

The Color Virus

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In the summer of 1998, I spent three weeks on vacation in Seychelles. I returned perfectly tanned. Months later, around Christmas time, the tan still hadn't faded. On the contrary, it appeared to be getting darker each day. My friends at New Year's Eve dinner teased me and joked about my visits to a tanning bed. I believe it was in February of '99 that I shaved my head like a bowling ball: my barber believed that this would be an infallible remedy for the disorganization of my hair that had become desperately curly. The result was not what we had hoped, and the hair grew back in a mass of small frizzy strands of ebony black.

These physical changes had some unexpected consequences on my sexual life. I found myself at the center of attention of most of the female population: my girlfriend, my colleagues, other friends, and complete strangers. My friends were convinced that I was undergoing some unknown beauty treatment. Many acquaintances asked for the number of my esthetician, and got offended when I responded that I didn't have one.

That period of exaltation in my life was much too brief. In April, I had a strong case of conjunctivitis and my eyes became pitch black. It was the final straw, and things started to change drastically. Everyone worried about me: my girlfriend and my closest friends asked me to end my esthetic treatment. I assured them that I wasn't getting any treatment, but things took a turn for the worse, and rumors ran that I was the victim of a strange tropical disease. Almost everyone stayed away from me for fear of catching it.

As if confirming those voices, in May, I caught a strange type of influenza: my face swelled and made me unrecognizable. When I felt better and the fever broke, I looked at myself in the

mirror incredulously. The swelling had disappeared, but my face was not the same anymore: my nose had become larger and less pointed, my lips fuller and plumper, the outlines of my cheekbones more prominent. The image reflected was not my own, but that of a young African male.

“I know that you’re sick,” said my girlfriend, “but I can’t do anything to help you. Who knows if you have some genetic disorder, one of those diseases that you can transmit to your children. I don’t want mixed children. It’s better if we don’t see each other for a bit, while you get examined by a specialist.” I never saw her again, she never responded to my phone calls or my messages. I went to three different specialists that found me in perfect health. Two of them burst out laughing when I told them that the year before I had light blond hair, blue eyes, and the skin and typical aspects of a northern Italian from *Pianura Padana*.ⁱ The third recommended me to a psychiatrist.

In April, even before the events I have just narrated occurred, I had received a letter that communicated my expulsion from the *Ronda Padana*ⁱⁱ and informed me that my subscription to the *Lega*ⁱⁱⁱ had been suspended until my health improved. The man in charge of the two institutions is Giorgio, my dearest friend from high school. At my protests, he responded that the neighbors wouldn’t be happy to see a black man armed with a big stick in the group that was supposed to be defending them from immigrants.

During the month of May, I was sick and absent from work. When I returned, on the first of June, I behaved as always: I entered the office, gave a distracted greeting, and sat in front of my computer. An hour later, my boss arrived. He spoke briefly with some colleagues, and came directly to me. Without saying a word, he examined the programming in “C++” in which I was working. He nodded in satisfaction with his head and said bluntly, “Who are you?”

“I am Giampiero Bianchi,” I responded.

“Bianchi is sick,” he responded, “and it’s not funny to try to pass as him. If you wanted to work, and it looks like you know how, you could have talked directly with me. Come show me your documents, maybe I’ll give you a job. I need people that can program in “C++”.”

“Well, my documents...” I stuttered.

"Illegal, I understand, don't worry about that, I can pay you by the hour, under the table."^{iv} He laughed under his breath, "nothing personal, obviously." He was about to leave when he added, "I don't know how you know Bianchi, but don't expect to be paid like a regular..."

Two days after my employment status had changed, the landlord of the house I was renting came forward: "I don't know what relationship you have with Bianchi," he said, "but you can't continue to live in his apartment. This is a high-class place, the neighbors are complaining, and the value of the property is going down." "This is too much!" I responded. "I am Bianchi and I can prove it with my documents." He didn't spare them a glance, and it was better this way because no one could recognize me from the photos anyway. "I don't care who you are!" he yelled, "I don't want blacks here, and you better leave before tomorrow comes, or you will regret it. I have good friends in the police force."

I called a moving agency and left my furniture in their storage. I spent the night in my car and woke up in pain. The following morning, I called out from work, and went to a housing agency. When I spoke with them over the phone, they all said that they had many different apartments available for rent, and yet all of them were miraculously rented out by the time I arrived in their office in person.

