

Excerpt from

THE HUMMINGBIRD

by

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I can't go on, I'll go on.
Samuel Beckett
The Unnamable, 1953

One may well say (1999)

The Trieste district of Rome is, one may well say, the center of this story with many other centers. It is a neighborhood that has always swung back and forth between elegance and decadence, between luxury and mediocrity, between privilege and commonplace, and for now that will do: there's no point in describing it further, since a description of it at the beginning of the story could be boring, even counterproductive. Moreover, the best way to describe a place –any place – is to tell what happens there, and here something important is about to happen.

Let's put it this way: one of the things that happens in this story with many other stories happens in the Trieste quarter, in Rome, on a mid-October morning in 1999, in particular on the corner of Via Chiana and Via Reno, on the first floor of one of those buildings that indeed we won't bother to describe here, where thousands of other things have already happened. Except that the thing that is about to happen there is pivotal and, one may well say, potentially ruinous for the life of the protagonist of this story. Dr. Marco Carrera, the plaque affixed to the door of his medical office reads, specialist in ophthalmology and ocular disorders. It is the door that for a little while longer still shields him from the most critical moment of a life with many other critical moments. Inside the office, in fact, on the first floor of one of those buildings etcetera etcetera, he is writing out a prescription for an elderly woman afflicted with ciliary blepharitis – an antibiotic collyrium, particularly indicated following an innovative, indeed revolutionary, one may well say, treatment based on N-acetyl cysteine instilled in the eye – a treatment that has already resolved the most serious problem of this pathology in other patients of his, namely the tendency to become chronic. Outside the office, however, destiny is waiting to crush him in the guise of a short little man named Daniele Carradori, bald and bearded, but with a look that is – one may well say – magnetic, and which before long will focus on the ophthalmologist's eyes and arouse in them first incredulity, then bewilderment and finally a distress that cannot be cured by his (the oculist's) science. It is a decision that the little man has now made, and which has driven him to the doctor's waiting room where he is presently sitting, staring at his shoes without availing himself of the abundant offering of brand new magazines – not months old and falling apart – scattered on the end tables. No use hoping that he will change his mind.

This is it. The door of the examining room opens, the elderly blepharitic woman walks out, turns to shake the doctor's hand and proceeds to the receptionist's desk to

settle the bill for the visit (80,000 liras), while Carrera pokes his head out to call in the next patient. The little man stands up and steps forward. Carrera shakes his hand and has him come in and sit down. The Thorens vintage turntable – now out of date though in its day, that is, a quarter of a century ago, one of the best – sitting on a shelf along with a dependable Marantz amplifier and two AR-6 mahogany speakers, is playing the Graham Nash album entitled *Songs for Beginners* (1971), the volume turned down low; its enigmatic cover, resting on the aforementioned shelf, depicting the aforementioned Graham Nash with a camera in his hand in a context that is difficult to make out, is the thing that strikes you most in the whole room. The door closes again. Here we go. The membrane that separated Dr. Carrera from the most potent emotional shock of a life full of other potent emotional shocks has torn.

Let us pray for him, and for all ships at sea.

Postcard General Delivery (1996)

Luisa LATTES
General Delivery
59-78 rue des Archives
75003 Paris
France

Rome, April 17, 1999
I am working and thinking of you.
M.

Yes or no (1999)

“Good morning. My name is Daniele Carradori.”

“Marco Carrera, good morning.”

“Does my name mean anything to you?”

“Should it?”

“Yes, it should.”

“Will you repeat it for me, please?”

“Daniele Carradori.”

“Is it the name of my wife’s psychoanalyst?”

“Precisely.”

“Oh. Forgive me, but I didn’t think I would ever meet you. Please, sit down.

What can I do for you?”

“Hear me out, Dr. Carrera. And, after I’ve told you what I have to tell you, if possible refrain from reporting me to the Medical Association or, worse yet, to the Italian Psychoanalytic Society, which, as a colleague, you could very easily do.”

“Report you? Why?”

“Because what I am about to do is prohibited, and in my profession it is sanctioned with great severity. I never even remotely dreamed of doing such a thing in my life, nor did I imagine ever conceiving of it, but I have reason to believe that you are in grave danger, and I am the only person in the world to know it. So I decided to inform you, even if by doing so I am violating one of the fundamental rules of my profession.”

“Damn! Tell me.”

