino, Fiorello, Oliver, Benjamin, the very first dog Gec, the thousand dogs of his characters and his books, Maximus the Spinone Italiano, Minimus the Maltese Dog, from the very strange and restless novel "Le case del lago", and all the many canids one encounters in his stories. Each one with his own weaknesses and virtues, each one dying and then reborn like an angel, flying away, scratching fleas under his ears, or rather under his wings. I am faced with a strange cabal of angelic dog names to find the enigma, the book that perhaps doesn't even exist: what Carlo calls the Great Book, or precisely: Great Karma. The last unpublished and untraceable text by the equally untraceable writer Carlo Coccioli, the news would have claimed.

I sometimes imagine it as an empty box, like a magician, where you put your hand first, then your arm, then your whole body. And then you disappear.

BECAUSE I LOVE HER

Maybe because I'm on my way, or still standing. Or maybe because I'm moving, or I haven't moved at all. Right now I'm moving, accelerating, pressing on the gas pedal in the middle of the road, or I'm eternally sitting in this diner or in the room where they kidnapped Carlo, in his house, decorated with his memorabilia. It must be because everything revolves around me, and I manoeuvre it, as if I were the pivot of a wheel. Or, on the contrary: I'm the spinning top, and the world around me is always the same. As I accelerate, I change faces, or faces change me. Or, even worse: it's some kind of swing, a *columpio*, as he would put it.

Up and down, nothing always on top, nothing always at the bottom, the illusionary speed on a fixed lever.

The laughter of a naive child, blended with the jerks of his adult stomach panic.

Elevation and immersion, momentum, then abjection.

The *columpio*. The swing.

- *No es cierto* - he would say, shaking his round head, squeezing his little eyes a little bit. We giggle together this time.

- It's not exactly sure, Carlo, you're right - I would say.

A man's life is exactly what you and I are doing right now: detours, reverses, curves, u-turns, any conceivable road sign, he once told a fictitious interviewer he himself invented.

The road sign is punctured by gunshots.

Other cars roll rather than travelling on the steep highway to Querétaro.

On Mexican highways, there are signs indicating junctions where you can go bury yourself with your crazy car on an ad hoc route, which gently curbs the wheels to a bump. Safe now.

Me, with the Mivar portable tv transmitting the weather forecast and my blue plastic plate, with the crumbs of a quesadilla, I collect, one by one, with the crumbles of my mind every untraceable hypothetical piece of a disproportionate, inane, literary production. Not mediocre, obviously, but sometimes naive, unreasonable, let's say, I almost drown in it. But it is also the life of Carlo, calling me, with his demented back-drop, with his air of Siddhartha, a saint, but also a clown, a jester who flees from the court, to court God, or his many Idols.

- Have I deceived you? - asked Carlo, in his meditation booklet called *Little Karma*, that really created a little cult.

- Have I deceived you as well, Enrico? - A small voice, perhaps his, has been ringing in my head for days now, as I imagine it to be. Grandma-like, smooth, sometimes choked, with a Tuscan gruff, my harmless guru. I think about my guru, and I reluctantly gulp down more lousy Tecate. I see myself happily seated, at the Sunday mass, in the Church of S. Gervasio in the Campo di Marte district of Florence - I attend it because I was invited by my professor and mentor, Paolo Merendoni, more than for a real affection for service. And now, myself, chasing a heretic who followed a different church, a different parish every year....

- *Coccióli*? - I exclaimed loudly, with the wrong accent, before Merendoni.

- Yes, Enrico, you must present something about this author, and quickly: *Carlo Còcciolli*. Within a few months. This year is the tenth anniversary of his death. There could be a lot of money in it for a conference, you have to take the opportunity of decades, centenaries, four-centenaries... Do you get it? It's absolutely... a M-U-S-T-D-O. In fact, you should start right away. And then see where it goes. If it goes. But it has to go, you know, you know! But now, it's time to go! - he glossed like a Rossinian opera character.

