

Miha Mazzini: The Plant of Destruction
Short story, version 1.12

Let me tell you about my only friend. He's dead and this story is all that is left. I don't remember where and when we first met. But I do know exactly what he looked like, this student with curly hair, and I have never forgotten his youthful face. In most cases, changes erase our memory of people we see frequently. Of course his face aged, his skin became rougher, perhaps like a sailor's since he used a sun bed at least once a week, his chest broadened, his jeans increasingly hung loose on him, but his smile stayed and when it shone, it evoked in me all his ages simultaneously.

After the age of fifty, we have encounters that embarrass us, but we cannot stop ourselves from being deluded every time: we see someone we know, whom we haven't seen for a long time. A part of our brain jumps with joy, at least someone hasn't changed and isn't affected by time, does this mean there's hope for all of us? We wave to the person and receive a surprised look. We become aware that the person is too young and it can't be who we thought it was, perhaps it's his or her son; we smile an embarrassed smile and rush off with the bitter realization that there are no exceptions.

So, my friend and I met when we were students, which limits it to a period of no more than six months, just before 1990. He didn't last long at the university. Together with another friend, he started up a computer company, which at that time meant importing and selling hardware with varying degrees of legality. Yugoslavia was falling apart, as indicated by the long strings of zeroes that kept being added to the banknotes that were, due to fuel shortages, delivered on alternate days. The company was successful, the socialist authorities went into action, my friend had to emigrate and we lost touch for a good number of years.

Slovenia became independent, I went into politics and occasionally thought of him, but didn't make any enquiries. He came up to me after a political gathering and we went for dinner. For quite a long time we just looked at each other, shaking our heads in satisfaction that time had been kind to us. He was in computers again, this time in software, as the new state had meanwhile adopted copyright protection legislation to which at least all the state owned businesses had to adhere. All he told me about the years since we had last seen each other was that he had lived in a French speaking part of the world, and while saying this he compressed his hand into a fist, as if exercising or milking words in vain. I didn't request more, only waited for him to say with surprise: why politics? I began a monologue about what an impossible entity Yugoslavia had been, about this Frankenstein that the communists had stitched together and then tried to bring to life through the mixing of genes. They moved people in the hope that the regime would last long enough for them to create a new nation that would forget its roots. I told him about the cleansing of Slovenia and how it was necessary to send all the southern genes back across the borders, return to Africa all those imported by socialism, raise the birth rate and prohibit abortions, which are not only an immoral act but also an anti-social one. He took a deep breath and I stopped, realized I wasn't at a political rally, and then waited for him to say something, but he just stared ahead and slowly blinked. His lashes were so long!

He spoke about a completely neutral theme, I can no longer remember what, perhaps it was the weather. When saying goodbye, we shook hands. If we hadn't shaken hands, I would probably never have called him. This will sound impossible, but if I went blind I could pretty reliably recognize people by their handshake. Everyone can tell the difference between a limp

handshake and one that is too strong. Many people's palms sweat, or at least that's what they think, and before shaking hands they wipe them on their trousers and there's the sound of skin rubbing against material. The palm can be cold or hot and everything in between. Some hands lie in yours as a whole, with others you can feel the individual fingers. Some handshakes are uniform throughout, others get stronger or weaker. I have always found shaking hands to be a very quick opportunity to read someone's psycho-physical profile.

After two weeks I called him and suggested lunch. He declined because he already had a meeting, but a few days later he called me.

We met regularly, but our conversation was limited. He knew about my career only what he discerned from the media. During the decade after independence, everyone wanted to be liberal, broad minded and generous, which is why my party barely managed to make it into parliament. But it helped me business-wise as companies have to be nice to the people who can influence the passing of laws.

He never asked me for a favor towards the company he was working for. It was growing, maintaining important systems and had many contracts with the state, which ensured its stability. Once I asked him for some computer advice, but he spread his manicured hands in a helpless gesture and smiled in such a way that made me join him even before he told me that he had climbed up so high on the hierarchy that he had lost contact with the practical aspects of the business.

Sometimes we played squash together. It took a long time before he broke into a sweat. First he would get so red that I worried about his heart, but then the perspiration suddenly started to pour. I was never able to predict during which set it would happen. His personal smell erupted from behind the perfume and the deodorant, a smell I visually connected with clumps of red clay, and whenever we collided in the squash court, I could smell it on my t-shirt.

