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Escape

Written by Dominique Manotti

Translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Ros Schwartz

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DOMINIQUE MANOTTI

ESCAPE

Translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Ros Schwartz



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ESCAPE

CHAPTER ONE

FEBRUARY–MARCH 1987

8 February, near Rome

The bins stink. A huge skip with black plastic rubbish bags spilling on to the concrete floor, a poky little room with no windows lit by two flickering fluorescent tubes, blocked off by a metal shutter and an iron gate. Filippo is furious. Usually, when he comes to sweep out and clean the bin room, the garbage trucks have already been, the skips are empty and the stench is not too bad. But today the smell is almost unbearable. He sets to work, gagging. He sweeps and scrubs the floor, then sloshes bleach and buckets of water over it. Six months inside, another 410 days to go, desperate to get out, but how? Then what? He hurls a final bucket of water and glances at his watch. In a quarter of an hour, his shift will be over. Time to clock out, go back up to his cell … *410 days, fuck, another 410 days* … Suddenly, the motor controlling the metal shutter from the outside starts up and the shutter begins to vibrate. Panic. This has never happened before. He isn't supposed to be there when the gate opens. *What do I do?* Terrified, he glances at his watch. *No, this is when I should be here*. A dull thudding sound comes from the rubbish chute, something banging against the walls, and a curled-up body catapults headlong into the skip then unfurls and dives into the refuse. Filippo just has time to recognise his cellmate, Carlo. A stream of incoherent reactions, *My only friend breaking out … and without me …* The metal shutter begins to rise, letting in a shaft of sunlight across the floor. *I'm here when he breaks out, I'll be accused of aiding*

and abetting him and I'll get another year at least … in solitary. Without a second thought, Filippo jumps, arms raised, grabs the top of the skip, steadies himself with acrobatic agility and plunges into the mound of refuse. He hears Carlo swear under his breath and say, 'For fuck's sake bury yourself and cover your face,' and then loses contact. He pulls his T-shirt up over his face, closes his eyes and swims down between the bags towards the bottom of the skip. The plastic is nice and slippery, but the smell and the weight are suffocating. A torn bag and his head and arms are covered in sticky, viscous, rotting, scratchy matter. And that stink. He vomits. All over his face. *Calm down, stop panicking, otherwise I'm dead. Get this T-shirt off, wipe my face, breathe calmly, short breaths, protect my nose and mouth.* His body curls into a ball, Filippo tries to open up an air-pocket by extending his arms very slowly. He listens to the sounds coming from outside. The truck has just dropped off an empty skip. He pictures the guards positioned all around the yard. Now the truck is about to load their skip. Its sides clanging, the skip rises through the air as it is winched up, one more thud and it is on the truck. A pause, the operators must be attaching the tarpaulin … engine starting up, they are on the move, a pause, his heart now thumping, the guards must be lifting up the tarpaulin, inspecting the skip's contents. Filippo huddles tighter, the truck is off again, at a steady speed. He is out. Incredulity. *What on earth am I doing here?* He briefly loses consciousness.

The skip is swiftly emptied. Their bodies are thrown out and they roll among the bags and the refuse. Already on his feet, Carlo grabs the semi-conscious Filippo's arm and forces him to get up. They are standing thigh-deep in a mountain of rubbish. Dazed, Filippo looks around him and notices an industrial building and a brick factory-chimney on his right, and on his left a very high, very smooth wall against which the refuse is tipped. *Is this the taste, the smell of freedom? Not really.* Carlo doesn't give him time to collect himself, he pulls,

pushes and shoves him, forcing him to run down the mound of rubbish, then drags him towards the perimeter wall. In front of him stands a ladder. 'Up!' commands Carlo, thumping him in the back, 'Get a move on.' Filippo climbs the ladder in a daze, swings over the wall and tumbles down the other side. Carlo jumps down nimbly just behind him and helps him up. A car awaits them, engine running, doors open, and they fling themselves on to the rear seat. The smell is unbearable. The driver – wearing dark glasses, his coat collar turned up to conceal the lower part of his face – opens the windows and pulls away at speed. Seated next to him a girl, head held stiffly, face covered by a headscarf. Without turning around, she says:

'So who's this?'

Filippo hears Carlo's tense voice:

'Drive, drive, we'll talk when we can stop.'

They are lying side by side on the floor in the back of the car. Bumps and bends, they must be driving fast along a country road. Filippo feels all his muscles contract and ache. He makes himself breathe, protects his head and let his mind go blank.

