

Bommòrs

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1. To Notre Dame, Indiana, United States, I had sworn to myself I would never go back. Notre Dame is the richest and most important Catholic university in North America (and it is therefore pronounced more or less like *note deim*). It is located one and a half hour by car from Chicago, a stone's throw away from the lake Michigan. I had been there once for a congress in the middle of winter and it had not been pleasant. The campus is huge, but isolated from the nearest city (South Bend, a few kilometres away) and very isolated from Chicago, and the cold weather is more or less the same unbearable cold weather of Chicago, with snow and wind and 10-20 degrees below zero for weeks and weeks. If you are a student, you shut yourself up in the college and you study, do sport, spend time with your girlfriend. If you are a visiting professor, you die of melancholy while watching the icy rain falling *horizontally* on the glass walls in the hall. Everyone was good and nice, but after those three days of snow and dark I had told myself that could be enough for what concerned my campus-experience.

Instead, there was a second time. Last spring I was in Chicago for a few months and my colleagues from Notre Dame asked me to give a few lessons there (I work with one of the few Italian cultural products that have an international market, Dante Alighieri). So I gave it another try, and this time I did not regret it. The campus under the sun is great: trees and benches, boys playing frisbee, girls sunbathing, bicycles: all happy and nice (and most of them white, it goes without saying; Hispanics are rare). Just like in one of those 1950s Hollywood comedies where pain diseases betrayals and death seem unable to touch the humans. At night there was a small party at a colleagues' place; everything was so pleasantly friendly and relaxed that by the end of the evening I had decided to ignore, beside the memory of the freezing winter, also the gross ingratitude of an Italian colleague who had been working there for a while and that earlier on had whispered to me: «If you're over thirty, this place is like a prison».

Then, when I was about to go and I was starting the greetings sequence (*I* was going back to Chicago, the ungrateful colleague would remain there), a very tall, completely bald man came up to me. I had noticed him, during the evening, talking with the other guests. Since he was very tall, and I am not, I had kept myself well clear of him (isn't it annoying when you talk to someone *that* much taller than you?).

«Robert».

I immediately felt embarrassed for not having introduced myself at the beginning, and therefore I had the overly-kind and overly-interested reaction you have when you want to be forgiven. Why did he speak Italian so well? Because, he explained to me, he had lived for a long time in Italy. And where, in Italy? First in Varese, then in Reggio Emilia.

At this point, the overly-interested attitude came out naturally. How come Varese and Reggio Emilia, when all the Americans that live in Italy would not move for whatever reason from the axis Roma-Firenze-Venezia, especially the academics sent down there from their European universities for the summer programs? Wasn't he, Robert, an academic? No, he was not an academic. He had been to Italy to play basketball, just after finishing college at the Pennsylvania University, at the beginning of the seventies. I have never really played basketball (yes, too small), and what I know about it comes from the television, which in the eighties and nineties did not broadcast Italian basketball, but the American one. I do not remember anything about the television programs of the seventies. I mentioned the only name that came to my mind, the one everyone recalls: «Those were the years of Meneghin, right?». «Yes exactly, I played with Meneghin», he answered. Then something from the past struck me: «Well then... maybe I know you, aren't you... What is your surname?». «Morse», and he took out his business card: «Robert Morse». The lightning in my head again: «I mean, are you Bob Morse?». It was him. It was Bommòrs.

The fact is that for quite a good period of my childhood I *was* Bommòrs. My brother and I had hanged a homemade basket in our yard, and from age five to ten basketball was an acceptable substitute for football when there was just a few of us kids. We would not play matches: nobody knew the actual rules. We had shooting competitions; not with a regular-size ball, but they were still serious competitions (and rough as well, as anything concerning me and my brother after some time together: my brother on the top, and me underneath). As kids do, we had nicknamed ourselves with the names of the players we had learned from the radio or the TV. So, when our friends joined us, there was room for Recalcati, Marzorati, Antonelloriva and some others whose name I have forgotten. But when it was just the two of us, there was no doubt: my brother was Meneghin, and I was Bommòrs. It had taken almost thirty years and a business trip to the American Midwest for me to understand two things: that Bommòrs

was a real human being, that one could meet in the real world; and that Bommòrs were two distinct names, a name and a surname like any other Christian has.