I never asked him about women and he never mentioned one. All I know about his childhood is that his parents didn't want him and that he had been with a number of foster families, about which he said nothing. When we met during the day, we ate quickly and talked while chewing. He finished work late and when he was very tired during dinner, he ordered a small beer. Whenever he put his thumb and index finger on the cold moisture coating the glass, he said the same thing: "I know it'll make me even sleepier, but ..."

The twentieth anniversary of my political career was approaching and I was getting more and more concerned. I would wake up at five in the morning and stare at the ceiling. Then I slowly dozed off just so that the alarm could tear me apart again. I wondered: "I'm nearing fifty. Will I have enough time?"

Sometimes I added without being a believer: "Oh, God!"

I only needed a few years to enter the history of the nation. Look what Hitler accomplished in no more than six years, from 1933, when he came to power. He turned a disintegrating country into the greatest force in the world.

In 2008 the crisis began and I slept well again. With every day there were more unemployed, to whom I could explain very clearly via the media that their jobs were being taken away by immigrants. Poverty grew with every new day, the result of the international conspiracy of

bankers. People have problems and I have the answers demanded by the times. Not just the content but also the form. On television you get twenty seconds and during that time it is possible to blame foreigners, but not to defend them.

Our dinners turned into a Wednesday ritual and I didn't interrupt it, even though I had ever more to do and an increasing number of offers for public appearances. We were becoming a serious parliamentary force. Not we, I; in this country a party is only an extension of its leader.

Our first victory was the referendum with which we prevented homosexual marriage. The immoral would like to satisfy their bestial urges during these hard times, such decadence! Evolution's appendix, something nature neither possesses nor needs.

After winning the referendum, I ordered champagne and couldn't stop myself from forcing him to drink and putting my arms around him. He looked embarrassed and spent a long time smoothing the hair above his ears and adjusting his cufflinks. When the food had calmed me down, he slowly, carefully began talking about some research ... Oh yes, I forgot to say something. As the years went by, he would increasingly often quote some study or other, probably trying to compensate for his lack of formal education, something I have noticed in many people. Well, there was this study about how extreme right-wing parties (his description, I find us perfectly normal!) were joined by a disproportionate number of closet gays. He used this exact term. This is how they try to hide from the public, while at the same time enjoying the company of real men. It was an odd dinner: within a second he had managed to ruin my good mood and I forced down my dessert and then left.

He managed to take the joy out of my work for over a year, regardless of the increasingly fruitful results. In the middle of a meeting I would start watching a colleague, trying to guess whether he was one of the concealed degenerates. Would he try to corrupt me? My identity, including its sexual aspect, was clear and solid, but the thought that such creatures could be working with me was making me paranoid.

It was precisely because of deviants that I went into politics. I was living in a student dorm and one winter day two faggots moved into the room next to mine, and they made no effort to hide anything and everyone knew what they were. I was no longer able to sleep because of them and their antics. After less than a month I moved out, to more expensive, but private accommodation with a family, instead of having to endure all night long the activities of the degenerates next door. A conviction matured inside me that I had to do something. Not for myself, but for the nation. Yes, it may sound silly now, but I founded my political party out of idealism.

And now I had a strong party, but I didn't know how many "neighbors" were in it. Would I have to return to those terrible nights in the dorm? To the cold wall to which I pressed my hand and my ear, trying to hear what they were up to. Never a sound or a moan, but they couldn't escape my imagination. The horror!

Apparently some people count sheep when they can't sleep at night, while I examined each leading member of my party under a microscope, trying to evaluate them. I carried out personnel changes and sacked a few people before I calmed down.

Initially I had resented my friend, but soon I became grateful to him. Every movement must experience regular purges, it's like the spring that removes all the rotten branches and dead leaves.

Maybe there's no connection, but during the first game of squash after the spoilt dinner, I ran into him so hard that I literally flattened him against the wall and damaged his collar bone. When he came to play again after a few months, I was afraid of myself.

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He called me at 3:16 in the morning, on the personal phone that I always leave switched on and the number of which was only known to him and the party general secretary. All he was able to do was say my name a few times, while I tried to intervene with "What is it? What is it?" my heart going cold. His voice! I imagined vividly his lips, the top one fuller than the lower one, tripping up and smothering his words.

He wasn't crying or sobbing. He sounded as if he had a cold, as if he had been talking for hours, but having to use such terrible strength that went beyond words. About how the computer system had collapsed and how the employees on duty had called him. He told them to immediately call the people in the States who had written the software, but of course he had to go to work and when he was there, his subordinates handed him the phone. He could not refuse it. "Do you understand?" he said and I said yes. A guy at the support services explained something to him, quickly and excitedly.

