



GIULIANO GOLFIERI

ALTER EGO

MY JOURNEYS BEYOND
HUMAN BOUNDARIES

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Tempus Fugit

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WHO AM I?

I do not remember my childhood.

The first time I recall opening my eyes was when I was about fifteen. There was an intense smell of moss. I could see the sky through the branches of the forest in which I was lying and I instinctively lifted an arm towards my face. I looked at my hand, stared at it for some time, moving it as if to test those new joints. I felt a burning in my left wrist from a scar that was not completely healed. I knew what I was looking at. I knew I was in France, not far from Paris. I also knew that it was 1740. But I did not know who I was or why I was there.

I was lying on a smooth rock that stood about a metre and a half out of the ground, like a pedestal created by nature to support my fragile body. A few minutes later I had gained enough strength to stand, and realised that I was completely naked. I was not afraid. I felt well. The first strong sensation I had was that of great thirst.

I looked straight ahead of me and started to run, as if I desperately wanted to reach someone or something. I arrived at Roissy-en-Brie, a small village on the road leading from the woods in the direction of Paris. I arrived in the village exhausted, naked and thirsty. It was a late spring morning. I stopped in front of the church of Saint Germain, under the puzzled gaze of the villagers.

A priest, who at that moment was consoling a distressed elderly lady, ran towards me and covered me with the cloak from around his shoulders.

“Who are you, boy?” asked the man, who must have been about thirty.

I spoke my first words between one laboured breath and the next, with a dry throat but in perfect French: “I have no idea, Sir. I woke up in the woods. Something in my heart urged me to run here.”

“We have to find you some clothes. Follow me,” the priest muttered.

I followed him into the little church, to a back room.

“Take these. They’re the clothes of a young man who sadly died of an infection a few days ago. The lady I was talking with outside was his mother. Do not worry – they’ve been boiled.”

“Thank you...water, please!”

The priest filled a large goblet with fresh water, which I swallowed in two enormous gulps.

The man had a rosy face, plump and reassuring, and his smiling expression made me feel immediately welcome in that little village. I was lucky to have happened upon it.

“We have to find your parents. Are you sure you cannot remember your name, or where are you from?”

“No Sir. I do not remember even having existed before today.”

“But someone must have taught you to walk, to talk...?”

I shrugged, asking myself the same thing.

He led me to a mirror and asked if I was able to recognise myself. For the first time, I looked at my soft features, which could have belonged to any young man of that period. I ran a finger over the arch of my eyebrows, looking closely at the reflection of my green

eyes. The thin lips, the ruffled blond hair, they were all details that failed to stimulate any memory within me.

“No, I cannot recognise myself,” I admitted disconsolately, after a careful analysis of that unfamiliar face.

“It is not possible that in 1745 a boy could get lost in a wood - your family could not just have abandoned you to your fate, naked into the bargain! We are not in the Middle Ages!”

“Did you say 1745? One of the few things I *can* manage to recall is that it’s 1740!” I exclaimed with conviction.

“No my boy, I think you’ve lost all memory of the past five years and that some kind of trauma has made you forget what happened even before that. Most of the time, it’s a temporary condition. I’m sure you’ll soon be able to remember everything,” he reassured me, checking under my thick hair for any signs of a scar or wound that could have been the cause of my condition. I showed him my wrist with the cut that was not completely healed and asked if he could medicate it. He disinfected it and tied it with a bandage.

Father Rafael, as my kind saviour was called, invited me to stay with him until I could remember who I was.

A few months passed, during which I was allowed to sleep on the floor of the church, on two blankets that I used as a mattress and surrounded by the wooden statues of angels. Those angels did not permit me to sleep soundly during the first few nights there; I always imagined that at any moment one of them might move or turn his head to stare at me.

I made a great deal of effort to help Father Rafael and to repay him for his hospitality. Since his servant had

just passed away and he had not yet found a replacement, I kept the chapel tidy, collected the offerings of the faithful during the services and ran all the small errands that the parish priest required. Despite being in such close contact with religion, I felt no call to God. In my heart I was unable to understand why so many people devoted themselves to something intangible.