“First I have a favor to ask of you, however.”

“Does the music bother you?”

“What music?”

“Nothing, never mind. What do you need to ask me?”

“I would like to ask you a few questions, just to be able to confirm the things that have been said to me about you and your family, and to exclude the possibility that I have been given a misleading picture. In my opinion it’s quite unlikely, but it cannot be ruled out entirely. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“I brought these notes. Just answer yes or no, please.”

“Understood.”

“Shall I begin?”

“Go ahead, begin.”

“Are you Dr. Marco Carrera, forty years old, raised in Florence, with a degree in medicine and surgery from La Sapienza University in Rome, specializing in ophthalmology?”

“Correct.”

“Son of Letizia Delvecchio and Probo Carrera, both architects, both retired, residing in Florence?”

“Yes. But my father is an engineer.”

“Oh, I see. Brother of Giacomo, a little younger than you, residing in America, and, forgive me, of Irene, who died by drowning in the early 1980s?”

“Yes.”

“Married to Marina Molitor, of Slovenian nationality, a ground attendant for Lufthansa?”

“Yes.”

“Father of Adele, age 10, who attends fifth grade in a public elementary school near the Colosseum?”

“The Vittorino da Feltre, yes.”

“And who between two and six years of age was convinced that she had a wire attached to her back, which prompted you parents to consult a child psychology specialist?”

“Manfrotto the Wizard ...”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing, it was what he had the children call him. But he didn’t solve the wire issue, even if Marina continues to think so.”

“I see. So it’s true that you consulted a child psychology specialist.”

“Yes, but I don’t see what it has to do with—”

“You understand why I’m asking you these questions, don’t you? I have just one source, and I am verifying that it is truthful. It’s a scruple that I cannot overlook, given what I’ve come to tell you.”

“Understood. But what did you come to tell me?”

“A few more questions, if you don’t mind. They will be slightly more intimate questions, which I would ask you to please answer with the utmost honesty. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“You gamble, don’t you?”

“Well, not anymore.”

“But can one say that in the past you were a gambler?”

“Yes. In the past, yes.”

“And is it true that until age fourteen you were much shorter than boys your age, to the point where your mother nicknamed you the hummingbird?”

“Yes.”

“And that at fourteen your father took you to Milan to undergo an experimental hormone-based treatment, after which you caught up to a normal height, gaining almost five inches in less than a year?”

“In eight months, yes.”

“And is it true that your mother was against it, that is, she wanted you to remain small, and that taking you to Milan was the only act of authority exercised by your father in carrying out his parental functions, given that in your family – pardon me if I use the exact language with which this fact was reported to me – he doesn’t count for shit?”

“Ah! That’s not true, but considering who told you these things, yes, Marina always thought that.”

“It’s not true that your mother was against it or that your father doesn’t count for shit?”

“It’s not true that my father doesn’t count for shit. Only that’s the impression that many people, especially Marina, have always had. They are two very different types, she and my father, who most of the time—“

“There is no need for you to explain anything to me, Dr. Carrera. Just answer yes or no, all right?”

“All right.”

“Is it true that you have always been in love with, and for many years have had a relationship with a woman named Luisa Lattes, currently residing—”

“What?! Who told you that?”

“Guess.”

“Certainly not! It’s not possible, Marina can’t have told you that—”

“Just answer yes or no, please. And try to be honest, so that I can assess the credibility of my source. Are you still in love with or could you have given your wife the impression of being still in love with this Luisa Lattes, yes or no?”

“No!”

“So you don’t see her secretly, during conferences you happen to attend in France, or Belgium, or Holland, or places that are not too far from Paris, where Lattes resides? Or during the summer, in Bolgheri, where you spend the month of August in two neighboring family houses?”

“That’s ridiculous! We see each other on the beach with our children, and maybe we start talking, but we’ve never dreamed of “having a relationship,” as you put it, much less seeing one another secretly when I go to a conference.”

“Listen, I’m not here to judge you. I’m just trying to figure out if what I’ve been told about you is true or false. So is it false that you and this woman see each other on the sly?”

“It’s false, yes.”

“And you rule out the possibility that your wife may be convinced of this even if it isn’t true?”

“Of course I rule it out! They’ve even become friends. They go horseback riding together, that is, just the two of them alone: they leave the kids to their husbands and they go gallivanting around the countryside all morning.”

