

Anna Montagner

The Cradle

For a while now, Via Giorgetti has been quiet. On the street, there is the same silence that permeates a church, or a school, when people are mourning. Houses get heavy on the asphalt, apartments get heavier on top of each other, and it almost looks as if the ceiling of each and every one of them has been affected by a hefty gravity, becoming slightly shorter than usual. With the windows open, one can breathe in a feeling of pity and disgrace that slaps them and makes them want to leave - leave this world, inhospitable as it has never been before.

Trapped inside a house that has recently turned into a prison, Antonio wonders what's left to do for Christmas and what's left to wish for the new year. At 81, he misses his life - pedestrian and coupled - and fears that his melancholic thoughts will fill up the space, upholster the walls, cover his wrinkled hands and cloud the memories he has been left with.

"We are all tired, Betta," he thinks as he lets himself collapse into the couch. On the coffee table, he can still see Betta's glasses. Just as he does with most of her things, he avoids looking at them, or moving them. Behind his procrastination of packing her belongings lies a hope that she will eventually come back.

From the window in front of him, he can see the unperturbed sea looking at him as a dear old friend challenging his last sparks of strength. This year it will be just the two of them - just them drinking to the end of a time that has perhaps taught us all to wish for what we have.

The imminent coming of the holidays and the fear of being blocked away from relatives and friends have been forcing many families to quickly leave town. Although one could say that

their departure brought an initial exhale of relief and an illusion that the misery of the moment left as well, without most of its residents, Via Giorgetti looks quite gloomy. Besides, they made the sacrilegious decision of not decorating their houses' exteriors because they have been too busy packing and escaping the government's public announcement about the rise of restrictions. No dazzling lights, no vertiginous Christmas trees, no dear old wreaths hung up on the doors. Others, instead, who were lucky enough to already share their houses with their loved ones, have boarded up inside preventing the sullen mood of the outside to go in and the joyful laughs of the kids to reach the streets.

This year, Via Giorgetti is darker and lonelier and, perhaps one could add, more airless, than it has ever been before. For as long as he can remember, Antonio has never seen such angry and hopeless people around Christmas. Even their surgical masks can't hide their pouts. It feels as if Via Giorgetti and its community were subject to a betrayal; those who left and those who withdrew in their houses with their families are to blame for the solitude of their neighbors. By now, it is a widespread belief that there are no cakes to share: everybody must stand alone.

When they decided to buy the apartment, it was 1965 and they had already been married for two years. Antonio had recently been promoted as a full time literature teacher in the local high school and Betta, a nurse in the maternity hospital, had finally been accepted to work on a daytime shift. In 1965, she could proudly state that she had already successfully helped more than 130 women to give birth. They both thought, and all the people around them happily agreed, that it was finally the best of both worlds and they could begin imagining a family.

Also that year, between March and the end of summer, they had already toured so many apartments, but none of them seemed to satisfy Betta's requirements. Antonio knew that his wife was looking for a sacred, virgin space where she could imagine their kids fighting over who picked what to have for dinner on a Saturday night. Besides, she had repeated more than once that the house should match her floral summer dresses and have a glossy finish like red cherries in the early days of June.

They chose Via Giorgetti because of its proximity to the beach. They chose that apartment because one could see the sea from the window in the living room. They truly fell in love with it only after a couple of days of having lived there. One night, after Antonio had woken up to follow Betta who was sleepwalking, he noticed the sound of the sea. He could hear the crashing of the waves against the shore, loud and clear from every room of the apartment - as if the sea was pushing behind the cracks on the walls, impatient to pour out of them. Surprised, he rushed to the closest window but, as he put his head out in the cold, the sound faded. He went back inside and reached for Betta, walking in her sleep. The waves were back - roaring as if the water was flowing inside their bodies.

Just as all the other nights, he looked after his wife - like a guardian of her dreams - and watched her mimic the act of painting the walls of the room they had decided to arrange for their first child. Betta would stand in front of a wall splattering the extra paint from her hands, and use her arms as brushes to color up the room. Antonio would look at her, sitting in between the extremes of the door. He would listen to the sound of the sea that filled the silence of her movements and gave Betta a rhythm to follow. When the sea was turbulent, Betta would wave

her brushes like white flags demanding peace on a strenuous day of war; when, instead, the sea was calm, Betta would start painting the room corner to corner.

The day in which Antonio revealed to Betta what she would do at night, he asked her what color she would paint the walls. She said she couldn't remember - she couldn't say.

“Perhaps blue,” she then added "like the abyss.”

That sound - of the deep abyss, of foam beating life's time - would cradle them when, at times, the night turned darker than they had expected and they would fear the creaking of the pipes, or the blowing of the wind, just like kids.

