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Black Run

Written by Antonio Manzini

Translated from the Italian by Antony Shugaar

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B L A C K R U N

A N T O N I O M A N Z I N I

Translated from the Italian by Antony Shugaar

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To my sister, Laura

The mountain cannot frighten one who was born on it.

— FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

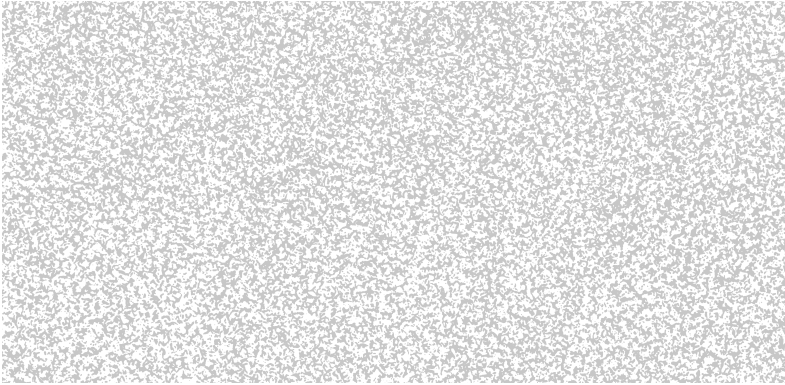
*In this life
it's not hard to die.
But to make life
is trickier by far.*

— VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

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B L A C K R U N



T H U R S D A Y

The skiers had all gone home, and the sun, which had just winked out behind the craggy blue-gray peaks that were shredding a few scudding clouds, was still tinting the snow pink. The moon was waiting for darkness so it could light the whole valley until the next morning dawned.

The ski lifts were no longer running, and the lights were out in the chalets at higher elevations. The only sound was the low muttering engines of the snowcats running up and downhill, grooming the pistes that twisted around boulders and stands of trees down the mountain slopes.

The next day marked the beginning of the long weekend, when the ski resort of Champoluc would rapidly fill with out-of-towners eager to dig their skis into the snow. The runs had to be in perfect condition.

Amedeo Gunelli had been assigned the longest run. The Ostafa. Stretching almost a mile in length, and about sixty yards wide, this was Champoluc's main piste, and it was used

by ski instructors with their beginner students as well as expert skiers to experience freeriding. This was the slope that took the most work, and it had often lost its snow cover by lunchtime. In fact, there were plenty of bare patches, unsightly stretches of rocks and dirt, especially at center piste.

Amedeo had started from the top. He'd only been doing this job for three months now. It wasn't hard. All you had to do was remember how to work the controls on this treaded monster and keep calm. That was the most important thing. Keep calm and take your time.

He had his earbuds in, with Ligabue's greatest hits blasting on his iPod, and he'd fired up the joint that Luigi Bionaz, the head snowcat operator and his best friend, had given him. It was thanks to Luigi that he had this job and a thousand-euro paycheck every month. Perched next to him on the passenger seat were a flask of grappa and his walkie-talkie. Everything he needed for the hours of hard work ahead.

Amedeo pushed snow in from the sides, spreading it and smoothing it over the barest spots, chopping it with the tiller while the rakes flattened it till the surface was smooth as a pool table. Amedeo was good at his job, but he didn't much like working alone like that. Folks seem to think that mountain people prefer the solitary life of a hermit. Nothing could be further from the truth. Or nothing could be further from the truth as Amedeo conceived it. He liked bright lights, loud noises, and lots of people talking all night long.

"Una vita da medianooooo," he sang at the top of his lungs, to keep himself company. His voice reverberated off the

Plexiglas windows as he focused on the snow, which was turning a pale blue in the moonlight. If he'd stopped to look up, he'd have glimpsed a breathtaking spectacle. High above, the sky was dark blue, like the ocean depths. By contrast, all along the mountain ridges it was orange. The last slanting rays of sunlight tinged the perennial glaciers purple and the underbellies of the clouds a metallic gray. Towering over everything were the dark flanks of the Alps. Amedeo took a slurp of grappa and glanced downhill. A nativity scene made up of roads, houses, and twinkling lights. A dreamlike vision for those who hadn't been born and raised in those valleys. For him, a squalid and heartbreaking diorama.

“Certe notti la radio che passa Nil Jàng sembra avere capito chi seiiiiii ...” He sang along to the words of the song by Ligabue: “Certain nights when the radio plays Neil Young as if it knew who you really we-e-ere ...”

