A NEW CHRISTMAS WITH 500 LIRE



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When I was little I ate sitting in a high chair, locked in behind its wooden tray. Once I'd finished my mush they'd try to give me something to play with, to keep me busy, but it never lasted. I was always looking for something. But for what?

By the time they found the answer, it was already too late. I was barely two, and they set an Alemagna panettone down in front of me, the kind with candied fruit, whole, sealed and still in its box, and then, in the silence of time ticking by, they realized it was gone. All that was left was a trace inside a piece of cardboard, and of the contents, nothing. Until my grandfather, farsighted as ever, said he was sure I'd eaten the whole thing myself, without leaving a crumb.

That's when the Casus Belli broke out, everyone trying to figure out what would happen, whether I was going to die. And just in case, off we raced to the hospital, my mother crying because she thought I was going to die and my father laughing like a madman, and nobody knew why.

It didn't take long to find out. The moment I got to the emergency room, the doctors picked up a smell that was unusual for that place, a strange stench. Just enough time for my mother to notice I had filled my GIRIPÀ with shit and that it couldn't hold any more, leaving a trail all along the road.

The stomach pumping was off the table, but there was my father out in the street cleaning up, like a garbage man. But he was just THE GILLETTE MAN.

Meanwhile the relatives kept tossing out wisecracks and jokes, telling gags on the subject, stirring up the wrath of my mother, who was touchy, felt mocked, and couldn't swallow the whole thing.

But that was just one Christmas, in 1967, that they told me about when I was grown. Because the one in 1970 I remember firsthand, as co-star.

I had made my usual letter for Christmas, the kind Uncle Jeff still sells today in the «AMAZON COMPLINATS» catalog under the model «for a fistful of tears», with the precise goal of slipping it under my grandfather's plate at the table, so that after the first course, when the second course arrived, he would find his mail.

But he, my mother's father, when it was time to change plates, made it known he wanted to keep going with the same plate, just so he wouldn't dirty another one.

I didn't notice that everyone at the table was laughing, but it wasn't an open laugh, it was the up-your-sleeve kind, and that worked fine for the men. And the women, how did they do it? With looks and wordless understandings, a one-of-a-kind dialogue that over the years helped me decode a lot of things.

In the end Grandma was my accomplice, because she changed that fucking plate, and of the letter not a trace, they had swiped it.

«Freeze, everybody!» was my cry. It felt like being in a police station, until somebody found it under the table and put it back in its natural position.

Grandpa acted surprised, wondered who could ever have had the nerve to write to him, what a son of a bitch, and after reading my mail out loud he gave me his answer.

«Dear grandson,» he said, «every year you write me the same things, but your noble intentions stay only noble, because the facts leave plenty of evidence and you take me for a fool, always being a little rascal. Besides, you know very well that your grandpa is retired and my resources are limited; so, I'm granting you a Christmas allowance in the amount of 500 lire.»

I took the money and thanked him, but my mother pressed me straight away to give an answer. Everybody wanted to know what I had in mind.

«Dear Grandpa, of all your four grandchildren I'm the second oldest and the only boy, so I'll put the money you gave me aside without spending it, and if you should ever need it, you know I've got it for you too.»

I believe that's how I answered, but even if I've blanked on the exact words, that was the gist.

And after 56 years, that's how much time has gone by, I wish I could have him here beside me in the flesh, because he's always stayed my grandfather and I've never forgotten him.

Since May 7, 1975, the day he went home to the Father, whenever I can I go to his grave and leave 500 lire worth of flowers. And every time the florist won't take the money and always tells me the same thing: where the fuck do you even get lire, it's been over 25 years now. And I always answer the same way. They're my grandfather's.

Bye, Grandpa.

Ferdinando