Italian Literature in Translation. Volume III. **Women Writers.**
Edited by Loredana Lipperini.
Italian Cultural Institute in London.
A selection of extracts from novels by Italian contemporary women writers never previously published in English.
Women Writers
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In Italy we keep hearing that this is the year of female writers, ever since 2017. In fact, after a never confessed underestimation that recaptures and unfortunately actualises Grace Paley’s old statement “we read the books written by our male colleagues, who do not usually return the courtesy”, Italian female writers are at long last considered “literary” and not simply “sentimental”. They win prizes: three of the last four Campiello prizes were awarded to Simona Vinci, Donatella Di Pietrantonio and Rosella Postorino. Even the Strega Prize 2018 was won by Helena Janeczek after over a decade of male victories. Nonetheless, female writers keep doing what they have always done, namely narrating reality in a courageous way, often overcoming the taboo of gender. The female authors proposed in this short selection, albeit an incomplete one, are all profoundly embedded in the world surrounding them, despite their different ages, provenance, and interests. They either retrieve and analyse it through the lens of history – great History with a capital H or the tiny history of hamlets – or dissolve it lyrically in visionary narrations that can concern love, death, or both, the family as a cradle of horrors or as a suffocating nest, the difficulty of overcoming existential or generational wounds, and the mysterious ways of desire. They also reinvent styles, without fearing ghosts or those who return from death in any case, whether literally or literarily. Whichever path they choose, they always do so fearlessly.

Loredana Lipperini
Author, journalist and radio host
1. Close Your Eyes

Luigi Ceresa was one of the bakers in the town and had a family dogged by misfortune: people said that the crows ate at the table with them. His sons and daughters died, one after the other, like butterflies at night. He tried to keep them all together in the small house above the shop, which faced the spiazzo, the main square of the town, where the tavern was and the public weigh station, and in the past the large population of the countryside and the few inhabitants of the village had come to stock up on loaves of bread and biscotti.

That bakery had belonged to his uncle Raffaele and, before that, to his grandfather Carlo, while his father, Giuseppe, had stayed clear of it. No one ever discovered how he had become
lame, but everyone knew that the police were always looking for him, and it was said that he preferred coal to bread.

Luigi hadn’t been too happy to inherit the shop, since he wasn’t much good at daily gossip or morning greetings, and was in fact famous for his thick, curly eyebrows, his belly bloated with air and wine, and his weasel-like face. But he had hands that were good for kneading, with a broad palm and a secure grip, he spun the dough as if it were made of clouds, and he coughed flour before going to bed: he had it in his body.

Ever since his uncle Raffaele died, his son Antonio had been his only helper in the shop, and day by day the bakery seemed closer to ruin; the work was less, the people were angrier.

Luigi was coarse and rough like a crust of bread, as hardy as rye. Many found him unbearable, just as many as he didn’t like himself.

First of all — she who received the least love — was Violante, his wife, a woman who had learned to live on childbirth, like a brood mare kept tied up in the field alone, and in the dark, ever since she had begun to go blind, and cooking had become a matter of smells and tastes.

She cut her fingers, banged into corners, forgot to open the windows, dropped vases, stools, pots, stirred up fires already out, but she had trouble asking her children for help, partly because, since the older girl had left and Adelaide had gotten sick, too, Violante had begun to hate them all.

The one who troubled her most was Nicola, a silent, almost transparent child: she never heard him coming, and couldn’t tell when he was in the room; ghostlike, he could appear and disappear.

If she had seen him, maybe Violante would have understood — would have been suspicious of that fine dirty-blond hair, the color of a dry wheat ear, those eyes, whose gray was like the bottom of a metal tub, and that pale white glistening skin — that nothing had to do with anything, out of place like flowers in a stable.

But since Nicola was born, she’d barely been able to see, and his shadow had been pointed out to her as that of a son, one of many, among the dead at birth, the dead from mishaps, the dead from illness; she had been told that he was healthy and from that day she went along with it.

Even though to her he didn’t really seem healthy, being incapable of the simplest activities, useless in the house and useless in the shop, and it was discovered that he learned strange things, like letters and words.

Nicola was scared of everything, from horses’ hooves to the Carnival firecrackers, from the high heels of wealthy ladies to the hands of his father; the slightest thing could make him run away.

For Luigi that was his cross, to have a useless son. At a month old, he had seemed to him so smooth and clean, perfect, come into the world to be handsome and adored, the young king...
Luigi, who, in the family tradition, had never been a great lover of the clergy, saw a way of getting rid of him, after the mistake of having kept him from the start, by sending him off to his kind, men who didn’t put on pants to go to work but tunics in which to pray and hide.

Don Agostino, evidently eager to help the child, whom he considered to be misunderstood, had declared that in time he would be willing to lead him to the faith. I would welcome him happily into my flock, he said one day in the Ceresa house, while Violante with an unsteady hand poured water into a glass for him, spilling it on the kitchen table. It dripped on the floor and puddled as far as the priest’s sandals.

I’ll do it myself, Signora Ceresa, don’t worry, said Don Agostino, stopping her hand.

Some time later, on a Sunday morning, the priest woke with the rooster at five, rose from his pallet, pushing aside the sheet, washed his face, put on his robe, slipped into his ... the glass of a painting depicting the Virgin Mary, and left the bedroom to eat a piece of bread and drink a cup of coffee.

Don Agostino was stubborn, every trifling thing became a torment, a relentless thought. What in those days had cut his hours of sleep to three was the matter of incense.

The priest opened the offering box, a few coins were lying on the bottom.

Whose generosity would he appeal to today, that of the shoemakers who would hammer the Lord’s soles in Paradise, that of the innkeepers who with the wine saved would make drops of gold rain down from the heavenly vault, or that of the cowherds who with their pitchforks would drive out every demon? There was less and less money, and he needed more and more incense.

Don Agostino was a man with blue eyes and a tall frame, his shadow towered like a poplar, and his fingers were clean, that was enough to make him different: having the fingers of a gentleman.

The priest had made the sign of the cross slowly and said Forgive her when Signora Tabarrini, the wife of one of the many shoemakers in the town, had, at the end of Mass the Sunday before, raised her voice.

How could Don Agostino explain to her that the stink of Anacleto’s mares, ever since he had added three to the two he already had, spread into the church, to the sanctity of the crucifix, so that as they were saying Amen the air smelled of manure and death, and how could he ever give thanks to the Lord as if they were all going down among the worms and clean-picked bones?

They were people he didn’t understand, not even after many years, ever since he had arrived from Como with his bag of tunics and crosses to say that he would save them from suffering on earth and raise them up to the joys of heaven.

While he was lamenting the scant financial resources and preoccupied by the thought of the incense, he entered the church, through the door at the back, to get everything ready for Mass.

He hesitated, because immediately the smell of manure hit him, but this time stunning, aggressive; it pinched his nose, as if he’d just eaten a hot pepper, then came the sound of someone chewing and biting and licking, of someone clopping along the
Giulia Caminito

naves on wooden clogs, finally the sharp bleating of a flock of sheep in front of the altar.

The priest made the sign of the cross again, kissed the imaginary lips of Christ, asking forgiveness for that sin, because certainly it could only be the sin of a sinner, and he leaned against the stone walls, the same that over the years had held him in their arms like a mother with her infant, like a child with his old father.

The church was full of sheep who had attended to their needs among the pews, sprayed the curtains and paintings, nibbled the little Bibles that Don Agostino placed carefully on the benches.

Those who saw the priest running through the narrow streets of Serra in search of help saw a man racked with fever, a wounded fawn with the eyes of a madman, shouting about the disaster.

Getting the flock out was agonizing, it took the work of three men, who muffled their laughter behind words of displeasure.

Mass began late, the incense wasn’t lighted, the floors were summarily cleaned, the women of the town sat on the benches with handkerchiefs over their mouths.

Don Agostino said Mass holding his breath and cursing the guilty person through his teeth, because he had recognized him, it could only have been him, the priest in fact had immediately understood that he had been heard in the home of someone else promising Nicola a future.

And yet he didn’t go and search for the perpetrator of the crime.

No one will give Ninì to the priest, said Lupo at night, sitting at the table, with a malicious smile on his face.

Violante and Luigi remained silent, the child made them uneasy, caused them to give way, he was capable of anything.

Nicola stared at his brother, stirring and stirring the soup, as if he’d seen a comet for the first time.

Lupo, Wolf, believed in fables, but only in people’s fables, not in the priests’, not in God’s. He had to see the story with his own eyes, go and look for it, pursue it, step by step. That was why the things of heaven were nothing to him, because he would never be able to look God in the face and say to him: here you are.

What people said had a foundation of truth, that he was sure of, his grandfather Giuseppe was always repeating it to him: maybe only as big as a walnut, a tiny useless truth. That was where you had to get, though, in order to understand the story.

So that day when the clouds whirled above Serra and he was a stubborn child, with dark skin and eyes, Lupo set off to retrace the course of the Misa into the Apennines, among poplars and thorn bushes.

He followed the banks, passed mills, made his way through the luxuriant reeds, rested under willows, inspecting the gnarled bends of the river, its gentle pools, its narrows, the darkest corners, where it would have been possible to hide a treasure.

If he’d had time he would have followed all the rivers of the Marche on foot, but there wasn’t time, Lupo had to work, people like him weren’t fit for school, there was nothing much else for him to do but stay in the shop, look for jobs that required small hands and small feet, climbing trees, going down into ditches, simple tasks like watching the animals, collecting the milk, dragging sacks, lining up loaves on the counter at the bakery.

And he had to earn something, to send Nicola to school. That little time Lupo wanted to devote to the Misa, his river, which in summer gave them water when the sky forgot about it. If he found a treasure, their life would change.
Because the fable said this: when the pirates, the Turks — on the other side of the sea, beyond Senigallia, beyond the harbor, in a part of the world unknown but close, so close they could attack you — came to the Marche they had followed the courses of the rivers, rivers that, like the Misa, descended diagonally from the Apennines to the sea. Pirates, pillagers, bandits, criminals faced those rivers squarely, rowing against the currents and whirlpools looking for the right inlets, where they would dig and deposit their most valuable treasures, and one day they would come and recover them.

Over the years they’d forgotten about them, Antonio had told him, the brother old enough to leave soon, because it seemed that no Ceresa was ever child enough to stay; he had explained that now, with the heat, the rivers were drying up and when that happened the treasures emerged from the earth and returned to men.

All those gold doubloons, jewels, precious stones that the pirates had forgotten, stolen in all likelihood from the nobles on the coasts, could become theirs, the people of Serra, if they washed their faces in the Misa, after a day of threshing and sheaves, would find a pearl necklace entwined in their fingers.

For Lupo the fables, like everything else, had to be taken in bites, because only by biting into a fruit, a piece of meat, a mound of earth could you taste it, could you discover if it was sweet like jam or bitter like radicchio, hold on to it or throw it away.

But Lupo didn’t find any treasures that day. For him the Misa carried the waters of the Nile, blessing towns and villages, lands swallowed up by the heat and fields no longer fertile, but in reality it was only a small dry stream that had a single tributary and at around thirty kilometers flowed wearily into the Adriatic. With the obstinacy of the reckless and the patience of the shepherd Lupo followed it to San Donnino, losing a whole day of work.

When he bathed his face and his feet among the eels, ready to go home empty-handed but with the idea of beating up Antonio before evening, even if he still came only to his brother’s elbow, he heard a sound of scratching in the dirt. He walked through the water toward an inlet that, gripped by boredom and heat when he passed by, he hadn’t inspected carefully.

Treasures don’t make noise, he said to himself scowling. He was angry the way only lies could make him angry; he threw a rock in the direction of the sound and heard a yelp.

He stood still for a few seconds, considering the situation, before running back to the inlet, because he was curious but not reckless.

As the Misa went on flowing toward the sea, carrying no jewels, he saw a very young gray wolf, who had a wounded paw and was trying to get up the bank with the desperation of a starving dog.

Wolves like that, mountain dwellers, never came down, because the peasants were afraid of them and hunted them to protect the livestock. The wolves were their witches, their pirates, their Medusas. People said that wolves were evil eyes, thorns between your fingers.

Lupo the child then planted himself in front of the animal and looked at him, and for a waiting period did only that, looked at the other as it struggled to flee and couldn’t.

The wolf, gray mountain predator, young and small, with white cheeks and tufts of fur on its back that had turned reddish in the sun, growled, low, in its throat, until it got used to that child in dirty trousers with an insolent face, and stopped.

They studied each other then, for a short while, Lupo took a step, the other growled, Lupo waited until the other stopped, and then their dance began again.
Step. Growl. The child was on him.
He observed the wound, maybe a bite, maybe a trap, the wolf’s paws weren’t big enough to hurt him and the child knew he could hold his muzzle tight if he tried to bite. He wondered where his mother was, if he, too, had a blind mother, unable to keep him with her.
Stop it, now I’ll take you away, he said.
The animal didn’t understand, he was lifted up and placed on the back of that small man without a gun.
And in this way Lupo, Wolf, carried his wounded enemy around his neck, up the hill, to Serra, and so he made the acquaintance of Cane, Dog.

What are you made of, eh? Water and salt?
Luigi grabbed Nicola’s wrist and picked him up like a sack of rye, a leg of prosciutto from the cellar, and shook him this way and that, the child’s feet kicked the air inertly, they dangled, attached by mistake.
What use are you, I’d like to know? Whenever I come home you’re here, whenever I go out you’re here, whenever I eat you’re here, whenever I shit you’re here.
Luigi threw Nicola into the far corner of the kitchen, between the chair legs, while Adelaide, the sick sister, coughed in the bedroom, and Violante groaned, sitting against the wall with her hands in her lap and prayers on her lips, her head covered by a veil of mourning.
They had buried Antonio a week earlier: he had been shot by mistake coming home from the fair, the sun was setting, he just wanted to steal an apple off a tree, the farmer had shot him dead the way you do a mad horse.
I slave all day and you cry as soon as you see work.
Luigi kicked him with the tip of his foot, catching him in the ribs, Nicola closed up like a walnut, without saying anything, he absorbed those blows, clenching his jaw.
We encouraged you, that’s how you got to be like this. The children of princes are useless, like you, when people have to work they don’t have time to be afraid, they have to do or die of hunger.
You’re sick here, like those people who always sleep and cry.
And after tapping him on the temple with his finger, then pressing hard, as if to open up his head, Luigi grabbed Nicola by the legs and dragged him to the middle of the room, because he was inert, feeble matter, could be tossed into the river or a gully.
Now get up, goddam kid. If it hadn’t been for me…
The baker grabbed him by his blond hair and pulled him up like a puppet, and, like the old doll belonging to Nella, the daughter who’d vanished, or the dolls sewed by Violante when she could still see, had made him walk.
Luigi had come home an hour earlier: during the night an owl had built a nest in the oven chimney, the shop was full of smoke and the house, too, and to get rid of it the man had broken the paddle he used to take the bread out of the oven, that same paddle that had been his uncle’s and his grandfather’s. Violante had cried the apocalypse, the customers had run off, hearing that pounding on the hood that resounded like thunder, and the baker began calling his sons to help, but none of them responded.
He had shouted for Antonio, but Antonio hadn’t come.
The only good son he had left had been killed.
With the rage of the furies he had climbed the stone stairs to go home, he knew that Lupo was in the fields with Cane, that...
damned animal that seemed to live on his breath and never left
him alone, the bad luck beast had happened right into his fami-
ly, which had always had enough troubles for all the Marche.

The baker found only Nicola, who with his notebook open
was practicing writing near the window, and hadn’t moved a
hand even in the pestilential black smoke.

Now you get out of here and go to Montecarotto to get the
smith, I have to have the paddle fixed.

Luigi pushed Nicola to the door and then down the stairs,
the child rolled down, leaning against the walls so as not to
break his neck.

You’ve got to run, the father shouted from the top of the
steps, if you dawdle, I’ll burn all your pieces of paper.

Nicola, his body battered by pain, his head locked in panic,
and his mouth dry, began running with only the strength of
fear.

But his flesh was born weak, his thoughts had become cow-
ardly, and he fell at every step. No one knew why, but it wasn’t
in Nicola’s nature to live in the world like others.

That route past the convent and then along the stairs that led
to the woods, to the road to Montecarotto, exhausted him,
slowing him down.

Breathing hard and trembling he descended along the walls.
It was midday, the time without shadows and without safe
hiding places.

Midday for those in the fields was a sacred moment not to be
violated, when the country divinities appeared in the suffocat-
ing heat that rose like fog from the grain, in the smoke ...
from, rockswere transformed into elves, bushes into nymphs, prayers for
the yield of the harvest flowed down in swarms.

High up above the world, above Serra and Montecarotto,
above ascents and descents, was that sun that touched Nicola as
soon as he reached the little valley.

His pale skin caught fire, his head began to buzz, hornets
horns horns horns, everything stung, hurt: a distance so short that
everyone walked it lightly, carelessly, for Nicola was torture.

Every night before he went to sleep he hoped to wake up like
others, changed, cured by some magic of the stars; he hoped
he’d be able to stay still in the light for hours, motionless and
wise as an oak, enduring all the heat that came from above and
below, he hoped he’d be able to go for kilometers and flee, go to
the sea, see the ships, see the seagulls, see people on the sand
and the cliffs.

But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t work. He was no good for
anything.

His shoes seemed full of gravel, his clothes heavy as if he
were wearing a winter coat, his throat choked like the day he
was told: your brother was shot. He had thought it was Lupo
and the agony had caused him to wet himself.

The places on his body where Luigi had hit him began to
scream with pain, and the white ascent to Montecarotto was the
peak of the Gran Sasso, it was that entire inaccessible Italy that
he didn’t know and perhaps would never see, which he knew
only how to write, I T A L Y, in block capitals, with too much
space between the letters.

I’m sick, I’m not doing well. Nicola took a few more steps, gasped for breath, felt the sun
bringing on a fever, then collapsed in a heap.

He thought of the word canicola, dog days, he had explained
it to Lupo as soon as he learned it, as he did with every word he
read or heard.
It’s when the sun passes beyond the constellation of the Dog, and in the country they sacrifice a dog to the heat and to God, so that he won’t let the fields burn.

What are constellations? Lupo had asked then.
The designs in the night sky, his brother had answered.
And while his eyes were closing, giving in to the fact that he didn’t know whether or how he might ever get up from there, he saw them. Three men in black, with black bows at their necks, in the heat of midday approached him. The three men picked him up and laid him in the shade of an olive tree.

Nicola would never understand whether he had only dreamed them, because the noonday lets you also see what’s not there, holds the keys to the passage to the world of the dead and the unborn.

Setting foot beyond the Ocean, many years later, he would think back to that moment, to the hour of the Dog, when he didn’t yet know the sea and thought that everything was impossible.

I’m hot, says Lupo.
I told you I’m hot, Ninì, Lupo repeats.
I’m here, Nicola answers.
Go to your bed, says Lupo.
It’s far away, Nicola answers.
It’s down there, just a few steps, says Lupo.
It’s far, Nicola repeats.
How can I sleep like that? says Lupo.
Close your eyes, Nicola answers.
You are on top of me, says Lupo.
Close your eyes, Nicola repeats.
So Lupo closes his eyes.

