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The Death of Marco Pantani

A Biography

Matt Rendell

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Extract

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The Miracle

(1970–84)

At 11.45 in the morning of 13 January 1970 Marco Pantani entered the world in Cesena, a small administrative centre in the Italian region of Romagna. His first journey, to nearby Cesenatico, took him fifteen kilometres and a world away. For, although Cesenatico owes its name and existence to Cesena, whose medieval merchants opened it as their gateway to the Mediterranean in 1303, Cesena directs its imagination northwards across the agricultural plain that extends as far as Treviso, and westwards to Bologna, whose university has faculties in the town. Cesenatico, by contrast, dreams of the sea, from which it has been inadvertently claiming land since the fourteenth century, thanks to the Port Canal, which affects the currents carrying sand and silt down the Adriatic coast. In the sixteenth century Leonardo was commissioned to renovate the port: among the da Vinci manuscripts at the Institut de France, Codex L, folios 66, 67 and 68, dated 6 September 1502, show the designs of the waterways that remain the heart of the town. Not so the brightly coloured barges that came and went with goods and people for half a millennium. A few now float listlessly in the canal, but most were museum pieces as long ago as the nineteenth century, when Turner depicted one with a smear of colour against a haze of sea and sky. Today, occasionally rigged for the tourists, the barges travel only on picture postcards, although Cesenatico was said to be closer to Venice, Trieste, even Dalmatia, than to Cesena, as recently as the 1930s. The fishing fleet is still intact, though, and thriving. One lunchtime, six vessels chugged into port before me, brimming with mullet they'd pulled out in less than half an hour. Today the town's main sources of wealth are its generous beaches. Even hundreds of yards inland, a fine layer of sand covers every horizontal surface.

Yet Marco would turn his back on the sea and head out into the hinterland, where the land crumples not into mountains but into a succession of abrupt knolls. Their scale can be deceptive; the highest promontory, the Maiolo, gestures rather than towers into the sky – the pass summits at Pugliano, 787 metres above sea level, and the gradient, at its steepest, grazes 9 per cent. The Barbotto, by contrast, peaks at barely 500 metres, but the pitch gathers with the climb and the final kilometre tops one-in-eight. The rain pours off it into a river, the Rubicon, that starts on its slopes. In 49 BC Caesar crossed the river, which marked the boundary between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul, to conquer or perish against Pompey. In a paradox that must have delighted him, Marco used these squat hills to become a great climber of high mountains, crossing the Rubicon almost every day from adolescence to the end of his short life as he pursued the gruelling métier of the professional road-racer.

At the top of the Pieve di Rivoschio – four kilometres of climbing, four more of gentle descent and then a sudden, steep ramp for the final stretch – lies the village where, as the tumult of the Second World War receded, on a smallholding large enough for the family home, four sheep and a clutch of chickens, Marco's grandmother Delia Gemelli, who called herself Alfea, lived with her husband, Marco's grandfather Sotero, known as Bacón. The family had deep regional roots: Sotero had grown up twenty-five kilometres away at Sársina, where he had inherited his trade from *his* father, Ciro, whom everyone called Ferdinando. Marco's forebears, then, were itinerant shoe-repairers, travelling from village to village, patching and sewing the tough hide boots of the *contadini*. Alfea, meanwhile, bore Sotero four children: Dino, Luciana, Ferdinando – Marco's father – and Ersilia.

Italy, at the time, was still a peasant nation. There were oases of technological progress, but most fortunate enough to be wage-earners worked in labour-intensive firms, the glut of small shops, the countless trades and, above all, the fields. Then, between 1950 and 1970, as Marco's father and his siblings grew up, backward Italy became an advanced industrial nation. Three million migrants from the impoverished South kept wages low in the North and made Italy a massive exporter of cars, typewriters and domestic appliances, with European market leaders in Zanussi, Ignis, Indesit, Olivetti, Fiat and Pirelli. Industrial production expanded from the established 'industrial triangle'

between Turin, Milan and Genoa, reaching the Adriatic coast at Ravenna, thirty kilometres – not twenty miles – north of Cesenatico.

