

## Call of the Grigna Mountain

It's the afternoon of a clear September day, so rare in Milan and so unique in its splendor. It's the end of a summer that, if it weren't for the exams of those two make-up classes, it would be perfect.

The air is fresh, pristine, and pure, it tastes of mountain streams, of glaciers, of uncontaminated silence, of unconquered peaks. The call is irresistible. My eyes wonder outside the window and here are the Alps in their magnificence. The rocky peaks of the Alps stare at me from their perch at the end of the road. It looks like I could touch them, they bewitch my thoughts, and they invade my senses with a seraphic, piercing, inebriating harmony.

"Giorgio, it's the second time I ask you. Can you tell me the difference between a corporation and a limited partnership?" asks Mario gesturing from the opposite side of the dining room table.

"Uh, what?" I said, and for a fraction of a second I cursed him for interrupting my daydream. "Well, yes, so..." but at that point, whether the corporations were an integral part of the coming exams or not was not important and I interrupted the explanation to ask him if he had seen recently his cousin Guido and his friend Enzo, the mountain guide. I always asked myself if Enzo really was a certified alpine mountain guide. He was more or less our age and I wasn't twenty years old yet, but those were the sixties, the years of innovation, of creativity and anyone had license to create a profession for himself.

Anyway, we had talked about climbing Grigna and for me, exams or not, the moment had arrived to make a decision, set a date and prepare for the climbing expedition.

In a second, exams and corporations were forgotten. A couple of phone calls and half an hour later we were in conference with Guido and Enzo on the sidewalk in front of our door. We decided to do the "big climb" three days later. Franco, Mario's brother offered transportation with his Fiat 1100 only if he could be included in the mountain expedition group. The assembly of the newly formed alpine club accepted by unanimous consent and, since his car could legally have four people only, I would have to follow in my Lambretta. It was O.K. with me. To me every excuse was good to use my "bike".

Our expedition would be radically different from all others. Instead of starting the ascent in the morning and coming back in the afternoon, we decided to start the climb in the afternoon, wait for sundown at the summit and then descend back to Rifugio Stella Alpina (Edelweiss Alpine Lodge.) This plan

would call for part of the descent in semi-darkness and part in complete darkness.

The weather forecast was excellent, we had stable high-pressure conditions and thoughts of the new adventure filled us with excitement.

Finally, the day of the big climb is here. We are jumping out of our skin in anticipation. The sun is warm, the air is dry and a light breeze blows from the West: ideal ingredients for the perfect excursion. “Grigna today you will be ours!”

We spend the morning with the last preparation chores like going to the supermarket to buy cold cuts and bread for the sandwiches and batteries for our flashlights to be used during our descent in darkness, set up our backpacks, clean my scooter and fill it up with gas.

We eat something quickly and leave.

Viale Zara immediately presents us with an unforgettable, surreal, picture-perfect spectacle. It almost looks as if the asphalt ends at the base of the Resegone Range that majestically stands out against the blue sky. An idyllic canvass spread across the road by a wizard in jest.

As we leave Monza on our way to Lecco, the horizon broadens. Some farmhouses here and there stand mostly at the edge of the fields cultivated with millet and vineyards whose vines are loaded with plump grapes that have a hard time concealing themselves behind the wilting leaves. The fragrance that exudes from those rows of vines overpowers my nostrils and anticipates a glorious year for local wines. The Brianza, as this region is called, at this time of the year has the scent of the hay, of autumn flowers, of fruit and...”Damn, that truck in front is spewing hits venomous exhaust on me. I bet its motor hasn’t seen an oil change since the time of Cecco Beppe, the Austrian emperor!” Never mind, it is only a small drawback that doesn’t take anything away from the landscape, a small blemish that disappears at the second crossway re-instating my daydream.

Time flies and in a jiffy we arrive in Lecco. More than a city Lecco seems to me like an overgrown village where everyone knows each other. We stop for gas and people look at us as if we are Martians. The truth is that the “Milanesi” in this part of the world are easily pointed out. You can tell they come from the city; their faces are pale, their attire is sophisticated, and they speak as if they had a dictionary pending from their lips. In other words, they are foreigners!