I was a smart boy with a kind face and I smiled at anyone who would look at me. It did not take long for the inhabitants of the small village of Roissy-en-Brie, with its just over two hundred people, to become fond of me. I had found a hot meal a day and someone to help me survive in what was a dark period of history: at that time Louis XV was in power and there were still more than forty years to go before the French Revolution. Poverty was rampant, especially in the small villages, but the people I met in those years showed me more kindness than many others I met in more prosperous times. Time passed, and despite the efforts of those who had taken it upon themselves to try and help me remember at least my name, my memory before the day of my arrival remained totally obscure and inaccessible.

During the quieter afternoons of that summer, I often spent time with a young woman named Marie, who had witnessed my ‘exciting’ arrival in Roissy-en-Brie.

“From now on I’ll call you Ariel,” she said one afternoon, as we were walking along the edge of the Armainvilliers woods – the woods from which I had originally come. “You appeared out of nowhere, as if you had fallen from the sky. Perhaps you cannot remember your past because you are an angel, and Ariel is an angel’s name.” From that moment on, that name became my

own and everyone started to call me Ariel instead of 'boy' or 'son'.

With the exception of Father Rafael, she was the first person to notice my scar; about three inches long on the inside of my left wrist, running parallel to the veins.

"You have no memory of that either?" she asked inquisitively.

"No, I remember it was quite a fresh wound when I woke up in the woods, but it has never caused me much trouble."

"You know who has scars like that, don't you?"

"I do not know," I answered with genuine curiosity, looking at my wrist.

"An aunt of mine decided to take her life a few years ago. She cut herself with a knife exactly at that point. We found her on the floor of her house a few days after her death, with hardly a drop of blood left in her."

She clearly thought maybe I had lost my memory following a failed suicide attempt.

"It seems very strange to me that a boy of your age, and with such a sweet nature, could do such a thing...maybe you just had an accident and that scar was caused quite by chance," the girl went on.

I tried to imagine myself intent on cutting open my veins, but despite all my efforts the black hole of my memory did not allow any glimpses of the past.

I liked Marie very much and she was the first woman to stimulate my boyish fantasies now that I was in full puberty. She was a few years older than me but never revealed her age. Her shiny, curly, red hair lent her a rare radiance. As she spoke to me, I watched her fleshy pink lips, and instead of hearing the words she actually spoke, I would see her utter an infinite series of the

words “kiss me”. She had a most singular gift - the ability to find four-leaf clovers. I could never understand where this sometimes genuinely disconcerting skill came from. Walking through the meadows together, sometimes she would stop as often as every three or four steps because her eye had fallen on a four-leaf clover. She rarely picked them, saying that ripping a gift of nature from the earth would bring bad luck. She tried to teach me her mysterious observation technique, but I was never able to find a single one. I convinced myself that she was simply a very lucky person.

Marie was a farmer’s daughter, and while she was still a girl she had been promised in marriage to a man much older than her - the village butcher. This inhibited my every attempt at a physical approach, despite our affinity with one another and the long conversations in the intimacy of the woods.

About three years passed, each one the same as the next. Despite the warmth with which the community had welcomed me and my strong feelings for Marie, I felt deep within my soul a great desire to reach Paris.

One day in May, immediately following the end of a service, I turned to Father Rafael and announced my decision in a determined tone: “I am very happy here and I feel at home, but for some time now I have been wanting to move to the city. I will go to Paris and try to build a new life for myself.”

“Have you lost your mind, Ariel? In Paris you will be dead within a few days! Here you can build yourself a dignified life in the grace of God. You are an intelligent and healthy young man. Do not waste your life in that place of perdition!”

“I will be eternally grateful for everything you have done for me,” I replied, “but I hope that in Paris I will be able to find my origins, to find out who I am. If my heart pushes me in that direction, maybe it means that is where I come from”.

Father Rafael stroked my face and looked into my eyes for several long seconds. He then gave me his blessing, as well as a small sum of money taken from the offerings of the faithful, which would allow me to survive for a few days. He advised me to visit one of his cousins who lived near the Notre-Dame Cathedral, and wrote a letter of recommendation for me to give him on my arrival.

“If you’re lucky, he will find you work. He’s a very wealthy lawyer, and I’m sure he will not deny you help if you prove yourself capable.”

