

REALMATTER



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REAL**MATTER**

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Preface

Reading Time 0'

Lucy: "You're reading the brothers Karamazov?"

Linus: "Uh-huh... I find it quite fascinating."

Lucy: "Don't all those Russian names bother you?"

Linus: "No, when I come to one I can't pronounce, I just bleep right over it."

Charles M. Schultz, November 4, 1964

1. Cascomatta

Reading Time 11'

Things had gone much more smoothly than he had dared to hope. When brother Bisencho had told him about Saiquiodono's impending visit, he had not been too optimistic. He was certain this was going to be yet another young man from a wealthy family from the provinces, coming to the capital to take a look at the Bateren, perhaps eager to buy a few rosaries and crosses that his pretty wife and her ladies in waiting could wear over their garments, as was fashionable these days. He might help replenish the coffers of the church, God willing, and that would be a blessing. But he did not sound like conversion material. Ten years married to a woman said to be both very beautiful and totally devoted to him, and, according to Bisencho's report, uncharacteristically attached to her himself; possessor of a fortune neither large nor small; the young man seemed unlikely to harbour any fear of greedy neighbours, and even less likely to hold expansionist ambitions. Men like Saiquiodono were not fertile ground for the message of Daiusu. Confident, contented, treading the happy middle ground: they had no reason to feel the restlessness, the angst, and the appetite for change that could be effectively channeled into embracing a foreign religion. Saiquiodono was not coming to meet him out of need, whether material or spiritual, but out of curiosity. Curiosity was good, but not great. Men like Saiquiodono might

be persuaded to buy a large number of rosaries and crosses at an inflated price; but it was foolish to hope for more than that. Better not get his hopes up, he had thought.

Yet when they had finally met, Urugan was surprised by Saiquiodono's charming personality. So tall he was stooping slightly, the young lord had an imposing presence. Shrinking in his old age, lately Urugan found himself ill at ease in the company of people taller than him, but this man somehow inspired in him an instant sympathy. As soon as they exchanged bows and sat down, Saiquiodono started talking in halting Portuguese, skipping the formalities and moving straight to posing pointed questions. Urugan, a veteran of these encounters, was taken aback. He had carefully rehearsed his lines in Japanese, memorized Saiquiodono's titles and the appropriate formulae to address him; he had several minutes' worth of empty talk ready to deliver. They died in his throat as he tried to keep pace with Saiquiodono's rapid-fire succession of queries. The young man was very well read, and seemed to be already conversant with most of the basic aspects of the Kirishitan religion, as well as other elements of Southern Barbarian culture.

So detailed was Saiquiodono's knowledge that Urugan felt slightly alarmed: could he be a spy? One could never be too careful these days; true, eight years had passed and Quanbacodono had not yet acted upon his ordinance of expulsion of the Bateren, but they were, after all, operating in

defiance of an official edict. The Law of God and the laws of men were at odds in this land, and the Bateren were on the wrong side of temporal rule; the threat that this posed to their safety should not be underestimated. In practice, however, this particular regulation seemed to have had little effect on the mission. In Nangasaqui, activities were proceeding more or less undisturbed, or so the Padre Provinciale boasted. Even in Miaco, as long as they officiated all ceremonies in the safety of the private homes of wealthy lords, the fathers and brothers had been left to practice almost undisturbed. The pace of conversions may have slowed down a little, but not even that significantly.

If anything, Urugan often thought, the decrease in conversions was more likely to be a consequence of the relative peace that followed Quanbacodono's unification of the country, rather than the result of his edict of expulsion of the Bateren. The internal wars the fathers had encountered in the early years since their arrival had been a blessing for the mission. The ways of God are mysterious indeed: many a local lord had converted in the midst of the conflicts, perhaps hoping that their chances of winning over his neighbours would have been greater with God on his side, perhaps driven by the awareness of the transient nature of life in times of war to think more deeply about matters of eternity. And whenever a lord had converted, all his retinue had followed suit. Peace, on the other hand, took away the restlessness, the angst, and the appetite for

change that could be effectively channeled into yearning for Daiusu.

And yet there were factions in Quanbacodono's court that were hostile to the Bateren; could this tall and clever young man, so well versed in the Holy Scriptures, have been sent by them as an informant? He had been recommended by a relative of Ucondono, one of the Bateren's most trusted allies; father Bisencho had assured Urugan of his reliability. It was peculiar that Bisencho had not mentioned that the man could speak Portuguese, or that he has read almost all the literature produced by the printing press in Amacusa; this was not the kind of detail that a conscientious and concerned father would omit in these dangerous times. But if Saiquiodono was indeed a spy, and he had made it this far, there was little one could do now; they were already doomed. Urugan resolved to take the risk; he had survived greater challenges than this one.

