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PETROVEC**  
QUARANTINE.  
ROME.

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# QUARANTINE. ROME.

Book  
data

*nonfiction*

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## About the book

This book is a lively and intimate collections of the author's original essays, diaries, and other texts written in Rome – the capital of Europe's first coronavirus outbreak. Faced with a changing society on the one hand and loneliness on the other, quarantine restrictions remind him of further tragedies, such as refugees being rescued in cities, devastated by earthquakes. The author handles personal crises with a lot of humor and irony, while attending others' misfortunes with compassion and a profound understanding. Revisiting stories he covered as a journalist, he confronts them from a personal, warmhearted, more human perspective. Indeed, this book wears two faces: one smiling, the other crying.



## About the author

Janko Petrovec, also known as an award-winning actor, is a translator from Italian, a journalist and a writer. Since 2016, he's been a foreign correspondent from Rome.

## About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.





## Sample Chapter

*for Andrea, Pavla and Andreja, who were there all the time,  
and for Hana, so she will know what kind of times she was born  
into*

What is before you is almost a diary. On Fat Thursday 2020 my time began speeding up but here and there I managed to note a thought on the edge of my screen so as not to forget it amid the deluge of things to do with work. I am a journalist, the Rome correspondent for the Slovene national broadcaster RTV Slovenia. It is nearly four years since I have come here, to the heart of Italy. It manages to shake me with unexpected joy and indescribable misery a number of times every year. The last such occasion so far was the new corona virus epidemic, Covid-19 as it has become known. And this is the red thread of these notes, if you happen to need one.

At the end of February it seemed as if the whole matter might be over in a few weeks. When events made my appearances unusually frequent, questions from listeners and viewers began trickling into my inbox; people were worried about how things would be in Slovenia. Initially I replied, then I no longer had the strength to, so I occasionally posted a thought or two on social networks. The response was great and I was grateful for it, through it my followers also encouraged me to transcend my usual writing and begin a book, something I had previously neither

wished nor hoped to do. I am also grateful to RTV Slovenia for enabling me to spend the most active years of my career here. As the Italians say, *Hai voluto la bicicletta? Adesso pedala!*, You wanted the bike? Now pedal!

My reflections sometimes became misgivings, with time contemplations, occasionally ideas. Most of them I never published on line, they demanded paper. For this I have to thank the people at Goga, my publisher, who comprehended this even before I did.

This is not a chronicle of the epidemic as we experienced it in Italy. That I have already written with my radio and TV contributions, broadcasts and commentaries. My archives show me that between 20 February and 31 May 2020, the period during which the pages that follow were also written, 265 of my items went on air on Slovene Radio and Television. Enough said.

Instead, this is a chronicle as it resonated within me, with a twelve-year background in journalism and twelve years in theatre. With theatre being my first love, the comic and tragic faces of the masks held by the muses Thaleia and Melpomene reflect the two faces of this book, one smiling, the other crying.

I thank you for your attention. Welcome into my world.

## 20 February

It is evening when the news of the first Italian infected with the new coronavirus is announced. Somewhere in Lombardy, Codogno. Never been there. A thirty-eight-year-old man, young, sporty, they say. As he was being taken into intensive care, he apparently said he wanted to see his child, due to be born shortly.

At the weekend I am going to Apulia and then to Slovenia.

## 22 February

There are 132 people infected, officially. Two dead. Here in Gallipoli it is a beautiful day and lunch was good. Shame about losing my ticket to Slovenia but it would bug me more if I didn't return to work now. This evening I am flying back to Rome.

## 25 February

Just imagine, the end of the press briefing at the Ministry of Health and all the politicians go home for dinner but you still need to do your report for the news, the political debate after the news, and the late night edition? Well, then.

The Milan Stock Exchange fell more than five percent this morning. There are 322 people infected, 11 deaths. Closing the borders would be a mistake the Italian Health Minister believes after a meeting with his counterparts from neighbouring countries, including Slovenia. With public events they will decide on a case to case basis and unify instructions for travellers to and from infected areas. How is this supposed to work?

It is Shrove Tuesday, Venice is entirely empty. The Milan Furniture Fair has been moved from April to June, 500 shops in Milan Chinatown have closed – their own initiative. So this is going to last more than a month.

## 27 February

I was at a press conference with the Italian Ministers of Health and Foreign Affairs this morning. They tried to reassure everyone that the two epicentres with eleven municipalities have been sealed off; tourists have nothing to fear. Everywhere else in Italy is safe, they say, and we can easily avoid both areas. One is in Lombardy, the other in Veneto, just south of Padua.