The next day I prepared a knapsack with the few things I had acquired over those years. I departed immediately after the first church service of the morning, accompanied by the advice and farewell wishes of the village inhabitants. Many wanted to help me with what little they had; some offered a piece of cheese, some gave wine or eggs. I could not accept all the offerings, for I did not have enough room in my pack.

In the distance I saw Marie, radiant as ever, waiting for me at the end of the road that led out of the village to the west. When I reached her she gave me a black leather cuff, of the kind that archers wear.

“It will cover that ugly scar,” she told me, helping me to put it on my left wrist.

“Thank you! But I... I cannot accept it.”

“Do not worry. I took it from my husband. He has a chest full of them and he’s not been hunting with his bow for years. He will never notice.”

She took both my hands in hers, held me tight to her chest and gave me a long kiss on the mouth. I had desired her lips for so long, and as they pressed against mine for the first time, I felt a warm shiver run down my back. At that moment I regretted my choice to leave and almost changed my mind. But I knew the time had come.

“One day I will escape from this hole, I will come to Paris and we will live together. You need to grow a little in the meanwhile, my angel,” she said, staring straight at me with her sweetest smile. She let go of my hands and I continued on my path, my eyes welling with tears.

On the road to Paris, the scar on my wrist, which during those years in Roissy-en-Brie had completely healed and was now little more than a mark on the skin, began to redden and itch. I thought the cuff might be irritating it, but since that was all I had left of Marie, besides the taste of her lips, I decided to keep it on despite the discomfort.

Since the only directions I had received from my fellow villagers were “proceed westward”, I thought it a good idea to follow the river Marne to ensure I didn’t get lost. When I reached the point at which the tributary meets the Seine, I knew I had almost reached the city. Paris turned out to be much closer than I had expected; it took less than six hours’ walk to reach the city boundary, where the countryside started to give way to small, refined, bourgeois buildings. During my hasty pilgrimage through the modern suburbs, I noticed that

the clothes of the people I encountered became increasingly ostentatious. The farmers' wagons turned into elegant carriages of polished wood pulled by well-groomed horses, and the smells in the air became more and more pungent; they were potent, invasive and nauseating, and yet they evoked in me a strange feeling of belonging to that place. I had felt sure that seeing such a large and busy city for the first time would have made me feel quite overwhelmed, but instead I felt immediately at ease, as if I had spent a lot of time there in the past. On reaching the cathedral area, the beating heart of the city, I found myself being pushed along in a river of people. I crossed the market square, deafened by the noise and the shouts of the vendors. A cart loaded with fish suddenly swerved and almost struck me. Men, women and children of all ages swarmed in every direction, creating before my eyes a turmoil of colour and life that was far removed from the small village I had just left.

I felt disorientated and my stomach churned...but how I loved that noise, that chaos!

I immediately began looking for Father Rafael's cousin, following the directions the priest had given me.

Despite having no memory of any particular place, I seemed to be able to orientate myself rather well and had no difficulty in finding the lawyer, Luc De Ville, as the priest's cousin was called. His office was located in an alley adjacent to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. I went in and introduced myself, handing my letter to a rather portly man in his forties who sat behind a large desk. He read it carefully and, looking me straight in

the eye, said, “Well, boy, I read that you have been very helpful to my cousin Rafael. I am sure you can do something for me too. But this is Paris, not a small provincial town. Do you think you can deliver letters and parcels around the city?”

“Sir...”

“Call me Luc,” he interrupted me.

“Mr. Luc, I thank you for this offer. I have a good sense of direction and I assure you that I will do my best to make myself useful. In return I ask only for a hot meal and a place to sleep.”

“I’ll find you some food and a bed, do not worry. And you will need new clothes; I cannot send you to my clients dressed as a peasant. I’ll take care of that too.”

“Thank you kindly, Sir. I will not disappoint you!”

Fortune continued to smile on me and within a few days, the lawyer confirmed that I could be considered his official messenger. He found me some clothes and a small private room, and began to pay me a weekly salary with which I could buy food. I reluctantly had to remove Marie’s cuff, since it was not suitable attire for a town messenger. Although my scar was now exposed to the air, it continued to be uncomfortable and sometimes even painful.