Two dogichi discreetly entered the room, bringing tea and a few small dishes on lacquer trays. Urugan and Saiquiodono sat down to share the food, continuing their conversation. A frown briefly creased the young man's face as he scrutinized the simple meal of rice, dried fish, and vegetables. Urugan could not help noticing his disappointment, and stifled a chuckle. For all his intellectual curiosity, Saiquiodono was also driven by a more literal hunger for the exotic after all! He must have hoped for some beef stew, some grape liqueur perhaps, a more literal taste of the blood and flesh

of Yesu Kirisuto. If he was a spy, he was a naïve one. It was well known in Miaco that meat was never served to prospective converts. Conquering the trust of indigenous populations by showing respect for local customs was a core principle of missionary activity; it was fundamental to pave the way for the complete overhaul of their spiritual dogmata. On the rare occasions that a meal containing dried beef or salted pork was prepared for the Bateren, it was cooked in a separate building, and the brothers in charge of the kitchen were instructed to use different knives, pans, and pots, lest the smell of animal flesh clung to the implements. But most of the time the Bateren themselves ate Japanese-style meals. If Urugan missed some things from home, meat was not one of them; ever since he was a child he had disliked its texture and its smell, and never understood why it was meant to be a delicacy, much preferring the plain taste of grains. Rice, fermented beans, and dried fish had won him over immediately.

Saiquiodono's disappointment lasted only the briefest moment; he immediately plunged back into the conversation. In a mix of Portuguese, Latin, and Japanese, the two men went on talking for hours, barely noticing when the dogichi discreetly took away the mostly untouched dishes on their trays, and replaced them with freshly brewed bowls of tea. Despite their age difference, almost forty years, Urugan felt a deep affinity with Saiquiodono. He was not wrong in thinking that the man had come to him out of curiosity; but it was a genuine intellectual inquisitiveness, a

burning desire to learn. His questions were pointed and unrelenting, yet not polemical; he really wanted to understand. Unlike the bonzes with whom Urugan had often engaged in debates over the past twenty years, Saiquiodono's questions bore no trace of hostility. He wanted to believe, but could only do so if he was persuaded by watertight arguments. He had been earnestly looking for flaws in the Scriptures' account, and was now listing them one after the other in his heavily accented yet grammatically correct Portuguese. After expounding each one of his critiques, he paused and stared at Urugan as he rebutted them and further elucidated the meaning of the divine teachings; his face was a mask of attentiveness. The young man's penetrating gaze triggered in Urugan an equally intense fervor. Back and forth arguments and counter-arguments went, rephrasing concepts in Japanese and Portuguese and back to Latin; Saiquiodono did not know Greek but followed with great attention as Urugan elaborated on notions of agape and philia.

Excitedly they went on talking well into the night, and as the first light of dawn filtered in from the garden, Saiquiodono was converted. The dogichi were summoned again, and asked to escort the young lord to father Bisencho's lodgings to receive the holy sacrament of Baptismo. Your Kirishitan name will be Paulo, Urugan said. You will be baptized by the grace of Yesu, and you will become a Kirishitan. Cascomatta, the young lord said. I will. As they deeply bowed to each other, it was Urugan's turn to feel a tinge of disappointment at

the realization that it was time for Saiquiodono to return to Figen.

A few days later, one of the dogichi visited Urugan to inform him that Saiquiodono had safely arrived back in Figen, but some very unexpected developments had occurred. Urugan felt a chill run down his spine. Had he been fooled by the young man's charm, and, seduced by those intense eyes, had he given away significant information that risked compromising the safety of the mission? Yet the dogichi's expression was of perplexity more than of dread; this reassured Urugan. The news, he hastened to explain, was not cause of immediate concern, but was quite startling. Saiquiodono had returned home with the firm intention of living the rest of his life as a Kirishitan. However, as soon as he entered his lodgings, his servants informed him that his wife had been struck by severe illness while he was away. Saiquiodono was notoriously attached to his wife, a noblewoman of great beauty and kindness. He must have been terribly concerned about her illness, which seemed very serious. What was worse, her attendant, aware that the wife was devout follower of the Foque Xo, had summoned a number of bonzes to look after her spiritual needs. According to the dogichi's informants, the bonzes suspected that Saiquiodono's visit to the capital had been prompted by his interest in the Daiusu religion, and had promptly blamed the lady's infirmity on her husband's heretic disposition. What an unfortunate coincidence! Urugan could not believe his ears. Just when he thought he had conquered one more

soul to Daiusu's reign! The inquisitive young man was likely to read this tragic event as a sign that his doubts, that Urugan had so carefully unraveled one by one over the course of that long, exciting night, were after all legitimate.

A week elapsed without further news from Figen; a dogichi came to Urugan with a message from Bisencho, politely suggesting not inscribing Saiquiodono into the register of new converts for the moment. Urugan could not forget the young man's intense gaze, and the emotional hours they had spent together, but he resigned himself to the idea that his conversion had not endured this calamitous turn of destiny. Cascomatta, Urugan told the dogichi; I will follow Bisencho's advice.

