

SENNA

THE TRUTH

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SENNNA

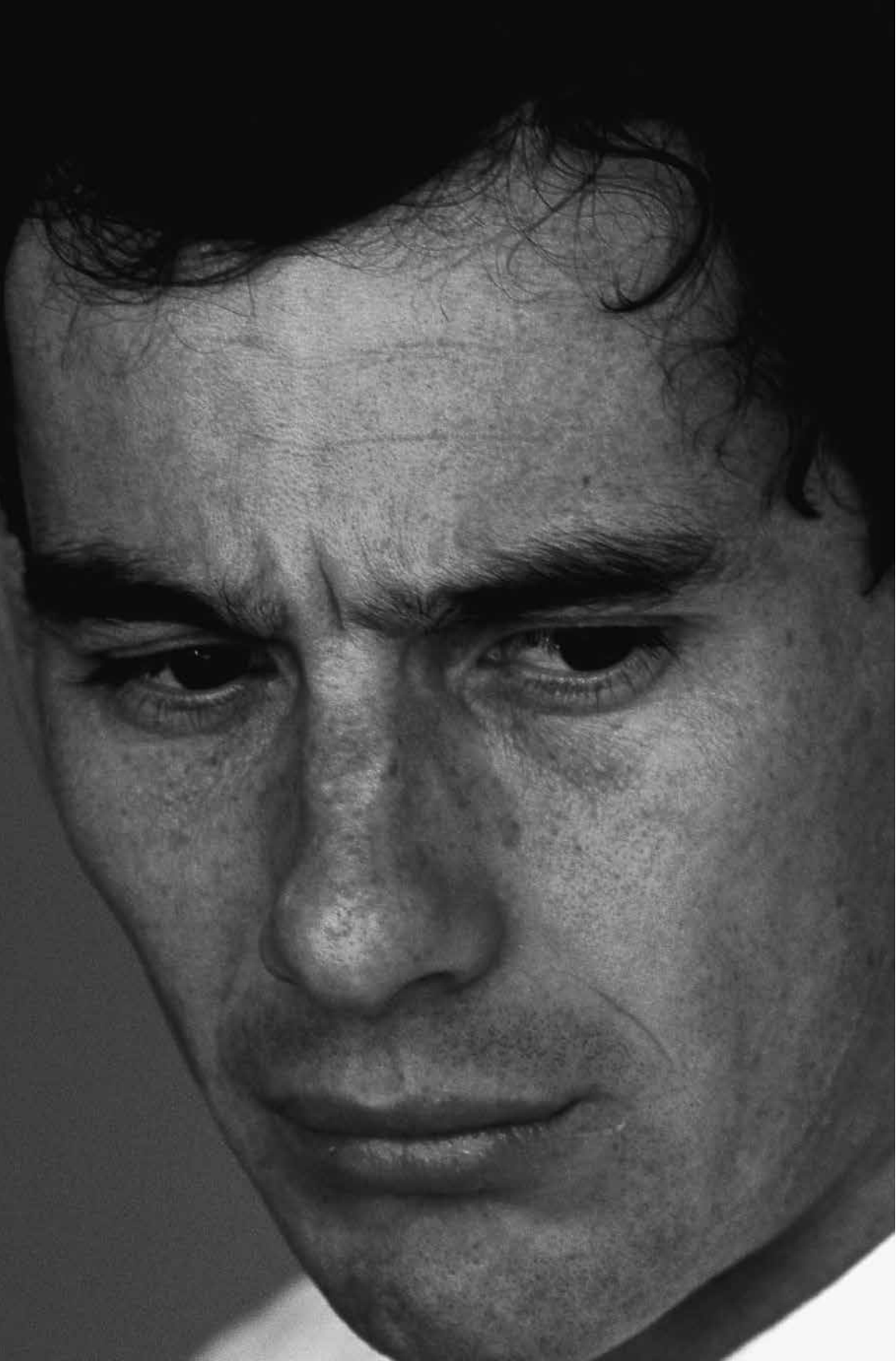
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‘HELLO, CAN you hear me?’