Betta had four miscarriages in between 1967 and 1972. They stopped trying after the fourth one had almost reached the time to be given a name. They talked about their loss separately, each one with a different therapist. At the end, they both agreed it would have been better to talk with each other. Those three extra rooms, left empty for their newborns, would now only raise memories of pain and faded dreams. For years, Betta was not able to enter any of them and felt betrayed by the house itself that had promised to offer a fertile soil for her dreams. They would have moved to another place if it wasn't only for the reassuring sound of the waves that, as always, whispered sweet and comforting songs when the night kept them up.

The three of them - Betta, Antonio and the house - eventually forgot, or perhaps accepted, the disappearing of a life they had imagined without any possible flaws. They moved on, avoiding the unspeakable and letting the redundancy of their every day routine spread like dust on the doorknobs of their rooms, and the shelves of their fridge, and their battered shoes finally still, after having left millions of footsteps behind.

As he tries to look out the window through the darkness of the sunset, Antonio sees his reflection on the glass. He wonders how he got there, how come time has gone so quickly without him realizing it.

“Perhaps, I slept too much, Betta” he says out loud. The truth is that he regrets his naivety and believing he would never get old. Without his wife by his side, he senses the fragility of life and he feels suddenly vulnerable.

In front of his reflection, he touches the corner of his eyes; they have always pointed downward as if he was constantly pervaded by a feeling of sadness. Betta would say that he would hold his regrets and bad memories there - the worst place to hide them, according to her.

“There are no lies in the eyes” she would say.

He tries to lift them up but the fake resemblance to a happier version of himself only makes him doubt the man he has become. He can only focus on what he hasn't given her, and on the missed opportunities, and on the way it could have been.

Since Betta passed away, Antonio has found his days to be interminable. He convinces himself to get up from the bed and clean the space as if someone used it for living - as if someone visited him. Because of the current global health crisis and the way it hit him personally, he even stopped going grocery shopping and instead he gets his food delivered weekly by a group of young volunteers. He punctually waits for them at the door and, when he hears them running up the stairs of the building, he looks through the peephole - excited as a kid.

He is curious to note how they change - if they change - and to see when young beautiful invincible people start showing the first signs of their mortality.

He let her go on alone, and for that he feels guilty. At times, the thought of Betta being in the afterlife - in something that, despite the age, he can't quite understand yet - scares him and doesn't let him sleep. He thinks of what he will leave to the world once he is gone, and wonders if there is anything that won't succumb to the inescapable time.

“Who will remember me, Betta? Who will remember us?” he asks.

He finds comfort in imagining the afterlife as a transparent blue sea where Betta can finally reunite with their children.

Other times instead, when he thinks of Betta in the afterlife, he doesn't miss her. In those moments, his wife represents only the shroud of the mundane that perhaps blindfolded him. His love for her is concealed by the thought that they might not have created anything together. He remembers when he wanted to be a writer. He was young, unmarried and perhaps in love only with his books. He never dreamt of becoming a literature teacher, but life came with responsibilities and love came with its price. There was the need to take care of living expenses and eventually planning a budget for the enlargement of the family. And as he ventured into that adult's journey, he lost his zeal, forgot about his dreams and never forgave himself for it. With Betta, he didn't just find love, but he also fell into the rhythm of the daily life, the regular life, with no adventures or sparks.

“Look!” he turns to the kitchen as if he forgot that nobody stands there anymore. Outside the window, the beach is illuminated by shining rays - flashlights that move up and down, and

get lost in the moon's glare. He gets a glimpse of the silhouette of two people, embracing each other. The darkness hides their faces and the sound of the waves covers their voices. It looks as if they are kissing but Antonio can't tell for sure. Their bodies are close - so close that they make one unified shape - so close that they start to dance.

The scene reminds Antonio of his first date with Betta. He invited her to the town fair, by mailing to her house two tickets for the Ferris wheel. She was wearing a red polka dot dress and a pair of shoes whose pattering sound would awaken the dormant butterflies in Antonio's stomach. On the Ferris wheel, after they reached a point high enough to look over the sea, Betta wouldn't stop talking. She also seemed disinterested in Antonio's explanation of the surrounding areas. Only afterwards, she revealed to him that she had vertigo. Antonio thought she looked as vulnerable as a flower, as little as a luminous star in the overwhelming sky, and as beautiful as she had always been. He bought cotton candy to share with her and, when they kissed on the way back to her house, their lips were still covered with melted sugar.

"Your lips are sticky. They won't let mine go" he said jokingly. Antonio and Betta laughed and danced at the sound of a romantic melody that was audible only to their ears.

To Antonio, those two people dancing now on the beach are young. They look just like him and Betta when they were in their twenties. He wonders if they are as happy as he was, if they feel as lucky as he felt on the Ferris wheel, and wish them to never lose that spark - that love for life - that brought them together. He laughs as he remembers those summer nights spent with Betta laying on the shore, looking at the stars and singing songs that nobody plays anymore. He laughs as he remembers how easy life seemed back then, how much time he thought he had.

