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In the town of St. Sanit



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Have you ever been to the town of St. Sanit? It would appear to be a very strange place.

There are no roads into the town. In fact, the bridge into St. Sanit, which is located on top of a mountain, collapsed many years ago. And nobody ever bothered to rebuild it. The only way in is a narrow path which brings you to the town after about an hour's walk. Here you'll find a sign indicating: *Unwelcome to the town of St. Sanit.*

After a while there is a second sign: *What have you come here for?* And finally, right in front of the town gate, which is said to date back more than a thousand years: *Go home!* Which is hardly a welcome message after all.

In fact, the townspeople are not interested in receiving visitors or tourists; they are used to being alone: "Better alone than with people you don't know" they say. And in fact here everyone knows everyone else, and they are all used to living like that, alone.

You will have already come to appreciate that life here is a bit different. The inhabitants of St. Sanit have strange habits. Even though they all know each other, they don't greet one another like real friends: they don't shake hands, they don't embrace each other, and you never see anyone kissing... not even their own mother on Mother's Day, or father on Father's Day. To greet each other, they make a gesture with their hand, from a distance, and they never come closer than one 3,28 feet (1 meter) to one another!

In this town, nobody invites you to a party, too many people don't feel well, nor are there any local fetes. Sometimes the band plays, but it's difficult to play the trombone or the clarinet with a mask on your face. Yes, because everyone here wears a funny little mask, not like a colourful carnival mask, but a little green one that covers the nose and mouth. And how can you eat wearing a mask?

At home, at lunch and dinner, you can take it off, but what if you go to the pizzeria? You order pizzas on a special app, and they deliver them to your home. No one goes out to eat except in very small groups, such as you and me, without anyone else around. Things have been like this for a long time, and no one can remember what it was like before. Not even the elderly folk.

Everything was quiet in the town of St. Sanit until one day a stranger came along. He had a notebook and a pen with him, and a camera: a journalist!

Not at all put off by the steep climb, nor by those unusual unwelcome signs, as soon

as he arrived in the village, he went into a café (the only one in town) ...and without his mask, he ordered:

“Good morning! I’d like a cup of coffee!”

“Owd’you like it?”

Stammered the man behind the counter, who was wearing a green mask that covered his mouth.

“What?”

“The toffee...”

“Oh! Espresso. Thank you!”

The man began fumbling about with the coffee machine, prepared the cup and placed it on a tray and then, with a long stick, put the tray on the only table in the café before withdrawing at a due distance of 3,28 feet (1 meter). But that strange customer drank his coffee, approached the counter and started talking again. Close up!

“My name’s Felix Untroubled. I am a journalist and I’d like to write an article on your nice town!”

“I don’d know anyding and I don’d know anywan! (but what do you want? You should have stayed home!)”

“Maybe you know someone I could interview... for example the Mayor?”

“The Mare’s busy. Anyway go to the Tarn Hawl and ask his secreday!”

Mr. Felix pays and goes out, heading for the Town Hall. On his way, he notices everyone is wearing those funny little green masks: why?

He’d like to ask someone, but they all keep out of his way... and run away exchanging strange glances and looking worried. The welcome he gets in the Town Hall isn’t very nice either:

“The Mare’s nod here. He wux from home. He wearly comes here. Try bassing by later.”

What should he do? And yet they’d told him there was a story to tell and the more he saw, the more his curiosity as a journalist grew.

In front of the Town Hall, on the other side of the square, was a Church.
“(And if I were to try talking to the priest?)”

“Yes, this is the biggest church in town, named after our patron Saint, St. Sanit.”
Oh, finally someone who spoke clearly. Without a mask.

“A mask? No, I don’t wear one. After all, no one comes here anymore.”

“And how do you celebrate the Mass?”

“Via skype. And no baptisms or confirmations... never mind confessions. A council decree has ordered people to stay at least 3,28 feet (1 meter) from each other. But it hasn’t always been like this; before there was the Saint’s water.”

While they talk, the priest accompanies the journalist in front of the chapel dedicated to the Saint. Inside the chapel is a beautiful painting: a nun, with a bright halo on her head, holding a stick in her hand with which she touches a rock out of which flows water, clear and full of light.

“This is St. Sanit, depicted as she made the miraculous water flow from the rock. You know, many people once came here, to pray and thank the Saint for favours received, and for the truly miraculous water. The spring still exists. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes, I really would.”

“Then wait a minute, I'll go and get my mask. I need one to go out. Mayor's orders!” The spring is located near the Church, only a few steps away. A simple construction protects it and benches are all around, to allow the faithful to sit and pray.

"This was the spring of the miraculous water of St. Sanit. Everyone came here even from outside, to collect it and take it home. It was sold in little bottles with the image of the Saint, and everyone wanted it. It really was miraculous water. It was used to clean hands, home interiors, and also to wash fruit and vegetables. And it kept all diseases away! Then one terrible day the spring dried up, the water stopped flowing, and since then no pilgrims have come here anymore. What we need is another miracle! Even for a priest, living in this town is not at all easy!"

Mr. Felix says goodbye, it's lunchtime. After all that walking, he felt hungry... but where could he find a restaurant? Easy, there's only one, right in the square: "The pilgrim's stop".

It looks empty. Maybe it's too early... or too late.

“Good Bording!”

