



Photo credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

TU NON SAI LE COLLINE
DOVE SI È SPARSO IL SANGUE.

CESARE PAVESE

Sergio stood at the top of the driveway, morning paper in hand, listening to a sound he hadn't heard for a long time. The tread of marching feet—a sound an ex-soldier does not easily forget. He stepped out onto the footpath and peered down the street. Soldiers in full uniform, carrying rifles were marching across the intersection towards the cenotaph on the corner. His throat tightened. A *coup d'état*?

He watched the soldiers halt on the verge, stamp their feet and salute the small knot of people in front of the cenotaph. The newspaper slipped from Sergio's fingers and dropped to the ground. He bent down to pick it up and saw the headline: LEST WE FORGET. A *coup d'état*? Not likely. Just April 25th —Anzac Day.

All those bloody medications. They must be scrambling his brain.

Sergio shuffled down the driveway towards the back of the house, carefully avoiding the bumps and hollows where the brick paving was worn. He'd almost recovered from the stroke he'd suffered six months ago. Still had a weakness in his left arm and leg and wasn't as sure on his feet as he'd been before. His daughter insisted he use the walking frame whenever he went out of the house, but he'd forgotten it—again. She'd be ringing later in the morning to check that he'd had breakfast.

Once inside, Sergio spread the paper out on the kitchen table. The grainy photo on the front page was one he'd seen countless times before. Anzac Cove at dawn—the bay, high cliffs, troop ships off shore, boats packed with soldiers, men in the water struggling to reach the beach. He'd heard all the stories of bravery and suffering told about the event in this country, which had been his now for more than 50 years. But for him, April 25th was always Liberation Day. The Liberation of Northern Italy in 1945.^[1]

He grunted, satisfied but irritated by the coincidence. And that 'LEST WE FORGET'. Who could forget? His memory wasn't as sharp as it had once been, but he hadn't forgotten much about his war.

And he had never forgotten Mauro.

‘Mauro! So wilful. Does just what he wants.’ Sergio could still hear his mother’s voice, tight with disapproval, when she spoke of their neighbour’s son. ‘Runs away from school, rings the church bells, has the village thinking there’s a flood or avalanche on the way. Can you imagine it? He’ll be the ruin of his parents one day, that boy.’

It must have been June or July 1939. Sergio was home on leave from national service. There was talk of war everywhere.

Mauro seemed to be in their house from dawn to dusk. Starry-eyed, hanging around, pestering Sergio to teach him how to use his rifle, to let him try on his uniform, wear his Alpini regiment cap. Sergio’s mother had made it clear the cap should stay on the sideboard, between photos of her grandparents. But when Mauro and his family came for Sunday dinner, the boy grabbed it as he sauntered past the sideboard and set it next to his plate.

‘The cheek!’ blurted Sergio’s mother when they were alone. ‘And Mauro’s mother does nothing. Leaves it up to me to pull him into line. Why doesn’t she control that boy?’

Sergio tried to remember what he’d said to soothe his mother’s sense of injury at being upstaged by a twelve-year-old. Maybe he said that Mauro was just impetuous and high-spirited. And Mauro’s mother so drained of energy with caring for his sickly twin brother, Carlo, that she couldn’t keep up with him.

Some months later, war was declared and Sergio was called up. He didn’t see Mauro again until late October 1943, following the Armistice with the Anglo-Americans, after he’d made it back home on foot from Marseilles, where at the time his battalion had been stationed.

Not that he recognised the six-foot youth sprinting towards him from the end of the street, shouting, ‘Sergio! It’s me, Mauro. Your special pal.’

Before Sergio knew it, the youth had his arms around him, hugging him tight, almost lifting him off the ground. Sergio pushed him away and held him at arms length.

‘Mauro. Mauro. Little Mauro. I can’t believe it! God, you’re taller than me now! What are you up to?’

'I'm going to be a partisan.'

'Go on. You're not even eighteen yet!'

'They said I could join them.' Mauro's voice was a mixture of confidence and defiance.

'You trust me, don't you Mauro?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'Then take my advice. Stay away from the partisans, while you can. It's a dangerous business.'

'I'm not scared. I just want to see some action, like you.'