The years of the 'economic miracle' were years of change in other ways, too. At the end of the war, American troops in Ray-Bans had handed out chocolate and chewing gum. Rock and roll from jukeboxes competed with the rattle of pin-ball machines, washed down with Coca-Cola. American icons like Marilyn Monroe and James Dean entered the Italian imagination, and American money – Marshal Aid, but also covert US sponsorship of the Christian Democrats as a bulwark against the Communists – entered the national coffers. Meanwhile, the tourist industry of the Adriatic Riviera emerged from the ravages of war. The charming villas that had housed the pre-war gentlefolk now became bed-and-breakfasts, and the first high-rise buildings appeared. In 1947 Cesenatico received the boost of a visit by the Giro d'Italia, that monument of national sporting events, which brought two national heroes to town in the cyclists Gino Bartali and Fausto Coppi.

This was the new world in which Sotero and his family made their way. In 1951 they moved to Villalta, 2.8 kilometres from Cesenatico. The move, perhaps fifty kilometres, was a modest one by Italian standards: between the end of the war and 1970 hundreds of thousands of Italians left for the Americas and Australia; similar numbers crossed to France, Switzerland and Belgium, while perhaps ten million internal migrants changed region. Nonetheless, their day's journey took the Pantanis from the back-breaking toil of agricultural labour to the tourist-fuelled boom of the Adriatic coast.

Marco's father – Alfea's third son – had been born Ferdinando, but the name was too long-winded for Alfea, so she called him Paolo. When he was ten or eleven, the family was on the move again, this time into the heart of Cesenatico, to a home in Via Giusti. Sotero found work with the local authority, cleaning the streets. In the afternoons, despite the resolute atheism of his Communist convictions, he played cards and gossiped with the parish priest. Like Sotero, Cesenatico had radicalism in the blood. Several sons of the town had fought for Garibaldi and, in August 1849, the General himself had found temporary safety there. He and two hundred of his troops had regrouped, grabbed some sleep, then boarded twelve barges bound for Venice to help break the Austrian siege. A plaque above what are now numbers 57 and 58, Corso Garibaldi – a charming cobbled street on the south bank of the canal –

announces: 'In this house, on 2 August 1849, Anita and Giuseppe Garibaldi, chased by four armies, found refuge after the events of Rome.' This historic building was also Marco Pantani's first home.

In 1966, soon after Ferdinando, now called Paolo, had completed his military service, he met Tonina Belletti at a dance along the coast at Bellaria. Tonina – the *-ina*, an affix of endearment, is part of her birth name – had been born in Rimini, the daughter of a sailor, Bruno, known to all as Baiò, and Maria, known as Poppona. Paolo was twenty-two, Tonina sixteen and a half. By the time they were married, in 1968, Tonina was pregnant with a daughter, Laura, who would be known as Manola. After their first year of marriage Paolo and Tonina moved into the Garibaldi building. Tonina, disarmingly open, dizzying with energy, tells the story quickly, with an anxious enthusiasm that confuses the chronology: 'We came to Cesenatico and spent a year in Via Cremona, where I was already expecting Marco. When we were married, I was already five months pregnant with Manola. When Manola was born, immediately afterwards, after five months, I fell pregnant with Marco. Because I couldn't have children. I said, "I won't get married if I can't have children." I saw several doctors, and they said, "No, you can't have children." Yet I had Manola and straight afterwards I had Marco.'

Yet the two miracle births in quick succession triggered a family drama Marco was too young to experience directly, but which would shape much of his life. Soon after the arrival of the children she had longed for, Tonina fell into a devastating emotional crisis and took a razor to her veins. There were economic difficulties too: Paolo had trained as a plumber and worked for himself for a spell, but there were problems and, when a number of clients refused to pay, Paolo's business failed and he was forced to find a boss.

