The Mnemagogs

Dr. Morandi (but he wasn't yet used to hearing himself called "Doctor") got off the bus intending to remain incognito for at least a couple of days, but he soon realized that this would be impossible. The owner of the Café Alpino gave him a neutral welcome (evidently she was either not curious enough or not keen enough); but from her smile, a combination of deferential, maternal, and slightly mocking, he understood that he had already been identified as "the new doctor" and had no chance of a reprieve. My degree must be written all over my face, he thought; *tu es medicus in aeternum*, and, what's worse, everyone will notice. Morandi found irrevocable things distasteful and, at least for the moment, he was disposed to see the entire matter as an enormous and perpetual nuisance. "Something akin to the trauma of birth," he concluded to himself, nonsensically.

. . . In the meantime, as the first consequence of his lost anonymity, he needed to go and find Montesanto without delay. He returned to the café in order to retrieve the letter of introduction from his suitcase, and then began, under the merciless sun, to search the deserted town for the nameplate on Montesanto's door.

He had a difficult time finding it, and succeeded only after much useless circling about; he hadn't wanted to ask anyone for directions, as he thought he detected an unfriendly inquisitiveness on the faces of the few people he did encounter.

He had expected the nameplate to be old, but he found it to be older than anything he had imagined, covered in verdigris, the name almost illegible. All the shutters on the house were closed, and the lower façade was faded and peeling. Lizards darted away rapidly and silently as he approached.

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Montesanto himself came down to open the door. He was a tall, portly old man, his eyes nearsighted yet lively amid the tired and heavy features of his face. He moved with the quiet solid confidence of a bear. He was in shirtsleeves, without a collar; the shirt was wrinkled and of dubious cleanliness.

It was cold and nearly pitch-dark on the stairs and then up in his office. Montesanto sat down, and offered Morandi a particularly uncomfortable chair. Twenty-two years in here, he thought with a mental shiver, while the other man lingered over the letter of introduction. He looked around, his eyes growing accustomed to the gloom.

On the desk, letters, magazines, prescriptions, and other pieces of paper whose purpose was by now indiscernible had yellowed and accumulated to an impressive thickness. A long spider’s thread, rendered visible by the dust clinging to it, hung down from the ceiling and swayed weakly in the imperceptible breath of the midday air. A glass-fronted cupboard held a few antiquated instruments and a few small bottles; the liquid inside had corroded the glass, marking the level at which the bottles had been preserved for too long. On the wall was a large and strangely familiar photograph of “Senior Medical Students, 1911.” The

photograph was, in fact, well-known to him: he identified the square forehead and strong chin of his father, Morandi Senior; and right next to him (ah, how difficult to recognize!) was the same man here before him, Ignazio Montesanto, thin, neat, and frightfully young, with the aura of an intellectual hero and martyr, so fashionable among senior undergraduates of the time.

When he had finished reading, Montesanto put the letter on the mass of papers on his desk, where it disappeared without a trace.

"Well," he said finally; "I am very happy that fate, fortune . . ." and he finished the sentence with an indistinct mumble followed by a long silence. The old doctor leaned his chair back on its two rear legs and turned his eyes toward the ceiling. Morandi decided to wait for the other man to continue the conversation; the silence was beginning to weigh on him when Montesanto suddenly started to speak.

He spoke at length, first with many pauses, then more rapidly; his countenance became animated, his bright eyes lively and intelligent in his weary face. Morandi, to his surprise, realized that he was feeling a

definite sympathy for the old man. This soliloquy was a grand holiday that Montesanto was permitting himself. Occasions to speak (and he clearly knew how to speak, knew its importance) must have been rare for him, brief returns to an old vitality of thought by now, perhaps, lost.

Montesanto told stories: about his brutal professional initiation on the battlefields and in the trenches of the other war; about his attempt at a university career, which embarked on with enthusiasm, endured with apathy, and abandoned amid the indifference of his colleagues, had sapped all his initiatives; about his voluntary exile as a family doctor in a remote location, in search of something too unknowable ever to find; then about his solitary daily life, as a stranger in the middle of a community of simple, carefree people, both good and evil, but for him so distant as to be unreachable. He spoke of the past's definitive dominance over the present, and of the final suffocation of his every passion, apart from his faith in the dignity of thought and in the supremacy of spiritual things.