Just when Urugan had lost all hope, a friend of Ucondono visited the Bateren's residence in Miaco, bringing the most extraordinary piece of information. Saiquiodono's wife, after a few days in critical condition, had sadly passed away. Several bonzes had gathered in the mortuary room, ready to perform funerary rituals. There they found the husband, crouched next to her, crying profusely while clutching a little carved statuette of Yesu on the cross. Appalled, the bonzes reprimanded him sternly; had he not caused enough harm with his foolish interest in the Southern Barbarian religion? How dare he bring this abomination to his wife's deathbed? Sure, ladies these days were fascinated by such ornaments, and most people may think them harmless, but wasn't the woman's tragic death sufficient proof of the evil power of such

sacrilegious objects? Saiquiodono had kept sobbing quietly, his body limp with sorrow.

And then it had happened. Urugan could picture it as if he had been present himself. The man's intense eyes, the controlled emotion in his young and virile voice.

Saiquiodono stood up, his spine so straight that he seemed even taller. He stared at the bonzes with his penetrating black eyes, and yelled at them to leave the room immediately. Wild-eyed yet otherwise perfectly composed, he went into his wife's apartments and gathered all of her belongings; her kimono, her hair ornaments; and flung them out of the house. Swiftly and methodically he went around the residence, gathering all Buddhist objects and chucking them into the garden, where they gathered in a slovenly pile, getting dark and shiny under the light rain. When he was done throwing out everything, he summoned his house servants and gave them a small parcel of salted pork that he had brought back from his journey to the capital.

Take it to the cook, he said, and tell him to prepare it immediately. Just grill it as you would with dried mackerel. No rice, no tea, the meat will be enough. Serve it to me here, in the mortuary room.

Meat of a four-legged animal, tonosama? On the day of your wife's funeral? In the mortuary room? The servant asked, bewildered.

That's what I said. Are you refusing an order?
Saiquiodono asked with quiet fury.

Cascomatta, replied the servant, bowing briskly. I
will.

2. Furoarucana

Reading Time 10'

William remembered his childhood through a dark green filter; perhaps it was the light in an old city bus, or that of the shades on buildings' windows that he watched with obsessive curiosity. Growing up in the 1970s in a middle class suburb of a small town, he was a frightened little boy. All people talked about, it seemed to him, were terrorist attacks: bombs on trains and in railway stations, hijacked airplanes. He was keenly aware of living in a world of which he knew close to nothing, and in which even adults did not seem at ease.

He never knew what waited at the end of the road he walked on; everything in life seemed just a fragment of something else.

Spurred by his love of drawing, from a young age William became skilled at observing and representing his surroundings. He tried different media and techniques, and finally settled on comics. His dream was to become the new Charles M. Schultz, as he told the American author himself in a fan letter. That was only the beginning of a long period of one-sided correspondence with famous authors. With an old Everest typewriter and a massive stock of stamps, both of which he had discovered in his grandparents' home, he began to write, ceaselessly and shamelessly, to the artists and writers he admired. He also wrote to a

number of toy train makers, begging for gifts, discounts, and even personalised alterations to their model trains. All he got in return were catalogues with exorbitant prices.

When he reached high school age, William insisted on going to an institute specialising in visual and plastic arts. This meant commuting every day from the suburban hills where his family had moved in the meantime all the way to the city centre. It took two hours to get to school and even longer to get back home. Urban transport was completely unreliable; most schooldays he would return just in time for a late dinner, having skipped lunch. Among the various specialisations of the art high school, he chose to major in printing arts.

The creative and unstructured environment of the school was overwhelming at the start: William spent his first year of high school being mostly confused. In the long run, however, the school's artistic atmosphere made it easy for him to balance schoolwork and friendships, and afforded him the right to dream, discover, and make mistakes. It felt as though none of the students ever had the slightest fear of making mistakes in their artwork. Any technical failure was another experiment, a draft that could be stored in a cardboard folder that simply recorded their evolution. And they brought the same spirit in all areas of life; school was a creative and productive tide, endlessly ebbing and flowing.

Despite his dedication to schoolwork, particularly

in the art subjects, William still had plenty of spare time, and on a summer night when he was fifteen, as he was staying up late studying for the third year Maestro d'Arte exam, he encountered Japan for the first time. He turned on the TV and on Rai Tre public television channel he came across a movie by Ozu Yasujirō. He was thunderstruck, and the effect lasted for a long time. He had become a neon light, turned on even in the daytime. It was as though he had suddenly discovered cinema, learned about the existence of movies, and worlds, distant in time and space. That distance felt like a path to be treaded.