Then I lean on the bar at the Foreign Press Club in Rome. I chat with colleagues; nobody will quote the ministers. We know too little. They didn't convince us.

## 1 March

The daily increase in cases was five hundred percent today, a total of 1577, first cases in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. This means that it will sooner or later also reach Slovenia. It was reported from Spain that Luis Sepúlveda is infected. *The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly*.

## 4 March

The number of positive cases has exceeded 3000. Tomorrow the government is closing schools throughout the country. They are also discouraging people from shaking hands, kissing and

hugging. Everyone should keep a metre's distance from others, older people should not leave home. This is going to be tough.

At midday I went to Piazza Vittorio where we had arranged to meet for a coffee and an interview with Robert. He has been following events in the Vatican for decades and is an incredible expert. The seventh anniversary of Pope Francis's pontificate is coming up, it's only right to draw a line and reflect upon the years – and it will be easier with Robert's thoughts.

I wait for him, peering suspiciously at the coffee. Some people are still chatting with their heads close to each other. Then Robert arrives and we start talking. His thoughts are cogent; eventually he relaxes, he finds the fuss about the epidemic pointless. We soon part with warm greetings, in the afternoon I need to attend the press conference at the opening of the Raphael exhibition.

It is the first time that so many of his works, five hundred years old, are being exhibited in one place. I must visit alone at some point in the coming days, the crowds now are just too big. Iris and I set up the camera and begin recording when we are suddenly ushered out of the exhibition area – someone has collapsed.

Outside on the steps. Why did he collapse? What's wrong with him? Who is he? A heart attack, apparently, someone comments. But if it was a heart attack, he would have been taken away, but he is still there.

An hour later we return to the galleries in the former stable house on the Quirinal Hill and continue recording, forgetting all about the fallen trooper.

## 8 March

Mass is being cancelled throughout Italy but right now this is not worrying me too much. The number of positive cases is almost 6000, 233 people have died. This morning all of Lombardy was shut down and half the lands surrounding it as well as a province by the Adriatic in the Marches. Entry and exit from these areas is forbidden. All public events have been cancelled, sports centres and cultural institutions closed. People are only allowed to go out for work, to go to the shops or visit a doctor.

In Rome all is fine. Yesterday morning I went to the market, admittedly very early when there were few people around. I spent around a hundred euros, buying all kinds of things, far too much stuff. Only in the car did I realise that it will never fit into the fridge. I tried to figure out which things I could put in the freezer. Suddenly I realised I was stockpiling. Not for a week, for longer.

## 9 March

Keeping to ourselves for a few weeks, avoiding handshakes, hugging, and non-essential travel, washing our hands frequently don't signal the end of the world.

*Later that day:*

I am on Twitter but only for work. So much information appears there first that you can't avoid it. I could say I am a passive user. I sometimes tend to be long-winded but even when I'm not I don't know how to respond to basic journalistic questions in

one hundred and forty characters, let alone express my opinion on anything. Yes, I know, two hundred and eighty characters are also not much use to me.

What I find most annoying about Twitter is that it gives the impression that all its users have opinions on everything. And because thoughts are written, they by synopsis signal that they are also authoritative. Opinions at the bar, however are different. I was born at a time when the written word still counted for something. But I am probably wrong, after all, even with Guttenberg some people complained that this printing press was an incredibly evil invention, that what goes onto paper is nothing but sinful.

Twitter wisdoms, especially on days like this, throw me off course. Accusations, deriding the authorities and other institutions and a barrage of allegations and insults, all without any self-discipline. Measures by the authorities are in the pillory simply because they are measures by the authorities. Does nobody realise that we are children of thirty years of scepticism and cynicism that have destroyed any respect for every kind of authority? We are in the middle of a situation that virtually none of us have found ourselves in before and all of us are learning – citizens, politicians, and the health system. If we have inexperienced politicians, this is because we elected them ourselves. Why did more experienced people not offer their services to us at the elections. Because we have attached to politics a stigma of corruption and selfishness. For now it seems to me that what is being tested is our patience and common sense with some minor relinquishment of things we take for granted. Perhaps also our obedience.

And anyway – whence everyone's opinion on everything? I myself have a relevant opinion about very few things around me, most of them happen without me having any kind of opinion at all about them and I declare as much. I don't have an opinion

on that, if someone happens to ask. I have a couple of gardens of my own where I tend to my apple and pear trees but when I walk past other gardens where others grow strawberries, bananas or cabbages, I notice them but don't have an opinion about them. I simply don't. And if a thought happens to occur that helps me get to the next day, the last thing that would occur to me is to start tweeting it around. Who, indeed, would possibly be interested in my opinion on football, for example, or about President Pahor? I am no expert on either. And still I survive.