It was 1897: Lupo was born on the threshold of the new century, the year Errico Malatesta was caught in Ancona writing in the pages of L’Agitazione, the year the peasants of Lazio occupied the land and the rice cleaners rebelled to have the rate of their pay raised, and in Rome even the shopkeepers demonstrated against the government, but this Lupo couldn’t know and wouldn’t know for a long time. To him, born like others for work, it wasn’t given to know how History revolved, how populations and peoples whirled, how ideals crumbled to the ground and where hopes went to hide: he was supposed to have his eyes fixed on his own adversities and leave to others the power of decisions.

When he was born, Lupo was another naked dirty wailing child, and when Stalin apprenticed in Ancona, Lupo was ten years old and he looked at his father with his black eyes and wished on him every sort of suffering.

Lupo would have liked to go to school, even though he hated the priests and responded to their orders, even the kind and gentle ones, with trouble.

That was the thing he learned right away, a law that he would carry forever in his heart: you have to respond to what you feel is unjust, to the harm that others do you, without words. And so Lupo would always retaliate with deeds, against everyone, including Luigi.

That was why Lupo at ten was throwing on the floor every object found in the house, while Luigi followed him and tried to grab him; the child slipped through his fingers like silk, and Cane growled.

Luigi moved in an inferno of broken dishes, drawn curtains, overturned beds, under the pool-like eyes of a child who seemed to have the devil in his breast, who bit, spit, bared all his
teeth, seemed to be able to swallow everything, from fruit to the quarters of an ox.

You mustn’t touch Nicola, Lupo shouted. I’ll pay for the books, it’s not your business.

Because that was their pact: Nicola would get to fifth grade if it was Lupo who paid, and so he had put aside what was needed, cent by cent, getting out of his head any fantasy of some small charm, to give the money to his brother.

The first time Nicola showed him an A written on a piece of paper, he had understood that everything learned was a slap in the face at Luigi, every word more that Lupo knew was a blow that he gave him to the knees, every sentence written opened to him another sentence and then another, and their village and their fields, their dialect, became only spit in the world.

Nicola had to study for both and every night go and tell him what he’d learned, make him practice, make him repeat, make him see, because hands and deeds would always count more for Lupo, but to do well you had to understand well.

Since Lupo was born, Luigi had been unable to restrain him, the child overwhelmed him and dominated like the worst fear, as soon as he could walk he had become difficult to approach, ... to a human race that the baker felt unable to oppose. Like a natural disaster, Luigi watched him knock down the house.

While Lupo overturned a basin and shouted that their children would die one by one anyway and only he and Nicola would remain, fated to survive as a single person, Violante prayed that an earthquake would swallow them, all of them, with the house and the town, to eliminate from the world that life that wouldn’t function.

Luigi, pushed to the wall by the child’s predictions, flung himself under the bed to get the gun.

Meanwhile Adelaide, lying down, coughed, her girl’s chest rising in an irregular rhythm, every breath the sound of illness; and when she had breath she called Antonio, but Antonio was no longer there.

The baker said: now I’ll shoot you, and aimed the gun at the child. He answered: you don’t have the courage.

Luigi, who like everyone would have liked only to have someone to whom he could teach the trade, to whom he could pass on the shop that he couldn’t bear any longer, to whom he could entrust his future, while it crumbled like moss left in the sun, thought of Antonio’s green eyes and lowered the gun angrily.

The child was right, he didn’t have the courage. Defeated, he looked at his hands, shaking his head, while Cane stared at him with his yellow hyena eyes, ready to bite him in the neck, where the vein that brings blood to the brain pulses.

I’m going with Gaspare’s brigade to Senigallia, Lupo said, looking at him from the depths of their pit of quarrels and viciousness. And he left the house.

It was the custom in the countryside for some of the little boys, usually not many, to join the brigades of men, and with wine, cheese, and a few instruments go and spend Sundays in the cities of the coast.

Gaspare Garelli was grown, he was seventeen, but Lupo was always following boys older than him, who were happy enough to have his company: he was in fact smart, a worker, ready to have fun but also able to respond to words if caught in the middle, and if they were going to do something foolish he went along.

Before leaving, Lupo said goodbye to Nicola, who was sitting
on the steps with his notebook all battered by use.
He won’t hit you again, don’t worry, he said, giving him a pat
on the head. I’m going with Gaspare and I’ll be back tonight, he
added.
Can I stay in your bed? Nicola asked, raising his thin face
from the notebook.
Stay where you want.
Lupo looked at him and then put on his hat and started run-
ning toward the cemetery street; Cane went down the stairs and
followed him.
Nicola, still banged up, managed to settle himself on the
steps and went back to reading.
The brigade of men left the town carrying what they needed
for bocce under their arms, with songs and some dancing. Lupo
approached Gaspare.
What’s wrong with Ernesto? he asked, pointing to the man
who, scowling darkly, was following at a distance. Even Cane,
usually the last in line, was ahead of him. And Lupo didn’t want
to know what was wrong that day but what afflicted him in
general, because every time he saw him he seemed more and
more worn and silent, depressed in mood and hopes.
He hadn’t recovered since Amisia rejected him, they were
supposed to be engaged, it seems, but Ernesto made a fool of
himself at the Carnival celebration last year. He showed up at the
dances in an old faded outfit carelessly rigged with lampblack and
water. Amisia was wearing white and when they danced he got
her all dirty, ruined the good dress she’d just bought, and all Serra
made fun of them, Gaspare explained, amused.
And if I buy him a new outfit? Lupo asked turning to look at
Ernesto, who was moving slowly and breathing hard, as if
climbing a steep mountainside.

Who’d give you the money, eh? There’s not so much work
now, until September you won’t see anything. We’re not people
who can afford new clothes at every festival, much less other
people’s, said Gaspare.
Who is it that can afford them? Lupo asked with an expres-
sion of defiance.
Those who have everything, those who own the fields, who
own the houses, Gaspare explained.
Who are they? Lupo asked again, pressing him.
The owners. My father’s field isn’t his, you know how it
works, don’t you?
Maybe, Lupo answered and turned again to look at Ernesto’s
hat swaying on the weight of his empty head.
Everything here belonged to the priests before Italy arrived,
but now it belongs to the friends of the priests, now there’s only
the King, the one who if you raise your head he has it cut off. It’s
people who, if they want, will buy your soul and sell it, because
it’s a pure soul.
Gaspare patted him on the shoulder smiling.
And how do you kill the King? Lupo asked, stopping in the
middle of the dusty street.
In what sense? Gaspare looked at him in bewilderment,
uncomprehending, wondering whether he was asking ques-
tions whose answer he already knew himself.
How can you get rid of him, do you think. It ends up like the Pope, if he goes away another one comes,
and then another. They never go away, they just change faces.
There’s no way.
It’s not true! They already killed the King, the Re Mitraglia,
the one who machine-gunned the workers. Tomassini told me
the other day, at the tavern, he said that seven years ago he was
shot, by someone named Gaetano. Someone can do it for every King who comes, Lupo explained, convinced.

Gaspare was silent, in the distance the brigade was advancing with some trumpet sounds, Petri climbed up a tree to get a fistful of cherries and was handing them out, even though, to tell the truth, they weren’t his. Some were describing the game of *ruzzola* played on the previous outing, when Paoletto nearly hit the statue of Providence with his wooden disk. The others laughed.

*2. In a Minor Key, for My Use*

Zari’s hair was brimming with pearls, and she was wearing the bright-colored clothes of a parrot. She was running in the *zeriba*, the big garden behind their house: it was the only stone dwelling in the village, because they were the children of the chief and the chief couldn’t sleep in mud and straw.

While she shouted, a bird outside her cage, she pinched her younger brother’s thighs and then threw him on the ground, laughing as she skipped among the still unripe skins of the pumpkins. Her favorite game was to run away into the garden and hide behind the distended stomach of their long-horned cow.

Her brother said she was cruel and mean, that she had no love in her body, but he was too little to understand the words he was using.

Zari had heard the sound of hooves and had looked up at the Nuba Mountains: she would remember them like that forever, at the onset of the rainy season, with their islands of green so clear it was a torture for the eyes, the small clearings without water, the narrow twisted paths unsuited even for animals.

The hoof beats were closer and came from below, from the part of the world that they didn’t want to know. Zari had shouted to her brother to call their maid, but she wasn’t there, she had left, and their mother wasn’t there, either, of her passage only the flame in the window remained.

Every night before Zari went to sleep her mamma said that that little flame would protect her: it represented a vow to the souls that inhabited things, at every step, in every branch, and in every trace of water the divinities would cradle her, keep her near their heart, far from suffering.

Zari was eight when she saw men with faces hidden get off their horses and come toward her, she had looked at the flame and hoped that the fire would carry them away with it, but the flame remained tiny and silent, smoldered on its small votive altar and observed the men load Zari’s brother on a horse and then her, too, grabbed by the waist and picked up, a feather that had no weight or will.

The men spoke in Arabic to their horses, urging them to run, Zari thought that her father would come, no one could take away the children of Akil, the proprietor of the Nuba Mountains, who had beautiful fields of sugar cane and millet and cotton, where he brought his children to tell them that one day these would be their responsibility, their task.

The unknown men had come to the most inaccessible place in the world, where the inhabitants believed they were safe forever, among the thick trees, on the dry plains adored only by the Nubians and inhospitable to anyone else, in that part of Sudan they thought was buried under the layers of a brilliant, suspended time.

The people of the village had seen those horses passing at a gallop, like arrows just shot, the defenseless bodies of the children on their saddles, and had started running, had shouted
their desperation to heaven and earth.

But even though the people of the Nuba were quick, knew their own roads and paths, the village men couldn’t catch them: one of the Arabs had gone one way, his companion another, and Zari didn’t even realize she had lost her brother.

At night the child was thrown into a tent with other stolen children, they were traveling beside the White Nile, going toward the Libyan desert; they had put a heavy, dirty chain on her ankle, her braids were cut with scissors that one of the Arabs always kept in his pocket, her clothes burned in the bonfire that blazed in the slave traders’ camp.

They had spent the night screaming, none of them wanted to surrender, and in a singing voice they sought help, a few spoke, asked who are you, where do you come from. They didn’t understand those people, those people didn’t understand them, even the slaves had trouble understanding one another, each came from a different area, where the people were different. They shared only bewilderment and fear.

In the morning, after a night when no one slept, Zari had been yoked to the ganga, the wooden collar, of another, taller slave, even though she didn’t know she was a prisoner, she didn’t know where she would go or why, she walked, following the column. It appeared clear, however, to her and the others, that anyone who tried to escape would be beaten or killed with the thrust of a knife.

One night, at a camp put up when the sun had set, Zari looked at the tamarind trees and thought that maybe those men would do worse things to her than a knife could, and so, when they were distracted, she had attempted flight, taking shelter under one of the trees, but she was tired, she didn’t know where to go, and she fell asleep.

The roar of a big lion who had passed by the tree without seeing her awakened her and the hands of the Arabs descended, they picked her up and shoved her, beat her with a fallen branch.

Twenty-four hours later Zari had traveled up the Nile in a boat, shut in a crate like fruit or lamb, and had been taken to the market to be sold. She didn’t know where she was. She was in Cairo, three thousand kilometers from her home.

A Turkish man had turned her around and around like a precious fabric, he had raised her arms, checked her armpits, the muscles of her thighs, and she would have liked to pinch him and shout: leave me alone, I’m the bad girl, the mean one you should all be terrified of.

Another man passed, he touched her between the legs as if he were testing a tomato, he squeezed her to feel the pulp, to see if she was juicy, if she had too many seeds, if she would go well in his stew.

Zari was one of the few who didn’t weep or cry, she was sure she was still in the zeriba playing, and that her brother would pop up among the chickens, would cry: look here, I found three eggs.

One after the other, the men had weighed her, opened her mouth, looked at the teeth, felt the canines with their fingertips, they didn’t want a girl who bit, but they didn’t know, when they tugged her nipples with two fingers, that they were touching a Bride of Christ.

In the heat of the Egyptian market, they didn’t know they couldn’t pay the price of sanctity, in fact no matter how much money they pulled out of their packs it wouldn’t be enough for she who would become the blessed, the venerated, the Moretta, Abbess of Serra de’ Conti.

Sister Clara looked down from the high window, at the top of the wall that had been erected to keep their silence even farther from the world.
Now, in the narrow courtyard visible from there, she could see nothing but dry dark roots, untidy tufts of grass, and cantankerous ivy.

And to think that once three great lemon trees had lived in that same courtyard, and for that reason it had been called the lemon grove; the sisters cared for the trees the way silver is cared for in the houses of nobles.

On the days of the harvest a fizzy scent rose up from below and reminded them all that the time had come for jams, liqueurs, preserves.

One after another the lemons were plucked from the tree with delicate fingers, placed in baskets that were carried to the kitchens, the storerooms, then washed, peeled, put on the stove, candied.

This was what kept all of them awake, faithful, close to God: the time that with meticulous love each sister devoted to her own lace pillow, to her own crown of flowers, to the cut of the peel of a yellow lemon.

They’re suppressing us, thought Sister Clara, we’re lemon trees, they want to see us dry up.

It had happened to everything that had been removed from the Monastery, every tree, every room, every cell was abandoned, taken from them to fall into oblivion, be locked up.

But she had been there a long time and had access to the old notebooks and registers, to the accounts of expenses, to the careful transcriptions of the ancient endowments, to the contents of every drawer in the armadio dei livelli, before it was used for storing spools of thread. She had seen the money of the noble families fill the coffers of the Monastery of Santa Maddalena, she had administered it, had bought what they needed.

She knew how much and what the nuns had done for that world that now no longer wanted them, throwing them like old shoes into the dirty corners of uninhabited houses, leaving them to the dust and feeble light.

They who had treated the tenant farmers on the Monastery lands like members of a large family, the sacred family of God, brothers and sisters. No one knew better than the nuns how to respect the farmers, who were paid for every job, for whom the meeting room was always open to make known every fear and every despair, whose difficult daughters were welcomed, to be brought up and taught to kneel at the altar of Christ.

Sister Clara thought back to the days of pork, when from the fields of Serra the farmers brought the meat of the slaughtered pigs, their skin, their blood. The nuns prepared great pots of chickpeas, and while the men stripped off the flesh, the sisters passed them breakfast, lunch, and dinner through an opening. To the bailiff and the bailiff’s wife who had brought the pigs they gave their share, the bones, the loins, and the salamis, the ciauscolo. Each had his share, because those pigs were born on church land but were made to satisfy the hunger of the sons and daughters of God.

For a long time now Italy had looked unfavorably on the religious orders and hadn’t wanted the monasteries to possess anything.

Now the nuns lived in cramped rooms, and were transferred from place to place, some sent south overnight, since they weren’t made to love places and objects, faces and embraces, but only the image of God, and they would find God everywhere from Naples to Trieste, from Iesi to Verona.

They wanted to pull them up like weeds; she had managed to save only a few rooms, the kitchen, a small refectory, the room for the novices, the sewing room, but even over that little that had been returned to them they had no control, they paid for it in the name of others, they were always deprived.
The tenant farmers had new masters, who didn’t go regularly to the fields to follow the work, or spend money to keep the earth fertile and the trees green. The new masters came by only to collect, and when it was time to kill the pigs they had the farmers do it and then they carried off the meat to the city, for the tables of the rich.

Sister Clara wasn’t a fool, nothing about her could have been sharper and more acute, from her cheekbones to her fingertips, nails, knees, ankles, she had the capacity to pinch, cause annoyance, and she knew that money brought in money, and that if some churches and monasteries had known, with the money of once upon a time, how to improve that simple town, others had drained the chalice of Christ until they were drunk, to the point of sin and negligence.

But still it was money with which Father Celestino had ransomed her, and all the stolen girls, up to eight hundred freed slaves.

Sister Clara continued to think about that, imagining the scent of the lemons that in the past had risen from the courtyard to fill the hallway, to kiss the nuns’ sheets and foreheads.

Their was indeed a life of thoughts and glances, gazes and nods, bows, joined hands and certainties, and she was sure that she would never abandon her own sisters to the assault of this Italy. The same Italy that, when she was still a child, had kept her from taking the vows of silence, for years she had asked and had been told no. King Victor Emanuel had requisitioned their goods, inventoried their lives, prohibited the novitiate, banned the entrance of new nuns. Like the other orders, theirs, too, was supposed to be extinguished.

Only the death of Count Cavour had allowed them all to survive, and Sister Clara was convinced that it was God who, from the height of his terrible love, had put an end just at that moment to the life of the persecutor of his sons and daughters.

Moretta, Sister Anna called her with a choked cry, appearing pale at the door of the record room, and Sister Clara turned, losing the train of her thoughts.

You have to come here, said Sister Anna again, and her face was clearer than some dawns in the countryside of Serra, with trembling hands she supported herself on the stone door jamb, her voice was high like a song, and Sister Clara twisted her mouth, every sound that wasn’t music distressed her like the hands of a man between her legs.

Calm down, Sister Anna, soon the bell will ring for afternoon prayers, the Moretta answered.

Sister Evelina... Sister Evelina... with tears of anguish Sister Anna stopped, bringing her hand to the wooden crucifix she wore around her neck. They found her hanged... the cord of her tunic, Sister Anna finished explaining.

The Moretta made the sign of the cross and passed the sister to go down to the nuns’ rooms.

Sister Evelina had received the order to be transferred, there weren’t enough rooms for everyone, and a new nun much valued by the Bishop of Ancona was supposed to come to their convent and take her place.

When Sister Clara opened the door of the room she saw Sister Evelina’s feet sticking out from her habit, the feet of a corpse. She remembered when she had first arrived in Italy, black, small, angry, and Father Celestino had said to her: now you’re safe, and for a moment she had believed him, thinking she would find again her own zeriba, the long-horned cow, the chickens’ eggs, her mother’s flame, always lighted, in the window of her memory.
Eleonora C. Caruso  Everything’s Closed Except the Sky
Everything’s Closed Except the Sky

Waiting at arrivals is Pietro, his father. Julian hasn’t seen him for a year and thought he’d have to pick him out like a stranger, but instead he’s just the same: sweaty forehead, meek expression, unaware of how the years have overtaken him, with his thin eyeglasses and a short-sleeved shirt that’s a visual holdover from the seventies. If they kept standing there, maybe they could go back to a time when both were younger, and Julian would linger behind in the supermarket to see if someone, anyone, would notice. He did that in Tokyo, too, without meaning to. Some days he would wait in front of the Shibuya station like the tourist-swarmed statue of Hachiko the dog, eyes on his phone instead of on the Studio Alta megascreen, as the branches overhead filled with red leaves, green buds, pink petals.
But he no longer wanted it to be just anyone, he knew who he was waiting for.

Julian is suddenly afraid his father will leave — people do — so he runs across the stripe that marks the boundary of Being Home and drops all his things to cannonball into his father’s chest.

Pietro is saying welcome back, something about his hair, about Tokyo, about how he must stink. He doesn’t stink. He smells like sweat and cigarettes.

