

The Siege,

By Rocco Carbone

Chapter Two

Abruptly, Maria opened her eyes. She withdrew her arm slowly from beneath the blanket and, after several attempts, managed to find the switch of the lamp on the night table. With her other hand she fumbled for the reading glasses she'd left on the bed along with the newspaper before falling asleep, and slid them on to check the time: three o'clock in the morning. The room was so quiet she could hear the ticking of the hands of the watch she kept fastened at her wrist.

She had woken from a bad dream, in which she was again at the seaside home in which she'd lived as a parents had left and had instructed her to stay behind, to wait for them and be brave. But it was very noisy outside, and she couldn't keep calm. She was afraid the waves would reach up and sweep her, her home and everything else away. Approaching the window, she opened the shutters carefully. A blast of icy air mixed with salted water splashed her little girl, many years before. In her dream, a storm was raging and she was alone. Her face. Raising her eyes she saw the sea, black and towering terribly nearby, and she had the impression that it was about to submerge her in one instant. She tried to shout, but couldn't. And then she woke up.

That year Maria would turn seventy-six. Her own health had always been good, but her husband, two years before, had died of a stroke, and from that point on she'd begun to feel the weight of age. Six months earlier, getting up from bed in the morning she'd slipped on a rug of the corridor, and shattered her thigh bone. After a hospital stay, she returned home, though walking was now more and more of a bother. She didn't like using a cane, and instead preferred to sleep in, mornings, getting up late, resting in the afternoon, and returning to her room right after dinner.²

The night before, dining with her son, her daughter in law and her niece, there had been a lively quarrel. Saverio had gotten back from work, alarmed. He had said that the sky, which was now constantly yellow, couldn't possibly be the result of a temporary condition, and that he was very worried. His wife had made fun of him, while his daughter Angela tried to reassure him by making up a list of explanations of the phenomenon, which they'd studied in her science class at school. Maria didn't say a word; she merely listened. That afternoon she too had seen the same strange, heavy sky, and hadn't paid much attention. She was in that phase of life in which it is difficult to be amazed by something new, and where the new itself is merely a fraction of something already lived that returns, filling a momentary lapse of memory.

Maria pushed the blanket aside, put first one foot and then the other carefully on the cold floor, took the cane at the bedstead and got to her feet. She left the room and went to the kitchen to drink a glass of water. She looked towards the French window. The shutters were almost closed, and she approached them and opened them wide. A white rain was falling silently from the sky. It didn't take her long to understand that it wasn't water. She went outside to the balcony and stretched a hand to the rail, withdrawing it immediately. The tips of her fingers were covered with thin, whitish grains of sand. When she raised her eyes she saw the slow mass in the sky, backlit, falling to a regular rhythm, as quiet as a winter snowfall. She touched her hair, which was already dirtied with the dust, then glanced at the floor, where a thin layer of particles lay on the small area of the balcony. Touching it with a foot, she felt the soft contact of her sole with the material.

Going back into the kitchen she closed the French window, drank and then washed her hands. She helped herself with her stick to the bathroom, and arrived at the door to the double room, which was ajar. She opened it. Cristina was asleep, turned on her side and facing the night table, illuminated by a lamp, while on the other side of the bed her son was laying on his back, his hands resting on his belly. She went close, stretched out a hand and touched his arm, squeezing it gently. Saverio opened his eyes, and grew so frightened by the sight of his mother's face close to him at that time of night that for a few seconds he couldn't utter a word. Drawing nearer, Maria said, Wake up, Saverio. I want to show you something.

What time is it, mother?

It doesn't matter.
 What happened?
 There's something new out there. The sky.

Hearing this last word, pronounced in a low tone, Saverio woke up instantly. He told his mother to wait for him outside the room, then he got up, quickly put on his trousers and a shirt. He thought that he should say something to his wife, but immediately gave up the idea. Better not to wake her up. Better to pretend that nothing had happened, before seeing with his own eyes what was going on. Maybe it was just the fantasy of an insomniac old woman who woke up in the middle of the night seized by alarmed and baseless thoughts.