*Late in the evening:*

Restrictions on movement throughout Italy. Premier Conte has just announced it.

The measure comes into force in the morning. Apparently Conte is to sign the decree tonight. Ski slopes are closed. Schools, culture and sport, everything closed until 3 April. Restaurants and bars all closed from 6 p.m. Movement restricted to the immediate surroundings of one's home apart from work and health commitments and essential care.

Just as well that the best butcher is just round the corner and the best park in Rome also nearby. We have tap water, so, thanks for your concern, everything is OK.

## 10 March

*First day of lockdown*

A friend from Ljubljana wishes me well. She imagines that it must be a little like a state of war. In fact it is more as if, despite the sun shining, a dense invisible layer has descended onto the city.



## 11 March

### *Second day of lockdown*

The Uffizi in Florence is closed – and not. On their website they offer us tiny flashes of beauty. If not for our culture, then what are we fighting for? as a misquoted Churchill might have said.

### *Late in the evening:*

Premier Giuseppe Conte just now in his address to the nation: Italy is shuttering all shops except supermarkets, food stores, chemists, and related production. Bars, restaurants, hairdressers, beauty salons and all non-essential production - closed.

## 12 March

### *Third day of lockdown*

The air in Rome hasn't been this clean since the war. The smell of spring, like on the Karst.

Milan is more beautiful when it's full. Rome when it's empty. The sun above, down below a melancholy solitude.

## 13 March

### *Fourth day of lockdown*

Yesterday I left home for a couple of hours when Iris and I went to do a report for the News. As soon as I stepped out into the street I

was stopped by the carabinieri, I told them where I lived, where I was going and why, and they didn't make any problems. With Iris, my camerawoman, we both felt odd keeping at a distance from each other, without the usual hug before we started work. We stuck to instructions. Holding the mikes at a distance, staying safe.

Towards evening I felt pain in my lower back, three weeks of marathon reporting is taking its toll. So I decided to go and stretch my muscles in the local park for half an hour. I met a few lone joggers, a mother with her child and a couple of people taking their dogs for a walk. I also met four policemen but none of them stopped me. The decree dictates that we can only leave home for work, matters of health or essential care of yourself or relatives. In the implementation instructions the government also allows outdoor recreational activity, provided it is undertaken alone. It is something of a grey zone, recreation is not encouraged but also not sanctioned, provided we are ALONE when undertaking it. Well, at least it was so yesterday.

So far, today seems a calmer day. Perhaps, after a long time, I will manage to work for only eight hours. Most probably, I will do everything from home, find news from agencies and colleagues who are still out in the field, make a few phone calls if anything isn't clear. Then, as always when I am left without work, I will start thinking about what else to do. What now, here in the block of flats? The plan is as follows, the windows have been dirty for over a month, so I will probably tackle those. If it will be warm in the afternoon I might even wash the balcony – otherwise that can wait till the weekend, it looks like there will be time then. Lately I have also neglected my reading so, if I have a couple of hours to spare, I just might start on that metre-high stack of books that have been waiting for too long. It will also probably have to do some shopping, possibly having to wait in a queue since the greengrocers and the butchers only allow two customers into their shop at a time, our local supermarket five.

At six o'clock tonight we await an *event*. There is an appeal on the internet for us to open our windows and sing or play to each other, show each other that we are here, that we aren't giving in, and that we will succeed, we only need to be patient for a few weeks. So, in fact, this will probably be a nice day.

## 14 March

### *Fifth day of lockdown*

My friend Nicola is flat on his back in bed, but no worries. Nicola is just over thirty and I am friends with him because I am already at an age when one also needs to find teachers younger than themselves. Nicola writes for one of the leading world newspapers and over the last year I have quoted him at least three times, for he is forever on the tail of financial and economic scandals. His day is a week for me, and my programme is not exactly light. This thing about limiting our movements has shattered him, a follower of all that is going on in Rome and now, stuck alone within four walls. And another thing, last night the city authorities closed all fenced public parks, his among them. Desperate, the guy set up his CrossFit workout at home and clearly exaggerated. He is thus in bed with muscle fever today but he says he somehow manages to get to the fridge, so I'm not worried.