Julian throws his whole weight into the hug, as always, and as always it doesn’t last long. When he hugs someone and breathes he feels a balloon of words swelling up, and the longer he stays the bigger it swells, filling his throat, covering his palate, crushing his tongue. To deflate it safely he has to back away, cautiously extricate himself, piece by piece. For hours after hugging someone, Julian will touch his wrists, his hair, his legs, the tip of his nose — checking to see he’s all there, that nothing has been left behind in the other person.

Even now he’s tapping his feet together, reaching for the weight of his bag and avoiding the eyes of his father, whose arms are still hanging there in a cloud of unexpressed, enduring questions.

Touching is sad because separations are sad. It would be better not to touch at all.

The sky is the way it always is over airports, empty. Cars swarm in front of the terminal and heat shrinks the field of vision down to seventy millimetres.

“It’s been like this for three days,” his father says. “Aren’t you dying, in those long sleeves?”

Julian is having a minor heart attack at every bam of a car door and shakes his head no. The bones of his back chafe against the fuzzy seat.

The Samsung that he’s holding is a blistering hot bar of soap. He imagines it melting in his hands, circuits emerging from the foam, contacts slipping through his fingers. Bubbles of red (1)s. Pop.

Guardrail with nothing in the background. He watches the road from above, as if still on the plane. Cars like pebbles. Strips of sandpaper. Sun-scorched fields. His father is asking about Tokyo, but he has yet to unzip the file with the information needed to answer that question. Nice, he says.

He takes the Chesterfields out of the glove compartment and looks at his father in profile. He still has all his hair, but otherwise he’s an ordinary man. His mother was ordinary-looking, too. And Julian, despite the sky-blue coif copied from k-pop, remains ordinary.

Christian’s the only one who isn’t ordinary.

When people ask who his brother takes after — because they do — he says nobody, and that’s the truth. But the opposite is also true: that Christian simply takes, from anybody, his beauty feeds on everyone.

“It was as if your flight didn’t exist, it wasn’t on the arrivals screen. I tried to get information out of the airport people but dream on, it was like asking for some special favour. There wasn’t even a human being, just this phone answered by a call centre, and the connection was terrible, too. Nothing works right in this country. You hungry, want to stop somewhere?”

Julian pulls a cigarette out with his teeth, because the other hand is holding his phone under the ac. I ate on the plane, he says. When he was little he used to curl up behind the seat, touch the mysterious mechanisms underneath, stick in a finger, pull it out covered in grease, put it in his mouth. Did he like it, that taste?

“I have to go see my accountant in Milan, so is it ok if we go
to Cri’s? That way you can get some rest. You must be addled from the time difference.”

Julian leans over to stick an arm under the seat and thinks back: for his dad, after the divorce, their flat became your mum’s; after mum’s death, Milan; and now, since he left, Cri’s.

A sudden brake. Julian bumps his head on the dash and the phone falls at his feet. He looks at the finger that has no grease on it, no trace at all of the time when he’d curl up behind the seat, dad driving, mum pretending not to see him, she’d ask Christian where’s your brother and he’d say I don’t know.

That complicity from him used to be the morning sun on the last day of school, a charging station when your phone is dead, the mist sprayers at the amusement park, a cold half-litre glass bottle of Coke on a day like this.

It used to be, he tells himself, lighting his cigarette.

The house wraps around him just as it did a year ago. Even in the dim light, Julian can make out signs of Christian: the rings on the radiator, the crushed plastic bottles piled up in a plastic bag, the shoes by the door. A year ago Christian would never have let dad set foot in that flat, though, and wouldn’t even answer his rare phone calls, which were only for emergencies; Julian acted as their go-between, always. But it seems they’ve made up while he’s been away, enough so, at least, that his father is opening the blinds himself. The sun lights up a single long blond hair stuck to the sofa. Julian picks it up and wraps it around his index finger till it cuts off the blood.

When his phone locates the wifi it starts to vibrate, but he puts off checking his notifications because once the screen is unlocked, that thrilling sign of life might turn out to be call centre spam, an update, an invitation to some event he couldn’t care less about. The buzz you get from a notification lasts only until you read it, then you need more and more of them or you’ll feel lonelier than ever.

“Cri isn’t here,” Pietro says, “he texted me yesterday saying ‘oh, I’m in Switzerland’. He’d forgotten to tell me.” He turns on the AC. Beep. “One thing his therapist told him was to avoid spur-of-the-moment decisions, and what does he do? He goes to Switzerland. Why Switzerland, anyway, do you know?”

No, he doesn’t. Julian hasn’t been in this flat and hasn’t talked to him since 23 December 2014. And it’s 9 June 2016.

“Sorry, you’re right, you’ve only just got back. It’s an oven in here, but give it a minute and it’ll cool off. Sure you don’t want something to eat?”

The hair comes unwound. God knows it’s weird, he thinks, to see his father there again, it’s like a character who only appeared in the pilot episode of a TV series turning up again in the eighth season. Although it’s true that in those eight years, two out of three cast members have died or tried to die, so what can you do?

I’m jet-lagged, he says, I’m going to take a nap. He doesn’t say he’s feeling confused because he left this place like — you know when you read a medication leaflet and then it won’t fold it up the way it was, you try and try but there’s no getting it back to that shape, so you crumple it up and cram the bottle down on top, close the box and who gives a shit?

Like that.

He goes to his room thinking he really will take a nap, dazed as he is by the fact that just twenty hours ago he was looking at the wax ice cream in an Ikebukuro shop window, but as he steps through the door his drowsiness vanishes and his soul snaps back into its casing with four loud boings:

ROOM. MUST. BE. STRIPPED.
He ditches his bag, locks the door. Tearing the sheets off the bed, he throws them on the ground. He tries to flip the mattress, but it weighs a ton and plops back down diamond-wise on the rectangle of slats and empty spaces. He steps up on top, still wearing his shoes, and claws the stickers off the wall, the print-outs of memes, his schedule from the last year of school, posters of k-pop bands that came in magazines ordered from Seoul, then scrunches them all into a tapey wad. He turns the desk chair upside down, drapes the sheet over it. *Meds* by Placebo is still on the dusty old mini-stereo. 

*It’s in the water, baby. It’s between you and me.*

He takes out the CD, snaps it in two. The iridescent halves show a twisted reflection of his face. He pulls out the plug.

He sits down on the bed with his legs crossed, to catch his breath. That’s hard to do, underwater. The mattress is bare. The wall is bare. He’s bare. He breathes.

*Where’s the place I should go home to?*
*I’ve been too deeply shaken.*
*Now I’m tired of it all.*
*Where’s the person I should love?*

He uncaps a black marker that was on the desk, it smells like petrol. Filming himself with his phone, he draws an X over his mouth. The ink is the first thing he’s tasted in… how long?

+ —

He stayed in his room the whole evening, whole night. Not sleeping, but allowing his inside to come out and see how the neighbourhood has changed. Julian’s inside is different from other people’s, it’s sewn to the outside with weaker thread. If he moves suddenly he can feel it, a weird slackness in places where the skin ought to be taut. Sometimes he hopes the thread will come undone and let everything out, other times he fears it, and grips his phone like he could pour himself inside if some fatal breach occurred, a backup of himself flowing through his fingertips.

How empty can a person get and still be a person?
If a voice is silent, is it still a voice?
He gets up and turns off the air conditioner, the room is cold as a shopping mall. He switches SIM cards. At first he means to throw the Japanese one away, but then holds onto it. He browses through the notifications one by one, he has a lot of messages, but only answers An’s. The blinds are still down and his phone illuminates the closed suitcase sitting in front of the door. He ought to take a shower, get changed, but his brain has blocked out the part of the house where you do that. If he visualized the floor plan, there would be black scribbles over the bathroom.

He switches his sweaty top with another long-sleeved top — wiping off sweat with the old one — keeps his jeans, slips his Vans back on. When he opens his suitcase, the first layer is snack food. He takes a photo with the flash on, then rummages around until he finds those revolting BlackStone cherry-flavoured cigarillos. In Japan everything tastes like something other than itself, even water, even relationships. He sticks his phone into his pocket, gives his mouth a quick rinse at the kitchen sink, and goes out, telling his father he’s having breakfast with An. His dad seems happy and says go on, you’ve kept her waiting long enough. What’s that supposed to mean?
In video games you sometimes run across surprise glitches caused by faults in the software. The hero keeps falling and falling into a bottomless crevasse, a save at the wrong point burns up the data, the laws of physics go haywire and blood flies upwards, the image of an absent person appears because the environment has memorized that presence.

Julian sees his mother, every time he goes out the front door. She’s in the car, waving to him, hair pinned up. She stays there, until he moves.

The absence of Tokyo around him feels overwhelming, as does the Milanese summer. People are getting on and off trams, moving disjointedly. Nothing vertical meets the eye, and the horizon is so bare that it looks abandoned.

If he thought about it too hard, Julian wouldn’t even know how to blink, so he doesn’t think about it. He walked the Home-to-An’s route for all five years of secondary school in every mental state and every kind of weather, it’s a muscle memory thing, so he just lets his muscles carry him through the patchy shade of Via Volta up to Via Paolo Sarpi, where the cross streets still look like the loading zones they originally were, when Julian was in primary school and traffic would get tangled in the vehicles and fables of surly Chinese people. The whole way there he’s thinking how much he wants a cigarette, but he’s at her front door by the time he remembers that in Italy you can smoke in the street.

An is sitting on the shared courtyard balcony, forehead propped against the bars of the railing and a manga open on the other side. Her bare feet dangle in the air. She sees him and makes a mooing sound, there’s something in her mouth. She throws it at him, an ice cream stick. “JULI!” she yells, and drops the manga, flipping back and rolling on her side, then getting up. Julian meets her halfway on the stairs and An leaps on him. All those texts become bare legs and mint-scented breath. He’s thought of her every day. He’s tagged her in dumb photos every day. Every day he would find some silly little gift, they’re on their way in an insured parcel, posters CDs washi tapes snacks flyers necklaces earrings ribbons fake nails gashapons socks notebooks charms Gudetama swag, three hundred sixty bits of proof that she was with him all along, that something of her besides words on the screen travelled across eight hours of space as a presence, as comments, opinions, in short as An Ma, just turned twenty, by far the person Julian loves best on the face of the planet.

But right now he’d rather not be there.

An says: Tokyo, this heatwave, what’s that on your mouth, I want some bubble tea, god that hair is killer on you, I’ve been flipping out on my parents, hang on lemme get my shoes.

An often says lots of things all at once, unlike Julian, who says one thing at a time and then almost always regrets it. As soon as they’re spoken, the words he thought were right lose their meaning, taste like fizzy water gone flat.

He hugs her, taking care not to burst the balloon, and licks the ink that has melted into the fissures of his chapped lips. “How are you?” An asks. And he says: can I use your bathroom?

Milan, the Republic of Bubble Tea. Tapioca balls will save the world. An has taken off her shoes, her bare feet are propped on Julian’s chair and wriggling in the tepid breath of a fan tied to the ceiling. She’s been fighting with her parents because they don’t want to pay for university anymore.
“According to them I need to find a job, but what job? There are no jobs, plus I’m a girl and Chinese, who would take me, a massage parlour?” Talking to her phone, tapping on the screen in agitation. She’s posting a selfie of them together. “And the clincher is I’m supposed to keep working at the shop too because ‘it’s my duty,’ see? It’s not like they pay me! So like I’m supposed to study and also work two jobs, what the hell? I might as well go to China, in that case, can’t be worse than here.” She turns her phone around to show him the post. Best day ever it says. “Can you believe it? And then there’re people like Cloro who’s always out farting around. Must be nice to have shitloads of money.”

With this, An goes back to gulping tapioca. She used to be a fan of Cloro, even though she now denies it. You can still see her comments under the older videos on the channel, the ones before the Wikipedia page Fiaba Ortes (born 13th August 1995), better known as Clorofrilla, is an Italian YouTube personality. Julian lived with Cloro for six months, in Tokyo. She told him once that with fame on the web there’s a line you cross, at first people only love you, then they mostly hate you. … don’t know, you think you’re the chosen one, the special person who will eat up nothing but love. That’s how she put it, eat up nothing but love.

He’d like a cigarette, he even pulls one out, but then remembers he can’t and sniffs the packet, looking at his phone. Eventhough he’s not following Christian on Instagram, he’s stumbled across a photo of him. Sometimes he’s tempted to put a like, just to see what would happen, but he already knows: absolutely nothing.

“How was the homecoming?” An asks.

It keeps coming, Julian says.

They were supposed to go to Tokyo together, she’s the one who found the school he enrolled in, but then in the end her parents refused to shell out and Julian couldn’t stay in Milan, or even explain to her why not. He doesn’t know if An was angry, they’ve never talked about it. Right now she seems happy, as she chews her straw and shakes it around in her teeth, spraying rainbow droplets on the screens of their phones.

They go out into the pollen, into the sunlight. Julian can finally smoke. He tells her about it all: Attack on Titan, the perfect queues in the tube, with the people-pushers everybody always asks about, the yellow helmets on nursery school kids, the big-bang concert at the Tokyo Dome, the hairdresser he asked for a style like t.o.p.’s in a live TV performance of Bad Boy, he even showed him the GIFs. The food, so she won’t be forced to ask: have you been eating?

Eating up nothing but love, An. Can you imagine? He walks her to her front door, the names on the buzzers are all in Chinese, who knows how the postmen manage. An tugs his sleeve. “Wo xiang ni.” I’ve missed you. Aitakatta. I wanted to see you. He hugs her. The balloon swells — Dad and Christian are talking again, it was always Dafne and me looking after him, for years I kept trying and failing to get them in the same room, then they start talking again after what he did, isn’t that insane? — but he sucks it back in with the soft part of his throat. In Japan the streets don’t have names, who knows how the postmen manage.
Heat shock upon coming out of the AC, the sweat rushes back and clogs his pores. He needs a shower.

His father isn’t in the living room, but the TV is on showing the news. Same scams, same swindles, same crimes, same cruelty. Only the ads have changed. He goes on Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Instagram again. All under the name Juli_ChouChou. He chose that because of a Japanese film he loves, *All About Lily Chou-Chou*. In the movie you don’t even know if Lily Chou-Chou exists. Juli_ChouChou either. But there are always new hearts, new followers. He looks at Christian’s profile — Bisexual. Bipolar. *Wait in the fire*. He’s only just opened an account, but is already on his way to fame. No surprise there, he’s got a face made to order, all cheekbones and photogenics. He never used to have accounts on socials, probably because they make it harder to hide your cheating from your girlfriend. But then at some point the cheating came to light, the girlfriend left him, and now Christian can have all the accounts and all the hearts he wants: has he ever bothered with anything less?

Pietro comes into the room, looking surprised to see him. He said once he hasn’t been himself since David Bowie died, and maybe that’s true. He asks after An, does she like university? Julian says yes. He describes the lunch they never had, cold soba.

“Given it any thought yourself? I know you’ve only just got back, but the deadline is around the corner, if you want to transfer…”

Julian asks him if he lives there, now. After the divorce Pietro moved to a temporary apartment in Busto Arsizio, which stayed temporary for almost ten years. Julian was nine and believed it for a while, at first. On Sunday night movies, the wealthy parents with perfect teeth always get back together in the end. But then they stopped showing those movies.

“No, of course not.” He laughs, like a person in love who’s happy but still unsure of what’s in store. “I only come by to see how he’s doing. Make sure he’s sleeping, taking his meds… not trashing the place, if at all possible…”

But are you getting along?

“Let’s just say we’re talking. Not always nicely, but talking, at least in therapy sessions. When he’s in the mood he may even overshare, when he’s not he’s… well, he’s Christian. You know how he is.”

Yeah, I do, Julian thinks. Do you?

“In any case he’s coming home tomorrow evening, I’ll say hi then go back to Busto, you can do whatever you like. But at least you’ll see each other.”

Julian stays glued to his phone. Somebody has retweeted a misogynist tweet to say how wrong it is. Everybody’s talking about the referendum for Great Britain to leave Europe, the hashtag is #brexit.

“Don’t worry,” says Pietro. “He’s doing better.”

The TV is still on, with news of rapes. Julian is dreaming of love stories as cold as train stations and peaceful as hotel breakfasts.

This time he goes in the bathroom — he has no choice. He doesn’t look at anything, there’s a piece of lead in his frontal lobe. He gets undressed and his neck loses all its stiffness because of the empty spot in his throat. Standing there naked, he pinches the wound with his fingers, it’s never healed and he’s never sewn it up, instead he’s made a habit of checking its packed interior, the cotton he’s stuffed in there, drenched in paint and gel and glitter — it’s like a nebula, when you shake it, really. His memory...
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has pixelated Christian’s face. It’s not like something censored, it’s like a high-definition image that’s too detailed to parse. The same goes for this feeling, and Julian knows just one thing, how hard it hit him. He’s been seventeen for two years now. It’s been December for eighteen months now, and he’s cold. He lets the heated water bubble out of the pipes, lets his hair melt into sky-blue blood down his thighs to his feet. He pulls himself in, a layer at a time, a smell at a time, a fear at a time, a feeling at a time, a sound at a time, until he can say: my body is empty.

He hasn’t been broken, if no one can see the pieces. He hasn’t even fallen, if no sound could be heard.

* —

He’s woken by something biting — hard — into his leg, it’s hunger attacking his muscles. He recognizes the feeling, clenches his jaw and repeats to himself it’ll pass it’ll pass it’ll pass until it does pass. His father hugged him yesterday, but it wasn’t a real hug: he was counting bones. Julian could feel the thumb pressing his vertebrae one by one.

He opens his suitcase, again. A hundred mesmerizing packets of sweets and snacks, covered in twee: little faces on the fruit, mascots with their own mascots. Cloro’s voice, in English, in a side street that didn’t look like Takeshita-dori, till you saw the alternative boutiques perched along its steps: Today I’m taking you to Daiso to see the craziest snacks you can buy for 100 yen! With me here is ChouChou, who hasn’t said a word since the BIGBANG concert — don’t laugh, it’s true! — but we’ll forgive him because he’s so kawaii and brightens up the shot for me. Please please fave this video because both of us managed not to realize it’s the Saturday of Golden Week, the biggest holiday season in Japan, and it’s like the WHOLE WORLD is in Harajuku. You can’t even see the pavement and the risk of getting crushed to death is pretty high, but…

Julian touches the packets with a fingertip, tracing waves, like the miniature rake of a desktop Zen garden.

He goes into the living room, holding his phone and a chocolate grape lollipop. He lets his father see him unwrap it. His dad is making coffee, he’s immediately located the moka pot in what used to be his kitchen. So is everything back to how it was? Before that winter when Christian went nuts, before mum died, before the divorce, before… what? How far back do we have to go, to find an intact version of ourselves?

Julian hesitates, then sticks the lollipop into his barely awake mouth, catching it off guard. The sugar is a five-car pileup in his brain. Dazed, he accepts a cup of coffee.

“I’ve been listening to some of your Koreans,” his father says. Dipping the lollipop into his coffee, Julian asks what he thinks. Pietro shakes his head in amusement.

