The Story of an Old Man

By Patrizia Toia

Nobody knew for how many years his back had been bent, but Oldie, that was his name, seemed tireless.

Nobody knew where he came from and where his travel had started, either.

One thing was sure: he travelled and travelled, from village to village, from oasis to oasis, in search of new voices and ears eager to listen.

His luggage was a worn shoulder bag and a cumbersome bird cage with four carrier pigeons inside.

He usually preferred the shadow of big palm trees, where he used to gather all the kids after they got out of their home, led by curiosity. He asked them to bring their friends, brothers, but also fathers and
mothers, because what he had to tell them, he said, was “extremely important.”

First of all, though, he asked all the villagers he met to describe their own lives: it was then that Oldies’ smile slowly faded from his face. He was facing kids who used to get up early in the morning in order to work with their parents and usually got back home in the evening. Sometimes they were happy, sometimes not.

Old as he was, he had many stories to tell. He came from a far away land, distant, yes, but he had reached it on foot, therefore it had to be on the same planet.

“Well - he thought - , how different is from here, though!”.

He got everything he wanted in his life: happiness and sorrow.

He loved to share his memories with others, maybe because he always received new different stories, in return.

Nevertheless, this was not his only task. Oldie had in his bag some useful tools that he hoped he should never use and that sometimes he was forced to take out.

That happened again when he arrived in the Village of the Sun, as the inhabitants used to call it. Very few children ran towards him at his arrival. When he knocked at some doors the answers he received were always the same: “They are out working in the fields” or
“They went to fetch some water at the river”.

Oldie did not think twice: he extracted from his bag a pencil and some sheets of paper and quickly wrote a message. He gently opened the bird cage, tied the message to a pigeon leg and he unleashed it. Now he only needed to wait. Days, weeks, months….it did not matter: he could not do anything else.

After hundreds of days spent in helping as he could the people of Sun, the help so long awaited finally arrived, in the form of trucks, materials, tools and a dozen of volunteers.

“What are you here?” asked a woman between hope and concern.

“We are going to dig a well - said a boy, with ruffled hair and a pair of dark glasses on his head - and we want to work together with you”.

Some other days passed. One day Oldie found the oldest palm tree of the village and gathered around all the kids, started to tell them about his life, his homeland, all the people he had met and all the places he had seen. The kids, free from the homework that used to fill their days, listened to him with undivided attention.

One other time Oldie picked up from his purse a tales book. That book had always been with him during all his travels and he almost knew it by heart.
He opened it at the first page and he started reading it. Later, in the same natural way, he picked up some sheets and pencils and he started to teach the kids how to read and write. “I want you to be able to read by yourselves” he said, and started.

Many days passed, the village atmosphere was changing bit by bit while Oldie’s back got more and more bent.

Few days later the old man, after a lesson, leant against a palm trunk and died in peace. The kids were not left alone, though. He had prepared for them a basket full of books, not only tales, there were a lot of things: agriculture manuals, law treaties, religious scripts, philosophical thoughts, big encyclopaedias, physics and mechanics texts....And also a notebook written by pencil. It was Oldie’s story: a tale of wars between neighbouring states, economic crises, mass slaughtering, social injustice, but also of brave people, extraordinary thinkers and rare artists. The kids realized that was the history of the world they lived in, a world they finally could understand and could be fully aware of. Oldie could still live: Time could never completely erase him.