

Shadow Players

by Manuela Pacella

*It seems to me unlikely that there is no alternation between abstinence and reappearance of sexual desire. So I am convinced that those who continually try to satisfy these desires are not aiming at sex, but at power!**

Sitting on a bench, in silence, facing the beautiful mountain pick achieved.

He was speaking in Austrian with the two guys who were serving us at the shelter, one very young and the other one around his 50s. I wasn't getting the meaning of any words, as probably they were even speaking a strict dialect.

But I wasn't trying to understand either, or guessing what they were speaking about, so used to that, so used he would not help me with any sort of translation or involving me in the speech. I was so familiar with that that I gave up in asking myself the reason why he did it. He once spoke about feeling ashamed; ashamed of me, just because... What? Am I a foreigner? Am I Italian? Well, this wasn't hurting me so much by the way.

While they were speaking it was starting to get dark.

He asked the bill for what we ate. We were starving after all those climbing up there. So we ate everything they had in the menu. Fulfilled my stomach I was wondering where we could sleep, in the woods or in the next shelter?

While the two men were inside he asked me, with a huge smile on his face: "Are you thinking the same thing I am thinking of?"

Me: "What?"

He: "I think they are gay!"

They came back with the bill. It was almost the amount of money we had in two.

It was getting even darker.

I understood he would never ask them the favour to find a place for us inside.

I began to shiver.

I was at the top of an unknown mountain. The only way I knew to get back was the way to go up, so a very steep climb made of wooden steps between gorges and water basins. I realized it couldn't be the way to go down.

Before going there he assured me we had enough money and I asked him more than once. He also assured me that the walking was about two hours. Was at least the double.

The night was arriving much faster than expected.

The wood transformed itself in the darkest place I have ever been. I was never afraid of darkness. I always liked woods.

I said I was scared. He hugged me but I didn't feel warmer. I kept shivering.

I thought he could go inside with them, with those two men, have sex with them even if, in that proclaiming his thought about them, he badly hid a very provincial judgment. He is so obsessed by sex that I realized in one second that the lenses through which he sees people cut the bodies in pieces and each of us can be fucked. It wasn't only a problem of all the other women: younger, thinner, more charming, impossible to have, intelligent, self-secure; those who showed him their attraction but better those who went first closer to him and then a bit away; no, just all: the mothers, the sisters, the saints, the whores, the silent ones... Oh, yes, he never liked The Mistress!

But I can't include in this list also men. I can't face it now.

* Susan Sontag in *Susan Sontag. The Complete Rolling Stone Interview* by Jonathan Cott, Yale University Press, 2013 (Italian ed.: Il Saggiatore, 2016, pp. 120-121).

I sensed that he could go inside with them, forgetting I was there with him.
I sensed he could forget me even in my presence.

There was full moon.
We both were a bit afraid to go into the woods. He assured me. But I wasn't.
We first slept in the middle of a field.
He woke me up at one point, even if I was managing to sleep.

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He woke me up so many times to clarify, alert, aware me.
One year, each night, he preferred me:
inhuman (not breathing)
far away (two rooms)
smelling good (stop smoking)
less female (try to get weight down)
more female (longer air)
more natural (no dyed hair, no make up, cotton underwear, preferably gym suit to show
the world I was self confident)
no requesting (wait him to have sex)
no secure at all about everything (bad dreams about all the other available women;
nostalgic dreams about the work and friends I left in another, far away life)
mothering (his daughter),
not mothering (if I would have thought to be a mother myself)
autonomous in the decision to leave (as I was getting old I had to decide what to do as the
possibility he could then leave me for a younger one, once he would have wanted to have
a family again, was strong; you know, is a natural instinct for men, women should be
young and attractive).

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He woke me up because was raining.
Like criminals we went under the roof of the shelter where we ate but where he wasn't able
to ask them the roof that now we were "stealing". Trying to find a comfort in a situation that
I can hardly define now just paradoxical, I promised myself or I wished to wake up before
the men in the shelter.
I did, for once I shacked him out from his sleep and I requested: "Bring me back home."

