

# MALACQUA

FOUR DAYS OF RAIN  
IN THE CITY OF NAPLES  
WAITING FOR THE OCCURRENCE  
OF AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

*Nicola Pugliese*

Translated by Shaun Whiteside



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## THE FIRST DAY

At seven in the morning on the 23rd of October, which was the following day, the news came first to Annunziata Osvaldo, 27, of Boscotrecase, telephone operator on the emergency service at police headquarters. After she had heard it Annunziata Osvaldo looked instinctively upwards, at the window with the iron bars, and outside it was raining, definitely, it was raining: the rain had started falling in violent spates at about three in the morning, at various points in the city the lights had blown, completely useless, the emergency teams of the Enel had also realised that they couldn't fix a thing if it went on raining as it was raining right now, and as it had continued throughout the night until the first light of a greyish dawn, sometimes violet in tone, resolutely pallid and funereal. With all that water coming down and coming down, and when you were about to say: there, it's stopping now, you didn't have time to open your mouth before the water violently returned, a harsh and predetermined rancour, an irreversible obstinacy. And at seven in the morning on the 23rd of October, which was the following day, Annunziata Osvaldo as

ever couldn't understand very much; at the other end of the line the person speaking was saying nothing, he was speaking excitedly, literally eating his words and thus he expressed only a breathless residue: it has collapsed, the road has collapsed, completely submerged, there are people inside, the cars have been swallowed up. Before doing anything else Annunziata Osvaldo realised that the fire service had to be alerted, with the collapsing roads there was nothing to be done at police headquarters, to each his own jurisdiction, and in the register she wrote '7am, 23 October, notification of a collapse in Via Aniello Falcone, fire service to be informed', and then called the fire service. From the station on Via del Sole her operator colleague told her he was already aware, that a squad had been sent out, and perhaps it wasn't a hoax this time, and other alarms had come in from San Martino, not to mention the surrounding province, then Sant'Antimo, Afragola, Frattaminore, all spreading out in all directions, and Christ the city's really made of cardboard, is it possible that only a few hours of rain could do this?, eh, possible, it's possible, what are you going to do?, the airport weathermen should put signs up: rain tomorrow. Neapolitans, move to Rome.

And at 7.30 on 23 October the fire brigade reached Via Aniello Falcone along Via Tasso, where works were under way to rebuild the sewerage system, and going along Via Tasso the firemen looked up towards those fading lights. The water was already crashing down on the asphalt, filling the uncovered channels, penetrating

## *Malacqua*

the earth and softening it, turning it into a shamefully inert mess, a slurry of mud around the new structures of reinforced concrete, and they would resist, definitely, they would resist. When they reached the tight bend of Via Aniello Falcone, the driver was taken unawares: the chasm was right in front of him, four or five metres away let's say, and he braked in a hurry, and what the fuck!, the others said, what a way to stop!, and what the fuck!, what a way to stop!, said the crew commander in the vehicle behind. The firemen all got out with their feet on the ground and the commander got out and they went and looked and it was immediately clear that this wasn't a small matter, far from it, because the chasm occupied the whole of the road, on the right all the way to the overhanging wall – with dozens and dozens of buildings below it – and on the left that dark chasm engulfed even the pavement, six or seven metres away let's say, from the foundation of an old building immediately post-war, perhaps, its facade painted grey and its windows all wrought iron and fuck!, said the commander, this is seriously dangerous, come on, let's get going, clear the lot.

And the firemen passed through the hallway and there right in the middle of the courtyard was the porter talking to a woman who had appeared on the first floor. They were both saying things, but when they saw the firemen they fell suddenly silent, and the porter now only listened: but how: clear it?, what?, all at once?, but then it's dangerous, seriously dangerous. And a woman