He'd finished the first run, a wall. He turned the cat to head downhill toward the second section and found himself facing a stretch of black piste—a black-diamond run. Like in karate, the black classification meant the most challenging kind of run. It was frightening. An expanse of ice and snow with no end in sight.

Only guys who'd been doing this work for years and who could spin the snowcat around like a tricycle would even dare to venture down that steep, twisting track, full of switch-back curves and sheer drops, that led down to the main run. Anyway, that was a stretch that didn't require grooming. It

was supposed to be left the way it was. It was too tight, for starters. If you took it wrong, the treads would lose their grip, and before you knew it the snowcat would flip over, pinning you under tons of metal and hot grease. The skiers could groom it themselves, gradually smoothing the track as they descended. Someone had to go up just once a month, with a plow blade, and that was only when things had been pushed as far as they could go and the icy mounds that had built up absolutely had to be flattened out. Otherwise, on those blocks and slabs of ice, cartilage and ligaments, ankles and knees snapped and sprained regularly and unpredictably.

The light on the walkie-talkie on the seat next to him blinked. Someone was calling him. Amedeo yanked out his earbuds and grabbed the device. “Amedeo here.”

The radio crackled, then the voice of his boss, Luigi, emerged through the static: “Amedeo, where are you?”

“I’m right in front of the wall at the top run.”

“That’s enough. Head downhill and do the section below, near town. I’ll take care of the top section.”

“Thanks, Luigi.”

“Listen,” Luigi added, “remember to take the shortcut down to town.”

“You mean the lane?”

“That’s right, the one that runs from Crest—that way you don’t have to cross the piste that Berardo’s cleaning. So take the shortcut, you got that?”

“Got it. Thanks!”

“Forget about ‘Thanks.’ Make sure you buy me a glass of white before dinner!”

Amedeo smiled. "That's a promise!"

He stuck the earbuds back in, shifted into the lowest gear, and rumbled off the slope.

"*Balliamo un fandango ... ohhhh*," he went on singing. "We dance a fandango." Again, Ligabue.

Overhead, heavy cloud cover suddenly filled the sky, blocking out the moon. That's how it always works in the mountains: before you know it, the weather veers around as fast as the winds at high altitude. Amedeo knew that. The weather forecast for the weekend was ugly.

The snowcat's powerful headlights lit up the slope and the dark mass of fir and larch trunks lining it. Through the black branches he could still see the lights of Champoluc below.

"*Balliamo sul mondoooo ohh*," he sang. "We dance on the world."

He'd have to drive past the ski school and the snowcat garage, then head downhill toward town, and from there work the slope uphill.

He flicked the scorched filter of the joint out the window. Just then, the headlights of another snowcat blinded him. He lifted one hand to shield his eyes. The cat climbing the hill pulled up level with him. It was Berardo, another driver.

"Hey, are you high? You blinded me!"

"Heh-heh ..." Berardo snickered idiotically.

"Listen, Luigi's taking care of the top. I'm heading down to do the bottom of the piste, near town."

"Got it," replied Berardo, whose nose was already bright red. "You want to get a glass of white at Mario and Michael's tonight?"

"I'm supposed to treat Luigi, so I'll be there anyway. I'm heading down to the end of the slope!" Amedeo shouted.

"Take the Crest lane—I've already finished the run up above!"

"Don't worry, I'll take the shortcut! Later!"

Berardo went on his way. Amedeo, on the other hand, turned toward Crest, as ordered. Crest was a small cluster of mountain houses above the slopes. Nearly all the houses were uninhabited except for a hut and a couple of villas owned by people from Genoa who loved skiing more than they did their own city. From there, he'd go through the woods to the shortcut, which would take him eight hundred yards downhill. He'd give the end of the run a quick groom and then finally came the glass of white wine and cheerful conversation and laughter with the Englishmen who no doubt were already drunk. He went past the few lights on in the village, then left it behind him. The lane that the snowcats used was clear and distinct.

"Ti brucerai, piccola stella senza cielo ..." Hitting the high notes. "You'll burn up, little star without a sky."

He headed downhill, proceeding cautiously down the track, which was used only in the summer by off-road vehicles heading for the village of Crest. The headlights mounted on the snowcat's roof lit the shortcut brightly. There was roughly zero likelihood of driving over the edge.

"Ti brucerai ..."

No problem. The treads were gripping perfectly. The cabin was tilted to one side like a thrill ride, was the only thing. But even that was fun.

“Ti bruceraiiii.”

Then the tiller hit something hard and the snowcat bounced on its treads. Amedeo turned to see what the vehicle had hit. Must have been a rock or a patch of dirt. Out the rear windshield, the lights illuminated the churned-up snow on the lane.