Thus in the summer of his third year at the Art Institute William taught himself Japanese. He started that very night: he somehow managed to record the rest of the film on a VHS tape, and for a month he re-watched it and repeated all the dialogue lines that he was able to grasp, without understanding their meaning and probably getting the pronunciation wrong half of the time.

Furoarucana?

Chioua uacasa nacatta.

Socca.

With every iteration his ability to hear and reproduce those sounds, and to read the nuances in the gestures of the actors, improved. For a month, every night, and when he could in the daytime too, he secretly met with Ozu and his film, and was transported, body and soul, into 1950s Japan. The film was *An Autumn Afternoon*; not

long after, he also came across, and duly recorded with his VCR, Tokyo Monogatari, and gradually saw all of Ozu's other movies. By the end, the Japanese language with its range of sounds was deep inside him, eager to pour out to reconquer its new world. He had absorbed the stories of distant families, and those stories and those sounds welled up in him like an overflowing pitcher. It was July of 1990.

In August, William and his brother got a part-time job as delivery boys. While the brother spent his money going out with friends, William invested his first paycheck in a Japanese grammar book, which he discovered at the same used books store where he had helped out in the art section over Christmas. He devoured it from the first day. Finally he could visualise and write what he had always rehearsed mechanically. He couldn't wait to transfer on paper and in a thousand shapes the sounds that had possessed him for weeks. While the brother did his rounds on his Vespa, William was too young for a riders' licence; he did his deliveries via public transport, which gave him plenty of time to read. The Japanese grammar was a thin and worn-out volume, the only exemplar in the shop. It must have been forgotten in the farthestmost shelf of the underground storage room. The quality of the book was not great; a diligent typography student, William could not help noticing that the tome was old and poorly printed, god knows where and with what means.

When he went back to school in September, all of

William's art projects were on Japan, from xylography and serigraphy to advertising graphics. His teachers encouraged him to take up Asian Studies at university; he was over the moon to have found a path, even if he had to wait two more years before graduating high school. It was then that he made a chilling discovery. He had made a Japanese pen pal, with whom he exchanged postcards, and one day she politely pointed out to him that his Japanese was a little odd. In the extended and uncertain time that it took for his next postcard to reach her, he reminded her just as politely that he was only sixteen, and moreover he was self-taught. Her terse response was: "check the date on your grammar book." He took the volume and opened it carefully, to prevent the pages from falling out: it was a reprint of a Japanese grammar book from the Meiji period, originally published in 1911. If this story were a comic book, this frame would be in reverse colour.

How could he have missed this detail? He had gotten into the habit of covering his books with wrapping paper, and thus had not looked at the actual jacket; he had devoured the book excitedly, without looking at the front page, let alone the preface or introduction; both at home and at school he was surrounded by time-worn books filled with important-sounding names, and all this had diluted the old-fashioned aura of the text. He had focused uncritically on the content, ignoring the form. The only criticism he had, as a visual arts and typography student, was the poor quality of

the inking on some pages and the uneven pressure of the galleys on others. Here he was, thinking that he was building a relationship with Japan, exchanging postcards with Japanese girls and inviting home the Japanese solo travellers he came across on his way from school, and all along he had been trying to converse with them with a ridiculously archaic language. The final blow came when another Japanese friend noted, with surprising accuracy, that he talked like Hara Setsuko, one of Ozu's iconic actresses. There you have it: a six-foot-tall white teenage boy that spoke like a Japanese woman from the 1940s, and wrote like a drunken ambassador from the nineteenth century.

At sixteen, William went to the capital city to take the official Japanese Language Proficiency Test at the local branch of the Japan Foundation, and miraculously passed the beginner level. He started hanging around the Asian Studies department of the university well before he enrolled, nonchalantly sneaking into language and culture classes. He also began to learn Norwegian by himself in the library, under the perplexed gaze of academics. He felt like Hermann, the protagonist of *Heimat Two*, when he goes from the little town of Shabbach to Munich. The tools to understand the diversity of the world were all within easy reach: he felt a sense of empowerment similar to the one he would get many years later from the Internet. The idea that in town there was a place like this, full of exotic books, classrooms, students and professors willing to teach even a clandestine like himself, was

beyond his wildest dreams.

When he finally enrolled in a university degree, with a major in Asian Studies, William felt that he had become the privileged member of some kind of important youth group, as though he belonged to a junior diplomatic corps. He studied Japanese and Indonesian, and, once again undercover, took one semester of Chinese. He unconsciously brought to university life the habits that he had developed at art school, first and foremost the freedom to interpret and use the contents of his studies in immediate and real applications.

Graduating was not his first priority. The ocean of youth was so vast that swimming in it was enough to give meaning to life. Studying for him was an immersion in the spaces and times of school, and he wanted it to last as long as possible. Life would call him back to shore at some point.

