

Wash Your Hands

by Alain Elkann

8 June 2020, Capalbio

They had been celebrating Giorgio's seventieth birthday for the last few days. Some of the people who gathered to honour him wore masks while others didn't. They hadn't seen one another for more than two months, and they spoke about what they'd done during the pandemic, made small talk about this and that, "So, you were saying..."

Allegra and Roberto had come up from Naples and were buzzy and cheerful. They came with two wonderful gifts: Allegra brought two dogs she'd embroidered herself, and Roberto brought a custom-made umbrella from Naples. Cousins Ernesto and Arturo had also come for Giorgio, from Turin, along with children, grandchildren, and friends.

He'd spent a long time on the phone the night before with Leone to correct a final thesis paper that needed to be turned in today.

It was the beginning of a strange week. It was like being on holiday after many days trapped in the house. Everything was now open, but the only difference was that people were wearing masks.

He felt a bit sad, a bit useless. That pseudo-normal life, which was not at all normal, had him feeling off kilter. He couldn't even think about what was happening in the United States. It was

very well possible that the agitation in the air could lead to the defeat of populists in the United States and Europe. He couldn't imagine Trump being re-elected president. He had certainly ruined the reputation of the United States in recent years.

He knew that what he was writing was all over the place, but it just went to show that he was uneasy, not at peace. He tried to write and correct *Inghe*, the novel he'd finished in a single draft before leaving London. He was also working on another novel that was tentatively entitled *Il funambolo (The Tightrope Walker)*.

14 June 2020

Today was his mother's birthday. She would have been ninety-eight. He thought about her every so often but not quite enough. She'd left the house in Moncalieri to him and Giorgio, and they tried to maintain it as best as they could, though it was often a source of contention. Despite that, he and Giorgio were close, as were their children, and that was the most important thing.

Summer had arrived in Capalbio and neighbours of all ages were entirely too social, as if they felt the need to get together and celebrate after a war. Unfortunately, the war wasn't over, and that sense of euphoria could very well lead to a return of the virus because nobody was taking precautions.

He tried to work, but he was distracted, ill at ease because this situation had turned his life upside down. He needed and wanted to return to his home in London, but he didn't want to have to quarantine when he arrived, so he waited. He was tired of that semi-holiday state, of not knowing what would happen. There was a sense of discontentment he could not shake. He wasn't reading much and had little desire to read. It wasn't good for his mental state to be around a lot of people who weren't wearing masks and who had decided to live their lives normally. This is why he wasn't able to write in his diary. It seemed like there wasn't much to say.

Marco Brambilla had come by a few days before. They didn't speak very much, chatting about the same old things: what went through their minds during the coronavirus, their fears, their projects, the uncertainty of the future.

16 June 2020, Capalbio

Giulio Giorello had died due to complications from the coronavirus, that insidious bastard of a disease that had killed friends and left so much damage in its wake around the world. He wanted to scream, “Enough!” So many people were gone: Giulio Giorello, Germano Celant, Nicola Caracciolo, Gaetano Rebecchini, and Giuseppe Gazzoni, just to name a few great Italians struck down by the coronavirus. It was all too sad.

He’d voted that day for Sandro Veronesi’s *Il Colibrì* for the Strega Prize. It was a shame that he won for a second time, but that was *the* book, and there wasn’t much competition. However, Veronesi was a true writer. Volponi had also won the Strega Prize twice so there was a precedent. Having said that, there was actually one keen competitor named Carofiglio, though he was a magistrate and not strictly a writer like Sandro was.

There were a lot of young people at the house. Giacomo was there for two days, and this made him happy. They were all in the dining room studying online.

The day before, there’d been the board meeting for the LAPS Foundation. Lapo had done a great job, explaining his project brilliantly. The various board members all made interesting speeches. Afterward, he’d participated in an email query session with students from Cornell University who were currently studying his novel *I soldi devono restare in famiglia*. They asked him questions about how he wrote, about Italian Jews, Jewish writers, and the relationship between Jews from the diaspora and Israeli Jews. It had been interesting.

He'd later spoken with Beatrice Masini to talk about his book *Una giornata*, which was to come out in the autumn.

The weather was beautiful, but he spent the morning working. Then he went out for a bit with his grandson Giacomo who had a lot of fun driving the golf cart. They went to the beach and took a walk and Giacomo knew the names of all of the birds and many other things. They stopped to look out at the sea and walked through a big field of sunflowers – such amazing flowers – as they returned home. The nature in the Mediterranean was truly a wonderful thing. While on the beach, he'd read a few pages of Thomas Mann's diary from 1933 to 1939.

Mann travelled a lot, took a lot of pills, and complained of stomach-aches and nervous conditions. He'd seen Huxley in America and the director Lubitsch. He spoke of the horrors of Hitler's Germany and how weak Mussolini was.

Roberto and Allegra were to arrive that evening. Despite the cheerful atmosphere in the house with so many young people, he continued to think about poor Giulio Giorello.

17 June 2020

They were still being given ambiguous, contrasting information about the coronavirus. China, England, the United States, Germany. What a nightmare!

Tomorrow, he was heading to Moncalieri and then perhaps to Switzerland for some doctors' appointments and to see his grandchildren.