My friend Renato is a teacher. If these were normal times, he would probably be complaining about hopeless students. But in fact, he cannot do without them, at the school he teaches he is considered one of the most popular teachers. Since 4 March when schools were also closed in Rome he has been banging his head against the wall. But everything has its good side and,

after his hairdresser where he used to go for a haircut and a chat regularly also closed his shop the other day, Renato decided he would do a little re-education. Every half an hour he would send him via WhatsApp professional articles about coronavirus, his hairdresser friend has to read them and, based on the latest information, admit that he had previously been wrong in spreading fake news.

And me... Today too I disturbed about five times my little bird friend that still doesn't have a name. I haven't a clue what kind of bird it is even though some forty years ago my father gave us an entire lecture on the sleek grey bird, a little bigger but a lot more curious than a sparrow. The poor bird still cannot understand why I keep appearing on its balcony when its stack of seeds that it truly deserves with its daily fluttering and chirping is still full.

Oh, another thing, my windows are sparkling clean. The camellia and the orchid can once again see each other, arguing about which is the fairest of them all. But I think I might, when the shops open again, buy a curtain. Jesus, what an argument, what *will* the neighbours say in this deafening Roman silence!

## 15 March

### *Sixth day of lockdown*

Breakfast was bread with butter and jam, for lunch fish, potatoes and a salad, and I don't know what's for dinner yet because there's no bread left and the grocer round the corner is no longer open until ten because of the crisis.

I had barely three hours' work – it seems they have plenty of work with themselves back home and don't need my stories, and

it's a Sunday anyway. The fifteenth. Pay day, when I usually check through what I have done over the last month.

On Friday 21 February I put in for holiday; the plan was four days in Apulia (carnival and views of the Adriatic) and then back home to Slovenia from Bari for five days (Ryanair to Trieste, cheaper than the train). The thirty-eight-year-old Mattia from Codogno, in intensive care for two and a half weeks, was identified as patient number one. A day later there were already a whole bunch and I began to have a guilty conscience for having planned a break. On Sunday we went to the museum in Lecce when my phone rang and my colleague from Ljubljana cautiously suggested that, while leave was sacred, it would still be much better if it was me and not her who reported on such a serious situation... I told her I would, sat in the car, took out my computer and camera and made the report, then I switched on Alitalia's app and booked a ticket to return to Rome at 21.30 that same day.

On Monday 24 February I prepared nine reports, four TV and five radio items, all on the same theme. Over the following days I did another seventy-three.

Looking today at Facebook posts about people in Slovenia still gathering in crowds, it feels as if I have not achieved anything over the last three weeks.

Then I switched off the phone and my thoughts, put on my trainers and gloves (facemasks are still not available at the chemist's but tomorrow I am supposed to receive some from Slovenia by DHL) and went running in Borghese Park. This time I went through the Porta Pinciana (first police patrol), then past the Casa del Cinema to the race track in the Piazza di Siena (second police patrol) and at the Roman Globe turned south-west, crossing the tree-lined Viale San Paolo Del Brasile (third and fourth) and eventually stopped on the Terrazza del Pincio (fifth patrol, this one didn't stop me either). My thoughts switched on again

there and it was as if Urban, my trainer from Ljubljana, was guiding me through my stretching exercises. The sun set behind Saint Peter's and I stared in wonder at the square below me, the Piazza del Popolo, People's Square, without a living soul, but I was wrong. Someone had placed a pair of five-hundred-watt loudspeakers and blasted *Gente di mare* from them waking up everyone all the way to the Trevi Fountain, if not beyond.

## 16 March

### *Seventh day of lockdown*

The hours yesterday passed filled with a kind of torpor between one report and the next, and, looking back at it today, I think that Monday confirmed what I had known anyway: when you're young the days are short and the years too long, when you're old the days drag on and the years go past in a flash. Now I am somewhere in between.

Ever since this thing started, I have in my mind the image of that painting by Magritte with the sky above bright as day and street below veiled in darkness. There is an anxiety in this painting but as it was painted by a Belgian it seems impenetrable behind an invisible wall of reason. I have been trying for days to enter it and experience something but the artist will not allow me to do so.

Then tonight I remembered that behind that invisible wall there is probably a droplet of water climbing up the stairs. As I was taught by the famous wordsmith of anxiety Dino Buzzati in my pre-graduation delusions, this is no metaphor. In apparent defiance of all other droplets, a single droplet seems to defy gravity and climbs upwards. A servant girl noticed this first and

everyone laughed at her. Then the people on the lower floors began losing sleep over the droplet, climbing slowly upwards. We're safe on the fifth floor, we think to ourselves, but who knows where it will start sliding from tomorrow. Upwards.

