

# MUMMY DARLING

by Maurizio de Giovanni

Translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel

If I could say it, this is what I'd say: my name is Luigi Alfredo Ricciardi, and I see the dead.

If I said so, they'd stare at me hard and nod their heads, worried, while considering the fastest way out or wondering how long it would take to get help. Maybe they might laugh uncertainly, but their eyes would probably betray a vague fear. When it comes to death, people are afraid.

These days, too, what with strange individuals who've gone so far as to change the calendar and call 1931 the ninth year, and stride along kicking the air, fear wears many colors. And a person who goes around saying he sees the dead might get put in the slammer, or else they might enlist him and make him a general.

In any case, I don't say it. To anyone. And I've never said it.

I see the dead who've been murdered, or died in an accident, violently that is, suddenly. I see them at the scene where it happened, for a time that's unpredictable, ten days, a month, even two: Little by little they fade away like a memory, gradually leaving this lousy world from which they were wrenched.

I see them with wounds and blood, wearing their last expression, repeating the final phrase of a thought that death abruptly cut short, over and over again, using the same tone and the same words. Like a filmstrip, one of those new "talkies" they show in movie theaters, where women are always crying and men smiling. Always the same film. Think about it a little, being tied to a chair in front of a screen that repeats the same scene, again

Commissario Ricciardi, the protagonist of Maurizio de Giovanni's recently translated thriller *I Will Have Vengeance* (Europa Editions 2013), debuts for *EQMM* in this story. The author says this is the only narrative in which Ricciardi speaks in the first person. Ricciardi has an unusual ability: He can see and hear the dead in their final moment. Aside from the specific case under investigation in this story, it can be seen as an introduction to *IWHIV* if read beforehand, or a glimpse of the novel's origins if read afterward. ■■

and again, but in Technicolor, even colors you wouldn't care to see: pink guts, red entrails, black blood. Gray brain matter.

You learn so many things, being able to see the dead, which the rest of the world can't imagine. For example, the fact that blood pumped from a wound by a heart that's still living is black; that the brain is liquid when it oozes out of a skull that's been cracked open with a hammer. That when you go on talking with punctured lungs you spew a frothy spray of bubbles out of your mouth, like soapsuds for washing the floors, but reddish, like watered-down wine. And you learn so many other lovely little things.

If I could talk about it, anyone who didn't run away screaming would probably ask me how I keep from going crazy. My answer would be that when you're a child you can get used to anything. The first time it scared me, when I saw a man sitting on the ground in a garden with a pruning knife planted in the middle of his shirt. The shirt was drenched with black blood, and he was foaming at the mouth, telling me that he hadn't even touched my wife. (*My wife?* But I was only five years old!) Later on, as a result of seeing children run over by carriages, women hanging themselves for love, thugs butchered by rivals, little by little I learned to keep my head down when I walked, humming tunes to myself so I wouldn't hear anything, leaving room in my mind for secret thoughts.

You grow up with your habits—and you survive. Naturally, you're not like other people, and you know it. So you keep to yourself, like the hunchback poet's solitary sparrow.<sup>1</sup> In my case, I'm not sure why, my schoolmates sensed something dark about me and left me alone, rather than taunting me to death as they did to kids who were retarded or crippled.

And when you grow up, you start to ask yourself what you want to do in life. And inevitably, since you have no choice, you end up doing the work that I do. To try to set things straight in a course that's been interrupted. To figure things out and bring closure to death's hasty business, which automatically cut the thread with a single snip, without untying all the knots one at a time. I became a policeman, and now I'm a *commissario*, police commissioner with the Mobile Unit of Naples' *Regia Questura*.

