

The Silence of the Mountain Peaks

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The engine of the *Lamborghini* roared uphill on the dirt track, its trailer jumping up and down at every hump in the road. In the darkness before the sunrise, shadowy fronds of rhododendron and *marosuli*¹ rustled on the tractor's wheels and on the sides of its trailer like big woody hands. Up above on the mountain side, the trees blended with the sharp edges of the Alps, swelling together against the dawn sky. My grandfather was leaning on the wheel knob like someone who had been traveling on the same track since his mother had him in a pack basket, every summer, in the morning and in the evening. *Al va pastuur*², they said about men going up the mountains to herd cows, men who woke up before sunrise to milk the animals and who, after long summers of hard work, pinned an edelweiss brooch on their green felt hat. My grandfather was a shepherd to the bone, he was born among the cows. On the tractor's trailer there was a white plastic tank with an aluminium framework where water rolled around at every bump. I wedged

in between the tank and the side of the trailer, the branches on the side of the road thumping against my body. In my hands, I held a green felt hat that I kept rubbing in an attempt to make it lose the stiffness typical of new things. Nowadays, you can't be born as a *pastuur*, but you can die as one.

The *Cima Verde*³ came into sight as the track became wider. The mountain was hunchbacked, just like the silhouette of my hat: the gentle breeze of morning caressed its slopes. An abandoned mountain cottage laid at its feet: it consisted of a stable with a tin roof and narrow windows with iron gratings, a *casera*⁴ and a bivouac, a long empty fountain and *tegiöl*⁵ and a small dry-stone wall cellar leaned against the side of the mountain. That had always been enough for the *pastuur* living of livestock farming at such high altitudes. With his dark pastures and his blood-coloured mountains, painted gold by the early light of the dawn, the *Buschèt*⁶ was still hiding behind the night's curtains. At six o'clock in the morn-

1. Translator's note: the grandfather and the boy from the story speak a dialect from northern Italy. *Marosuli* is a dialectal word which translates as dwarf alder.

2. Translator's note: *Al va pastuur* literally translates as "he's going to work as a shepherd", referred to men going up the mountains in summer to make cow herds graze pastures at high altitudes.

3. Translator's note: *Cima Verde* is the name of one of three peaks of the Bondone Mountain, in Trentino. Its name literally translates as "Green Peak".

4. Translator's note: a "*casera*" is a small building that farmers used to make cheese.

5. Translator's note: hay.

6. Translator's note: a *Buschèt* is a small grove.

ing, at an altitude of two thousand metres, there was only silence. Groundhogs were still asleep underground and the mountains were silent. Every once in a while, the chiming of a cowbell could be heard like a soft sound fleeting through the air for a brief instant before fading among the empty mountain ridges.

The tractor's engine crackled a couples of times before shutting down. *Dom, che 'n va a töli?*⁷ I heard my grandfather say. *Specia!*⁸ I said, sitting by the fountain to tie up my mountain boots.

It was the last day we would spend at the *Buschèt*. Summer wasn't over yet, but at that altitude, it was already autumn for the shepherds. The cows were too thirsty: the pasture was dried up and there had been a lack of water over the last season. The tufts of *isega*⁹ that had been spared by the rough tongue of cattle had become yellow and dry just like the twigs of a basket. They had turned the *Cima Verde* into a bright yellow cloak speckled with brown rhododendrons and ashy black stones. For many centuries, the lives of shepherds had been intertwined with those prickly grassy waves. When the snow began to melt, the mountains were drenched in streams and little cascades. Throughout the summer, the mountain ridges foamed with cows that painted the pastures green and yellow with their grazing. In autumn, the herds migrated down in the valleys, leaving the mountain ridges like wave crests dotted by white edelweiss petals. One time, snow had even fallen in August, when the cows were still grazing the pastures, and the mountain ridges had become ice white. Nowadays, it didn't happen. The mountains had stopped

turning white, even in winter: the water stays underground, hidden. Year after year, water springs kept surfacing ever lower, until they dried up completely. The only way to keep the mountain cottage alive was through the tractor and its water tank. The engine's smoke did what the clouds could no longer do. It didn't make any sense: in fact, our cows were the last ones to graze the pastures on those mountains.

*Dom!*¹⁰ My grandfather and I headed towards the noise of cowbells, dragging our boots on the mountain track. The cows were peacefully scattered on a small plateau. Some of them were still sleeping, their faces huddled up on their side as if trying to smell their own tail. When they got up, they left behind big poodles of ruffled grass. As the daylight grew, the sun rose from behind the sparking peaks and the beasts' shadows became smaller and turned gold. Using my hand to shield my eyes, I stared at their shiny backs, counting them by their names. Two of them, Bianca and Stella, were missing. I tried to listen closely, but the herd was beginning to head towards the mountain cottage and the noise of their cowbells echoed on every mountain side. It was impossible to hear the sound made by two lost cows.

I found them higher on the mountain, next to an abandoned small shepherd house made of rocks and roof stone tiles. *Mostri vé*, I bursted, *ié egnüdi sü chiló a cercà l'erba fina*¹¹. Once you got up there, you could find thousands of white edelweiss with little pointy leaves. When we happened to pass through there, my grandfather would bend over to pick one, saying *vedat, quest l'e 'l fiuur dal pastuur*¹², then he would put it on his hat and tell me, *an di tala metarée*

7. Translator's note: *Come on, let's go get them.*

8. Translator's note: *Wait for me!*

9. Translator's note: "*isega*" is a dialectal word for *Festuca*, a grass common in high altitude pastures.

10. Translator's note: *Come!*

11. Translator's note: *Old rascals! They came up here in search of the finest grass.*

12. Translator's note: *You see? This is the shepherd's flower.*

*anca tí sul capél la stèla*¹³; and I used to dream about the day when I would put that rare laurel on my head too. *Dom!*¹⁴ I clapped by hands and the two cows took the path, their bloated udders wiggling between their legs. Edelweiss had stopped growing, just like shepherds.