Dino Buzzati tells us not to trouble our minds with it, that this is no foretelling of misfortune and not even a special sign – it is simply a droplet that climbs upwards. That is why we are afraid. But his slightly younger contemporary Enrico Quarantelli with a particularly apt surname for these times, was able to reassure us decades ago. From the 1950s onwards the American sociologist studied society's response to big catastrophes. He discovered that they bring out the best in humanity: solidarity wins over conflict, society becomes more democratic, social differences shrink and when institutions fail, a civil consciousness that is resistant to evil prevails.

I was reminded of him by Gabriele Romagnoli in yesterday's edition of *la Repubblica*. In concluding his thoughts, he quoted Quarantelli: It is difficult to accept that goodness is normal, it is too reassuring a truth.

## 18 March

### *Ninth day of lockdown*

Time has stretched into boredom and tuned foul. The familiar prods of individual informative programmes no longer spur it along. I have reached a state of maintenance, so to say, I follow the news, watch and check it, but there is no surprise. Waiting for the trend in infections to reverse is killing me.

Every time I went running in the park over the past few days I felt guilty in case I happened to get too close to anyone

by chance. It happened a couple of days ago in the shop, I was in somewhat of a good mood and hurried past some other customer. The woman made me jump when she shouted at me as if I was some teenage brat. The girl at the till told me she was some doctor who lived in the next street along.

So I stayed at home for two days. Two days! As penance. In the end I was snapped out of my lethargy by the Minister of Sport who announced today that if people continued not to take notice of warnings and the 46,000 charges issued so far due to idiots who still go on picnics and the like, he will also forbid recreation. It shook me up enough to immediately pull on my trainers and run to the Galleria Borghese and past the gardens where daffodils flower under the branches of mature cedars and citrus trees. The scent was so powerful that, nothing to do with my health or hay fever, I sneezed. Into my sleeve, of course.

Oh, yes, earlier on in the afternoon Iris and I met up on the hill opposite the Colosseum to get a few shots of deserted Rome for tomorrow's *Globus* foreign affairs programme. Both wearing a face mask. There were only three of us on the viewing terrace where there would normally be three hundred people taking selfies. A sun-burnt, barefoot homeless man had just finished his skype call making use of free internet access, then lay down on a former flower bed and fell asleep in the warm Roman sunshine.

## 19 March

### *Tenth day of lockdown*

When I was a child, ten days meant going to the seaside, down to the island of Cres. Expectation, unable to sleep, then the evening before we left, Father and I went through the script: when you'll



come to wake me up in the morning, you must say, “Janko, wake up, we’re going to the seaside.” And he would do so every year, at four in the morning, with that soft voice of his, “Janko, wake up, we’re going to the seaside.”

Ten days was one of the most beautiful trips in my life, the summit of Kilimanjaro in clouds, giraffes on the steppes and lions in Ngorongoro, a centimetre of dust on my backpack every evening during a trek across the Serengeti.

Ten days of holiday also at the end of April and beginning of May. If it happens. Alitalia have just sent me an email informing me that my evening flight to Trieste on 24 April has been cancelled.

## 20 March

### *Eleventh day of lockdown*

This thing about contacts over the internet is a little like praying or calculating in a foreign language, you somehow manage but you’d rather not, thank you.

A friend of mine has now got in contact with a *Zoom* work-out group but they were all born in the era of black and white TV. He says it works but because none of the members of the group know how to switch off their mike, you can barely hear what the trainer is saying, just lots of panting. We met at a birthday party that my colleague Rachel organised on *Jitsi Meet* the day before yesterday. Thirty frames with faces and the same background. For about fifteen minutes I wondered how long I was supposed to listen to this screeching before I could switch off without being rude. In the end I excused myself with an early morning report (lies), signed out, got myself a yoghurt and went

to bed. Rachel was still pleased with the party and I believe her; beside her wonderful husband, their millennial daughter has also been staying at home for the past eleven days. Normally she is somewhere further north, attempting to live independently, but when there's a crisis, there's nobody like mother to turn to. The girl is fluent in both Italian and English but has probably never come across the words broom or mop in either.

Apart from this, nothing special. In the afternoon I saw *The Godfather* for the three hundred and eleventh time (as if it was my first), before that I sharpened all our knives and washed the down balcony (again), playing the Apulian *Pizzica* at full blast. At some point I noticed that a neighbour was watching me from the roof terrace of the block next door and I apologised to her from a distance. She shouted back, "Oh, no, go ahead, it's nice," though I wasn't sure whether she was talking about the music or because I wasn't wearing a shirt. That is to say, due to the quarantine my belly is becoming quite a sight!