Strange old fellow, thought Morandi: he noticed that the other man had been talking for almost an hour without once looking him in the eye. Initially, he had tried at various points in the conversation to lead Montesanto to more concrete subjects, to ask him about the sanitary conditions of the community he served, about the outdated equipment, about the availability of pharmaceutical supplies, and perhaps also about his personal arrangements; but, owing to his own timidity as well as to a more considered reticence, he hadn't succeeded.

Montesanto was now silent, his face turned to the ceiling, his stare fixed on infinity. Evidently, the soliloquy was continuing inside his head. Morandi was embarrassed: he wondered if a reply was expected of him, if so what reply, and if the doctor was aware that he was not alone in his office.

He was aware. He suddenly let his chair fall onto all four of its legs and, in an oddly strained voice, said:

"Morandi, you are very young. I know that you're a good doctor, or, rather, will become one. I believe you're also a good man. In case you are not good enough to understand what I've told you and what I'm

about to tell you now, I hope that you are at least good enough not to laugh. And even if you do laugh, it won't be so bad: as you know, it's unlikely that we'll meet again. Besides, it's normal for the young to laugh at the old. Only I beg you not to forget that you are the first to learn these things about me. I won't flatter you by telling you that you seemed particularly worthy of my trust. I'm being honest when I say that you're the first opportunity that has presented itself to me in many years and probably the last."

"Go on," Morandi said simply.

"Morandi, have you ever noticed the power certain smells have for evoking certain memories?"

The blow came unexpectedly. Morandi swallowed hard; he said that he had noticed, and had even devised a tentative theory to explain it.

The change in subject was inexplicable. He privately determined it must be some kind of "mania" that all doctors succumbed to after reaching a certain age. Like Andriani: sixty-five, rich in fame, cash, and patients, he had still managed to bury in ridicule what remained of his career over the subject of neural reflexology.

With both hands, the other man clutched the corners of the desk and stared into the void, frowning. He continued:

"I will show you something unusual. During the years I was an assistant lecturer in pharmacology, I studied in some depth the action of stimulants when absorbed through the nose. I didn't obtain anything useful to humanity, but I did obtain one rather indirect result, as you will see.

"I dedicated much of my time later on as well to the question of olfactory sensations and their relationship to molecular structure. In my opinion, it's a very fertile field of study, and open to researchers who don't have a great deal of funding. Recently, I've had the pleasure of learning of others' work on the subject, and I'm familiar with your electronic theories, but the only aspect of the subject that interests me anymore is another. I am in possession of something that I don't believe anyone else in the world possesses.

"There are those who don't care about the past, who let the dead bury the dead. There are those who, instead, are galvanized by the past, and saddened by its continual disappearance. There are still others who

have the diligence to keep a diary, day after day, so that everything of theirs is saved from oblivion, and who preserve in their houses and on their persons material memories: a dedication in a book, a dried flower, a tuft of hair, photographs, old letters.

"As for myself, it horrifies me to think that even one of my memories might be erased, and I practice all of these methods myself, but I have also created another.

"No, it's not a matter of a scientific discovery: I just took advantage of my pharmacological experience to reconstruct, with precision and in a preservable form, a certain number of sensations that mean something to me.

"I call these sensations (I repeat, don't get the impression that I talk about them often) mnemagogs, or 'memory evokers.' Will you come with me?"

He got up and headed down the hall. Halfway along, he turned and added: "As you can imagine, they have to be used sparingly, if we don't want to diminish their evocative powers; furthermore, there's no need for me to tell you that they are inevitably personal.

Strictly so. One might even say they *are* me, since I, at least in part, consist of them."

He opened a cupboard. Inside were fifty or so small numbered bottles with ground-glass stoppers.

"Please, choose one."

Morandi looked at him, perplexed. Hesitantly he extended a hand and selected a bottle.

"Open it and sniff. What do you smell?"

Morandi breathed in deeply many times, at first with his eyes on Montesanto, then lifting his head and tilting it as one does when searching one's memory.

"This smells to me like a barrack."

Montesanto sniffed the bottle himself. "Not exactly," he responded. "Or, at least, not to me. It's the smell of classrooms in an elementary school; in fact, of *my* classroom in *my* school. I won't dwell on its composition. It contains unstable fatty acids and an unsaturated ketone. I understand that for you it means nothing. For me, it's my childhood.

"I also still have the photograph of my thirty-seven first-grade classmates, but the scent in this bottle far more readily calls to mind the interminable hours of tedium spent on my spelling primer, and the particular

state of mind of a child (I am that child!) who is waiting for his first spelling test. When I smell it (not now, it naturally requires a certain measure of concentration), when I smell it, my guts churn just as when I was seven years old and waiting for my turn to be examined by the teacher. Do you want to choose another?"