Said the owner, and accompanied him to the only table of the little restaurant.

“What can I prebare for you?”

“What's on the menu?”

“Dothin. Nopody ever comes here. But I can pring you whatever you want!”

“A good plate of pasta will do... if you have it.”

“Ob course! Do you want it here or will you eat outsaad?”

“I'd prefer it here... if it isn't a problem! (but what a strange town this is!)”

And off the man went, only to appear after a good half hour, with a piping hot plate of pasta with tomato sauce. There was also a glass of wine and a mug of water...all of which was left on the counter...

“Here you are! You can com and vetchit when you want.”

Fetch it myself? What no table service?

“You know, it's all telf tervice here. Wid the rules we have on geeeping a distance of 1 betre...”

The pasta was really good and the glass of wine fuelled the conversation:

“I’d like to know more about the customs of this town. Who could I talk to?”

“You could dry askin Batteo Salebbe bedder known as Batusalah, the oldest man in down. Grandfader, great grandfader, great grandfader, he knows a sdory or du!”

(translation: you could try asking Matteo Salebbe better known as Methuselah. The oldest man in town. Grandfather, great grandfather, great grandfather, he knows a story or two.)

“Where does he live?” asks Mr.Untroubled.

“Bibo!” calls the man, and a young boy comes running...

“This is by son, when he can he gibbs me a hand. He’s sbart, and knows eberyone in town. He’ll jow you de way.”

“Hello Bibo! Goodbye and thank you.” They go out and walk through the town.

“My name’s Nino. Not Bibo – says the boy – Here they all speak strangely because of the mask.”

“Yes, and it's hard for outsiders like me to understand you. But how come you don't wear one?”

To get to the house of Salebbe, better known as Methuselah, you have to leave the town and then face a climb that leaves you breathless. The two proceed slowly, and there's time for a chat.

"No, it's a nuisance for me, I'm allergic. I get blisters here... all over my face and neck. And so the Mayor gave me special permission not to use one."

"Do you have permission not to go to school as well? I think you should be studying at this time of day."

"What school? You see that building over there?"

And he points to a building covered with climbing plants and brambles. An old sign, which can barely be read, indicates "School of the miraculous....".

"Was that the school?"

"Yes. No children have gone there for years. Methuselah once went there, and he's the only one who still remembers it."

"So what do you do then for lessons and learning to read and write... and all that?"

"We do it from home, on skype. Our teachers hold lessons from their homes. And they give us homework too."

"This town should not be called St. Sanit, but Skype town!", jokes the journalist. The boy laughs.

"We're almost there. I often come to see Methuselah. I like his stories."

They find him sitting on a bench on the front porch, sunbathing. He's not wearing a mask, and his tanned face is full of wrinkles.

"No, life here hasn't always been like this."

The old man invites his new guest to sit next to him, and he starts telling stories.

"While the bridge was still there, a lot of people came from outside to pray to St. Sanit, and to drink her miraculous water. No one wore masks. Then the spring ran out and the water stopped flowing. Then people started to get sick. The local doctor blamed some virus brought in by tourists. Then, by order of the Mayor, a long time ago, all the roads were closed, the bridge was knocked down, and the use of masks began, to protect against infection. But together with the tourists, and the miraculous water, joy and cheerfulness also disappeared. And an even more serious illness struck all the inhabitants of the town: the emotionvirus."

The pitch of the old man's voice dropped and became sadder as he continued his story.

"You see, all emotions are useful, and we shouldn't fight against them, but try and understand them. They help us to overcome the difficulties of life. From behind their masks, however, the people here have become used to hiding everything. No one can see if you are sad or cheerful, if you are moved or crying. They all hide their fragility, and defend themselves not only from a virus, but from their own emotions. And this has become a habit for everyone in this sad town. Everyone is alone, and no one is able to communicate with their neighbours anymore."

"What about the children?"

"Children like Nino are stronger, they are still not acquainted with this terrible emotionvirus disease yet. They are our hope. But it would take a miracle, to bring life back to this town, which has unfortunately lost any sense of love and friendship. Here today people have shut themselves away, behind their masks, and the distance from others is more than the one 3,28 feet (1 meter) ordered by the Mayor."

On their way back to town, the journalist has an idea: what we need here is a new miracle...

"Nino, we have to do something to defeat the emotionvirus, and bring life back to this town. Will you help me?"

"Of course I'll help you! - says Nino - I'd like everything to go back to the way it was in Methuselah's day. He says that back then children played in the streets, or soccer, without being scared of touching or pushing one another. They could even fight one another! Now we're all locked in our houses, and we only meet via skype."

The first step was to go back to the church. The parish priest was finishing the vespers. It was really strange: he was talking to the walls, to the columns... and there was no one there. Just a little camera to record what he was doing.

Then he nodded to Nino and the journalist and invited them to sit on one of the many empty benches.

"So, how did it go?"

"Well, I know more now, and I understand a lot of things. Not only about the story of the Saint, but about the strange habits of this town. And I know what the problem is. I'd like to solve it, but I don't know how."

"I have an idea."

It was Nino. And without his mask, you could see him smiling...

End of part one. Did you like it? Now it's your turn!

I really do need you to help me to write the end part. I really can't manage it on my own!

You can send it to: contact@annagennimiliotti.it