

ERRI DE LUCA

from The Day before Happiness

translated from Italian by Michael Moore

I DISCOVERED THE HIDING PLACE when the soccer ball ended up there. Behind the statue's niche, in the courtyard of the building, was a trapdoor covered by two wooden boards. I noticed they were moving when I stood on them. I got scared, recovered the ball, and wriggled out between the statue's legs.

Only a skinny child contortionist like myself could slip his head and body between the slightly parted legs of the warrior king, after twisting past the sword planted right before his feet. The ball had gotten stuck in there after ricocheting between the sword and the leg.

I pushed it through, and while I was squirming to get out, the others returned to the game. Traps are easy to get into, but getting out takes some sweat. To make matters worse, fear was making me rush. I went back to my place in the goal. They let me play with them because I got the ball back no matter where it ended up. A customary destination was the balcony on the first floor, an abandoned apartment. Rumor had it a ghost lived there. Old buildings had trapdoors in the walls, secret passages, crime and love stories. Old buildings were dens of ghosts.



THIS IS HOW IT WENT the first time I climbed up to the terrace. From the little window on the ground floor of the courtyard where I lived, I was watching the bigger boys play one afternoon. The ball shot up in the air off a bad kick and ended up on the second-floor terrace. A vinyl ball slightly deflated from use, it was lost. While they were arguing over the quandary, I stuck my head out and asked if they would let me play with them. Yes, if you buy us another ball. No, with that one, I replied. Their curiosity aroused, they accepted. I grabbed hold of a rain pipe, a downspout, which passed next to the terrace and continued up to the roof. It was small and attached to the courtyard wall with rusty clamps. I started

to climb. The pipe was covered with dust, the grip was less sure than I had imagined. But I had made a promise. I looked up: behind the glass of a third-floor window there she was, the little girl I was trying to get a peek at. She was in her spot, head resting on her hands. Usually she was looking up at the sky. Not this time. She was looking down.



I HAD TO KEEP GOING and I did. Sixteen feet is a big drop for a child. I climbed up the pipe, bracing my feet on the clamps until I was at the same height as the terrace. Below me the comments had quieted down. I extended my left hand to grab onto the iron railing. I was short by a palm. So I had to trust my feet and reach over with the hand holding onto the rain pipe. I decided to do it in a single swoop, and I reached it with my left. Now I had to bring over my right. I tightened my grip on the iron railing and flung out my right hand to grab hold. I lost my footing: for a moment my hands held my body suspended in thin air, then up swung a knee, then two feet, and I climbed over. How come I wasn't afraid? I realized my fear is shy, it needs to be alone to come out into the open. But the eyes of the other boys were below and hers were above. My fear was embarrassed to come out. It would get even with me later, that night in bed in the dark, with the rustling of ghosts in thin air.



I THREW THE BALL down, they went back to playing, ignoring me. The descent was easier, I could stretch my hand out toward the rain pipe counting on two solid supports for my feet on the balcony's edge. Before lunging for the pipe I took a quick glance at the third floor. I had volunteered for the task hoping she would notice me, the little dust brush from the courtyard. There she was, eyes open wide. Before I could attempt a smile she had disappeared. Stupid to look and see whether she was looking. You were supposed to believe without second-guessing, as you do with guardian angels. I got mad at myself, sliding down the pipe to get off the stage. The prize, admission to the game, was waiting for me below. They placed me in the goal and so was my role decided. I was goalie.



FROM THAT DAY ON they called me *'a signa*, the monkey. I would dive between their feet to grab the ball and save the goal. The goalie is the last defense, the hero in the trenches. I got kicked in the hands, in the face, I

didn't cry. I was proud to play with the bigger boys, who were nine, even ten years old.