I met Morse again about ten days later, after a couple of very nice e-mails where he briefly told me about his new life in Indiana as an Italian teacher in a college, where basically nobody would know anything about what he had done, what he had been in Italy thirty years before. And even those who knew would not pay too much attention to it. «For my students, anything that happened before 2001 is ancient history. And what happened outside the United States has never really happened: long ago, far away...».

The train trip from Chicago to Notre Dame lasts a bit more than two hours (that seem three just because you change country, from Illinois to Indiana, and the time zone as well, from Central to Eastern time, so the clock moves one hour forward). It is not a pleasant journey: not only because the South Shore Line train is an old banger (those who can, here, use the car; those who cannot, deserve this), but also because the scenery across the window is something you would like to forget, especially if it is raining. It was raining. Flat land as far as the eye can see, no trees, detached wooden houses at both sides of the railway, industrial relicts and, half way through, the city of Gary with its chimneys. Up to a few decades ago, Gary was the steel factory of Chicago. Now the wrought steel comes from China and Gary is one of the cities with the highest poverty and crime rate. There, in bad conditions, live the children of the workmen fired in the eighties and nineties, as well as the new immigrants from Mexico who every morning go to Chicago to work in the shops and in the canteens. Then, finally, South Bend. South Bend, a student of mine told me, is «the most beautiful American city between Chicago and the coast», and having not seen the others I have no reason to doubt it. In fact, it is little more than a village on the lake. Before getting there, I knew about it only because in *High Society* Grace Kelly asks Frank Sinatra, who is a freelance photographer, where he comes from, and Sinatra answers «South Bend, Indiana». Judging by Grace Kelly's face, it does not look like a place where it is very *chic* to be born.

Morse speaks Italian better than almost all the Italianist colleagues I have met in the United States, even if he did not learn Italian when he was little. His family, he tells me, arrived in America between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. His father's ancestors «came with the Mayflower» (I do not know if this has to be taken literally: I

think that «to come with the Mayflower» just means that a family has been in America for a very long time, even if not exactly from 1620)¹. His mother is Quaker and comes from one of the most ancient families in Pennsylvania. He grew up in an eighteenth-century house: which is, with the due proportions, as if an Italian would grow up in the *fori imperiali*. He did not learn Italian at university (he studied Medicine for two years, before quitting everything in order to play basketball) and he did not even have an Italian wife (two wives, both American, and two daughters scattered around America). He learned it after his twenties, in Varese, which is surprising. «I don't know all the terms concerning literature. But I know all the words and sentences one needs to live in Italy». And many others, actually (so, to my regret, during our lunch at the campus restaurant I will not have the opportunity to parade my English, except when speaking with the waitress. Which is a pity, because after two months in Chicago I feel very fluent).

Morse has just come back from Madrid, where he was invited for a reunion party of the fifty European basketball stars of all time. There he saw many old friends that he makes mention of and whose names I immediately forget. He is 57 and has lost or shaved the hair he had in the seventies picture I have seen on the internet. Now he looks a bit like an over-size Yul Brynner, although much more good-natured than Yul Brynner as far as I remember him in the immortal *Indio Black, sai che ti dico? Sei un gran figlio di...* He is probably the calmest, most relaxed and wisest person I have met throughout my whole American stay. The two hour lunch will be, in a word, lovely.

At the age of twenty, Morse could become a good basketball player. But he was a slightly different twenty-year-old. He had been studying, he wanted to see what the world was like outside America. A *scout*, one of those people who go around colleges and universities to recommend the best young to the European teams, proposes him a good contract with Ignis in Varese, and he accepts it.