The voice was hoarse and the tone low, resigned: ‘Who are you? I can’t understand. The line sounds disturbed ...’

‘This is me speaking softly, I don’t want to be heard. I have to tell you something very delicate and [with] just a little time available, because I have to give an answer.’

On the other end of the line was Massimo Gambucci, freshly appointed director of the Enzo and Dino Ferrari Circuit, who had been handed the keys to the Imola circuit on 2 May 1994 by Giorgio Poggi, the director at Sagis (the track’s management company) who had left office the night before. The tragic weekend of the San Marino GP had nothing to do with it; it was a change in the top management that had been planned for some time.

Gambucci had been promoted precisely at the most difficult moment in the history of the racetrack, which, on the afternoon of Monday, 2 May, was placed under seizure by the judicial authorities. There was a surreal quiet in the facility. The engines were silent. F1 seemed over after the tragedies of Roland Ratzenberger during Saturday’s qualifying and Ayrton Senna during Sunday’s race. The racing world was stunned: in two days, the latest arrival in the ‘Circus’ and the most acclaimed champion had both died.

‘Listen Franco,’ Massimo resumed in a more decisive tone, ‘the racetrack is under seizure and a police inspector has been assigned to make the initial investigation. He is from the *Stradale* [the traffic police] and has started the investigations at the track as if he were to ascertain a normal accident on the urban network. If this is the beginning of the investigation we are off to a bad start.’

‘The news of the sequestration has already been relayed by the agencies,’ I replied, ‘and the track, I guess, has become off limits to us journalists.’

‘That’s not why I called you,’ Gambucci urged. ‘I have the feeling that the policeman doesn’t know anything about Formula 1 and he informed me in advance that, tomorrow, we should rebuild Senna’s Williams, putting every piece near the wreck in the closest possible position to where it was originally mounted. Do you feel up to giving me a hand? I’m authorised to get a track-steward to help me and I’d choose you for your experience with F1: maybe you could see something we might miss.’

I remained silent, almost stunned by the astounding proposal. ‘Don’t talk about it with anyone,’ Gambucci insisted. ‘Perhaps by looking at the FW16 we might be able to give some useful pointers to the investigators.’

‘I thank you for the appreciation, of course I accept. I will be at your disposal.’

‘Don’t you dare say that you are a journalist,’ Massimo concluded, ‘and speak as little as possible: remember that you will be there only as a track-steward.’

At the click of the phone call, although I was still sitting in front of my desk in the newsroom, the whole world began to swirl around me. That night I slept: I saw and replayed Ayrton’s accident in my mind and, like everyone else, I couldn’t absorb the fact that the Brazilian ace was actually no longer with us. I kept wondering what had killed the three-time world champion ...

Televisions kept searching for news: updates, live broadcasts multiplied on all networks, with experts giving their impressions: fault of the track for the dangerous bumps at *Tamburello*. No way! Driver error (we had to hear that too)! Or, mechanical failure. Everyone had their say, and instead of trying to clear the air, a self-feeding media fuss was raised, while the F1 world clammed up to defend the Circus, which had never been so much under attack on a planetary level.

The next day, on the short car journey from the Conti Editore offices in San Lazzaro di Savena to Imola, I did not even realise I was driving the 34 kilometres between the two locations: it was as if I was in a haze. What terrible things would my eyes witness? What would I be able to understand? Had Massimo chosen the right person for such a delicate job?

So many unanswered questions, yet surely this could also be my big chance to follow the investigation from the inside. And maybe I might make a small contribution to the search for truth.

At the racetrack gate my name was noted and they let me in without any fuss. I arrived directly in the pit area, where it was rumoured that both Senna's Williams and Ratzenberger's Simtek were stored. Nothing of the sort: the cars, with all their debris, had been collected in a garage under the Agip grandstand, at *Variante Bassa*. It was the base where the Sagis stewards met.

