Black Swan

by Bruce Sterling

The ethical journalist protects a confidential source. So I protected "Massimo Montaldo," although I knew that wasn't his name. Massimo shambled through the tall glass doors, dropped his valise with a thump, and sat across the table. We were meeting where we always met: inside the Caffe Elena, a dark and cozy spot that fronts on the biggest plaza in Europe. The Elena has two rooms as narrow and dignified as mahogany coffins, with lofty red ceilings. The little place has seen its share of stricken wanderers. Massimo never confided his personal troubles to me, but they were obvious, as if he'd smuggled monkeys into the café and hidden them under his clothes. Like every other hacker in the world, Massimo Montaldo was bright. Being Italian, he struggled to look suave. Massimo wore stain-proof, wrinkle-proof travel gear: a black merino wool jacket, an American black denim shirt, and black cargo pants. Massimo also sported black athletic trainers, not any brand I could recognize, with eerie bubble-filled soles. These skeletal shoes of his were half-ruined. They were strapped together with rawhide boot-laces. To judge by his Swiss-Italian accent, Massimo had spent a lot of time in Geneva. Four times he'd leaked chip secrets to me—crisp engineering graphics, apparently snipped right out of Swiss patent applications. However, the various bureaus in Geneva had no records of these patents. They had no records of any "Massimo Montaldo," either. Each time I'd made use of Massimo's indiscretions, the traffic to my weblog had doubled. I knew that Massimo's commercial sponsor, or more likely his spymaster, was using me to manipulate the industry I covered. Big bets were going down in the markets somewhere. Somebody was cashing in like a bandit. That profiteer wasn't me, and I had to doubt that it was him. I never financially speculate in the companies I cover as a journalist, because that is the road to hell. As for young Massimo, his road to hell was already well-trampled. Massimo twirled the frail stem of his glass of Barolo. His shoes were wrecked, his hair was unwashed, and he looked like he'd shaved in an airplane toilet. He handled the best wine in Europe like a scorpion poised to sting his liver. Then he gulped it down. Unasked, the waiter poured him another. They know me at the Elena. Massimo and I had a certain understanding. As we chatted about Italian tech companies—he knew them from Alessi to Zanotti—I discreetly passed him useful favors. A cellphone chip—bought in another man's name. A plastic hotel pass key for a local hotel room, rented by a third party. Massimo could use these without ever showing a passport or any identification. There were eight "Massimo Montaldos" on Google and none of them were him. Massimo flew in from places unknown, he laid his eggs of golden information, then he paddled off into dark waters. I was protecting him by giving him those favors. Surely there were other people very curious about him, besides myself. The second glass of Barolo eased that ugly crease in his brows. He rubbed his beak of a nose, and smoothed his unruly black hair, and leaned onto the thick stone table with both of his black woolen elbows. "Luca, I brought something special for you this time. Are you ready for that? Something you can't even imagine." "I suppose," I said. Massimo reached into his battered leather valise and brought out a no-name PC laptop. This much-worn machine, its corners bumped with use and its keyboard dingy, had one of those thick super-batteries clamped onto its base. All that extra power must have tripled the computer's weight. Small wonder that Massimo never carried spare shoes. He busied himself with his grimy screen, fixated by his private world there. The Elena is not a celebrity bar, which is why celebrities like it. A blonde television presenter swayed into the place. Massimo, who was now deep into his third glass, whipped his intense gaze from his laptop screen. He closely studied her curves, which were upholstered in Gucci. An Italian television presenter bears the relationship to news that American fast food bears to food. So I couldn't feel sorry for her—yet I didn't like the way he sized her up. Genius gears were turning visibly in Massimo's brilliant geek head. That woman had all the raw, compelling appeal to him of some difficult math problem. Left alone with her, he would chew on that problem until something clicked loose and fell into his hands, and, to do her credit, she could feel that. She opened her dainty crocodile purse and slipped on a big pair of sunglasses. "Signor Montaldo," I said. He was rapt. "Massimo?" This woke him

from his lustful reverie. He twisted the computer and exhibited his screen to me. I don't design chips, but I've seen the programs used for that purpose. Back in the 1980s, there were thirty different chip-design programs. Nowadays there are only three survivors. None of them are nativized in the Italian language, because every chip geek in the world speaks English. This program was in Italian. It looked elegant. It looked like a very stylish way to design computer chips. Computer chip engineers are not stylish people. Not in this world, anyway. Massimo tapped at his weird screen with a gnawed fingernail. "This is just a cheap, 24-K embed. But do you see these?" "Yes I do. What are they?" "These are memristors." In heartfelt alarm, I stared around the café, but nobody in the Elena knew or cared in the least about Massimo's stunning revelation. He could have thrown memristors onto their tables in heaps. They'd never realize that he was tossing them the keys to riches. I could explain now, in grueling detail, exactly what memristors are, and how different they are from any standard electronic component. Suffice to understand that, in electronic engineering, memristors did not exist. Not at all. They were technically possible—we'd known that for thirty years, since the 1980s—but nobody had ever manufactured one. A chip with memristors was like a racetrack where the jockeys rode unicorns. I sipped the Barolo so I could find my voice again. "You brought me schematics for memristors? What happened, did your UFO crash?" "That's very witty, Luca." "You can't hand me something like that! What on Earth do you expect me to do with that?" "I am not giving these memristor plans to you. I have decided to give them to Olivetti. I will tell you what to do: you make one confidential call to your good friend, the Olivetti Chief Technical Officer. You tell him to look hard in his junk folder