«I arrived in Malpensa on a very hot day of July. The people from Ignis come and pick me up at the airport, but instead of bringing me to Varese they take me to Loano for a summer tournament, something that did not exist in the United States. Four teams. You would play in the open air, in the evening, in the damp air, with the wind. I would shoot from outside the area and the wind would carry away the ball. We stop playing at

¹ Actually, it seems that it should be taken literally. Bob wrote me later on: «My father told me that we have an ancestor, Mary Chilton, who was on the Mayflower in 1620. It's a manner of speaking as well, but in my case it's true» (yes, but who tells me that Bob's father did not made that up, or his grandfather before him? Nevermind...).

half past one a.m. and we go back to the hotel. I'm exhausted for the effort, the heat, the jet-lag. But my team-mates decide to go eat a pizza and I follow them. We come back at four. I wake up at eight and at ten we are playing again under the sun. We play ten matches, always in different cities, from Loano to Porto San Giorgio, to Mondello in Sicily. Then we go back to Varese. They give me one day to do my laundry and then we leave again for the mountains, for the high altitude training. Ten days without ever touching a ball, only running and exercising. I had never worked so hard in my life. But I had never felt in such a good shape. That year we won everything».

What about your team-mates' welcoming?

«Great. Things were very different compared to how they are now...».

(N.B. «Things were very different compared to how they are now» will be often repeated by me or Bob or by both of us during our conversation. I will not repeat it every time in order not to be boring. For a brief consideration on the meaning of this sentence, see the end of the article).

«Things were very different compared to how they are now. The rule was that there could be only one foreign player per team, and almost all the foreigners were American, a dozen altogether. Yet, once a player was holding a team's membership card, he had to remain there until the end of the season; you could not take another one. Hence, everybody did his best to treat you well, to make you feel comfortable. Nowadays, they can change one player per week, if they like: the group does not have much importance anymore. In my case, I stayed with Meneghin, Ossola, Bisson and Zanatta for six years. Which meant loyalty to the city, the spectators, the sponsor. It's not like this anymore».

Anyway, I care about basketball only till a certain extent. What I am really interested in is knowing how life was in Italy in those years when I was too little to see it, and how it looked like to someone coming from America. Thus, I moved the conversation to the everyday life topic.

«In Varese, we led a very quiet life. I would train myself, play, try to learn Italian to be able to speak with people and read the paper; in short, to live a normal life. My friend Massimo Lucarelli helped me a lot. He wanted to learn English, I wanted to learn Italian, so we would meet and study together. And after a few years I felt that Varese had become my city».

Since I have never interviewed anyone, I feel bound to casually throw out some mischievous questions/remarks, so I come out with this crap:

«Wasn't there anyone trying to get you to marry his daughter? An American, a sportsman, in a small town such as Varese. Didn't you receive strange invitations for lunch?».

Bob puts me back in my place without any qualms: «Well, I was quite a reserved person. And I still am. After two years in Italy I married an American girl, a schoolmate of mine who came with me to live in Varese. Nothing more».

Nowadays, when any idiot can become famous for five minutes, it is difficult to understand how pleasant celebrity – a modest one – could be in those years.

«You have to bear in mind that Varese was a very small city, and that Ignis and his owner, Giovanni Borghi, were some kind of a legend: a country team against metropolis such as Madrid or Moscow. Beside the championships, we played seven finals in a row for the Champions League. Which meant to be on Eurovision when there were just three channels, and to be seen by several million people. When we would play against the Red Army there was also the Eastern audience: numbers were even more impressive».

In this legend-team, Morse was the American who would always shoot a basket: «I would often be at the top of the goalscorers' list, thus I was known outside the basketball scene as well». And what was there outside the basketball scene?

The thing – he tells me – that would strike him the most when visiting the factories [visiting the factories!? Yes, the sponsors of Ignis and Mobilgirgi used to take the interested players to visit the factories, and Bob was always interested; one imagines nowadays Ibrahimović visiting Moratti's refineries: oh yes, things...], the thing that would strike him the most was the lack of safety measures for the workmen. «I came from the United States, where people would pay much attention to these things. I don't want to mention anyone's name [this man does not want to mention anyone's name not for fear but for fairness. And we are in the middle of Indiana, thirty years after the things he is telling me about]. Yet, in the varnishing factories [one keeps imagining Ronaldo or Totti while they walk around the varnishing section] the workmen would do their job without masks, without protections. This impressed me».