“I think I miss Dafne. At least she gave me some musical satisfaction now and then. You ever hear from her? On Facebook, I mean. She’s in India now and it’s hard to call, and with her parents… it’s not like we exactly had a falling-out, but…”

It would be unfair to say his father has asked how everyone is except him, because he did ask and Julian said fine, and it ended there. But irrationally, Julian wants him to ask again, …

The ex-girlfriend Dafne are old friends of his dad’s, but above all the only people who still talk about mum using her
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name, Giulia, and if they stopped his father would no longer hear that name, and never hearing anyone say the name of a person you loved must be sad, or at least so he imagines. But he doesn’t say any of that, he just says I’m sorry, which is like not saying anything. Even so his father puts a hand over his on the table.

“Thanks, Juli. I know you were happier where you were, but I’m glad you’re back.”

Between the hand and the lollipop, Julian is at a loss. He sits there frozen.

After some clinking of coffee cups and spoons in the sink, Pietro leaves for work. The house is now cloaked in the unnatural silence of the moment just before someone shouts surprise!, but no one’s there and the furniture stays neutral. Julian goes in the kitchen to throw away the lollipop, then reconsiders, keeps it in his mouth and clacks it against his teeth, running his tongue over them now and then — he’s had his braces off for a year now.

An Ma 15 minutes ago
One more reason to love T.O.P. ❤️
[VIDEO: BIGBANG — Bad Boy]

Phone in hand, he goes into his mother’s room. The bed is too neatly made for his dad to have slept there, but that’s no surprise, the man has too much emotional reserve, verging on a sort of timidity. He must have bent himself into a pretzel on the sofa. In any case, Christian doesn’t let anyone use that bed, for years he shared his narrow mattress with Dafne rather than move in there. Only the two brothers would stretch out on it, every so often. Sometimes together.

On the bed is an Ikea-style box with curlicues, and inside is some of Dafne’s stuff. Things of no value, but which all speak of her in some way: the biographies suggesting her empathy, the accessories her equilibrium, the makeup her concern with appearances. And then there’s an mp3 player covered in half-melted stickers, Julian remembers it vaguely, must have been a Christmas present. He presses play, but nothing happens.

Dafne was Christian’s childhood friend, then his girlfriend. By the end of their relationship she was so broken that to get through to her you had to talk to one shard at a time. Christian shatters people because he storms through life in a wild, flailing way. He takes it for granted that they’ll stand up to his detonations, keep their footing in his earthquakes. Yet he was the one who tried to call a halt, swallowing all the lithium he could get his hands on one December evening, like the ultimate fuck-you to them all: I’ll stop myself then, since none of you seem up to it.

Because of the quiet smile you gave me
I’d stopped crying by morning.
In this thin rut, you are breathing.

Julian goes back to his room. He’s brought along Dafne’s mp3 player, but can’t find the hole for the charger. After a while he realizes it takes batteries. He finishes the lollipop and smokes a cigarette, layering tobacco on top of coffee, on top of grape and chocolate, on top of nights half awake. He sprawls on the bed with his phone. Everybody has an opinion about Brexit. Everybody but him sees the lighter side of everything.

If you want to feel depressed there’s this website that shows what David Bowie was doing at your age.
The thought that I might wake up in November with a woman
President of the United States makes me want to cry. What’s to celebrate about civil unions, when compared to modern countries we’re still the Third World? It’s been a while since 2016 killed anybody, I’m getting nervous. If this Tom Hiddleston and Taylor Swift thing is true I’m going to slit my wrists. Italy is the country where… where… where…

(He sees some pieces of tape left on the wall. When he pulls them off, there’s lint and bits of plaster underneath. He pushes rec and sticks them on his mouth.)

…GIF of Benedict Cumberbatch. Men are sexually abused too and nobody talks about it. What every incest survivor should know. Proof that Captain America is in love with Iron Man. Can we take a minute to appreciate the magic of pixel art? It’s not about racism, you can’t turn a white character black. Do I have to sacrifice my firstborn to get some media representation of asexuality? List of things you shouldn’t use as lube: blood, sugar, spit, lemon juice, flour, petrol…

(He plugs in his phone. It’s hot to the touch. He watches three episodes of Orange Is the New Black.)

…the penal code does not punish incestuous behaviour per se, only insofar as it leads to public scandal. Yet the definition of public scandal… Clorofrilla posted a video: “Spiciest food I ate in Seoul.” Watch it now!

My mom reacts to the HOLD THE DOOR scene. Can anybody explain this Funko Pop obsession to me? The things are hideous. Amanda Knox documentary coming out in September: 10 points for… …a heart was drawn on the palm of her left hand in red marker. There was tape over her mouth. Her neck and wrists were tied with nylon rope, and strangely enough… JonBenét had eaten some pineapple an hour or two before she was killed… police say they found the prints of her brother Burke, who was nine at the time…

(Bathroom. REC. Using nail scissors, he pokes a hole in the tape to insert a cigarette. In the video you can hear his stomach going gruaaaaron.)

* —

When he comes back from the bathroom he’s got a text. The only people who send him texts are his father and the swimming pool he considered joining two years ago. It’s three pm and his blinds are still down.

Cri is on his way home. Tonight we can have dinner together, like you always wanted. Better late than never :) He thinks: dad’s finally taken the nose out of his emoticons, baby steps. Then a coldness creeps into his hands starting at the fingertips, his breathing speeds up. He sticks his phone and cigarettes in his pocket, glances at himself in the mirror and sees he’s still in his pyjamas, but that’s ok, the bottoms are from a tracksuit. He
slips on his shoes with no socks and goes out. Running down the stairs, breath hindered by the tape still on his mouth, hand over the banister in case he needs to grab it. Then come the glitches, the sunlight, the door clicking shut behind him.

He’s outside.

He quickens his pace before he even knows where he’s going, blood buzzing in his ears, a rim of blackness creeping out from behind his eyes. He focuses on the lollipop, urging the sugar to keep him on his feet. Crossing at the corner, he almost gets run over by one of those heavy orange bikeshare bikes. It must weigh more than I do, he thinks. Funny. He almost never thinks about his body, most of the time it’s like it didn’t exist.

One piece of tape has fallen off, he peels the others from his mouth and holds them up to the light. Amid the dust and plaster are dead scraps of lip. The sun is beating on the concrete. Then the narrow flowerbeds lie prostrate like penitents.

Milan is sweltering, everyone’s in t-shirts. No lighter, no money, no keys, no earbuds. His phone is half dead and burning hot in his pocket. Every so often his vision does weird things.

Luckily An is at the shop. Right away she says: why are you in your pyjamas? She takes a t-shirt from a rack; around it are other racks jammed with clothing, then a bunch of cartons and nothing else. The air conditioner is dripping into an empty paint can.

“Here. The panda DJ.” He has no money.

“And the tag says ‘wholesale only’. Who gives a fuck.”

An is watching the video of SNsd’s Catch Me If You Can on her tablet. Julian saw it for the first time at the HMV on the corner of Shibuya, a few days after he arrived. In his attempt to fit in, he was already looking down on the tourists who crossed the street holding selfie sticks, though he realized none of the Japanese people were likely to give a damn. What’s happened, since then? The thread snapped too quickly to say, there’s no connection anymore between the Julian he was before and the one he is now, assuming he is.

He asks if he can use the loo.

“Change here, I don’t mind.”

He stands there holding the t-shirt. An laughs.

“Go on, go in the loo.”

The fluorescent light is anything but flattering, but even with a shiny face and zits on her forehead, An is pretty.

He changes in front of the mirror. The idea that this is the face he talks to people with sometimes catches him completely off guard. An’s voice quizzes him on his preferences regarding Korean faces:

Taeyon or YoonA? YoonA.
Wendy or Joy? Joy.
YoonA or T.O.P? Who’s T.O.P?
Mmph. Bae Bae. T.O.P, then.

He comes out of the bathroom. Since his arms are now bare, he keeps them crossed over his chest. He says the panda DJ is cool. An looks at him and doesn’t ask. Whether he’s eating. Whether he’s there for some particular reason. Why the hell he’s in his pyjamas. Instead she asks: “And between YoonA and T.O.P in Not Fall in Love?”

He can’t say, they’re too different.

“No kidding, they’re a boy and a girl, of course they’re different. But which do you like more?”

Julian doesn’t get it. He has a feeling the question is no longer
about K-pop. An lets the tension hang there like a drawn-out note, but finally says, looking at her phone in front of the tablet: “At least you like Asians.”

They stay till six, watching people stuffing marshmallows into their mouths and spitting sticky chewed-up balls into their cupped hands. At one minute past six An’s mother arrives and eyes Julian with her usual displeasure, rankled by the hair, he thinks, or by the stench of Japan on him, An thinks — “believe me, when she hears some relative has started making sushi, she pulls a face like he was raping puppies on the daily.” Julian waves, lunching over to hide his t-shirt, then slips out of the shop with An into the sun-baked street. He turns down her suggestion of meeting up with some school friends in half an hour. Everything has put a distance between him and the others, and he doesn’t have the presence right now to silently watch his own impotence to bridge it, or even the resilience to accept that distance without asking why. Why? Why? I knew each one of these people, so why?

An is fanning herself with her hands and Julian blows on her neck. “Stop, that just makes it hotter.”

You know, An, I read this thing online about how when satellites die, their last command from Earth is to move to the nearest graveyard orbit, where they’ll float as nameless carcasses, thousands of miles away from any form of life, for all eternity. An tugs his shirt: “Take good care of the panda DJ.”

Via Sarpi is pungent with food smells at this time of day. They mingle with the plasticky sweetness of his t-shirt, that strange smell of clothes made in China. In Tokyo Julian ate meat for the first time in years, not by choice. It was just impossible to avoid.

The first time was in some soup, he registered the sliminess even before the taste, and had to throw up in the spotless bathroom of the ramen bar. He threw up the second time, too, then the third, then the fourth, then noticed what relief it gave him, and that he was anxious for that relief, hoping to feel it again, because as he vomited, the malaise that had been so vague took on the shape of something struggling not to be uprooted, and then with only a little effort, one last heave, that thing would finally come out and let him breathe, for a while. But one day he was in Ikebukuro, outside of Tokyo Hands, and there were so many voices shouting into megaphones, and so many lights, and so many people, and so much music — music everywhere, at least three layers of music — that he realized if he played that game, Tokyo would kill him.

Now Julian has cut himself off from that reservoir of energy. What could kill him, in Milan, has already killed him.

Cicadas…
…hmm mm…summer has arrived

He murmurs to himself and to the pavement as he walks towards the Cimitero Monumentale. It’s Milan’s posher cemetery, where tourists and the last few goths from street-style forums go to take pictures, but to him it’s just the opposite way from home. New buildings have appeared where scaffolding had been up so long he thought it was permanent, but everything else is the same, like a movie you’ve seen five times before. He always picks streets he doesn’t recognize. That’s why he liked walking through Tokyo: nothing meant anything to him. A stretch of wilderness, sun and asphalt, a big overgrown vacant lot with a rusty fence all around. Between the fence and the dead branches is an old sign, “Bar Sorriso.” Behind the sign is a dirty plush toy and
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some bags of clothing. Beyond that is concrete, unspooling till Milan fades to black. He goes down into the only metro station in the neighbourhood to look at the map — yellow red green purple, just four lines, how cute. He stays there recouping from the heat for a while, but people are noticing his hair and his arms so he leaves. He can’t deal yet with the shock of being looked at, in Tokyo he’d become accustomed to a peaceful transparency.

He walks to a bare piazza with an ice cream shop. A big dog is wandering around the tables hoping something will fall. If his grip on reality were just a little weaker, Julian would get down on all fours and lick the ice cream off the street with him.

Maybe at this very moment Christian has come home. Maybe he was expecting to see him, maybe for a year now he’s been rehearsing how to apologize and thinks he’ll finally get the chance tonight. Maybe Julian wants to deny him that relief, or maybe he wants to shield himself from the umpteenth pointless illusion. Maybe.

A South American guy gives him a light. Cherry and nicotine offer his tongue the semblance of a flavour. He sits down on a bench with a view of the number 14 stop, hugs his knees and fiddles on his phone till the battery is down to 10%. Sometime after eight, a couple of families with kids arrive at the ice cream shop. The kids are playing with their phones. He gets up. The piazza spins around him. A sky without signboards, without power lines strung limply between poles, without the silhouettes of buildings. Graveyard orbit.

There’s a 24-hour Carrefour supermarket. It’s the first thing that looks familiar to him since he’s been back. In Tokyo there was always something lit up, anywhere he went: a konbini, a restaurant, a string of vending machines. He could see them if he leaned out from the balcony of his second flat, fluorescent chunks of electricity lining the street at night. Sometimes he’d go down to get some coffee and would sneak a cigarette in the nook between his neighbours’ house and the combustible rubbish collection point, other times he’d just gaze at them, imagining their warm wire hearts.

It’s almost ten, some stars are coming out. Hi, stars! Long time no see! He crouches down with his back to a broken planter and watches them, then gets bored, checks his phone but it’s almost dead, watches people: young couples getting groceries, young not-couples, ethnicities he can’t place. He’s used to Asian faces now and everything else is a blur, it’s funny: we think we know exactly what we’re like on the outside, but other people have trouble telling us apart. So the outside doesn’t really matter in the end?

A young guy comes out of the supermarket, a cashier maybe, wearing a blue jacket. Julian asks him for a light. He waits to be alone again and uses up the last 3% of his battery listening to Gamble, with the phone tucked between his knees and chin and the volume down low.

_When the cicadas chirr_
_I know summer has arrived_
_and every time, somehow,_
_I feel envy._

_If things end on this battlefield,_
_they'll end with some kind of surrender._

The stars thicken, the people thin out. A man is standing in front of a closed phone shop. A black prostitute, fanning herself with a flyer, is clicking her way heel-to-toe down the street. When the tram starts up it makes a sort of spark with
the cables, then no more trams pass and even the cables fall asleep. A man with a hard, pear-shaped belly stops in front of Julian and asks questions he doesn’t understand, but the man keeps insisting, and makes him uneasy. The maybe-cashier comes out with another cigarette and the guy finally goes off. The maybe-cashier watches him walk away, then looks at Julian.

“Hey, you’ve been here a hell of a long time.”
Mmh.
“Everything okay?”
Mmh. He hesitates. I locked myself out, he adds.
“Can’t you call somebody?”
He holds up his dead phone.
“Oh. Ouch.”
They smoke.
“What’s that, a cigar?”
Julian shakes his head. He passes him the cigarillo. The guy takes a deep, full drag then blows the smoke out, closing one eye and lifting an eyebrow.
“Nice. Tastes like unicorn shit.”
Julian laughs.
“Christ almighty, please kill me. No really, nice stuff. There’s a service station in Piazzale Accursio, maybe I’ll get a swig of petrol to wash it down, the perfect chaser. What are these things? Just so I can take out a restraining order on them.”
Julian hands him the empty, crumpled packet. He walks over to look at it in the light from the supermarket, which makes the automatic doors slide open.
“Wait, holy shit, I know these. They’re the ones from Nana. A manga, you know that one? Probably before your time.” He throws the packet in a nearby bin. “Come on inside. What’s
Teresa Ciabatti 03 Daddy’s Girl
You don’t understand! I shriek, clutching the little head to my chest.

I run down the stairs, stop at the fourth step, and jump. Nonna behind me: give it back to me! But I don’t let it go, until my mother appears: where did I find it, I have to return it right now!

Then, fiery, bravely, I strut over to the window: what do you want with her? Feisty, headstrong: why are you so heartless? Inconsolable: without her my life is meaningless.

This is me, standing on the sill of the large window — making it clear that yes, I might even jump — skin pale as a ghost, straight teeth, one of the few who doesn’t have to wear braces. Pink bathing suit with red strawberries. Bare legs, no shoes. What do you want with her, I repeat despairingly.

translated by
Anne Milano Appel
Maybe all the toys I have aren’t enough for me? Mama complains. No other little girl has what I have... that’s not a doll, it’s not a toy, can’t I see that it’s a worthless nothing?

Hugging the worthless nothing tighter and tighter, I mumble: I’ll take care of her.

Shouts that tumble over one another: the problem is you’re too spoiled.

You have no heart.

You hate me.

Watch out, now you’re going to get it.

There’s so much violence in this house.

Give the head back to Nonna right this minute!

Why did you bring me into the world if you don’t love me?

Let go of that thing or you’re going to boarding school.

And then I, in a frenzy, still standing on the windowsill, the sea behind me, I, up there like a demure little Madonna, accuse them: all you’re interested in is money and jewelry, love doesn’t count.

Little idiot, the voices talk over one another, get down immediately, now you’re really going to get it.

Money and jewelry, I repeat calmly, by now a Madonna, mine is an ascension, I am taking off, away from you miserable humans, money, jewels, furs, I rant a moment more before a thundering voice roars.

What’s going on?

A voice that seems to come from above, and instead is coming from here, from right here, from the porch to be exact.

I jump down from the windowsill, run to him, and show it to him: I show him the little polystyrene head with the brown wig. I beg him, I implore him to tell them, to tell the two women, those two inferior beings, to let me keep it: I will be mother, grandmother and sister to her, I promise. She will be my love, my only love.

Let her keep it, daddy orders.

My name is Teresa Ciabatti, I’m seven years old, and I just discovered that my grandmother wears a wig. Due to alopecia, she’s completely bald. She keeps the polystyrene head with the spare wig in her closet. It’s identical to the one on her head: dark brown, styled in a chignon.

All the Pileri women are bald, mama reveals to me in a chummy moment, she and I in the big bed, our legs intertwined. And Nonna Teresa is too... Keep it to yourself, she shuts me up. My great-grandmother was bald, her sisters were bald, the daughters were bald. All bald up until mama. With her the affliction stops. Mama has luxuriant hair, I stroke it, she should let it grow, why does she keep it so short, oh, she sighs, I’m too old for long hair. Your beautiful hair, I comb it for her the year when she sleeps. Mama has thick, shiny hair, and I do too.

I who, standing on the diving board, loosen my dark blond, slightly wavy lustrous hair, this healthy hair, imagining that someone looking up from the beach can see me and wonder: who could that fantastic creature be?

It’s me, I feel like shouting, just me, Teresa Ciabatti, then I raise my arms to the sky, take a run-up and dive in.

My hair billows beneath the water.

I have a happy childhood. Barbies, paper dolls, porcelain dolls. Dresses, shoes, jewelry. And a polystyrene head with hair I can comb to my heart’s content.

I live in great big houses, in the summer in this one with the pool, my pool. I travel. I’ve been to London, New York, Paris,
Vienna, Greece, Turkey, Disneyland. In the winter mama and daddy take us skiing: Cortina, Madonna di Campiglio, Switzerland. I’ve seen the sea and the snow, the pyramids and the desert, I’ve seen the Rosetta stone and Mickey Mouse in person. I’ve seen everything, you kids who go to school with me: I’m different, no use denying it, I am the Professor’s daughter.

My father is the most important man in the Maremma, the chief surgeon. He treats the poor for free, the Professor loves the poor. Often in the afternoon, accompanied by my nanny or my grandmother, I drop in at the hospital to say hello to him. If he’s operating, I wait for him in the staff room, where the doctors stop by to pay homage to me. Handsome, young. In the arms of one or the other, I close my eyes: don’t let me see, I gasp on their muscular chests, I’m so afraid, when the doors open and a stretcher comes out, on it a sleeping patient, a tumor. Behind come doctors, nurses, and finally him. The disciples step aside to make room for him to pass, and I see him surrounded by a bluish light, a light like the purest radiance of a star, the light that blesses only the Professor, my father. I run towards him and jump on him — hey, gently! — my legs wrapped around his waist, and my arms around his neck, so, so tight — you’re suffocating me — and I beg him, I implore him in a loud voice so that everyone can hear: oh, poppy, let’s go and buy my tutu.