Prof. Merendoni, alternating formalities and informalities. That alternation of pats on the head and threats, caresses and grit, a.k.a. Paolo Merendoni: Ph. D., Emeritus, Visiting, Chair, etc. in a plethora of American and London and Australian and Asian universities. He is the scholar with whom I trained since my early academic days, with whom I cut my teeth through the meticulous scrutiny of thousands of exams and essays during my doctorate, the mature man I have accompanied to dozens and dozens of sumptuous dinners in the Tuscan hills, and even, him being very emaciated, blood tests - which turned out to be a renal complication that was no small thing - Paolo, mephistophelesque, admired, feared and paternal, whom I persuaded, adulated, pursued for endless projects, and even followed, in recent years, to his parish in Campo di Marte. Perhaps he was in the grip of a spiritual fire as he was growing older, and I was in the grip of the opposite, of the icy terror of growing old and never taking his place... now, all of a sudden, he turns against me, with this author, almost unknown to most people!

Of *Coccióli*, or *Còcciolli* I had only read that *Little Karma. Minutiae* etc. written in Texas, which had the effect on me of a lavender soap: a smelling sensation of an over-scented loo, with the impression

of wanting to forget every naive thing in there, even that madness of his on Disney World, which the writer Pier Vittorio Tondelli liked so much. Who had said: well, here's a nice satori on Mickey Mouse!

A satori?

Coccioli had compared Mickey Mouse to a totipotent Hindu deity at the end of a hallucinatory mystical journey in Disney World in Orlando, Florida, as if he had been foraged in the quest by Timothy Leary himself. The lysergic journey of a lucid man, during which Coccioli had let himself be toured among the thousand attractions, among pirates, animals and other puppets for children, but he had witnessed several times the *Face of Truth*. In closing Coccioli wrote: *Buddha won't be offended if I feel tempted to put a photograph of Mickey Mouse in red shorts and black tailcoat together with the thousand and one Buddha.*

- Perhaps you would like to work on Tondelli, Paolo? With a comparative approach, I could... - I was clinging to the chair, raising the collar of my shirt like a rooster.

- What Tondelli-and-Tondelli. Tondelli is OUT-OF-DATE. Dr Capponi have you in fact ever read this Mr Coccioli?

- No - I replied - not all of it, to be honest... just one, halfway through, a quarter - I raised my little finger - but in a comparative approach... - I insisted.

- Peace! You will do it along the way. Listen to me, Capponi: Coccioli was a young author of a certain importance in Florence after the war, he used to work, underpaid, at the Vallecchi publishing house. Previously, he was even a partisan, he talked about his experience in his first novels, very strange at a time when everybody was expected to "speak", indeed, of partisans: he instead spoke of priests, restless priests with a penchant for exorcism. Can you imagine? For obscure reasons, after winning an Italian prize he went to Paris, where he got

in good with some large publishers, including the Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel. In Paris, he published some decadent books in French, for amazingly important publishers, of which we know nothing here in Italy. Then, for reasons once again unknown, he moved to... Mexico City. There, he started publishing in Spanish, writing for some local newspapers - some claim they are prestigious, but we talk about Mexican newspapers, Enrico... He got famous for the scandalous book *Fabrizio Lupo* as well as for his many religious conversions, we could say that he still boasts a huge number of fanatics, among writers, apparently... and an almost nil number of fans, among academics. That's all - he took a breath.

- Am I supposed to help replenish the latter?

- Let's just say there's plenty of room for intervention. In Coccioli, listen Enrico - he started reading as if from scattered notes - there is God combined with sex, there is homosexuality, there is a certain spiritual labour of our age. There are the suffering animals, animalism, maybe you will also find some... veganism, a soy hamburger here and there, and yes, Pope Francis, of course, as a Latin American! - laughed Merendoni, because of the demented joke.

- Added all together, in a somewhat incoherent way, tailored to irritate the do-gooders, the self-righteous; we talk about forty works, try wrap your mind around it... - he concluded.

- And why me? - I pleaded.

- To pay a philological tribute to this mania, in a SE-LF-LE-SS way.

- Selflessly?

- You don't have a care in the world, nor money or family. If we can get some money out of the business, it'll benefit your next position. If all goes well. And you know ... YOU-MUST-GO, you know! And now, you must leave now. The tenth anniversary, remember. The tenth anniversary. Go!