Years later, Ignis was sold first to Philips and then to Whirlpool.

«I occasionally tutor people that have to go to Italy for studying or working. I have a student who will go working in the Italian branch of Whirlpool. It's in Varese, because the old Ignis offices are there. Life's strange, isn't it?».

After two years in Varese, a brief return to the United States. Bob thinks about going back and study Medicine, but then he is offered a new contract in Varese, this

time as a professional. Money was enough: not like the millions that started flowing after the eighties, but enough. Former Ignis, now Mobilgirgi, was trying to launch out into the European market, therefore it decided to invest on a player who was well-known also outside Italy. Yet, he tells me with a smile, most of the salary would disappear in taxes. (During the following story, I slowly sink into the armchair):

«For what concerned my statement-of-income, I was honest. And that's why I found myself on the *Prealpina*, Varese's newspaper, in the list of the major taxpayers in town: at the sixth place, in a city full of *real* billionaires like Varese. My neighbour, who lived in a huge villa and owned a chain of household appliance shops, had returned his income as six million liras on the tax declaration. When I complained with my neighbours in Varese they thought I was a fool. They explained to me that taxes, in reality, were optional».

After winning as much as can be won (every year it was either the championship or the Champions League or both of them), Morse decides to change and he goes to Antibes. The game level was not so high, but life was very pleasant. Then, after three years, when he is thirty-three, another offer from Italy, by the Cantine Riunite in Reggio Emilia, a team that had recently been promoted in A1 and needed an experienced player.

«We never won the cup but we remained in A1, and the second year we got to the play-off. Great years, like in Varese. Reggio Emilia is a bit more left-wing, and I liked that».

Back to the United States in the mid eighties, Morse worked as a talent scout for a couple of Italian teams.

«I looked for players who would be suitable for your championship. But it's always hard to find young people ready to leave everything, learn a new language and establish themselves in Europe for a long period. Most of them leave with the idea of making good money and then come back within two-three years. For them it's a working choice, not a life matter. Learning the language, getting to know the country, this is a waste of time in their opinion. Sad, isn't it?».

In the early nineties, Morse cooperates with the World Basketball League, a league just for players who were less than 1 96 tall. The idea was that of not competing with the NBA: less physicality, more technique.

«There are a lot of players who are very talented but too short for the NBA. Our league would play the regular season in the summer, when the NBA is over. I was in

charge of the relations with Europe: I would invite European teams in the United States and I would organize the matches with six or seven of our teams. In winter, instead, I took the American players on tour to Europe. It was interesting: those were the first intercontinental matches between clubs, and they gave me the opportunity to travel around Europe».

The World League goes on for a few years, then the NBA's competition becomes unbearable: «Even in the summer there were more debates about the accident of an NBA player than about our matches». Morse goes back to Italy for one year and works for Telemontecarlo as a commentator. He lives in Rome, between Prati and Monte Mario, and he likes it there. But the following year Fininvest buys the American basketball rights, and engages Dan Peterson to commentate on it. A different style.

For about one hour I do not manage to ask the two stupid questions I had in mind since the beginning. Because I know they are stupid. Then I am forced to. Morse is talking about his first coach in Varese, a Slav whose name I cannot remember (then I find it on the internet: Nikolić). Ignis wins the championship, but all the same he resigns in order to go back and coach in Belgrade, since his leave was over and he was running the risk of losing his job at the university (definitely, things were very different compared to how they are nowadays). So I ask, dauntlessly:

«Now tell me, does the coach really matter so much? Because if you look at it from the outside...» (which is the sport version of the question: «is the conductor really so important?») - I ask this one quite often as well).

«Well, of course».

Which is enough for me.

I do not even wait for the provocation to ask the second stupid question.

«Who is the best player you've ever seen playing? And the one you've played with?».