I’m going to be a professional ballerina, I’m sure of that for various reasons, including my father’s influence on the world. He can do anything: get a farmer’s son hired at the Orbetello town hall, intercede with the Regional director for the head post in Massa Marittima. Even straighten out the wayward daughter of his friend the police chief. Having gone through heroin, and dozens of men, the poor girl finds herself with nothing to show for it, not even a diploma, a beautiful girl, no doubt about it, she’d like to get into television, her worried father explains, but they’re pipe dreams, Renzo, just the dreams of a naive girl… Dreams that Renzo makes come true.

So then, given all he does for others, what won’t he do for me? Ballerina, actress, TV host. Meanwhile, I practice at home, where I insisted on a rehearsal room with a mirror and a barre. Pink tutu and toe shoes, I pause in front of my reflected image: the feeling of a grandiose future ahead. Ballerina, President of the Republic, the first female president, saint. Saint Teresa of Orbetello: there I am, ethereal evanescent, advancing solemnly along the beach to the sea, not stopping, continuing to the water, walking on the water, with everyone saying ooh, murmuring: I knew she was special. I’m special, yes. I myself repeat it, I want to tell mama, share my privileged status with her.

Where’s mama?

She’s sleeping. So I say it to myself — you’re special, Teresa — even behind the scenes, even before going on stage.

The Supercinema in Orbetello. We little girls are waiting for the musical note on which to make our entrance. Mine is different, I have a cue that’s all my own. First the others enter, as a group. Then I go on, by myself. I’m not the best or the most graceful. The other little dancers protest: why always her? They talk behind my back.

Do you know how many times I’ve smiled at the hateful looks they give me in the locker room? Year after year — as a child, a little girl, a teenager — I stand out on stage in the front row. The applause is for me, all for me, not for you.

Not so in 1979, the year of Inverno, a choreography set in the snow with a prima ballerina, the teacher explains, who is lifted by the ballerino, this year we will have a ballerino — a boy, a boy, squeals of joy in the studio — a professional dancer from Grosseto.
And we, sitting cross-legged on the floor, are quivering, our little hearts are palpitating. The little heart of everyone but me, I already know, girls, let’s try not to be hypocritical. Close your eyes and see me vault over the ballerino’s head, gaze at me, splendid and graceful, eyeing the world from above. Oh, how I wish that doctors and nurses would come this year, those good-looking young men who adore me, I would like them all here to applaud me. The thrill of having someone at my complete disposal, the pack in white coats that follows daddy around, that troop I’ve always felt was also mine: to Vincenzo the blond nurse, give me a ride to the amusement park, to Paolo the cardiologist, I want a stuffed tiger, to Emilio the gynecologist, go buy me a pair of red shoes, size thirteen.

They do it. They do it to please the Professor, some say. And yet: can you be sure that there isn’t an individual among them who is in love with this fabulous, special little girl?

Sitting on the floor, waiting for the teacher to assign roles, I think of the medical troop that adores me and applauds my leap in the arms of the ballerino. The teacher is about to say the word, she is about to pronounce my name: Teresa Ciabatti, it’s you.

Instead she says Simona. The prima ballerina this year will be Simona.

My breath catches, my little heart lurches, it’s not possible, I stammer, it’s not possible, in the studio and in the locker room, heatedly tearing off my tutu. I toss my little shoes on ... I won’t accept it, no, no, no, I’m going to tell daddy, I threaten in my panties and undershirt, pint-size, I thunder.

I’m going to tell daddy and those minions of his who do whatever he says: some rush to repair the sink, some to white-wash the fence, others to repaint the walls of the house. We don’t have plumbers, electricians, house painters, we have doctors and nurses, a swarm of doctors and paramedics at our complete disposal who have even learned the workings of the pool in case something malfunctions. Can you get out of the water for a second, Amedeo, an anesthesiologist, asks me, just long enough for me to fix the skimmer. No, I answer, stretched out on the crocodile. I don’t even turn around, eyes closed behind dark glasses that protect me from the sun.

I’m going to tell daddy, I repeat in the locker room, I put my duffle coat on right over my underwear, and run out. Half ballerina, half ordinary child, I reach mama’s car.

What’s wrong? she asks.

It’s not fair, I protest, slamming the door.

Would you mind telling me what happened.

I hate them all, I scream, the people, this town. Francesca Fabiani looks at me, bewildered: what did they do to you?

I sniffle. She doesn’t ask me anything else. She doesn’t probe, she doesn’t insist. What happened at the dance school could have been a tragedy, a confrontation, or nothing at all. It doesn’t matter.

Now she hugs me — even though I try to squirm free, I hate physical contact — and holds me tight. Could it be that it’s really she who is clinging to me? That she’s the one asking me for help? Whispering that everything will be all right, everything will be all right, my little one.

* * *

It’s not true: nothing will be all right. People in this town envy me. I want to run away, but I can’t, I’m only eleven years old. A
captive child, I think, imprisoned in my bedroom. Eleven years according to the birth records, but fifteen, sixteen in terms of intelligence. I’m different, I’m special, I assert day after day in front of my parents. They are silent. I think I’m a genius, I whisper, intimidated by the word myself. I’m a genius, I say louder, I am a genius, I affirm confidently, articulating the word clearly, genius.

My parents do not reply, except I can then hear them mumble as soon as I leave the room: maybe she’s not well, an iron deficiency, don’t you see how pale she is?

Never mind iron deficiency, I’m just fine. Just fine, world! I don’t understand mama and daddy’s concern. Why don’t they look at me, all they have to do is look at me: I can’t say that I’ve developed — I’m one step away — but don’t you see what a magnificent woman I’m starting to become? Other parents would be proud, instead of whispering in the kitchen about imbalances and disorders, other parents would hug me and shower me with kisses.

Instead I lie here unappreciated. I’m growing up in this house, in this town where nobody recognizes how exceptional I am. Snuggled up on your lap, daddy, I ask you: do you think I look like Marilyn Monroe?

Mama takes me to see Pappalettere. Take off your shoes, the doctor says, get on the scale. Weight normal. He stands me against the wall, height. The last time he measured me I was gosling height. Today I’m above giraffe, where the quarter-inches end, and there are no more animals. Now sit on the examination table, says Pappalettere. Ears good. Throat, I pull back, Pappalettere, you know the tongue depressor makes me gag, I’m afraid, don’t worry, he reassures me, open wide… good girl…

Sitting there, my feet dangling in space, I know I’ll have to lift up my tee-shirt now. Three months ago I asked mama for a bra, a trainer bra, and she told me: what do you need it for. I blushed and didn’t ask again. I walk stooped over, I’m still a little girl, little as mama and daddy insist. So now, sitting on the exam table, staring at the animals painted on the wall to mark every ten quarter-inches — chick, cat, gosling, dog, giraffe — I wait for the pediatrician to tell me to pull up my tee-shirt. I wait while I lurch my back, praying that the moment won’t come right away, a little while longer, a few minutes more, before you realize that I’m big.

Pappalettere places the stethoscope on my tee-shirt — I can keep it on, I don’t have to undress! — maybe he too is embarrassed, I am after all the Professor’s daughter. Now the pediatrician positions the stethoscope on my chest, up by my heart. It’s pounding.

My name is Teresa Ciabatti, I am eleven years old and today is my first day of middle school. My parents’ decision was to enroll me not in Orbetello, where for everyone I am the Professor’s daughter, but in Port’Ecole, where nobody knows who I am, and you’ll see, she’ll come down from the clouds, daddy says, patting mama’s shoulder. After various tests and assessments — all normal, the girl is in perfect health — my parents concluded that the problem is the environment: in this town I take advantage of my father’s position, I use his power as a shield. Let’s send her away where no one knows her, daddy decided. Let’s send her by herself. Because Gianni, instead, the good boy Gianni, the submissive Gianni, is allowed to remain in Orbetello. He has friends and tennis here… mama explains.

Without wasting time thinking about the injustice — I’m a spirited girl, what do they think — I go to face my new life.

Bye bye Orbetello, bye bye malicious small minds, goodbye and good riddance. No, I’m not scared, on the contrary. Waiting for
Teresa Ciabatti

me in Port’Ercole there’s beach volleyball, speedboat rides, prizes, I imagine cups and medals. And applause, lots of applause, bravo, Teresa! Beyond the lagoon, five miles away, lies another world for me. A world of sensitive people, I tell myself on this long-anticipated first day of school, here I am guys!

I arrive in town in the early morning: fishermen returning from their boats, stillness, silence, the scent of the sea, never mind lagoon! Everything here is so picturesque. Here life is something entirely different, life and love. Because in this insignificant town I will find love, I think in the car — in mama’s Fiorino — in this godforsaken place, I will be loved. I turn to look back, for just an instant: the little town that earlier had been shrouded in dawn mist is lit with a faint glow, street lamps and house lights, a strip of land in the distance. Nothing else. Orbetello.

A poignant feeling of melancholy comes over me then, or perhaps hope.

It’s a gray September day, the sun peeks in and out, up above the sky is a vivid blue dotted with huge clouds, like flakes of plaster. It’s a breezy day that stirs the trees and sweeps branches onto the road. Not a normal day for the season. I start walking up the stairs. Mama dropped me off on Via Caravaggio, because at the moment, only temporarily — the teachers, headmaster, and mayor assure us — the school cannot be reached by car, have patience, a few months, they guarantee, the work has already begun (work that will last six years, long enough for both me and the next generation of students to finish middle school).

The steps leading up the hill are the beginning of adulthood. My first steps without mama and daddy, I forge ahead amid conifers and pebbles. Here, on my way to adolescence, I will see a squirrel for the first time in my life, a real squirrel! He quickly scampers up the trees, so fast that I only catch a glimpse of the tail: an instant, and he disappears among the foliage, almost an illusion, if it weren’t for the rustling of leaves, and plop, an acorn that drops.

Fucking rodents. A voice.

A boy under the tree. A young boy, smoking. Besides squirrels, as I come and go through the grove during the three years of middle school, I will see juveniles doing drugs, juveniles having oral sex, juveniles fucking. Juveniles, all minors. All on the path to the school. Welcome to the Michelangelo Buonarroti middle school, Port’Ercole, Grosseto.

Will someone please tell me why — in this school that’s unapproachable from the civilized world, in this insignificant town — why in this particular place, there is a high frequency of fantastic adolescent specimens? Who are these tall willowy creatures, these long-legged beings with their flowing hair?

Fedora, Iside, Dolores. In the second year there is also a Maria Teresa. A quasi-Teresa, who is not me.

Will someone tell me why these creatures are here, in 1983? They can’t be the fruit of the grafting of the Spanish stock that also affected Orbetello, just look at the results on us Orbetellians: heavy haunches, sagging butts. Will you explain to me where they came from?

At home, in the hall mirror I see a severed head advancing. No longer the beautiful girl. I close my eyes and run away.

Why did you send me here, mama and daddy? I won’t survive. In an oasis of Valkyries, I’ll disappear. Girls who when they
play volleyball — in short shorts and transparent tee-shirts — draw all the attention, leaving no room for me. Their breasts bounce up and down with every leap. At every return the boys wait anxiously, hoping that bras will come unhooked, that shorts will rise up and get wedged in the crack of those perfect behinds. Who am I among them? Who am I halfway up the climbing bars, whispering I can’t do it, I can’t do it, looking down as if from a precipice, while they overtake me with their long, long limbs? Who am I who must be rescued by two of them, as ordered by the phys-ed teacher, two ballerinas, panthers, who nimbly reach me, one of them removes my hand and places it on the nearby rung, there, that’s it, the other makes me move my foot down, slowly, you won’t fall, they reassure me, as they lead me down.

Only on the ground do I realize that one of them is Maria Teresa. Five foot six, black hair, very bright green eyes. Olive complexion. At moments of reflection, she rests a splayed hand on the side of her nose, covering half her face. I’m better looking in profile, she explains. White tee-shirt to show her bra. The school’s biggest tits. A lot of boys claim to have seen them. At the age of twelve, Maria Teresa has already fucked. She doesn’t have a steady boyfriend.

Maria Teresa is the only girl of four children, her father is a fisherman. She doesn’t want to end up like her mother, poor woman, her figure ruined by pregnancies, and to think that as a woman she was beautiful, you should have seen those legs, but now… She struggles with the household chores, always asking her kids: Athos do this, Roberto do that, Gianfranco over there, Teresa find the brush under the bed. No, she doesn’t want to lose her figure like her mother, although in the end it’s bound to happen, at thirty men don’t want you anymore. You have kids, you iron. Fortunately, thirty is far away, there’s still time to make the most of every second. It’s all in the moment, she tells me as she applies makeup in the gym’s bathroom mirror. I can put makeup on even without a mirror, she adds, even blind. Image is important to her, image is everything: perfumes, shoes, clothes, she doesn’t buy her dresses at the market like many of the kids at school do, no, only boutiques for her (much later I will discover that, to get money, Maria Teresa steals at the stores, especially at the Coop — God does she love the Coop! — and then resells the stuff at half price).

In the locker room at the gym she studies me from top to bottom: for example, it’s not that I dress badly, she observes, you can tell it’s designer stuff, but I dress like a child, when physically, on the other hand, I have the measurements, tits, she seems to think, unless she’s mistaken, let me see them.

I shrink back.

With that thing on you can’t see anything, ready, set, go, take off the sweatshirt.

How inadequate I feel in front of you, Maria Teresa. How I’d like to be your friend! Walk beside you, with boys turning their heads to remark: such gorgeous chicks. Because beauty radiates. So does being grown up. With you beside me I would stop being little.

Lift up your tee-shirt, she insists. Then, staring at the floor, I pull up my sweatshirt and tee top. I knew they were there, she says gleefully. Do you know my name is Teresa too? I offer. She smiles: I make everyone call me Maria, Teresa sucks.

After getting close at the gym, the conversation (Maria, didn’t you realize the connection between us?), the boobs (I got
Teresa Ciabatti undressed for you!), after all that intimacy, nothing. As if we had never met. Sometimes she answers when I say hello, sometimes she doesn’t. There’s no way I’ll be able to win her, she’s ashamed to be seen with me, I look like I stepped out of kindergarten.

At home, I clamor: I want a miniskirt! And my father: forget it. And my mother: not above the knee. And me: I said a miniskirt!

Then one day in May I climb the stairs through the woods wearing the skirt and canvas shoes with a wedge heel, less than an inch, just enough to make me feel grown-up and send me to you, Maria, to twirl around and say: I bought it at the boutique.

You look at me, you study me, then you pass sentence in front of the other girls: below the knee, you look like my grandmother. Eyes lowered, I feel ridiculous, hopeless, an abused little creature, even foolish, Maria, and at that very moment an inner voice tells me you really are foolish, Teresa Ciabatti. You know why? Because you can’t let yourself be humiliated by a trashy pauper, come on. I have to say it: I had never seen so many poor people all in one place. This is a school for the poor. Beautiful, but poor. And maybe the time has come to upend the plan, not to bow to their classification parameters, because life is something else, life outside of here is very different, you people don’t know it, but I do, and now I’ll tell you what life is, bitches, Teresa Ciabatti will tell you, I lift my head proudly, I’ll teach you an early lesson about what your destiny outside of here will be like.

Someday, you have to come and take a swim at my place, I toss out that same morning in the bathroom.

Maria is putting on lipstick in the mirror. I try again: you have to come to the pool at my house. What do you mean? She gives a hint of reaction. I begin to take off: in the summer I live in my two-story villa, one of the few houses in the Argentario area with a pool, it’s me and Susanna Agnelli, a man, daddy says, Susanna Agnelli is a man… anyway it’s just she and I with a pool — I go on, more and more confidently — no no, I’m not lying, Maria — I laugh — the God’s honest truth… my God, no, my father is not the villa’s caretaker, the house is mine, my own personal property, priceless, and that’s because my father is the Professor, mystery unveiled, my dear Maria — I’m the Professor’s daughter! I announce, as if shedding my bourgeois clothes to reveal a superhero outfit. You know who the Professor is, don’t you? Surely he must have operated on someone in your family, he’s very generous with the poor. Yes, it’s true, he has this reputation of being severe, people are afraid of him and, well, I’m not saying he isn’t, stern is stern… except with me, he adores me, I sigh weakly, it’s so much work to climb from the bottom of the pit back up to the stars. From up here everything is magnificent.

I’m back on top again, once again in the glittering jumpsuit with my super powers. Here I am conquering my place in this school. You don’t know what a comfort — I entertain the crowds, recess after recess —, in the morning you wake up and, even before brushing your teeth, you say: you know what, I’m going to take a swim.

And that’s how the friendship between me and Maria began. She teaches me to be an adult: no more blouses with little flowers, no more duffle coats, shoes with straps. Do I really not own any jeans? She’s horrified: eleven years old and I don’t have a pair of jeans? Not to mention makeup, why don’t I wear makeup? And earrings? I don’t even have pierced ears… A little girl, I look like a child, if it weren’t for the tits, come on, let’s show them off, let them see the merchandise! Leave it to her now, she’ll transform me, she’s very good at transformation, she’d like to be an ae-
Teresa Ciabatti

The woman who wants to be a hairdresser when she grows up. Not a hairdresser, though, you ruin your hands being a hairdresser.

Maria gets her brother to drive her to my house. It isn’t summertime and we’re in Orbetello. A small fifteenth century palazzo, a former Spanish fort, in the historic center. Three floors, parquet floors, books, lots of books, paintings by well-known artists. Come upstairs, I take my poor friend by the hand and she lets herself be led, docile, she’s never seen such wealth, and this is nothing, my dear girl, wait till summer, wait till you come to Pozzarello, my villa with the pool. Perhaps for the first time in her life Maria Teresa Costagliola wishes she were someone else, oh, if I had been born a different person, she must think, if I had been born Teresa Ciabatti…

But you aren’t me, my darling friend. You are you, and I am me. Is this room really all yours? Her big eyes pop. I mean, do you sleep here by yourself? And who should I sleep with, sorry? I reply, the mistress of a world where one sleeps alone, where there are personal bathrooms and whirlpool tubs (or maybe I’m wrong, the Jacuzzi bath vogue comes years later).

We spend entire afternoons in my room, Maria and I, a microcosm where nothing else is needed. I have to get rid of the toys, she says, but then she goes over to touch them — mommy mommy, the doll cries — and she jumps, what a start! Daddy brought it for me from America, I say, in Italy it doesn’t exist. And then we sprawl on the bed, and I ask: who can we call? Because I have a phone in my room. A telephone in the shape of Garfield (I may be wrong here too, that the Garfield telephone appeared in the nineties). And then Maria gets bored, looks in my closet, complains that I have nothing grown-up. So I get up from the bed and take her by the hand, come with me. Corridor, first door, second, third, last door, go on in, and hold your breath.

Daddy’s wardrobe room: jackets, coats, skirts. Shoes, bags. Oh my God, Maria murmurs, look at this crocodile bag! They killed a crocodile just for this! And then up top, hanging in plastic, the evening dresses. Eyes turned upward, as if we were contemplating an apparition.

