

## **There's a man in the habit of hitting me on the head with an umbrella**

Fernando Sorrentino

There's a man in the habit of hitting me on the head with an umbrella. It makes exactly five years today that he's been hitting me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I'm used to it.

I don't know his name. I know he's average in appearance, wears a gray suit, is graying at the temples, and has a common face. I met him five years ago one sultry morning. I was sitting on a tree-shaded bench in Palermo Park, reading the paper. Suddenly I felt something touch my head. It was the very same man who now, as I'm writing, keeps whacking me, mechanically and impassively, with an umbrella.

On that occasion I turned around filled with indignation: he just kept on hitting me. I asked him if he was crazy: he didn't even seem to hear me. Then I threatened to call a policeman. Unperturbed, cool as a cucumber, he stuck with his task. After a few moments of indecision, and seeing that he was not about to change his attitude, I stood up and punched him in the nose. The man fell down, and let out an almost inaudible moan. He immediately got back on his feet, apparently with great effort, and without a word again began hitting me on the head with the umbrella. His nose was bleeding and, at that moment, I felt sorry for him. I felt remorse for having hit him so hard. After all, the man wasn't exactly bludgeoning me; he was merely tapping me lightly with his umbrella, not causing any pain at all. Of course, those taps were extremely bothersome. As we all know, when a fly lands on your forehead, you don't feel any pain whatsoever; what you feel is annoyance. Well then, that umbrella was one humongous fly that kept landing on my head time after time, and at regular intervals.

Convinced that I was dealing with a madman, I tried to escape. But the man followed me, wordlessly continuing to hit me. So I began to run (at this juncture I should point out that not many people run as fast as I do). He took off after me, vainly trying to land a blow. The man was huffing and puffing and gasping so, that I thought if I continued to force him to run at that speed, my tormenter would drop dead right then and there.

That's why I slowed down to a walk. I looked at him. There was no trace of either gratitude or reproach on his face. He merely kept hitting me on the head with the umbrella. I thought of showing up at the police station and saying, "Officer, this man is hitting me on the head with an umbrella." It would have been an unprecedented case. The officer would have looked at me suspiciously, would have asked for my papers, and begun asking embarrassing questions. And he might even have ended up placing me under arrest.

I thought it best to return home. I took the 67 bus. He, all the while hitting me with his umbrella, got on behind me. I took the first seat. He stood right beside me, and held onto the railing with his left hand. With his right hand he unrelentingly kept whacking me with that umbrella. At first, the passengers exchanged timid smiles. The driver began to observe us in the rearview mirror. Little by little the bus trip turned into one great fit of laughter, an uproarious, interminable fit of laughter. I was burning with shame. My persecutor, impervious to the laughter, continued to strike me.

I got off—we got off—at Pacifico Bridge. We walked along Santa Fe Avenue. Everyone stupidly turned to stare at us. It occurred to me to say to them, "What are you looking at, you idiots? Haven't you ever seen a man hit another man on the head with an umbrella?" But it also occurred to me that they probably never *had* seen such a spectacle. Then five or six little boys began chasing after us, shouting like maniacs.

But I had a plan. Once I reached my house, I tried to slam the door in his face. That didn't happen. He must have read my mind, because he firmly seized the doorknob and pushed his way in with me.

From that time on, he has continued to hit me on the head with his umbrella. As far as I can tell, he has never either slept or eaten anything. His sole activity consists of hitting me. He is with me in everything I do, even in my most intimate activities. I remember that at first, the blows kept me awake all night. Now I think it would be impossible for me to sleep without them.

Still and all, our relations have not always been good. I've asked him, on many occasions, and in all possible tones, to explain his behavior to me. To no avail: he has wordlessly continued to hit me on the head with his umbrella. Many times I have let him have it with punches, kicks, and even—God forgive me—umbrella blows. He would meekly accept the blows. He would accept them as though they were part of his job. And this is precisely the weirdest aspect of his personality: that unshakable faith in his work coupled with a complete lack of animosity. In short, that conviction that he was carrying out some secret mission that responded to a higher authority.

Despite his lack of physiological needs, I know that when I hit him, he feels pain. I know he is weak. I know he is mortal. I also know that I could be rid of him with a single bullet. What I don't know is if it would be better for that bullet to kill him or to kill me. Neither do I know if, when the two of us are dead, he might not continue to hit me on the head with his umbrella. In any event, this reasoning is pointless; I recognize that I would never dare to kill him or kill myself.

On the other hand, I have recently come to the realization that I couldn't live without those blows. Now, more and more frequently, a certain foreboding overcomes me. A new anxiety is eating at my soul: the anxiety stemming from the thought that this man, perhaps when I need him most, will depart and I will no longer feel those umbrella taps that helped me sleep so soundly.