

T H E G O O D B Y E K I S S

Massimo Carlotto

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K I S S**

*Translated from the Italian
by Lawrence Venuti*

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events,
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Penal Code, Article 178:

Rehabilitation discharges additional penalties
as well as any other penal consequence of the sentence,
unless the law provides otherwise.

Penal Code, Article 179:

Rehabilitation is acknowledged when five years have elapsed
from the date on which the sentence is served,
or discharged by some other means,
and the convict has given positive
and consistent proof of good conduct.

PROLOGUE

THE ALLIGATOR WAS GENTLY BOBBING BELLY-UP. It'd been picked off because it started to get too close to the camp, and nobody wanted to lose an arm or a leg. The sweetish stink of decay mingled with the scent of the jungle. The first cabaña stood about a hundred meters from the clearing. The Italian was calmly chatting with Huberto. He felt my presence. He turned and grinned at me. I winked, and he resumed talking. I came up behind him, took a deep breath and shot him in the back of the neck. He collapsed on the grass. We grabbed him by the arms and legs and threw him beside the alligator. The reptile belly-up, the Italian face down. The water was so thick and stagnant that blood and scraps of brain sluggishly formed a spot no bigger than a saucer. Huberto took the gun from me, slipped it into his belt and with a nod signaled I should get back to the camp. I obeyed, even if I wanted to stay a little longer and stare at the body in the water. I didn't think it'd be so easy. I rested the barrel on his blond hair, careful not to touch his head, avoiding the risk that he might turn round and look me in the eye. Then I pulled the trigger. The shot was abrupt; it made the birds take off. I felt a slight recoil, and from the corner of my eye I saw the chamber of the semiautomatic slide back and load another round. My eyes, however, were focused on his neck. A little red hole. Perfect. The bullet exited the forehead, ripping open a ragged gash. Huberto watched him die without moving a muscle. He knew what was going down. The Italian had to be exe-

cuted, and Huberto offered to lure him into the trap. For some time now he'd been a problem. At night he would get blind drunk and abuse the prisoners. The comandante called me into his tent the evening before. He was sitting on a cot, turning over a huge pistol in his hand.

"It's a nine caliber," he explained, "Chinese make. An exact copy of the Browning HP. The Chinese copy everything. They're careful, meticulous; if it weren't for the ideograms, you'd take it for the real thing. But the mechanism ain't worth shit. It jams at mid-clip. Perfect in appearance but weak inside . . . just like Chinese socialism."

I nodded, feigning interest. Comandante Cayetano was one of the original guerrilla cadres. And one of the few who survived. Now in his sixties, he wore a long, thin goatee just like Uncle Ho, and just like the Vietnamese leader he was long and thin. The son of a landowner who raised sugar cane, he chose to take up the cause of the poor and the Indios when he was young. Always stuck to the same line. Boring as hell, but macho. He definitely didn't call me over to jaw. He never did. He was never especially nice to me.

"Kill him," he said, handing me the pistol. "One shot should do it."

I nodded again. I didn't show any surprise, didn't even ask who I had to kill. It was obvious.

"Why me?" was the only question I allowed myself.

"Because you're Italian too." He spoke with a vicious tone that wouldn't stand any backtalk. "You came here together, and you're friends. It's better if this thing stays in the family."

I nodded again, and the next night I pulled the trigger. Nobody in the camp said a thing about what happened. They were all expecting it.

That was the sum total of my guerrilla experience, that double-crossing execution. Killing somebody who, like me, had

decided to dedicate his life to the cause of a Central American people. To words. Fact is, we were two pricks filled with delusions of grandeur, who ran away from Italy and the stuck-up babes at the university, pursued by an arrest warrant for subversive activities, among a few other petty offenses. Not counting the bomb we planted in front of the offices of the Industrialists' Association. It killed a night watchman, some poor bastard about to retire. He spotted the bag, climbed off his bicycle and made the mistake of poking his nose into it. From the newspapers we learned he passed by every night. We simply didn't check beforehand; we were much too busy bragging at the bar about operations others had carried out. A girl I'd been with a couple weeks decided to come clean half an hour after her arrest, and she squealed on us. In a flash we crossed the French border. In Paris, a year later, when we heard we were sentenced to life in prison, we looked into each other's eyes and decided to play hero. Except the jungle wasn't the Latin Quarter or Bergamo, let alone Milano. And the enemy, if he captured you, didn't throw you in jail but skinned you alive from your ankles up. We arrived full of enthusiasm and healthy revolutionary fervor, but it took us a week to discover a guerrilla's life is utter hell. Luckily we always stayed behind the front lines. Unlike those silent Indios, we didn't have the balls to confront the dictatorship's rangers and their American instructors. The Indios never smiled. They lived and died with the same expression. My friend gradually went out of his mind. He started to drink and play weird games with the soldiers the Front captured in ambushes. I'd warned him certain failings weren't appreciated in those parts, but by then he'd stopped listening to anybody. During the day he moved like a robot, waiting for night.

