

Broken stories

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After that business with Ana I took to going round cemeteries, to search among the dead for a tiny slice of life to cling to. Since then I've been wandering at random around the cemeteries of Paris reading epitaphs and imagining stories; stories that allow me to escape my own, that protect me, that don't let me think. However, I just can't seem to do it, I can't forget about myself; wherever I start out from I always end up tumbling back into my own story, into this story. I start to pull on the thread; from a tip that hardly sticks out of the ball of yarn, and it turns out that at the end of the thread, at the end of countless knots and all the tangled thread in the ball of yarn, there I am, frayed, like the tip of the thread should be.

One morning I went into Montparnasse cemetery and began what had now become my routine, my erratic sepulchral stroll. With a thousand things in my head, my mind did its best to read epitaphs and keep me on my feet by avoiding trees, potholes and tourists, and to think about Ana, the very same Ana that I would probably never see again. Sadness, cold, exhaustion, anguish... at some point I sat down in despair on a wooden bench; I took a while to react. Opposite me there was an enormous lime tree watching over Morelli's tombstone that was starting to lose its leaves; Morelli was one of a great many writers like Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir or Baudelaire who roam around this literary cemetery at night; this cemetery of stories. The white marble was covered in notes, drawings and messages that his faithful admirers left for him; I read a few and put them carefully back in their place. There were a wide variety of messages; ranging from sentimental nonsense like "*I love you*" or "*you are my inspiration*" to long letters

confessing terrible disappointments in love, exiles or brilliant literary careers that had been cut short unfairly. But what really attracted my attention was a scrap of crumpled yellowish paper that seemed to have been put there as if by accident; I couldn't explain it but it was as if this scrap of paper were speaking to me and were saying "*read me.*" I picked it up carefully as if it were an incunabulum, smoothed it out and read it. The scrap of paper looked like it had been torn out from somewhere; the text didn't start or end; the handwriting was cramped and almost illegible, but it had a seductive mysterious quality that encouraged you to read it to try and uncover its message; the note said:

... so there are things in there that are not just thread; the ball is not a thread wound into a coil, inside the world of the ball of yarn your surprise now glimpses things that aren't thread, now you know that you need more than thread to make a ball of yarn...

Who could leave a message like that? What could it mean? I immediately thought of Ariadne's thread; the kind that can get us out of the maze; or of a common thread; the thread running through our lives, or a narrative thread. And then I read again, "*...you need more than thread to make a ball of yarn...*" And then I remembered Ana and that the bond that we had established, this thread that we thought was indestructible, no longer exists. It's sad, really sad, to witness the slow death of a thread; to see how even the strongest thread slowly frays; a little bit here, a little bit there, until a day arrives when the slightest brush with something or the lightest breeze tear it apart, and the thread came to an end. I had lost the thread that would get me out

of the maze, or even worse, my ball of yarn was too small and I had ventured too far. I was trapped for ever in this maze of tombstones and the dead.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching and put the scrap of paper away in my jacket pocket where my fingers once again came across Ana's letter; that lifeline riddled with holes that I wanted to cling to in order to keep myself afloat in the middle of the void. I left the cemetery thinking that in a sense we are all a bundle of parts, a kind of socially accepted version of Frankenstein; we are made of parts of others, of parts of the dead that still haven't rotted, of forgotten experiences, of invented memories; shreds that we gradually add to our own story; sometimes elegantly, but on other occasions like patches sewn on to clothes to cover up holes; and everything that happens to us, every event, each throw of the dice adds a new paragraph to our lives that we have to adapt in some way to our story so that it makes, or seems to make, some kind of sense. However the trouble is that sometimes we lose a couple of lines and then we have to rewrite part of the story; we take a while to do this, to readapt the story as a whole; sometimes we write things down and then cross them out and try things out again until the story, our story, ends up being more or less like we wanted it to be. Sometimes it can happen that a fierce wind rips out an entire paragraph and then things get more complicated: the story is not like we wanted it to be anymore. I ... I've lost several pages from this story.

I went back to the cemetery the next day. Little by little the dry leaves from the trees were starting to cover the cemetery paths, and while I walked among dead leaves that lay among the dead, I once again felt overcome by that unbearable feeling that I was also like a tree shedding its leaves, that my dreams and illusions were falling away

from me, and a premature autumn had settled in my mind. I continued to walk deep in thought until I reached Morelli's grave where the wooden bench, the lime tree with the ochre leaves and the wide tombstone covered in notes, flowers and drawings were waiting for me. I carefully went through each of the notes; more or less the same as the day before; nothing that would attract my attention. I sat down on the bench to have a rest and my mind wandered as I looked at the blue autumn sky. The cold Parisian sky was lined with white strokes like shooting stars in the middle of the day; a sky ploughed by planes; planes that unwittingly take stories back and forth; planes like the ones that brought me this far; chasing in vain after a story shattered by time.

I lowered my head and looked at the tomb again... and then felt a shiver, and once again the yellowish scrap of paper (or maybe it was slightly ochre-coloured) crumpled up and placed as if by accident in a different spot from where it had been the day before, on top of two other notes. I looked all around me and couldn't see anyone nearby; just an old woman feeding a couple of cats. And then a disturbing sensation and once again my hand stretched out to pick up the scrap of paper and slowly smooth it out and confirm that the handwriting was the same and that someone was leaving bits of a story there; a fragmented story that was desperately seeking to find itself; or rewrite itself; or perhaps lose itself for ever among tombstones and the dead. The note said:

...life as a commentary of something else we cannot reach, which is there within reach of the leap we will not take...