Sergio closed the paper. He didn't want breakfast, wasn't hungry. He'd have a coffee, a strong one with a generous nip of grappa.

As he waited for the coffee to boil, he stepped into the living room and turned on the television. On the screen, a contingent of navy men in crisp white uniforms filed by. The Anzac Parade through the city had started. The army followed, members of a Light Horse regiment wearing slouch hats decorated with large, grey emu feathers. They always made him think of the Bersaglieri regiment. Didn't march at double pace though.

The phone on the table next to the sofa rang. It'd be his daughter, checking on him. He toddled over and answered it.

‘Hello—morning Gabriella—yes I’m up—eating breakfast—an egg, a bit of bacon, fried tomato—I can’t eat a lot in the morning—noise? Ah, it’s the Anzac March on TV—true, it made me angry when you were little—I didn’t get to choose the side I fought on—yes, things have changed—and it passes the time—I’m OK, don’t worry—see you around five. Ciao.’

The rich coffee aroma drew Sergio back to the kitchen. He had hoped his war was over, after Marseilles. But the Alps bordering Switzerland had become the centre of partisan resistance to the Germans and the local Fascists, the Black Shirts. Not long after he’d arrived home, the commander of one of the partisan groups in the region, the Garibaldi Brigade, paid him a visit.

‘Bill’, as Sergio would later call him, explained he’d been put in charge of the area by the command in Milan. They wanted discipline tightened, training improved and the recruits politically educated.

‘Politically educated?’ Sergio accepted the cigarette Bill offered. ‘Now that’s a hard ask for the men from these villages. All they know is their land and the mountains. A lot haven’t even been to Lake Como.’

Bill drew on his cigarette. ‘That’s why I need a man like you on the ground.’

Sergio said he’d think about it. But he’d seen what was going on and knew he’d end up joining.

As he filled his cup, Sergio heard the commentator’s remarks from the lounge room, identifying the rainbow bars of medals worn by veterans who were marching past, drawing attention to adolescent grandchildren at their side, faces bright with pride.

He had to admit that his mother had probably been right about Mauro. He was wilful and a bit wild. But it was hard not to admire his energy and daring. Bill had seen those qualities straight away and was happy to exploit them.

‘Pretended he’d be nineteen in a few months!’ Bill had told Sergio after he’d joined the Garibaldi Brigade, and raised concerns about Mauro’s youth. ‘Stupid pup. I grabbed him by the collar and told him he was sixteen if he was a day. And that if he ever tried another trick on me I’d have him shot.’ Sergio laughed.

‘By the look on his face, I think he believed me.’

‘The *Fiamme Verdi* can’t be trusted. That’s why there’s going to be zero fraternisation with them—from now on. Zero. Forget about what went on before.’ Bill banged his fist on the table to give his words extra emphasis. He enjoyed doing that when briefing his men. ‘Let me tell you,’ he’d thunder, ‘the *Fiamme* are controlled by those other black-shirted sons of whores—.’ He spat vigorously on the ground. He enjoyed the sense of control the swagger and exaggeration gave him. ‘Those other black-shirted sons of whores—the priests.’

‘He always looks straight at me when he bad-mouths the *Fiamme*,’ grumbled Mauro. Mauro’s uncle was with the *Fiamme* partisans. When Sergio discovered the connection, he’d ordered Mauro to tell Bill.

‘The *Fiamme* are fighting the Black Shirts and Germans, just like us, aren’t they?’

‘You haven’t been listening to Bill, have you, blockhead?’

‘But I have to meet with my uncle.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s getting medicines for Carlo.’

‘That’s why you have to tell Bill everything. Straight away. That’s an order!’

A short time later, it was discovered ammunition had gone missing and had ended up in the hands of

the *Fiamme*.

‘That cunning pup Mauro came to me a while ago and told me he had an uncle in the *Fiamme*,’ Bill shouted at Sergio. ‘But he forgot to tell me he meets with this uncle. Regularly. Did you know about this?’

Sergio nodded. ‘And I ordered him to tell you everything. Look, Mauro says his uncle is getting medicines for his twin.’

‘Is he now? And how’s he paying for them?’

‘The family.’

‘The family? And where would they find the money? We have to get to the bottom of this. Bring Mauro in.’