Maria was waiting for him in the living room, in front of the open window. The light was off, the room was lit by the faint light cast by a street lamp on a nearby road. Saverio drew close and beheld the fine, ceaseless rain of sand. He went to the window, stretched out his hand, and after a few seconds found it covered by a white warmish substance of some kind. Withdrawing the hand, he blew on his palm and a fine layer of sand flew off.

When did you notice it? he asked his mother.

Not long ago. I got up to drink a glass of water. What's going on?

I don't know. But you'd better go back to sleep.

I'm not tired.

It doesn't matter. Please, go to your room. And be careful not to wake anybody. We'll talk about it tomorrow.

When he found himself alone again, he paused to contemplate for a few minutes the spectacle taking place in front of his eyes, then went to the studio, sat down at the desk, took a cigarette from a drawer and lit it. He picked up the receiver and dialed a number that he knew by heart. At the other end of the line, the phone rang unanswered for a long time. He was afraid that the person he was looking for was unreachable at that time of the night, when after a last ring, a sleepy voice answered.

Hello?

This is Saverio speaking.

Do you know what time it is?

I know, but it doesn't matter.

What happened?

Wake up and open the window. I'll be waiting.

What?

The window, I told you. Don't ask me any more questions.

Saverio heard the noise of the receiver as it was put on a table. Further off, he could distinguish the sound of the shutters being opened. Then a silence began, and it seemed to him interminable. When the other person came back to the phone, his voice had a different tone.

I've never seen anything like it. It has already covered everything.

This is why I called you.

What do you want to do? I'm coming to see you. I'm going out now, I'll be there in half an hour.

Without waiting for an answer, he hung up the phone and got up from the desk, then he went to the window and threw the cigarette outside. The trajectory of the still-glowing ember was mixed with the sand that was falling harder now.

Within a few minutes, Saverio was already on the road. To protect himself from the sand, he had taken an umbrella with him. The town was submerged in silence. The dust kept falling from the black sky and had abundantly covered the asphalt, the parked cars, the branches of the trees and everything else. The light of the street lamps could hardly penetrate the falling mass of small grains as they slowly deposited themselves on the ground after having paused a moment in mid air to be ruffled by short gusts of wind. More than once he had to cover his eyes and his face to avoid being

hit by that light rain, which at every step seemed to impede his steps. His feet were half sinking on that soft blanket, making his progress more uncertain.

The person he had phoned was Retez, the priest of the parish. Saverio hadn't hesitated to wake him up in the middle of the night, because he knew that he could do such a thing. They were bound by a very old friendship, and he was the first person Saverio thought of to talk to about what was happening. Retez was a good priest. His devotion to what he did was motivated, in Saverio's opinion, by the fact that he had made his commitment late in life. Back in their schooldays, Retez couldn't have cared less about religion. He considered it too abstract to be the object of his quick, active, and above all ambitious intelligence. At the time the two of them hadn't much in common.. Saverio was a pretty dull student, diligent enough to pass at the end of the year, absent minded in class, quiet with his classmates. Retez, on the other hand, was always ready to take part in any discussion, quick to answer the teacher's questions, and always ready to show off a talent which was, it had to be admitted, superior to most.

After finishing high school, Saverio decided to abandon his studies, and after a few years of quiet inactivity, he found easily a job at the post office. His friend meanwhile had left for a larger city, where he enrolled in a very good university. At that point, they lost track of each other, and it wasn't till many years later that Saverio met him again, this time dressed as a priest. Though he was astonished by his friend's life-choice, it wasn't until they started seeing each other that he dared ask about the change. He thought that it would have been painful for his friend, or too exhausting to talk about it, believing as he did that this decision was the result of a profound crisis that had called into question all his past convictions.