## 22 March

### *Thirteenth day of lockdown*

Now that they have also taken the parks from us and there is a storm coming, we have really fallen silent. An acquaintance from the horde of foreign correspondents in Rome commented yesterday that we were doing journalism with a condom, saying it's "a bit *eh*, but still better than nothing."

The truth is that I wake up every morning in the middle of a playground with at least a hundred blocks, then I have two, three, maybe four tasks: to make a stack of five that will stand. There are numerous chipped, scratched, perhaps even rotten ones in

the pile. You need to check each one three times and pick out the best. One stack. Then you dismantle it, pick another block and add it to the next stack. And so on till the evening. At night all those blocks you dismissed keep you awake – doubt eats away at you; might it might not have been better to create a stack from three from an entirely different set, ones you barely noticed but that seem to fit together? But in the morning you have no choice, a new pile awaits, another hundred or so blocks.

Thank God for those younger than I am! No, I am not a technoidiot, just at an age when I no longer get enthusiastic about every gimmick. Not long ago I was talking to Nicola – live, I mean before the quarantine – and he said at the end, “I’ll send it all to you on WhatsApp or do you prefer stuff via email and an SMS alert as in the year 2000? I could even recite it down the phone like in the 20th century?” I feel quite familiar with WhatsApp, so we’re still speaking the same language and I clearly still haven’t lost touch with thirty-somethings entirely.

Nicola is fifteen years younger than I am but even he didn’t really have command of *StreamYard*, the new window into the world for us and dozens of our colleagues. On the initiative of the younger ones we have begun using it these days and we will until the end, we connect on WhatsApp, someone takes on a task, others take on others, in the end we are all better off, and after three weeks we are once again in touch with ministers, epidemiologists and economists. At a distance, but at least we ask questions and they reply to them.

Journalism with a condom, true perhaps. To me our work seems more like a walk through the autumn market. There is plenty of everything and you pick stuff to put into your mine-stone and in the end you run out of money for the salt. If you’re artful you can still make a soup that is good. But it will still lack that final touch.

## 24 March

### *Fifteenth day of lockdown*

Seasickness is supposed to be the body communicating motion while the eyes don't perceive it. This way a conflict between the information occurs in the brain and the results are seen lower down, in the stomach, for example.

I searched two days for the reasons for the conflict I felt that has been growing inside me these days, and I think the comparison is accurate. On the one hand, the body is not in motion, on the other the brain is constantly buzzing. The second is certainly true, I am still not entirely convinced of the role of the first, perhaps the real problem is more the emotional rather than physical inactivity.

We respond to every interpersonal relationship with emotions. This is what is lacking most during these days. So – if I push aside the hundreds of pieces of information that have today also passed the synapses of my brain – the event of the day is a single one. Here it is.

I wake up relatively early. When life was still normal, I often went for my morning rounds at about half past six. I put the *caffettiera* on low heat, stick on my trainers and go round the corner to the right (greet Giorgio the tobacconist who is just rolling up his blinds, tell him I'll be round later for some batteries for the camera) and across the road to Fabrizio the newspaper man (if I bought a left-wing paper yesterday, I will get a right-wing one today, for certain), right again at the traffic lights to the bar on the next corner (no, mate, I won't have a cappuccino today either, I have my *caffettiera* on at home, just give me two croissants, thank you) and then straight to Caterina, the shop keeper (two rolls, milk, and butter once a

week) and then turn right again back home where my coffee has just finished brewing.

Today I woke up as if the world was normal. But Giorgio was still closed, I greeted Fabrizio at a distance (because I am fed up of both the leftists and rightists right now, when things are bad it is always worth blaming the other side, isn't it?), the bar is closed anyway, and Caterina shouted at me for not seeing that she hadn't put her mask on yet and anyway, now, with the extraordinary situation, she doesn't open until half past eight.

So today Caterina is my spark, she triggered in me the only emotional response of the day. She was so resentful of me coming early that instead of buying some rolls and milk, I had my coffee black! So screw that!

## 28 March

### *Nineteenth day of lockdown*

In some public discussion we had a decade or two ago – perhaps a century ago, I don't know, time around me has in the meantime gone into override and deep inside me, in my personal time, at not-quite-fifty, I could well be the age of Methuselah – Manca Košir declared that she has realised in life that she cannot both like a person and insist on being right in a dispute with them. It's quite possible that she said something else but in this form her realisation has settled in my mind as a kind of home base to which I often return.