Bill was seated at a small table, reading, when Sergio and two other comrades returned with Mauro. Bill didn’t raise his head immediately. When he did, he acknowledged the senior men with a nod, and then addressed Mauro.

‘It’s my business to know everything about my men.’

Mauro looked puzzled.

‘That’s why I needed to know about your uncle, what’s his name, Alfredo?’

‘Alberto.’

‘Ah yes, Alberto. And if you hadn’t told me, told me he’s with the *Fiamme Verdi*, you know that would have been a very big mistake.’

‘Yes. That’s why I told you.’

‘But you didn’t tell me everything. Did you?’

‘But I did. I told you everything.’

‘No, you didn’t tell me everything. You didn’t tell me that you meet Alberto regularly. Every week, in fact, at the Café Stazione,’

‘He’s my uncle.’

‘Yes. And he’s with the *Fiamme*. Now I issued an order about the *Fiamme Verdi*. Not long ago. Remind me what that order was.’

Mauro shrugged.

‘Let me hear it. Sharp!’

‘Zero fraternisation with the *Fiamme Verdi*.’

‘So you remember. No one, *absolutely no one* is to meet with the *Fiamme*.’

Mauro looked affronted.

‘So, how do you explain seeing your uncle so often?’

‘Jesus! He’s my uncle. He wants to know how my brother’s getting on, and my parents too.’

‘Do you expect me to take that as an excuse for not following orders? Tell me what’s actually going on?’

‘Nothing. What are you getting at?’

‘Well, we’ve had ammunition going missing for a while. Did you know that?’

‘No.’

‘And you know where it’s ending up?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll tell you. With the *Fiamme Verdi*.’

‘What’s that got to do with me?’

‘Maybe nothing. Or maybe—everything.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m just wondering if there’s a connection—’ Bill turned towards Sergio. ‘You told Sergio your uncle’s getting medicines for your brother.’

‘So? You’d do that for your nephew, wouldn’t you? If he was as sick as Carlo?’

‘I am asking the questions. Our ammunition’s going to the Fiamme. Your uncle with the *Fiamme* is getting medicines for your brother Carlo—and I’m wondering, how? Where does he get the money? Do you see my point?’

Mauro lunged towards Bill. Sergio tried to pull him back but Mauro shoved him away, grabbed Bill around the neck, shouting, ‘Leave my brother out of this. And my uncle too.’

It took Sergio and the other men two attempts to pull Mauro off Bill. But Mauro punched and elbowed himself free and made it to the door. Once outside, Mauro raced towards the boulders where the tree-line began. Sergio followed, hoping to catch up with him and persuade him to come back. When Sergio arrived at the boulders, Mauro had already disappeared into the forest.

Immediately, Bill sent out a search party—three men who knew the territory intimately. He told them to shoot if Mauro resisted. He couldn't and wouldn't have Mauro roaming about freely. The Black Shirts or the Germans would pick him up in no time and it wouldn't take them long to make him talk. Mauro was unstable. He couldn't be trusted. He had to be brought back and dealt with.

Sergio tried to persuade Bill against pursuit, arguing Mauro would return to camp, once he'd calmed down and come to his senses. He volunteered to go after Mauro himself. Bill shook his head.

'This is not a job for you, Sergio. You know that.' And he walked away, humming *Bella Ciao*.

Mauro's pursuers caught up with him after a couple of hours. He'd covered quite a bit of distance, reached the ridge overlooking his village. He might have made it home if he hadn't caught his foot in a rabbit hole and badly sprained an ankle. He was resting in a hollow near a tree when they found him. On arrival back at the camp, Bill informed Mauro that he'd deal with him the morning and confined him to a small hut, under an armed guard.

Later that evening Bill called the group together. He announced that they were meeting as a disciplinary tribunal to decide on Mauro's punishment.

Bill invited Sergio to speak first. Sergio reminded everyone of Mauro's youth. He agreed he needed to be punished, more for insubordination than anything else. He proposed Mauro be kept under strict surveillance and given hard labour. The Brigade had supporters amongst the peasants who would keep him under close guard. They could always use extra labour. The others weren't convinced that this would work since most of those peasants were older men. Mauro would quickly work out how to outwit them and get away. Then there was the matter of his connection with the Fiamme and the missing ammunition.