where he keeps the spam with no return address. Interesting things will happen, then. He'll be grateful to you." "Olivetti is a fine company," I said. "But they're not the outfit to handle a monster like that. A memristor is strictly for the big boys—Intel, Samsung, Fujitsu." Massimo laced his hands together on the table—he might have been at prayer—and stared at me with weary sarcasm. "Luca," he said, "don't you ever get tired of seeing Italian genius repressed?" The Italian chip business is rather modest. It can't always make its ends meet. I spent fifteen years covering chip tech in Route 128 in Boston. When the almighty dollar ruled the tech world, I was glad that I'd made those connections. But times do change. Nations change, industries change. Industries change the times. Massimo had just shown me something that changes industries. A disruptive innovation. A breaker of the rules. "This matter is serious," I said. "Yes, Olivetti's people do read my weblog—they even comment there. But that doesn't mean that I can leak some breakthrough that deserves a Nobel Prize. Olivetti would want to know, they would have to know, the source of that." He shook his head. "They don't want to know, and neither do you." "Oh yes, I most definitely do want to know." "No, you don't. Trust me." "Massimo, I'm a journalist. That means that I always want to know, and I never trust anybody." He slapped the table. "Maybe you were a 'journalist' when they still printed paper 'journals.' But your dot-com journals are all dead. Nowadays you're a blogger. You're an influence peddler and you spread rumors for a living." Massimo shrugged, because he didn't think he was insulting me. "So, shut up! Just do what you always do! That's all I'm asking." That might be all that he was asking, but my whole business was in asking. "Who created that chip?" I asked him. "I know it wasn't you. You know a lot about tech investment, but you're not Leonardo da Vinci." "No, I'm not Leonardo." He emptied his glass. "Look, I know that you're not even 'Massimo Montaldo'—whoever that is. I'll do a lot to get news out on my blog. But I'm not going to act as your cut-out in a scheme like this! That's totally unethical! Where did you steal that chip? Who made it? What are they, Chinese super-engineers in some bunker under Beijing?" Massimo was struggling not to laugh at me. "I can't reveal that. Could we have another round? Maybe a sandwich? I need a nice toasty pancetta." I got the waiter's attention. I noted that the TV star's boyfriend had shown up. Her boyfriend was not her husband. Unfortunately, I was not in the celebrity tabloid business. It wasn't the first time I'd missed a good bet by consorting with computer geeks. "So you're an industrial spy," I told him. "And you must be Italian to boot, because you're always such a patriot about it. Okay, so you stole those plans somewhere. I won't ask you how or why. But let me give you some good advice: no sane man would leak that to Olivetti. Olivetti's a consumer outfit. They make pretty toys for cute secretaries. A memristor chip is dynamite." Massimo was staring raptly at the TV blonde as he awaited his sandwich. "Massimo, pay attention. If you leak something that advanced, that radical… a chip like that could

change the world's military balance of power. Never mind Olivetti. Big American spy agencies with three letters in their names will come calling." Massimo scratched his dirty scalp and rolled his eyes in derision. "Are you so terrorized by the CIA? They don't read your sorry little one-man tech blog." This crass remark irritated me keenly. "Listen to me, boy genius: do you know what the CIA does here in Italy? We're their 'rendition' playground. People vanish off the streets." "Anybody can 'vanish off the streets.' I do that all the time." I took out my Moleskin notebook and my shiny Rotring technical pen. I placed them both on the Elena's neat little marble table. Then I slipped them both back inside my jacket. "Massimo, I'm trying hard to be sensible about this. Your snotty attitude is not helping your case with me." With an effort, my source composed himself. "It's all very simple," he lied. "I've been here a while, and now I'm tired of this place. So I'm leaving. I want to hand the future of electronics to an Italian company. With no questions asked and no strings attached. You won't help me do that simple thing?" "No, of course I won't! Not under conditions like these. I don't know where you got that data, what, how, when, whom, or why… I don't even know who you are! Do I look like that kind of idiot? Unless you tell me your story, I can't trust you." He made that evil gesture: I had no balls. Twenty years ago—well, twentyfive—and we would have stepped outside the bar. Of course I was angry with him—but I also knew he was about to crack. My source was drunk and he was clearly in trouble. He didn't need a fist-fight with a journalist. He needed confession. Massimo put a bold sneer on his face, watching himself in one of the Elena's tall spotted mirrors. "If this tiny gadget is too big for your closed mind, then I've got to find another blogger! A blogger with some guts!" "Great. Sure. Go do that. You might try Beppe Grillo." Massimo tore his gaze from his own reflection. "That washed-up TV comedian? What does he know about technology?" "Try Berlusconi, then. He owns all the television stations and half the Italian Internet. Prime Minister Berlusconi is just the kind of hustler you need. He'll free you from all your troubles. He'll make you Minister of something." Massimo lost all patience. "I don't need that! I've been to a lot of versions of Italy. Yours is a complete disgrace! I don't know how you people get along with yourselves!" Now the story was tearing loose. I offered an encouraging nod. "How many 'versions of Italy' do you need, Massimo?" "I have sixty-four versions of Italy." He patted his thick laptop. "Got them all right here." I humored him. "Only sixty-four?" His tipsy face turned red. "I had to borrow CERN's supercomputers to calculate all those coordinates! Thirty-two Italies were too few! A hundred twenty-eight… I'd never have the time to visit all those! And as for your Italy… well… I wouldn't be here at all, if it wasn't for that Turinese girl." "'Cherchez la femme,'" I told him. "That's the oldest trouble-story in the world." "I did her some favors," he admitted, mournfully twisting his wineglass. "Like with you. But much more so." I felt lost, but I knew that his story was coming. Once I'd coaxed it out of him, I could put it into