The indomitable Tonina decided to look for work. She continues: 'My husband didn't want me to because, here in Romagna, a man feels inferior if his woman works. I started in hotels: the Hotel Esplanade, then the Hotel Conti. I used to take Marco with me to the Hotel Conti – he wasn't three – and he got up to everything you can think of. Once, I was making the beds with the owner's wife, high in the building; I turned around and saw Marco climbing from one balcony to the other! Another time, he was shouting and shouting, and I told him, "Don't cry or they'll send us home." But he was rubbing his eyes, poor thing,

because they were full of plaster, the sort you put on walls. He was full of life. Yes. His life was all hurry. I remember that when he went to school, everything was at the last moment. Shoes, everything: ''Come here quickly, because you've forgotten your cap'' . . .', and her reminiscence fragments into a mass of frenzied detail.

The Adriatic Riviera in which Marco was growing up was a world of change. The picture postcards of old fishermen mending fishing nets contain a truth: the force of habit has inexplicably failed to blind the locals to the beauty of the surroundings. They carry with them a sense of belonging, even if experienced individually (and it's hard for a community of hoteliers and restaurateurs so exposed to the mutability of the market – a community where everyone wants so much from the tourists, and from life itself – to maintain that old-time sense of aggregation). An intimate relationship, then, and an evolving one, for, as recently as the 1950s and 1960s, the local variant of Romagnolo dialect was still very much the common tongue. A survey conducted no further back than 1955 showed that, taken as a whole, 66 per cent of Italians couldn't speak Italian. Think of the migrant workers from the South, who can only have spoken dialects incomprehensible in the northern cities: they must have faced a difficult integration. Marco's uncle, Dino, freely admits he expresses himself more readily in Romagnolo than in Italian. The national language gained ground thanks partly to formal schooling but mostly to the informal education of the television: in the course of four years in the late 1960s the number of television sets in Italian homes doubled to seven million and, by the time Marco was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, dialects throughout the peninsula began to fall out of use, a trend as sudden and unprecedented as the economic upturn. Kids of Marco's generation still slipped into dialect to deliver a *battuta* – a 'one-liner'. Someone who knew Marco for most of his life, Giuseppe 'Pino' Roncucci, his *directeur sportif* when he was an amateur, told me: 'When there was a *battuta*, he could say it in dialect. ''*Andemm, Pieno, andemm*'' – ''Let's go, Pino, let's go.'' If you made a *battuta* in dialect, he'd reply in dialect, but I heard him speak very little in dialect. He spoke a lot of Italian.' Again, after he'd won the Giro and the Tour in 1998, he walked round in a T-shirt with the dialect line: '*U gne n'è par nisèun*'– 'There's nothing left over for anyone else.' But the T-shirt was designed by someone else.

And so, the old tongues lost their nuance, and the languages of the current generation's parents and grandparents began to run out of speakers. Henceforth, dialect would be nothing more than a rhetorical device inserted into the conversation the way we insert a metaphor or an expletive. A tragedy, in its way, although more obvious tragedies accompanied Marco's first ten years. Less than a month before he was born, a terrorist bomb exploded in a Milan bank, killing sixteen. The blame was attached to left-wing anarchists, although it soon proved to have been the work of the far right, aided by the secret services and protected by the police. It opened a decade of terrorist incidents, some horrific in scale, which culminated, in 1978, in the kidnap and execution by the leftist Red Brigades of perhaps Italy's most distinguished statesman, Aldo Moro and, in 1980, in an explosion in a crowded waiting room at Bologna railway station which left eighty-five dead. Between these atrocities, dozens of journalists, police, magistrates, industrialists and academics were maimed and killed by terror attacks.

Amid shadowy State involvement in lethal plots and the framing of the innocent, the expression *dietrologia* – the conviction that hidden dimensions underlie surface reality – became current; so too did the phrase '*tutto in nero*' – 'everything under the counter' – for these were also years of systematic tax evasion that would have brought another country to its knees. Shop-owners and artisans often declared incomes equal to or smaller than those of their employees. Self-employed professionals, small entrepreneurs and shopkeepers survived and prospered by defrauding the State, once by tax evasion, and twice by investing the proceeds in the high-interest bonds which financed Italy's public debt. Italy carried on regardless and, on the Adriatic Riviera, the holiday industry, its hotels full and margins wide from 1 March to 20 September, year in, year out, saw the boom continue for another decade even as the rest of the country went through a complex and painful economic and social transition. In the course of a generation, a peasant culture was supplanted by a culture of consumption which took over the High Street and, to an even greater extent, the consumer's imagination, in the form of daydreaming and longing.