The ball ended up on the balcony other times, I would get to it in less than a minute. In front of the goal I defended was a puddle from a leak. At first it would be clear, I could see the girl in the window by reflection while my team was attacking. I didn't run into her, I didn't know what the rest of her body was like under that face resting on her hands. On sunny days I could find my way to her through the ricocheting of her reflection. I would keep staring at her until my eyes welled up with tears from the light. The closed glass of the courtyard windows allowed the reflection containing her to travel all the way down to my shadowy corner. So many rounds of her portrait to reach my little window. A television set had recently arrived at an apartment in the building; I heard you could see people and animals moving on it, without color. But I could watch the little girl with the rich brown of her hair, the green of her dress, the yellow added by the sun.



I WENT TO SCHOOL. My foster mother enrolled me, but I never saw her. Don Gaetano, the doorman, took care of me. He brought me a hot meal in the evening. In the morning before school I would bring him back the clean plate and he would warm me a cup of milk. I lived alone in the little room. Don Gaetano spoke very little, he too had grown up an orphan, but in an orphanage, not like me, running free in a building and going out into the city.

I liked school, the teacher spoke to the children. I came from the little room where no one spoke to me, and at school there was someone you had to listen to. It was nice to have a man who explained to the children the numbers, the years of history, the places of geography. There was a colored map of the world, someone who had never left the city could find out about Africa, which was green, the South Pole, white, Australia, yellow, and the oceans, blue. The continents and islands were in the feminine gender, the seas and mountains masculine.

At school there were the poor kids and the others. The poverty cases like me would get a slice of bread with quince jam, brought in by the janitor. A fresh-baked smell came in with him that made our mouths water. Nothing for the others, they already had a snack brought from home. Another difference was that the poverty cases had their heads shaved in spring for lice, the others kept their hair.

We used to write with a fountain pen and ink was available at every desk inside a hole. To write was to paint: you dipped the pen in, let the drops fall until one remained, and with that you managed to write half a word. Then you dipped again. We poverty cases would dry the sheet of paper with our warm breath. Below our breath, the blue of the ink trembled while it changed color. The other children dried with blotting paper. Our gesture was more beautiful, blowing wind over the flattened paper. The others instead crushed their words beneath a white card.



IN THE COURTYARD the children played amid the remote past of the centuries. The city was ancient, excavated, filled with grottoes and hiding places. In the summer afternoons when the tenants went on vacation or disappeared behind the blinds, I used to go to a second courtyard where the opening of a well was covered by wooden boards. I would sit on top of them, listening. From below, who knows how deep, came a rustling of moving water. Locked up down there was a life, a prisoner, an ogre, a fish. Cool air rose up between the boards and dried my sweat. In childhood I had the most precious freedom. Children are explorers. They want to learn secrets.

So I went back behind the statue to see where the trapdoor led. It was August, the month when children grow the fastest.

One early afternoon I squeezed between the feet and the sword of the statue, a copy of the King Ruggero the Norman in front of the Palazzo Reale. The wooden boards were fastened tight, they moved but couldn't be lifted. I had brought my spoon with me, I used it to pry at the encrustations. I placed the two boards off to the side, below was the darkness, descending. Fear rushed in, taking advantage of the fact that no one was around. You couldn't hear the sound of water, it was a dry darkness. After a while fear grows tired. Even the darkness became less compact, I could see a couple of rungs of a wooden ladder descending. I reached out my arm to touch the support, it was solid, dusty. I covered the passage back up with the boards; I had discovered enough for one day.



I WENT BACK WITH a candle. A coolness rose from the darkness and grazed my short-panted legs. I descended into a grotto. Underneath the city is the void on which it rests. Our solid mass above is matched by an equal amount of shadow below, bearing the body of the city.

When I touched the ground I lit the candle. It was the cigarette smugglers' depot. I knew they went for offshore pickups in motorboats. I had discovered a storeroom. Having hoped for a treasure, I was disappointed. There had to be another entrance, those boxes couldn't fit between the legs of the king. Yes, there was a stone staircase opposite the wooden ladder. The storeroom was quiet; *tufò*, the volcanic rock from which it was built, erases noise. In a corner was a bedspring, a mattress, some books, a Bible. There was even a toilet, the kind you had to squat over. I climbed back up saddened. I hadn't discovered a thing.