It’s nobody’s fault if, on the other end, we “Milanesi” look at these Lario’s residents as if we are seeing aliens, and aliens from our world you can tell

they are. A lot of them are tanned – maybe that is because of the sun rays reflected by the lake or maybe simply because they spend more time than we do outdoors – they speak a dialect with a comical inflection that kills me because I’d love to understand what they are saying, but I can only put together four words in a whole sentence. I should be able to understand more, because I had spent two years near Como, which is only a shotgun distance from here. Obviously this dialect is much different from the one in Como. They also have a different perception of time. Their clocks appear to run much slower than our clocks in Milan. I think they enjoy life by taking in every small pleasure out of it. That is one thing we “Milanesi” cannot do, taken as we are by the frenzy of our busy modern life – and this is not an advertising slogan -, we speed by too quickly; Frenzy is in our blood. It conditions us. Even now we ask ourselves why it takes the gas station attendant so much time to print our receipt. Why? We have time; there is no reason to rush. And yet...

Maybe this is the underlying reason for our adventure, to make up for some of the time wasted chasing our own tails, to broaden our horizon, not just the visual, but the interior one as well, giving our soul a chance to find once again the joy to live, the same joy that many “aliens” had found outside of Milan’s walls.

We resume our trip. We enter Valassina Valley, and in a short time we arrive in Ballabio. The road to Pian dei Resinelli is very steep and frequently winding. Every once in a while we encounter a bus that has a hard time negotiating some of the switchbacks. I wouldn’t want to be in the shoes of those drivers who, not only have to deal with the constant twisting of the road, but also with the occasional car driver who refuses to back up and give them room to maneuver.

Here is Pian dei Resinelli with its legendary Siberian taiga style birch trees on a green plateau, a velvety and spongy carpet, dotted with flowers whose scent mixes in with the scent of wood and resin. We are now at 3600 feet and the air is oxygenated, clean, alluring, precursor of good news. We let this almost festive wave carry us for a moment to continue then our last motorized leg of our trip until we reach Rifugio Stella Alpina.

We park right in front of the footpath that will take us to our destination, the Southern Grigna, also called Grignetta. Not to waste any time, we don’t even care to pay a visit to the lodge. We put on the backpacks with the supplies, get started up the path and, at a good clip, we move towards “our” Grigna, because, in time, it will be ours.

The sun is high above the horizon and the sky is as blue and clear, as seldom I had seen it. A few timid clouds dot the Western sky, a brush stroke just to make more interesting the incoming sunset.

The dirt footpath is lined at times by a stonewall, by blackberry briars, or hazelnut bushes, and other times by chestnut trees. The temptation to stop and collect those blessed fruits is great, but greater is the anticipation of the spectacle waiting for us at the summit, so we clench our teeth and ignore the palate craving for those delights postponing the bucolic feast; there is a peak to conquer, we can't delay any longer.

We engage then in a short descent towards a meadow at the end of which a raging brook offers its icy waters to us. We drink it on the go and then we ascend into a shady pine forest that cools our first sweat. We walk under the canopy for quite a long time. The path becomes serpentine. Tracts uphill alternate to tracts downhill very frequently. The shade allows a sustained speed jumping at times over a brook or crouching under a low branch, or walking like ducks not to slide over dead leaves collected in spots where the sun doesn't reach.

I have to say that in that forest none of us felt like talking. It was like being in a cathedral of conifers whose austerity called for our respect and we, in a mutual and implied agreement, conformed to nature's request.

We exit that refreshing oasis and abruptly find ourselves on the side of a mountain. The path is narrower now and not always flat, so much so that sometimes we have to walk with a limp where the left leg feels longer than the right one and has to compensate for the weight of its counterpart. Not far above us we see the first high mountain rocks. Below, a steep green incline. We are tempted to roll down like we used to do when we were little, but the trundle-a-barrel play in this spot is about three hundred yards long. Maybe we shouldn't heed to the temptation, also because we would have to spend additional energy to regain our present position.

We climb a little more and find ourselves on the crest of the mountain. The wind surprises us blowing on the right side and comes up from the rocky and very steep slope, completely different from the calm and green slope on the left from which we have come. Now we really feel like mountain climbers: a few feet separate us from the menacing drop that is spitting on us its glacial winds. We, on the other end, undaunted, look forward; we can't let that intimidate us especially when we know this is coming from a mountain that has been conquered hundreds of times before us. In front of us a ridge and then, there it is Grigna with its first real challenge, a deep canyon littered with

rocks and boulders with the majority of them piled up at the base, a hazardous formation called “ghiaione”.