Marco had little personal experience of this world of shining objects. Tonina told me there had been no money for toys. 'He bought his first toy when he began to earn money with his bicycle, aged twelve or thirteen. He bought a missile-launcher, Robobox, and I've still got pieces

of it about the house. But Marco loved fishing and hunting. As a child he could name every fish in the Adriatic, and he'd go miles to fish for freshwater trout.' He would return to these pastimes of withdrawal into nature, of stealth and wordless concentration, all his life, although it was not his father but Sotero who would load Marco on to his bicycle to take him fishing. And it was Sotero who collected him from school. Paolo told me: 'I had commitments. I was often away for two to three weeks because I didn't always work here in town. So he spent most of his time with his grandfather Sotero, who was like a second father, maybe more.' Looking at a photograph of Sotero and his grandson, Tonina remembers, 'They had a marvellous relationship. Sotero was my father-in-law, not my father, but I was very fond of him. He wasn't beautiful on the outside, but he was on the inside!'

The move to Corso Garibaldi on the Port Canal conditioned much of Marco's future life by giving him a neighbour named Guerrino Ciani, who belonged to Sotero's generation. Tonina told me, tenderly: 'From infancy, Marco always had this love for old people and for children. He was very attached to Guerrino.' Guerrino was also a keen cyclist and a founder member, in the 1960s, of the Fausto Coppi Sports Club, known in Cesenatico as 'the Fausto Coppi'. In 1971 the Fausto Coppi had held the first Nove Colli, or Nine Hills, an all-day amateur ride skirting San Marino and searching out the hardest climbs in the Cesenatico hinterland. The annual Nove Colli quickly ballooned, and the Fausto Coppi with it. Marco would have seen the bikes in the courtyard, and Guerrino set off with the Fausto Coppi riders. Then, in 1979 or 1980, Guerrino was one of the founders of the Fausto Coppi's youth section, intended to introduce children to racing cycling. This was where Marco would start to compete. Guerrino's influence was decisive in Marco's decision to take up cycling.

Yet Marco's choice of sport was surprising. Cesenatico had produced footballers: the international goalkeeper Giorgio Ghezzi, nicknamed 'Kamikaze', had won league titles with Inter in 1953 and 1954, was then sold to Genoa – a decision Inter fans found incomprehensible – before ending his career with Inter's bitter city rivals, AC Milan; and Alberto Zaccheroni, who had an undistinguished career as a full-back before becoming one of Italy's leading managers, winning the league title with Milan in 1999. Both had connections with the holiday industry: Ghezzi

retired to Cesenatico, where he owned the Hotel Internazionale, named after the team with which he is still associated; Zaccheroni was the son of a Cesenatico restaurateur.

As Tonina describes it, 'Marco, ever since he was small, wanted to be seen. At the nursery school in Viale Trento, he protected the other children. When he was a bit bigger, he played football, but they never let him play because he was small and skinny. He spent a lot of time on the bench, so he gave up.'

Mario Pugliese, the Cesenatico correspondent for the newspaper *La Voce di Cesena* – 'The Cesena Voice' – was Marco's classmate at school. He told me, 'If you wanted to practise sport in Cesenatico, you either played football or you joined the cycling team. Marco wasn't a good footballer. He played for Cesenatico, but he was really very ordinary. He was absolutely individualist, and therefore unsuited to a team game. We were always yelling, "Get rid of it! Here! Here!" But he never passed.'

Yet cycling came to Marco thanks as much to his shyness as to his inability to pass the ball. His inhibitions were of such crippling intensity that he could come across as retarded. Guerrino Ciani's son-in-law, Nicola Amaducci, noticed as much. Tonina recalls: 'In the courtyard of the house where we lived the boys used to meet to go out training with Amaducci. Amaducci began to say, "Come on, Tonina; let him come out with us." I said, "We'll see what his father says, but we don't have much money." We'd married with nothing; we'd bought an apartment; we had two children. He said, "We'll provide the bicycle." It's the bicycle that's now hanging in the bar.'