He was already tired when he got to the square. Despite the umbrella, a sudden gust of wind sent the sand flying onto his clothes, face and hair, making Saverio feel thoroughly dirty. He proceeded to the house near the church, got to the main door and rang the doorbell once. Soon, Retez opened the door and let him in, without uttering a word. Once inside, Saverio lay the umbrella against the wall, shook the dust from his clothes and followed his friend into a large room which contained a wall full of books on one side and on the opposite side a crucifix above a long mahogany table. He bade him sit down, then offered him a cup of coffee, poured one for himself and began to drink.

In the following seconds the two men remained silent. Retez was wearing a black shirt with his collar unbuttoned, and sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Despite the hour of the night he didn't appear sleepy. Every now and then his small clear eyes glanced in the direction of his friend.

Saverio placed his empty cup on the metal tray.

So, have you noticed what's is happening? he asked quickly, as if to rid his mouth of the words.

Yes, I saw it. I don't understand it. But there must be an explanation.

explanation for what?

For why the sand is falling from the sky. By tomorrow, the papers and TV will be full of it, and we'll learn a little more.

What more is there to learn? interrupted Saverio, standing up with a sudden movement that caused the chair to fall behind him.

Whatever there is to know, they'll tell us. Whether it's a passing sand storm, as I believe, or something different, I can't say just now. But please do calm down.

You're still looking for answers. You also think everything will be over soon. I would like to think that, but I'm afraid I don't believe it

And why don't you believe it?

Because what's happening it's too strange. There are no easy explanations.

But what other reasons could there be?

It's not about reasons. I'm not reasoning, now. But I have a clear feeling. Something tells me that we have to prepare ourselves for a difficult period. .

We who?

We who live in this town. Myself, my family, my colleagues at work. Our friends and our enemies. The people we don't know, and the ones we pass in the street without greeting.

Saverio lifted the chair back up from the floor and sat on it.

I never asked you this before, he went on, but I want you to answer with sincerity.

I'm listening to you, said Retez who in the meantime had poured himself another coffee.

Do you believe in God?

Retez placed the cup on the table without drinking from it.

Are you joking?

No, I'm not. Answer me.

Can a priest not believe in God?

That is not an answer.

Retez rose and went to stand next to his friend. He put a hand on his shoulder.

You are tired, Saverio. You should go back home. We'll talk about it tomorrow, when we know more.

There's no time to wait.

You already know my answer to your question.

I want to hear it from your lips.

I believe in God Saverio. In a God of tenderness and mercy such as the Bible teaches. In a God who can't bear to see suffering.

And what about sin? The sin that each of us carries inside the mother's womb? The Bible teaches that too. How can this God of yours accept sin?

God accepts sin, said the priest, only insofar as he renounces the exercise of His own judgment over mankind.

Because if He should exert His judgment over mankind, He would annihilate it for all the wrongs it's done. So it is written. But for the sake of making the world live, God can renounce judgment.

How?

In the name of mercy, Saverio. Of His infinite love for mankind.

But you know that in renouncing judgment, it is no longer possible to separate good from evil. And if it should happen, the world would be sentenced to mass confusion...

This could be the case. And so?

Saverio remained silent. He sat down again, keeping his eyes fixed on the floor.

It's just sand, said Retez. A passing storm of sand. Tomorrow it will be over. Calm down. And go home.

He looked at the clock hanging from the wall.

In less than three hours you must go to work. It will be a long day, and if nothing else we'll certainly have a better sense of what's going on.

Saverio didn't respond. He rose as if expecting to be accompanied to the door. Then he took the dusty umbrella from where he'd put it and went outside without saying goodbye.

