Dark is the Morning

ALSO BY RUPERT THOMSON

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NON-FICTION

This Party's Got to Stop

Dark is the Morning

Rupert Thomson



An Apollo Book

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A Gianpaolo Paganelli,
e a Antonio Lalli ed Ester Sambrotta
non è successo niente

Then I die with anxiety, then my wild mind imagines
who embraces my love, and in what ways:
then I call curses down

Tibullus

Dark is the morning that passes
without the light of your eyes

Cesare Pavese

I

–

Harry

There is a house in Abruzzo, on the steep but fertile slope between the ancient hilltop town of Vasto and the Adriatic Sea. Its walls are charred and blackened, and several of the windows have lost their glass. A sign that says BEWARE OF THE DOG hangs on the metal fence that surrounds the property, but the dog in question has long gone – if indeed there ever was a dog. The lawn has not been cut in years, and one of the huge terracotta urns has fallen over. The pool is empty.

To live in that beautiful place, among the olive groves, the acacia trees, and the bursts of pink and dark red oleander, you need to be wealthy. Many of the houses are recent builds – not farmhouses, but villas and haciendas, with wide sun terraces, lawn sprinklers, and electric gates. The peaceful, almost sleepy one-lane roads and the views over the wide blue sweep of the Adriatic give the area an exclusive feel. Hardly anyone passes through, just residents, and the occasional cyclist in bright, tight-fitting Lycra.

Only the other day, I took a left turn off Via Istonia and drove up to the house. I stopped outside and put the car in neutral. It was a pilgrimage of sorts – or perhaps I was trying, once again, to come to terms with what happened back in the early 2000s.

I still find the whole thing hard to believe.

II

—

Gino

It had all started so well. I was surprised that Raul had included me in his birthday celebrations, since I had only been working in the department for a few months. Raul was my boss. Eighteen of us gathered on Thursday evening, in his favourite restaurant in Vasto, but then, towards midnight, as the other guests were beginning to take their leave, I ran into Uccello, an acquaintance from my teenage years, and suddenly I found myself in a basement club, drinking rum and Coke and doing lines of god knows what.

I glanced at my watch. Twenty to seven.

As the road wound its way uphill, through the woods, I shifted into second gear. My heart was leaping in my chest, and my mouth tasted of ash. I must have smoked about a thousand cigarettes. The sky soared overhead, its pale blue dusted with gold, though the sun hadn't lifted above the mountains yet, and the olive groves and vineyards in the valley were still in shadow. Somehow, it was Friday already. Where had Thursday gone?

I passed the track that led to the six-hundred-year-old oak tree, then I rounded the final bend, and there was Caracciolo, its houses arranged along the spine of a ridge, façades of bare

concrete and decaying stone, most of them austere, untended, the church taller than the rest.

Caracciolo, where I had been born and raised.

I would die there too, if I wasn't careful.

When I walked into the kitchen, my father was sitting at the table, dressed in a blue shirt and a grey waistcoat. He liked to help out at the *comune*, in an administrative role. In his fifties and early sixties, he had served two terms as mayor of the village, and he had kept in touch with things ever since, even though he was past retirement age. Once he stopped work, he would probably spend all his time on the land, growing the fruit and vegetables he was famous for. As I pulled up outside the house, I had known that he would be waiting for me. He was always there when I fell. Not to catch me, though. No, never that.

I thought it was a dinner, he said. His head was lowered, and he was turning his empty coffee cup on its saucer.

It was, I told him. But then I ran into somebody I used to know, and one thing led to another.

All this running around. It's making your mother unhappy.

He looked at me, over his shoulder. His eyes were dark brown and soulful, just like mine. It was something that people who knew our family would come out with – *You've got your father's eyes* – though it was always said with a certain regret, as if they weren't actually talking about similarities at all, but about differences, the things I hadn't managed to inherit from my father. His judgement, his patience. His goodness.

You'll be thirty soon, he said. Perhaps it's time to think about settling down.

I couldn't help laughing.

