

Summer of 1993

End of June - from this side of the world

We are indeed living in two separate worlds, my darling. The time and space we share are not the same. The single motions of a daily life are not the same and cannot be carried out at the same time. The very moment I'm lying on this beach, on this little boat, enjoying the sun of an early Summer afternoon dressed only with my costume, wondering if I should take another dip in the water, you are sitting down in our lounge, trying to get warm by the heater; when I'm looking at the sun setting over this beautiful lake in Central Italy, you are likely to be in your ram sleep, maybe dreaming about the time that cuts so clearly my Northern day from your Southern night.

We may be thinking of each other, but we are so far removed from each other. Your day begins when mine ends, my day begins when yours is almost gone by. The very emotions I live this day, this hour, are the emotions you may have lived many hours ago; our day, our date is only fractionally the same: the time, the light, the season, the habits, are different when not starkly opposite.

The life I am living now is not going to last long, soon we will be reunited: until then our lives are running along widely diverging paths. I am mingling with the holiday like lifestyle, with the warmth, the water, the swimming, the freshly cooked Summer dishes. I am a man of leisure, sometimes pleasure. I can afford to lie on this beach, on this boat, on this bed or on this lawn and never worry about anything; you must be carrying on with your daily routine, your struggle against the cold, the annoying bits of your work, the short daylight, the food you constantly have to heat up, the son of ours who will not stop running about the place. My time belongs to me, I have plenty of time to think over what I intend to do at any point of my trip. You don't have time, nor does the time you spend worrying about things and people ever really belong to you.

I am in this sort of quite bearable lightness of being, while your being becomes unbearable every new hour, every new day. I can think of you two, I can picture you at this moment, at this height in time, as you prepare to do something I would do in a different time of the day, or would not do at all. You are not going through what I am now, you cannot be part of this. By the same token, I cannot share your little troubles, your little joys, your cold hours of the early morning, the rush to work, the night, the fatigue, the life with a small child. When I'm not out and about I am mainly going along with my solitude, my thoughts about this trip, this place, these people as well as my thoughts about you, that place, those people.

I fear, my darling, this gap cannot be bridged. I feel that my experience here and now is distant, removed, detached from you, from your feelings, your emotions, your perceptions, your time, your space, your single moves and gestures, all which you perform within the circle of a life repeating its cycle incessantly.

Now what gets me, what I cannot dare face without unease, is my having to confront this other self, the self I will have to leave behind me, the self I will have to look back at once I rejoin your time - our time, my dear-, the self who won't be coming with me, left behind to carry on within the compassionate thoughts of those who care about him. This is what I fear most, as I prepare to take the jump: the utmost certainty that I will have to think of myself as I am now thinking of you and that I will not be able to reconcile the two. Myself in another time, another space, looking at myself encircled in the time and the space I will have left, time, space, people and places I won't be part of for a while, perhaps a long while.

One world will be regained, another lost. Just like now, when I am longing for a time, a face, a voice which I cannot just find inside me, which lives, is living its independent existence. This world is mine, the other isn't. Later, as this is lost, the other will come into place once again, indeed, it will reaffirm its very existence as the only one, the only acceptable one, the only one which I can relate to. My world, your world, his world - our world my dear, with or without this embarrassing sensation of loss, this discrepancy between the being and the has been. Maybe I won't all be there, maybe I will be wondering for sometime how much of me has really managed to take the jump. Much to my bewilderment, much to your acknowledgement, much to our mutual willingness to make our presence felt to each other...

Just a day or two later

Now, my dear, I want to tell you about a few things that have caught my attention in this country and this city I once considered my own.

Everywhere I went, I had to rely on the subway a lot. At any station, in any carriage, at any time - but mostly in the morning - I was stunned by the amount and variety of beggars and buskers. As I said, variety is the name of the game, so I will try to slot the many a little girl, little boy, young man, boy, girl and woman I saw into some sort of grouping.

Those who have something to offer asking for money in return are the buskers, beggars are they not indeed. There are some stationary buskers near the platforms of the *metropolitana* but the main lot can be seen on the trains, constantly hopping in and out of a carriage as they strive to bring a bit of sound and joy to a universe of individual boredom deep inside and of surface emptiness in people's looks.