IT DIDN'T CROSS MY MIND, it never could, to tell the police. To betray a secret, reveal a hiding place, are things a child doesn't do. In childhood, spying on someone is despicable. Not even a discarded thought, it never occurred to me. I went down to the storeroom often that August, I liked the cool and rested silence of the *tufò*. I started reading the books, sitting on the ladder where the light came in. Not the Bible, God was too scary. That's how I picked up the habit of reading. The first was called *The Three Musketeers*, but there were four of them. At the top of the ladder, feet dangling, my head learned to draw light from books. When I finished them I wanted more.

Down the alley where I lived were the shops of the book vendors who sold to students. Outside they kept used books on sale in wooden boxes. I started going there, to pick out a book and sit down on the ground to read. One man chased me away. I went to another and he let me stay. A good man, Don Raimondo, who needed no words to understand. He gave me a stool so I wouldn't have to read on the ground. Then he told me he would lend me the book if I brought it back to him without damaging it. I replied thank you, I would bring it back the next day. I spent all night finishing it. Don Raimondo saw that I kept my word and let me take home a book a day.

I would choose the thin ones. I picked up the habit in summer when there was no teacher to teach me new things. They weren't books for children, many words in the middle I did not understand, but the end, the end I understood. It was an invitation to escape.



TEN YEARS LATER I found out from Don Gaetano that a Jewish guy had hidden in the storeroom in 1943. I was in my last year of school and Don Gaetano had started to confide in me. In the afternoons he would teach

me how to play *scopa*, to figure out the unmatched cards. He used to win. He didn't throw his card down on the table, he played quickly, delayed by my mental count of the cards that had been played. To reciprocate our newfound familiarity, I decided to tell him something.

"Don Gaetano, one summer ten years ago I went downstairs, to the big room with the boxes."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I know everything that happens here. The dust, *guaglio*', the wooden ladder was covered with dust and hand- and footprints. Only you could have slipped in there, between the legs of Ruggero. They used to call you *'a scigna*."

"And you didn't say anything to me?"

"You're the one who said nothing. I kept an eye on you, you went down cellar, didn't touch the boxes, and didn't tell anyone."

"I didn't have anyone."

"What did you go down there to do?"

"I like the darkness and there were books. That's where I picked up the habit of reading."

"A monkey with books: you climbed up that pipe as quick as a mouse, you dove between feet to get the ball, you had a natural courage, unforced."

"No one told me to do one thing or another. I learned at school what was allowed. I'm happy to go, I thank my foster mother for making me study. This is my last year, then the scholarship she got me runs out."

"You're getting a lot out of school. You're *roba buona*, good stuff."



THAT WAS HIS ULTIMATE compliment, *roba buona*, a noble title for him.

"But at *scopa* you're a mozzarella."

"Let me ask, Don Gaetano, what was the use of the tilted ladder that came out behind the statue? No one could pass through there."

"Yes they could. During the war I sawed through one of Ruggero's legs, in an emergency you could remove it. During the war we needed hiding places, for contraband, for guns, for people who had to hide. A hunt was on for Jews, the money was good. In the city there weren't very many."

Don Gaetano noticed my curiosity about stories that had taken place around the time of my birth. He forgave the inhabitants, war brought out the worst in people, but not the informers, anyone who had sold

a Jew to the police. “È 'na carogna”—He’s a dirty rat. “The Jews, aren’t they the same as us? They don’t believe in Jesus Christ, and I don’t either. They’re people like us, born and raised here, they speak dialect. With the Germans however we had nothing in common. They wanted to boss us around, in the end they put people up against the wall and shot them, looted the stores. But when the time came and the city went after them, they ran like us, they lost all their bluster. What did the Jews ever do to the Germans? We never did figure it out. Our people didn’t even know there was such a thing as Jews, a people from antiquity. But when the chance to make some money was involved, everyone knew who was Jewish. If a reward had been offered for phoenixes, some of us would have found them, even secondhand. Because there were rats who were informers.”