I exploited the arrival of a Spanish TV crew to put some distance between myself and Comandante Cayetano, the danger of combat and the cause. I didn't give a damn anymore. A

short fat-assed journalist had her eye on me. I led her to think she'd have a thrilling affair with one of the last fighters in the international brigades. After a few passionate nights, she requested and received the comandante's permission to have me assist her in the interviews. I escaped to Costa Rica, crossing the border on foot. I promised to join her in Madrid. But I needed a passport, and the thought of returning to Europe with a life sentence hanging over my head still seemed a pointless risk. I looked for work on beaches. European investors, particularly Italians, had begun building hotels on the most beautiful, pristine strips. There were no contractual obligations, no town-planning schemes; licenses were granted through a convenient system of bribes. An earthly paradise metamorphosed into a cement paradise. In addition to Italian, I spoke Spanish and managed quite well with French. I was hired as a bartender in a hotel owned by an Italian woman. She was loaded, in her forties, separated, no kids. A Milanese prone to affairs. The kind of woman who knows how to handle people. When I introduced myself, she gave me the once-over. She must've liked what she saw. But she wasn't stupid. She told me straight out I was clearly a terrorist on the run. One of the shitheads who'd destroyed her car to construct a barricade right in the center of Milano. She remembered the date. So did I. Three days of rage. The city stank of gasoline and tear gas and two deaths, Varalli and Zibecchi. I reeled off a lie that was pathetic but credible. She advised me not to act up; the Costa Rican police had no sympathy for political refugees. The place did seem like paradise to me, compared to the jungle, and for the first time after my escape I could entertain the idea of putting down roots. My fate was in my boss's hands, however, and slipping into her bed whenever it was vacant seemed the best method of keeping the situation under control. Her name was Elsa, and she wasn't bad-looking. Of course, women who were much more beautiful—and much

younger—strolled the beaches. But I wasn't in a position to indulge in certain luxuries. She played hard to get and made me suck up to her for two months before I could kiss her. She doubted the sincerity of my love, as well as almost everything I told her. Lying to her was easy, and it gave me a kick: it let me construct a different identity. Like a fake passport. Except on the inside. It let me live long stretches without squaring accounts with my real life, which I began to hate. That frightened me. For too long my life was based on declarations of intent I never carried through. For lack of courage. And deep down I always knew it. But I had no problem lying to myself, not to mention the people at bars and meetings. They weren't all like me. Just the opposite. I formed part of that minority who found the movement a site of camaraderie and freedom. Things my family always denied me. If I imagined the price was life in prison and murdering a friend, I would've stayed put at home, stomaching my father's bullshit, my mother's failings, my sisters' bigotry.

Elsa preferred to screw in the morning, before getting breakfast for the guests. I always thought she preferred the morning because she didn't have to spend a lot of time having sex. She was always in a rush and totally without imagination. An orgasm, a kiss on the forehead, a cigarette. I first cheated on her two years later with another forty-year-old. A Florentine with her husband and sister-in-law in tow. On the pretext that her complexion was too fair and delicate, she spent most of her time perched on a barstool. Gin and tonic plus an endless desire to chatter. She was a little overweight, but she had a pretty face and a look in her eyes that said she was up to no good. She wasn't the only one; the others were all younger and more attractive. But I was drawn to the forty-year-olds. The thought of worming my way into their lives and toying with their weak spots made my head spin. I betrayed Elsa with no

regrets. The others were a cinch. In those days I was little more than thirty and, like Elsa used to say, a handsome piece of ass. The bar was a strategic spot, and you didn't need a bunch of irresistible come-on lines. It was enough if your glances were just a bit shifty, if your smiles were polite and defenseless and if you were ready and willing to listen.