People don't do that any more, I said. And anyway, I'm nowhere near thirty.

My father ran a hand over his thinning hair, not quite touching it. What happened to Franca?

Franca?

Marcello's daughter. You used to like her.

Why are you talking about Franca all of a sudden? I haven't seen her for years.

She wanted to marry you, didn't she?

For Christ's sake, Dad, not you as well. It was bad enough hearing that from all my friends.

My father looked down again, the corners of his mouth twitching. He had this way of smiling that looked painful.

I'm just saying. Standing up, he took his cup over to the sink and gave it a quick rinse. I think she's living in San Salvo now.

He placed the cup in the drying rack, then picked up his keys and walked towards the door, resting a hand on my shoulder for a moment as he passed me.

When he had left the house, I climbed the stairs. Pausing outside my parents' bedroom, I heard a murmur. That was my mother, Gabriella, saying her rosary. I moved on down the passageway. Once in my room, I closed the shutters against the daylight, then I lay down on my bed.

Franca.

She had appeared in class when I was nine. I don't know where she had been to school before. Maybe in Gissi, which was where her family were from. Or maybe nowhere. She was a strange, stringy little thing, with a thin face and brown hair that hung past her shoulders. People were cruel to her at the

beginning, especially the girls. They called her 'The Rat'. It didn't seem to bother her too much. She'd probably been called names before. Either that, or she didn't care what people thought.

About three weeks after she arrived, she walked up to me at break. I was sitting in the corner of the playground, near the war memorial, reading a comic. My friend Luca wasn't far away. One day, Gino, she said, I'm going to marry you. I don't remember how I reacted. I expect I was embarrassed. I might even have said something cheap and spiteful like, Why on earth would I agree to that? At the time, my nickname was Dopey, after the dwarf in *Snow White*, not because I didn't talk or because I had big ears, but because my expression was the same as his. So people thought. After Franca's declaration, Luca and the others were always on at me. *Dopey and The Rat, Dopey and The Rat*. I heard it all the time. So Dopey, they'd say, when's the wedding? And, What if the Pied Piper shows up? And, If you have a baby, it's definitely going to have a tail. For the next few years, I avoided Franca. Sometimes I felt her eyes on me in class, or in the playground, but she didn't approach me again. Gradually, she made friends among the girls.

The next time I spoke to her was Halloween. I would have been about thirteen. A rumour had gone round that something was happening in the tall brick house at the top end of the village. The house belonged to an Englishman called Harry French. Bald with black eyebrows, Harry had the rounded shoulders and thick wrists of a wrestler, but he worked in Hong Kong, my father told me, as a market trader. He was one of the first foreigners to buy a property in the village. My father helped him with the paperwork, and also with the renovations, and the two men became friends. I called Harry *Il Francese* – The Frenchman – though not to his face.

That evening, as the sun went down, a group of us walked over to the house. It was almost dark, but no lights showed in the windows. A pumpkin stood on a stone pedestal outside. From inside the house came thin violin music and sinister rumblings. Every now and then there was a blood-chilling scream.

As we watched, the door creaked open, seemingly of its own accord. On a chair in the hallway sat a figure dressed in black. His face was painted white, and blood trickled from his mouth. Behind him, on a table, three candles flickered in a silver candelabra. The door slammed abruptly, without him even lifting a finger.

Luca gave me a nudge. Your wife's over there.

I looked where he was looking. A little further down the hill, Franca was standing beneath a street lamp with some other girls.

Don't be boring, I said.

Luca grinned, then shrugged.

The door creaked open again. This time there was a bowl of sweets on the tiled floor, halfway between the man's chair and the door. When one of the small boys edged forwards, asking if he could have a sweet, a gorilla leapt from the shadows. The boy fled, screaming. The beast lumbered after him, beating its chest and roaring. The vampire in the chair tipped his head back and laughed, revealing a set of jagged, bloodstained teeth. Some of the younger children were crying. Others would have nightmares for weeks afterwards.