Not counting a few teenage whims that came to me with a slight delay, I have so far gone through life with relatively few conflicts. I am slightly too sensitive to know how to insist on asserting my own will so when I come across a wall of opposition

I prefer to wait, look around and choose another path or at least a different turn. With this strategy, developed spontaneously and which I only fully comprehended recently, I manage to stay in the centre of events without allowing them to get to me too much.

I wrote *spontaneously* but this is probably inaccurate since it is a different memory that is fundamental, this had also probably distorted over the years but is true deep inside me and I can swear by it. At primary school I was bullied, the thugs would lie in wait for me on corridors, on my way home, everywhere. I got on their nerves. The silly thing was though, that I was in fact taller than these terrorists. I would sometimes come home desperate, sometimes indignant, occasionally even crying. This is what went on. Only once did I strike back, when they cornered me outside the headmaster's office. The circus elephant in me then pulled out the stake it was tied to (freely after Jorge Bucay); I then punched and kicked one of the terrorists and was called into the headmaster's office. Me. I got a written warning. As far as I can remember for years previously, the bullies that without mercy beat me and humiliated me never answered to anyone.

Now that I am a sort of public figure they send me friendship requests on Facebook, clearly their own personal memory also adaptable. I imagine they tell their wives and children that they went to school with me, perhaps even that we were friends (oh, such a misused word). Obviously I ignore their requests; the hatred I still feel towards them today in a perverse way enriches me, remaining within me as a warning, a teaching, a star that is there in order for me to never follow it.

Why mention all this? In truth the link is still hidden from my mind but for days I have been thinking how these early traumas in some strange way after all these decades are tightly linked to all that I am experiencing now, in these weeks of anxiety when I receive on a daily basis letters, messages and calls from people

I probably don't even know, yet they thank me for my work and thoughts, wishing me all the best and filling me with courage.

And I occasionally get the feeling that I am living on a planet where we just might show some love for each other and at the same time also insist on being right!

## 31 March

### *Twenty-second day of lockdown*

All day I have been looking over shots coming from Bergamo and towns around it. I have spoken to three colleagues who are there. At the end of the day I feel drained, it's all true. Over two thousand dead in an area with less than a million people. Of eight hundred general patients, officially one hundred and fifty are ill. They estimate that as many as sixty percent of doctors and nurses in the area of Bergamo are infected. During a teleconference the President of the Bergamo Medical Association Guido Marinoni told me that general doctors bought their own protective equipment in hardware stores because the state had not provided them with anything. They had noticed an increase in cases of pneumonia in January but only suggested quarantining three towns at the centre of the outbreak at the end of February. The central government did not agree to this and the local government did not isolate them.

It appears to be even worse. Colleagues from a local newspaper have checked registry entries and discovered that the number of deaths over the last few weeks is up to ten times higher in some municipalities than the average of the last few years. "In homes for the elderly and care hospitals we have lost an entire generation," the abovementioned Guido Marinoni commented.

In a single month six hundred of the six thousand residents of these institutions have died. This is not some nightmare. In Bergamo it is all really happening.

## 9 April

### *Thirty-first day of lockdown*

It's Maundy Thursday and I recall in my memory Da Vinci's Last Supper in front of which I stood a few months ago in Milan. He depicts the Biblical motif and although the supper is the Last, it is in fact full of expectation. My last suppers are far less surprising, events that shortened my life happened long before them, Nice, Amartice, the Aquarius, Genoa... When I sat at my desk at the end of these four stories, the dead were mostly already counted.

July 16 in 2016 was a wonderful Saturday night in Nice. A light breeze from the sea flattened the sand on the beach. From the Promenade des Anglais one could see the last few bathers that insisted on swimming till sunset despite the disapproving glances of passers-by. Spoilt Russians, disrespectful *étrangers*, I overheard some of the comments.

I admit that the temptation was huge, I had deserved a dip in the summer waves. But after eight live reports that day and editing the item that had just been aired on the evening news, I was shattered, my legs could barely hold my weight. Iris, who always manages to surprise me with her sudden bursts of energy, even if she had worked hard all day with me, persuaded me to go for a walk. "Air our brains a little, come on." A couple of dozen people were still fighting for their lives in hospitals around Nice, among them five children. Sitting to have dinner on the Riviera felt odd even though we were both starving. At the time we



didn't know that they would add a further two victims to the list of eighty-four victims who had two nights earlier ended up under the wheels of the truck driven by a crazed jihadist.