That's how I spent seven years. Almost without realizing it. Everything ended when Elsa unexpectedly came behind the bar and found me in the arms of a German broad. I don't remember her name, not even her face, but she was a very important pussy in my life. That fuck suddenly took away everything I had. The next morning I hightailed it from the hotel, bag in hand, and did a quick disappearing act. All through the night Elsa played the role of the betrayed benefactress; one way or another she was going to take revenge. A hell of a woman, but when she got pissed off, she lost her head. I had just enough time to steal the passport of a guest from Alicante who bore a faint resemblance to me. I dropped by a forger who used to hang out at the bar, had him substitute my photo and grabbed a direct flight to Paris. When I arrived at the airport, I thought of going to live in Mexico. It struck me as the most logical move. Then a trio of Air France stewardesses crossed my path. I stopped to check them out. And as I was admiring their asses, I decided to give my life a new twist. It was just a hunch, but enough to make me change my escape route despite the warrant that dogged my trail for more than ten years now. On the flight the hunch took shape, turned into a rock-solid decision, then into a well-defined plan, and when I sailed through customs, I hit the nearest pay phone. It wasn't easy to track down the person I was looking for, but in the end I got hold of him. He was surprised to hear from me after so long, and he wasted no time to ask if I was in a jam. I sighed and answered I had to see him on the double.

We met around lunchtime in a brasserie near the Gobelins metro stop. I got there early and passed the time watching people come and go.

“Enrico, why d’you come back? What happened? Where’s Luca?” he blurted, even before taking off his jacket. My immediate supervisor during the Parisian exile, he was using our noms de guerre. His real name was Gianni, but in the organization he was known as Sergio. He’d always been an intermediate cadre, carving out a career in France only because the bigwigs all got jailed in Italy. I looked him over. He had a peasant’s face, and his hands were dirty with grease. Worked in some sort of factory. His life was waking at five in the morning to drag his class consciousness to the plant.

“Luca died a few years ago,” I announced. “They caught him playing hide the salami with a captured official and laid him out.”

“Are you shittin’ me?”

I did nothing but stare at him.

“What about you?” he asked in a whisper.

“I fucking got fed up and came back.”

Sergio bit into his sandwich, taking a moment to think. He chewed slowly and gulped down half a glass of red wine. To him I was nothing more than a pain in the ass, and it was his job to take care of the problem.

“What do you figure you’ll do?”

The time had come to play my hand. “I’m heading back to Italy. I’m going to cooperate with the authorities and turn a new leaf.”

He went white as a ghost. “You can’t. We’ve already been wiped out by the turncoats. We shut down years ago, Enrico. The organization doesn’t exist anymore, it’s finito. The armed struggle is over.”

“Then there’s no problem,” I cut him short.

“No, you know about too many comrades who were never

ID'd. People who lead normal lives today. They don't deserve to end up in the slammer."

I shrugged. If I was in his shoes, I would've snarled and hissed a death threat. But he just winced. "What's happened to you?" he asked, running a hand over his face.

"I'm fed up with this shitty business," I shot back. "I don't have the slightest intention of spending the rest of my life in exile, every day risking jail for a stupid fucking night watchman and a few flyers."

Sergio tried one last appeal—to values and ideals. I waved him off. "Find a solution, Gianni," I said, shifting to his real name. "Otherwise I'll fuck over all the survivors. Your sister too, even if she didn't have shit to do with it. I'll add her name to the others. I'll say she brought me the explosive and the cops swallowed her story too fast."

I got up and left without even looking at him, leaving behind my beer and sandwich. The whole thing was a ball-buster. I didn't have much money, and that day I couldn't spend any more. Started knocking on doors, methodically, looking up people I knew during my first Parisian sojourn. I chose the ones who didn't have direct ties with the Italians. I knew there was nothing to fear from retired guerrillas, but you can never be too cautious. I had a fake passport and a conviction in Italy. A tip-off and they'd lock me up in La Santé with the Basques and the Muslims. A Uruguayan couple put me up, expatriates from a previous generation. He was an engineer, she a psychiatrist. The woman gave me a sympathetic ear. "One week," she finally said, jerking her thumb to make herself perfectly understood.