But there was something wrong. He could see it immediately, right in the middle of the lane.

A dark stain stretching at least a couple of yards.

He braked hard.

He removed the earbuds, set the iPod aside, turned off the engine, and got out to check.

Silence.

His boots sank into the snow. In the middle of the lane was the dark patch.

“Christ, what the hell is that?”

He started walking. The closer he got, the more the stain in the middle of the shortcut changed color. At first it was black, but now it was purplish. The wind was whistling faintly through the needles of the fir trees, scattering down feathers in all directions.

Small, white, weightless feathers.

A chicken? Did I hit a chicken?! Amedeo muttered to himself.

He kept walking through the deep snow, sinking in five or six inches at every step. The down feathers covering the snow lifted into the air, spinning in tiny whirlwinds. By now the stain was brown.

What on earth did I hit? An animal?

How could he have missed it? With the cat's seven halogen lamps? And anyway, the noise would have chased it away.

He'd almost walked right over it when he finally saw it for what it was: a stain of red blood, churned into the white blanket of snow. It was enormous, and unless he'd run over a whole henhouse, that was way too much blood to have come out of a single piece of poultry.

He steered clear of the stain and carefully edged around it till he got to the point where the red was brightest, almost shiny. He crouched down and looked carefully.

Then he saw.

He turned and took off at a run, but he didn't make it to the woods. He vomited all over the Crest shortcut.

A cell phone going off at this time of night meant trouble, as sure as a certified letter from Equitalia, the Italian equivalent of the IRS. Deputy Police Chief Rocco Schiavone, born in 1966, was flat on his back in his bed, eyeing the big toenail on his right foot. The nail had turned black, on account of the filing cabinet drawer that D'Intino had carelessly dropped on Schiavone's foot while hysterically searching for a passport application. Dottor Schiavone hated Officer D'Intino. That very afternoon, after yet another idiotic move pulled by that cop, he'd sworn to himself and the entire citizenry of Aosta that he'd make sure he got that moron transferred to a godforsaken police station somewhere far from the sea, down at the opposite end of the Italian peninsula.

The deputy police chief reached out his hand and grabbed the Nokia that kept ringing and ringing. He took a look at the display. The caller number was police headquarters.

That rated an 8 on the scale of pains in the ass that ran from 1 to 10. Possibly a 9.

Rocco Schiavone had an entirely personal hierarchy up and down which he ranked the pains in the ass that life senselessly inflicted on him every day. The scale actually started at 6, which covered anything that had to do with keeping house: grocery shopping, plumbers, paying rent. The number 7 included malls, banks, medical clinics, and doctors in general, with a special bonus for dentists, and concluded with work dinners or family dinners, though all his living relatives, thank God, were down south in Rome. An 8 on the hierarchy began, first and foremost, with public speaking, followed by any and all bureaucratic procedures required for his job, going to the theater, and reporting to chiefs of police or investigating magistrates. At number 9 came tobacco shops that weren't open when he needed a pack of cigarettes, cafés that didn't carry Algida ice cream bars, running into anyone who wanted to talk and talk endlessly, and especially stakeouts with police officers who needed a bath.

Topping the hierarchy, the worst and the most dreaded, was a rating of 10. The top, the worst, the mother of all pains in the ass: the investigation he wasn't expecting.

He hoisted himself to a sitting position on both elbows and pushed ANSWER.

"Now who's busting my balls?" he barked.

"Dottore, this is Deruta."

Special Agent Deruta. Two hundred and twenty-five pounds of useless body mass vying valiantly with D’Intino for the title of stupidest member of police headquarters staff.

“What do you want, Michele?” roared the deputy police chief.

“We have a problem. On the slopes at Champoluc.”

“And where do we have this problem?”

“At Champoluc.”

“And where is that?”

Rocco Schiavone had been shipped north to Aosta from the Cristoforo Colombo police station, in Rome, the previous September. Four months later, all he knew about the geography of the city of Aosta and its surrounding province was the locations of his apartment, police headquarters, the courthouse, and the local trattoria.

“Champoluc is in Val d’Ayas!” Deruta replied, in an almost scandalized tone of voice.

“What’s that supposed to mean? What’s Val d’Ayas?”

“Val d’Ayas, Dottore, is the valley above Verrès. Champoluc is the most famous village in that valley. People go there to ski.”

“Okay, fine, so what?”

“Well, a couple of hours ago someone found a corpse.”

A corpse.