After Tonina's animated turmoil, the contrast of Amaducci's gentle melancholy. We met in Amaducci's Bar del Corso, yards from the Garibaldi building, and there was immediately a tenderness about him and a sense of apprehension that subsided only a little as the conversation became more natural, although even then he nervously curled a piece of card around a finger, or into a slim tube. His beard is no longer the proud jet-black you see in the photographs, where Marco, his thirteen-, maybe fourteen-year-old scalp still covered by dense locks, always seems to have his arms locked around Amaducci's neck. Grey hairs now outnumber the dark, and Nicola Amaducci looks across the room with warm, sad eyes and speaks with a voice put on edge by the presence of

a microphone, then softened by his deep courtesy and the slightest of lisps. Christened Nicola in memory of his great-grandfather by parents who didn't like the name so called him Roberto, he has worked with schoolchildren all his life – call it a vocation – albeit as an administrator, not a teacher, overseeing school canteens and transport, and the relations between the education services, pupils and their families. A career spent caring for local kids. And when, in 1972, his own son was born, Nicola, called Roberto, called him Roberto too, as if to correct the earlier oversight. Amaducci knew Marco almost from the moment he was born: then, in 1977, the Pantanis and the Amaduccis were two of eighteen families who formed a cooperative and built a three-storey apartment block at 136, Via dei Mille: the First of May Condominium. The Amaduccis moved into an apartment on the third floor of stairwell C; the Pantanis took a flat on the first floor of stairwell A. Where Tonina portrays a gregarious, outgoing child, Amaducci paints a quite different picture: 'He was always strong-headed, impetuous, introverted, rather solitary. He had difficulty making friends. Marco had a small vegetable garden alone, below the flat, which he cultivated on his own, and he often went fishing alone. Roberto and Marco were only two years apart, so they sometimes played together in the garden, although it often ended in an argument. It was Marco's personality, you see? He was a solitary child, quiet, but always full of energy. My wife, who was a primary-school teacher, worked with him one summer at a camp for children with working parents, and he was always up a tree or on a roof, full of life, but rather alone. And when a ten- or eleven-year-old child is isolated, it's not nice, so to try and help him make friends with other children, I invited him to take up cycling with us. I thought his personality would suit him to cycling. I wasn't thinking of results, I was just thinking that group sports, going out to train with friends, would help calm him down a little. Because life can be difficult for young people . . .'

Amaducci first got involved in the Fausto Coppi Sports Club when his son Roberto started to ride in 1982. 'I joined too, first accompanying the kids, then as vice-president of the club. Very soon we were taking out more than fifty children to ride every Sunday. I didn't think of myself as a *directeur sportif*: I experienced sport as something to enjoy, as something in which to progress, to reach a certain level of proficiency, but above all as fun. Everything that came after that was extra. I was

always with those boys. I worked in the office during the day and at Fausto Coppi in the afternoons for training and in the evenings when there were races. It was almost a form of social work, although I was directly involved because of my son, and later my daughter, who began to ride. My wife was always there too, and my father-in-law was involved. We had a lot of fun: it was a commitment that brought responsibility with it, but enjoyment always came first. They were the most beautiful years of my life.'

Despite, or perhaps because of, this nurturing philosophy, the youth section of the Fausto Coppi quickly produced a group of talented and highly competitive riders: 'Of the children of Marco's age, four others progressed to become Category One amateurs: Andrea Agostini, Anthony Battistini, Renato Baldassari and Francesco Buratti. All got to within a step of the professional ranks. All four were good riders, but Baldassari and Battistini especially so. Except that, for various reasons, they never took that final step: Battistini, because his mother died at a critical moment of his development; Baldassari, because of his character, although nowadays he's always on his bike, competing as an amateur and regularly winning. Andrea Agostini, too; when the amateur circuit races end in a sprint, he's always the favourite to win.'