A lot of other things I learned by walking around this city. I come from a small town, in the province of Salerno, where there is no madness and no wealth: People die of hunger or adversity. Here, instead, death wears many colors, none the same as any other: rage, hatred, resentment, jealousy. The fact that everyone lives so closely packed, crammed on top of one another, trampling each other, pushing and shoving, I want your place, I get rid of you and I take it. Every available square inch of space is taken, those struck between the eyes and left without a spot can only go on endlessly imploring an almighty God who is deaf. Or they can weep. Or cry out for their mother, their wife. Or laugh even: like that time with the whore.

I remember it was raining. Here everything is overblown, even the rain. When it rains, it rains with a vengeance: Nonstop torrents rush down from the *Quartieri Spagnoli* to Via Toledo, carrying garbage and dead rats from one

<sup>1</sup>The hunchback poet's solitary sparrow is a reference to Leopardi and his poem "La passera solitaria," often known as "Passero solitario," the solitary sparrow.

basement flat to another, like a gift from destiny.<sup>2</sup> The parks become flooded and bestow their branches and leaves on the rest of the city. Shoes with cardboard soles fall apart, leaving chilblains exposed to one's neighbors' mockery. Little pickpockets flounder in the mud, baggy pants held up by a piece of cord, their ribs visible under sunbaked skin, searching for who knows what treasure.

They came to call for us in the usual way, a boy who stops at the door and shouts out an address to the guard, hurry, someone's dead at the Torretta.<sup>3</sup> In this city there has never been a signed accusation, a name to record, a voluntary witness. And off we went under the downpour, collars raised, leaping about on our toes like arthritic ballerinas to avoid puddles of variable unknown depths.

No car, mobile unit my ass; we have two vehicles and the questore, or rather his wife, has one of them and the other one hasn't run in ages. One umbrella for four people: me, two police escorts, and Maione.

Maione is my brigadier, the one who always accompanies me. Big, heavysset, good as gold; they killed his son three years ago. The son too was a policeman. We solved the crime, caught the would-be Camorrist, who thought he was smart. I left him in Maione's hands, to see what he would do: He stared at the thug for a long time, his eyes full of the memory of his son, then he put the handcuffs on, trying not to touch him, and took him to jail. What you see is what you get, with Maione. He has no false bottom. In some sense, he's the man I would have wanted to be.

You don't need a specific address to find a dead body in this city, even when the rain is driven horizontally by the sirocco spitting in your face. All you have to do is go with the flow and follow the crowd. That time the crowd was gathered outside a charming little door, on a side street not far from the roar of the sea.

Oh, said Maione, as the two policemen exchanged glances and smirked. Well? I said. A bordello, *Commissa'*. That's a bordello.

I don't care for brothels. Not that I object to them, for heaven's sake: It's simply that I've seen the monsters generated by passions, and I hate places where passions are indulged. I don't go to those places; I feel sorry for those who work there, maybe. I think love is something quite different. Every night, for example, I watch a young woman from the window as she makes dinner for her family, washes up afterwards, and then embroiders quietly, and that's enough for me; I don't listen to the call of my flesh, and it doesn't perturb me.

A substantial group of people pressed around, indifferent to the stinging rain the sky was unleashing on the city. Death is always a spectacle, which you can later talk about in the evening, as thunder rattles the windows, to hold your family's attention. What's more, that particular occasion offered a chance to peek behind the forbidden door, at the satin and soft lights, the perfumes and disinfectants. Grim-faced, the elderly doorkeeper kept watch to make sure nobody entered: Something might disappear in the confusion, the curious have nimble fingers. She didn't even want to let us in, then she saw

<sup>2</sup> Naples' *Quartieri Spagnoli*, or Spanish Quarter, is a densely populated maze of narrow streets, bustling and jam-packed; this older, poorer area of the city stands in sharp contrast to the newer *Vomero*, with its solidly upper-middle-class population. Via Toledo, which borders the *Quartieri*, is one of Naples' main thoroughfares.

<sup>3</sup> La Torretta Market is one of a few covered markets in Naples.

Maione and said good evening, *Brigadie'*, please, come in. The policemen nudged each other, sniggering. I looked at Maione, curious: Red as a beet, he stammered that the lady was a neighbor of his. If you ask me, the policemen were less than convinced by that. Me, a little bit more, but not much.