Schiavone let the hand holding the cell phone flop onto the mattress and shut his eyes, cursing through his teeth. “A corpse ...”

That was a 10 on the scale of pains in the ass. Definitely a 10. Possibly 10 with a bullet.

“Can you hear me, Dottore?” the telephone crackled.

Rocco raised the device back to his ear. He sighed. “Who’s coming with me?”

“Your choice. Me or Pierron.”

“Italo Pierron, every day for the rest of my life!” the deputy police chief responded promptly.

Deruta acknowledged the insult with a prolonged silence.

“Deruta? What, did you fall asleep?”

“No, I’m at your orders, Dottore.”

“Tell Pierron to come, and to bring the BMW.”

“Do you think the jeep might be better for high-mountain driving?”

“No. I like the BMW. It’s more comfortable, and it has better heating and a radio that works. The only people who take the jeep are those losers the forest rangers.”

“So should I tell Pierron to come get you at your apartment?”

“Yes. And tell him not to ring the bell.”

He dropped his phone on the bed and closed his eyes, laying his hand over them, palm down.

He heard the rustling whisper of Nora’s negligee. Then her weight on the mattress. Then her lips and warm breath in his ear. And finally her teeth, nibbling at his earlobe. At any other time, these were all things that would have aroused him, but right now Nora’s foreplay left him completely indifferent.

“What’s going on?” asked Nora in a faint voice.

“That was the office.”

“And?”

Rocco pulled himself up into a sitting position on the bed without even glancing at her. He slowly pulled on his socks.

“Can’t you talk?”

“I don’t feel like it. I’m working. Leave me alone.”

Nora nodded. She brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. “So you have to go out?”

Rocco finally turned and looked at her. “Well, what do you think I’m doing?”

There Nora lay, stretched out on the bed. Her arm, thrown over her head, revealed her perfectly hairless armpit. Her crimson satin negligee caressed her body, emphasizing with an interplay of light and shadow her generous curves. Her long, smooth dark hair framed her face, white as cream. Her black eyes looked like a pair of Apulian olives freshly plucked from the tree. Her lips were thin, but she knew just how to apply the right amount of lipstick to fill them out. Nora, a magnificent specimen of womanhood, just a year over forty.

“You could be a little nicer about it, couldn’t you?”

“No,” Rocco replied. “I couldn’t. It’s late, I have to drive up into the mountains, I have to kiss the whole evening with you good-bye, and in a little while it’s probably going to start snowing, too!”

He stood up brusquely from the bed, went over to sit in an armchair, and put on his shoes: a pair of Clarks desert boots, the only type of footwear that Rocco Schiavone knew. Nora lay on the bed. She felt a little dumb, made up and dressed in satin. A table set for dinner, and no guests attending. She sat up. “What a shame. I made you raclette for dinner.”

“What’s that?” the deputy police chief asked glumly.

“Haven’t you ever had it? It’s a bowl of melted fontina cheese with artichokes, olives, and little chunks of salami.”

Rocco stood up and pulled on a crewneck sweater. “Nice and digestible, I gather.”

“Am I going to see you tomorrow?”

“How the hell would I know, Nora! I don’t even know where I’m going to be tomorrow.”

He left the bedroom. Nora sighed and stood up. She caught up with him at the front door. She whispered: “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“What am I, a bus?” Rocco shot back. Then he smiled. “Nora, forgive me, this is just a bad night. You’re an incredibly beautiful woman. You’re unquestionably the top tourist attraction in the city of Aosta.”

“After the Roman arch.”

“I’m sick and tired of Roman rubble. But not of you.”

He kissed her hastily on the lips and pulled the door shut behind him.

Nora felt like laughing. That’s just how Rocco Schiavone was. Take him or leave him. She looked at the pendulum clock that hung by the front door. She still had plenty of time to call Sofia and go see a movie. Then maybe they could get a pizza together.

Rocco stepped out of the downstairs door, and an icy hand seized his throat.

“Fucking cold out here!”

He'd left the car a hundred yards from the front entrance. His feet, in the pair of Clarks desert boots he was wearing, had frozen immediately upon contact with the sidewalk, frosted with a white covering of goddamned snow. A cutting wind was blowing, and there was no one out on the streets. The first thing he did when he got into his Volvo was turn on the heat. He blew on his hands. A hundred yards was all the distance it took to freeze them solid. "Fucking cold out here!" he said again, obsessively, like a mantra, and the words, along with the condensation from his breath, flew up against the windshield, fogging it white. He started the diesel engine, punched the defrost button, and sat there staring at a metal streetlamp tossing in the wind. Grains of snow fell through the cone of light, sifting through the darkness like stardust.