After about an hour, the sound effects inside the house cut out, and the door remained closed. Luca and his cronies drifted off into the night. When I looked round, Franca was still over by the street lamp. She was on her own.

Looks like it's finished, I said, turning away.

She asked if I was going home.

I said I was.

A light rain had begun to fall. I tilted my head skywards and felt tiny specks of water landing on my face.

She moved closer. You mind if I walk with you?

I didn't say yes. But I didn't say no either.

She lived not far from me, in a new apartment block near the sports ground, but instead of turning left up the main street, which would have taken us home in a matter of minutes, we walked down the hill as far as the medieval fountain, then round the back of the school and up the steep steps next to the post office.

It was pretty good, don't you think? she said.

You weren't scared?

No, not really.

Me neither.

It felt like Dracula was real, she said, and he was in our village. She paused. And King Kong.

I liked her take on things – how she managed to give praise while remaining cool and jaded. I liked the way her hair hung past her shoulders, almost to her waist. One of her front teeth had a small piece missing. She had run into a door when she was eight, she told me. Blood everywhere. Luckily, her father was an ambulance driver. I laughed. She didn't have any sweets of her own. I gave her some of mine.

When we reached the top of the steps, where she would turn left and I would go straight on, she asked if I knew about the convent at the head of the valley. Apparently, it had once been used as a cocaine factory. She had heard her father talking about it on the phone.

She glanced at me, and her pupils seemed to flare. You think we should investigate?

We met a few days later, on the road that led out of the village. It was late afternoon. November. The air smelled of woodsmoke and dead leaves. Though the convent was close by, it was down in the valley, and hidden by the trees. Once in a while, on Sundays, the church was used for mass, but the convent buildings were abandoned. As we walked, I told her that I would be going to school in Vasto the following year. I wanted her to be excited for me, but she didn't say anything. She didn't even look at me.

I'll be back in the evenings, I said, and at weekends.

You'll make new friends. Her head was lowered, and her hands were pushed deep into the pockets of her jeans. You'll have a different life.

I realised I had to do something to change the mood.

Let's run, I said.

I didn't know where the idea had come from, but when I set off she kept pace with me.

We had only been running for a few seconds when I began to laugh. Soon we were both laughing. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps because running was something we never did, not if we could help it. Neither of us were any good at sport.

We stopped under the trees where the road curved back on itself. We were panting. I had a stitch.

Kiss me, she said.

She was standing close to me, her face in shadow. I looked at her, but didn't move. I couldn't. Leaves stirred overhead.

You don't want to, she said. You think I'm ugly.

It's not that, I said.

Is it because I'm from Gissi?

In Caracciolo, we tended to look down on anyone from Gissi. My uncle, Pasquale, always said that the only reason to

go to Gissi was to take a piss. His father used to say the same thing. As for me, I didn't understand what the problem was.

I shook my head. No.

What, then?

I looked at the ground. I don't know.

Fuck. She stared off into the trees. You idiot. She was talking to herself. I'm sorry, she said. Forget it.

It was the first time I had heard her swear. She kept surprising me in ways that made me think I should be interested in her.

We started walking.

When we reached the convent, it was in darkness. From further down the valley came the sound of barking. There was an old woman who lived on a farm all by herself. She had more than a dozen dogs, if the rumours were to be believed.

On the far side of the building, where the undergrowth was at its most dense and tangled, we found a door that was secured by nothing other than a piece of twisted wire. The door opened into a storeroom. There was a wooden ladder propped against the wall and a floor of beaten earth. Some demi-johns stood in the corner, their green glass furred with dust. Speaking in whispers, we moved on through the building. In a room on the first floor, on a table, we discovered traces of white powder. We looked at each other. Was this the evidence that we were after? Rolling a page torn from an old prayer book, I snorted some of the powder. My nostril burned, and I began to sneeze. Franca touched a finger to the powder and rubbed it on her teeth and gums, then she spat quickly. That's chalk, she said, or plaster. I stared at her. Where did you learn how to do that? She was nonchalant, as always. I must have seen it in a movie.