better order later. "So, tell me: what did she do to you?" "She dumped me," he said. He was telling me the truth, but with a lost, forlorn, bewildered air, like he couldn't believe it himself. "She dumped me and she married the President of France." Massimo glanced up, his eyelashes wet with grief. "I don't blame her. I know why she did that. I'm a very handy guy for a woman like her, but Mother of God, I'm not the President of France!" "No, no, you're not the President of France," I agreed. The President of France was a hyperactive Hungarian Jewish guy who liked to sing karaoke songs. President Nicolas Sarkozy was an exceedingly unlikely character, but he was odd in a very different way from Massimo Montaldo. Massimo's voice was cracking with passion. "She says that he'll make her the First Lady of Europe! All I've got to offer her is insider-trading hints and a few extra millions for her millions." The waiter brought Massimo a toasted sandwich. Despite his broken heart, Massimo was starving. He tore into his food like a chained dog, then glanced up from his mayonnaise dip. "Do I sound jealous? I'm not jealous." Massimo was bitterly jealous, but I shook my head so as to encourage him. "I can't be jealous of a woman like her!" Massimo lied. "Eric Clapton can be jealous, Mick Jagger can be jealous! She's a rock star's groupie who's become the Premiere Dame of France! She married Sarkozy! Your world is full of journalists—spies, cops, creeps, whatever—and not for one minute did they ever stop and consider: 'Oh! This must be the work of a computer geek from another world!'" "No," I agreed. "Nobody ever imagines that!" I called the waiter back and ordered myself a double espresso. The waiter seemed quite pleased at the way things were going for me. They were a kindly bunch at the Elena. Friedrich Nietzsche had been one of their favorite patrons. Their dark old mahogany walls had

absorbed all kinds of lunacy. Massimo jabbed his sandwich in the dip and licked his fingers. "So, if I leak a memristor chip to you, nobody will ever stop and say: 'some unknown geek eating a sandwich in Torino is the most important man in world technology.' Because that truth is inconceivable." Massimo stabbed a roaming olive with a toothpick. His hands were shaking: with rage, romantic heartbreak, and frustrated fury. He was also drunk. He glared at me. "You're not following what I tell you. Are you really that stupid?" "I do understand," I assured him. "Of course I understand. I'm a computer geek myself." "You know who designed that memristor chip, Luca? You did it. You. But not here, not in this version of Italy. Here, you're just some small-time tech journalist. You created that device in my Italy. In my Italy, you are the guru of computational aesthetics. You're a famous author, you're a culture critic, you're a multi-talented genius. Here, you've got no guts and no imagination. You're so entirely useless here that you can't even change your own world." It was hard to say why I believed him, but I did. I believed him instantly. Massimo devoured his food to the last scrap. He thrust his bare plate aside and pulled a huge nylon wallet from his cargo pants. This overstuffed wallet had color-coded plastic pop-up tags, like the monster files of some Orwellian bureaucracy. Twenty different kinds of paper currency jammed in there. A huge riffling file of varicolored plastic ID cards. He selected a large bill and tossed it contemptuously onto the Elena's cold marble table. It looked very much like money—it looked much more like money than the money that I handled every day. It had a splendid portrait of Galileo and it was denominated in "Euro-Lira." Then he rose and stumbled out of the café. I hastily slipped the weird bill in my pocket. I threw some euros onto the table. Then I pursued him. With his head down, muttering and sour, Massimo was weaving across the millions of square stone cobbles of the huge Piazza Vittorio Veneto. As if through long experience, he found the emptiest spot in the plaza, a stony desert between a handsome line of ornate lamp-posts and the sleek steel railings of an underground parking garage. He dug into a trouser pocket and plucked out tethered foam earplugs, the kind you get from Alitalia for long overseas flights. Then he flipped his laptop open. I caught up with him. "What are you doing over here? Looking for wifi signals?" "I'm leaving." He tucked the foam plugs in his ears. "Mind if I come along?" "When I count to three," he told me, too loudly, "you have to jump high into the air. Also, stay within range of my laptop." "All right. Sure." "Oh, and put your hands over your ears." I objected. "How can I hear you count to three if I have my hands over my ears?" "Uno." He pressed the F-1 function key, and his laptop screen blazed with sudden light. "Due." The F-2 emitted a humming, cracking buzz. "Tre." He hopped in the air. Thunder blasted. My lungs were crushed in a violent billow of wind. My feet stung as if they'd been burned. Massimo staggered for a moment, then turned by instinct back toward the Elena. "Let's go!" he shouted. He plucked one yellow earplug from his head. Then he tripped. I caught his computer as he stumbled. Its monster battery was sizzling hot. Massimo grabbed his overheated machine. He stuffed it awkwardly into his valise. Massimo had tripped on a loose cobblestone. We were standing in a steaming pile of loose cobblestones. Somehow, these cobblestones had been plucked from the pavement beneath our shoes and scattered around us like dice. Of course we were not alone. Some witnesses sat in the vast plaza, the everyday Italians of Turin, sipping their drinks at little tables under distant, elegant umbrellas. They were sensibly minding their own business. A few were gazing puzzled at the rich blue evening sky, as if they suspected some passing sonic boom. Certainly none of them cared about us. We limped back toward the café. My shoes squeaked like the shoes of a bad TV comedian. The cobbles under our feet had broken and tumbled, and the seams of my shoes had gone loose. My shining patent-leather shoes were foul and grimy. We stepped through the arched double-doors of the Elena, and, somehow, despite all sense and reason, I found some immediate comfort. Because the Elena was the Elena: it had those round marble tables with their curvilinear legs, those maroon leather chairs with their shiny brass studs, those colossal time-stained mirrors… and a smell I hadn't noticed there in years. Cigarettes. Everyone in the café was smoking. The air in the bar was cooler—it felt chilly, even. People wore sweaters. Massimo had friends there. A woman and her man. This woman beckoned us over, and the man, although he knew Massimo, was clearly unhappy to see him. This man was Swiss, but he wasn't the jolly kind of Swiss I was used to seeing in Turin, some harmless Swiss banker on holiday who pops over the Alps to pick up some ham and cheese. This Swiss guy was young, yet as tough as old nails, with aviator shades and a long narrow