At the last agency I visited, I found a Congolese man looking as defeated as I was. "No house, brother?" he asked me. A few months prior, I would have looked at him with distaste, without responding at all, but I had started to understand something about being black. "Nothing," I responded. "They only have apartments over the phone..." "As long as you don't say what color you are," he finished, laughing. "Where are you from?" he asked me.

"You won't believe it, but I'm Italian." "I believe you. I know there are Italians with black skin and they are not doing too well. But if you have an Italian last name you can give your proxy to someone who can rent for you. When you are physically there, they can't do anything, unless they evict you with some pretenses."

My new friend had an unpronounceable name and told me to call him Tom. He had an honest face and I so desperately needed to talk to someone that I told him my whole story. "Unbelievable!" he said when I had finished. "you can't prove who you are by using your

documents. If someone rents to you... how will you sign the contract? And if the police catch you, you are done: they will think that you are a thief and that you stole the Italian documents."

"Come and sleep at my house and tomorrow we will think of something." I went with him to an old shack in the open countryside where he lived with eight other immigrants, who were all workers. They gave me a place at their table, we ate, and then talked and laughed. I was surprised. They talked about soccer, women, work, and TV programs. It was more or less what my old friends from the *Lega* talked of. Sometimes they would even say words in my Italian dialect: if one didn't pay too much attention to their accent, they sounded like typical young guys from *Padania*.

Let me explain: I belonged to the *Lega* party, but I didn't believe all of the propaganda about the immigrants. I knew they were normal people and not devils, but what really surprised me was that these immigrants weren't different from me: there were no strange rituals, tribal songs, or grotesque outfits; they dreamt of the same cars, and used the same phones, shoes, jackets, and stereos. They had fun at the same clubs with the same music and the same girls. The only true difference was in physical aspects (that I, at this point, shared) and the minor nuances of the language that would fade away with time. If anything, they seemed more mature than the average Italian guy of the same age, knew more languages, and were worldlier, but that's it. For the rest, they behaved like anybody else.

Some were Muslim, others Protestant or Catholic. This seemed to have such an insignificant importance in our daily lives, that I realized the minimal impact that religion has on our social life. As far as food is concerned, their diversity wasn't too much of a surprise to someone like me who knew vegetarians, fast food eaters, traditionalists, lovers of sushi, anorexics, etc. ... What I mean is, it's not that they weren't different, but that their diversity from Italians was no greater than the diversity among the Italians or among the immigrants. The multiculturalism I was so averse to was not in them, but was everywhere, in our world.

The next morning before going to work, I spoke again with Tom about my problem. "First of all," he told me, "we have to find a way to prove your identity: find a good lawyer, find testimonies: your girlfriend, friends, your family. Get a medical certificate...not sure what else I can suggest... Then we'll talk again."

I went to see a lawyer that I knew from the *Lega* party, but it was a total disaster. “Are you a friend of Giampiero?” he asked, surprised. “No, I am Giampiero, let me explain,” I replied. The lawyer pressed a bell three times under his desk and said, “My secretary has already called the police. I suggest that you leave immediately.” I, who hated the Union, ended up looking for a union lawyer.

Spataro, this union lawyer, found my story particularly amusing. I immediately asked him if he believed me. “You have to understand,” he replied, “truth and justice isn’t for lawyers, maybe they aren’t even for humans. It’s not important whether I believe you or not. I will defend you, if I can, with the laws we have and with my experience, which isn’t little. The rest doesn’t matter.”

The testimony was at an impasse almost immediately. My ex-girlfriend never responded to me. Spataro managed to get in touch with her, but her response was shocking. She refused to appear in court. When she was threatened to be subpoenaed, she responded that it was better if we left her alone, because she would go to court and say that she did not know if the story of the virus was true or not, and that she could say that I was a different person.

My ex-friends didn’t want to claim under oath that there had not been a change of person either. At that point, I decided to go to my mother, who had been in charge of the family estate after the death of my father. It was painful. She shouted from the doorstep that it was typical of Giampiero to send an immigrant to speak on his behalf, instead of visiting his mother in person as any good son should do. I realized, then, that maternal instinct is a lie.