In the 1990s, when he was still an undergraduate, William had chance to go to Japan for the first time. He stayed with American relatives that were on secondment in Tokyo. He was suddenly thrown into an international jet set, among ambassadors and CEOs; the effect was dizzying, not in an unpleasant way. The first night they took him to dinner to a fancy French restaurant in Yokohama. Since he was going to be their guest for two weeks, he had wanted to treat his relatives to dinner to thank them for their hospitality; he decided to seize the opportunity on that very night. After all, he was the only European at the

table; it only made sense that he would treat everyone to a nouvelle cuisine dinner. He knew this would probably mean being on a tight budget for the rest of the holiday, but preferred to get it over and done with. When the bill arrived, William almost fainted: five people, in a couple of hours, had wine and dined for a total of over ten thousand dollars! He sat dumbfounded with the bill between his fingers, while a violin player patiently waited by the table, probably hoping for his customary hundred-dollar tip. Eventually everyone laughed, the violin player moved to another table, and someone politely took the little piece of paper from William's hands. All he had brought with him to Japan were five hundred dollars, which were supposed to last for the whole two weeks.

After that first trip, William returned to Japan several times: to buy books, to take photos, to take a break from a homeland that did not seem to grow at his same pace. Japan became his wild strawberry patch, like in the Ingmar Bergman movie; a place where he could reorder his thoughts and reassure himself that it was ok to be different. As the years went by, however, these brief regenerative trips were no longer enough. William felt trapped in his home country; to stay back there, he felt, was a betrayal of a path that had been building up all his life. His life trajectory had made him too full of gifts and too eager for action.

Despite his love for comics, William had never been an enthusiast of manga and anime; he didn't

share his peers' fascination with ninja or samurai, robots or kawaii characters. And naïve as he may have been, he had never really imagined that he would find the black and white Japan of Ozu's films. Still, when he found himself living in Tokyo, it felt like a dreamland: the Japan of everyday life resisted any categorization. The journey was not without obstacles; to be permeated by a different culture was a painful and confusing process. Often he found himself awake in the middle of the night, wondering; what if he didn't like Japan after all? Well, that would be his fault, William thought, for thinking that Japan was there to please him. It made more sense for him to try to please Japan instead.

3. Aruchici

Reading Time 16'

Early morning in late autumn, a tinge of cold in the crystal-clear air; for the first time he felt that winter was coming. Precariously balancing his briefcase as the bicycle bounced on the cobblestone, *Ciro* once again marveled at the beauty of the city. So many monuments all in one place! Egyptian obelisks and Corinthian columns, Renaissance palaces and cathedrals, marble fountains shining in the rosy light of dawn. It was a long ride from his little flat across the river to the city centre, but he loved every minute of it. When he started working at the Registry Office of the Foreign Ministry, *Ciro* would never have imagined that the most exciting part of the job would be riding to work through the streets of the capital; nor would he have thought that the excitement would last this long. He had been on the job almost a year now, and still every morning he felt that sparkling feeling in his chest as he rode past the Pantheon and Hadrian's temple, taking in the scenery as he pedaled quickly towards the office.

Not that work itself was dull; quite the contrary. *Ciro* was deeply grateful to the uncle that had put in a good word for him at the Ministry; even if his responsibilities were very limited, this was a dream come true. He had always been fascinated by distant lands; as a child, he had dreamed of studying Oriental languages and civilizations at

university, but the war had disrupted his plans. Now he spent his days redirecting uncategorized mail from all over the world and archiving copies of incoming and outgoing correspondence with embassies and consular offices. Surrounded by foreign stamps and exotic letterhead, trying to memorise names that he could hardly pronounce, *Ciro* felt like a true citizen of the world. His absolute favourite was the Far East desk; China and Japan had always fascinated him, and he considered himself doubly fortunate that, since he began working at the Ministry, the Far East section had been a particularly active one. Archiving dispatches from the Embassy in Tokio was a close second to fulfilling *Ciro's* fantasy of travelling to the Orient.

The salary of a clerk at the Registry Office was not great, but the excitement of the work more than made up for it. And his mother could boast with all the neighbours that her son was “basically working side by side with the Duce.” Mamma’s wide exaggeration had a thin factual basis; Mussolini was known to be partial to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was often spending time in his offices in Palazzo Chigi. Not that *Ciro* had ever actually come across him in the building. Recently, however, he had to archive a copy of a letter personally written by the Duce, or, as it turned out, written by the cabinet chief for him to sign. *Ciro* had fantasized that he might be the one to walk over to the galleria *Deti* to collect the missive: this time mamma would have had something to really brag about! Heck, it would have made a good story

for Ciro to tell his mates at the osteria as well. No such luck, of course; that had been handled by someone higher in grade. Still, the letter itself had been remarkable enough to offer the excitable young man fodder for many hours of daydreaming.

