

Nedo of the seagulls

I used to see him often at the no. one stop when the no. one was still circulating. That so evocative number reminded of the origin, the beginning, but for the majority of the travelers it was just a number like all the others. Thinking about it, actually, that bus was just special, as it was the only one to be able to boast of the double-decker model, funny to tell but absolutely true. However, I won't linger too long on that nor on the journey that, from the stadium, crosses the whole city. It's Nedo I want to talk about, what would commonly be called an old person, one of those, you know, that you see wander about apparently without a destination.

«I was born in 1912, the day that Nedo Nadi won his first Olympic gold» was one of the first things he told me. «That's why my father called me like this.»

I still remember my surprise and the absolute indifference to that surname. I had never heard about him although he was the greatest fencer in history.

I still have a clear picture of when I first saw him. A taylor-made suit inside an old coat, the grey hat, his hands on the walking stick, the old-fashioned shirt, the worn out but still shining shoes. Short, he used to sit always in the same place, in the front row, immediately behind the driver when the busses were still

pale green. He used to sit alone and I would rarely see him talk. It seemed like no one could see him.

One day I decided to follow him. I saw him get off at the last stop, wait for long minutes and get on the no. fifteen towards *Mondello*¹.

Perplexed, I got on that bus unable to figure out where it would have taken me. It was almost by Valdesi that I saw him get up and slowly walk down the step. It was a fresh March day and the sun was colouring the sea of pale pastel hues.

The man proceeded for a while then suddenly left the road and walked towards the beach.

Confused, I kept on following him and, when the sand clung to my shoes, I delivered a firm kick hoping to loosen its clutch. That manoeuvre distracted me and, as I turned around, his shape had vanished from the horizon. A grimace of anger stood out on my face and, frantic, I cast a glance in every direction. There was no sign of him, he seemed to have vanished inside the white expanse of sand.

Incredulous, I kept on searching for him when my glance got attracted by the shrilling buzz of the seagulls. By tens they were catapulting from the sky gently landing on a boat on the sea-shore.

Intrigued by this, I started walking and, suddenly, I caught a glimpse of him, hidden by the keel, busy throwing food at them.

«Come forth» he said without turning around. «I've been noticing you for many days.»

Surprised, I slowly went nearer. «They're really extraordinary creatures» he continued in a thin voice. «When I can, I always bring them food. My wife prepares it and sometimes my nephews add some sardines.»

¹ Known Palermo's seaside site

I looked at him, confused, while the image I had pictured to my self was rapidly fading to reality.

«Beautiful day» was my banal answer. We started talking and the words flowed like a river in spate. I slowly flooded myself with his smile, with his eyes, faded but still full of enthusiasm, with his kind manners of an old-time gentleman. He told me of his life at sea, of his long imprisonment in Abyssinia, of his children, and in those moments, time seemed to hide behind the notes of those magical recollections. Since then, no. one was our meeting-place and every journey marked a new reunion. How many times did we find ourselves on the seashore commenting the little daily happenings, on the pier feeding the seagulls, in the square talking about women and old engines until, one day, I saw his sit occupied by another person and the day after and the following one and the one after that again.

I never saw him again but I want to remember him sitting at a table in the square in Mondello, busy showing me some old photos. Those pictures yellowed by the time strengthened his past moistening his eyes with sweet drops of melancholy.

I never knew his surname. To me he was Nedo, Nedo of the seagulls and today, after more than twenty years, his memory still dwells in a tiny place inside my heart.