The car comes to an abrupt stop, the engine switches off, the door opens. Carlo taps Filippo on the shoulder, making him start, and points to a clump of trees about a hundred metres away.

'Wait for me over there, I won't be a minute.'

Filippo straightens up, takes a few steps, stiff at first, aching, confused, then he freezes, completely overwhelmed, stunned by the sight that greets him. He is standing beside a tumble-down dry-stone barn on a shelf jutting out from the mountain-side. Down below lies a blue-green lake, and opposite him a white, rocky ridge, vivid against a vast blue sky. He feels giddy. He opens his arms wide and breathes deeply. The air is very pure, sharp. He feels it enter his lungs and cleanse the stench of the bins and the vomit. *The calm, the silence, the beauty,* that is the word that sums it up for him. A surprising word for a kid from a working-class district of Rome who's never admired a

landscape. He sets off again, walking slowly, swaying slightly, shivering with cold, surprised to be in one piece, at liberty, and in the middle of the mountains.

Without thinking, he turns round, perhaps to speak to Carlo, or to seek reassurance that he is there and will be joining him. Carlo is there, his back to him. Standing before him is the girl from the car, not very tall, her perfect oval face raised towards him in the full sunlight. She is talking to him earnestly, perhaps angrily. Her headscarf has slid down on to her shoulders freeing a mass of fair hair that glints copper-coloured in the sun, ruffled by the wind. The image etches itself on his memory. The girl with coppery lights in her hair and the mountains, the beauty of freedom. Carlo puts his arms around her, leans slowly towards her mouth and kisses her in a lengthy embrace. Behind them stands the driver who has turned down his coat collar, removed his dark glasses and is staring at the couple formed by Carlo and the girl. Filippo is struck by the man's appearance – a square jaw, deep-set eyes beneath very dark eyebrows that form a thick, continuous line across his face, and a scar on his left cheek which drags his eyelid downwards. The overall effect is thuggish. When the driver notices that Filippo is watching the three of them, he suddenly looks furious and raises his hand. Scared, Filippo quickly turns round without waiting to see how the gesture finishes, and walks towards the clump of trees as instructed by Carlo, with a sense of having committed a serious offence, but not knowing what. In such situations, his strategy has always been to take refuge in deepest silence and switch off his mind, without attempting to understand.

He sits down with his back to the trees, staring out over the valley, and lets himself be entranced by the landscape.

Carlo comes over, hands him a pullover which he puts on straight away, and crouches down beside him.

'We hadn't expected you to be in the bin room…'

'I had no choice. I'm always there at that time. The truck was

late, it arrived while I was cleaning. I was surprised, because it's never happened before.'

'…and certainly not that you would jump into the skip.'

'I didn't think. I saw you and just followed.'

'What are you going to do now?'

'Stay with you. Can't I?'

'No.'

'Then I have no idea.'

'We part company here.' He places a canvas bag at Filippo's feet. 'I've put everything I could find in the cars in there for you. Clothes, two sandwiches, and some money.' Carlo pauses, Filippo says nothing. 'My escape will be in the news, I think. And they'll be looking for you, because you broke out with me. You'll have to keep a low profile for a while, until things settle down.' A pause, Filippo still saying nothing. 'Do you understand what I'm telling you?'

A nod. Filippo continues to gaze at the mountains.

'If things get too tough here in Italy, go over to France. Here, on this envelope, I've written the address of Lisa Biaggi, in Paris. Go there and say I sent you, tell her what happened. She'll help you.' Filippo takes the envelope without looking at Carlo and slips it in the bag. Carlo stands up.

'Goodbye, Filippo. Take care of yourself.'

And he leaves, walking fast and without turning round.

A little later Filippo hears the sound of an engine coming from behind the ruined barn. He sits rigid for what feels like ages. Then he sees a car driving alongside the lake, down below. It looks tiny, out of place in this wilderness. Carlo is inside, for sure. The car disappears behind the rocky ridge. Agony. The sun is setting behind Filippo and the rock face opposite turns pink, then grey. It is dark. Filippo is exhausted. He feels bereft, lost, helpless. Orphaned. Unable to pursue a coherent train of thought, he simply lets time flow past. When he starts to shiver with cold, he gets up, returns to the dilapidated barn

and finds the car that brought them there, hidden under a half-collapsed roof. He lifts the bonnet – the spark plugs have been removed and wires ripped out. He slides under the rear seat, wraps himself in a blanket lying on the floor and falls asleep, his head resting on the canvas bag.