scar in his hairline. He wore black nylon gloves and a raw canvas jacket with holster room in its armpits. The woman had tucked her impressive bust into a hand-knitted peasant sweater. Her sweater was gaudy, complex and aggressively gorgeous, and so was she. She had smoldering eyes thick with mascara, and talon-like red painted nails, and a thick gold watch that could have doubled as brass knuckles. "So Massimo is back," said the woman. She had a cordial yet guarded tone, like a woman who has escaped a man's bed and needs compelling reasons to return. "I brought a friend for you tonight," said Massimo, helping himself to a chair. "So I see. And what does your friend have in mind for us? Does he play backgammon?" The pair had a backgammon set on their table. The Swiss mercenary rattled dice in a cup. "We're very good at backgammon," he told me mildly. He had the extremely menacing tone of a practiced killer who can't even bother to be scary. "My friend here is from the American CIA," said Massimo. "We're here to do some serious drinking." "How nice! I can speak American to you, Mr. CIA," the woman volunteered. She aimed a dazzling smile at me. "What is your favorite American baseball team?" "I root for the Boston Red Sox." "I love the Seattle Green Sox," she told us, just to be coy. The waiter brought us a bottle of Croatian fruit brandy. The peoples of the Balkans take their drinking seriously, so their bottles tend toward a rather florid design. This bottle was frankly fantastic: it was squat, acid-etched, curvilinear, and flute-necked, and with a triple portrait of Tito, Nasser and Nehru, all toasting one another. There were thick flakes of gold floating in its paralyzing murk. Massimo yanked the gilded cork, stole the woman's cigarettes, and tucked an unfiltered cig in the corner of his mouth. With his slopping shot-glass in his fingers he was a different man. "Zhivali!" the woman pronounced, and we all tossed back a hearty shot of venom. The temptress chose to call herself "Svetlana," while her Swiss bodyguard was calling himself "Simon." I had naturally thought that it was insane for Massimo to denounce me as a CIA spy, yet this gambit was clearly helping the situation. As an American spy, I wasn't required to say much. No one expected me to know anything useful, or to do anything worthwhile. However, I was hungry, so I ordered the snack plate. The attentive waiter was not my favorite Elena waiter. He might have been a cousin. He brought us raw onions, pickles, black bread, a hefty link of sausage, and a wooden tub of creamed butter. We also got a notched pig-iron knife and a battered chopping board. Simon put the backgammon set away. All these crude and ugly things on the table—the knife, the chopping board, even the bad sausage—had all been made in Italy. I could see little Italian maker's marks hand-etched into all of them. "So you're hunting here in Torino, like us?" probed Svetlana. I smiled back at her. "Yes, certainly!" "So, what do you plan to do with him when you catch him? Will you put him on trial?" "A fair trial is the American way!" I told them. Simon thought this remark was quite funny. Simon was not an evil man by nature. Simon probably suffered long nights of existential regret whenever he cut a man's throat. "So," Simon offered, caressing the rim of his dirty shot glass with one nylongloved finger, "So even the Americans expect 'the Rat' to show his whiskers in here!" "The Elena does pull a crowd," I agreed. "So it all makes good sense. Don't you think?" Everyone loves to be told that their thinking makes good sense. They were happy to hear me allege this. Maybe I didn't look or talk much like an American agent, but when you're a spy, and guzzling fruit brandy, and gnawing sausage, these minor inconsistencies don't upset anybody. We were all being sensible. Leaning his black elbows on our little table, Massimo weighed in. "The Rat is clever. He plans to sneak over the Alps again. He'll go back to Nice and Marseilles. He'll rally his militias." Simon stopped with a knife-stabbed chunk of blood sausage on the way to his gullet. "You really believe that?" "Of course I do! What did Napoleon say? 'The death of a million men means nothing to a man like me!' It's impossible to corner Nicolas the Rat. The Rat has a star of destiny." The woman watched Massimo's eyes. Massimo was one of her informants. Being a woman, she had heard his lies before and was used to them. She also knew that no informant lies all the time. "Then he's here in Torino tonight," she concluded. Massimo offered her nothing. She immediately looked to me. I silently stroked my chin in a sagely fashion. "Listen, American spy," she told me politely, "you Americans are a simple, honest people, so good at tapping phone calls… It won't hurt your feelings any if Nicolas Sarkozy is found floating face-down in the River Po. Instead of teasing me here, as Massimo is so fond of doing, why don't you just tell me where Sarkozy is? I do want to know." I knew very well where President Nicolas Sarkozy was supposed to be. He was supposed to be in the Elysée Palace carrying out