“All of us, Betta. We all thought we had time” he says. And he suddenly has the impulse to exit his house and run down the stairs, or open the window and jump in the sea - if that meant getting to them faster, revealing to the two dancers what he wished he had known all along. As he imagines Betta sitting on the other side of the couch, he believes that, for them, death arrived sooner than they had thought. It came with the disappearance of their dream of becoming a family, with their inability to rise up again and emerge from the quicksand of the routine life they had fallen into; it came masked as comfort. All those days spent grumbling about their bad luck and silently blaming each other were only a waste of time. He should have taken her travelling around the world; he should have bought her flowers, or a new pair of shoes; they should have eaten more sweets. And as he thinks of that, he wants to apologize to Betta and to his young self for not having grasped at life, and instead having let himself surrender. Betta’s death, together with the consequent loneliness that Antonio was left with, only disclosed what had been left hidden to fester.

“You don’t have time” he would like to scream, but instead he sits on the couch and silently enjoys the peak of their youth.

He leans over a picture of their wedding and caresses Betta’s face. She was beautiful - with her dark curly hair tied up in a loose bun, and her smiling green eyes, and her sugary lips that he used to kiss every day.

“What am I thinking? I love you, Betta” he says fearfully. And, as he looks for her in the young couple dancing on the beach, he notices that the flashlights are gone, and the moon’s glare shines unruffled, and there are no people kissing. He is alone again. Perhaps he dreamt of them,

perhaps it was a gift from the sea. He turns off the light of the house and closes his eyes, as the memories of his youth and the melody of the waves rock him to sleep.

The proof that the two lovers weren't a fruit of Antonio's imagination arrives over the following days. The two in fact repeatedly meet on the beach around the same hour every night. Antonio sits on the couch and waits for the bright rays of their flashlights. Sometimes, he waits with one of them for the other lover to arrive, attentively protecting them from the fragility that their loneliness reveals. From his apartment, Antonio watches over them and steals from them a sense of belonging - belonging to the visceral thrill of life - that he realizes he has been missing since Betta's death.

As he gets to observe them more often, he starts to think of their story - who they are, what they do for a living and what they, instead, wish to do. He assumes that they are meeting in the middle of the night in order to escape the strict government's restrictions that prohibit from seeing those who aren't part of the nuclear family. Antonio imagines their quiet escapes in the dark and their endless run on the shore; he imagines their cold hands, and their skin cut by the gusts of wind that come from the sea; and he also imagines them thoughtfully choosing what words - what poems - they will share with each other in the little time they have together that night.

To Antonio, it comes naturally - the need to start writing about them.

Once again, he prepares himself on the couch in front of the window. The two lovers will arrive soon. This time, he has a small notebook with him in which he has already written a few words. He feels surprisingly anxious, as if making a story out of the lovers' secret encounter is a

crime he can be punished for. He waits longer than usual or, perhaps, this night is pervaded by a never-ending expectation. When the first lover arrives, Antonio assumes it is the girl, as he is sure that he can see her hair waving in the wind. She walks slowly as if she is trying to defer her arrival but, nevertheless, she gets to the meeting place before her lover. Antonio writes the word “impatience” in his notebook. The flashlight - overwhelmed by the darkness of this lonely night - is focused on the horizon in front of her. They wait - Antonio and the girl - for minutes that seem interminable, even hopeless. When the other figure arrives, there are no acrobatics of lights, no disclosure of feelings. The two figures only stand in front of each other leaving between their bodies a space - a distance - that has the shape of nothingness.

Unexpectedly, the second figure steps back after a few moments of silence and the distance between their bodies - their lips, their bellies, their feet - takes the shape of a goodbye.

“No,” Antonio screams “don’t turn, don’t walk away!” But it is too late. Antonio sees one flashlight separating from the other, lighting up the horizon and floating into the dark, as the shadow behind turns and walks away.

The girl is left alone - the body is left quivering. She looks over the blue sea that in the dark matches the colour of the sky, becoming invisible - becoming frightful - and she walks towards it.

Without thinking, Antonio jumps off the couch and goes for the door of his apartment. As he is about to run down the stairs of his building, he suddenly remembers Betta and tries to stop tears that he has held for too long. He goes back to his apartment and writes with indelible black

ink, using uppercase letters that take over the blank page, the name *Orpheus* in his notebook. He then flies back to the door and surges towards the shore, the girl and the water.

He touches the cold wet sand with his bare feet and trembles, as he realizes he is finally outside breathing fresh air - as he realizes the girl is not there anymore.

“Betta!” he cries “Betta!”

He runs towards the shore, Betta, and the water. He crashes into the famished waves and the roar of the abyss, as his tears reunite with the salty water of the sea.

He reaches with his arms to a frail silhouette that dances in front of him but, as he grabs it, he sinks deeper into the blue. Underneath the rolling line that separates sky from sea - blue from blue - dead from living - he sees her. With Betta next to him, he finally closes his eyes and lets the gentle sea cradle him to sleep.

The next day, he wakes up in the hospital. A girl saw him immersing into the water and called for help. She left a note for him.

It reads - There is nothing worth our silence.