Can I see them up close? Maria asks softly.

Sure you can. She points to a dress, I take it down with the pole. Can I try it on? she whimpers. You can do whatever you like, I intone solemnly, as if I were her god opening the gates of paradise to her, come in, Maria.

And while she undresses, remaining in her bra and panties, God how beautiful she is, while she puts on the dress, looks at herself in the mirror, and walks up and down the room, feeling important, an elegant lady, I stretch out on the floor, legs up the wall, looking at her from below, and I seem to see my mother, actually mama with the green dress, and above her all the clothes that hang there like so many mamas, all the mamas I’ve heard about and haven’t seen, because I’ve never seen mama wearing one of those dresses. I regret the time before the long sleep, the time when I did not exist, how I would like to go back there, know you when you were young, the day you arrive in Orbetello and mistake daddy for a stretcher-bearer, the day of your wedding, or the day you are about to give birth and they photograph you, a radiant you, with an enormous belly, and daddy saying: it’s one. Then instead we are two. We pop out, and there are two of us. The Professor had twins, hurray, hurray.

How I wish I had known you then, mama, before us two, when everything was full of hope. They tell me that you wore very short skirts, that you put vinegar wraps on your hair, they say that to get back in shape after the pregnancy you scissored your legs nonstop for as long as an hour, maybe lying on the carpet,
when we were sleeping, and nonna would tell you get up, Francesca, and you’d say, I want to finish.

A sense of melancholy comes over me inside, like an absence, the absence of that mother I never knew, where are you? I sigh. Where are you, young, beautiful mama?

I yearn, I look back nostalgically, while the real mama appears in the doorway, what are you doing in here? she asks, and Maria crosses her arms over her chest as if she were naked, and instead she has on an evening dress, the pea-green dress. I’m sorry, she says. Mama, staring at the dress, doesn’t say a word. I didn’t mean to… my friend tries again, it was just for fun, she hesitates, I’ll take it off right away, ma’am, and she struggles to lower the zipper on the side, help me Teresa, she says to me, and I get up, there, she’ll take it off, I too reassure my mother, disoriented by her silence and by her eyes, staring, what are you looking at, mama, what do you see?

A few hours later, soaking in a frothy bathtub, blowing bubbles with my mouth, when my mother bursts in, complaining that at least I could have put my panties in the hamper, how many times does she have to tell me, instead of reacting and starting an argument, I ask: will you keep me company?

You have to be neat, she goes on. I slide down some more, bath foam up to my chin. That was a beautiful dress, I say.

She scrunches up my underwear. When did you wear it? My mother takes the sponge and sits on the rim of the tub, come here, I’ll wash your back.

Okay, she doesn’t want to talk about it. I sit up, turn my back to her. Will you make letters on me? I ask. She snorts impatiently, you have to be washed.

Will you do them? I insist. Mama dips her finger in the water, runs it swiftly over my skin, too swift. Slower, I say. Now she goes very slow. I, T… she skims over me lightly, almost a caress, double T… mama’s hand, she must have touched me like that when I was little, I don’t remember, Y.

Kitty! I say. You wrote kitty.

* 4. —

The three years of middle school are a crescendo of prohibitions: no going out with girlfriends, no birthday parties. In Port’Ercole I go to school, and that’s it. That’s because mama and daddy realized, or someone told them, that the kids at the seaside school are on the ball: sex, drugs, they even do drugs, Renzo! I hear them arguing: we were wrong to send her there, we have to rescue her.

Only I don’t want to be rescued, I want to stay in that school on the hill, with friends who love me, and the sea, and the squirrels. I’m happy, mama, daddy, for the first time in my life, I cry tragically, I’m a happy woman.

Woman, my father shakes his head. They try to take me away, I rebel, to the point of attempting suicide.

I swallow thirteen aspirins, lie down on the bed and wait for death. I fall asleep, I wake up, I fall asleep. Mama comes into the room, she doesn’t understand that I’m dying. I have to shout it with my last bit of strength: I committed suicide. And I show her the empty blister.
I don’t die. But I don’t give up. Extortionary, rebellious, reckless, it’s the age, mama tries to tell daddy, let’s not dramatize it. But then I appear every week, in my nightgown, a ghost, barefoot, disheveled, announcing: I attempted suicide. One evening, in the kitchen, around the tenth attempt, they raise their eyes from their plates and look at me, my family looks at me with pity, not with concern. I’m dying — I raise the bar — and you’ll be sorry.

The child neuropsychiatrist my father consults is a luminary who comes from Rome purposely to see me. Doctor, let me say first of all that I am just fine, I begin, sitting in front of him. I have many friends who love me, you have no idea how much they love me, people in general love me, my life is incredible, doctor, I have everything I want, and besides that I’m beautiful, a beautiful girl, not that I’m thinking about love, it’s a little soon for that, more than anything else it’s the overall picture, a magnificent picture of happiness.

He stares at me: did you want to die?

The luminary thinks he can intimidate me. I take a deep breath, I settle more comfortably in the chair, which is after all the one in daddy’s study, the visit takes place there, and I explain: you see doctor, I’m not allowed to live my life. These people who are my parents hold me prisoner, they don’t trust me, but on what basis, may I ask, have I ever killed anyone? If these people didn’t want me, they could have simply not brought me into the world, I’m sorry, children are individuals in their own right with their own personality and their own desire to live, it’s not right to clip their wings, and I, sooner than let them clip my wings — I get carried away, pompously, my voice shaking — sooner than have my wings clipped, I… I’ll clip them myself.

At the end of the session the luminary confronts my parents. There’s nothing wrong with me, I’m just a teenager struggling to differentiate myself, to be an individual apart from her parents. His advice — with all due respect to the Professor, you never know, a modest bit of advice — is that they reach a compromise: on the one hand, concede, on the other, prohibit.

Daddy refuses: I’ll wall her up in the house. Mama shakes her head.

These are my parents when I’m twelve, almost thirteen. What are they afraid of? What future do they want for me? Here comes my mother, a bathrobe, her hair pinned up, she comes out of the bathroom, goes back to my father in the living room, resumes the discussion — let’s try to make her rediscover Orbetello, her girlfriends from elementary school — and returns to the bathroom. Out she comes again — after all it’s only a year until the end of middle school —, back in, back out, again and again, until she shows up in the living room without her robe, she must have forgotten it, and announces: a year passes quickly.

From the stairs where I’m crouched, hiding, through the transparent nightgown, I see her body as if in an x-ray. A body that is still slender, its lines perfect. How many have looked at it, desired it, dreamed about it? I think of the men who have loved my mother, I imagine them as numerous, a crowd — I hope, it’s the thing I want most from up here, from the top of the stairs — that still desires it. What does it matter if my father looks at her distractingly, says that in a year anything can happen, she could even get pregnant, and turns to the TV again, while my mother’s youthful body goes back to the bathroom, changing shape in the different hall lights, first very thin, then muscular, ephebic, voluptuous, ailing, that young body that I, along with millions of imaginary men, keep gazing at until it disappears into the bathroom.
Sitting around the kitchen table, mama and daddy tell me the new rules: I can go out in the afternoon, see my girlfriends from Orbetello, how long has it been since I’ve seen them? I can stroll along main street from 5:30 to 7 pm. I am allowed to go to the movies, sit and chat on the benches in the piazza. I can have all this freedom, but in Orbetello, not in Port’Ercole. In Port’Ercole I can only go to school.

I hesitate for only a second. Then I express joy, and promise: I’ll stay right in front here, if you look out you’ll see me, I swear on your life, daddy.

You were right, mama, daddy, I exult when I come home at night in the days that follow, Orbetello is my world, my life! How nice to stroll around town, sit on the benches, and you know what? I want to start going to Mass again, Mass is important, I believe in God.

I’ve changed, they rejoice, it didn’t take much, rules, the luminary was right. They sigh, relieved: they thought they had lost me, yet here I am, their beloved girl.

Yes, mama and daddy, here I am again, returned to my senses, a good girl, I hug them, I will never disappoint you. Now I’m going to my room to study, call me for supper.

I go upstairs and flop onto the bed: I’m a genius. What did I say when I was little? Ge-ni-us. I was right.

My dear Professor, your daughter is cleverer than you are. Illustrious Professor, the great man, the famous figure who controls everything in the area except your daughter, because she doesn’t let herself take orders, on the afternoons when she goes out she doesn’t stay in Orbetello — as she swore on your life, Professor —, oh no. Hidden behind the station hedge, she waits for the bus. She climbs in, and crouches down in the back seat.

She arrives in Port’Ercole, spends an hour with her friend Maria — strutting along the seaside promenade, Via Caravaggio — letting the boys eye her, then the bus again, Orbetello, home. I’m sorry, Professor, your daughter does what she pleases, not what you say. The only one in the world who doesn’t do what you say.

At night, lying in bed, I take pride in the thought of my deceptions, I’m going to make it, I will grow up in spite of my father.

Life around me acts in my favor even at difficult moments: I am waiting behind the station hedge again when an old man leans out of his car window to ask me if I want a ride, an angel sent from heaven just when I had depleted my allowance and Gianni’s as well, no sense of guilt though, he’s a child, a child who doesn’t need money, an innocent child who continues playing tennis, unaware of the adult world bearing down on him, if only he were to look up, he’d see that the threatening adult world is his twin sister. Bye bye Gianni, go ahead and stay a child while I grow up, and I get into the old man’s car and say: Port’Ercole.

Whatever you say, the white-haired little man replies. This gramps who now turns to ask me my name, and whether I have friends waiting for me. This little grandpa who persists: do you have a date with a boy? And he smiles: ah, the boys, the boys of one time don’t exist anymore. . . And he continues: at your age the boys are underdeveloped, the females want other things. . . This little old man who finally suggests: why don’t we go to the Monte? Don’t get me wrong, he clarifies, just to get to know each other, he explains, reaching a hand to my thigh.

I’m thirteen and an old man is molesting me. This man could throw me on the ground, pin my arms behind me while he pulls down my pants, rape me.

Still, I’m not afraid. Besides, I say maturely, the Monte is quite
close to my house, the summer house, you know, not to brag — and I take off, and I’m Teresa Ciabatti again — my house is the most beautiful house on the Argentario, with a pool. It’s me and Susanna Agnelli, Susanna who after all is a man, a masculine type, my father who is her friend says so, he even operated on her, because daddy is a surgeon, the chief surgeon of Orbetello.

The old man gets nervous: the Professor?
I nod. You’re the Professor’s daughter? He switches to the formal “you.” I break into a broad smile: that’s me, so beloved, so adored. The old man’s voice starts to quaver: you must excuse me, miss, I respect your father a great deal, whenever people hear the name Ciabatti in Maremma, they bow down… the Professor, the good he’s done… I owe him so much, and never, I mean I would never do anything to disrespect him, see, I would cut off a hand for the Professor, really, you have to believe me, he keeps repeating all the way to Port’Ercole where he drops me off.

And I slam the door in his face.

This is how all the events of my childhood and early adolescence wind up, never in tragedy.

As though protected by a cloak that makes me invisible, there are no consequences for me, always rescued. I’m about to fall, I’ll fall, I lose my balance, I wave my arms, I hold my breath, now I’ll fall. I don’t fall.

Here I am some years earlier, 1979, the stage of Orbetello’s Supercinema. Here I am caged in a wire framework covered with white foam rubber, a snowball. Never mind that in the mirror I see this mask, this ball, this ridiculous thing that is me. It doesn’t matter, because I anticipate the moment when I will stand out from the others.

After assigning the roles in Inverno, the instructor introduced a variation to the ballet: the change of season. The sun that melts the snow carrying away winter. A snowball, one of us, must break away from the group to lift the sun into the sky. And who if not me? Teresa, she points to me, while the other girls glare at me hatefully. In the bathrooms I will explain that it was my father, he always intervenes on my behalf, I sigh, I can’t stop him. It’s not fair, one of them whose name I don’t remember protests plaintively. That’s life, I reply. Get over it, my little dance partner, that’s how the world is, people who possess things, who possess you.

And now I pull away from the group and move to the center of the stage, in front of the immense audience. It’s me, people, the best one, the privileged one, the little girl who will get ahead in life because she’s the Professor’s daughter, by the way… where are you, daddy? The stage lights are blinding me, preventing me from seeing you, a very bright light in which I can make out a kind of secret sign for me, only for me, a promise — but of what?

Of a different future. A special future, thanks to you. So, imagining you watching me, I bend down to pick up the sun. And with slow movements, a dance, I lift it high above, onto the iron hook up there, in front of the blue papier-mâché backdrop, and then I see you, I found you, I recognized you, daddy, in the shadows, it’s you, really you, and mama? Where’s mama? Mama is sleeping.

*5. —

There is no swimming pool, Maria accuses me. The third year of middle school has begun for me, and also for her, having flunked. There is no villa with a pool, she keeps taunting me in
front of the others. Some laugh, some nod. I stammer that yes, there is, I swear. But nobody believes me now. The summer is over, and I disappeared. Try explaining to them that my parents prevented me from inviting them, no bringing home any Port’Ercole kids. Try explaining to them that they look down on them, druggies, a bunch of drunken junkies, that’s what my parents think of them.

Maria criticizes me for not doing anything. I don’t have a pool and I don’t fuck. I don’t even take it in my hand, let alone in the mouth. Gino, for example, who might even be interested, asked what I do, and Maria couldn’t lie! Then he tried to negotiate: okay, no fucking, but behind? Would you take it from behind, Teresa? Maria asks me.

What do you mean? Up the ass.

And I, who didn’t even know that such a thing existed in the world, blush.

You really are a child, Teresa Ciabatti, Maria vilifies me.

Sitting at my desk, while the others gather in the halls for recess, I beat myself up: you’ve won, mama and daddy, I’ve been ostracized, happy? In my diary I write THE WORLD IS SHITTY, and I color it pink. Now I’ll call the Child Abuse Hotline, I mull it over, give me the number for Child Services. I imagine the phone call: my father holds me prisoner… It might not be enough: my father beats me. He beats me every day, twice a day… More dramatic: Help me, Child Services, my father rapes me. He rapes me at home.

Then I think rationally: who will ever believe me? Who can believe that the Professor — a good man, a benefactor, a saint, a man who helps the poor — beats his daughter? Your daddy loves you so much, they tell me in the hospital, woe to anyone who lays a hand on his little girl.

A little girl whose best years are being squandered.

Thirteen years won’t come back again. Thirteen years is the life that you’re denying me, father.

Because of him, in fact, I’m once again shunned, just like the first day of school, that day when nobody knew who I was.

My season didn’t last long, how long does a butterfly live?

I remember the skirt, when I wore the skirt for the first time. I went down the stairs, and the boys bent down to get a peek at my panties. And the perfume. In the bathrooms I put Maria’s perfume on. A cloud of perfume, a trail of fragrance behind me, in which there are boys, so many boys, and then my mother smells it in the Fiorino — what’s that scent? — and makes me go apologize to the teachers.

Sorry teachers, most esteemed teachers, it was a mistake.

And the teachers, touched, smile at this naive child, at this anomaly in a school of sluts.

How long does a butterfly live?
Sara Gamberini The Majesty of Abandonment
At the bookshop I met Lorenzo, a crazy, aloof, poetic man. I developed a crush on him even though we hadn’t spoken yet, an adolescent crush or metaphysical pressure, a preview of the future. Once again, the invisible had more clarity than the material, every person was all people and all things looked alike all the way to infinity as far as the Alpha Lupi star and, beyond it, as far as Corona Borealis, then finally back to us.

Doctor Orlando used to tell me that there’s no possible cure for what we are.

We should be able to bear the fact that everything is unfathomable.

I wrote Lorenzo a six-page letter, I tried leaving out some sections but was afraid it would no longer be clear that I loved him. I was embarrassed by having so much to say, by not having said it sooner, so never gave it to him.
I’ve always wished to be a woman of few words. Or else one who can control her anger. Instead, I’m unable to flaunt the purple rings under my eyes, be a flâneuse, or resign myself to my evanescence, and I really wish I could. Everybody’s scared of destiny.

Bianca said I should have written I love you before signing off. Instead, I made an amulet from a piece of twig and put it in the envelope; over time, the wood tore it in several places. The envelope, which I carried in my handbag, now contained tobacco, fluff, bits of liquorice and words of insubstantial love. Silent love.

We’d been working together for a couple of months, me in the fiction department and him in music and film. The departments of very large bookshops have barriers where shyness remains entangled for years on end. You could sense very palpably the reticence of all the sales assistants who’d preceded me. Some had got married. There were also traces of the awkwardness of writers coming to launch their books. We would clean the shelves with Windolene, the marks would come off on the cloth, we’d shake them out of the window and they’d come back to hover in the air and land on the wide-brimmed hat of the lady who came by at ten every morning. She carried the dust of things that weren’t ready.

I had been asked to introduce the launch of a novel by a writer I loved, and his scent of incense, resin and leather left me speechless. During the reception, he spoke to me of flowers and the I but he couldn’t see me.

We sat next to each other at meetings because I wanted to be near him, and predestination would make its way through head and lungs, ruthlessly. We encouraged omens.

A few months after being recruited, the personnel was reduced and the barriers were lowered. As a matter of fact, one morning, when the fragrance of linden trees spread across the city, I thought something unusual would happen, a spell that would put me in a difficult situation. We’re in the era of imaginary love which, for fans of the old-fashioned, is one of the finest feelings, love in a vacuum, devoid of expectations. While I, secretly, was waiting.

One day, so I could be on my own, I sorted out the entire cookery section, and looking through recipes from the Carnic Alps, I decided to devote myself to regional cuisine for the sake of forgotten traditions. I hated to lose them. Before I met Lorenzo, I couldn’t do without anything. In the evening sitting at the table in front of a plate of frico, I would talk to him when he might have been by the sea, or asleep, and tell him I found it too salty.

Ever since I’ve been thinking about him, I still feel sad but the reasons for that are no longer important. What’s left are totally pure movements.

I never did work out whether it was love or the alignment of the stars.

The first time he spoke to me was on 9th January, he said, is it you who sorts out the new titles? Then he mimicked shooting me with his fingers and winked at me. I nodded then shut myself in the toilets so I could grin undisturbed. My heart was throbbing in my neck and temples, and I was trying to remember which vein was making so much noise next to my ear.

I could simply have called it love and, of course, love had something to do with it, but it was also something like a trip to Betelgeuse and the dizziness from traveling across space, like diving into a river for no reason, with our clothes floating while we looked at the sky and the sky answered us. It was when he was in Macerata and I in Lisbon, and I would sense that he was bored or else thinking about me. I knew when he was resisting me, so I’d also start resisting without knowing what it was all about, what was happening or not happening.
He’d walk between the bookshelves and whisper *je t’aime*, and I would turn to answer him but whenever he spoke to me my shoulders would start feeling heavy and I’d only be able to move them after a couple of minutes. I’d lose sight of him, so respond mentally or by uttering voiceless words.