"Do you understand? Do you understand?" my friend kept asking, wheezing now, as if trying to run beyond his capabilities.

"What? Tell me, what?"

He uttered a few moans. He held his breath and his body groaned as if he was lifting a heavy weight.

"I don't speak English!" he said.

"How can that be? You're a computer person."

He said in a feeble voice:

"Everyone says that!"

He started explaining that in college he did Russian and that then he'd moved to a Francophone country. He knew enough English to be able to read slowly with the help of a dictionary or an electronic translation, enough to catch the gist. All the details were handled by his subordinates anyway. All he needed was to get the wider view, the purpose. Everyone, every single person he met always expected that he spoke English, the official language of the computer world. And because they expected this, because they had this image of him, he was too scared to deny it. He just swam with the tide. But now...

"So embarrassing! So embarrassing! Sweat was pouring off me, I'm as wet as if I'd fallen into a river. So embarrassing! How would it look if I'd admitted in front of my staff that I didn't

understand what the American was on about? So I just nodded and sweated. He ended the call and I was still unable to stop my chin from going up and down. Only when I realized what I must look like did I summon up the strength to issue some orders. There were only two possibilities ... only two ...”

It sounded as if he had sobbed.

“And? And?”

“The wrong one! I chose the wrong possibility. They went to get the CEO. So embarrassing. I’m in the toilet. And they’re outside, in the server room. Waiting for me! The embarrassment of it!”

“Take a taxi and come here. Rush out, don’t look at them, just come here, now!” I told him firmly and a small fragment of me was enjoying the power of rescue. I held the phone in my hand for a long time after we stopped talking.

He didn’t come. I drove to his company and saw the ambulances and two police officers entering the building with a roll of police tape.

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It was a church funeral. Clearly they no longer take posthumous revenge on suicides.

We had never discussed religion. Another unknown, of many. Another thing I should have asked him. I had missed out on so much! The sense of sadness was mingled with regret and anger over my own stupidity – I had behaved as if Wednesday evenings would go on for ever.

Before the funeral I spent day and night thinking only about the things I had missed out on, the things I hadn’t found out, hadn’t asked and in the end I desperately clung to nothing but the physical details, his hands, the tongue he ran across his lips in between sentences, the right hand that he put on his left shoulder, as if embracing himself, when he was deep in thought.

Again and again I kept repeating his desperate confession. He must have known enough English – did the American maybe have an unfamiliar accent? Was he paralyzed by the audience, staring at him and expecting from him something he was convinced he was unable to deliver? His perfectionism, which called for all or nothing. How carefully he used to put down the cutlery after eating, or tidy away his sports equipment and dry himself after showering!

The first night I woke up with my cheeks and pillow wet and a question that suddenly cleared my brain: why hadn’t he learnt English? He’d had so much time! Even if he had made use of just the last ten years, it would have been enough. Why?

I made myself a coffee and stared at the street light.

He had nurtured his Achilles’ heel. In another profession, his weak spot would not have been important, but he had persisted just to keep the risk alive. He had cradled his weak spot, the possibility that one day they would see through him, identify him as an interloper, someone who was not quite right, someone who was not theirs and that they would no longer want. He

knew the moment would come, it could not be any other way. Was that why I had always seen at the bottom of his dark eyes a melancholy resignation and a kind of glow that I interpreted as pain? I had thought it originated in his childhood, but maybe it was only a harbinger of the future he was anticipating.

I have met people like that: sometime, somewhere they acquire the seed of destruction (or they are born with it?) and they nurture it so that it takes root and grows into a large plant. Its roots grow into the concrete, shattering and breaking it after many years, and producing a huge tree that ultimately falls and crushes the person.

People who carry a different life in their head than the one in their body.

The night was slowly giving way to morning, while I was unable to move away from the window. It seemed so pointless. All I should have... I should have...

This is an epitaph to my best friend.

I should have.

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Just above the open grave he stood, my only friend. A part of my brain exclaimed: 'He's alive!', then a louder voice said: 'How young he is!' until reason intervened and decided: 'It can't be him! It must be his son!'

It was.

But black.

I forgot the ceremony, the coffin, the body, everything. I was unable to tear my eyes away from the son he had not told me about, perhaps because he had begotten him in foreign lands. There he stood before me, not quite as dark as dark chocolate, more like the milk chocolate that harms your body and ruins your teeth. The same melancholy in his eyes. My heart broke when I expressed my condolences to him and shook his hand: the same handshake. It's him, him!

He spoke English with a French accent. I invited him for dinner, on Wednesday, to our restaurant.

We have so much to say to each other.

THE END