He was trying to correct *Inghe*, and he'd taken a break from writing about the characters Viky and Simon in *Il funambolo* for a few days. But he felt like he might get back to them in the afternoon. Marco Delogu was to come visit in the afternoon. Delogu was in the running to head up the Istituto di Cultura in New York. He would certainly do a good job. Finotti had called him to tell him he was also one of the three candidates up for the job. The final decision would be taken by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was currently Di Maio...!

He had been taking half of a tranquilizer pill every day because he was feeling a bit melancholy, especially in the morning. Everything was seemingly normal but that wasn't really the case. This bothersome pandemic was always there in the background. He asked David if he'd begun to go back out in London, and he said no; there were two-hundred new deaths. Life continued on in a sense but was still on hold. The only thing that had changed is that he'd begun to see people again, had begun to talk about other things. He continued reading Thomas Mann's diaries, and that interested him because he spoke about his daily life.

Lapo was in Lisbon and very busy with his foundation, but he didn't feel completely at peace.

20 June 2020

It was the first day of summer. The longest and saddest day because the days would now begin getting shorter. He was in Moncalieri with Anna. He'd seen Jaki, Lavinia, and the children. They'd bought a new dog. He hadn't done anything special that day, and he still had moments of sadness.

22 June 2020

It was a Monday. He began preparing for some small trips. He didn't know what was making him feel so down, but he was unable to work so he focused on small practical matters. He'd organized all of his books and notebooks the day before in the Moncalieri house. Anna helped him quite a bit as she always did. It would take another lifetime to get through all of the books he wanted to read: Freud, Camus, the French Revolution, Mann's diaries and books, Canetti's *Auto da Fè*. But he couldn't concentrate. He was constantly anxious about the coronavirus that was all around them, preventing them from being able to fully relax, forcing them to proceed with caution in returning to normal life.

26 June 2020

He had finally returned to Capalbio after trips to Moncalieri, Geneva, and Milan. In a strange way, Capalbio had sort of become their home after the pandemic. He'd taken care of various family and practical matters during his trips, and had gone to the dentist. He read a little, did an interview, wrote a few pages for the new project focused on Viky and Simon, and he'd almost finished with *Inghe*, the novel he was correcting.

Summer had arrived in Capalbio, bringing heat and mosquitoes with it, and the wheat in front of the house was growing, making for amazing views.

He saw Brigitte in Geneva, and it was a warm, sweet encounter. She seemed to be in fine form, and they'd talked about family matters. The grandchildren were with them in Moncalieri and Turin, and Anna was struck by how much they knew and their stories and opinions.

Lapo was in Spain, continuously immersed in his charity initiatives. But he was to return to Italy on 30 June. He seemed very busy and was still with Joan.

When they'd returned to Capalbio the night before, they'd run into Giuliano and Salma, whom he hadn't seen in a long time, in a restaurant. It was a pleasure to see them again.

The new director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in New York was to be chosen any day now.

He had several friends in the running. May the best one win!

Yet New York seemed so far away. Upon their return to Capalbio, he'd spoken with Anna about the strange adventure they'd had over those months and they were still in the midst of

it, still experiencing the after effects and sense of unease. The coronavirus would go down in the history books. Nobody knew how long it would last or what form it would take, so they continued to live in this pseudo-home with constant uncertainty. There were new outbreaks of the infection here and there. Some countries were seeing the virus return in a big way. The economy was a disaster because the uncertainty had paralyzed many things and changed everyone's lives. They'd all become used to living isolated from one another, a virtual life tied to the computer and with relationships conducted over the phone. What would life be like afterward? How would young people be able to study? What world would they live in? Would there be other wars? Other illnesses? Would Trump finally be voted out? He shuddered to think about Trump continuing to be in charge of the American military. What was certain is that people were talking, trying to understand, young people were losing jobs and trying to find another one or cobble together work. The coronavirus had brought the world to a halt. A world at a standstill, forced to reflect, to rethink its models, to look to nature. There had also been some horrible racist episodes in the United States, but, unfortunately, that was nothing new. What was new is that they didn't know what would happen. Would things be like before? Different than before? Would the world be better or worse?

His friend Patrick had written, "Heaven or hell?" Who knew! The one thing that was certain, was that they'd all understood just how insignificant they were when faced with the power of nature.

The weather was beautiful, an incredibly clear day. He could hear the birds, the sky was bright blue, the wheat fields yellow, and beyond that, the dunes, the sea.

Anna was making a big effort to get back on track with work, to take care of her children and her family. Ginevra was about to tour Italy to present her film "*If Only*" in theatres in Turin, Milan, Parma, Modena, and Bologna...

He hoped he'd be able to go to Milan in early July for a public conference, an evening event with Amos Gitai during the Milanesiana festival to talk about the death of Rabin. He was also to meet with Beatrice in Milan to talk about preparations for the launch of his novel *Una giornata*. Then he hoped to go Paris and London to see what was left of his previous life, his house, the daily routine that he'd become accustomed to these last few years. Was it possible to get back to the same life with a sense of good cheer and optimism, with a vaccine on the horizon, or would everything be different?

So, for the moment, this diary will take a hiatus, to see what happens over the summer. The long Capalbio chapter, which began in March and finished in early July, is coming to a close. There sits a house in a big field near a small village that was the centre of the world for months, our world, our work, and our personal relationships. It was an unexpected time, extraordinary, humane, and different, a time in which nature saved us. Nature, the sun, the air, and the wind gave us the energy to continue on day after day.