appeared on the second floor with grey hair, about 55, and said that she wasn't going to clear anything at all, she wasn't leaving her house, even if there was an air raid. She hadn't fled during the Allied bombs in 1943, so come off it, not for a slightly more violent rainstorm or a big hole in the road she wouldn't, and still from the second floor, two windows to the right, a distinguished gentleman in pyjamas and dressing gown hastily wrapped around him shook his head disconsolately and said you see, madam, if the firemen tell you to leave the building there's a reason, probably a serious one, they wouldn't say such a thing lightly, isn't it true that they wouldn't say such a thing lightly? The firemen said no, they would never say such a thing lightly, they were saying it because it was dangerous, yes sir, they were doing only their duty and nothing else, they realised, yes, of course, they realised. But the lady said and where am I going to sleep tonight?, in a hotel?, and at whose expense?, the City of Naples? But you see madam I'm trying to explain the situation right now. But there was really little to explain, because in the meantime in the middle of the road the crew commander was collecting witness statements and there were a few people who had seen and who swore: in that chasm there are now two cars, definitely, they were parked right there, you see?, three metres away on the right, and they aren't there any more, and when the road collapsed I heard a dull sound, a strange sound, and a woman's voice, definitely, a terrible scream, sir, a heartrending thing. Staring at

## *Malacqua*

the rope on the truck, down in the chasm which was pouring down, a fireman had gone down, Giovanni Esposito, 24, from Roccarainola, who said play out the rope gently, play out the rope gently, and the others played out the rope. But then he disappeared, and his voice fell silent, and two firemen appeared on the edge of the chasm to see and could barely make him out: he asked for rope, more, but gently, gently, very slowly, and those two firemen passed his words on and the men on the truck played out still more rope, ten metres already, no joke in those conditions, not by any means, and then the crew commander said all right, pull him up now, I don't want to risk anything until we know. The other firemen in charge of the case pulled up Giovanni Esposito from Roccarainola, who set foot back on the cobbles, and the cobbles came apart at once, and he lost his balance and slipped, but the rope was there to hold him, the rope was there, and he merely slipped, his right hip only crashed hard on the ridge, he had a brief raw pain from it, but once he was definitely up it had all passed, all of it, and he felt no pain at all, and said to the commander: Commander, there must be people down there because I heard something like wailing, perhaps a woman, but I might be mistaken. Then the commander went to the radio in his flame-red vehicle and told them to send out another squad, with planks, tackle, winches and various tools they needed to go down further, about twenty metres, maybe more, then he said to the driver inform the Municipal Technical Office and

tell them to send someone and explain carefully how things are, then right away call the assessor of Public Works, alert the Prefecture, and while he was saying those things in the pouring rain a cluster of people with black umbrellas had formed, and they were watching in silence, and at the windows of the building were men and women watching. But what the hell are these people waiting for?, the commander yelled, I told you to clear everything!, straight away!, and he looked up towards the upper floors, but a violent spate of rain made him lower his head again and fuck!, he said, and from below the hood of his raincoat he managed to light a cigarette, and call an ambulance, he yelled at the driver, or two, and he added under his breath because we have no idea how things will go here. And as he said that talking to himself, what the hell, today of all days, my wife's birthday, he thought of Via Tasso, oh Christ!, Via Tasso.

At 7.45 on 23 October the uncovered sewers on Via Tasso had completely filled with that shitty rain!, when will it stop?, and now the water was sliding along the asphalt, on the planks of the roadworks, on to the pavement, and quickly escaping downhill, carrying soil and waste and newsprint. At the intersection with Corso Vittorio Emanuele it was really a raging torrent that was coming now, while from above, level with the Italnapioli cinema, Via Tasso gritted its teeth, and also gritting his teeth and muttering fuck off was Biagio Di Sepe, 45, from Avellino, who was determined not to give a toss and had put on