But the jewel was Marco: 'He enjoyed riding his bike, and we saw in a matter of a year or two that he had something the other children didn't. In 1983, when he started racing, the races for the juniors still included climbs, and he was always ahead on them, despite the fact that his way of riding was always to ride at the back, never at the front. But even in those days he went well – very well. But you never think one of your children will do what Marco did. You think they'll ride well, finish high up in the field, but not become what Marco became. He was different from the others as a child, and he achieved what he did because he was different.'

The affection that bonded Marco and the man who introduced him to cycling is suggested, in twenty-year-old photographs, by Marco's embrace. But Amaducci's words seem to refer not just to those childhood years but to the end of Marco's life: 'What he needed was affection. He needed someone to be near him. With me, he was always himself. With me, he never changed.'

Perhaps it was the idea of shared experience; perhaps cycling allowed him the silence he enjoyed when he was hunting, or fishing, or taking

watches apart and playing with the parts for hours and hours. This blissful absorption, losing himself in time as he dissected some mechanical device, perhaps mimicked his adored grandfather, bent over a shoe, forcing a needle through leather with strong, accurate fingers. Perhaps he simply forgot his shyness in the heat of competition. Either way, Nicola Amaducci was right: cycling allowed Marco to break through his chronic inhibitions and enjoy friendship, showing the extroversion he could otherwise only achieve with his mother. It gave him an outward persona, a mask he could use to face the world. It also gave him deep bonds with other boys – bonds which would survive him. But if, in one direction, cycling set Marco free, in another, it added to Tonina's burden of anxiety, which lives on in her memories, liberated by the years from chronological order: 'For me, the anguish was continuous, every time he went out. If I met him at the crossroads, I'd turn the other way in fear, because he was a bit reckless. Every time he went out, I was afraid. Because, many things had not yet happened, but . . . after the first accident, the second, the third, the fourth, that is – and I remember one day I went to work, and he was going out with two or three other boys; I was on my bike going to work, and I said, "Helmets for those boys!" and my husband said, "Go away!" When I got home to the condominium, the other boys asked me, "How's Marco?" I said, "Why, where is he?" He was in hospital because he'd been hit by a car. He had been descending; the car was coming up the other way.'

In 1983 Sotero had part-funded Marco's first racing bike, which would supplant the model loaned by the Fausto Coppi. To do so, grandfather, father and son visited the Vicini factory in the outskirts of Cesena, founded by the 1939 champion of Italy, Mario Vicini, known locally as Ghaibera Vicini. Paolo told me: 'We wanted to buy a bike we'd already seen. But Marco saw this "Tour de France" bicycle, twenty or thirty thousand lire more than the other. It was dark red, bull's blood, metallic.' At a distance of two decades the cost is still imprinted in Paolo's memory. 'The other bicycle was 260,000 lire. We paid 290,000 lire' – €145. 'Two or three years later, when Marco had to ride a team bike, we sold it to a mechanic.'

Marco learned to dismantle and reassemble his bike with great expertise; and, later on, as Tonina recalled, 'He always went training with an Allen key in his pocket, because he analysed his position. A bit

higher, a bit lower, a bit here, a bit there. He almost always went training alone. He often told me he heard voices. He never told me whose voices they were. They were his affair. Even when he dropped Tonkov at Montecampione, he threw away his glasses and everything, and he heard voices. Perhaps it was his grandfather.'

Initially, it was not Marco's father but his uncle Dino who accompanied him to races. Dino also lived on Viale dei Mille, in the Condominio Gabbiano – the 'Seagull Condominium' – a hundred metres away. A timber-yard hand during the week, Dino was passionate about cycling. In the newspaper, he always lingered over the cycling pages, and rode himself, although not competitively. Even today Dino cycles two or three mornings a week. For the past twenty years he has taken part in recreational events all over Italy and France. We met in a bar near the railway station where Dino plays cards each afternoon, like his father before him. 'We were the ones who put him on a bike. Sotero gave him his first bike, but we were the ones who went with him every Sunday. Paolo didn't want to follow. He used to play football, until we put him on a bike. People were always saying, "Where did you get a son like that from?" I was always replying, "I'm not his father, I'm his uncle." Because I was bald, they thought I was his father – until Paolo started shaving his head.' But that was not for a decade yet.