extensive economic reforms. Simon was more urgent. "You do want us to know where the Rat is, don't you?" He showed me a set of teeth edged in Swiss gold. "Let us know! That would save the International Courts of Justice a lot of trouble." I didn't know Nicolas Sarkozy. I had met him twice when he was French Minister of Communication, when he proved that he knew a lot about the Internet. Still, if Nicolas Sarkozy was not the President of France, and if he was not in the Elysée Palace, then, being a journalist, I had a pretty good guess of his whereabouts. "Cherchez la femme," I said. Simon and Svetlana exchanged thoughtful glances. Knowing one another well, and knowing their situation, they didn't have to debate their next course of action. Simon signaled the waiter. Svetlana threw a gleaming coin onto the table. They bundled their backgammon set and kicked their leather chairs back. They left the café without another word. Massimo rose. He sat in Svetlana's abandoned chair, so that he could keep a wary eye on the café's double-door to the street. Then he helped himself to her abandoned pack of Turkish cigarettes. I examined Svetlana's abandoned coin. It was large, round, and minted from pure silver, with a gaudy engraving of the Taj Mahal. "Fifty Dinars," it read, in Latin script, Hindi, Arabic, and Cyrillic. "The booze around here really gets on top of me", Massimo complained. Unsteadily, he stuffed the ornate cork back into the brandy bottle. He set a slashed pickle on a buttered slice of black bread. "Is he coming here?" "Who?" "Nicolas Sarkozy. 'Nicolas the Rat.'" "Oh, him," said Massimo, chewing his bread. "In this version of Italy, I think Sarkozy's already dead. God knows there's enough people trying to kill him. The Arabs, Chinese, Africans… he turned the south of France upside down! There's a bounty on him big enough to buy Olivetti—not that there's much left of Olivetti." I had my summer jacket on, and I was freezing. "Why is it so damn cold in here?" "That's climate change," said Massimo. "Not in this Italy—in your Italy. In your Italy, you've got a messed-up climate. In this Italy, it's the human race that's messed-up. Here, as soon as Chernobyl collapsed, a big French reactor blew up on the German border… and they all went for each other's throats! Here NATO and the European Union are even deader than the Warsaw Pact." Massimo was proud to be telling me this. I drummed my fingers on the chilly tabletop. "It took you a while to find that out, did it?" "The big transition always hinges in the 1980s," said Massimo, "because that's when we made the big breakthroughs." "In your Italy, you mean." "That's right. Before the 1980s, nobody understood the physics of parallel worlds… but after that transition, we could pack a zero-point energy generator into a laptop. Just boil the whole problem down into one single micro-electronic mechanical system." "So you've got zero-point energy MEMS chips," I said. He chewed more bread and pickle. Then he nodded. "You've got MEMS chips and you were offering me some fucking lousy memristor? You must think I'm a real chump!" "You're not a chump." Massimo sawed a fresh slice of bad bread. "But you're from the wrong Italy. It was your own stupid world that made you this stupid, Luca. In my Italy, you were one of the few men who could talk sense to my Dad. My Dad used to confide in you. He trusted you, he thought you were a great writer. You wrote his biography." "'Massimo Montaldo, Senior,'" I said. Massimo was startled. "Yeah. That's him." He narrowed his eyes. "You're not supposed to know that." I had guessed it. A lot of news is made from good guesses. "Tell me how you feel about that," I said, because this is always a useful question for an interviewer who has lost his way. "I feel desperate," he told me, grinning. "Desperate! But I feel much less desperate here than I was when I was the spoilt-brat dope-addict son of the world's most famous scientist. Before you met me—Massimo Montaldo—had you ever heard of any 'Massimo Montaldo'?" "No. I never did." "That's right. I'm never in any of the other Italies. There's never any other Massimo Montaldo. I never meet another version of myself—and I never meet another version of my father, either. That's got to mean something crucial. I know it means something important." "Yes," I told him, "that surely does mean something." "I think," he said, "that I know what it means. It means that space and time are not just about physics and computation. It means that human beings really matter in the course of world events. It means that human beings can truly change the world. It means that our actions have consequence." "The human angle," I said, "always makes a good story." "It's true. But try telling that story," he said, and he looked on the point of tears. "Tell that story to any human being. Go on, do it! Tell anybody in here! Help yourself." I looked around the Elena. There were some people in there, the local customers, normal people, decent people, maybe a dozen of them. Not remarkable people, not freakish, not weird or strange, but

normal. Being normal people, they were quite at ease with their lot and accepting their daily existences. Once upon a time, the Elena used to carry daily newspapers. Newspapers were supplied for customers on those special long wooden bars. In my world, the Elena didn't do that anymore. Too few newspapers, and too much Internet. Here the Elena still had those newspapers on those handy wooden bars. I rose from my chair and I had a good look at them. There were stylish imported newspapers, written in Hindi, Arabic and Serbo-Croatian. I had to look hard to find a local paper in Italian. There were two, both printed on a foul gray paper full of flecks of badly-pulped wood. I took the larger Italian paper to the café table. I flicked through the headlines and I read all the lede paragraphs. I knew immediately I was reading lies. It wasn't that the news was so terrible, or so deceitful. But it was clear that the people reading this newspaper were not expected to make any practical use of news. The Italians were a modest, colonial people. The news that they were offered was a set of feeble fantasies. All the serious news was going on elsewhere. There was something very strong and lively in the world called the "Non-Aligned Movement." It stretched from the Baltics all the way to the Balkans, throughout the Arab world, and all the way through India. Japan and China were places that the giant Non-Aligned superpower treated with guarded respect. America was some kind of humbled farm where the Yankees spent their time in church. Those other places, the places that used to matter—France, Germany, Britain, "Brussels"—these were obscure and poor and miserable places. Their names and locales were badly spelled. Cheap black ink was coming off on my fingers. I no longer had questions for Massimo, except for one. "When do we get out of here?" Massimo buttered his tattered slice of black bread. "I was never searching for the best of all possible worlds," he told me. "I was looking for the best of all possible me's. In an Italy like this Italy, I really matter. Your version of Italy is pretty backward—but this world had a nuclear exchange. Europe had a civil war, and most cities in the Soviet Union are big puddles of black glass." I took my Moleskin notebook from my jacket pocket. How pretty and sleek that fancy notebook looked, next to that gray pulp newspaper. "You don't mind if I jot this down, I hope?" "I know that this sounds bad to you—but trust me, that's not how history works. History doesn't have any 'badness' or 'goodness.' This world has a future. The food's cheap, the climate is stable, the women are gorgeous… and since there's only three billion people left alive on Earth, there's a lot of room." Massimo pointed his crude sausage-knife at the café's glass double door. "Nobody here ever asks for ID, nobody cares about passports… They've never even heard of electronic banking! A smart guy like you, you could walk out of here and start a hundred tech companies." "If I didn't get my throat cut." "Oh, people always overstate that little problem! The big problem is—you know—who wants to work that hard? I got to know this place, because I knew that I could be a hero here. Bigger than my father. I'd be smarter than him, richer than him, more famous, more powerful. I would be better! But that is a burden. 