It is true, Grigna was conquered many times before but its challenges shouldn't be underestimated, as Enzo explains. The “ghiaione” is an uneven pile of rocks and boulders kept precariously in place only by adhesion and ready to fall on top of our heads at the first unusual and abrupt noise. Therefore we resume our hike with caution, each a few yards from the other, choosing our steps carefully and, at the same time, keeping an eye on those boulders just in case they decide to tumble down.

In the unfortunate event this happens, we know that, unless a catastrophic rockslide occurs, it doesn't help to run for shelter, the available reaction time would be too short. The best course of action is to wait until the boulder is right above us and, at the last bounce, jump out of its way. This is because the uneven surface of the boulder and the irregularity of the terrain don't allow foreseeing the direction the boulder will take until that very moment.

Lessons I had learned from the Salesians in boarding school became life saving. A school friend, just to test the theory in a similar situation, made a loud Tyrolese sound. It's echo bounced from wall to wall and after that all hell broke loose. In a few seconds, a rockslide came cascading on top of us. Every one of us had to dodge quite a few of those boulders. Everybody, because of luck or as a result of a miracle, came out unscathed. I don't remember the punishment our school friend received for his bravado; however, considering the severity of the Salesians, I am sure it was exemplary.

Having surmounted this first obstacle, we follow the path up a steep ascent on the southern side of the mountain, coming back eastward at the top of the canyon, and here we have to go through a mandatory passageway of considerable difficulty, not as much as physical, but mental difficulty. In fact, hanging onto a fixed rope, you have to push yourself off a cliff and swing to the other side of the gorge. The pendulum is only two, three yards, but you're swinging over a crevasse whose bottom is at least three hundred yards below you. I confess the knot in my throat was harder than a rock. They tell you not to look down, but the thrill of the moment suggests otherwise and the adrenaline high tells you that maybe it was well worth it.

We find ourselves pushing our hearts back down from our throats into our chests while we continue slowly in a single line, but now things get even a little more difficult because during the last leg of our excursion we have to climb a thick rocky spire that doesn't offer any protection whatsoever. This time I don't look down, I focus my attention on the details in front of me: the

edelweiss in the moisture-laden crack, the slender but strong shrub sticking out of a fissure in the rock, Franco's boot moving slowly inches from my nose and then, finally, I see Enzo's hand easing me up to the top of the peak while he smiles at me with camaraderie. I sit on the floor and I rest for a few moments, happy but with my aching and shaking leg muscles. I look around. Grigna's top is shaped like a molar that has lost a cusp. After a narrow neck, on the highest part of the tooth a simple, and yet majestic iron cross extends its arms outwards. From my observation point it appears glued to the mountain in front of us.

I get up but not before having caught my breath first. Here the air is light. The altitude is 6,531 feet. It doesn't certainly top the Mont Blanc, but it gives you the same thrill, the same emotion. After the mandatory triumphal "Hurrah!" nobody says a word anymore. There is no need for it; the view is worth a thousand words, it takes our breath away, the same breath we had just regained. It pays us back for all the efforts and pain sustained during the climb with a peace and serenity that don't seem earthly. On top of this spire I have a strange feeling, I sense Grigna being suspended in the air among other mountains, a precious stone in the center of a crown made of fluctuating peaks. I suspect the filmmaker James Cameron has come here too, experienced the same illusion and owes to this magical scene the inspiration for the floating mountains of Avatar.

In front of us is the Northern Grigna Mountain; a little to the side in the Northwest sector is the Bernina Group with its snow-covered peaks; to the East, the Cervino and Monte Rosa Mountains; to the South, The Padana Valley where a glitter flashes suddenly. We believe it is the Madonnina – the golden statue of the Virgin Mary on top of the Duomo in Milan saluting us and with that we improvise an a cappella chorus and start singing, "O mia bella Madunina che te brilet de luntan... - Oh my beautiful little Virgin Mary that shines from far away..." accompanied by the call of two eagles circling above us.