My criminal record was clean so I had never had my fingerprints taken. My teeth had always been perfect. All that was left to prove my identity was a graphological examination; Spataro cautiously wanted a skilled expert to do it in private. It had to be a manuscript written by me in the past, whose date and identity could be legally tested for authenticity. Spataro found a letter I had sent to the Ministry of Finance four years earlier. Since I work at the computer, I almost never handwrote anything unless it was an official document. The results of the test were negative: maybe in four years my handwriting had changed; maybe my illness had altered the shape of my hand and fingers.

Spataro remained very calm. “Mr. Bianchi,” he told me, “I don’t know if you are a very unlucky Italian, or an illegal immigrant trying an unusual technique to get legalized. Either way, I

must say, there is no way of demonstrating your identity. You have no witnesses, no medical certificate, no graphological evidence. You are going to have to accept the inevitable."

Tom and the other guys embraced me with great solidarity, except Ahmed, who told me that perhaps I was a dumb illegal immigrant who was trying to do something witty. The others immediately shushed him, but the outburst of Ahmed, who was a little bit drunk and later apologized to me in his usual way ("What you say must be true, trying to pass for an Italian to get the citizenship with the face you have, either it's true or it shows that you're totally crazy rather than dumb"), gave Tom a brilliant idea.

"Listen, what if you act like you're an illegal immigrant without any documents?"

"And what would I do, go into hiding?" I answered. "No, don't be ridiculous: you have a job, some money in the bank, us as friends, you can buy an identity." In the bank, I had thirty thousand euros; it took me almost three months to drain my bank account with my ATM card. I abandoned my car, and burned Bianchi's papers.

The boys found an Ecuadorian immigrant returning to his home country: in Ecuador, on the Pacific coast, there are some black skinned people. I bought his passport, residence permit, social security card, employment card, and his driver's license for five thousand euros. Since then, I am Serafino Gonzalez, born in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, son of Don Anastasio Gonzalez, a fisherman, and Doña Hermenegilda Biche, both pure Afro-Ecuadorians.

I took a Spanish course in the Cuba-Italy Association, and since then I have been traveling to Colombia at least once a year to practice my Spanish and for my own pleasure. Obviously, I avoid Ecuador, where the true Serafino lives, to whom I will always be grateful. My life here in *Padania* has taken a satisfactory pace. I bought a new car, with my "real" name, and I was able to rent a ridiculously high-priced apartment with three of my immigrant friends, including the wonderful Tom.

I confessed the "truth" to my employer and he hired me officially as a regular. "You're better than Bianchi," he told me; "in my company, I need people like you, who work hard and aren't full of strange ideas. Of course, you couldn't marry my daughter, but she's ugly and has a bad temper; you wouldn't like her." A few days later, I saw him participating in the protest against

the construction of the mosque in the city. But, what can I say, we all have our own issues when it comes to certain things.

Myself included, of course. I still have right-wing ideas; I still think *Padania* should be independent from those southerners that suck our blood. However, I could not vote for the *Lega* party anymore; racism and xenophobia now seem to be stupid shortcuts after my experience. Foreigners are a resource and opposing them is to reject the productivity and wealth that makes *Padania* what it is. Having a small homeland full of old people, with the factories closed for lack of workers, seems too foolish to me. However, I'm done with politics. Now I work, and I go to the club with my new friends; I enrolled as a super senior at the University, and I go back to Colombia every year. In Cali, I met a sweet girl like no other. Maybe I will end up marrying her, ask her to come to Italy, and sponsor her for a family reunification, being the good immigrant that I am.

Yesterday I read in the newspaper that Seychelles is becoming popular again, and that the Party secretaries **, Congressmen **, **, and **, mayors ** and **, famous journalists ** and **, political commentators ** vacationed there last summer. The article made me extremely happy: who knows? Maybe the Color Virus will strike again.

ⁱ *Pianura Padana* runs from the Western Alps to the Adriatic Sea, and includes a large portion of the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Piedmont, Veneto, and Friuli Venezia Giulia.

ⁱⁱ *Ronda Padana* refers to groups of private citizens who volunteer to guard and protect a certain area or neighborhood.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lega* is a right-wing and anti-immigration political party.

^{iv} In Italian, the expression “under the table” is to pay someone ‘in nero,’ literally ‘in black.’ So even here, Giampiero is subject to a joke aimed at the color of his skin.