It had all begun over the summer, when a hand-delivered parcel arrived at the front desk of the Ministry. Ciro remembered it well; while most uncategorized correspondence he was able to redirect after a quick glance at the opening lines, this one had given him a hard time. The cover letter was on letterhead from the Regio Istituto Universitario Orientale—the very school that Ciro had fantasized about in his childhood. The Institute was based in his hometown of Napoli, not here in Rome; why had the parcel been hand-delivered? The documents neatly stacked in the envelope were just as puzzling: several different versions of an announcement for a competition to compose a poem to advertise a Japanese tonic beverage named Karupisu. One was meant for publication on a newspaper, a different one for a magazine, one was to be sent as an individual letter to solicit an application from an illustrious artist.

The sender, a Japanese language teacher at the Oriental Institute, humbly suggested that none other than Gabriele D'Annunzio would have been the perfect candidate to compose the ad. This milk-based tonic, the accompanying letter explained, was already extremely popular in Japan, where it had been successfully advertised as a sweet, refreshing treat to enjoy on a warm starry

night, “like the taste of first love.” The Poet, the sender of the letter argued, would certainly appreciate the subtle, elegant eroticism of the allusion, and would be best positioned to devise an even more appealing slogan, perhaps with a Latin flair. While he had had the honour of meeting the Poet in Fiume, where they had been on very close terms, the sender continued, he had unfortunately lost contact, and was thus reaching out to the Ministry in the hope that they could assist him by forwarding his query, especially in consideration of the personal friendship between His Excellency the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prince of Monte Nevoso.

Puzzled as to where he should direct the message, Ciro was also enthralled. Who was this language teacher, brazen enough to treat the Duce basically as a go-between? Was this a cultural misunderstanding, ascribable to different notions of etiquette? Surely in no country, not even in Japan, such a request would be considered acceptable. Weren't Japanese people supposed to be even more obsessed with protocol and hierarchy than Europeans? The hint at his close friendship with D'Annunzio at the time of the Fiume expedition sounded quite dodgy too. And yet, what if it was true? The past decade had seen such turmoil in Europe that all sorts of strange encounters could have happened.

Even after he deferred the decision about what to do with the message to his supervisor, hoping that his own hesitation would be interpreted as a sign

of humbleness rather than of incompetence, Ciro could not stop thinking about the letter and its author. The name itself sounded so exotic. Scimoi Aruchici. He wondered what kind of person he was. Had he attended the Oriental Institute as he had wished, Professor Aruchici might have been Ciro's teacher. He pictured him standing behind a tall lectern, maybe dressed in a kimono, or would he wear a suit instead? Unraveling the mysteries of Japanese literature on a chalky blackboard, every now and again dropping a casual hint at his days with D'Annunzio in Fiume. For days Ciro fantasized about Professor Aruchici, almost hoping that the lecturer himself would show up at the Ministry demanding to know why his letter to the Poet had not been forwarded as he had requested.

He was dumbfounded by the coincidence when, a few weeks later, he had to store a letter from Ambassador De Martino, extending the invitation of a Japanese newspaper for D'Annunzio to give a series of conferences in Tokio and Osaca. Even though he could have easily archived the missive based on the letterhead, Ciro had perused the whole message carefully and excitedly. D'Annunzio's poetry, the letter explained, translated into Japanese by prominent literati, was extremely popular in the land of the rising sun, and a visit by the Poet himself would contribute immensely to the spread of fascist ideals in a terrain that, De Martino was certain of this, was already fertile for them. Ciro was reminded of Professor Aruchici's words. He, too, had pointed out that the Poet was already very popular in

Japan. After a cursory look, Ciro's supervisor had dumped the hand-delivered bundle in a drawer; but could Aruchici have been on to something? Maybe he was right, this Japanese fascination for D'Annunzio could be put to good use.

De Martino was highly supportive of the initiative of the Japanese newspaper; he had done some investigating on the publisher and was confident that its political leaning was the right one, and that the ownership was not likely to change anytime soon. All people involved were trusted individuals, and the enterprise was sure to be highly beneficial. De Martino himself had taken the liberty of drafting a letter that could be addressed to the Poet by the Ministry; better still if it could be signed by His Excellency the Prime Minister. Once again someone taking the Duce for a go-between, or worse, D'Annunzio's secretary! Yet this was not a little Japanese from Napoli; it was his excellency the ambassador, and Ciro's supervisor had taken the request quite seriously. Copies of De Martino's initial draft and further revised versions were included in the folder, as well as a copy of the typewritten message to the Poet that had been then brought to the Duce for signing. Disappointed as Ciro may be that he had not personally collected the documents from Mussolini's office, he had felt so close to the hub of world affairs. Excited by the discovery, he had been looking forward to further developments.

Weeks went by; summer came to an end, giving way to a golden autumn. Day after day, crossing

the Tiber river at dawn and dusk, Ciro gazed at the marble statues of angels, majestic against the equally glorious sky, wishing he had the words to articulate the emotions welling up in his chest. Day after day, there had been no news from the Prince of Montenevoso. Ciro began to feel a curious sense of vindication at this lack of response. He wished he could tell the little Japanese from Napoli that the Ambassador had not received a better treatment than him after all.