We’d spend our coffee breaks together and he’d say I looked like a Persian woman. A silence would fall and I didn’t know how to fill it. I’d make a mental note: Persian. We’d talk about the microcosm, about metaphysics, about poetry, with great passion, Lorenzo believes in Aliens but doesn’t want to do anything about it. He has that kind of immovable certainty. He was very angry for years but then recovered when he got used to the idea that everything is one. In what way, one, I’d ask.

The intention was, once gestures, words and the body are excluded, to develop the precision of a subtle connection. To find the exact point where everything happens in the absence of purpose, a suspension of action.

What happens if you place an obstacle? Something becomes insurmountable or reachable.

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When I was a child, I used to pull at my mother’s face when she came home, to make sure it wasn’t a stranger wearing a mask. There was her and then that stranger who scared me; I trusted no one and trusted anyone. The desire to have another family emerged very early on, when I was about five, a search for a place with banality at its heart, no intellectual interest to distract us, soup with tortellini for dinner, no political struggle, no passion between mother and father but the dull quiet of a couple, school exercise books on the kitchen table, the fragrance of freshly-sharpened pencils, an eraser tearing the pages, knowing nothing about Togliatti or Madame Bovary, taking some honey before going to bed at night when you have a sore throat.

We would dress as butterflies, as surreal cowboys, as angels in nightgowns with cardboard wings, what does it matter who we are, Lucia would say. We would search the house for the beads from her necklace, which had fallen on the floor during test flights or while we were walking with short steps, led by a friend of my mother’s, a failed director of animated films. Something wonderful would always happen when I was with her, lunar experiences, to the point where, every time, I would think here we are, we’re the butterfly and cowboy gang, with a heart instead of hair, a heart instead of everything, we’re looking for the beads, it beats hours of preaching, of idleness, of supermarket queues. But our world would open in scheduled time, and a temporal vacuum would form between one spell and another, forcing me to come and go between two dimensions and impersonate their juxtaposition. Lucia smell of flowers and white coffee. I’d take her jumper to kindergarten and smell it for eight hours and, with every breath into her skin, Lucia would take shape fully and appear in the canteen, in the dormitory, and tell me not to take anything seriously, look at that plasticine statuette, it looks like a firefly. Make it fly.

Suspecting my mother made me unhappy. And protected.

This was helped by an apartment block full of bigots, a moralist schoolteacher and a grandmother who hated her daughter. Every spark of Ines’s resentment towards Lucia made me age ten years.

If we had been living in an anarchic commune, in a forest of elves, in any place that was far away, I would not have had to endure the fights between conservatives and revolutionaries.

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Sara Gamberini

The Majesty of Abandonment
I enjoyed telling Doctor Lisi again and again about the hostility between my parents, the neighbours, the priest and the teachers. I did it to preserve their sacredness. A specific image of my family had taken root in my memory, something akin to Hugo Ball when, wearing a chef’s toque-like hat, he would read poetry at the Cabaret Voltaire. The fields in spring, too, look like us, as do the chestnuts on the fire and woollen shawls. Because of ideals such as feminism and communism, and a few rituals, like for example on the occasion of the winter solstice, when our house was illuminated only by candlelight, we were mistaken for eccentrics, saboteurs of the traditional family. There were strongly disapproving looks in the lift, words uttered softly as soon as we walked away, the notes in my diary destined for Lucia. Today, Maria came to school without her exercise book, Maria says she lives alone in a tree house. It was so important to absolve them, you need defence in order to preserve love. But Doctor Lisi showed a growing lack of leniency towards them and also kept telling a story, about the day I arrived in his consulting room, exhausted.

If they hadn’t hit your weak spot, he once said, you wouldn’t have given a damn about the neighbours’ gossip.

That day, I hid in a safe place my love for people who constantly make mistakes. I silently counted on my fingers the ornaments on the bookcase, reached ten, closed my hands and started all over again. He seemed to be chiding me, I could sense his impatience; the old filing cabinets were crammed with unspoken words, the nylon curtains falling straight, touching the floor. The majesty of abandonment.

“During the last session I got frightened, I thought I saw you get up, I glimpsed a shadow moving. I sometimes feel defenceless here, I’m afraid you’ll make an unexpected gesture, that you’ll leave or tell me off, that you’ll start yelling. Can you imagine? Your calmness, the silences, the long pauses between words, a puff of Marlboro and you suddenly go crazy, stand up and start dancing. Sometimes, I imagine that one of your patients will come in with a pistol, that you’ll get me out in a hurry, not bother with me and concern yourself only with him. I am that patient.”

“You must learn to modulate detachment and find the right balance with the rest of the world. You seem to be afraid of everything but then rush to just anybody without using a filter.”

The fantasy of the patient with the pistol frightened me. At night, I fell asleep watching Un giorno in pretura, where Cosima Missari, who scared the hell out of me, was telling the judge she couldn’t possibly have been seen running because she was fat and never ran. Then I no longer felt anything, the world ceased talking. Trials shouldn’t be broadcast on television, because you can see the entire unconscious of the culprits. Hugging the pillow, I promised to work on my anger with all my strength.

*  *  *

Are you alone? I once asked him but he didn’t reply. Are you mad? Are you happy?

If we transported Doctor Lisi into a dimension where psychoanalysis hadn’t emerged yet, we could undoubtedly come across him as the leader of a sect, sitting under a huge, golden circle, intent on showing his experiments:

turning lead into rain

moving Caterina’s nature into Paolo.
The unconscious is so powerful, nameless, able to reproduce ad infinitum, like in magic spells. Don’t you ever feel a need for the void? I once asked him when I couldn’t accept our distance. But he wasn’t interested in the void.

My faith actually comes from a fright. That day the sky was heavy with rain and I pedalled slowly in the storm, as if I were afraid of nothing. Dark blue smoke was coming out of my head, rising to the sky, blending with the night, with particular events, with unconsciousness, reaching the delicate strength of luminous trails, wrapping around them, then letting them drop between Betelgeuse and Ursa Minor.

I think the universe is made up of stars and forgotten time and sparks. It’s made up of stars and little bears and concertos in C minor. I think the universe is made up of stars, tiny bits and compassion. I figure the universe is made up of inattention, of galaxies and carelessness.

I couldn’t work out if you could disagree with a saviour and still keep him.

I called Lorenzo and when he answered I hung up. In my mind, I said hi, Lorenzo, how are you. I had developed telepathy. By triggering a state of absence, Lorenzo initiated me into the subtle dimensions. He’d say all is bright and walk dragging his shoes along the bookshop aisles; he’d scratch his belly under his T-shirt and seemed to be afraid of nothing, or perhaps I was the one not to be afraid, I don’t know. He was almost certainly a revealer of the unfathomable. Sometimes, you meet a person strict materialists consider as a hiccough. What does he give you? How often does he call you? How does he make you feel?

In the rarefaction position, a position we fans of rarities subscribe to, unfathomable people are held in great esteem.

I would listen to him, ecstatic, talk about the tendency of the leaves of a larch, the only conifer that’s not an evergreen, to fall on a specific autumn day, when he told me about his year-long studies watching a tree in his garden. Research that amounted to nothing, since no scientific theory backed it up.

Some loves are connected to a journey, some to solitude, and then there are those that serve absolutely no purpose: the finest loves.

He was slouching on the river bank with an oscilloscope; he believed that emitting various kinds of vibration to the water would allow him to perceive a different vibration, depending on the sound, in the crystal pattern. He would leave the house with an oscilloscope and stay by the river until evening. I’ve never understood what he meant by crystal. I figured his love was connected to the different types of impulse.

Post-Modernism on one hand, my ravings on the other. My friends would order me to arrange a specific date with him, and drop the poetry. I would write see you tomorrow at 9.30 p.m. then delete the message. Or else I would send it to myself or a made-up number.

Lorenzo seldom wrote to me, sometimes he’d send me a series of emoticons I’d enlarge and interpret for hours. A shoe, a frog, a baby bottle, applause, a heart. Or else a turd, a cartoon, a tongue sticking out.

Bianca urged me not to put any question marks but use an assertive tone.

He has to get a move on. Start dating. Do some fucking. Could he be stupid? I went home feeling deeply sad, and during the car journey,
mourned the fact that nobody believed in the ineffable. But, inside me, Lorenzo appeared in the guise of an arsehole. An impotent sexophobe. A narcissistic coward. At work the following day, I walked down the corridors, haughty, making cynical cracks, but he was wearing a metal wire around his wrist with a small blue stone, a glass sphere and a piece of red fabric hanging from it. He said I don’t believe in this nonsense, it’s just scaremongering, then closed the newspaper, agreeing, unfazed, to occupy a lunar position. He had the self-assurance of a warrior.

Every so often, we’d write each other a message to avoid sinking into delirium, to make tangible what we said to each other when we were talking, he in Paris and I at my cousin’s wedding and my words echoed somewhere in him, perhaps in his head or his spleen.

The fine tuning happened before the desire to kiss him. In the beginning I resisted him because I didn’t understand. Once, I saw him throwing pieces of paper into the wastebasket and picked them up: they carried drawings of geometrical forms and dots, something resembling a constellation, only it wasn’t. It’s me, I thought, and yet we hadn’t told each other anything yet.

Whenever we were in the same room, everything would start to speak.

But where were Doctor Lisi’s credentials? His credentials for diagnoses, for the long silences, his credentials as the best practitioner?

We were always arguing, I would attack him, he would interpret my anger, his explanations would fill me with frustration, I’d call him a failure, Doctor Lisi would interpret my resistance and I would finally fall silent. Sometimes, I’d leave his consulting room without saying goodbye. I’ve always wanted to be someone who reacts to adversity with haughtiness.

Whenever the moon appears in the celestial vault, the rows don’t seem so dreadful. I’d address the sky and ask it to prepare the remediable. I’d imagine leaving wearing a light-blue dress and taking refuge in a café to drink hot tea, with a haughty expression, my hair tied at the nape of my neck, breathing deeply, a subtle detachment from the other patrons, whom I found repugnant. And everything around nothing but independence.

Staying up till five o’clock in the morning after an argument with my analyst, to see if it would change colour.

Meanwhile, at a steady pace, a lesson on absence and distance would arrive from the universe. At home, I’d stuff myself with food, smoke and count the people who loved me. It was a rainy season, awesome thunderstorms would break out during the night, and the sky would constantly be flashing. Remember that, in the place you come from, when we walked barefoot on the carpet and listened to Édith Piaf, disagreement was a legal escape route.

I could sense rarefied presences to which I didn’t pay attention. Back in those days, Huangbo would keep telling me: Why this constant talk of reaching and not reaching? The fact is — by thinking about something you create an entity and by not thinking about anything you create another. Destroy these wrong thoughts and you’ll have nothing left to look for.

Doctor Lisi looked annoyed with my passion for Lorenzo, which happened after many years of psychoanalysis, and catalogued our relationship as deviant. But not everybody likes a quiet life. When interpreting the choice of partner, one neglects the blessings and the slow action of sedimentation produced by difficult but indispensable encounters.

I asked Lorenzo how one could be sure that invisible phenomena really exist and he replied that it was purely and simply
an act of faith. If you’re wrong, then you’re wrong, that’s all. He was reluctant to talk about it, believing that grace was transmitted only through a state of absolute silence. I’d spend my nights looking at the sky, taking pictures of clouds at dawn and studying constellations, pointing a finger at the map of the sky with my eyes shut, then seeing where it ended — Epsilon Indi, the orange dwarf star in the Indus constellation.

If I closed my eyes, I could see Lorenzo walking around New York, dragging his shoes, looking up or down, awed and irritated by everything, queuing at museums, lying on the bed or eating a burger. Before he left, he’d given me a picture painted by him, which had flames in it, populated by awesome, metaphysical beings, there was Santa Claus with a red third eye and a partial, timeless sky. I would use his trips to come back to my senses, sleep at night, and suspend contemplation.

When he returned from his holidays, he was distant and I thought he’d fallen in love with someone, but we weren’t close enough for me to ask him. I’d never met anyone stronger. She would not be embarrassed by things like the river with an oscilloscope, she’d think you’re mad. Love me.

I find the autumn very moving. The mystical time of the harvest would come soon, as would the sky, finally low, unreachable — whereas in the summer it stretches out in the shape of a dome — with vine leaves in the cold air, woollen scarves, rubber boots, children drawing bunches of grapes in their exercise books with many circles in decreasing order, then colouring them in purple and iris-blue. Sometimes, they feel uneasy at school and their heads and throats fill with air, and the crotch of their tights slides down between their legs, they walk around with the elastic down, have difficulty running, jumping, they sit apart. The child won’t socialise, the child struggles to fit into the context, the child finds it difficult to work out his or her frustration, but tights never stop sliding down.

Sometimes, unease resembles melancholy.

The teacher praises the child’s drawing and he remembers the new pencil sharpener, takes it out of the case, touches it and calms down; the sharpener is made up of the same atoms as home, as the solemn love of his mother. The air is expelled from the throat, the drawing looks nice now, somebody’s looked at it, recognised it, the atoms of the purple grape circles are the same as the happiness ones, the same as the air pushing through the head to leave the body. The iris-blue, goodness and mother atoms unite, the child fixes the elastic of the tights, now back over his tummy.

Meanwhile, in the city, the gingko leaves were turning yellow and diffusing waves of impermanence.

Lorenzo and I never had real conversations, we didn’t talk about what happened to us. Everything would become poetical and inconsistent after just a few words, which made me feel guilty, and I’d accuse myself of masochism. Because of my pointless passion as well as my celestial position, I seemed like a woman of extremes. That or suffering from anxiety.

Anonymous sentimental individuals are this century’s rebels, the unfathomable ones. The disorientated sentimental individuals who love relentlessly, the only revolutionaries, the only protesters left. People who cannot be included in statistics of behaviour are still loved but considered unreliable, frail and useless.

I remember evenings spent praying, sitting in front of a pot where I’d sowed cornflower seeds, and I’d water them with
water used to wash my face and which I’d then leave on the windowsill all night. A ritual that had yielded no outcome. I kept the pot on my bedside table to help me fall asleep, seeking the tiniest protection because I’m scared of the dark. Back in those days, Cartarescu would tell me that what we usually call reality is nothing but the surface of things.

Bianca and I often meet in Piazza Dante, and, sitting on the steps, we talk about exasperation and love. Dante has a stern expression, his book in one hand, a finger of the other laid on his chin while he turns his head, engrossed. He has the stern look of people who’ve been betrayed. One evening, a woman asked if she could sit next to us, because she needed to be near someone. The woman was talking to herself and seemed like someone recently gone mad, someone who was going mad for the first time during those days. Her face wasn’t yet distorted with doubts and her speech was orderly and accusing, but her delirium was illuminated by a small certainty, a privileged contact with everything, devoid of anxiety. In her eyes were a few unmistakable gleams of hope. She said that it had become difficult to live in our city but that for the time being we couldn’t move away. She sensed something and pointed it out to me, that a man would shortly be coming to combat this power, a kind of man, she added. Then the wind began to blow, finally, the wind, she said, see? It’s a sign. I asked Bianca if I, too, spoke like that, and if I also gave the same impression as these remarks about the wind, about signs.

Doctor Lisi claimed that we are all the people we dream about. Lorenzo claimed we are all the people. Bianca, the fox with blueish highlights, believed in my reasons. And yet that evening, she introduced me to a friend, the right man for me. It was a boring dinner in a restaurant in the city centre, and I swallowed whole slices of veal in tuna sauce so the evening would end sooner, we talked about what is left of inadmissible truths, everybody’s expectations twisted by courtesies, and all I wanted was to go home and stand by the window in the dark, smoking. Instead, they left us on our own and I walked through the city centre with a very handsome man who wore his hair in a ponytail and had narrow hips and dark eyes, but there wasn’t even the tiniest spark between us, not even a tepid one such as desire or the pleasure of seducing. When I crossed my legs on the bar stool, my trousers split completely at the crotch. I held in my pee all the time, what do you think of Trump, earthquakes are nature’s punishment, they’re random events, I can make delicious biscuits, I write poems. I concealed the tear in my trouser, waiting to drum up the courage to tell him, we were so lacking in light that I was embarrassed. I declined all his gallant gestures that I should walk ahead, with a sweater hanging over my legs I took a little walk with him down the alleys. I finally managed to show him my trousers once I’d become too anxious, I interrupted our conversation on the philosophy of personality, on Orion, you look like an honest person, you like electronic music, and I went home.

I was agitated and it took me a long time to fall asleep, I listened to the refrain of 
*We Three Kings of Orient Are*, a carol I found moving, closed my eyes and said, hi, Lorenzo, I’m having trouble sleeping. I wrote him a message using words that allowed me to avoid others but he didn’t reply. I excused him by reminding myself of a theory about the emptiness of words and fell asleep. It was enough to know that I loved him, I had never loved anyone. Sometimes, idealisation is simply the total absence of ill-will.
When I wasn’t at work, I’d go to the hills, sit in a meadow, near fig trees, olive trees and dog roses, pretending I was there to read and write. Instead I was keen on proving myself to the Everything Lorenzo talked about, but I could do it only if I was doing something else at the same time. One day, I read an article by an insightful publisher expressing surprise at some authors being published by independent publishing houses. In a normal publishing context, novels like these, he said, should be the highlights of leading publishers. And I felt that not only the fates of niche authors but everything else applied to these words. When I returned to town, with the certainty of a person who has experienced the void, I came across Lorenzo in the car, waiting at the traffic lights. I said hello but he didn’t see me, he was nodding in time to the music. Even so, I took this for a positive sign. What do you expect? I said to myself, but couldn’t think of anything else.

Bianca suggested distance as a strategy. I walked along the bookshop shelves indifferently for a few days, barely saying hello to him but looking angry. He mirrored my aloofness and we pretended to be two strangers. Lorenzo kept up his withdrawal, he could have gone on like this for ever, so I spoke to him again because I can’t stand nonchalance.

Everybody was reading things into our relationship while Lorenzo, impassive, carried on being immersed in celestial bodies. I have high esteem for people who succeed where I fail: to be closer to the other person than we think we are, to feel with the person we love, to have what he possesses, and to know what he knows and which escapes us. Love is contemplation. Relationships where people are very much alike and share everything are destined to become a symbiotic blend, and desire soon evaporates. To where love is just a comfort zone.

Doctor Lisi urged me to discover what was concealed behind my obstinate desire for Lorenzo. But I couldn’t find anything behind it. Let’s remember that behind is a place that doesn’t exist.

All the emotions had altered. A walnut shrimp, an acacia chick, fabulous animals, small, with plant insets, would come to mind in the evening, when I was trying to meditate, but all I got from the top of the bookcase were premonitions about my future.

Sometimes, I was overcome with the fear of forgetting and I would start searching the house for bills, or the piece of paper on which I’d jotted down appointments. I’d write to-do lists in my diary and sort everything out while harbouring an anxiety I would then take out on customer service representatives.

According to Buddhist philosophy, we do not experience life but think it, imagine it and submerge it in opinions and fantasies. Every moment of anxiety, jealousy or worry indicates a clash between desire and reality.

Enlighten the mind, observe, pay attention. I wished I could ask a Buddhist monk how he tackled the riddle of psychic symptoms.

Once, I did a family constellation and I had to choose Playmobil figures to impersonate my family members. I was looking for a red-haired woman who’d look like my mother but... for that. The doctor made me stand up to visualise my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother next to me, and asked...
me to imagine them all involved in the selfsame drama of abandonment. But my anxiety did not go away. 