The buskers

The first one is a tall young, sad looking man (maybe Polish) playing the harmonica (badly: he hardly gets any money). He gets off after just one stop, his face wearing an even sadder look.

Next, two young men get on the train playing fiddle and accordion player; they're of some Eastern European origin and get stuck right into some Italian popular tunes across the peninsula. They play definitely better than the previous guy, and are moderately to very successful with the people sitting in the carriage, who give them coins without too many reservations. After playing some hastened fragments of two or three folk songs, they decide to move on to the next carriage.

Later some other accordion player gets on the train jamming solo, along with playback music from a cassette player: extremely organised and very successful. People reach for some more coins in their pockets and generously give them away, time and time again...

The beggars

There is always *a* little girl, more often a few little girls pleading to be refugees from Sarajevo - whatever their real origin, with or without their supposed mother: they are moderately successful, though that also depends on previous waves of donations. Sometimes there are two women with two or more little girls and boys. Most of these unlikely families are made of gypsies, Rom people who come from the former Yugoslavia, or maybe Albania, or Romania. Colourful, vivacious, young and beautiful and often underaged con artists they are, as they go after people's money in more than one way, cheeky, sometimes daring, singing their gipsy songs in their own language, looking so happy and spirited, yet showing their thick dirt under their nails, their long days without a shower, their smells, the tired rags they are forever dragging about over their shoulders.

They get on the train, plead something in broken Italian, stretch their hands, collect their meagre takings, then move on. Time and time again. Waves after waves after waves. Sometimes they burst out singing unaccompanied, they sing as if they were singing to themselves, for their own entertainment and for their own sake. They come, they take, they steal if they can, they move on. They get off the train. The whole thing is like a carousel, a revolving human theatre of figurines.

On the subject of donations and generosity

People are generally quite willing to give (from a 500 lira note upward). A small donation can be that of one or two people in two rows of seats facing each other. An average donation might be that of one or two people in each row. A generous donation might be that of two or three people for each row.

Some people will give over and over, irrespective of the quality of the performance or the dramatic verve of the beggar in presenting his plea. They often carry a coin collection in their purse precisely for that purpose. Other people will not give ever: a bit like our narrator, who got embarrassed the one and only time he brought himself up to getting his wallet out...only to discover he had no change and no small notes either. Or they will give, but in a handful of cases: as for example, when faced with of a good performance, which draws a very positive and generous response from the travelling listeners. In general, performers, musicians of all kinds and even lousy music imitators and improvisers would have a much higher chance than beggars to attract people's generosity and stimulate them to reach for some coins or small notes, as many times as this can be reasonably expected to happen!

The people of the subway

Rome's subway stations are a microcosmos of the world up above. There are people waiting on the platform and getting on and off the carriages at all hours. People, people... during peak hours multitudes of people. Young, old, foreign, local, working people, unemployed, students, rich people, poor people, exhibitionist people, shy people, gypsies, beggars and buskers -of course-, destitute people...and young or underaged people with nothing better to do than going out and about around the city.

While I wait for a train on the platform not much is happening. People stand around idle, kind of resigned, or sit on the benches looking at their knees...some read a magazine, a newspaper or a little piece of paper that might look like a shopping list. Others talk to their friends who listen or pretend to listen while they look around. Some don't talk at all and don't move but they stare at other people around them. Sometimes gazes meet for a moment, occasionally followed by a smile. There is no watcher and watched. Everyone watches everyone and no one seems to be perturbed by this human activity.

The people of the subway have an air of fatigue, of constant tiredness about them, they sometimes seem to be in pain, as their faces expressively show. At the same time, they seem to be in a hurry to get to their station, to get up and get off the train and go out of the station. They move quickly in a gentle and disorderly stream of downward or upward people.

The people standing hang on to the nearest metal pole to keep their balance. They're close to each other even when the train is not crowded and do not fight for personal space. The people sitting seem content to be doing so as they have a spot but don't mind giving it up for an older person or a pregnant lady. There are people reading in all positions: sitting, standing, leaning on the side of the train, leaning against a pole, semi-sitting on metal structures near the row of seats. They all await their time to rejoin the surface, while they enjoy a ride in the entrails of the eternal city.