OUR CARD GAMES were interrupted by people who passed by the doorman’s loge, asked for something, dropped off, picked up. Nothing escaped Don Gaetano. It was an old building complex with various apartment blocks, he knew everyone’s business. People would come by to ask his advice. Don Gaetano would tell me to watch the door and then go. When he came back he would pick up his cards and the conversation where he had left off.

“He stayed down there until the Americans arrived and until the last day he thought I might sell him to the Germans. That’s what his old doorman had done. He had managed to escape by the roof, with just enough time to slip on a pair of pants and a shirt, no shoes. He had a parcel of books within reach and brought them along. Jews are taught to run at an early age, like us, with the earthquake always beneath our feet and the volcano ready to blow. But we don’t run away from the house carrying books.”

“I would, Don Gaetano, I’ll bring along my schoolbooks if I have to run from an earthquake.”

“He came to me at night under an air raid. I kept the main door open and he slipped in. He had torn from his chest the star he was supposed to keep sewn on, threads were hanging from his lapel. I took him down there, he stayed for a month, the worst month of the war. At the point of the uprising I brought him a pair of shoes I’d stolen from a German soldier. With them on he came out to meet the liberated city. He asked me why I hadn’t sold him out.”

“And what did you answer?”

“What could I answer? He had spent a month down there counting the minutes, wondering if he’d be saved or not. Every thank-you he uttered to me was laced with suspicion. The war was about to end, the Americans had arrived in Capri. Angrier still was the thought of being arrested a few days before freedom. That September was a furnace. The Germans planted mines up and down the seashore to prevent an American landing, they blew up whole chunks of the city, and the air raids went on and on. The sea suddenly filled with hundreds of American ships. Fire coming at us from every side. For us it was about stealing freedom, for him it was about his life. And his life was hanging from someone who could betray him or be arrested, murdered, and not come back to him with something to eat. When he heard me descending the stairs he didn’t know whether it was me or the end.”

“What did you answer him, why didn’t you sell him out?”

“Because I don’t sell human flesh. Because war brings out the worst in people but also the best. Because he had come shoeless, who knows why? I don’t remember what I answered him, maybe I didn’t. History had ended and the whys didn’t matter. I heard his thoughts and I answered, but he couldn’t hear mine. You can’t speak with other people’s thoughts, they’re deaf.”

“So it’s true what they say about you, Don Gaetano, that you hear the thoughts in people’s heads?”

“It is and it isn’t, sometimes yes and sometimes no. Better this way, because people have evil thoughts.”

“If I think of something can you guess it?”

“No, *guaglio*, I get the thoughts off the top of someone’s head, the ones someone doesn’t even know he has. If you set about studying your own business, it stays with you. But thoughts are like sneezes, they escape all of a sudden and I hear them.”

That’s how he knew everyone’s business, that’s why he had a sadness ready for the worst and a crooked smile to throw it away. From the corners of his eyes the wrinkles opened and the melancholy drained out.

“Was the Jewish guy thinking a lot?”

“Yes, he was. Not when he was reading, but the rest of the time, yes, about the Holy Land, about a ship to get there. Europe is lost to us, here there is no life. He gave the example of a belt. We Jews, he thought, are a belt around the waist of the world. With the holy book we are the leather strip that has been holding up the trousers ever since Adam realized he

was naked. Many times the world has wanted to take the belt off and throw it away. It feels too tight.

“I remember that thought clearly, he often had it. When he came out into the open air he could barely stand on his own two feet. He went to his home but it had been occupied. A family had settled there, they’d even changed the lock. I went there to put in a word and they moved out, but first they emptied the house, they even tore the electric wires from the walls.”

“How did you persuade them?”

“We had guns, we had fought the Germans. I went at night, fired at the lock, went in and told them I would be back at noon and wanted to find the house empty. That’s how it went. He moved back into his house, sold it a few months later, and went abroad, to Israel. He came by the loge to say goodbye. The city was still a pile of rubble. ‘I’m bringing a stone from Naples with me. I’m going to put it in the wall of the house I’ll have in Israel. There we will build with the stones they’ve thrown at us.’”