“That proves nothing. You can become friends with someone and see her every day precisely because you are morbidly jealous of her.”

“Yes, but that’s not the case, believe me. Marina isn’t morbidly jealous of anyone. I’m faithful to her and she damn well knows it. And now would you please tell me why you say I am in danger?”

“So you haven’t been writing letters to one another for years, you and this Luisa Lattes?”

“No!”

“Love letters?”

“Certainly not!”

“Are you being truthful, Dr. Carrera?”

“Of course!”

“I’ll ask you again: are you being truthful?”

“Of course I’m being truthful! Now would you mind telling me—”

“Then I must apologize, but contrary to my convictions – which were solid, I assure you, otherwise I would not have come here – your wife has not been truthful with me, and so you are no longer in danger as I thought, which is why I will not disturb you any further. Please disregard my visit, and I urge you to please not talk to anyone about it.”

“What? Why are you getting up? Where are you going?”

“I apologize again, but I made a grave error of judgment. Goodbye. I know the way—”

“Oh no you don’t. You can’t come here, tell me that I’m in grave danger because of something my wife told you, give me the third degree and then take off without telling me anything! Now tell me, or else I’ll report you to the Association!”

“Calm down, please. The truth is I shouldn’t have come here and that’s that. I always thought I could believe what your wife told me about herself and about you, and I formed an exact idea of the disorder she suffers from precisely because I’ve always believed her. Based on this idea, faced with a situation that seemed very serious to me, I felt I had to act outside the limits imposed by professional ethics. But now you tell me that your wife has not been honest with me about something very fundamental, and if she wasn’t honest about that it’s likely that she hasn’t been so about many other things, including those that made me believe you were in danger. As I said, an error on my part, for which I can only apologize again, but since your wife stopped coming to me I found myself wondering whether—”

“What’s that? My wife has stopped coming to you?”

“That’s right.”

“Since when?”

“Since over a month ago.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You didn’t know?”

“No, of course I didn’t know.”

“She hasn’t come again since the first session after returning from vacation.”

“But she tells me she continues seeing you. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, at three fifteen, as always. I go to pick Adele up from school because Marina has to come to you. Even this afternoon I have to go pick her up.”

“That she lies to you doesn’t surprise me in the least, Dr. Carrera. The problem is that she lied to me too.”

“Okay, so she lied to you about one thing. And besides, excuse me, but aren’t lies supposed to be even more revealing for you people than a truth that’s kept concealed?”

“You people who?”

“You analysts. Isn’t everything of some use to you, truth and lies, and so on?”

“Who says that?”

“Well, I don’t know, you ... Psychoanalysts. Psychoanalysis. Doesn’t it? Since I was a child I’ve been surrounded by people who are in analysis and I’ve always heard it said, well, that the setting, the transference, the dreams, the lies, everything has its importance precisely because the truth the patient is hiding remains entangled in them. Doesn’t it? What’s the problem now if Marina has invented something?”

“No, if this thing about Luisa Lattes is only a fantasy of hers, it makes a big difference, because then it’s your wife who is in danger.”

“Why? What danger?”

“Look, I’m so sorry but I shouldn’t talk to you any longer. And don’t tell your wife I came here, I implore you.”

“But how can you think I’ll let you leave after what you’ve told me? I demand that you now—”

“It’s no use, Dr. Carrera. Go ahead and report me to the Association, if you must: I deserve it after all, given the mistake I made. But you can never force me to tell you what—”

“Look, it’s not a fantasy.”

“What did you say?”

“What Marina told you about Luisa Lattes is not a fantasy. It’s true, we see each other, we write to each other. Only it’s not a relationship, and above all it’s not marital infidelity: it’s something between us that I can’t even define and I don’t understand how Marina can know about it.”

“Are you still in love with her?”

“Listen, that’s not the point. The point is that—”

“Forgive me if I insist: are you still in love with her?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see each other in Leuven last June?”

“Yes but—”

“In a letter a few years ago did you write that you like the way she dives into the water from the shore?”

“Yes, but how the h—”

“Did the two of you take a vow of chastity, that is, not to have sex even if you want to?”

“Yes, but really, how does Marina know these things? And why don’t you tell me what you have to tell me without making a song and dance about it? A marriage is at stake here, shit, there’s a daughter!”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but your marriage has long since ended, Dr. Carrera. And as for children, there will be another one, soon, but it will not be yours.”