"I seem to remember . . . wait. . . . In my grandfather's house in the country there was a small room where he used to put the fruit to ripen . . ."

"Very good," Montesanto said with sincere satisfaction. "Exactly as the manuals describe it. I'm pleased that you've come across a professional smell: this is the smell of a diabetic's breath in the acetonemic phase. With a few more years of practice, I'm sure you would have come to the same conclusion yourself. You know, of course, that the smell is an unfavorable sign, a prelude to coma.

"My father died of diabetes fifteen years ago. It wasn't a quick or merciful death. My father meant a great deal to me. I sat up with him for endless nights, powerlessly witnessing the progressive obliteration of his personality. Those vigils weren't wasted. Many of

my beliefs were shaken, much of my world changed. So for me the smell is not about apples or diabetes but about that uniquely human struggle, solemn and purifying, of religious crisis."

"But this is just phenic acid!" Morandi exclaimed, smelling a third bottle.

"So it is. I thought that this smell might mean something to you as well. But of course it's not even a year since you stopped working shifts in a hospital, the memory hasn't yet matured. Because you would have noticed, don't you think? The evocative mechanism we're discussing here requires that the stimuli, having been activated repeatedly and associated with a place or state of mind, must then be inactive for a period of time of rather long duration. Besides, it has been commonly observed that memories, in order to have an impact, must contain a flavor of the past.

"I, too, have worked in hospitals and breathed phenic acid deeply into my lungs. But this took place a quarter of a century ago and since then phenol has ceased to constitute the basis of antiseptics. But in my time that's how it was, and so still today I can't smell it (not the chemically pure substance but this concoction, to which I have added traces of other substances, making it specific to me) without a complex array of things coming to mind, including a popular song, my youthful enthusiasm for Blaise Pascal, a certain springtime torpor in my back and knees, and the face of a fellow student, who I recently learned has become a grandmother."

This time he chose a bottle himself and handed it to Morandi. "I must confess that I still feel a certain pride in this one. Although I have never published the results, I consider this my true scientific achievement. I would like to hear your opinion."

Morandi sniffed it with care. It was certainly not a new smell. He might call it burned, dry, hot . . .

"When you rub together two pieces of flint . . . ?"

"Yes, that, too. I congratulate you on your olfactory acuity. You smell this scent in the mountains when rock is heated by the sun, especially in the aftermath of a rockslide. I assure you that it wasn't easy to reproduce these substances in a stabilized form in a test tube without altering the quality of the smell.

"I used to go to the mountains often, especially alone. When I reached the summit, I would lie down in the silent, still air and feel as if I had accomplished something significant. In those moments, and only if I thought about it, I would detect a faint smell rarely found anywhere else. As far as I'm concerned, it should be called the smell of peace achieved."

Having overcome his initial discomfort, Morandi was now intrigued by the game. He randomly uncorked a fifth bottle and held it out to Montesanto. "And this one?"

It gave off a faint smell of clean skin, face powder, and summer. Montesanto smelled it, replaced the bottle, and said briefly: "This is not a place or a time. It's a person."

He closed the cupboard; his tone had been decisive. Morandi mentally prepared to make some observations expressing his interest and admiration, but he couldn't get beyond a bizarre internal barrier and gave up on commenting aloud. He hastily took his leave with the vague promise of another visit and hurried down the stairs and out into the sun. He felt intensely embarrassed.

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After five minutes he was among the pines, furiously climbing to the highest point, trampling the soft forest floor, far from any path. It was pleasant to feel his muscles, his lungs, and his heart functioning fully, naturally, without need of intervention. It was wonderful to be twenty-four years old.

He picked up his pace, climbing as fast as he could, until he felt the blood beating hard in his ears. Then he lay down on the grass with his eyes closed, contemplating the red glow made by the sun inside his eyelids. He felt newly cleansed.

That, then, was Montesanto. . . . No, he hadn't needed to flee, he wouldn't become like him, he wouldn't let himself become like that. He wouldn't tell anyone about it. Not even Lucia, or Giovanni. It wouldn't be considerate.

Perhaps, in the end, only Giovanni . . . and in purely theoretical terms. . . . Was there anything he couldn't discuss with Giovanni? Yes, he would write to Giovanni all about it. Tomorrow. No (he looked at the time), right away. Perhaps the letter would even go out with the evening mail. Right away.