Without water, with only two apples, with the sensation of not being welcomed which
expanded at each step from him to the mountains around, to the region, to the entire
country, I was in silence.

He made and said other strange things.

Wishing a future in which he could live there, in a house, all alone.

Guessing how easy it is, in walking close to a precipice, to get rid of a wife.

Feeling ashamed to ask a simple glass of water at the first bar we finally met after three
hours of walking; he preferred to spend the last 4 euros we had for a bottle of very gassy
water.

I was, still, in silence.

Total resignation. No fight.

Once at home, I felt uncomfortable, even anxious and I laid down on the bed.

Of course, before I could even express it, he said it first. He was feeling uncomfortable

and anxious. Instead of panicking, as usual, I just said: "I guess is time for me to go back to my real home for a while."

For the very first time since I know him he was without words.

He stood up, went inside (we were in the terrace which witnessed so many words from us, so many, too many, only words), came back and said: "I understood something about me.

I always wanted you and at the same time wanted to be free; I wanted you because nobody sees me like you and in order not to loose this I am manipulating you."

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I was about 8 or 9 years old. I was facing a mirror, trying to put a bright red lipstick on my lips. I felt excited and guilty at the same time.

Behind me there was my auntie. The aunt nobody likes. Because she was/is younger, beautiful and with these qualities managed to marry the very intelligent and rich uncle.

I felt guilty because I was there. I asked my parents if I could stay over for the Christmas night and for once not to go to the other, favourite auntie, even if I loved her.

I felt guilty because I always liked also the beautiful auntie.

I always felt seen by her.

And wanted to try her beauty.

My mother never tried.

No guess why my father always, still, speaks about her not in terms of bodies qualities but in terms of intellectual ones.

I never got it as I thought she was beautiful when I saw her in older pictures. Then she became just as he wanted her to be.

A ghost, a shadow, the support of his success; economical, psychological, even the medical one.

My auntie was the ornamental one but I always thought that, even if she didn't study, she was very intelligent and her wishes or even the arrogance with which she, at one point, staged her latest success in hobbies like painting were kind of justified in the light of a life judged as only an ornament.

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I have tried to be the ornament, the supporter and even the almost ghostly one.

I managed to feel and be treated like an object, listening to words that were accusing my body to be different from the ones wished, listening to words that were hurrying me up as I was getting old, listening to words that were at least saving my face, like a portable mask that can be worn.

I run, I walked, I biked, I meditated, I danced.

Wasn't enough to achieve something unachievable as was a mixture of too many things.

Then I just stopped to try and I realized, in the dark woods, that I became all those things together, that I didn't know anymore who I was, that, basically, I was a dead walking human being.

Was a winter afternoon.

I was in my home, in my town, in the warm of my history.

I slept a bit after lunch, as it seemed I needed so much to rest, after so many broken sleep my latest years were made.

After that I rushed out home.

I arrived at the appointment. She opened the door, asked me to sit. She took her chair and sat in front of me, then she exclaimed: "What happened to you?"

I replied: "Why?"

She: "You are so white!!!!"

Me: "Yes, I know, my skin is very white." I said this with a bit of pride as I managed, in all my 40 years in this life, to never burn my face under the sun, considering this practice boomed in the 80s a total nonsense.

She: "Don't you know that exists make-up?"

In that very moment, for the first time, I started to see her 'body', separating it from the rest of her being. I saw an over 50s woman, very angry with her ex-husband, too convinced she is helping other women, with dyed good styling blond hair, a lot of make-up. In the complex I can honestly say she seemed to me a clown.

While watching her I decided to quit this new psychotherapeutic path. I have done already many. It costs too much and I am unemployed. I am totally fine for what and how I am.

*I hate to feel like a victim. I prefer saying: "So, I chose to fall in love with a person who turned out to be a villain." The choice was mine and I do not like to blame others, also because it is much easier to change oneself than to change others.**

* Susan Sontag in *Susan Sontag. The Complete Rolling Stone Interview* by Jonathan Cott, Yale University Press, 2013 (Italian ed.: Il Saggiatore, 2016, p. 28).