

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

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In the Event of the Zombie Apocalypse

The greatest source of anxiety in my adult life have been girlfriends with Literature MAs and perverted notions about life's sense for narrative, on a mission to find the roots of my neuroses – fear of flying, of motorway queues – in the disturbing childhood they invent for me.

In fact, the most disturbing part of my childhood was the puzzlement of my peers, similar, though less malevolent, than my future girlfriends' concern.

"What's wrong with your dad?" The stress always falling on the last word: dads, by definition, weren't meant to malfunction.

For the longest time I wondered how these kids got their intel, until one day, as I chased Camilla Baluani around the playground, I heard my dad talking to hers about ICBMs and megadeaths, the likelihood of SSBs (missile-carrying submarines) infiltrating the Mediterranean.

My brother Marco used to shrug the jokes away. He was popular: nobody picked on him. I was a juicier target, and questions would compound until my torturers – playmates and friends until boredom pushed them to cruelty – had me in tears.

My worst episode happened when I was twelve. I remember nothing. Apparently, it's not uncommon to black out during rage fits. I went ballistic in the school cafeteria, and shouted that one day something horrible would happen, and I (not my dad: *I*) would be proven right. I was sent to the principal, and that was the end of it.



My dad had a moustache and a flattop. He was stick-thin, and could never work up an appetite. He was prone to bladder infections, and needed the toilet very frequently, but wasn't paranoid about this. In the Summer, when he drove me and my brother six hundred miles to our grandma in Apulia, we just took frequent breaks. If no gas station appeared, we parked on the hard shoulder and peed on the guardrail.

He worked in a factory in West Milan that made shopping trolleys. He was an AC Milan fan with a seasonal pass. He played cards with my mom almost every night, Scala 40, no other game.

He was also a survivalist, and that's what I'll be talking about, but please, *please* remember he was other things, too. God knows I never do.



"Survivalist" will summon the wrong image. Hicks with guns in some Nebraska backwater. My dad was simply obsessed with cataclysm. He strived all his life to prepare us for the apocalypse he deemed inevitable. "It's history," he told Camilla's father at the playground. "Everyone could see a war was coming in the 30s, and it makes no sense to ignore the signs around us now."

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Nuclear war remained his favorite catastrophe. Milan's strategic importance in the European theatre pained him to no end. He was constantly planning to move us to the countryside, even better to the Alps. His dream was to take us to Switzerland. A secluded, inherently neutral country, where every resident was required by law to own a fallout shelter.

No such provisions were made in Baggio, our neighborhood, but some public buildings had reinforced basements, legacies of World War II bombings, that it was understood would serve as emergency retreats during a Russian, Chinese, or why not, American attack. ("You never know," he used to say. "We were supposed to side with the Germans until the day before we entered World War I"). My dad, who otherwise showed no interest in politics – he voted Christian Democracy and later Berlusconi in the belief that they would keep international relationships stable the longest – applied to join the commission that supervised the state of these shelters. He was accepted. It was all highly irregular, but the shelters were in a dismal state, even in ideal conditions they would have been ridiculously insufficient to deal with the most feather-weight nuclear warhead, and it was easier for the commissioners to let my dad join, than to risk antagonizing him and have him kick up a fuss.

He had keys to the shelters, or at least he knew where the keys were kept. He could make sure the shelves were well-stocked with canned peaches. That the stairs to the shelter closest to our home remained unobstructed and well lit.



The manuals started appearing after I entered high school. He condensed the most updated guidance around various nightmare scenarios, from pandemics to chemical weapons, into twenty-five-page handbooks (bound, with plastic covers) which we would find on the kitchen table at breakfast.

He asked about them over dinner. He wouldn't quiz us, wouldn't mark us – he was never there with a clipboard and chronometer, timing us as we ran to the shelter around the corner – but such ill-concealed disappointment trickled down his face any time he saw we hadn't read his manuals that pretty soon we started studying them cover to cover, with no need for reward or punishment.