Inside, a narrow corridor with smoke-drenched walls and a thick red runner led to a spacious room. Huddled against a wall, as if hoping to blend into a hideous painting of nymphs and fauns, were a dozen young ladies in tears. They looked like little girls dressed up in their mothers' clothes, some extremely young, their heavy makeup smudged from crying, leaving splotches on their white powdered cheeks, their lipstick like a smear of blood around an open wound. If I had to paint grief, I would use that image: joy negated, sorrow beneath the cheer.

In front of them, towering in the middle of the room, stood the "madame." Her hair was arranged in an upsweep, and she wore heavy jewelry around her neck, on her fingers, and at her ears. Her eyes, under at least two coats of eye shadow, flashed an expression of anger and rage. A woman aggrieved, not grieving. She led us up the stairs, telling us what had happened in a voice that was breathless from the climb.

Gilda's name wasn't Gilda, of course, but Maria Rosaria. She came from Frattamaggiore, from a poor family, needless to say. She'd been at the "house" (that's what they called it, the "house": To me it seemed like blasphemy) for two years. She was the prettiest, always cheerful, in high demand. Needless to say. Down in the "living room" (they called it the "living room," what a euphemism) they always lined up for her. And she always had a smile, a kind word for everyone. A saint. Needless to say.

Huffing and puffing, we came to another corridor with some partly open doors leading to the battlefields. Not a trace of a client, of course: All evaporated like morning dew at first sunlight. You don't kill the geese that lay the golden eggs, or silver ones either: It wouldn't be easy to come up with witnesses. The only closed door was the one that should have been open, Gilda's room. I signaled Maione, who nodded: He stationed the two policemen on either side of the door and he himself stood in front of it. I always go in alone. He thinks it's so I can carefully inspect the scene of the crime while it's still uncontaminated by the dance routine of photographer, coroner, undertaker, etc. Actually, it's so I can listen to what the deceased has to tell me.

A ritual, a liturgy: not a procedure. Like countless men before me, though with very different intentions and different expectations, I entered the room and closed the door behind me.

It always makes me laugh when I read in some book that people go into a room where a crime has taken place and start describing the furniture and accessories in great detail. When there's a corpse, you look at the corpse. And that's it. I wasted no time looking at nightstands, mirrors, console tables, or the ceramic pitcher and wash basin where clients rinsed off before and after. Instead, I stared at the big unmade bed, a white meadow with a huge red flower in the middle. And in the middle of the red flower, the eviscerated body of Maria Rosaria from Frattamaggiore, aka Gilda. In the rippling, muffled silence, away from the distant sobbing of the young ladies with the smudged makeup, I looked up and saw Gilda sitting on the edge of the bed, about two feet from her dead body: the same garter belt, naked breasts, loose flowing

hair. A silk dressing gown, unfastened, with a rouge stain on its shawl collar. Her belly slashed open diagonally, a cut that started beneath her left breast and ran almost to her right hip. From the aperture spilled the pink snake of the intestine, and a kind of transparent sac, maybe the bladder. Blood flowed from the clean-cut edges of the wound, providing a compassionate cover for the exposed entrails. Above all this carnage, the woman's lovely face was laughing.

Not a discreet laugh: not a polite smile, an amused grin. No. A rich, full-bodied, infectious laugh, the kind that makes your eyes water and leaves you gasping. In the midst of the laughter, over the shambles of the dangling guts, a few words could be heard. Mummy darling, Gilda was saying. He wants to take me home to meet his darling Mummy. I sighed and opened the door.