Once I got there, Gambucci, after greeting me, handed me a race-marshall's coat: it was one size too big, but it didn't matter. I had a new identity: track-steward. I must admit that I felt particularly uncomfortable in that role, which was not my own.

In the meantime, Stefano Stefanini, the *Stradale* inspector, arrived. He unsealed the shutter-stock and, after the usual pleasantries, opened the creaking roller shutter: on the right-hand side were empty tables and chairs with a worn-out air, and on the other side, separated, were the two single-seaters. Wrecks with rubbish bags behind them that contained all the smallest fragments collected from the track.

Outside, spring weather; inside, an indescribable chill caused by the air of death, which had begun to make me sweat. What was left of the Williams showed that the impact against the *Tamburello* wall had been violent.

'You must help me,' said the policeman, 'to put everything back in place, in the hope of finding some clues that will then allow the appointed experts to identify the possible causes of the two tragedies.'

I moved to the rear of the Williams and, glancing at Ayrton's car, a gruesome detail did not escape my notice: on the right side of the bonnet, where the Rothmans sponsor's inscription stood out, was a tiny grey lump. I was not prepared for that sight. My heart suddenly jumped into my throat and my pulse became pounding. Immediately a gag of vomit rose in my throat, followed by the urge to run far away. I didn't want to memorise that image: it was a small fragment of Senna's brain. What on earth could have hit the genius, who went by the nickname of 'Magic', so hard to cause such devastation?

I did not expect that horrendous sight, and at that moment all reasoning went haywire. I had to regain normal breathing and try to compose myself. I felt a sort of refusal to accept what was in front of me.

Stefanini, more accustomed to tragic and bloody scenarios, was instead in highly professional mode: he was looking for the right front

wheel that had torn off in the impact against the *Tamburello* wall. Years later – over time we have also become friends – Stefano confessed to me how difficult it was for him that day. Each of us played a professional role, but the apparent coldness did not correspond to the poignant emotions we kept hidden inside.

I noticed the tyre and pointed it out to the policeman as he moved aside to pick it up and fix it on the right side of the chassis. The suspension arms had torn off after the collision. In a rather mechanical manner we re-allocated what was left of the front wing and parts of the bodywork, while in the cockpit, on the seat, there was a piece of steering column attached to the steering wheel, which was held to the chassis by a serpentine electric cable.

Gabriele Tarquini, a former F1 driver and leader at the time of the British Touring Car Championship (BTCC) with the Alfa Romeo 155, had noticed with great observational skills that very same piece of column outside the car in the pictures we had published in *Autosprint*. That is why this guy from Abruzzo had confessed to us his disturbing doubt as to what might have happened at *Tamburello*. He had made the hypothesis that the steering column might have broken.

‘Man, Tarquini was right!’ I thought after seeing the broken column up close. His theory immediately seemed plausible to me.

The next Tuesday we came out with the following headline on the cover of *Autosprint*: ‘The Suspect’. It was the first hint towards a truth.

Publicly, I could not state that I had seen the steering column, just as I could never admit, to this day, that after the first visit to the box, where ‘caretaker’ Massimo Gambucci kept watch for months at night, I ventured on other nocturnal incursions, during which, little by little, many obscure points became clear in my mind.

We knew that a police patrol would come to check the seals on the shutter every two hours, but the policemen could not imagine that the pegs which anchored the shutter were easily slipping out of the asphalt into which they had been driven. Obviously, I was not officially authorised to enter the garage: I was to all intents and purposes a stowaway, an ‘accomplice’ of Massimo, who was prepared to risk an indictment in the hope that this would shed light on the too many mysteries of the Senna case. And so, like amateur thieves, in the darkness of the garage we

searched for those clues that then allowed us to reconstruct a complex puzzle in a design that gradually became clearer and clearer, despite repeated attempts at deception and the conspiracy of silence of a system that had very little desire to shed full light on what had happened.