It is a stupid question (I know, I know) because just like for tennis or football or boxing or any other sport you cannot compare champions from different periods: the latest one (Tyson, Federer, Armstrong) is always the best. Also, you cannot compare the days of the radio with those of the television because before the sixties athletes were mere names. It is a stupid question, yet I ask it. Not because giving the results is fun (that as well), but also because when you meet someone who is very good at one sport or at some other activity, it is nice to share with him the admiration for someone even

better. One is moved by the humbleness that the champion shows while talking about a colleague; greatness bowing to greatness. Is there a name for this feeling? Flattery? Something better?

Anyway, my whole basket experience comes from the television and from America, so I ask him about the eighties. The answer is:

«Magic Johnson».

(Magic Johnson. Whose big face I now see stamped on every bus in Chicago, advertising a finance company: «Need a loan?»).

For the nineties, there is no doubt: Michael Jordan («because he was inventive, he would create the game, he would jump higher than anyone else. And after a while he even learned how to play for his team. At the very beginning he scored a lot, but the team wouldn't win. Then Pippen and Kukoč arrived and the Bulls became unbeatable»).

For what concerns the seventies, besides Meneghin, Recalcati, Marzorati and Bommòrs, I know nothing.

«Once, when I was eighteen, we played against the Massachusetts team, an average-level team but with an excellent player. I tried to mark him, cut him out on the rebound, stop him beneath the basket. But he was the fastest, and would jump about twenty inches higher than me. My hands are normal, for a basketball player. He had two pizzas. I have never played with someone so good since: an average of twenty points and twenty rebounds per game. His name was Julius Erving, Doctor J.».

(On the spur of the moment I nod, trusting his words. Later on, on YouTube, I understand. There is the video of a match between the Philadelphia 76ers and the Lakers. Doctor J. gets to the midfield, grabs the ball with one hand, takes three steps in zigzags, sidesteps two Lakers players and, literally, *plunges* the ball into the basket, together with a part of his arm. In the following days, downloading *dunks* from YouTube will become my second job).

Even earlier on, the sixties. He mentions a couple of names I have never heard before:

«Bill Russell from the Boston Celtics. He played for 13 seasons and won 11 NBA championships. The greatest defender ever. And Wit Chamberlain. A giant of two metres and twenty. He ran the 400 metres in 49 seconds, and came close to setting the record for the high jump. Once they played a match with a 12 feet high basket instead of a 10 feet one, and even so he would manage to dunk. You should know him, because

he's the one who scored 100 points in a single match against the Knicks. He's a legend».

No, I do not know him. (Only later on, on YouTube...). I know almost nothing, I am disappointing Bommòrs with stupid questions, if only the guidobatta was here.

So, during dessert, we go back to the subject which I feel more comfortable with and which interests me the most, life in Italy in the seventies. Bob remembers clearly things that are hazy in my mind. The oil crisis: Varese without cars, under the snow. People with skis or on horseback. «For me, that was the Italian spirit: finding good reasons to be happy even if things were going amiss».

He recalls terrorism; the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, 1978; Italicus, 1974 (he himself mentions the dates, all correct. I tell him that out of one hundred, ninety of my first year students would not even know in which decade to place Aldo Moro). He also recalls things that I only heard once or twice and to which I never gave too much relevance. Of course, Seveso. Of course, the cholera in Napoli and the vaccination campaign: «I remember a picture in the *Corriere della Sera* where the fishermen were giving raw mussels to their kids in order to prove that there was no cholera».

And he remembers things that, simply, incredibly, had slipped away from my memory, and not only from mine.

«What stroke me the most during the years in Varese was the terrorist attack at the airport of Rome in 1973. I knew one of the players on board, he was rescued by sheer miracle».