Behind Madame, who continued to look more aggrieved than grieving, stood an agitated little man. He introduced himself as the brothel's physician, who acted as proxy for the provincial medical officer for public health. They had called him to see if he could do anything. I let him go in; I watched his face blanch and saw that he had to lean against the door frame to keep from falling. He stifled the urge to retch. Some doctor, I thought. Maione, escorting him to the bathroom, said, take heart, Doc: A case of syphilis is one thing, this is something else. I turned to Madame and asked her who had found Gilda in that condition, and who'd been the last person to see her alive. The woman told me that another whore, who was now downstairs, had found her: She said the word "whore" to my face. As for the second question, she said she had no idea, her eyes darting left and right. All in all, a truth and a lie.

It went well: The whore downstairs, a petite, plumpish girl who was Maria Rosaria's best friend, was dispassionate and determined. Livid with hatred for whoever had taken her dearly loved friend, she spoke through clenched teeth. Eyes flashing, she spat out that she'd entered the room to find out how things had gone with Gilda's most devoted client, an up-and-coming mobster in the area. A guy who wanted to get her out of the brothel, restore her good name, so she could be Maria Rosaria again. And bring her home, introduce her as his girlfriend; he was crazy about her. What, her only client? I asked. The only one, the young lady explained, because for months the man had bought all of Gilda's time for his exclusive use. When they saw each other that day, she reported, Gilda was supposed to tell him to give it up, once and for all. And now, however, she was the one who'd given it up.

Plausible, I thought. A razor is a thug's weapon. Then too, it also explained "Mummy darling."<sup>4</sup> Still, why kill her?

Because, the deceased's friend Concetta aka Miriam said, Gilda was quite content to be Gilda, and she didn't want to become Maria Rosaria again. Meaning that she liked life in the brothel: easy money, protection, security, chatting with the other girls. And rather than a life as the mobster's wife, whom he would sooner or later cheat on, she preferred being the guy's lover, and not being cheated on. So much for family. She was twenty-two years old, there was time.

But instead she hadn't been given any time, not even a little. And now there

<sup>4</sup> Mobster figures, *guappi*, have a rigid code of honor and a hierarchy of values all their own. Among them, the mother figure surely occupies the highest place. Ricciardi therefore finds the term "Mummy darling" consistent with the importance that a *guapo* like Rindone would attach to his mother.

she was, lying with her guts spilled out two feet away from herself as she split her sides laughing (*pardon, mademoiselle*). I went back into the room to take a closer look: the same furniture, the window buffeted by rain, a little door leading to the back stairs, locked. The reek of open flesh hung over the scent of cheap perfume: It smelled like someone had broken a flacon of cologne in a butcher shop. I gave the go-ahead for them to clean the room: They'd bring out a chest with a jar of entrails, like those found in an Egyptian embalmer's mortuary. Sitting on the bed drenched with her life's blood, Gilda laughed and kept saying Mummy darling.

We sent to have the mobster picked up, a certain Don Giuseppe Rindone. A name for a priest, I said to myself. It didn't take long; he stood stiffly outside the door, in the pouring rain. He reminded you of a weeping willow: thick hair drooping around his dark face, a sagging moustache adding to his sad expression. His eyes conveyed defiance towards the cops and an immense sorrow. On the one hand just talking with us was loathsome to him, on the other hand he wanted to hear about the crime. He didn't care about going to jail, or about being falsely accused of someone else's wrongdoing either. It drove him out of his mind, he said, to think that the person who cut short the life of the woman he loved might get away with it.

I believed him. That's how it works: People come in and talk. Then there's a spark, a vibe that jolts you, or doesn't, and you know if the person talking is lying or not. Rindone wasn't lying. Still, he'd been Gilda's last client: He was in trouble and he knew it, but he hadn't fled. The rain was knocking rudely against the brothel's windows, and the girls were sobbing over Maria Rosaria's lost life and, maybe, their own. I called for Madame again: A doubt had occurred to me.

