

THE VERTIGO GAME

A thriller in Venice



FRANCO
ALESCI

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Author's Note

The stories narrated in this novel are a figment of the imagination; all reference to real-life events or persons dead or alive are to be considered purely coincidental.

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Cover: A skull made of interconnected vectors.

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To Serenella,
the tuning fork of my soul.

1. The shot

3 January.

The shot rang out in the street and is reverberating between the buildings, echoing like in a valley. It rises overwhelmingly from the pavement, rattling windows, piercing eardrums and breaching the skin on the body, vibrating like a loudspeaker's membrane. It comes out, floats and rises like a falcon over the forest of the unstoppable white noise of the city, capturing everybody's fears: men turning into scared mice.

The shot is like a falcon circling on high over one of those rocky deserts, with some basic and primordial forms of life below, from the insects living in the subsoil to the little superficial creatures like snakes, lizards and mice that are part of the open pantry for ravenous birds. These "moving mouthfuls" are essential food that sometimes catches fire, suddenly rising up or rolling over, having been pushed by those strange African sirocco gusts known as *gibli*, *gebli* or *kebli*, depending on the area: the same hot, sand-carrying wind regardless. The falcons' eyesight is also eight times better than that of a human: like the Almighty, they can see all from on high, and are pitiless.

The neighbourhood is empty: there's nobody talking any more. There are just rustles, crackling and some gears engaging in the distance.

Previously scampering not far away in their confusion and with deafened ears, some blackbirds and a magpie have risen in flight, wildly beating their wings. They quickly disperse in all directions.

A few moments later, a passer-by yelled at the top of their lungs to break the silence.

'Bastards!'

There follows a pause, with everybody having heard that word shouted and reflecting on it. They're murmuring. The neighbourhood is a world in and of itself — one of the many this EARTH contains — and in wait for the sentence to clarify what was meant.

And so it comes.

'They've killed a man'. The voice gave out as if its sounds were the feathers of a paper fan having been torn for being too often unfolded, but it

communicates to everybody what has just transpired metres away from their cosy, orderly homes.

A dark soul has taken a life away.

Some people have now peered over from their apartment windows and understood what's happened. Some of them came down with others to unravel their fears and dissolve them as if they were poison pills amongst the stream of words flowing forth. Others still have double-locked their doors and turned the sound up on their TVs. Many have called the police and somebody has gone looking for an ambulance, not accepting that a single shot, deafening as it was, can take a life away.

Lying on the pavement, face-down and streetlamp-lit, is the corpse of a man. Not ten minutes earlier had they shot him in the head from behind, which you can easily tell by looking at the hole at the back of his neck. He died not noticing a thing, having been walking when the gunshot turned him into an inanimate fleshly object.

In the meantime, passing motorists coming home from work are stopping to see what's happened; there's someone taking photos and filming the murdered man on their smartphone. They'll be posting the pictures online or sending them to friends on WhatsApp.

Several cars have stopped, moving into the second lane. There's one behind the other, with their hazard lights flashing, seeming to go with the Christmas theme at the end of the season. The crowd of onlookers and the snake-like trail of lights draw other cars in and soon, a small gathering around the victim takes place.

The crime has taken place at Carpenedo, a tranquil part of Mestre; for those who know the city, it's connected to Venice by the Ponte della Libertà. This "asphalt thread" lies at the bottom of the lagoon with a few rail tracks and some highway lanes, this being the physical connection between the Venetians of its historic centre and those on the mainland, like an artery between heart and stomach.

In this area, the most serious incident in the past year consisted of an argument between two neighbours, who weren't even particular close, because one of the two hadn't taken care of clearing away his poodle's business from the pavement in front of them.

It's not even seven yet on this third of January evening.

It's been quite cold today, the temperature being a few degrees above zero.

The man was shot as he came back home from shopping, with a white nylon bag with the supermarket written on it beside him. Out of this came some items: a boxed whole-wheat spaghetti, some bananas, several pouches of cat food and two glass bottles that had been broken in the fall; from one, milk came out and from the other, red wine.

Also mixing together with the milk and wine is the victim's blood that keeps on coming out of his head, dripping out regular as clockwork.

Following the asphalt's slope, the milk, wine and blood have closely mixed to create a stream of pink trickling down from the pavement and going onto the highway.

The pink stream will be collected by the tyres of the cars passing by, about to spread it everywhere.

Before the attack, the man was wearing a cap with its brim similar to those of baseball players that, in the fall, ended up not far away from the body. He was holding his mobile in his hand, nothing remarkable, with a keyboard made of unusual characters: it seems like one of those calculators only able to do the four basic arithmetic operations.

Was there maybe someone following him and he was trying to make a call for help?

He's got thinning white hair slicked back and has unremarkable clothes on: faded jeans, a blue supermarket- or outlet-bought jacket worth a few dozen euro and trainers. Judging by the skin on his face, he had to be a man of advanced age. He apparently would look like an innocent pensioner.

Amongst those to have rushed to the scene, nobody knows the victim, but the man mustn't have lived very far away, as he was coming home on foot with the shopping bag in his hand.

His wallet, clear to see in the back pocket of his jeans, also makes it clear this wasn't a mugging here.

Some time later, a different kind of bang, albeit very strong, produces a shock wave like the one made by supersonic aircraft when one breaks the sound barrier flying at low altitude. It's come from the apartment of the man who's just been killed on the third floor of a building with six, just a few hundred yards from the site of the attack. The boom strikes terror into

the heart of the residents; not understanding why there's been an explosion, they rush out of their apartments, pouring - as if an avalanche - down the steps.

Having been left too long on the hob, an old pressure cooker blew up, turning into a small bomb. The pot lid was launched into the ceiling it later bounced off violently, hitting the kitchen window and smashing through. That meant, beyond the powerful sound waves, there was a hellish sound of shattered glass falling into the street. Shards of glass have showered down, having followed the steel lid's trajectory, and kept on spinning through the air of its own accord, reflecting the evening lights like a mirror. The whole movement was like a comet's, complete with trail and coma. Finally, the lid ended its course smashing through the windscreen and sticking to the driver's seat of a car below that, fortunately, had nobody sitting in it. Meanwhile, the clustered pieces of glass rained down onto the pavement and the lane of the highway, causing neither damage nor injury.

The fire brigade came in a few minutes, their siren sounding at full whack.

The victim lived alone or, rather, not together with other human beings: in a Persian cat on whom he lavished all his affections, he had a flatmate of sorts.

And it was on that day he'd started burning some of his minestrone by using that old pressure cooker, the only one he had. Like many other times, the man was planning to go shopping in just over half an hour at the supermarket close to the neighbourhood and come back home in plenty of time to have his dinner almost ready.

The cat hid under the settee. He hisses at a "strange dog", having perhaps mistaken the valve's whistle for a yelp and the explosion for a mastiff's bark. Out of emotion, his tail is greatly enlarged and the hairs on the back of his neck on end; his heart, meanwhile, is beating strongly, as if he'd climbed to the top of a tree. It's said that even animals, particularly those of a certain age, might die of heartbreak in the face of sudden and particularly intense emotion. This cat is nearly fifteen, to boot.

As soon as the firefighters arrived, they turn off the gas and cut off the electricity to all the flats as a precaution. They unravel a long extendable ladder, then pointing it to the kitchen window of the apartment that, after the explosion, has been left without any glass at all.

They go in.

A pungent smell tainting the air — almost enough to make you sneeze — greets the firefighters who've just come in: a coloured liquid mush has spread all over. It's a mishmash of celery pieces, beans, peas, carrots and ... crushed potatoes. On top of the small wall-mounted LCD television is also a clove of garlic that, miraculously, has been left intact.

The minestrone came out of the pot, powerful and unstoppable like a geyser jet, spreading over the floor, walls and ceiling of the kitchen, sticking like glue. The merry dance of odour goes through the crack at the bottom of the door, has also spread along the stairwell at the block of flats.

The name on the front door is the same that the police read not long earlier on the identity card of the man who'd been shot in the street.

The firefighters closely inspect the apartment, verifying according to their procedures that this is not a dangerous situation. They've immediately understood the cause of the problem and at once, they can reset the alarm.

Not long after, they leave the apartment, but the poor cat silently hidden and immobile under the settee was barely breathing so as not to be heard by those intruders dressed like extra-terrestrials. Nobody notices him.

2. Electric dance

4 February.

In a side street off *piazza* Ferretto in Mestre, well within the pedestrian area, different people are talking at the same time, but can't hear each other; they are one in front of the other, but can't see each other. It's as if they were invisible. Nobody can either see or hear everyone else: it's a group of people imprisoned by the solitude in fear, with words rising like smoky figures from a fire and riding the air molecules that bounce all over like the ball in a game of squash.

Advanced in her years, a woman coming home on her electric trike keeps going round and round in circles, turning in on herself. The lady's torso heaves forward as her head swings uncontrollably: they have just driven a large steel nail into her neck with a nail gun, almost piercing it from one side to the other, killing her instantly. The nail head is protruding from the skin, reminiscent of an unlikely piercing. She was a very thin lady; as much may be understood from the sunken face, the neck and hollow wrists emerging from her jacket.

Someone is thinking of connecting this attack with the murder of the other elderly man that took place a few miles from here: the other victim had been shot in the head.

At last, a man comes out of that throng of people and turns the electric motorcycle off, stopping for a moment and a deep breath because he also wants to do something else, something harder: he puts his hand over her face and closes her eyes.

At the same time and a few yards from where the crime took place, a gospel choir concert has started at *piazza* Ferretto. The boundless and deeply delicate energy of dozens of people is conveyed in the voices that, in unison, reach the same heights at the same time, flying through the air as if this were a huge swarm of birds.

These voices are directed by a portly gentleman wearing a long white scarf about the neck. He's moving his baton quickly, energetically, whimsically, powerfully and without stopping, making one think of a middleweight boxer as they're landing a combination of hooks and uppercuts. Around the stage, a large and orderly audience listen to them,

involved. The choristers are all Italian and white, although singing in English, putting great passion into it, sounding like black singers.

The lyrics speak of God, the Earth, loss ... and death.

Armand can feel the old lift move as it's going up and his skin of his body can feel the vibration even before his eardrums pick up on the noisy rattling. 'My partner Mara has come back from her shopping,' he's thinking. He opens the front door of their fifth-floor flat where they've lived together for decades: it's a small blessing, saving Mara the trouble of looking for the keys in her handbag. He leaves the door ajar, as he has many other times, going back into the study to finish the email he was writing to a friend of his from the WWF; he's a paying member. Armand has a long white beard and a fully shaved head; he prefers to shave the few hairs left on his head off every two or three days. It's as if he'd changed his head with his face to compensate for his baldness.

His completely bald head and long beard starting from the earlobes make him look like a hermit.

Armand and Mara have lived together across two centuries and millennia, both as vegetarians and active in many cultural associations, too evolved for the banal world of today that's more and more technological yet coarser. They were part of the Protests of '68 and "flower children", as they were called in the Sixties and Seventies, living through decades full of social upheaval, seeing the world progress through their youth, experiencing the great optimism inherent in the beauty of change. They've felt police batons on their shoulders and backs over and over, like thousands of other protestors. The blows those batons dealt didn't hurt that much: the black marks that would stay on their skins for a long while afterward reminded them of the courage they'd had in protesting and, compared to today's brutality, these were little more than light slaps.

They lived through the slow progression of rights for students, workers, women ... all of it was beautiful, exciting even.

Then, year after year, slowly yet unstoppably, the world began regressing that little bit more every time. After progress came the implosion of the human race: today's person has folded in on themselves, like a rag upon the floor. Such are the waves of time, the alternation of hills and valleys on the path of humanity, without beginning or end, where — sooner or later — we go through the same stages.

Armand and Mara are ill at ease at this age of decadence, pessimistic about the future of society, thinking it will be made of the past: they can see a “medieval future”!

On the fifth floor, the walls of the apartment they live in tell their story of a couple of free spirits, told through photos of themselves and their myths and travels.

There's a picture of Fidel Castro at age thirty that some Cuban friends of theirs sent. Hung on the walls are various tastefully framed silk paintings, recalling many journeys through India, Nepal and China. On the central coffee table of the sitting room are two sandalwood sculptures: one represents the god of good fortune Ganesh, half man, half elephant; the other is Hanuman, the personification of wisdom, honesty and strength, depicted with a monkey's face; both are Hindu deities. They've had these for forty years to remind them of their journeys to the East they've gone on together.

It's a nice and well-kept apartment over ninety square metres in size, with four spacious rooms, two bathrooms and hundreds upon hundreds of books of all genres with which they've filled three entire bookcases: two large ones in the study and one in the guest room. They must've piled up the last texts they've bought on the study floor; they'll perhaps be buying another bookcase.

Armand and Mara have been together for fifty years: they met with the student protests of '68 in full swing, shaping each other by feeding on dreams. They've always lived as man and wife, but never wanted to marry and, had children been born of their union, the couple wouldn't have had them follow any kind of religion; they embraced the illusion and necessity of being unconventional: following the rule of not following the rules, so to speak. They engaged with society throughout their life and shared an enthusiasm for their rôles as teachers: both taught literature at secondary school until they reached pensionable age.

All was well until a few years ago, when Mara began to show the first signs of multiple sclerosis: a changeable disease of many forms, impossible to predict, accompanied by visual disturbances, strong feelings of numbness in the limbs and exhaustion. She follows an exacting course of treatment and strict controls; she only managed to take a few steps today and this with the help of a walking stick.

The two police officers, alongside a man in plain clothes to whom they notably showed deference, — awe, even — have knocked on the half-open door and come in.

‘Hello,’ they say. ‘May we come in?’

They ask if he is Mr Armand Scarpa.

They’re thinking now’s not the time, given what they have to tell him, to ask him why ever he should have a French-sounding name. Going back to their offices, one of the officers — the more curious of the two — will ascertain that Armand was born in Bruges in Belgium, where his parents emigrated before the Second World War and managed a chocolate factory before returning to Veneto for good.

‘Yes; what’s happened?’ answers an astonished Armand.

‘Would you mind sitting down, please?’ they say, pulling him up a chair.

They are there to inform him a vile and inexplicable attack has taken place, proving fatal. Mara’s not coming back. They’re at pains to explain what happened not far from where they are.

‘It’s best you don’t see her, not right away. You’ll be able to see her at the mortuary to identify her tomorrow, where they’ll ask you to come with a family member’.

“Mara’s not coming back!” Armand repeats to himself within, his life now being like a “geological age” reaching its end.

“We’re going back to the age of the dinosaurs: reptiles will take the place of mammals, and these are coldblooded creatures: primordial, pitiless and brainless”.

‘Have you children?’

They don't.

‘Any relatives, both of you?’

They haven’t got any nearby; they live in other cities and haven’t heard from either of the couple in years.

‘Do you have friends?’

‘Yes, hundreds, all online’.

He thinks they are virtual friends and yet seem more real than those in the flesh that he comes across every day on the street, up and down the stairwell, in the shops and offices. Or, at least, he interacts more with them: distance is no bar and it’s easier to say things without seeing each other.

‘Is there anyone to help you, materially speaking?’

They weren’t very attached to their neighbours; not at all, for that matter.

He says he doesn’t need anybody.

Armand just can’t get the tears out. Not even when these men leave does he wail or despair, nor does he talk to himself or run to look through their photos and videos of their travels or their diaries. All of this is not a good sign.

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