My job was to go around Paris delivering deeds and documents; most of the time to other lawyers with whom Luc was working on cases, or to clients of the firm. In the following weeks, the life I lived was far removed from my previous one in Roissy-en-Brie, and it was a life that was much better suited to me. I missed the beautiful Marie, and I do not deny that almost every night, before falling asleep, I thought of her. I realised

that if I could acquire a horse, I could go and see her from time to time. After that first kiss, my body was eager to experience more of a woman, and the distance that separated us was, after all, surmountable. The fact that she had a husband who was very adept at handling knives was perhaps a little less so.

One afternoon Luc sent me quite some distance from the cathedral, to the office of a young lawyer named Claude Pierre Patu. He was about my age, and from the way he spoke to people, it became immediately apparent that his level of culture was well above the average. The first time I heard his voice, he was arguing with an arrogant client in his study whilst I waited downstairs to be received. They were shouting, arguing about a bad deal that had cost the man a large sum of money. A few well-chosen words from the lawyer were enough to convince him of his reasoning and shortly thereafter the irritated gentleman came down the stairs and went out, mumbling.

When the lawyer finally greeted me in his study, I saw in the young man's eyes the sadness of a person who was not happy with his life.

"Good morning. The lawyer Luc De Ville has sent me to give you this envelope." The melancholy look on his face prompted me to ask, "Are you quite alright, Sir?"

"No, not at all, young man," he said, taking the envelope from my hands and opening it with a paper knife. "I spend entire days arguing over idiotic matters with uneducated bumpkins like that! The most absurd thing is that I act in their best interests, but they often seem convinced of the contrary!"

"But is that not the nature of your work?" I said, bluntly.

“Unfortunately, yes. Indeed I have had quite enough of this way of life. My deepest desire is to write plays. I became a lawyer to satisfy the wishes of my father and grandfather. As a matter of fact, I have already composed some works, but it is difficult to combine my art with the work required in the office.”

“I see. I’m very sorry. I am sure that your passion will allow you to overcome any obstacle, if that is what fate decides for you,” I tried to console him.

I said goodbye and took my leave. As I walked away, he leaned out of the window of his first floor study and asked me if I would be interested in reading some of what he had written. Naturally I replied that I would be honoured, and he invited me to his home the following evening.

As soon as I saw his house, I realised that Patu came from a very wealthy family. I considered him very lucky; this wealth had clearly afforded him a good education and a very high level of culture. He greeted me with almost fraternal affection, at which I was amazed given that we had only exchanged a few pleasantries in his studio the day before.

“Welcome, my friend! I realise only now that I do not even know your name,” he said, as I passed through the imposing wrought-iron gate that protected a small courtyard in front of the house.

“They call me Ariel, but I do not know my real name. It’s a long story...”

“If it’s not too indiscreet of me, I’d be curious to hear it! I love long stories, even more so if they are complicated and mysterious,” he replied, his eyes suddenly twinkling at this prospect, as he led me into the house.

We made ourselves comfortable in a large dining room adorned with marvellous paintings and tapestries that depicted landscapes and hunting scenes, whose beauty delighted my soul and immediately made me feel at peace with myself and at ease with my guest. Patu offered me a glass of fine wine, which he had laid ready for my arrival.

I had nothing to hide and he seemed like a person whom I could trust, so I told him everything with transparency and sincerity; from my awakening in the wood, to my arrival in Paris. When I had finished my story, Patu was both incredulous and intrigued. He said there was some excellent material with which to write a novel: a young man from the forest who does not remember his past but who seems to have a knowledge of Paris, as well as a perfect command of French.

Afterwards he told me some stories he had thought up and showed me manuscripts of some scenes that he had written for the theatre. The passion and energy with which he spoke of his work led me to believe that his future would lie in the arts - despite some initial difficulties and disappointments he had encountered in that very different world. He also told me about his love of women and his sexual dalliances, for which he often paid. I was very amused by the libertine and shameless way in which he talked about sex, a subject of which I still knew so little.

It was late in the evening by the time we parted. I was very flattered that such an interesting character had opened his doors, and an important part of his world, to a simple messenger like me.