Though its days as a cocaine factory were long gone, if indeed anything like that had ever happened, the convent became our headquarters. We set up camp in a room with a vaulted ceiling and a window that looked over the valley. We'd bring a bottle of wine with us, and some tobacco and a candle, and we'd sit at the table by the window and pretend we were in a bar. Even weeks later, the words that had caught me off guard – *Kiss me* – still hung in the air, not like a regret, not even like a possibility, but like a covenant that bound us together. Sometimes Franca would tease me, slanting her eyes towards some flakes of whitewash. Fancy a line? Oddly, I would feel approved of. She had chosen not to see my snorting of some ordinary dust as a reason to mock me, but as something exuberant or cavalier, something that helped to colour in the legend of ourselves that we were already in the process of creating. Perhaps that was why I felt able to start talking about my father.

Nothing I do is ever good enough, I said.

She watched me carefully, her roll-up held close to her lips.

I seem to let him down, I said, over and over.

That's hardly a surprise, she said.

I stared at her. Rather than try to contradict me or reassure me, as others would have done, she had agreed with me.

When he was young, she said, he was some kind of hero, wasn't he?

I nodded gloomily. He foiled a fascist plot in Rome. It was in the seventies.

Leaning forwards, she placed her half-smoked roll-up on the paint-tin lid we used as an ashtray. Giancarlo Albanese, she said. He's loved by everybody in the village. He's always there for them. He's like the salt of the earth. She gave the last

phrase a peculiar emphasis, at once admiring and sarcastic. Also, he grows the best tomatoes – and not just tomatoes either. He grows the best everything. How are you going to compete with all that? You're only human.

Sometimes, when I bite into one of his tomatoes, I said, I feel like I'm going to choke on it.

She nodded. They're too perfect.

If only one of them would taste of nothing for a change. I smiled bitterly, then turned to the window and flicked my cigarette butt through the wire mesh.

When I turned back again, Franca was looking at me with an expression that was tense and direct. Slowly, she took off the grey fleece she wore, the one that said NEW YORK on the front in white letters, and then she took off the T-shirt she was wearing underneath. She wasn't wearing a bra. Reaching for her roll-up, she lit it with the lighter, then she leaned back in her chair.

What do you think? she said.

I couldn't risk speaking. I doubted that my voice would work.

Still looking at me steadily, she took a drag on her cigarette, then picked up the wine bottle by the neck and drank from it.

Do you like them?

The flame on the candle was tall and thin, and black smoke rose towards the vaulted ceiling, like a straight line drawn in charcoal.

No one's seen them before, she said. You're the first.

She finished her cigarette, and then, without any haste, and quite matter-of-factly, she put her T-shirt and her fleece back on.

As we walked back to the village that night, she told me that her relationship with her father wasn't exactly easy

either. I think he wanted a daughter who was beautiful, she said. Like the women in the shows he watches on TV.

I murmured a few consoling words.

You and me, she said, it seems like we're both kind of disappointing. She stopped on the road, one side of her thin face silvered by the moon. But maybe we could be something different – to each other.

To even think of an idea like that. To be able to open up a whole new world with one short sentence. I didn't pay enough attention, though. When autumn came, I went off to Vasto, as arranged. Franca attended the secondary school in Gissi, where her parents had both been educated, and we grew apart, just as she had predicted. At my new school, I fell in with a bad crowd. They were older than me, and they knew people who were older still, already in their twenties. They had nicknames like Toxic and Razor. Uccello was one of them. After I was expelled, I worked in dead-end jobs. I was out all night, drinking – and there was ecstasy and coke, of course. This was the nineties. I slept on other people's sofas, if I slept at all. My parents hardly saw me. Later, when I looked back, I glimpsed moments that seemed heightened or condensed, like recaps in a TV drama – stealing vodka from Conad for a dare, writing off my dirt bike on the Vasto flyover, blacking out at a warehouse rave and waking up in hospital – but there were also parts of my life that weren't accounted for, long periods of blankness. Things got so out of hand that I was remanded to a psychiatric unit, then sent to a religious community in the north. I couldn't believe where I had ended up. The place didn't just treat addicts. It was a refuge for criminals and psychopaths as well, people who had been in mental institutions or in prison. I remember sitting at the breakfast table with my