'Improving the world,' that doesn't make me happy at all. That's a curse, it's like slavery.'" "What does make you happy, Massimo?" Clearly Massimo had given this matter some thought. "Waking up in a fine hotel with a gorgeous stranger in my bed. That's the truth! And that would be true of every man in every world, if he was honest." Massimo tapped the neck of the garish brandy bottle with the back of the carving knife. "My girlfriend Svetlana, she understands all that pretty well, but—there's one other thing. I drink here. I like to drink, I admit that—but they really drink around here. This version of Italy is in the almighty Yugoslav sphere of influence." I had been doing fine so far, given my circumstances. Suddenly the nightmare sprang upon me, unfiltered, total, and wholesale. Chills of terror climbed my spine like icy scorpions. I felt a strong, irrational, animal urge to abandon my comfortable chair and run for my life. I could run out of the handsome café and into the twilight streets of Turin. I knew Turin, and I knew that Massimo would never find me there. Likely he wouldn't bother to look. I also knew that I would run straight into the world so badly described by that grimy newspaper. That terrifying world would be where, henceforth, I existed. That world would not be strange to me, or strange to anybody. Because that world was reality. It was not a strange world, it was a normal world. It was I, me, who was strange here. I was desperately strange here, and that was normal. This conclusion made me reach for my shot glass. I drank. It was not what I would call a 'good' brandy. It did have strong character. It was powerful and it was ruthless. It was a brandy beyond good and evil. My feet ached and itched in my ruined shoes. Blisters were rising and stinging. Maybe I should

consider myself lucky that my aching alien feet were still attached to my body. My feet were not simply slashed off and abandoned in some black limbo between the worlds. I put my shot glass down. "Can we leave now? Is that possible?" "Absolutely," said Massimo, sinking deeper into his cozy red leather chair. "Let's sober up first with a coffee, eh? It's always Arabic coffee here at the Elena. They boil it in big brass pots." I showed him the silver coin. "No, she settled our bill for us, eh? So let's just leave." Massimo stared at the coin, flipped it from head to tails, then slipped it in a pants pocket. "Fine. I'll describe our options. We can call this place the 'Yugoslav Italy,' and, like I said, this place has a lot of potential. But there are other versions." He started ticking off his fingers. "There's an Italy where the 'No Nukes' movement won big in the 1980s. You remember them? Gorbachev and Reagan made world peace. Everybody disarmed and was happy. There were no more wars, the economy boomed everywhere… Peace and justice and prosperity, everywhere on Earth. So the climate exploded. The last Italian survivors are living high in the Alps." I stared at him. "No." "Oh yes. Yes, and those are very nice people. They really treasure and support each other. There are hardly any of them left alive. They're very sweet and civilized. They're wonderful people. You'd be amazed what nice Italians they are." "Can't we just go straight back to my own version of Italy?" "Not directly, no. But there's a version of Italy quite close to yours. After John Paul the First died, they quickly elected another Pope. He was not that Polish anticommunist—instead, that Pope was a pedophile. There was a colossal scandal and the Church collapsed. In that version of Italy, even the Moslems are secular. The churches are brothels and discotheques. They never use the words 'faith' or 'morality.'" Massimo sighed, then rubbed his nose. "You might think the death of religion would make a lot of difference to people. Well, it doesn't. Because they think it's normal. They don't miss believing in God any more than you miss believing in Marx." "So first we can go to that Italy, and then nearby into my own Italy—is that the idea?" "That Italy is boring! The girls there are boring! They're so matter-of-fact about sex there that they're like girls from Holland." Massimo shook his head ruefully. "Now I'm going to tell you about a version of Italy that's truly different and interesting." I was staring at a round of the sausage. The bright piece of gristle in it seemed to be the severed foot of some small animal. "All right, Massimo, tell me." "Whenever I move from world to world, I always materialize in the Piazza Vittorio Veneto," he said, "because that plaza is so huge and usually pretty empty, and I don't want to hurt anyone with the explosion. Plus, I know Torino—I know all the tech companies here, so I can make my way around. But once I saw a Torino with no electronics." I wiped clammy sweat from my hands with the café's rough cloth napkin. "Tell me, Massimo, how did you feel about that?" "It's incredible. There's no electricity there. There's no wires for the electrical trolleys. There are plenty of people there, very well-dressed, and bright colored lights, and some things are flying in the sky… big aircraft, big as ocean-liners. So they've got some kind of power there—but it's not electricity. They stopped using electricity, somehow. Since the 1980s." "A Turin with no electricity," I repeated, to convince him that I was listening. "Yeah, that's fascinating, isn't it? How could Italy abandon electricity and replace it with another power source? I think that they use cold-fusion! Because cold fusion was another world-changing event from the 1980s. I can't explore that Torino—because where would I plug in my laptop? But you could find out how