- Okay, Paolo, God forbid!

- What are you still doing here, huh?

- I'm just gathering my thoughts. First I need to call home. It won't be easy. Thank you, for the opportunity...

- Oh, and one more thing, Dr. Capponi, forget the comparative approach. This is you and Coccioli. Facing each other.

So I would go down the hills of Siena, my Colle, camouflaged with happiness in autumn. I used to take my SITA Colle-Poggio-Firenze bus every Monday, stay in Florence for a week, after some moderately decent Sunday routine at home. My quiet demons surrounding me, dawn till dusk, the Florentine glories: dearest authors, close as family members, and just as close there were minor characters, ever present: the Parronchi, the Bigongiari, then there was Romano Bilenchi (if you're born in Colle, you always return to Colle, Enrico!), then Viani, the poet Luzi, a futurist hint of that crazy Ardengo Soffici and Papini...

Now I'm on the hunt for Carlo Coccioli's poison.

- Religiously speaking, you are a poison; but if the poison was revealed in full, perhaps it would be healthy... - a Ligurian priest once told him.

And what do I find healthy in all this?

Enough time to avoid thinking about my betrothed Dina's sudden proposal of marriage. Procrastinating my return home, in the bureaucratic embrace of my father, heir to the thousand-year-old lands of the noble Capponi dynasty. Little he supported my academic feats - Do we really need such a job? - and much more interested in forming alliances with the other nobility, represented by Dina's family: the Buoninsegni, prosperous visionary entrepreneurs, owners of half Colle, winemakers, hoteliers, restaurateurs, with a touch of loansharking, a

mild one, of course. The Future is in their hands, noble and carefree, and I too, with my father, my tiny mother, crushed between the papers of another notarial deed.

- Go ahead, Dr. Capponi, you have the skills, more than everyone else among your colleagues. They're hanging by a thread, prey to odd jobs, waiting for the next research grant, eager for my next attempt to scrape together bread crumbs for them. They can't afford it. Traveling will even cool your head - Merendoni told me, sensing my hesitancy as well as my subtle guilt, while I buy a flight to Mexico City, and I ask for confirmation of pending reimbursements.

You are a poison, Coccioli; but if the poison were to be revealed in full, maybe it could be healthy, that Ligurian priest told him.

This dissonant journey verbally sponsored by Merendoni, has such little meaning today, so little *philology* after all: my sense of *selfless love* is linked to the deep care I now devote to observing that lizard there... crossing the cracked road as if after an eruption, observe it cut by a car, follow its little body breaking on the glass of the diner where I am sitting, splat. There are several malicious reddish marks on this window. Small and terrible details, annoying mosquitoes, injected with other people's blood, one could follow each one though.

I clench my fists, tip over in the car after paying the Navajo lady of the diner, push the accelerator pedal, after starting the engine.

I then get out at the exit indicated by the Navajo woman earlier.

I find myself on a dirt road without decelerating, the bumps seem healthy, because they keep me awake.

I take another look at the Mexican landscape. Once again, it seems to me monotonous rather than wild, although it has acquired a bit of greenery and luxuriance. A different nuance of green from the green of the hills of Colle: goodbye, I said, when I returned to the family home, just to pick up a travel bag, and receive the last reprimands of my loved ones. Today I think of you with an empty and cloying nostalgia.

- Do you have to go over there? And do what? Won't this trip be dangerous? Have you read the papers? - Sai my tiny mother, when she got old she became small, feeble, taciturn, and troubled by a few personal evils. Mom, who talks less and less, they say, don't you think? And out there, a whole world she doesn't even seem to consider: delightful little villages, gentle fogs of a mild winter, a school bus that runs along the railway and then climbs up a small road covered in wisteria.

- You're a fool. Are you going to Mexico? They'll cut heads off there, that's for sure. You're a big dummy - Mom and Grandma squawked again.

- You, I mean, you! To Mexico! They'll eat you alive, eh... - my dad added, from behind the newspaper he was reading on the terrace.