When he arrived at the house it was five in the morning. Opening the door he feared that someone was already awake, but the empty darkness that that welcomed him in the entrance reassured him. Before entering, he paused for long time on the landing trying to brush the sand from his clothes. He was hot and sweaty from the long walk. He went to the bathroom, stripped, and threw the dirty clothes in the hamper and turned on the shower. He carefully washed his hair and lathered his body with soap, studying the small grains piling up at his feet before they disappeared down the drain. He went back to the bedroom, turned on the lamp on the night table. His wife was still asleep in the same position as before. He opened the closet and dressed in clean clothes. Then he went to his study. By this time of day he would usually be seated at his desk reading something, but this morning even the thought of that habit kept him from performing it. From a corner in the room he pulled the velvet-covered armchair and moved it in front of the window. He sat down and remained still, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, and looked at the sand falling and the darkness of the night giving way to a feeble light. He thought about his discussion with Retez and in contrast to other times felt no remorse for his sudden fit of temper and for the anxiety that had seized him. But he wasn't nervous anymore. He stretched his legs in front of him, rested his head against the back of the chair and without having the time to notice it he fell asleep.

It was already seven thirty when he was awakened by the noise of the door opening. He opened his eyes and the first image that he saw was that of his wife. She was barefooted, still in her pajamas, and evidently just up from bed.

What time is it? asked Saverio.

It's late, answered Cristina. But that's not important. Did you see what's going on? Didn't you notice? Look.

She went to the window and opened it. A gust of wind entered the room, showering her with dust.

Does this seem normal to you? she said.

No, it is not normal. But it's happening.

So you were right last night.

It's not about being right. It's about something that neither of us knows anything about. That perhaps no one knows as yet. But let's think about breakfast. Is Angela up?

Breakfast? You want breakfast?

Yes, and you should have some too. Go, now. I'll be with you in a moment.

When he found himself alone again in the room, his first thought was to call the office. He did so and waited a long time before someone answered. It was the guard. Saverio asked him if somebody had managed to make it into work, and if the bosses had told him what the employees were supposed to do that day, but the man at the other end of the line couldn't tell him anything precise. He merely responded that no one was in yet, and he wasn't sure they would be, what with all that sand. Then he hung up.

In the kitchen Saverio found his wife and his mother sitting at the table, talking in low voices. He turned the flame off under the hissing coffee pot, and poured the coffee in the cups. Seating himself next to Cristina, he began to drink, while inviting the others to do the same. Maria, he noticed, had a very tired expression on her face. Doubtless she had spent the night sleepless, either in bed or perhaps in front of a window, quietly contemplating the rain falling from the sky.

After drinking his coffee, Saverio turned on the radio, fiddling for a while among stations until finding one evening news. He heard the voice of a man reading a communiqué' as follows:

A completely unexpected meteorological phenomenon is now taking place in the town of R. At the moment it is impossible to find a plausible explanation for the dense rain of sand, which is falling over its center. The experts are already at work and are proposing a variety of different hypotheses, but for the time being they can't predict the duration of the phenomenon. The appropriate authorities are working out an emergency plan to alleviate the citizens' difficulties, and the police have been alerted to solve any major problems that may arise. Citizens are kindly requested to stay at home while waiting for the developments of the situation, which will be promptly communicated to them by and, TV and newspapers..

The voice was then followed by a commercial and this in turn by a piece of light music. Saverio turned the radio off and sat down next to his mother.

Well, we'll just have to wait - he said. Let's pretend this is a vacation day.

Angela stepped into the kitchen, dressed and ready for school, and seemed amazed to see her father still at home. She stood silent a moment with her rucksack on her shoulders, then suddenly went to the French window, glanced out, let the rucksack slither to the floor and put the palms of her hands on the glass. Saverio got to his feet and stood next to her.

Do you see it?

His daughter didn't answer. Her eyes were fixed on the street, and every now and again she raised them to the sky, to follow the slow falling of the sand.

What is it? she whispered finally, as if asking the question of herself.

Sand, answered Saverio. It's been falling since last night, but there's nothing to be afraid of. The radio said that it would soon be over, and that in the meantime, its better not to go outside.

But I have a test today, at school.

The schools are closed. So are the offices. Everything is closed.