So we sat in the restaurant and ate, apparently I ordered pasta Frutti di Mare. I washed it all down with a glass of wine, perhaps two. The breeze continued to carry away thoughts and in the end chemistry did its thing, my brain became flooded with sugar and calmed me down. For a few minutes that pleasant holiday-feel exhaustion suppressed everything else: it was as if I had returned from a walk in the mountains. We stayed the night in some obscure aparthotel, in the middle of the night we had to go to the airport to catch a flight home. We arrived in Rome early on Sunday morning. That summer was bearable with a frequent breeze from the Apennines.

The real heat that year only came towards the end of August. On the evening of 25 August 2016 I took two aspirins and twice smeared the top of my head with soothing cream before leaving for the restaurant. After two days in the mountains I was totally sunburnt, lack of sleep and exhaustion had destroyed my inner thermometer so I no longer knew whether I was having a fever, feeling hot or cold, or whether I was just imagining it. I am in the town of Ascoli Piceno, half way between Amatrice and the Adriatic. My cameraman Mitja and I have just sent in our latest report for today's news, we're quiet, our thoughts interrupted with images of the black bags filled with bodies that were being pulling out of the rubble for two days now after the earthquake. Ascoli Piceno is compassionately empty; on the medieval walls we notice the interventions with which they stabilised them after the last earthquake two decades ago. We walk down quiet streets, it is already late, but there is still a light in a shop window next to the Church of Saint Peter Martyr. We enter, the restaurant is called *Il capriccio degli dei*, The Caprices of the Gods – life is so often full of sarcasm. We ate our supper in silence without any

satisfaction. Then we went to bed. During the night we were woken by a couple of aftershocks, in the morning we continued to film in the area. By then they had already counted almost three hundred dead, time was endlessly painful.

The third story ended on 27 November 2017, a Monday. The weather had cooled even in Catania on Sicily – mind you, only two days ago, in this humid part of the Mediterranean only a few miles north of Libya! In the afternoon the port authorities returned me my passport and I could disembark from the *Aquarius* together with my colleague Megan, two cartoonists, the doctor, two sailors and a few humanitarian workers. We arranged to meet at around 6 p.m. at the first bar at the end of the pier. Antò and I were the first to sit at the plastic table, beer and crisps. Slowly everyone else appeared, beer and crisps. Nobody could be bothered to talk after an entire day of disembarking more than four hundred refugees and one body that we picked out of the sea down off the coast of Africa. Our last supper wasn't much, beer and crisps, awkward goodbyes, see you sometime, you can find me on Facebook, and silly things like that. We had just been through a couple of weeks that ate away at our essence, yet we have no words to tangibly describe them. Megan and I took a taxi to the airport and flew to Rome late that evening. In the middle of the night I unlocked my front door, unaware that I would pay for my smile of relief in a few weeks' time, with a slight delay, when new images of crushed bodies would once again claim their share of tears.

Less than a year later, on 16 August 2018, after two days of constant reporting from the site of the motorway viaduct that crashed into the valley below a day before the Feast of the Assumption, I finally had an opportunity to take a look at the centre of Genoa. The previous night I called Enrico, the cameraman from Rome. Where are you, what are you up to, can you come to Genoa? Enrico is self-employed and was somewhere

on the Adriatic with his family, “But, no worries, of course I’ll come.” And he did.

All day we took shots throughout this magnificent town for the evening report on the News, baking in the summer sun, talking to people around town, listening to complaints. Enrico was fresh, supported me all along. I only took him to the ruins of the collapsed viaduct in the afternoon to take the shots we needed. In the end he too fell silent, our last supper was to be something quick at the railway station, but we didn’t have time, take away, please. The train rattled through the Ligurian tunnels towards Rome when we each unwrapped our sandwiches and looked at each other in silence. Forty-three lost this time.

Solitude when things are so painful, so inexpressible.

Like the Pope tonight, during Mass in Saint Peter’s Basilica, looking more like tiny Jorge than the Great Bergoglio. I cannot think of anything worse for a devoted priest than being left without the faithful. Bergoglio spent Maundy Thursdays in previous years sitting down for a meal with the poor, followed by washing the feet of prisoners, for example, in institutions far away from Vatican’s golden cage. This year he was a lone figure amidst all that Baroque, and instead of blessing the Holy Oils he was mourning the lost priests. Over sixty have already died in Italy during the epidemic so far. Nobody knows what their last suppers were like.

## 10 April

### *Thirty-second day of lockdown*

It’s Good Friday. The crosses I have born are no crosses at all: I have never gone to bed hungry, nobody has ever pointed a gun at me, I always had a roof over my head. Everything else is insignificant.



GOGA

GALLERY

ART



foto: Robert Kruh



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