Having left his bicycle against the wall in the backyard, Ciro hurried to his desk. Once again, he skipped his coffee at the bar; despite pedaling fast, his daydreaming always made him run late. Better this way, he bitterly reflected; he would save the money and might be able to buy a girl a glass of wine next Saturday, maybe take her dancing and then... smiling to himself, Ciro sat at his desk and started sorting the new correspondence to be archived; a few letters for the Middle East desk, and, as usual, a sizable number for the Far East desk.

At first Ciro thought he had misread. And yet there it was, black on white: a detailed program of D'Annunzio tour of Japan, to be organized in October next year.

Day one: Visit to the Meiji and Yasukuni shrines and visit of Tokio

Day two: Lunch offered by the Asachi and Hochi Shimbun; in the evening, conference in the Hochi's Reception Hall

Day three: Conferences at Tokio Imperial University and at Waseda University; dinner at Koyokwan

Day four: Journey to Nikko, sightseeing

Day five: Journey to Sendai and Matsushima, sightseeing

Day six: Return to Tokio

Day seven: Journey to Kamakura and Hakone, sightseeing

Day eight: Visit to Ise Shrine

Each of the exotic names in the schedule made Ciro's head spin with vibrant imaginations. He whispered the words to himself, savouring their sounds: iasucuni... coiocuan... acone... And the list went on! How many days was this visit supposed to last? It sounded positively exhausting.

Day nine: Journey to Gifu; fishing in the Nagara-gawa river

Day ten: Journey to Kioto

Day eleven: Conference at Kioto Imperial University

Day twelve: Journey to Nara

Day thirteen: Journey to Kobe and Osaka; conference

Day fourteen: Navigation in the inner sea of Seto-Naikai and visit to Miyajima

Day fifteen: Journey to Kyushu and visit of historical sites

Day sixteen: Departure from Nagasaki

The schedule was accompanied by a letter explaining that the program may be subject to

changes, as it was anticipated that numerous institutional representatives might wish to personally pay homage to a world-famous personality such as the Poet on his first visit to Japan. All expenses would, as a matter of course, be borne by the organising newspapers, and in addition, a fee of five thousand yen, equivalent to fifty thousand lira, would be paid to the Poet.

Ciro could not believe his eyes: when was this decided? Had the Poet replied directly to the Embassy in Japan, bypassing the Ministry? You never knew with artists, that's true; and yet it seemed unlikely this could happen without the Ministry being informed at all. Were the Japanese newspapers trying to force their way by acting as if an agreement had been reached? Maybe they expected that, if they pushed hard enough, and later blamed cultural difference for the misunderstanding, the Poet would feel obligated to travel to Japan, if only to save face? And what was the Ambassador's role in all this? Had he been encouraging the newspapers in their underhanded plan so that he could take credit for the achievement? Ciro felt a pang of disappointment at the thought that, after all, ambassador De Martino would succeed where professor Aruchici had failed.

But the surprises kept coming on that crisp clear late autumn day; another folder revealed a dispatch from De Martino, received around the same time, that addressed the earlier request of a D'Annunzio poem by professor Aruchici, or as the

Ambassador called him, Mr. Shimoï (oh but of course! Japanese last names came first! How silly of him to forget that; the secretary of the Far East desk had explained it months ago. Yet to Ciro's mind, somehow, the imagined Professor Aruchici had acquired such a vibrant presence that he could not give him up to the reality of Signor Shimoï). De Martino was writing to inform the Minister that a certain Shimoï had apparently tried to coopt Italy's National Poet to write a message addressed to the young men and women of the land of the rising sun on behalf of a society called Karupisu, and he wanted to warn his Excellency that Karupisu was nothing more than a commercial firm selling sugary beverages, and had no moral, patriotic, or educational aims whatsoever. Strangely enough, reading De Martino's aggravated message lifted Ciro's spirits. He may appear dismissive of Professor Aruchici, Ciro thought, but clearly De Martino saw him as a rival. He sounded even a little afraid of him. Yes, Professor Aruchici! The big ambassador fears you enough to feel the need to warn the Duce about you. Your name is written there, black on white, and more than once too! Even though he had never met, nor would he probably ever meet, either the ambassador or the Japanese teacher, Ciro felt a strong antipathy for the former, and a peculiar affection for the latter.

As he worked through the rest of the correspondence, dividing it and collating it into large brown folders, Ciro kept daydreaming about the tour of Japan offered to the Poet. The names of those exotic places whirled in his mind well into

the evening. What did the inner sea of Seto-Naikai look like? Was it placid like the Mediterranean or wild as the ocean portrayed in the woodblock prints that he had seen in a museum? What kind of delicacies were served at Koyokwan? Lost in fantasies of the Orient, for the first time on his ride back home, *Ciro* forgot to admire the marble statues on the Bridge of Angels; but he was late for dinner nonetheless.