they do all that! Because you're just a journalist, right? All you need is a pencil!" "I'm not a big expert on physics," I said. "My God, I keep forgetting I'm talking to somebody from the hopeless George Bush World," he said. "Listen, stupid: physics isn't complicated. Physics is very simple and elegant, because it's structured. I knew that from the age of three." "I'm just a writer, I'm not a scientist." "Well, surely you've heard of 'consilience.'" "No. Never." "Yes you have! Even people in your stupid world know about 'consilience.' Consilience means that all forms of human knowledge have an underlying unity!" The gleam in his eyes was tiring me. "Why does that matter?" "It makes all the difference between your world and my world! In your world there was a great physicist once… Dr. Italo Calvino." "Famous literary writer," I said, "he died in the 1980s." "Calvino didn't die in my Italy," he said. "Because in my Italy, Italo Calvino completed his 'Six Core Principles.'" "Calvino wrote 'Six Memos,'" I said. "He wrote 'Six Memos for the Next Millennium.' And he only finished five of those before he had a stroke and died." "In my world Calvino did not have a stroke. He had a stroke of genius, instead. When Calvino completed his work, those six lectures weren't just 'memos'. He delivered six major public addresses at Princeton. When

Calvino gave that sixth, great, final speech, on 'Consistency,' the halls were crammed with physicists. Mathematicians, too. My father was there." I took refuge in my notebook. "Six Core Principles," I scribbled hastily, "Calvino, Princeton, consilience." "Calvino's parents were both scientists," Massimo insisted. "Calvino's brother was also a scientist. His Oulipo literary group was obsessed with mathematics. When Calvino delivered lectures worthy of a genius, nobody was surprised." "I knew Calvino was a genius," I said. I'd been young, but you can't write in Italian and not know Calvino. I'd seen him trudging the porticoes in Turin, hunch-shouldered, slapping his feet, always looking sly and preoccupied. You only had see the man to know that he had an agenda like no other writer in the world. "When Calvino finished his six lectures," mused Massimo, "they carried him off to CERN in Geneva and they made him work on the 'Semantic Web.' The Semantic Web works beautifully, by the way. It's not like your foul little Inter-net—so full of spam and crime." He wiped the sausage knife on an oil-stained napkin. "I should qualify that remark. The Semantic Web works beautifully—in the Italian language. Because the Semantic Web was built by Italians. They had a little bit of help from a few French Oulipo writers." "Can we leave this place now? And visit this Italy you boast so much about? And then drop by my Italy?" "That situation is complicated," Massimo hedged, and stood up. "Watch my bag, will you?" He then departed to the toilet, leaving me to wonder about all the ways in which our situation could be complicated. Now I was sitting alone, staring at that corked brandy bottle. My brain was boiling. The strangeness of my situation had broken some important throttle inside my head. I considered myself bright—because I could write in three languages, and I understood technical matters. I could speak to engineers, designers, programmers, venture capitalists and government officials on serious, adult issues that we all agreed were important. So, yes, surely I was bright. But I'd spent my whole life being far more stupid than I was at this moment. In this terrible extremity, here in the cigarette-choked Elena, where the halfragged denizens pored over their grimy newspapers, I knew I possessed a true potential for genius. I was Italian, and, being Italian, I had the knack to shake the world to its roots. My genius had never embraced me, because genius had never been required of me. I had been stupid because I dwelled in a stupefied world. I now lived in no world at all. I had no world. So my thoughts were rocketing through empty space. Ideas changed the world. Thoughts changed the world—and thoughts could be written down. I had forgotten that writing could have such urgency, that writing could matter to history, that literature might have consequence. Strangely, tragically, I'd forgotten that such things were even possible. Calvino had died of a stroke: I knew that. Some artery broke inside the man's skull as he gamely struggled with his manifesto to transform the next millennium. Surely that was a great loss, but how could anybody guess the extent of that loss? A stroke of genius is a black swan, beyond prediction, beyond expectation. If a black swan never arrives, how on Earth could its absence be guessed? The chasm between Massimo's version of Italy and my Italy was invisible—yet all-encompassing. It was exactly like the stark difference between the man I was now, and the man I'd been one short hour ago. A black swan can never be predicted, expected, or categorized. A black swan, when it arrives, cannot even be recognized as a black swan. When the black swan assaults us, with the wingbeats of some rapist Jupiter, then we must rewrite history. Maybe a newsman writes a news story, which is history's first draft. Yet the news never shouts that history has black swans. The news never tells us that our universe is contingent, that our fate hinges on changes too huge for us to comprehend, or too small for us to see. We can never accept the black swan's arbitrary carelessness. So our news is never about how the news can make no sense to human beings. Our news is always about how well we understand. Whenever our wits are shattered by the impossible, we swiftly knit the world back together again, so that our wits can return to us. We pretend that we've lost nothing, not one single illusion. Especially, certainly, we never lose our minds. No matter how strange the news is, we're always sane and sensible. That is what we tell each other. Massimo returned to our table. He was very drunk, and he looked greenish. "You ever been in a squat-down Turkish toilet?" he said, pinching his nose. "Trust me, don't go in there." "I think we should go to your Italy now," I said. "I could do that," he allowed idly, "although I've made some trouble for myself there… my real problem is you." "Why am I trouble?" "There's another Luca in my Italy. He's not like you, because he's a great author, and a very dignified and very wealthy man. He wouldn't find you funny." I considered this. He was inviting