If you're up shit creek in a big European city and you're looking for a place to sleep with three squares a day, you need a system for tracking down a single woman. And if, like yours truly, you're not a bad-looking guy and have extensive experi-

ence with women past their prime, the chances for success increase appreciably. I plunked myself into an armchair and started poring over the personals in Saturday's *Libération*. Naturally, I had to focus on staunchly progressive neighborhoods where I could pass myself off as a combatant for Third World freedom. Rejecting women under forty and with children, I responded to about fifteen ads with voice mail boxes. Couldn't wait for the mail. A week later I brought my few rags to Régine's apartment near the Place de la République. Our first date happened at a photography exhibit in a private gallery. One of her friends was showing, and Régine was intrigued by the idea of meeting among a bunch of people she knew. I arrived determined to get somewhere. The other encounters were flops, and I swore not to be choosy, to turn on all my charm. But Régine was a real dog, and I had to force myself not to beat a retreat and vanish into the crowd on the Champs Elysées. Forty-seven, decent job, separated for ages, she had the face and body of a woman who'd let herself go and decided to give it up to lonely hearts. Somewhere along the way she registered it was too late to get back to even a vague facsimile of the woman she once was. At first she found it strange a man ten years her junior would date her. But she was horny, and the sex convinced her to take advantage of the opportunity. It was easier to make her believe she was living out some wonderful love affair than it was to screw her. But in the end she was the one who suggested we try shacking up, on the pretext that I needed a place and finding one in Paris wouldn't be a snap. She turned out to be an attentive lover, and my accommodations were definitely comfortable. Fact is, she was a petty woman, as ugly as her life. I couldn't believe that deep down she didn't suspect the mountain of lies I constantly unloaded on her. But loneliness made her vulnerable, if not simply deaf and blind. The little good sense she still had persuaded her to keep her cash and jewelry under lock and key.

This agony lasted a couple months. Finally Sergio found a remedy. He arranged to meet me in the same brasserie as before. I found him already seated, staring intently at a quarter liter of red wine. He looked like some caricature of a tavern scene. Maybe he was dreaming of the one near his home in Italy, where he'd spend some time after work, rinsing the taste of the foundry from his mouth and talking politics, cursing the owners and the party leaders who betrayed the cause.

I sat down without saying hello. "So what's up?"

"We've conferred and decided to make you a proposition," he began. "Your conviction is a done deal, and the only hope of getting it thrown out is a retrial. We've convinced a comrade with a life sentence to confess to your role in the bombing. He'll say his conscience got to him, he was with Luca that day, and he'll provide some credible details. The lawyers say it should work. But you have to get used to the idea of doing some time."

"How much?"

"Two, three years, however long it takes to get through the courts. And then to make the conscience thing believable the comrade has to confess once you've turned yourself in. They'll also pin some related crimes on you, but you'll pay for those while you're awaiting retrial."

This isn't what I wanted. I lit a cigarette. "It's too much," I hissed.

Sergio shook his head. "Even if you cooperate and spill everything, they'll make you do some time. The lawyers say this is the best deal going on the bad rep market."

"Don't push me," I said calmly. "I'm resigning from the firm, and I'm just negotiating the settlement."

I ordered a beer and took a drag on my cigarette, weighing the proposition. "OK. I'll turn myself in at the border."

Sergio heaved a sigh of relief. From his pocket he took out a notebook and a pen. "Write down what you remember about that night, details especially. The confession has to be precise."

While I was writing, he asked me if I wanted to know what my old friends and comrades said about my sellout.

I smiled. "I already know. I know them inside out. They called me a piece of shit and made noise about getting revenge: a shot in the head, or an axe, just like Trotsky. A lot of hot air. The same old story."

"Don't you even want to know which comrade is going to pay for your crime?"

"No. I'll read about it in the newspapers. Besides, if he's doing it, he doesn't have a choice. Among the names I could finger I bet there's somebody who's dear to his heart."

I closed the book and threw some cash on the table.

"You really deserve to die." He was serious.

"Don't be pathetic." I left, certain I'd never see him again.

A couple weeks later I forced open Régine's desk drawer with a screwdriver, took her cash and jewelry and exited her life forever. The next day I'd surrender to the Italian police, and I planned to have a little fun before going to jail. I unloaded the jewelry on an Algerian fence from Barbès for some chump change. From the Gare de Lyon I took the train to Nice. I picked a deluxe hotel, a high-priced whore and a fine restaurant. When I woke the next morning, my pockets were empty. Thumbed it to the border.

Before taking me to San Vittore, the cops made a stop at the headquarters of the Digos in Milano, the division of general investigations and special operations. Also known as the anti-terrorist squad. They locked me in a room used for interrogations. Cigarette butts were heaped on the floor; blood and coffee splattered the pale green walls. The bulls liked to throw coffee at suspects, paper cups filled with disgusting shit, just to show they were pissed off and didn't drink what they tried to palm off on you. I felt calm, all things consid-