Given the circumstances, for young people on the Riviera, German or English were more use than Romagnolo. Like the other holiday resorts of the Adriatic Riviera, from upmarket Riccione and swaggering Rimini further south, to the nightclubs of Milano Marittima halfway to Ravenna, Cesenatico was thriving on tourism, especially West German tourism, as early as the 1960s. The Deutsche Mark bought comfortable accommodation, good food, brilliant sunshine, golden beaches, at a favourable exchange rate. A cheap family holiday for the Germans, then, and for the locals, initially at least, an eye-opening tide of temporary revellers from a more emancipated world. And some German girls, of course, had (and still have) a fantasy about Italian men which made them easy pickings for smooth-talking beach boys. For a local boy with a little charm, the odds have always been favourable: in summer the seafront is crowded with beautiful girls in bikinis, some of whom have certainly come in the hope of meeting a Latin lover. The massive and continuing internal migration of the early 1960s, the liberalisation of

sexual habits, the diffusion of contraceptive devices, the divorce and abortion laws, all created a decisive break between the generations.

The tourist industry here did little to combat the idea of the Riviera as a place of sensual, if not downright sexual pleasure: even today, in perhaps more conservative times, the postcards depict young temptresses baring breasts, and sometimes more, and gazing alluringly out at you. The models are mostly blonde, not at all Italian-looking: they depict local identity loss – or, perhaps, though the idea feels forced, identity gain.

Mario Pugliese looks back with affection at the adolescence he and Marco shared: 'We went to school together from when we were eleven to when we were fourteen or fifteen. We were close friends, together every day. Actually, there were three of us; they called us the "MPs": Mario Pugliese, Matteo Panzavolta and Marco Pantani. We were hyperactive, and we were always being called into the headmaster's office after getting caught doing something wrong. Marco had an innate intelligence that allowed him to get by in school without ever doing any work. He'd arrive half an hour before school and copy our homework, but he was the quickest copier. He had the art of getting by – something typically Italian. But we were thirteen-year-olds, full of hormones, and we sometimes went a bit too far with respect to the girls in our class. Don't get me wrong: they liked it, but we weren't very elegant. If there was a girl in a miniskirt, we'd pick on her and make sure it got lifted up. Nothing disproportionate, nothing that wasn't essentially healthy.

'Marco was attractive enough as a twelve- or thirteen-year-old; but by the time he was fifteen, he was already losing his hair. It was a big problem for an adolescent, especially in those days. Today, baldness is fashionable to some extent, in part, thanks to Marco himself. But in those days, losing your hair was a problem; it meant trying all sorts of treatments. It was anti-aesthetic. Adolescence can be difficult enough for everyone, especially for a boy of extraordinary sensitivity like Marco. With a balding head, ears that suddenly stuck out . . . We're moving from facts into opinions, here, but a person who is extremely shy, extremely introverted, closed within themself, will develop a greater sensitivity. He'll learn to listen to himself much more, and refine his sensitivity – quite different from someone who has absolutely normal social interactions; and he was extremely sensitive.'

Marco's incipient hair loss took place in a nation in which a deep-rooted passion about appearance, style and fashion had assumed the traits of the consumer culture of the 1980s and 1990s: a 1992 survey showed no less than 37 per cent of Italians claimed to wear designer labels. As in other southern European countries, spending on pharmaceuticals was unusually high. Sales of aftershave lotions and anti-wrinkle creams were rocketing. Italian youth was obsessed with the word *bello* – 'beautiful'. To be a *bel ragazzo* or a *bella ragazza* – the adjective before the noun signifying beauty that is surface deep – meant peer-group acceptance and popularity; hair loss was not part of the type. Marco spent a great deal on scalp treatments and hair-restorers – to no avail.

Isolated from the common experience of Cesenatico's youth, he went out into the nearby hills alone to ride hundreds of kilometres. It was a simple defensive strategy. Pugliese continues: 'In adolescence, when others were having their first relationships with girls, for him it wasn't so easy. This no doubt increased his introversion.