Before reaching the stable, I stopped on a promontory to watch the rising sun. That was one of the few moments that a shepherd could devote to thinking. I lifted my eyes towards a horizon made of still waves. Just like the sunlight, my gaze was broken by the regular mountain ridges of the blue sea of the Alps. I saw the four small buildings of the house cottages besieged by the cows hustling around to fountain. My grandfather was filling it up with the water from the trailer tank. Since the mountains were no longer capped with a soft cloak of snow, the spring that had always fed these pastures had dried up. The tractor came and went everyday with its water tank, but it was useless. *An pöl miga ha isci tita l'istá*¹⁵ – my grandfather used to tell me. He was the only *pastuur* left, all the other shepherds had long given up. Without water, life on the mountain was fading away. The pastures were getting increasingly dry, and the cows suffered from thirst. Groundhogs and edelweiss were disappearing. Once the fountain of the *Buschèt* dried up, the season for shepherds would fade away, maybe gone forever.

What would become of the small mountain cottage, of the boots kicking the ground to the chiming of cowbells, of soft udders wiggling step after step, of the hands milking their teats, of the rhythm of the milk dripping in the bucket, of the rough tongues scraping *isega*, one tuft after the other, of the rumen going up

and down, of the milk throbbing in the udders? Would only silence be left?

In the stable, the cows were tied to the trough. My grandfather was bent over to milk them, a *sedèl*¹⁶ between his legs. His strong hands grasped the teats rhythmically, making the milk squirt on the bottom of the bucket. His forearms full of veins and his fists grasped the udder with alternate wrings, like two pumping arteries. Like white blood, the milk clotted on his fingers and on the bottom of the bucket, forming a white foam. Too soon, the udder was no longer bloated. With each squeeze, the teats became softer and let out less milk, filling only half of the bucket. *I cala 'l lacc*¹⁷, said my grandfather, putting four fingers on the side of the *sedèl* to show me where the milk had reached the day before.

For breakfast, I had a *mèzz*¹⁸, with warm milk wetting my nose and chin. I stared at the *Cima Verde*: it looked like a round udder shining under the sunlight. It was drying up too. My grandfather bent over the fountain as if he wanted to step inside it, and took a sip from a wine bottle that he had tied up to a wire and left floating in the water to cool it down. We untied the chains around the warm neck of the cows, and they hustled around the fountain, knocking their cowbells on its corners. Some of them wishfully smelled the old tap, remembering better times long gone. We filled it up with the rest of the tank water and after a few moments all that was left on the bottom of the fountain were the wet traces of their saliva.

The sun was shining high, and the heath of July still warmed us up. The cows grazed peacefully, the only things that bother them were blowflies and horseflies and, every once

13. Translator's note: *One day, you're going to put it on your hat too.*

14. Translator's note: *Come!*

15. Translator's note: *We can't keep doing this all summer long.*

16. Translator's note: *bucket.*

17. Translator's note: *They used to make much more.*

18. Translator's note: *ladle used for milk with a volume of half a litre.*

in a while, the shrill whistle of a groundhog. The heat was deceiving: summer had nearly ended, and soon it would all be over. My grandfather scratched his hat and told me *dom, che 'n va a serà l'acqua*¹⁹. We followed the fountain pipe towards the spring to close it. If the water did come back in spring, when the snow melted, closing the tap would prevent the pipe from breaking because of April nights' ice. That's what a *pastuur* had always done.

On the slopes of the *Cima Verde*, where the ground went down and created a little dip, a cubic concrete basin had been built to collect the water dropping from a small natural spring, reachable through a small iron door. There was a strong smell of moss and wet ground inside, but not a trace of water. The concrete bottom was perfectly dry and the grate filtering the water hole was clean. *L'è m'paiar d'agn che l'e isci*²⁰ – my grandfather's voice echoed on the stone walls. He moved the grate aside and took a rag and a cork from his pocket: he put the rag on the hole, then sealed it with the cork, using his fist to block it. The fountain had already seen its last thirsty mouths. *An sa veed, Buschèt*²¹.

The herd was hustling on the track. The stable was empty. My grandfather took off his hat and hung it on the nail on the door. He pulled the edelweiss from the cord and gave it to me, saying *Tegn, mi la düperi pü*²².

The *Lamborghini* roared on, sneezing a cloud of black smoke in the air. My grandfather released the clutch and the tractor gave a sudden jump onwards before being held back by the weight of its trailer. It started on the track puffing like an old locomotive, the empty tank bouncing up and down. *Dom! Dom*²³! The cowbells were chiming. With some slaps, my grandfather pushed the sea of the blotched, shiny backs onwards. The sun was shining high on the pastures, and green fronds of rhododendron and *marosuli* rustled on the sides of the cows. I walked behind them, thumped against by the branches that they pushed backwards. I held on to my hat to prevent it from flying away, but when I checked to see if the edelweiss was still there, I saw that it was gone. It had been pushed away by some branch. I turned around to look for it on the dusty road. Far behind, the stable and the other buildings were fading away in the silent shade of the *Cima Verde*. *An sa veed, Buschèt*.²⁴

19. Translator's note: *Come, let's go close the water tap.*

20. Translator's note: *It's been like this for a couple of years now.*

21. Translator's note: *I'll see you, Buschèt.*

22. Translator's note: *Here, I do not need it any longer.*

23. Translator's note: *Come! Come!*

24. Translator's note: *I'll see you, Buschèt.*