The leap we will not take? I thought. But I leapt over an ocean, leapt over the Equator, leapt over three borders, leapt over hunger and cold... and I didn't achieve anything, nothing but anguish and solitude. *The leap we will not take?*... But, come on!

I've been falling for twelve thousand kilometres since I decided to take that leap, and I haven't even managed to crash. *The leap we will not take?*... for goodness sake... And I carried on like that for several minutes, angry and bothered, convinced that these notes were intended for me; that they were a cynical, caustic joke about my decisions, which were always wrong. How could these words, written by God knows who, reflect so accurately what I was thinking? Or, even worse, what I should have been thinking. And the thing is that every so often it turns out that the words of the dead fit the thoughts of the living (if the one group is living and the other is dead). It's odd but sometimes it seemed that the dead know more about us than we do. I put the note away again in my jacket pocket making sure that nobody could see me and I left the cemetery thinking about that something else we cannot reach and that is right there, within reach of the leap we will not take.

I went back to the cemetery every day and there it was each day, my scrap of the story, my little fragment of the story, that broken story that someone mysteriously left there each day; a scrap of crumpled, yellowish, or sometimes ochre-coloured, paper that I sensed formed part of a story that I could reconstruct, that I wanted to reconstruct; as if it were a matter of piecing together an enormous puzzle. I thought about it all the time and I became so obsessed with it that I began to visit the cemetery at all hours to see if I could run into whoever was leaving these notes. However day after day I failed: the scrap of yellowish paper, my little portion of the story, turned up there on the marble, without me having the slightest idea of who was leaving it there and why.

The days went by and I continued to amass scraps of that broken story. How many little pieces made up the story? Would I ever complete it some day? Or would I

have to fill in the gaps with invented fragments, with lies, with convoluted ramblings? Each scrap, each new fragment of text, added a fresh, unique aspect to the idea that I was forming of what the story could be about; a story that very probably I would never know completely, but that I might manage to sense how far it would allow me to do so, until I came up against the impenetrable mystery that some stories (and some women) have. And it was then that the cold and a reflex action led my hands to take refuge in my jacket pockets where my fingers once again came across Ana's letter, which like a gigantic anchor, like a huge weight drags me down so that I am held prisoner of a story that I no longer know whether it is mine, or whether I want it to be mine. And then starting to think about Ana again; about how we never really get to know anybody, not even the one we love, not even ourselves. We can never know all the details of a story, of this story. Who is Ana, in actual fact? Is she that girl who was driven wild with pleasure with me? Or was she the one who didn't answer my letters? The one who laughed with me until we almost choked? Maybe the one who was drunk with joy when she got the Madame Curie grant? How many scraps of paper are required to complete the story? We only know stills, moments or flashes of the lives of the others; this is all we have; but this is not enough for us, the unbearable fear of the void, the *horror vacui*, forces us to fill in the gaps and make up the part of the story that we don't know, and place all our fears and illusions there. We need to complete the story; I needed to bring this story to an end.

One day I turned up in the cemetery before it opened and I decided that I was going to stay there until I discovered whoever was leaving those scraps of a story, of this story. The hours went by: three cats, cold, anxiety and discouragement. Some people passed by Morelli's grave and left flowers and notes, but not the one that I was

dying to see. Despite the fact that by now I had got into the habit of wandering around cemeteries, I was still surprised by the number of people who visit the graves of individuals that they have nothing to do with. What were those people looking for? What was I looking for? Perhaps to stand on the shoulders of the dead; perhaps it is only by standing on top of a huge mountain of despair, broken dreams and disappointments that we manage to see beyond the ends of our noses. It would seem that sometimes the dead provide a kind of enrichment for the soul. Maybe I'll never see Ana again, maybe I'll never manage to find out why she left me; maybe I'll have to make up part of the story, or maybe I'll have to learn to live with a broken story, with the unbearable feeling of not knowing exactly how things happened. Maybe it's not so terrible after all; maybe it doesn't matter.

At some point in the evening that I couldn't establish precisely, I was half-heartedly watching how an ant emerged laboriously from under a few pebbles that lined Morelli's grave. The ant walked the huge distance of almost a metre that separates the grave from the enormous lime tree and began to climb up the trunk; it then took a walk along one of its branches and when it passed near a dry leaf, with a familiar ochre-coloured tone, the leaf came away and fell, and forgot all about the tree for ever; the ant disappeared behind the branch and I got lost in my thoughts. When I looked down again I noticed, with a mixture of excitement, uncertainty and fear, in equal proportions, that an ochre-coloured, crumpled leaf had appeared on the marble, placed there as if by accident; I immediately looked around and couldn't see anybody. I hesitated for a moment and then I picked up the note that said:

Every so often the words of the dead fit the thoughts of the living (if the one group is living and the other is dead)...

... if the one group is living and the other is dead, I repeated slowly. And what if that was it? And if that was all there was to it? I stayed for a while lost in thought. Would I myself be anything more than a series of notes, of love affairs, illusions, misfortunes, put together with varying degrees of success? And it was then that my expression came to my aid and recalled the smile it used to show. All that was needed was to know how to rewrite the story. I got up off the bench and started walking along the paths covered in dead leaves. At some point, making sure that I wouldn't notice, I dropped Ana's letter as if by accident and finally left the cemetery.

And what should we do now that this story is over? Perhaps the best thing would be to rip it into a thousand pieces and scatter it around the cemeteries of Paris. There always be someone who's died who's grateful for the fact that every so often the thoughts of the living fit the words of the dead, if the one group is dead and the other is living.

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