'That's still a conjecture,' Sergio insisted. 'Where's the evidence that Mauro stole the ammunition in

the first place?

‘And where’s the uncle getting the money for medicines?’ Bill looked towards Sergio. ‘Even if it turns out Mauro didn’t take the ammunition, he can’t be trusted to follow orders. We know that now.’

‘It’s far too risky to keep him with us,’ the comrade next to Sergio said. ‘Not with that operation near the Swiss border happening in less than two weeks.’

‘We have to get rid of him,’ someone else responded in a low voice.

‘No, no, no,’ Sergio shouted. ‘Mauro doesn’t deserve it. All of you know that.’

‘Who else thinks like Sergio? Speak out. I want to hear you.’ There was silence.

Bill turned towards the three who had captured Mauro. ‘Take him to the forest at dawn and deal with him.’

Adolescent voices singing that ‘Abide with Me’ song told Sergio the city’s Anzac commemoration ceremony was under way. He sat in front of the television. The choir stopped singing. A tall, youngish man, thirty to thirty-five at the most, came to the podium. He introduced himself as an ex-army captain, who’d served in Afghanistan. The ex-captain spoke about the Anzac spirit—mateship, sticking together and looking out for each other when things were tough.

Mateship, sticking together, looking out for each other, thought Sergio. Yes, that’s what really mattered. That’s what saved their group back in November 1944, when they were ambushed by a big contingent of Germans and Black Shirts near the Swiss border. That’s what drove them successfully

over the mountains into the Engadine, down to safety in Silvaplana. But by that time, Mauro was no longer with them.

Bill had made one concession to Sergio. He agreed to keep the manner of Mauro's death from his parents.

'Tell them that Mauro was killed in a German ambush,' he'd barked. 'That we had no option but to leave the body behind. That we went back later, to look for him, and found nothing.'

Sergio had searched for Mauro's grave in the days after he'd been taken into the forest, but it snowed heavily, covering all traces. After that came the ambush on the border by the Germans and Black Shirts, then internment in Silvaplana for almost six months until peace was officially declared.

In the years before he left for Australia, whenever he was up in the mountains, Sergio looked out for signs that might lead him to Mauro's grave, but never found any.

As he stared at the river shining behind the stage on the screen, and the blue cloudless skies that promised a warm holiday afternoon, Sergio thought of the letter he'd received from a partisan comrade about five years ago. With the letter was a newspaper article—a report on a special Liberation Day ceremony. The article, titled *Tribute to a Young Partisan Hero*, explained that some hunters, high in the mountains, had found human bones. It told the story of Mauro's death at the hands of Germans and Black Shirts and revealed that the bones had been identified as his. Mauro's family and his partisan commander, known as 'Bill', had organised a memorial cross to be erected at the forest site where the bones were found. The article was headed up by a photo of several elderly men standing in the forest beside the cross. Sergio recognised two of them. Mauro's twin, Carlo, still alive, remarkably. And Bill, with his arm around Carlo's shoulders.

NOTES

1. Anzac Day (25 April) is a national holiday in Australia and New Zealand that commemorates all Australians and New Zealanders who served and died in all wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations. Marches and special commemoration ceremonies are held in cities and towns on the

day. Anzac Day was originally established to honour the members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli against the Ottoman Empire during World War 1. [↑](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Rita Tognini was born in Lombardy, Italy. Aged six, she migrated to Western Australia with her parents. She writes poetry and short fiction. Her short fiction has been published in the collections *Crush: Stories About Love* (Midnight Sun Press, 2017) and *Charisma: A Multicultural Anthology* (Kulcha Multicultural Arts of Western Australia, Fremantle, 1997) and in *Voyages, Journal of Contemporary Humanism* (2017) and *Studio* (2018). In 2016 she won the Peter Cowan Writers' Centre, Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award for Prose and gained second and third prizes in the OOTA Writers' Group, Spilt Ink Competition. Rita's poetry has been published in the collection, *Three in the Campagna*, and in journals such as *Australian Poetry Anthology*, *Creatrix*, *Fremantle Arts Review*, *Imago*, *Overland*, *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, *Uneven Floor* and *Westerly*, and has won prizes and commendations. Rita has worked as a teacher in schools and universities, and as a public servant and has a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics.