Despite It All, I Made It Through

Volume I : Tommaso

Narrative extract

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The psychological reflections in this extract are grounded in the author's lived experience and personal journey. They do not constitute a diagnosis or clinical advice.

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Chapter One

Un bambino mal vestito

Ligurian Riviera, late seventies

There are stories that begin before the child arrives in the world. Something has already been decided, something silent, something heavy, that will weigh on the first years like a hand pressed too hard on a shoulder too small.

Tommaso was born in a small town on the Ligurian coast, nestled between the cliffs and the sea, at the end of the seventies. It is written on the papers, the hospital, the date, the name. But the biological father is nowhere on those papers. He did not exist, officially. He still does not exist, decades later. An affair his mother, Graziella, had. A man whose face he does not even know, not a photograph, not a first name, nothing. Just that void where fathers normally exist.

Aldo, the man who gave him his name, was not his father either. He had simply agreed to sign, to cover, to act as if. Perhaps out of love for Graziella, perhaps out of pity, perhaps for reasons that will never be known. And then he had disappeared. The way one leaves after doing a favor, without looking back. Without leaving anything behind, not a letter, not a photograph, not even a story that could have been told later.

What is also known (and this may be the heaviest thing to carry of everything there is to carry in this story) is that before he was even born, the biological father had asked Graziella to have an abortion. Him, and apparently his family along with him. An entire family clan that had gathered around a decision: this child should not come into the world.

Graziella had said no. Or perhaps she had not said no, perhaps she had simply continued, that time had passed, that her belly had grown in spite of everything and that the decision had made itself, in that particular silence of things we do not confront.

In any case, he was there. In the autumn of that year. In a small town on the coast. In a hospital whose name he does not know.

And no one wanted him.

* * *

The first years are a black hole.

From zero to two and a half years old, hospitalizations. How many exactly? No one knows anymore. The records are hazy, the memories nonexistent because there is no one to carry them, no one who was truly there, no one who watched this child with enough attention to hold on to what was happening to him.

What is known is that a child that age does not spend so much time in the hospital without reason.

Those repeated hospitalizations, they say something. They say absence, neglect, or perhaps simply the poverty of a young woman alone who did not know how to care for an infant. They say that no one came to get him quickly enough, often enough. That between two visits, there was too much time. Too much silence. Too many white walls.

The walls of children's hospitals have a particular color, somewhere between beige and faded green, something that was meant to be reassuring and that reassures no one. The colors of compromise, belonging to no home, no child's bedroom. Colors that say: you are here because there is no other place for you.

There were metal cribs with white bars. Fluorescent lights that hummed at night, that soft, constant sound, almost imperceptible, that children who have slept in those rooms still recognize decades later. Caregivers who came by, stopped, moved on. Arms that held him for a few minutes and then put him back down.

He remembers nothing of that period. The brains of children are merciful sometimes, they erase what they cannot carry, they protect the body by erasing the memory of what was too difficult to get through. But something remains all the same. Not in the memory, in the body. In the reflexes. In the muscles. In that particular way of watching doors, of anticipating departures before people have even decided to leave. In that reflex of gripping what one holds (a toy, a hand, an arm) as if letting go meant permanent disappearance.

In that permanent tension, almost imperceptible, like an animal that never truly sleeps, that keeps one eye open even in sleep, that stays ready to flee or to fight or to cry even when there is nothing to fear. It is called attachment trauma. It was not called that at the time. No one really knew what it meant, and even if they had, they would not have had the words to say it about this little boy in this metal crib.

He would not have had the words either. He was two and a half years old. He had only one word.

* * *

Ingrid came to get him.

He was two and a half years old. She was around forty, a woman in her prime, with her direct way of looking at things and that energy she would keep all her life, that way of deciding and moving forward without asking herself too long whether it was reasonable.

She was looking to take in a child. She already had her two sons: Philippe the eldest, and Thierry the younger. Still at home, a teenager and a pre-teen, who would each leave a few years later: one toward a city in the North, the other abroad. But something in her still wanted to give. Ingrid was like that. She gave.

The hallway of the institution smelled of disinfectant, that particular mix of clean and impersonal that one finds only in places where people pass through without ever truly living. And the lukewarm dinner that had been served a few hours earlier in a common room, and perhaps also that indefinable scent

that places where too many children live in too little space always seem to have.

What she found that day, in that hallway, was a poorly dressed little boy.

Dirty. Hollow cheeks, eyes too large for his face. Those eyes one sometimes sees in children who have learned very early to watch the world without being part of it, eyes that observe everything, that watch, that wait to understand whether the situation is safe or not. The eyes of a small wounded animal that has never quite let itself be tamed.

He wore clothes too big for someone who had grown faster than his clothes, or perhaps it was the other way around, perhaps the clothes belonged to another child, picked up somewhere, too wide at the shoulders and too long in the legs.

He said nothing.

Or rather, he said only one thing. Repeated. Like a prayer, like a question, like a call sent into the void for so long that he may have lost hope that anyone would answer but that continued anyway, by reflex, by necessity, because it was the only word he knew and that word contained everything he needed to say: Mamma.

Not his name. Not “hello” or “thank you” or “I’m hungry” or “I’m afraid.” Just that word, that word immense and fragile at the same time, that word that contained everything he knew of the world until then.

That is to say very little. And everything, at the same time.

Ingrid looked at him for a moment. This little boy with his oversized clothes and his watching eyes and that word repeated like a litany.

And she said yes.

No visible hesitation. No turning back, no “let me think about it.” Ingrid was not the kind of woman to back down from what was difficult. She had looked at this little boy and she had decided.

Years later, she would tell the story in her own words, simply, without pathos, the way one recounts something that happened:

“Un bambino mal vestito, infelice, trascurato, che non parlava a parte dire Mamma.”

A poorly dressed little boy, unhappy, neglected, who could say only one word.

That is all. No drama, no further explanation. He was there. She took him. That is it.

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The house on the Ligurian Riviera was large. Truly large, far larger than one would have expected of a woman alone living on her savings. It was built around an interior garden, a closed and silent courtyard sheltered from the street and the wind and the noise of traffic. And it had that strange, almost magical detail for a child: a roof that opened electrically.

One pressed a button (a simple button on the wall, at adult height) and slowly, with a low rumble of a motor, the roof slid open and the sky came in. The stars at night. The sun in the morning. The rain when

it rained, and then the courtyard became something else, something alive and wet and different.

For a child who had spent his first years between the white walls of a hospital (fixed ceilings, high windows that do not open, a sky seen only from a distance), this roof that opened must have seemed like a miracle. Or perhaps not a miracle. Perhaps just the first concrete proof that the world could work differently. That ceilings did not have to be permanent.

Philippe and Thierry were still living there at the time. Ingrid's two sons, a teenager and a pre-teen, still in the time of the family home, before boarding school and their respective departures toward a large city in the North and abroad. The house was full, inhabited, alive. There were voices, sounds of footsteps on the stairs, meals shared around a table. Ordinary things that were nothing ordinary for a child who had known only institutional hallways and impersonal rooms.

Ingrid tells the story today, decades later, of how those two teenagers used to take the little boy to the private beach, one of those coves on the Ligurian coast accessible only through the house or by sea, where the sand and the rocks belong to those who know how to get down to them. They played with him. They took him along when they could have stayed with their own friends elsewhere, doing what teenagers do when an unexpected little brother turns up in their lives. Tommaso has no direct memory of those afternoons, he was too young. But something registered, no doubt, in what he carries without knowing how to name it. The two big brothers. The beach. The water. The laughter of children. The feeling, perhaps, of having a real family for the first time.

Tommaso was not potty-trained. Neither by day nor by night. This was not a question of ill will, how could a child of two and a half have had ill will in that regard? It was a question of learning. No one had taught him. No one had had the time, or the presence, or the patience to teach him those ordinary things that children learn in the arms of someone who loves them and who is there, truly there, every day.

Ingrid took care of it. Patiently, methodically, with that way she had of approaching problems: not with excessive emotion, but with consistency. She spoke to him. She showed him pictures in books: children's books with their simple illustrations and primary colors. She named things for him, objects, actions. She built something, brick by brick, in that small brain that had spent two and a half years lacking everything a child's brain needs in order to build itself.

Language. Structure. The certainty that the world had an order, that things had names, that one could point to them and understand them.

In the small interior courtyard, there was a tricycle. Red, a vivid red, almost aggressive, the color of things children love immediately. He did lap after lap on that tricycle. Hours at a time pedaling in circles in that closed courtyard, hands gripping the handlebars, legs working with furious concentration, teeth sometimes clenched with effort.

He was going nowhere. The courtyard was closed, the tricycle made circles. But he was going somewhere at the same time, somewhere in his head, in that way of discovering that he could propel

himself forward under his own power, that his legs worked and that his hands knew how to hold something and that movement was possible.
Ingrid watched him from the window, sometimes. He did not know it. He pedaled.

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In six months with her, he gained weight. He grew, not only in height, but in that way of taking up space, of making himself less small in corners, of lifting his eyes toward people rather than lowering them.
He began to speak. Not just Mamma, real words, words to name things, the house, the garden, the meals, the red tricycle. Words that added themselves one to another, forming short sentences at first, then a little longer. A child learning to build the world with words.
Children flourish when they are loved. It is a simple and almost brutal truth, their bodies await that signal to truly decide to continue. As if biology itself needed the confirmation that someone is there, that someone is going to stay, before investing in growth.
He had waited two and a half years. But he had waited.
It is often said that children are resilient. That is said to reassure ourselves, so as not to have to look directly at what abandonment truly does, what the first years of neglect inscribe in a body and a brain that do not yet have the resources to resist. It is true, in part. Ingrid's love changed something in this little boy. He ate, he slept, he laughed, he learned.
But the first years (the hospitalizations, the lack, that original void that no red tricycle and no picture book can fill entirely), those things do not disappear. They sink deeper. They settle into the deep layers, where language does not go. They wait.
They resurface decades later. In the way one loves: too hard, too fast, with that panicked fear that the other will leave. In the way one leaves: abruptly, for good, because waiting for abandonment is even more unbearable than provoking the separation oneself.
This is not an accusation. Nor is it an excuse. It is simply the truth of what happens when a child begins life that way, and grows up anyway, and loves anyway, and decades later pulls boxes out from under his bed and begins to write.

Chapter Two

The Big House Facing the Sea

A village on the coast, the eighties

Nursery school left him two memories.

The first (vague, almost without content) is a room with small colored chairs and drawings pinned to the wall with thumbtacks. Colored pencils in metal boxes that each child collected at the start of the day from a shared shelf. The smell of glue and dried paint. A teacher whose face he cannot recall but whose voice he remembers, low for a woman, with that way of speaking to children without stooping to their level but without towering over them either. A memory without a story, just an atmosphere. A color.

The second memory is memorable in a different way.

In the school bus that smelled of hot plastic in summer and crushed sandwiches at the bottom of backpacks (in that bus where children yelled and laughed and turned around in their seats to make faces at those behind them), the inevitable had happened.

He was five years old. He had felt something was wrong, that sensation of being too full, that warning from the body that children that age have not yet learned to read early enough. He had looked out the window. The road from the village to school was long. More tunnels. More bends. Too long.

He will not elaborate. Some childhood humiliations deserve to be mentioned without being recounted, it is enough to know that this kind of thing happens, that one remembers it decades later with the same mix of shame and compassion for the child one was. That one thinks back to that five-year-old face, the burning cheeks, the other children who had looked on and some of whom had laughed and others had not. The others, those who had not laughed, Tommaso remembers them too, with a belated gratitude. And one wants to tell that child that it did not matter at all. That it never did.

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He was around four years old when they had moved to another village on the coast.

The house was large, truly large, three floors that smelled of warm wood and old stone, with that immense garden descending in terraces toward the sea. One could see it from the garden, it was there, below, blue and shining, present like something self-evident. At any hour of the day, in any season, the air of that garden had that particular taste of salt and iodine that only the sea gives to air.

Palm trees whose long leaves clapped softly in the evening wind, like hands applauding without enthusiasm. Hydrangeas everywhere, pink, mauve, and sometimes an almost unreal blue depending on the acidity of the soil, blooming in spring with a slightly excessive generosity, as if the Ligurian vegetation did not know how to stop, did not know moderation, always wanted more color and more scent.

For a child who had spent his first years between the white walls of a hospital and apartments where the air smelled musty, for that child, this garden was something incomprehensible. Not in a bad way. In the sense of: too large to be contained in the words one has. Too beautiful to be real.

And sometimes, in the morning, when the sun crossed the garden diagonally and made the dewdrops shine on the palm leaves, when the smell of the sea rose from the terraces at the same time as the smell of Ingrid's coffee from the open kitchen, he would stop right there, standing in the grass still cold beneath his bare feet, and he would look. He did nothing else. He looked as if looking were already enough. As if that garden were proof that the world could be beautiful, proof whose existence he needed to verify each morning before the day truly began.

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The story continues in Despite It All, I Made It Through, Volume I.

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