Angela looked at her mother, who had been sitting there quietly, and then she ran out of the kitchen, went to the living room and turned on the TV. A local channel was broadcasting some recent images, with off-camera commentary. On the totally white streets of the town, behatted pedestrians were busy shoveling the dust from the pavement in front of the windows of the shops, while cars with their lights on moved slowly to and fro. The parks and the grass had vanished under the steady rain, as had the trees with their bent branches.

She turned the TV off and went to the window. She was far from being worried. It seemed to her in fact a great novelty, and she was curious to know how it would end; she wanted to talk it over with her friends, to go outside and walk on the sand. She went back to the kitchen, drank a glass of water and spoke to her mother.

I was thinking of going outside and seeing what it's like, before it stops.

You aren't going anywhere. Didn't you hear what your father said? We must stay home, we still don't know what this rain is.

Sand is sand, mother.

It could be dangerous.

Why?

It could make you sick. As I just said, we don't know anything yet.

Angela looked at his father.

We could go out together, just for a few minutes. I want to see it..

All right, answered Saverio. Put something on, I'll go to fetch my raincoat and the umbrella. We'll just go for a quick walk, he added to his wife.

Once outside, Angela ran to the center of the road, kneeled down, plunged her hands into the sand, then raised them and let the sand sift through her fingers, repeating the gesture several times. It is so soft, she said, almost shouting in her excitement. It looks just like ash.

A canvas rain hood covered her head and she was smiling as she stood up, took a few steps, and with her foot dug a hole to uncover the black surface of the asphalt. From a few meters away, Saverio watched. He wanted to leave, to tell his daughter to go back home, and at the same time he wanted very much to stay there with her. The rain had lessened, the wind had dropped and the visibility was better. He had the sudden idea that they might go to the sea, to see how the snow had affected that area of the town. He proposed it to Angela, who agreed right away. Off they went, keeping close to one another.

The town of R extends for a few kilometers along the coast. To the east there are low hills of volcanic origin, while to the west it is bordered by a seafront that runs in a nearly straight line for several kilometers, leading from the small port at the north end to the railway station. The sea that bathes this area is always agitated, rife with currents, and cold even in summer, when the temperature can climb above 100 degrees. On some summer days, a hot wind blows from the south, whipping over roads that have been designed a century earlier, just after the earthquake which almost totally destroyed the area. This explains why most of the houses and public buildings are at most two or three stories, and boast thick walls and deep foundations. Between the sea and the hills where most of the recent building has been, there is a height difference of a hundred meters, and the town is split lengthwise, by steep slopes and in some places by flights of staircases leading from one level to the other.

After 15 minutes, father and daughter reached the seashore, near the harbor. The sea was absorbing the dust from the sky, and its color had turned a yellowish orange. In the distance a big black ship was moving so slowly as if to seem completely still in the water.

The promenade was divided in two lanes, one for each direction, separated by a lightly sloping median strip, full of tropical trees. Angela left Saverio's side again and went to find shelter under the branches of a big ficus whose roots spread irregularly over the pavement. She called her father, telling him to join her, and leaned against its trunk of the tree, which was whitish and rough.

It is very beautiful here, she said, taking off her hood while her black hair, freed from its constraint, tumbled to her shoulders. Much more beautiful than I've ever seen it, in fact. We should take a picture before it's too late

Saverio didn't answer, and went on looking towards the sea, the sea he'd known since he was born; that place where as a boy he'd swum on some spring days with his schoolmates, and where he'd passed long summer afternoons, alone or looking for company among the people who crowded the nearby streets.

He took a breath, trying to smell the odor of iodine and salt, but could not. The rain of sand was lighter now, the grains falling intermittently. The ship had crossed a distance, and was entering into the port. The faraway whistle of a siren came through the air to break the silence, and the lighter sky suddenly looked less inclement. A seagull flew low, and landed on the dusty roof of a car, where he began to caw. It was a hollow cry that Saverio kept hearing even after the bird had flown away and disappeared.