"It's snowing! I knew it!"

He put the car in reverse and drove out of Duvet.

When he parked outside his apartment building on Rue Piave, the BMW with Pierron behind the wheel was already there with the engine running. Rocco leaped into the car, which the officer had already heated to a toasty seventy-three degrees. An agreeable feeling of well-being enveloped him like a woolen blanket.

"Italo, I'm hoping you didn't ring the buzzer to my apartment."

Pierron put the car in gear. "I'm not an idiot, Commissario."

"Good. But you have to lose this habit. The rank of *commis-sario* has been abolished."

The windshield wipers were clearing snowflakes off the glass.

“If it’s snowing here, I can just imagine up at Champoluc,” said Pierron.

“Is it up high?”

“Five thousand feet.”

“That’s insane!” The greatest elevation Rocco Schiavone had ever attained in his life was 450 feet above sea level at Rome’s Monte Mario. That is, of course, if you left out the past four months in Aosta, at 1,895 feet above sea level. He couldn’t even imagine someone living at 5,000 feet above sea level. It made his head spin just to think about it.

“What do people do at five thousand feet above sea level?”

“They ski. They climb ice. In summer, they go hiking.”

“Just think.” The deputy police chief pulled a Chesterfield out of the policeman’s pack. “I prefer Camels.”

Italo smiled.

“Chesterfields taste of iron. Buy Camels, Italo.” He lit it and took a drag. “Not even stars in the sky,” he said, looking out the car window.

Pierron was focused on driving. He knew that he was about to be treated to a serenade of nostalgia for Rome. And sure enough.

“In Rome this time of year, it’s cold, but often there’s a north wind that clears away the clouds. And then the sun comes out. It’s sunny and cold. The city’s all red and orange, the sky is blue, and it’s great to stroll down those cobblestone streets. All the colors are brighter when the north wind blows. It’s like a rag taking the dust off an antique painting.”

Pierron looked up at the sky. He'd been to Rome once in his life, five years ago, and it smelled so bad that he'd thrown up for three days running.

"And the pussy. You have no idea of the sheer quantity of pussy in Rome. I'm telling you, maybe only in Milan will you find anything comparable. You ever been to Milan?"

"No."

"You don't know what you're missing. Go there. It's a wonderful city. You just have to understand how it works."

Pierron was a good listener. He was a mountain man, and he knew how to stay silent when silence was called for and how to speak when the time came to open his mouth. He was twenty-seven, but you'd guess he was ten years older. He'd never left Val d'Aosta, aside from the three days in Rome and a week in Djerba, the island off Tunisia, with his ex-girlfriend Veronica.

Italo liked Rocco Schiavone. He liked him because he wasn't one to stand on ceremony, and because you could always learn something from a guy like him. Sooner or later he'd have to ask the deputy police chief—though he insisted on using the old rank of *commissario*—just what had happened in Rome. But their acquaintance was still too new, Italo sensed, and it was too early to delve into details. For the moment, he'd satisfied his curiosity by poking into documents and reports. Rocco Schiavone had solved a substantial number of cases—murders, thefts, and frauds—and had seemed to be well on his way to a brilliant and successful career. And then suddenly the shooting star that was Rocco Schiavone veered and fell, slamming to earth with a rapid

and silent transfer to Val d'Aosta for disciplinary reasons. But just what the stain on Rocco Schiavone's CV had been, that was something he never managed to find out. The police officers working at headquarters had talked it over among themselves. Caterina Rispoli argued that Schiavone had risen above his station. "I'll bet you he stepped on somebody's toes and that somebody had the power to have him shipped north; that kind of stuff happens all the time in Rome." Deruta disagreed; he felt sure that someone as capable as Rocco Schiavone was an annoyance, especially if he lacked a political patron. D'Intino suspected sex was at the bottom of it. "I'll bet he took somebody's wife or girlfriend to bed and got caught." Italo had a suspicion all his own, and he kept it to himself. His guess had been guided by Rocco Schiavone's home address. Via Alessandro Poerio. High on the Janiculum Hill. Apartments up there ran to more than eight thousand euros a square meter, or a thousand dollars a square foot, as his cousin, who sold real estate in Gressoney, had told him. No one on a deputy police chief's salary could afford an apartment in that part of town.

Rocco crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "What are you thinking about, Pierron?"

"Nothing, Dottore. About the road."

And Rocco looked out in silence at the highway, pelleted by falling flakes of snow.

* * *