When he awakes, the sun has just risen behind the white rocks. The light is sharp, pitiless. Filippo changes into clean clothes. He feels relaxed. He goes out and sits facing the sun, slowly eating a sandwich and drinking some fresh water. *Where the hell am I? Lost. Jumping into that skip was a bad move. Serves me right. I thought that my cellmate – working-class and proud of it, a political prisoner, educated, a smooth talker and avid reader – was my friend, a friend to the street kid who can barely read, incapable of stringing together three sentences. Idiot. In your dreams. Dumped like a girl.* Bitterness and resentment. *OK, so I don't know where I am, but do I know where I'm going?* A vision of the car, the previous evening, driving away along the lakeshore. *I know where I'm heading, the exit's that way. Then what? Rome? My family? I've slammed the door, I'm not going home a loser. And the cops will get there before me. Go back to my Termini station gang, back to fleecing tourists and selling contraband cigarettes? Endlessly fighting over cash, a girl, a carton of fags, the cops who'll pay off anyone willing to snitch on their mates, sit next to the guy who might have been the one who grassed on me and shake his hand. The filth, the violence, permanently stoned. I've had enough. When I was inside, I dreamed of something different.*

They used to sit side by side on the narrow lower bunk, passing a joint back and forth cupped in their palms, and Carlo would talk nonstop, very quietly in the dark, occasionally punctuated by desperate howls, muffled thumping on the walls, the screws on their rounds. He recounted his memories to Filippo, at first grim, of going to work in the Milan factories as a very young man, bewildered by the brutality of a factory

worker's life. Then, very soon, the workers' protests of the late sixties began. Carlo told him about the meetings in his workshop, in his factory, which soon became a daily event. Each person took the floor, and each person's view was given equal weight. There was an initial forging of collective thinking and a collective will. Carlo would grow excited as he recalled the euphoria of discovering the strength of men acting in unison, all equal, of workers' marches through the factory that started spontaneously after the meetings, going from workshop to workshop, discovering a world which, until then, had been mysterious and threatening, where the men were not permitted to move around freely. In a great burst of elation, solidarity and hope, they had believed that the factory belonged to them, that it had become their territory. He and his comrades, along with so many others, had tied red scarves around their necks to demonstrate their pride and their determination. They had driven out the hated bosses, had begun to reorganise their workload and the production process. Carlo still talked about the outbursts of wild joy, like that night in Milan when he and his friends set fire to all the bosses' cars at the same time. It made for an enthralling fireworks display and was a way of taking power over the city, a sacred revenge. It hadn't lasted long, but to experience that, at least once in a lifetime … Filippo listened, rapt. He felt every word resonate in his body. The factory had never been what he wanted, working as slave labour, for so little return. But the tightly knit group, standing together for better or for worse, collective struggle and violence as a way of life, the hope of overturning everything one day – that was something he had always dreamed of. Among Rome's street gangs, he had never found more than a distant, distorted echo of his dreams and his desperation, the battle for survival of all against all, without ever having the words to express it.

Today he could see it all very clearly; he envied Carlo and the Milan workers.

Carlo went on, 'The old world was fracturing, it was the dawn of a new era, but we couldn't find the right words to describe the world we were in the process of inventing, and to carry an entire people along with us. We spoke a turgid, outdated language, one we had inherited, the language of the old world that we wanted to bury. Naturally, no one understood us, any better than I think we did ourselves. If only there'd been a modern Victor Hugo in our factories to tell our story, just think … our fate might have been different. Who knows? There are moments like that when worlds can be turned upside down.' And on that note he fell silent, absorbed in his memories and his dreams. Filippo, sitting beside him in the dark, feeling the warmth of his body, carried on listening to his silences, moved to tears, without trying to understand why. Victor Hugo, no, he couldn't think like that. He didn't know who Hugo was, but he told himself that one day, perhaps, he would.

Carlo resumed, on a more sombre, despairing note, 'History very soon abandoned us, we'd probably got it all wrong, probably realised too late. The bosses reshaped the economic order. A globalised market – that was the watchword. It felt as though the factory, our world, the only world we knew, the focus of all our struggles, our pride and even our lives, was slipping through our fingers. Plants were relocated, we didn't know where, the machinery changed, and with it, the way production was organised. Power was vested in the white-collar workers, the teams of shop-floor workers were broken up, we felt the need to expand the battlefield, come out of the factory so as not to be suffocated to death inside. In December '69, the henchmen of the neo-fascists, the Italian secret service and the CIA, exploded a bomb in a Milan bank, Piazza Fontana. It left seventeen dead, dozens injured. Do you remember, Filippo?'