(Later on I check on the internet and I am astounded. I vaguely knew that something like that had happened in Italy, in the early seventies. Yet I did not know, or if I knew I forgot about it, that in 1973 in Rome some pro-Palestinian terrorists killed 32 passengers of a Pan America plane. Then I saw that I was not the only one to be surprised by this oblivion; from the blogs: «Is it possible that nobody remembers? That there is no casualties list, no memorial tablet, no association that would commemorate the anniversaries? Can this happen in a country where everything is remembered? I repeat, 32 persons killed. The second biggest attack for what concerns the number of casualties after the massacre in Bologna». I believe that not even one Italian out of fifty, nowadays, remembers that slaughter: is it because they were all American casualties? Or because the airports are free, extraterritorial areas? It is weird).

I congratulate him for his memory, for all the things he knows about Italy back in those years. He tells me he always considered basketball as a chance to see, to learn things that could be useful for his life. «I think I succeeded in this, because now my approach to things is slightly different from that of the average American: a bit more critical, so to say». And this is all the more so for his two daughters. «My older daughter attended Italian, French and American schools. When she got here, the teacher asked her to write an essay about a historical topic of her choice, and she wrote about Garibaldi and the *Mille* with their red coats. The teacher corrected her, saying that the “red coats” were those of the English soldiers during the revolution. This way, Jennifer understood that “her” past was very different from the other students’, and also from the teacher’s. She speaks French, English, Italian. After studying in America she went to the Sorbonne. Now she’s about to graduate in biology».

Bob was in Israel with his team shortly after the six days war. He travelled everywhere in Eastern Europe, long before the fall of the Berlin wall. Did he do the “cultural visiting” alone?

«Well, all of us were about 25, we didn’t think too much about these things. Ossola was like me, he always wanted to go around. And Massimo Lucarelli, who then graduated in Political Science. Some other times I would go on my own».

The list of the nicest places is unusual. There are Siena and Firenze (I immediately speak not too well of Siena, and criticize Firenze). But also the north of Finland crossed canoeing. And Lugano.

«Lugano?».

«Yes, it seemed to me like a quiet city».

He will vote for Obama. Basically every American I have met in three months in Chicago will vote for Obama. All of them but two: a stupid lawyer married to one of my students and the black porter in my faculty: who was in Vietnam and has already voted for McCain in 2000. All the others are for Obama. Which does not mean he will win. It only means that my habitual attendances are all sadly the same: intellectual.

«Anyway, whoever will win, a change is necessary». (*Change*, as everybody knows, is the key word of Obama’s campaign. A few weeks ago the satirical weekly magazine *The Onion* made a title out of it: «Black Man Asking for Change». «If Gore had been here we would not be at this point, this madness. We need better schools, a public health service, opportunities for the poor».

Would he go back to live in Italy? He goes back from time to time. He would like to spend some time there. But the Italian life looks more and more like the American one – that of the big cities, not the sleepy one in the Mid West. «Milano reminded me of Washington, where I lived for a while: traffic, big houses, big cars. It was like being constantly late. Well fuck it... Instead, do you know Todi? The slow food movement? The slow-cities? That, you see...».

And so, while Bob is taking me back to South Bend station, down Lake Michigan's very long bend, I seek a way to re-describe all, every single thing, in a less obvious way than the one that right now comes into my mind. Since what comes into my mind is a sort of whining. In the seventies, life in Italy and in the world was poorer but also more beautiful. There was less traffic in the cities, you could drive to the centre with your car, people in the street would recognize you but they would leave you alone. The players remained faithful to their teams for years and, instead of taking the money and running away, they learned Italian, and they would do it so well they would be able to teach it after twenty years. They made good money, but not exorbitant sums, and they would happily get married at the age of 25 with their girlfriends from college, not with sluts from a glossy magazine. Sure, workmen would work without masks. Yet, it could happen that a basketball champion would go visit them and get an idea of how life was for the poor devils. Sure, there was terrorism, Seveso, the energetic crisis. But these were all things that with a bit of concentration you could ignore, or forget; things that did not touch you closely.

Those were the two most pleasant and interesting hours in the last few months. I tell him this. I also tell him that we have to meet again in Chicago in June, maybe at the university. We promise each other to find a date that would suit both of us. We exchange mobile numbers. And I have never seen him again.