me to be bitterly jealous of myself. I couldn't manage that, yet I was angry anyway. "Am I funny, Massimo?" He'd stopped drinking, but that killer brandy was still percolating through his gut. "Yes, you're funny, Luca. You're weird. You're a terrible joke. Especially in this version of Italy. And especially now that you're finally catching on. You've got a look on your face now like a drowned fish." He belched into his fist. "Now, at last, you think that you understand, but no, you don't. Not yet. Listen, in order to arrive here—I created this world. When I press the Function-Three key, and the field transports me here—without me as the observer, this universe doesn't even exist." I glanced around the thing that Massimo called a universe. It was an Italian café. The marble table in front of me was every bit as solid as a rock. Everything around me was very solid, normal, realistic, acceptable and predictable. "Of course," I told him. "And you also created my universe, too. Because you're not just a black swan. You're God." "'Black swan,' is that what you call me?" He smirked, and preened in the mirror. "You journalists need a tag-line for everything." "You always wear black," I said. "Does that keep our dirt from showing?" Massimo buttoned his black woolen jacket. "It gets worse," he told me. "When I press that Function-Two key, before the field settles in… I generate millions of potential histories. Billions of histories. All with their souls, ethics, thoughts, histories, destinies—whatever. Worlds blink into existence for a few nanoseconds while the chip runs through the program—and then they all blink out. As if they never were." "That's how you move? From world to world?" "That's right, my friend. This ugly duckling can fly." The Elena's waiter arrived to tidy up our table. "A little rice pudding?" he asked. Massimo was cordial. "No, thank you, sir." "Got some very nice chocolate in this week! All the way from South America." "My, that's the very best kind of chocolate." Massimo jabbed his hand into a cargo pocket. "I believe I need some chocolate. What will you give me for this?" The waiter examined it carefully. "This is a woman's engagement ring." "Yes, it is." "It can't be a real diamond, though. This stone's much too big to be a real diamond." "You're an idiot," said Massimo, "but I don't care much. I've got a big appetite for sweets. Why don't you bring me an entire chocolate pie?" The waiter shrugged and left us. "So," Massimo resumed, "I wouldn't call myself a 'God'—because I'm much better described as several million billion Gods. Except, you know, that the zeropoint transport field always settles down. Then, here I am. I'm standing outside some café, in a cloud of dirt, with my feet aching. With nothing to my name, except what I've got in my brain and my pockets. It's always like that." The door of the Elena banged open, with the harsh jangle of brass Indian bells. A gang of five men stomped in. I might have taken them for cops, because they had jackets, belts, hats, batons and pistols, but Turinese cops do not arrive on duty drunk. Nor do they wear scarlet armbands with crossed lightning bolts. The café fell silent as the new guests muscled up to the dented bar. Bellowing threats, they proceeded to shake-down the staff. Massimo turned up his collar and gazed serenely at his knotted hands. Massimo was studiously minding his own business. He was in his corner, silent, black, inexplicable. He might have been at prayer. I didn't turn to stare at the intruders. It wasn't a pleasant scene, but even for a stranger, it wasn't hard to understand. The door of the men's room opened. A short man in a trenchcoat emerged. He had a dead cigar clenched in his teeth, and a snappy Alain Delon fedora. He was surprisingly handsome. People always underestimated the good looks, the male charm of Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy sometimes seemed a little odd when sunbathing half-naked in newsstand tabloids, but in person, his charisma was overwhelming. He was a man that any world had to reckon with. Sarkozy glanced about the café for a matter of seconds. Then he sidled, silent and decisive, along the dark mahogany wall. He bent one elbow. There was a thunderclap. Massimo pitched face-forward onto the small marble table. Sarkozy glanced with mild chagrin at the smoking hole blown through the pocket of his stylish trenchcoat. Then he stared at me. "You're that journalist," he said. "You've got a good memory for faces, Monsieur Sarkozy." "That's right, asshole, I do." His Italian was bad, but it was better than my French. "Are you still eager to 'protect' your dead source here?" Sarkozy gave Massimo's heavy chair one quick, vindictive kick, and the dead man, and his chair, and his table, and his ruined, gushing head all fell to the hard café floor with one complicated clatter. "There's your big scoop of a story, my friend," Sarkozy told me. "I just gave that to you. You should use that in your lying commie magazine." Then he barked orders at the uniformed thugs. They grouped themselves around him in a helpful cluster, their faces pale with respect. "You can come out now, baby," crowed Sarkozy, and she emerged from the men's room. She

was wearing a cute little gangster-moll hat, and a tailored camouflage jacket. She lugged a big black guitar case. She also had a primitive radio-telephone bigger than a brick. How he'd enticed that women to lurk for half an hour in the reeking café toilet, that I'll never know. But it was her. It was definitely her, and she couldn't have been any more demure and serene if she were meeting the Queen of England. They all left together in one heavily armed body. The thunderclap inside the Elena had left a mess. I rescued Massimo's leather valise from the encroaching pool of blood. My fellow patrons were bemused. They were deeply bemused, even confounded. Their options for action seemed to lack constructive possibilities. So, one by one, they rose and left the bar. They left that fine old place, silently and without haste, and without meeting each other's eyes. They stepped out the jangling door and into Europe's biggest plaza. Then they vanished, each hastening toward his own private world. I strolled into the piazza, under a pleasant spring sky. It was cold, that spring night, but that infinite dark blue sky was so lucid and clear. The laptop's screen flickered brightly as I touched the F1 key. Then I pressed 2, and then 3.

ISBN 978-88-6586-009-0 Cover di Roberto Grassilli warehouse.robertograssilli.com Published in ebook by August 2010. Follow us on https://twitter.com/40kBooks https://facebook.com/40kbooks