The clients who had evaporated were people who were known, loyal patrons who were settled in nearly monogamous routines, each with the same girl. Questioning the young ladies, it came out that what they sold, more than sex, was their time and a shoulder to cry on: elderly, respected professionals, inconsolable widowers, husbands steadily cheated on . . . I'm not saying I came to recognize the social merit of whores, but I came close. And allowing for a standard margin for error, I excluded the weeping old men from the list of Gilda's possible slashers. Maione looked at me, I looked at him: We were at a standstill. We both knew all too well how important the first hours following a crime are for uncovering motive and opportunity, and thereby identifying the guilty party.

On the edge of the bed the whore kept laughing, the rain kept knocking at the window, and time was passing. Rindone, in handcuffs, was standing motionless in the doorway of Gilda's room. Suddenly he turned and stared at me. You could tell he had to overcome his natural revulsion to speak to me. Finally he said: But didn't she deserve to live, *Commissa*? Even if she was a whore? I swear to you, if you saw her more than once, you too would all lose your heads, believe me.

More than once. More than once. Mummy darling.

I gathered everyone in the "living room." All of them: Madame, Rindone, the doctor, the policemen, the young ladies. I sat down, and I waited. Half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half: Silence at first, then someone started shuffling his feet. Someone else started looking at the grandfather clock, standing

amidst the naked nymphs like a professor who has accidentally ended up in a cabaret. After a while everyone started looking at the clock.

In the end, the murderer stepped forward and asked, respectfully: *Commisario*, will we have to stay here much longer? Because if we do, I must let my mother know, she's expecting me home.

It turned out that the missing weapon was in its place, in his bag: still stained with the blood of Maria Rosaria, aka Gilda, the girl who wanted to continue being what she was. A scalpel, of course, which slashes like a razor.

The doctor had the key to the door leading to the back stairs, so he could pay a visit to the young ladies without being observed and scaring the clients. Discreetly. The house was a respectable establishment. He'd lost his head over Gilda some time ago, since the second time he'd given her a checkup, the second time he'd seen her naked: more than once, *Commissa'*, and you lose your head.

There, that's when I got it: If Rindone had effectively bought all of Gilda's time, who could see her repeatedly and therefore lose his head? The insignificant little man who had the key to the back door and went to examine her.

It turned out that he had waited to declare himself. He'd thought a lot about it; he was getting on in years by now and he was a respected professional. He'd talked to his mother about it, his darling Mummy with whom he lived alone, and she'd laughed loudly in his face: "Imagine, you raise a son, you make a thousand sacrifices so he can study, you have him become a doctor so that one day, with a Fascist Party membership card, he can even become a provincial medical officer, and, to thank you, he comes and tells you he's in love with a whore and wants to bring her home to you!"

And she laughed and laughed, Mummy darling did, *Commissa'*, the little man said, blinking behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. And I saw red.

Later, I came to see Gilda, my muse. I said to her, come and meet my darling Mummy, when she sees you she'll understand, and she'll agree. And she laughed at me too, *Commissa'*, she started laughing hysterically. It made my head throb. You know what I think, *Commissa'*? That Gilda was a little crazy. That she had the seed of madness in her, and that's what made her laugh like that. An illness. And I cured her; I operated on her and I excised the laughter, with my scalpel. Indeed, all of a sudden she stopped laughing.

Luckily, Rindone was still handcuffed, otherwise the doctor would have met a worse ending than Gilda. Later I confirmed my fears: We had to break down the door to meet Mummy darling, and I saw her laughing from two orifices: her mouth, above, and the maw in her throat, slashed open with her son's scalpel. The head was still attached by the vertebrae, otherwise he would have decapitated her. You got it, it was the little doctor. And Mummy darling, in the gurgling image I had of her, was still laughing.

Every now and then, when it rains hard, I can still hear her laughing. Gilda, that is. The laughter echoes in my heart. Such a beautiful girl, what a shame.

It rains, you know, in this city of sunlight.<sup>5</sup>

It rains a lot. ●

<sup>5</sup> The city of sunlight, "*città del sole*", recalls the famous Neapolitan song "*O sole mio*."