After that first meeting, Patu and I began to visit each other fairly frequently. The fact that we were almost the same age and that my mysterious story had fascinated him so, gave rise within a short time to a sincere friendship between us. His home was on the Île Saint-Louis, one of two small islands that divide the river Seine on its route into central Paris. Luc's studio and my small quarters were on the Île de la Cité, the main island on which the Notre-Dame cathedral rests. To reach his house, as I often did at the end of the working day, I had to cross the ancient bridge of St. Louis, which at that time was called the 'Red Bridge' because of the paint used to varnish the wooden structure. The bridge connected the two small islands and had already been destroyed once before in 1710. Although it was a seemingly solid structure, poor maintenance had allowed parts of it to rot.

One evening, as I was on my way to Patu's house, I was involved in one of the most serious incidents ever to have occurred on that bridge. As I passed over it, a dozen carriages, loaded with waste material from a construction site on the smaller island, started to cross the Red Bridge, one after the other. Without warning, the wood under the wheels of the carriage next to me suddenly gave way, dragging it ruinously into the river, horses and all. I was thrown over the handrail by the backlash and found myself clinging to one of the wooden supports that had broken off. Everything happened so quickly that I did not have time to react in any way. I considered letting myself fall into the river, but the current was very strong, and, having no memory of my past, I did not even know whether I could swim.

“Help! Help!” I began to shout desperately, hoping that someone from the nearby convoy would see me. A worker jumped down from one of the carriages and rushed towards me. I saw him climb over the handrail and down the other side, clinging on where he could, badly scratching his arms and wrists. When he reached a position that would allow him to haul me to safety, he held out his right arm.

“Grab on to me, boy!” he shouted.

I managed with difficulty to grasp his big, sweating hand, and I immediately let go of the piece of wood to which I was holding on. As I clutched his wrist with my left hand, my scar, now completely reopened, pressed against his bloody cuts.

It was at that precise moment, with that accidental exchange of blood, that something truly extraordinary happened. I felt a sudden tremor start from my arm and run throughout my whole body. Then I saw a light so blinding that I was forced to close my eyes. When I finally opened them, I could hardly believe what I was seeing: the river from above, a hand stretched down below me... and no one clinging to it!

Incredulous, I instinctively touched my face, my arms, my legs...but even my sense of touch seemed not to be my own. Absurd! Unbelievable! I realised with complete horror that I was somehow, inexplicably, in the body of my unknown rescuer, while my own had abruptly disappeared and my empty clothes were falling away into the water below. I was utterly terrified. I did not understand what was happening to me. I thought I had fallen, and that I was in a strange kind of hallucination; that my dying brain was playing cruel tricks on me, as I passed from life into death. I tried with my

whole being to find a shred of rationality in that ludicrous situation. I continued to feel sensations that were completely alien to me - as if my soul were trying unsuccessfully to interact with the nervous system of a hostile host. I experienced several long minutes of pure delirium, before I was able to convince myself that I had indeed somehow taken possession of that 'new' body.

I felt very heavy but also much stronger than before. I was almost insensitive to the smells and I felt very tired, probably due to the full day of physical work I had behind me. My wrists were still sore because of the scratches. The thing that struck me most was my visual perception of the surrounding environment, which was entirely different from that to which I was accustomed: the colours were less vivid, the perspective and the depth with which I saw from those eyes were very different from mine.

Once I had reached full physical and sensory awareness, the flow of memories hit me. It would take me many trans-body experiences before I learnt how to deal with that amount of information. It would come like an unexpected giant wave. The feeling lasted only a short while, but its intensity was quite unbearable: I was suddenly overwhelmed by a very rapid sequence of images, sounds, moments of joy, moments of pain, moments of sadness...until finally the connection with my host was complete.

I remembered precisely who I was (or rather, who that man was). I remembered his wife's face, the pain of his mother's recent death, but also useless details like what he had eaten for lunch a few hours earlier. I felt a pain in my chest that was not quite physical but rather a sort

of remorse to which I could not attribute any particular memory.

Now *I* was *him*. In every respect.

My instinct urged me to run to Patu's house. In the surreal confusion of that moment, he was the only person I could turn to for help in trying to understand what had happened to me. I had no idea how he might react.

I climbed clumsily back over the parapet of the bridge in that heavy, unfamiliar body, and started running at breakneck speed towards the small island. On seeing me re-emerge from under the bridge and run off like a madman, another worker - a colleague of the man with whom I had mysteriously fused - shouted: "Where are you running Patrick? What happened to the boy? Did he fall? Is he dead? Patrick, answer me!"