We are closing in on sunset and we start seeing the first shadows in the most hidden valleys. The sun ignites the Cervino Mountain that with its prismatic shape reflects the last daylight multiplying its intensity. It is our western lighthouse, an orchestra maestro and at his phantasmagoric signal we begin our concert "Sul cappello, sul cappello che noi portiamo... - On the hat, on the hat that we wear..." then "Quel mazzolin dei fiori... - That bouquet of flowers..." and then again "Il Piave mormorava... - The river Piave murmured..." and the one that couldn't be missing, the hymn to Grigna "Alla guerriera bella e senza amore... - To the beautiful lady warrior incapable of

loving...” And every note reverberates down into the valleys. Grigna and the other mountains reply. They sing with us. They celebrate life. They dispel every pain giving us a sweet sensation of well-being that quenches our own souls, slow the blood flow in our veins, and bestow upon us an endless peace. A seraphic peace I had never experienced before. Here, on top of the world, nothing can touch us; every worry, any pain melts away, vanishes into thin air.

In time with the notes of our alpine songs, the shadows in the valleys become longer. The eagles retire to their nests and in my mind come the image of the eaglets that doze away with the lullaby of our “Signore delle cime...- Lord of the peaks...”

In the meantime the western sky goes from a bright yellow to a purple red, to orange that, filtered by the highest clouds, becomes pink. Meanwhile in the East, by contrast, the sky gradually changes from a powder blue to an intense blue and then to a deep velvety blue that, at the extreme oriental point turns into a dark coal-black that seems impenetrable to the light. Our gaze spans from the glory of the day to the mystery of the darkest night without almost even moving our head. It's like being in two different places at the same time. You feel like you are transported to the edge of reality. It looks like a window into eternity just opened up in front of you.

At the last notes of “...la Grigna, una montagna ripida e ferrigna...- ... Grigna, a steep and iron-clad mountain...” the sunset stretches its last colored fingers as to say good-bye. It's time for the alpine chorus to head back. The ever-increasing shadows dictate a difficult separation from this sublime place that has presented us with so many great moments, emotions like we never felt before that will stay with us until the end of our days. Reluctantly we hoist and shoulder our backpacks and, with a flashlight in our hand, we start the descent from a path a little less exciting than the one we took in the morning, but just as challenging considering that now we have a hard time figuring out where to put our feet.

We follow Enzo in single line, each of us immersed in his own thoughts, busy reviewing the day's events that - hard to admit in public - have caused us to mature just a little more than the previous day.

The descent during darkness requires more time than allocated, so the supermarket batteries, one by one, start to die. A real bummer because now it is a little overcast and there is total darkness. Only Renzo's flashlight shows some vital signs, perhaps because it's the biggest of all. The only option we have at this point is to match Enzo's steps one by one trying to guess the terrain morphology by relying only on the sound produced by the shoes of the

buddy in front of us. We appreciate in those minutes that seem as long as hours, the challenges the visually impaired face when walking. It goes without saying that our respect for those folks has increased tenfold.

Then, the miracle! The mass of clouds that hovered over our heads disappears and in its place is a full moon whose splendor is not astral in nature. Its brightness and shape remind us of a local city park street lamp instead. Its light is certainly more powerful than Renzo's flashlight, so much so that we can now increase our speed and make up some of the lost time. Even when we reach the conifer forest, the light emanated by the providential astral body allows us to continue our journey. We cover the last miles almost jogging and we arrive at the Rifugio Stella Alpina in the thick of the night, just in time to stop the Rifugio's men from dispatching the Emergency Alpine Corp to look for us, considering that our car and my Lambretta were the only vehicles left unclaimed in the parking lot after sundown.

After the inevitable scolding and our profuse apologies, not very sincere to be perfectly honest, we took possession of our vehicles and started descending towards the valley, which, after an enchanting day like the one we just had, looked like a valley of sorrow.

The night mist enveloped my Lambretta and me whispering in my ear "Come into my arms; today has been a dream, a beautiful dream, nothing more" but I knew very well it wasn't so. Our late summer excursion had topped all our expectations and more. Nothing and no one could convince me otherwise. The thrills, the emotions of that day were not destined to be shelved and forgotten. On the contrary, they had taken place in my heart as well as in the hearts of my adventure buddies, a special place where we will be able to take refuge in the future during life's difficult moments; a place that will welcome us with its warmth and bestow upon us a love of life that only a few of life's experiences like this one can offer.

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