'As an eleven-, twelve-, thirteen-year-old, he was expressive. Then things changed. He was a little taciturn, although obviously it depended on the company. But I think here is where a gap opened between Pantani the athlete who sits in the saddle and acquires charisma, security, and can impose his will very persuasively, and Pantani in plain clothes, not on the bike, who finds it harder to impose his charisma, and finds it harder to be secure.'

This teenaged insecurity built on a fragile possessiveness Marco had shown as a young child. Tonina recalls: 'He attached himself to [Guerrino], like another grandfather. He was so attached that when Guerrino's real grandson visited, Marco would hit him, because he didn't want him there. The other boy's grandfather belonged to Marco.' A school friend recalls that, as a teenager – his temperament already showing a terrible sense of hurt – Marco would not take part in playful wrestling like other boys: 'He would hit you in the face. He wasn't big, but it wasn't normal for a thirteen-year-old, and the other boys were slightly wary of him.' Only with the prop of cycling could he achieve togetherness.

Many years later, his manager Manuela Ronchi would find, 'On the few occasions I embraced him, he became rigid, and blushed. He wasn't used to receiving displays of affection.' In this most tactile of cultures,

it was a noticeable eccentricity: great warmth with an inner circle of same-sex intimates, and a wary coldness with others. Nonetheless, success would camouflage this and, perhaps, other conspicuous character traits. In later years, Ronchi continues, 'Because he was very reserved, and had a forbidding charisma, people who wanted to show him affection perhaps held back.'

The quality of the group that included Marco led the club to look for expert help, so in 1984 the Fausto Coppi called Vittorio Savini, a former technical director of the amateur Giro d'Italia and the brother of a journeyman professional, Claudio Savini. Savini had been to school with Marco's father Paolo at Villalta when they were both ten, although they'd had no contact since. Savini told me: 'They said, ''We've a group of youngsters who show promise, and you're the only one here who knows anything about cycling.'' I didn't really have time to get involved, but I told them I'd go along and take a look, and from the day I did, a Sunday I'll never forget, I fell in love with them all; not just Marco, but the whole group – kids who were trying so hard.'

Busy, intense, slightly bullying, Savini reminisces in the office of the Renault dealership he manages in Cesenatico: 'Marco wasn't the strongest of them. At that moment there were two or three boys who were as strong and, in the sprint, perhaps stronger: Anthony Battistini, Andrea Agostini and Francesco Buratti, a powerful *rouleur* who won a lot as an amateur. He could do sixty kilometres an hour on the flat, but he was a very poor climber. All in all, it was an exceptional group of boys, and wherever we went to compete, our group scared the hell out of the other riders.'

Marco rather resembled his father, but his peculiar character was all his own. It lodges in Savini's memory as it does in everyone's who knew him in childhood: 'Marco didn't have an easy personality, even as a child. He could be a very good, sweet boy, but there was anger in him: you only had to say a word against him and he could fly off the handle. When he was racing, even as a child, he was wilful. He didn't listen, and he lost a lot of races because of it. But even as a fifteen-year-old you could see he climbed well. There were no great mountain passes in the age-group race profiles, only small climbs; but each time we went over a road bridge, Marco would start right at the back, and by the brow of the climb he'd be in front. I used to say to him, ''But why do you always

ride at the back of the group?'' And you know what he said? He enjoyed looking into the faces of the other boys as they suffered. This was the pleasure he drew from it.

'When he was climbing, he was something else. Mother Nature had given him a gift. He hardly breathed; he didn't break into a sweat. People forget that. Marco had a capacity for riding we'll have to wait another fifty years to see the likes of again. When you told him to attack, he attacked, and no one could stay on his wheel.'

Savini became one of Marco's confidants. 'He used to come here and sit where you're sitting, and in the evening, at closing time, we'd talk again, and he'd let off steam, and sometimes we even argued, because we saw things differently. I'd known him as a child, and to me I suppose he was still one of my boys, when in reality he was thirty years old. It's not that I didn't understand him: it's just that I felt he was still a child, clean, pure, not a thirty-year-old with commitments, involvements, who reasoned differently.'