With a certain contempt on Sundays, he usually says to me, elbows set on the cleared tablecloth: - Here, keep the cultural insert, you like to waste time on it.

But it was he, my father, who now despised culture, who made me “waste time”, that is to say, to take an indicated path to make me what I am. Me, who had attended the *liceo classico* of Colle, who had been around the intellectual circles of Colle, who had entered the Florentine graces and dusty salons of luminaries, philologists and archaeologists of knowledge - who often received me in their nightgown, in sports overalls, even in pyjamas without gown, some even in boxers or swimsuits. I remember a meeting in Viareggio, in swimsuit, of our Association of Doctoral students, with Mr. Paolo Merendoni who bullied young scholars, performing youngish somersaults on the beach, taking his breath with confidence as he resurfaced from his feat. And all of us: bravo, bravo, great Paolone!

On that bus to Florence and beyond, I felt like a teenager again, filled with impetuosity and imaginary pimples. I had said goodbye to my mother-grandmother at Colle, as if I had had to leave for the military, with a bag full of odd things. Mother had remained in the hall before the door slammed on her face unintentionally, like a scene cut in the movies. - Be careful - she had told me almost tinged with sadness and age by the darkness of the hallway - as your father tells you, in Mexico, they cut the heads off and then dump them in the garbage, you know.

Dear Mom, I want you to know that in Mexico there are no garbage cans, like in Italy. Because garbage is a bargaining chip, they literally steal it from you, sell it to the highest bidder. Signed: Yours Enrico. I'd like to write that to you now.

So here he goes, Capponi jr., ideally free from the past as a backward teenager, towards Florence and beyond, on the bus. Then I would have taken another bus, checked in at the Pisa airport, passing

by a treadmill, and caught a connecting flight to Frankfurt, via a shuttle train, and would have entered directly, after more than 11 hours, into the crater of Mexico City: the giant mouth stretching as far as the eye could see, like a big carcinoma.

What about my research? Just scattered notes, just a quick run to the National Library of Florence, with its more than 130 volumes volumes... novels, memoirs, speeches, translations, idle works made by Carlo Coccioli himself, or by friends, to whom I had dedicated a few distracted weeks of reading. I had read them superficially and immediately set them aside, determined to do research that I could have defined “by ear”, looking for dusty traces: a palaeontologist, more than philologist. A palaeontologist in a hurry.

The first very long journey felt like a long yawning in the exhausting fixity of the shared screen of the Lufthansa airplane, where you could enjoy German cartoons and subsequently movies with Richard Gere. A very long journey in which Coccioli, knowing him as I think I know him only now, would surely have found some little Zen outlet. He would have found the coldness of the German stewardess somehow pleasant, he would have sung the sensual praises of a Palestinian steward, comparing him to a Hindu Dionysus, or to his King David inebriated by passion as at the beginning of his book *Davide*, an imaginary biography of the King of the Jews.

Carlo would have looked at that transparent sky solaced by the clouds of Greenland over which we passed, and he would have rambled about God: he would have listened to the dangerous creaking of the Boeing over Florida, and he would have spoken of that “finger of God” that played with him too often, in his opinion. Or he would have quoted, not the finger, but the saying, of Mohammed: *Heaven creaks, as it should, for there is no space in it for a foot that is not occupied by a prostrate or bowed angel.*

The sky creaked, as well as me and the plane, but then it braked vigorously, landing dangerously on the runway in Mexico City. The Mexican megalopolis was a shattered robot, it seemed like entering the room of a six-year-old boy who had scattered his toys around. Then I had a long wait at customs with hardened limbs, I had to look for a taxi, my attempts with Spanish. All in all, it hadn't been difficult to communicate with the taxi driver, passing on the directions. But above all, I asked him to turn off that infernal tropical music, full volume, skull-searing, filling the cockpit. And then the potholes, the bollard kerbs, it felt more like riding a horse than a car. The hiccups of the taxi created its route, more than rationally following a set path.

- *Primera vez aquí?* - asked the taxi driver with a robotic Spaniard.

- *Yes, amigo* - I answered.

- And what are you doing here?

- *A trobar unos amigos* - I displayed what Spanish I could offer.