head lowered, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. After a year, I managed to discharge myself. I borrowed money from a friend and backpacked round South East Asia. When I returned, aged twenty-two, my father said I could live at home, but only if I found a job. I worked in a supermarket, stacking shelves, then at a garage. I worked night shifts in a plastics factory. Nothing seemed to last. I took off again, this time to South America. Does travel really broaden the mind? I'm not so sure. For me, it was more like an anaesthetic. In the early 2000s, I found myself on a flight back to Italy. By then, I had forgotten that Franca even existed. My determination to obliterate myself had been so comprehensive that she had been obliterated too. But as I lay there on that summer morning, in my parents' house, that felt like a waste. *Maybe we could be something different – to each other*. Those words resurfaced. Suddenly, I didn't understand what I'd been doing for the last ten years.

I looked at my watch. Eight-thirty.

Had I slept at all?

Sitting up, I put my feet on the floor and rubbed my face. I would have a shower, throw some clean clothes on.

I was due in the office in an hour.

After talking to one of Franca's cousins who lived in the village, I learned that she had a job at a small company that sold motor insurance. The following week, as I drove into Vasto in my father's car – my old red Lancia had broken

down again – I invented an emergency doctor's appointment, which allowed me to leave work at four in the afternoon. By half past four I was in San Salvo. I parked outside a shabby building on a tree-lined street and sat still for a few moments, my hands gripping the steering wheel. Was I trying once again to please my father, who remained so adamantly unimpressed by my behaviour, or did I feel, in some hidden recess of my mind, that he had a point, and that Franca had been good for me? I didn't know. When I opened the car door, though, I felt light-headed, almost giddy, like someone at high altitude.

Franca was sitting at a counter, behind a Perspex screen. She was studying the document in front of her. A middle-aged man in a grey suit sat in the back, at right angles to her, against a blue wall. The office smelled of printer ink and bitter coffee.

Franca, I said.

She lifted her eyes to mine.

She had the same narrow face, the same lank hair. In the stark, fluorescent light, her skin seemed more colourless than I remembered. But all of that, oddly, made me happy. No one else could see beyond it or beneath it to the real her.

Gino, she said, what are you doing here?

I could have asked her the same thing. She was wearing a tight-fitting top with sleeves that stopped short of her elbows. Horizontal stripes of purple, cream, and brown. She looked as if she belonged in an office that sold motor insurance, and yet I knew she didn't. She was like someone in disguise or under cover.

Are you free tomorrow night? I said.

She blinked, but didn't answer.

I'd like to take you out to dinner. I put the card from the restaurant I had chosen on the counter. I've booked a table for nine o'clock.

She took the card. I don't think I know this place.

The owner has a gravelly voice, like someone in a gangster film. I bent a little closer to the screen. They say he's got three testicles.

Her laughter was explosive, almost like a sneeze.

The man in the suit appeared at her shoulder. Is there a problem?

Not at all, sir, I told him. This young woman has been very helpful. She's a real credit to your company.

The following night, I arrived at the restaurant a few minutes early. It was in San Salvo Marina, one or two blocks back from the sea. The owner, Giacomo, leaned in the doorway, smoking a cigarette. His orange polo shirt and yellow trousers made his quiff of silver hair look mauve.

You should have warned me, I said. I'd have worn my sunglasses.

He laughed. Anybody joining you?

Franca's coming, I told him. She's an old friend.

He looked beyond me. Is that her now?

I turned and saw Franca walking towards us across the dusty, dimly lit piazza. She was wearing a short skirt and a striped top similar to the one she'd worn at work the day before. Her legs were bare.