Christmas was in the air; the shops were decorated with bright red and green ribbons, and the scent of burnt sugar from the roasted nuts street vendors made *Ciro* impatient for the holidays. He had not been back home in months; the train ticket to Napoli was expensive, and his weekends more often than not were taken by catching up on accumulated work. At the Registry Office he was more distracted than usual; his supervisor had to reprimand him more than once. As he left the secretary's office after yet another scolding, *Ciro* heard a shrill laughter coming from down the corridor. He would recognize that voice among a thousand: *Olimpia*, possibly the prettiest typist in the Ministry, and certainly the loudest. "Gabriele D'Annunzio? Really?" *Olimpia's* peals of laughter resounded again. Suddenly burning with curiosity, *Ciro* pretended to be busy tidying up a file cabinet just across from the door behind which he heard *Olimpia* speaking. His *mamma* had taught him that eavesdropping was bad manners; but his *mamma* was not here now.

"Your handwriting is so gnarly, Baron Russo! I tried

to decipher it all morning! What is this here, an l or a b? It doesn't even look like Latin alphabet!"

"Which part? Here, give me the draft. Olimpia, you should button up that jumper. You will catch cold!" More roaring laughter ensued. Wow, Olimpia sure was noisy. Ciro hoped that her howling would not attract anyone else to the corridor; eager as he was to hear more, he would have been terribly embarrassed if he had to explain why he was lingering in front of a closed door.

"Ok, let me just read it out to you; it's not that difficult, really."

Ciro perked his ears.

"My illustrious friend, I had recently written to you to extend an invitation that one of the main newspapers of Japan, the Hochi, had addressed to you via the Royal Ambassador in Tokio, asking you to visit that country as a guest of said newspaper. Now the ambassador has forwarded me another letter addressed to the Royal Naval Attaché in Tokio by the Hochi newspaper, joined this time by another important broadsheet, the Asashi. This letter contains a detailed programme they suggest for your visit to Japan. I include it here, together with a copy of the letter of the Royal Naval Attaché, so that you can see the details of the invitation."

So the Poet had not agreed to the visit, after all! Ciro felt his intuition was right: sending the detailed program must have been a ruse to put

pressure on the invitee. And here he was thinking that the Japanese were all shy and submissive...

“As I already wrote to you in my previous message, I believe that a visit to that great country by the Soldier Poet, greatest living literary glory of Italy, would significantly increase our prestige in the Far East. On the other hand, not responding at all to the invitation, even if you do not consider the possibility of accepting it, may elicit the resentment of these two important newspapers, because of the suspicion that Orientals have that Europeans do not treat them with due regard...”

“You know what, Olimpia, wait a minute; I think I will make some changes to this part; the way I phrased it, it sounds as though we agree that they are owed our regard! Let’s see...”

The sound of a chair being dragged on marble tiles; the secretary was walking around his desk, further away from the door. Ciro leaned closer, afraid he would not hear the rest.

“Ok, that’s better: because of the tendency of the Orientals to believe that they are never considered enough by the Europeans, and because of their suspicion that they are treated as an inferior race, which is to be carefully avoided. Therefore, may I please ask you to kindly let me know what your decision is, so that I can convey it to the two newspapers via our Embassy in Tokio. Your faithfully, etc.”

“Here it is, Olimpia, you can go type it up now.”

A shuffling of feet alerted Ciro that it was time to swiftly retreat to his office, before the girl came out the door and saw him dubiously reorganizing a file cabinet that was not even in his section. As he walked briskly yet nonchalantly down the hallway, his heart was drumming in his ears, and he could not tell whether it was because of the narrowly escaped risk of getting caught eavesdropping, or because of the content of what he overheard. At the same time, he was smiling from ear to ear, and was not sure why that was either.

But the best was yet to come. One week later, the day before he was due to depart for Napoli to spend Christmas Eve with his mamma, Ciro found a large bundle of papers to archive in the Far East section. Pinned on top of the brown folder was a handwritten note on a small piece of unruled paper. The note said:

“The Office deemed it unnecessary to communicate to Gabriele D’Annunzio the content of the present report, having been informed that the Poet burns, without reading it, all the correspondence that he receives, unless it is sent through a special envoy and is handwritten by an important figure. He has left unanswered a previous typescript letter, with handwritten greetings and signature of His Excellency the President of the Council of Ministers, that conveyed an invitation to visit Japan from the Japanese newspaper ‘Hochi.’”

Ciro felt as though Christmas had come early. He carried the heavy bundle of papers along the gloomy corridor that led to the storage section chuckling all the way. He only wished he could show the little note to Professor Aruchici.

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