But I did not answer.

In a few minutes I found myself in front of Patu's house. The gate, which seemed smaller now that I had grown taller, was closed.

"Patu! Patu! Help! Please help me!" I shouted in the direction of the house.

He leaned out of one of the windows, eyeing me with suspicion, and said, "Who the hell are you? How do you know my name?"

My nerves suddenly gave in, I began sobbing loudly and fell to my knees before the gate, with my head bowed. At that point Patu, perhaps moved by the sincere despair of the man, came out of his house towards me.

"How can I help you?" he asked, in a kinder tone.

“Patu, I do not know how to explain it...I have no idea what happened...I...I’m Ariel!” I answered between sobs.

Patu looked at me, wide-eyed. He opened the gate and came slowly towards me.

“If this is some sort of a joke, I find it in very bad taste! Stand up.”

I got up and looked him straight in the eye. I think at that moment he must have recognised something in the devastated and frightened look in my eyes, because his facial expression changed from anger to disbelief. I tried to convince him by telling him in detail how our friendship had been born, but that was clearly not enough. Patu bombarded me with questions about our relationship and his writings, to which I was able to respond without the slightest delay. At each of my correct replies, his gaze became more and more incredulous, and despite the apparent absurdity of the situation, at that point he seemed to begin to believe that there might be some truth in the ramblings of this madman.

“What absurdity is this!” he cried, pushing me towards the entrance in a daze: “If Ariel is indeed somewhere in that body, I will find a way to prove it!”

As we entered the house, he stayed a few steps behind me, checking to see what direction I would take once inside, clearly looking for further verification of my story. Without thinking, I went straight to the living room where we always spent our evenings together and collapsed into the small burgundy chair in which I usually sat. Patu seemed quite struck by the fact that I had gone without the slightest hesitation to that particular chair.

I tried to remain lucid and to calmly explain the sequence of events: the incident on the bridge, the large man who tried to help me, the blinding light, and the inexplicable disappearance of my own body as I suddenly found myself in the position of my rescuer. I was disorientated by the strange voice that came out of my mouth. I was having great difficulty completing whole sentences without stopping from time to time in dazed bewilderment.

He paced around his spacious living room like a hungry dog, eyeing me as if I were a juicy steak.

After about an hour of questioning, he seemed somehow to have accepted that my preposterous revelation was true.

“Use my bathroom. Wash yourself and try to calm down. I will give you clean clothes, since yours smell as though you’ve fallen into a slurry pit,” he ordered me, addressing me as he would a stranger.

His detached reaction was perfectly understandable, and of course I accepted it; indeed I was very grateful to him for having welcomed me into his house in spite of the fact that, in appearance at least, I was a perfect stranger. After all, I too was seeing Patu in a different light; seen through the eyes of this strange man, my perception of everything was changed, and in Patu’s face I now observed different characteristics.

Thinking back on it, it would take me decades and countless inter-body experiences before I was able to completely control my sensory perception. Each time I found myself in a new body, the world around me would change radically: colours, proportions, smells, noises, and even tactile sensations, varied considerably from host to host.

I heated some water and lay down in the tub, trying to calm my mind and my body (which was thick and heavy in *all* aspects, I noted with interest!). I began to think that this whole business must have something to do with my mysterious awakening in the woods and with my complete lack of memory. Maybe this was not the first time this had happened to me. Before inhabiting the body of the boy, in which I had lived for the past few years, maybe I had been something or someone else.

It was extremely difficult to think clearly, since the man's memories often got the better of my concentration, even though they seemed more like images from a dream. His experiences were altering my perception of so many things that I had not yet experienced myself: even if I had never actually done so, I now knew what it was like to make love to a woman for example, to see a child born, to see my own mother die. The feeling was similar to that of waking after a vivid dream and having a tangible, yet surreal, recollection of the events.

After about an hour in the tub, I fell asleep, exhausted by all the thoughts. The moment that my host's body and brain slipped into unconsciousness, losing all control, the second bizarre event of that evening occurred: I awoke again in the woods.

Again I was naked and thirsty. This time, however, I was much more shocked and frightened than the first time, because I remembered everything that had happened.

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