

THE TARTAR STEPPE

As a lover of books (otherwise you wouldn't be reading this), you must have come across a book that you recognised as *the* book on page 2 or 3, if not on page 1. If you were that lucky, when you reached the last word and closed it with sadness, and tried to find a prominent place for it among your other books, even if you were not aware of it, you were giving it entry into your secret library, the one hidden among the volumes of the larger library that grows in spite of you.

For me, one of these books is *The Tartar Steppe – El Desierto de los Tártaros* or *Il deserto dei Tartari* if you prefer. Actually, I did not find it; the poet Marcelo Ortale made me find it. He recommended it so enthusiastically in this café in La Plata – Argentina – that you couldn't help but read it. And it has been there ever since, in my secret library, as if fulfilling its mission to complete me. From time to time, I take it down from the shelf where it stands next to Bradbury and Buchan, and I leaf through its pages with the same emotion I felt when I first read it. I have even dared to read it in Italian, with a dictionary at my side, of course.

In a simple and linear way, Buzzatti tells us about the professional life of Giovanni Drogo, who has recently graduated as a lieutenant. The narrative begins on a key day in his life, just before dawn (the moment, a real find – darkness, gloom, advancing light – of which we will become aware during the course of the story). Moving through the house with the silence of a shadow so as not to wake his mother, who, like every mother, *does* wake up, Giovanni prepares to leave his home and go to the Bastiani Fortress, his first post. He is overwhelmed by various emotions: the nervousness of leaving the familiar world behind, the pain of separation from his mother, the illusion of a brilliant career on the frontier.

But the destination that awaits him is not what he expected. So, almost as soon as he arrives, he wants to leave, but destiny, which sometimes seems to control our lives, does not want to leave him.

Anyone who knows military life, the barracks, the endless hours, the boredom, can already imagine the routine that soon envelops Giovanni: a routine in which nothing seems to happen and yet events follow one after the other, with no bands to announce them and no applause to celebrate them. But above all, time is passing.

Time pervades everything, actions, facts, men, and you are reminded of it by the obstinate dripping of the well, the regulated pace of the sentries, the changing of the guard and its strict passwords, the footsteps that climb the stairs and run through the corridors, the voices and their decisions; the light that does not rest. And the Tartar Desert.

The desert stretches out in front of the fortress, ahead, like the future, and the eyes of all men are turned towards it. They all hope that from its depths, where sight cannot reach, something will emerge to justify not only their presence there, but their whole lives.

The desert, the physical desert, is, at bottom, time. Buzzatti's success is precisely to have succeeded in making time become space, and, once made space, desert, not only describable, and thus visible to the reader, but also scannable to the soldiers, and even audible and tangible. And the reader sees, feels, hears, the passing of hours, days, years.

When the decisive moment of his life arrives, we understand that Giovanni Drogo's destiny is not only his destiny but, with some variations, the destiny of all men, and you feel that you are one of them.

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internet archive (library) https://archive.org/details/tartarsteppe00buzz_0/page/n7/mode/2up