- Are you Italian? I don't know many Italians, to tell the truth.

Bueno, conozco a Luis Miguel, ah!

- Who?

- *Cómo quién?* - he was amazed.

I didn't know, or don't remember, who he was.

- *Ándele*, the one who sang at the Sanremo Festival, ¿recuerda? How did he... *Noi... siamo ragasi di oggi... noi... (Us....we are today's young kids, Us)* or something like that? - He hummed and showed his teeth on the rearview mirror, inspecting them.

A glimmer and then the regurgitation of memory: I recalled that enviable little boy who had created a sensation in Sanremo, singing with a Spanish accent a song that was all too heartfelt (Us who? Us immigrants? Us Spaniards? Us... Italians who speak bad Spanish or vice versa?).

While the taxi driver continued sliding down the ugly slope of a dialogue between a loose Spanish and my mediocre Italian-Spanish, around us the city full of cars was whizzing by. No straw hats or coconuts, more mulatto baseball hats, hands in their pockets, waiting for the bus, or with packets of chips before their mouth. The city is not very earthy, nor muddy- the soil is more suspended in the air than on the ground, in the clouds filled with smog...

Merendoni had put me in touch with a professor researcher, a certain Fabio Gonnelli, who they said was an important poet as well as the official translator - okay, official for Mexico, let me right size this - of the poet Vittorio Sereni. Gonnelli has an Italian passport, his Italian is perfect, an incognito Italian, Merendoni had said, because he pretends to be purely Mexican and was born in Amsterdam to diplomatic parents. He speaks with a slight Turin accent.

- Hi, do you need help for a place tonight?

- Well, not just that. I don't know if Merendoni informed you. I know pretty much nothing about here. And I'm curious...

- I found a contact for with someone who had business with the very writer you're looking for, Carlo Coccioli. I don't know him, but a friend of a friend put me in touch.

- I mean, can you trust him? Coccioli died - I mocked him.

- Already? He seemed eternal... Shall I give you the number?

- Sure. I'd be happy to.

- Goodbye, then! - and his voice got lost in the phone terminating the call.

- Wait, wait. And the number, Professor Gonnelli? Are you still there? - I stopped him.

- Ah, yes. Here it is: 0052 and then 5663...

- Have you ever read him?

- Never.

- Never?

- Only the one everyone read: *Fabrizio Lupo*. I must say abandoned almost immediately, page 40, or so. The delusions of a Florentine homosexual struck by God are certainly not my cup of tea. With all my respect for homosexuals, and for Florentines, and, who knows, even for God.

- In Mexico, do they talk about Coccioli?

- Never.

- Never?

- Not so much, actually. Just some stale controversy. Rainy Sunday afternoons memories....

I would have met other cohorts of intellectuals and other personalities lost in their vocations who pretended to ignore Carlo, but they would quote him almost in their minds if pressed. As if something was bothering them, perhaps the same thorny spirit as Carlo, which I would have learned to know: disconcerting, shaggy, but at times loving, naive, even foul-mouthed loving.

- Coccióli?

(Never read him, to be honest, but he's) a pothead.

- Coccioli?

A saint, a genius.

- Carlo Coccioli?

A desperate wanker.

- C.C.?

A huge friend to all us A.A.'s.

- Our Cocciolino?

Dirty poisonous viper.

- Carlitos Coccioli?

Sincerely forgettable.

- The Italian who wrote *Fabrizio Lupo*?

Your Albert Camus, what the hell!

- Coccioli, Juanito's lover, the dancer?

A haven, a helping hand.

Perhaps Carlo had spoken (badly) of some of them and good of others, or of the parties and the powerful people they represented or invoked or hid, in one of the countless articles he wrote since his first years of Mexican residence: first the magazines *Hoy* and *Siempre!* then *Excélsior* (all renowned magazines, weeklies and newspapers) until almost his last days. Hundreds of comments in which Coccioli argues or dialogues with Mexican TV celebrities. Apparently simple articles, at times auratic, other times silly, with his heretical, childish and equally heartfelt, naive and decisive thoughts on myriad issues: the *machismo* prevailing in Mexican men, the Pope and his riches seen overseas from a Papal country, the young hairy men who dreamed of Woodstock and '68 elsewhere, the mistreatment of animals, alcoholism and the miracles of Alcoholics Anonymous - which Coccioli had inspired, as we read in the first communiqués of the AA themselves - but also homages to Aldous Huxley, Milarepa, indictments against Fidel Castro - after having loved and courted him for a while - the PLO, and even a portrait of Margaret Thatcher. Every week he was in the papers. And he would shoot, shoot and shoot: the list of insults would

certainly be as long as the list of humiliated, defenceless people he brought to the altar of Innocence, always. As much as he took hasty positions, as when he was almost branded forever as a madman for having “defended” in his own way the fatwa of the Ayatollahs against the writer Salman Rushdie, in a very polemic and almost paradoxical pamphlet: *La sentencia del Ayatola*.

I should have been camouflaged, entering Coccioli’s life like a chameleon, to be safe from fanatics and detractors, without being much visible.

But what kind of life was Carlo conducting in Mexico? What were his habits?

I imagined thrifty meals. No opulence, no greasy tacos and biscuits, more soups, which here resemble the Oriental ones.

What would they say about him at the local market?

A saint, a genius!

or

Dirty poisonous viper... (they blame newspapers who don’t pay and the publishers who don’t pay, so they never pay...)

Did he buy fresh avocados? Did he go to any of the *fonda*, as they call the restaurants here?

Hypothetically this is his Mexican diet:

Early in the morning, before a few bites, he’d have ingested a God, a God at will, a Candy God, he would have said. He must have read the Talmud, the Upanishads, the Psalms in Hebrew, or some of his favorite Mexican poet, his beloved friend Carlos Pellicer, the one they called nothing less than El Poeta de América, or he must have read the sonnets of his friend Guadalupe Amor, the eccentric Mexican poet known not only for her sonnets, but because they say she wandered around the city naked, giving scandal with her nipples in the wind.

Carlo then fed the hummingbirds that infested his Mexican jasmine, which here they poetically call *huele-de-noche*, “smells-at-night“, or waited for Javier or Juanito to make his bed.

- Buenos días, querido Carlo.

Like every morning, a smile on his face (his celestial Javier, who now hides behind an insolent, non-existent mobile phone number, did he ever had bad days?), he must must have mocked the garbage truckers - every morning they pass by making a hellish racket, honking horns and bells, like a reggaeton music parade...

I soon developed in my head this daily routine, this little Mexican karma of his, these small and meaningful days, in a city too big and monstrous, but not devoid of sweet mysteries.

LITTLE KARMA

8:03 AM

Carlo wakes up, Javier is preparing the Italian moka. The portable tv turned on the Televisa channel news: financial news, society, not as much soccer as in Italy. Carlo then gets up, his body is a bit off with age: he's not tall, but he has a physique that could remind of Jacques Tati. An unusual size for someone who lived through war, hunger in Florence, and then the Parisian rebirth and lots of travelling, maybe even some opulence, lunches with Coco Chanel or dinners with Diego Rivera, or some days on the beach in Monaco with the French writer Jean Cocteau.

8:05 AM

He wanders barefoot around the house, performs his ablutions with religious zeal, then descends downstairs. Javier turns with the grace of a dancer. Those two are glued by invisible threads, even when one is upstairs watching telenovelas on TV - Carlo is crazy about telenovelas, especially *La dama de rosa* - and the other is downstairs cooking. The quiet of a pre-established matrimonial harmony, jingling happily like

a music box, it's been so long it seems immemorial, and instead, well, they have been living together only for a few years.

9:02 AM

Carlo, swallowed his heart pills, the propranolol ones, leaves the house with a leather vest, a light pink shirt, a big buckle with a star (by King David?), like a bizarre cowboy. It's hot, 28 degrees, it's Easter week 198x, a few years before the earthquake, President José López Portillo has spoken on TV right that morning, soon to be reached by disgrace. Carlo stretches out his hand on the bumpy sidewalk, and a gypsy taxi pulls up.

9:40 AM

The taxi drives him to the first post office. The one, not very near, in the Mixcoac district, from where he has sent his letters since mid-1950s, when he lived nearby. He hasn't lost the habit: Carlo writes to European friends just like when he wrote to the famous philosopher Gabriel Marcel about his conversion to Judaism - *Moi-même, lié à certains milieux juifs ultrareligieux, orthodoxes, mexicains, j'ai pensé, dans un enthousiasme un peu hatif, à la possibilité d'une conversion formelle* - he wrote to Marcel on 6 November 1972 - he then wrote to his dear family of friends Ciruzzi, to the publisher and friend Alfredo Cattabiani di Rusconi, to the poet and critic Piero Bigongiari. Does he still write to the publisher Enrico Vallecchi who launched him?

9:44 AM

Each of his letters from Mexico takes months to arrive to the other side of the ocean. That's why he seals it with care, almost caressing each one, like this one. And he thinks, "Did I lie in this one too?"

10:20 AM (stuck in the tunnel 10' late, the sweat of the young Mexicans is mild)

Subway line 3, and then a shaky bus, Carlo arrived in the central square of Coyoacán, the district of neocolonial squares with fountains with bronze coyotes (Coyoacán means *The Place of coyote owners*). There's a cultural centre serving a decent coffee, this is where Carlo gives his "impromptu rallies". Sometimes the famous painter Rufino Tamayo and the Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos - to whom a prestigious Ibero-American letters award is dedicated today - as well as the dancer Evelia Berinstain, who in turn often invites him home for lunch - are waiting for him today, around 2:30, *dos y media*, she says.

10:40 AM

At the cultural centre, Carlo recites his article "*Entre glorias y patadas en las nalgas*", Between glories and kicks in the ass, almost by heart. He has a moment of failure, perhaps his already sick heart warns him.

10:50 AM

Among the "audience" we can see: two Political Science students who have been chasing him for a while, a hippie animal activist with long, white hair, a nun who happened to be there by chance, an Italian who recently arrived in Mexico to whom they said Coccioli "is one of the shows that God offers to the Universe".

10:55 AM

Not to be missed, among the little flowerbeds on the patio of the cultural centre, are the hummingbirds, watching over him, voracious-

ly flapping those wings in the air, almost applauding him. Or he feels so. A celestial applause.

12:00

- It's almost *almuerzo* time, if only we were in Italy - Carlo thinks, listening to his belly gurgling too soon after lunchtime at Berinstain. So he takes his time, wanders around the second-hand bookstores in one of the main squares, buying books on Buddhism, a Spanish edition of *Shiva and Dionysus* by Daniélou, takes a tour of the market in Coyoacán, invaded by plastic puppets, fans, coloured canvas bags, *luchadores* masks, fragrant baskets of fresh coriander.

12:30 PM

Everything here seems to him animated by a profound reason. Everything seems to be in love with God.

Alessandro Raveggi

Big Karma.

Carlo Coccioli's Lives

GRANDE KARMA. VITE DI CARLO COCCIOLI

An on-the-road novel on the footsteps of one of the most enigmatic Italian writers, Carlo Coccioli, on his 100th birth anniversary.

Following the great success of *Piccolo Karma* will we finally get to read the mysterious *Grande Karma*? Author and critic Walter Siti wrote: "One of the most striking elements in Coccioli's narration is the genuine authenticity with which he refuses the idea of a literature independent from life." In such a spirit Raveggi has chosen to tell us about the writer through the story of his own life, recounting the adventures of a young researcher who chases his traces around the world. Coccioli was a very original author who wrote in Italian, Spanish and French, a partisan, an animal rights guru, the first one to openly speak about the challenges facing homosexuals in Catholic Italy. Close to Malaparte and Cocteau, he was a finalist at Premio Campiello. Perhaps it was the multifaceted nature of his genius which caused his fall into oblivion. Travelling between Mexico, Paris and Florence, and above all, on the fine line between reality and fiction, this book uses the instruments of art to explore the enigma of one of the most menacing and fascinating intellectuals of the twentieth century.

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*Make yourself evanescent, be more
elusive than a cloud.*

Jean Cocteau to Carlo Coccioli



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