'Vaguely. I wasn't really interested. Milan was a long way north.'

'After that, there were more bomb explosions. Brescia, the *Italicus* train. The Italian secret service was murdering its own

people. They were using chaos and terror to fight us, to rebuild a major anti-Communist, anti-red front. Whenever we demonstrated, there were tens of thousands of us in the streets. We thought we were the people. We believed we were strong enough to follow them and fight them on the battleground they'd chosen, outside the factory, weapons in hand. And besides, we were the sons of the 1917 Russian revolution, of the Turin workers' councils, of the Italian Communist Party and of the Italian Resistance. Memories of violent struggle were still so vivid, so close, in our families and in the factories.' After a lengthy hesitation, Carlo said, 'I'm going to tell you a childhood memory.' Filippo was surprised, childhood memories were not part of Carlo's usual repertoire, but he waited, in silence. 'When I was a kid, I used to spend my holidays with my grandparents, farmers in the Bologna region. Once a year, on the 5th of August, always on the same date, probably some anniversary, my grandfather would take me down to the bottom of the vegetable garden, behind a hedge. We'd dig up a metal case and he'd open it. It contained two guns wrapped in rags. Each year, he would say solemnly, "Walther P38 pistols, captured from the Germans." He'd take them apart on a blanket, oil them very carefully, making me touch the metal and inhale the smell of oil, then he'd reassemble them and pack them away, and we'd bury the case again, always in the same place. "So there's no risk of making a mistake when we need to dig them up. Sometimes you have to act fast," he'd say. "They're my weapons from when I was in the Resistance. You never know." When I went to look for them years later, my grandfather already long since dead, I couldn't find them.' Carlo had a lump in his throat. He was silent for a while. Then he continued in a hoarse voice. 'So we took up arms. We risked our lives, we risked death each day, but that's not what is so terrible, the terrible thing is killing. And we killed. I killed. And our fathers cursed us.' There followed a long silence. In Carlo's life, the intensity of conviction and the violence of hope had

swept everything away, smashed everything. And Filippo contemplated the wreckage, fascinated.

Then Carlo would say, 'Those were different times. My grandfather never knew about all that. Just as well. I couldn't have stood it if he'd cursed me. Go to sleep, Filippo, we'll still be here tomorrow and we can carry on talking.' And Filippo would clamber into the top bunk and fall asleep, happy, his head full of confused dreams.

I listened, every night for six months. Thinking it over now, alone in the mountains, abandoned and betrayed, it just sounds weird.

Forget all that, otherwise I'm stuffed.

Filippo gets up, stretches, grabs the bag, slings it over his shoulder and begins the descent towards the lake. His mind is made up. It will be Milan.

10 February, Paris

Lisa Biaggi leads a well-ordered life. Every morning she leaves her little apartment in Rue de Belleville early, takes the Métro from Belleville and commutes to La Défense where she works as a medical secretary in an occupational health centre. On the way to l'Étoile, she stops to buy the previous day's Italian newspapers from a kiosk that stocks a good range of international papers for the tourists. She doesn't open them straight away but lingers for a moment, her mind free. Today it is sunny and bright, like a promise of spring. She sits on a café terrace at the top of the Champs-Élysées, the sun shining on her face, and orders a cappuccino and croissants. This is the best part of the day, and she relishes it. She has been a political refugee in France since 1980 and has found a steady job that enables her to live in relative comfort, but somehow she still cannot resign herself to making her life there. She has turned forty. She can feel her body, her face, and her mind wither as she waits to return, but there is nothing to be done, and each day the news from home reawakens the ache of exile. She

contemplates the swelling crowds walking past and sighs. Her cappuccino drunk, nearly time to resume her commute, and she opens the *Corriere della Sera* and begins to flick through it. A shock. On the inside pages, a photo of Carlo. Carlo, her man, the love of her life. Headline: Spectacular jailbreak … Her heart thumping, blurred vision, her eyes jump from one line to the next.

In a refuse truck … with his cellmate, Filippo Zuliani, a small-time crook … accomplices among the truck drivers. The police are actively looking for the two fugitives … Photos of the two men. The small-time crook has the mug of a small-time crook. What the hell was Carlo doing with him? It is worrying.