I can laugh about it now, shrug like Marco always did – at the very least I can write it down – but there was a time when my knowledge of the minutiae of annihilation, my familiarity with the impact radius of Tridents and the speed of infection of an airborne plague spreading through Milan's public transport, felt like an unfair violation of my peace of mind, a curse I carried with me always. On some days it was as if anything I encountered, any friendly face and random phrase and crawling thought, hyperlinked back to that terrible knowledge.



When I was twenty-six I spent the Christmas holidays at my parents'. I'd been living abroad for a few years, working in a laboratory in Geneva. (Not the big one). I didn't visit Milan often.

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As soon as I arrived, I checked the kitchen cupboards for water bottles and canned fruit.

During Boxing Day dinner, over a thin broth meant to cleanse our bodies from days of excess, my dad asked me what was the best procedure to cope with a massive earthquake in an urban environment. An easy one. I remained silent.

"How's Telma doing?" my mom asked.

"Why, so he can pass the manuals down to the grandkids?"

Telma had left me a month ago. Maybe that's why I was so bitey.

"I'm only trying to protect you," he said.

"Dad, when will it end?"

"It won't, Ugo. The risks are out there. It makes no sense to pretend otherwise."

"What makes no sense is wasting your life fighting calamities you cannot possibly stop."

"What little I can do, I'll do it."

It is the most common feeling among returning offspring: the sense that nothing has changed since you left. That by sitting at the old kitchen table you have traveled back to the age of sixteen, or twelve. I was prepared for it, but not for my dad's unapologetic logic. "Dad, what you have is a sickness. You should take medications."

He laughed it off. "People who install fire alarms – are they crazy, too?"

I stormed to my room and returned with one of his manuals. I slammed it on the table, upsetting a bowl of shredded carrots in lemon juice. "*In the Event of the Zombie Apocalypse!*"

He laughed again, without looking at me. "It could happen."

"Zombies could happen?"

"Fantasy stories have been right before. Jules Verne—"

"Dad, are you seriously saying you believe in zombies?"

"It's just a word," he said, flushing red and raising his voice. "It means rabid people, because of disease, riots. I wrote *zombie* on the cover because I thought you'd find it funny."

Seeing him struggle brought me no joy. I wondered what kind of person he was outside the house; what his colleagues thought of him. He had no friends I knew of.



The logic was what got me.

I know people whose parents are depressed, or alcoholics. You can pity those. You can pity my dad, if you want, but he would never let you. He always thought he was doing the right thing; that everyone else, foolishly but unsurprisingly, was being careless. That's why he spoke of nuclear

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winter with the other dads at the playground. To him, that was just sensible, the way some evangelicals will latch onto any chance to talk to you about Jesus.

“Which is proof that he was actually *crazy*, right?” I asked Marco’s husband, a therapist, the only time they invited me over for dinner. He didn’t have an answer.



I don’t know what my father would have made of Covid. “He would have loved it,” I said to my brother when we last spoke, but I instantly felt base. My father did not rejoice in suffering. He would have treated it with calm sobriety: he was prepared to deal with much higher mortality rates, anyway.

He died a few years ago. He had himself checked, and was diagnosed with multiple tumors. He was fifty-four. Later, asbestos was discovered in the walls of the factory where he worked, together with all sorts of toxins in the microplastics he breathed daily. The owner of the company moved to Switzerland to escape arrest. He made the front pages with a few statements describing Italy as a barbaric, treacherous country, fundamentally hostile to entrepreneurship.

My dad was quiet in the last few weeks. We took him on a trip to the mountains. My mom, after a lifetime of peaceful but unflinching opposition, proposed that they moved away from Baggio, to the countryside. He refused. He spent all day on his feet, bent forward under the weight of his own brittle skeleton, looking outside the window. When I got him out for a coffee at the café on the corner, he would stop every few steps, looking at the apartment buildings towering above us, at manholes, lampposts, every ridiculous fragment of Milan, like a man surrounded by enigmas.

One night when both my brother and I stopped by for dinner we brought all the manuals he’d written to the kitchen, and asked him to quiz us. He grimaced and gave us a curt, cutting sign with his hand: *take them away*. It was the only unkind gesture I ever saw him make.