## *Malacqua*

his rubber boots, on that morning of 23 October. And he couldn't even feel that water that was now passing between his feet, but he certainly saw it, he saw it very clearly, and above all he saw a few metres higher, where the uncovered sewer had filled up: the water swelled and gurgled, it almost breathed. Biagio Di Sepe suddenly said: Under these conditions I'm not bringing anything into the shop from outside, let alone the oranges with the rain, no, no, I'm leaving everything right where it is, it will have to stop sooner or later, and right above him in the sky there was a long blackish streak, and it had been like that at the market too, at four in the morning, but he had thought it would stop sooner or later, it would certainly stop. Except that it wasn't stopping, it showed no sign of stopping, and what a shitty day, he said, and he stood there with his arms folded in the shop doorway, and then he lit a cigarette and stood and watched. But when he checked that dull sound he saw nothing whatsoever, he heard only that crash, and those stones on the ground in the middle of the road. Then he looked carefully upwards and there it was, there it was, he saw it, the eaves were coming away, leaning towards the street, as if in slow motion, then the building began collapsing from below, thundering down to the cobbles, with those stones jumping, jumping, with the dust rising before being caught by the rain and thrust down once more against the asphalt. And fuck, he said, this is going badly. And he no longer felt so confident now, the fruit and vegetables would be fucked, who cares,

something major is happening here. And the van moved strangely, just a hint, perhaps he was mistaken, in any case it's a good idea to check, it's a good idea to check, losing the van is the last thing we need right now, with this shitty day presenting itself. Biagio di Sepe with his rubber boots went to his parked van, climbed into the driver's seat and checked the gear, and it was in first, but for some reason he put it in reverse, and checked the handbrake which was full on, but that handbrake had never worked very well, for how many years had he been saying: I'll get it seen to, I'll get it seen to, and now with all that rain there was no time to get anything seen to, he had to do something, now. And he surprised himself by turning on the engine. And the engine for the sake of turning on turned on, but he said fuck what did I turn it on for?, what am I doing?, not the foggiest, and then he turned everything off, everything again, I've just got to put blocks behind the wheels, that's it, blocks, and he took two big stones from the street and put them very tightly against the back wheels reinforcing them with a few kicks, and now, now it was sorted, right?, certainly, it was sorted, and he was about to deliver another kick, with that river coming down you can't be sure of anything, and I'm certainly not putting the oranges outside this morning, and he was about to return to his shelter. At that moment house number 234 twisted and leaned. And fuck he said, is the whole thing about to come down?

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## *Malacqua*

Carlo Andreoli drank his coffee in bed, resting on his left elbow, surrounded by such darkness that he couldn't see a thing, and lit a cigarette. The phone rang and at the other end of the line they told him all that had happened: the chasm on Via Aniello Falcone, two dead, two cars swallowed up, the collapse of Via Tasso, at house number 234, with the five people dead, killed in their sleep, the rain that was still falling, and if it went on falling like that there wasn't much to be cheerful about, and that was more than enough to wake him up completely. He went to the bathroom and put his face by the mirror, which returned it to him. And first he thought about the paper, of course, everything that needed to be done, the reporters that needed to be dispatched, the photographs and everything. Then seven minutes later he was back in his car, and the alarm had gone off, now, and the red light had come on. His head spun through the city, up and down Via Aniello Falcone, up and down Via Tasso. And there was the chasm, and there was the collapse, and all the usual things, and the people, and the mechanical gestures, rituals, and the press releases, the calls to the editorial office, and getting it all down will be messy and they need to move fast, get a move on, you can't go out without the news, you certainly can't miss all the trains, today, not with everything that's happened, imagine the mess. His head spun around the city seeing chasms and collapses he had known before, the weeping of mothers and relatives, the hysterical grief, the muffled, impotent rage. His head fled spinning, of course, it fled but then

*Nicola Pugliese*

came back on tiptoe along narrow paths and built for him a cruel and inevitable presence: where is the ultimate meaning? In the stones of the Castel dell'Ovo? Where?

He left his car on Via Partenope, and walked on in the falling rain: beyond the pavement the stone bridge, and the castle, with the yellowish stones against an inclement sky, and that rain falling on his knees and his shoes all the way between his toes, the damp reached his brain, the water rose along furrows and circumvolutions, shapeless gelatinous masses breathed with the water, and the water from within reached all the way inside his iris and appeared in his nostrils, it fell from his nostrils and down from his lips it fell slipping in grey rivulets. Within the view of that watery grey now falling in spates, oh yes, in cold spates, the eye runs identifying the gaps between stone and stone. Come on then, wake up.