She folds the newspaper and tries to convince herself that Carlo will be all right, that he isn't dead, but it is no good, she can visualise him dead. She picks up her belongings and heads for the Métro, towards La Défense and her office. It is too soon or too late to cry.

At La Vielleuse, Rue de Belleville, Lisa is playing pool, seemingly absorbed in the game, her long, slim form leaning over the baize, her face masked by her shoulder-length black hair, her movements precise. A habit that goes back more than eight years, to the time of her first clandestine missions in Paris, when Carlo was the main contact for the organisation back in Milan. Playing pool occupies both hands and mind when you're waiting for a phone call, night after night, at a set time. Lisa has come to enjoy the game, and she has carried on playing since Carlo's arrest, even though there is no longer anything to wait for. She is even considered to be a good player by the little group of regulars who are very respectful of her. You don't often find a woman who plays well. But today, as in the old days, she is playing to kill time. Carlo is free again … the old underground habits, why not? The phone rings for the third time that evening. Each time she jumps, just as before. The owner picks up the phone, looks over and signals to her,

this time it is for her. She dashes over to the old phone booth, closed off, discreet, right at the back of the room, as before.

'Lisa, it's me.'

Despite the overwhelming emotion, hearing his voice live for the first time in seven years makes her want to laugh. Who else could it be? A telephone date that has been on hold for seven years…

'I know.'

'I knew I'd find you. I love you.'

'I'm frightened, Carlo.'

'Everything's OK. I don't have much time. Listen carefully. The leadership of our organisation has declared that they're laying down their arms, they've admitted defeat.'

'I know, I still read the papers.'

'They're doing the right thing, I agree, even though I would like to have been consulted. But this changes things. I continued the struggle for seven years in jail, without letting up, I carried out all my instructions. But now we're laying down our arms, it makes no sense to stay banged up. I have no liking for long, drawn-out, tragic deaths.'

'So?'

'So I'm leaving.'

'Just like that?'

'Yes, just like that. You remember? We used to call that "practising the objective". When we consider a demand to be right and necessary, we enact it, we don't wait for it to be handed to us. I've seized my freedom.'

'That's crazy, now the Red Brigades are announcing they're laying down their arms, you'll be released within a few months. And perhaps the rest of us will be able to come back home.'

'Never. You're talking as if you don't know how the government works. They hate us because we exposed their rotten schemes and we frightened them, really frightened them. They found out that perhaps they were mortal. Now that they've won, they're going to make us pay for it, they're taking

their revenge and will continue to do so, there'll never be an amnesty, they'll let us rot in jail or in exile until the end of time…'

'It's not possible, Carlo, there are still some democrats in Italy…'

'Don't be naive. Are you aware of how many emergency laws they've introduced, how many of our people are in jail? Five thousand? More? You've seen the new law on dissociation? First the *penitenti,* those turned informants, then those who've formally repented. Just you wait, there'll be havoc, we're going to wither on the vine. Everything will fall apart, they'll do their utmost to wipe us out, one by one. Our politicians, pseudo-democrats included, are pathetic, incompetent and vindictive.'

'Maybe. But does that improve your chances of survival?'

'At least I'll have tried. I don't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing me die in jail. I do not repent, I do not dissociate myself from the movement, I renounce nothing, and I'm appalled by those who do, but fuck them, fuck those who've won. I'll get hold of some money and an ID – taking as few risks as possible – and I'm out of here. I'll go and live abroad, in the open.'

'I've been worried ever since they transferred you to that prison for common criminals, six months ago. I thought there was something odd about that. I'm afraid of a trap. And now your cellmate…'

'Don't be paranoid, Lisa.'

'Am I naive or am I para?'

'Both. Don't worry. My cellmate and I have already parted company.'

'What about the accomplices they mention in the papers?'

'The truck drivers. They're not politicos, but small-time crooks. They were paid, they're protected and they know nothing. My two current companions aren't politicos either and I'm certain of them. Lisa, give me time to find the money

and get my ID sorted, it's all been planned, organised, it won't be hard, I won't put myself in danger, and then I'll go abroad. I'll call you and you can come and join me. My next call will be the beginning of our new life. I love you, Lisa…'

'Stop. Be quiet. It's too painful. I'll wait for your next call.'

She hangs up. Her feelings of anguish are still just as sharp. The truck drivers aren't politicos, does that make them reliable? *No risks*, she doesn't believe that. Death lurks. She leans against the glass side of the booth and gets her breath back. Then resumes the game of pool.