Doctor Lisi said openly that I was making a mistake with Lorenzo; usually, an analyst never highlights an error. I thought he might be jealous. He thought I was raving, I couldn’t remember my dreams, I no longer had any quivers of anxiety. In his opinion, it simply meant that when love thunders like that and fills all the empty spaces, it turns the condition of abandonment into a distant memory. But only temporarily. That which is considered love on Gliese 581 c or in a novel is, to Freudians, a suspicious act.

When in the presence of messengers from destiny, you need to be able to accept that everything is unfathomable, that the answers will arrive with time, in unexpected ways.

What can be done against the power of chance encounters — and love certainly does happen by chance — what do you replace it with, dam it up with, whom do you give up? In my heart, ... able to meet my mother again, who was first my daughter, my queen, and this man who has feared me for thousands of years.

Lorenzo was convinced that love and desire produced attachment, an attitude he intended to remove from his life because it caused unhappiness. He told a colleague during a coffee break and I pretended not to hear. He’d suffered a great deal because of a woman. He still loves her, I thought.

I never hurt anybody. There’s a scarlet area — always inflamed — on the palms of my hands.

I have abandonment in my heart, that’s why I’m wild.

Because of that and because I am wired to feed on primitive energy. My aunt and grandmother did the same. We were born that way.

According to Doctor Lisi, Lorenzo manifested the same signs of narcissism as my mother, but I think he meant to talk about himself. He bore a striking resemblance to Lucia, proof that fate knows all things and is made up of the unutterable. We’re forced always to want the same forms and I didn’t think that was a bad thing.

One evening, I gave Lorenzo a long speech in the mirror, I’d put on lipstick and was half listening to myself but was a little distracted by the red that was moving and saying I can’t remember and revealing transparent teeth that seemed filled with blue water. Teeth with a river inside them.

I like it when things go back to being quiet, when you do your school work at the kitchen table, light the fire in the hearth, go to bed early, wake up early, bake cakes, move around slowly, the sun does not kiss you, does not envelop you, is a little remote. I like it when the air is discreet, the plants are no longer very thirsty and you sleep curled up, an uninterrupted sleep, you can pull up the blanket over yourself, close the shutters, lie there secretly, without revealing yourself too much. Not so exposed. Sheltered. When everything is delicate and what happens brushes against you lightly, and there’s a smell of wood burning in the hearth. When there’s silence and you can listen, pay attention, walk in the rain. When everything is calm, enclosed and secrets, invisible presences, can reveal themselves without fear or embarrassment. When the earth seems asleep — has it gone out for ever? Will it wake up? — and instead it surprises you again, and, amid the falling leaves, you can still find chestnuts, pomegranates and grapes. You can touch each other with particular care, skin is not uncovered,
it’s necessary to look for it, shift the fabric with the specific intention of reaching it. And it is perhaps the way we love that determines our preferences, love which is actually everything for us.

I keep a pain in my heart. We will never hurt each other, it’s important to say it to people who come near. It’s the time for peace, for stroking hair, you can rock, in the warmth, somebody stores poems in his or her name in a notebook and, at night, fall asleep happy.

When Lorenzo spoke, I would listen to him carefully, I’d say that’s where I was, I was here. I’d put my hands in my pockets, disorientated, not knowing anything anymore about places, rooms, stairs, spatial coordinates would be annulled, the North and South Poles would come away from the critical point of the expanses of ice, the snow would melt. All that was left were specific movements, looks that run for thousands of kilometres and come to rest where everything is without words.

The thread that separates the light from a logical explanation of the rational sequence of an event is, when there’s no sky, an infinitely small space where good nestles.

[...] * —

*Letter to Lucia*

I grew up filled with good manners and poetry, but not strong enough not to feel the horror of this life, not to feel afraid. Materialists distract me from the fragments of light. They improve existence, measure coincidences, summarise accidental events and this way blur the delicacy of incomprehensible phenomena.

Too many informed researchers have removed unknown causes. Waste has been hidden in space.

But where were you when Europe was being invaded?

You, who’d loved only that which was unmotivated, understood that well. You couldn’t bear too much suffering or a cold attitude or too much display of affection. You liked ambiguous, furious and calm displays. Violence restrained before unbearable stimuli, resisting while pretending to appear weak. A game of proportions I’ve never managed.

Those who have not been loved much, obstinately try to seem inadequate, that’s why the day you found one of my pieces of writing less good than the others, I stopped writing and carried on like that, making choices I’d renounce shortly afterwards, letting my hair down then tying it up again, following even the most absent-minded of your comments to the letter. I seemed to feel better only when I thought that everyone in life does one thing more than others, each his or her own. I don’t know how useful constant dedications, monographs of intent, are, but I noticed it while studying everybody’s existence as well as my own. My task in life has been to love you.

On the horizon, the haystacks of the Maremma, the sun setting over the straw, I’m sitting on a white horse, I have never got up from there and I’ve never been there, my feet can’t reach the stirrups, the hills are spinning fast in a vortex, we are happier than everyone else, eccentric and regal, the christening of my wild nature, children where they should be; it was the moment to make amends. Forgiveness deals with the unforgivable, it wants to defeat the eternity of actions that change direction, but cannot.
Antonella Lattanzi 05 Dark Story
They arrived in the dead of the night.

The twenty-fourth of August, 2012, was coming to an end. Carla was sleeping with Mara, close up against her daughter in the double bed, and to see them like that, in the half-light, almost in darkness, you would have found it hard to tell which was the mother and which the daughter. Next to them was Mara’s empty cot: the little girl always moved into her mother’s bed in the middle of the night. Mamma I want be wid you, the sound of her voice came faintly in the dark, and her mother would open her eyes with a sigh of relief; the little girl was already up, wide eyes shining in the darkness, her small hands on the edge of the bed, glaring at her mother with an adult expression of reproach.
Carla would pull her in immediately, what am I going to do when she’s too big to want to sleep with her mum any more, and would hug her tight, I don’t want to be alone, Mara. Then she comforted herself: who knew how long it would be before they could afford a bigger apartment, who knew if they would ever be able to — in Carla’s sweetest dreams, Mara would always sleep in her bed. That night Rosa was also in bed with them, although to Carla and Mara she was an alien presence, not because Carla loved her any less than her younger daughter but because for weeks Rosa had been oozing anxiety.

The bed was saturated with it, and so was the room, the apartment, the neighbourhood, and Rome itself. Mamma, Mamma, Mamma, Rosa never stopped saying every hour of the day and night. What is it, darling? Carla would look at her with tired, suffering eyes, the kind of suffering you see in a saint or a Madonna, the kind that only mothers know how to express with their eyes, the suffering of those who take it all upon themselves for the sake of their children, not flaunting it, but accepting it in silence, hiding it away; yet this suffering is so sharp, so stark to the children who observe it, that it pierces their eyes like a dagger and can never be dislodged. Sorry Mamma, Rosa would say, I don’t want to give you any more worries, Nico says that all I do is worry you. Her mother would look up from her sewing, or from her housework, or from the shopping, or from Mara, and would sit Rosa down beside her — or, if they were outside, take Rosa’s hands in hers — and she would say Don’t fret, my darling, nothing you can do will ever be unimportant to me, you can never say anything I don’t want to hear. Always talk to me, never forget to talk to me. And then Rosa couldn’t help herself, her mother’s voice was like the floodgates opening, a whole river surged out of her, she threw her arms around Carla and wept, Papa, she said, my Papa.

That night, Nico was there too: ever since Rosa had come to stay with their mother he had tried never to leave them alone for too long. As soon as Rosa was out of sight for a moment, as soon as you could breathe the air again, Nico would try to have a couple of words with his mother. Ma, he’d say in his blunt way, why don’t we go out tonight? You and me, we can leave the kids at your place.

That evening Carla had finally agreed. They’d gone to the Chinese restaurant in Via Albimonte, near the Largo Preneste square; once, when she was very young, Carla had gone with her mother to visit an old aunt at the hospital near there, in Via di Acqua Bullicante. She’d never even met the aunt before, or at least not that she remembered, her mother had dragged her along on one of her endless social calls — wherever her mother went, thought Carla, it was as though she were visiting a palace, attending a reception in a grand hall, she had a way about her, a presence that Carla had always found enthralling, so composed and mysterious. So very different from her own manner; she wished she could have been like her mother. There came a point when Carla couldn’t stand the boredom any longer, or the smell of old age and hospital, and she’d said to her mother I have to go to the toilet. She’d called Vito, secretly, from a payphone. Vito had come to Rome to do his military service so that he could be near her. Come, she’d said, I want to kiss you. And who knows how he did it, he was there in a flash, outside the hospital, on a moped, his uniform making him seem both distant and very close, looking at her as though she were shining, as though she were made of light, she felt so beautiful, so womanly, he got off the moped, she ran to him, and everything about that day, even the smell of old people and the hospital, remained imprinted on her mind as something beautiful. Perhaps that was the reason,
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when she left the home she’d always shared with Vito and her children, that she’d chosen to live near the hospital (it was certainly the reason she’d chosen the Chinese in Via Albimonte, every time she was in that area she felt a nostalgia that was both terrible and very sweet; I was very happy, one afternoon, around here). Or maybe not, maybe she hadn’t chosen the apartment in Via Prenestina because she was reminded of Vito, but only because, in her haste to get away, to avoid being prevented yet again by her husband — face the truth, you don’t want to leave either she’d said to herself as she hurried to pack, banishing the thought like an enemy, hoping, without admitting it, that someone would stop her — she’d taken the first place she’d seen, she’d said yes. There wasn’t even a contract to sign, no deposit, no guarantees. It was all illegal. You can move in this evening if you want, said the landlord, a fat man with a double chin and a goitre, a round swelling that pushed out from inside his throat as though it wanted to burst free, like a baby.

It was her brother Franco who had given her the landlord’s number, perhaps the only thing he’d done for her in all those years. It’s because you don’t want to have a sister on your conscience, she’d thought of saying to him, or it’s because you’re just like everyone else: I’m going to make some sort of gesture I can bank, so that one day I can remind you that I didn’t sit on my hands, that there was a time when I helped you out.

The past two weeks had been interminable. After the first few days of waiting, when she’d encouraged her children to have faith, their father would come back any moment, suddenly Carla beat back her tears and said That’s enough. Let’s go and look for him. From then on she, Nico and Rosa had done nothing but scour the city, taking turns so that Mara wasn’t left alone, and sometimes even taking her with them. They’d had hundreds of flyers printed with the father’s photo and the text “Have you seen this man? He disappeared in Rome 6 August 2012” along with their phone numbers; they’d plastered them all over the city. They’d looked for him everywhere, tired and drooping in the heat on public transport and on endless treks on foot, with the sun beating down and then the rain and the hail and the wind. They’d telephoned everyone they could think of. They’d stayed awake all night sitting around the table, trying to come up with another idea, another place to look, another person to call. The rising sun often took them by surprise. Not a day went by without Carla asking the police if they had any news. Looking for him was a way of keeping busy, and also of being together. They would have liked to stop work and spend more time looking for him, more thoroughly. But unfortunately there was no money, so they had to work. Even when Nico and Rosa had at last asked their mother to rest a bit, to take a breather, she’d refused to be idle. She never seemed to get tired. With Mara in her arms or in the pushchair, or holding her hand, she pounded the streets of Rome and its suburbs, determined and brave in a way they’d never seen before. She hunted for Vito one step at a time, never giving up, never sleeping, never eating or complaining of the heat or the cold. Will she have a heart attack Nic? Rosa asked her brother anxiously. No Rosina, don’t worry, stay strong little Rosa, hang on in there.

And so Rosa was sleeping next to her mother and her baby sister. Nico slept in the little kitchen, on a deckchair. It was as though by staying all together, by waiting all together for Vito to return, they would feel a bit less lost, a bit less desperate. As though only by keeping the family together they could create
the sort of powerful luminous energy which would surely bring Vito home. A bit later, as if it was a sign, the summer storm abated. At the Chinese restaurant, a little while earlier, Carla and her son had talked quietly, looking each other in the eye. From a distance you’d have said they were lovers.

At ten past three in the morning the police burst into Carla’s two-room apartment, submerged in the darkness of Via Prenestina like seaweed at the bottom of the sea. The banging on the door didn’t wake Carla, or Rosa, or Mara. It woke Nico with a jolt and he opened the door, bewildered. Four police officers came in, stamping their heavy boots on the floor, three men and a woman. Mara and Rosa woke with a start. In a second the police were in Carla’s room. She was still sleeping. When she opened her eyes, roused at last by a policeman tugging at her (she hadn’t been woken by the banging on the door, nor by Mara crying, nor by Rosa’s voice, nor by Nico shouting, “What do you want, what are you doing, go away, get out of here, there’s a baby in here”) all Carla could see, deep in a barbiturate sleep — like the time, only a couple of years earlier, when she’d woken up suddenly because Vito had come home from work to check up on her and found her and the new-born Mara curled up together, asleep on the sofa — all she could see, as she lay full of sleep on the bed, was a detail at her eye-level: the police officers’ boots.

Rosa was already on her feet with Mara crying silently in her arms. Nico was at the bedroom door, still shouting at the police to leave them alone. Two officers were standing right by the bed, a man and a woman. “What’s going on?” asked Carla. “You have to come with us,” said the policewoman. Carla pulled herself up. The other policeman held out his gloved hand and helped her up. Carla could smell him. Nico threw himself at them. He was restrained by one of the policemen who’d been standing a little further back. “Take it easy, sweetheart,” Carla said to her son. Nico was struggling, held tight in the policeman’s grasp; the policeman had thick dark eyebrows and a misshapen ear (only slightly misshapen, it was nothing really, it was only noticeable if you looked closely, but then, precisely because you’d thought it was normal, like other ears, the deformity suddenly seemed huge, horrible, it made you recoil, you couldn’t even look him in the face any more). This policeman had a tight grip on Nico but seemed to be supporting him, keeping him on his feet. Rosa said: “Please, please, what’s going on?” And the other policeman who was standing at the back said in a gruff voice: “Routine procedure.”

“Can I get dressed?” Carla looked at the policeman who’d helped her up, she looked at him with two eyes in need of protection, in need of love, like a very beautiful, very sensual little girl. She got dressed. The two police officers escorted her to the door, gripping her arms. “Signora,” the policeman who’d helped her up said suddenly, “don’t worry Signora, it’s nothing, you just have to come to the station with us to answer a couple of questions.” “What the fuck are you doing!” yelled Nico. “Why are you taking her away? What do you want? We’re the victims and you’re treating us like animals! Bastards!”

They took her away without even letting her say goodbye to the children. Rosa was standing there like a widow with Mara held tight in her arms, and the policeman with the dark eyebrows only released his hold on Nico at the last minute. “Where are you taking her,” Rosa asked at the door, “Please, I beg you, please.” “Ma,” said Nico, “don’t worry Ma, I’m going to call someone, it’ll be ok.” “Mamma,” said Rosa, looking at her.
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Carla tried to speak, but the police wouldn’t let her. The one who’d helped her up had lowered his eyes. They dragged her out of the apartment with Mara suddenly howling in a frenzy and reaching out her little arms, “Mamma, my mamma!”, Rosa sobbing and looking at her mother as hard as she could and Nico, who almost collapsed on the floor when the policeman let go of him, calling “Don’t worry, Ma!”

The raid had lasted less than five minutes. In an instant Carla had vanished out of the door. But she had time to give her children one last look: and it was a look that immediately struck them not as consternation, but as something very tender.

As soon as they were on the landing, the fourth policeman said to Carla: “Get moving.”

“Shut up, Di Blasi”, said the policeman who’d helped Carla up, looking at her with eyes that seemed to be shining with anguish. “Have some respect for the lady.”

They took her to the station. Carla had said nothing since she left the house, she hadn’t protested, she hadn’t answered the cursory questions put to her by the policeman who’d helped her up, kind questions, the sort of things you’d say to put someone at their ease. In the car she remained silent, looking out, it was still night, the heat was killing her, and when she saw a young man jogging who seemed hardly awake, she felt as though she would faint.

The police station in Via di San Vitale, not far from Via Casilina, was dark with many staircases and many rooms. As they went in, her four police escorts said something to the man in uniform at the counter, they took her up a small flight of stairs, the white walls were dirty, they passed through a glass-panelled door, it was still night, they came across other police officers in uniform or plain clothes, none of them paid much attention to her, her escorts had murmured conversations with the others or amongst themselves, but even those who did no more than glance at her eyed her with contempt or indifference. There were two worlds in the police station at that moment: one was the world of those who were in the right, the police officers, the other the world of someone who must have been brought there for a reason, and the reason, whatever it was, put her in the wrong, and she was the only person inhabiting the world of the wrong. They waited for the lift. When the doors opened, the policeman who had helped her up let her go in first, the usual courtesy towards a woman.

They went up a few floors, Carla wouldn’t have been able to say how many, she looked at the floor of the lift or occasionally exchanged a glance with the policeman who’d helped her up and his expression was sad and sympathetic and she looked back at him with the only eyes she had, and he saw how defenceless they were, how terrified, how beautiful.

They came out into a dirty white corridor, a brown and white floor and a serried row of wooden doors, some open, some closed. Looking into a brightly lit room with an open door, Carla caught a glimpse of a woman. She knew her. Milena saw her and lowered her eyes. Another policeman arrived, went into the room with Milena and closed the door.

Carla was also taken into a room. “Do you want to call your lawyer, Signora?” asked the policeman who’d helped her up. Carla shook her head. “Call a lawyer? What for?” “Are you sure? It’s your right.” “Yes, I’m sure”, said Carla, looking around in
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dismay. The policeman nodded. “Sit down,” he said, pointing at a table and a chair. Carla sat down, her back to the wall, facing into the room across the table. Behind her, pinned to the wall, there was a poster of various police badges and a photo of the president, Napolitano, with his thin lips, his chest puffed out, and something feminine about his eyes. They left her alone.

♦ 12. —

The seagulls were screeching outside the closed window. She was sweating, the heat pressing on her throat, and she watched them. They were flying low in front of the window in a sort of loop, they’d fly away for a few moments, then they’d come back. They screeched and fixed their menacing eyes on her. She watched them. One of them dashed against the window as if trying to break into the room. The glass didn’t break. The gull smashed against it with a sound like a gunshot. She started and jumped to her feet.

She didn’t have time to see what had happened to the gull — whether it was stunned, or dead, or was unable to die — because the door opened. Carla turned around. Alaimo, the Vicequestore, came in. Just behind him were two of the policemen who’d come to her house: the inspector with the mean look and the one with the moustache.

“Sit down, Signora Romano,” said Alaimo.

She sat down. Alaimo approached the table directly opposite Carla. The inspector with the moustache and the one with the mean look positioned themselves on either side of him.

“Inspector Cecchi,” Alaimo indicated the one with the moustache, then he indicated the other one: “Inspector Orlandi.” “But I believe you know each other already.”

Carla raised her eyes to look at them, and when she recognised them she felt utterly desolate. As though it was her mother and father standing there in front of her, her brother or her husband, her ex-husband. Then, sitting defenceless on the chair, she looked at Cecchi and whispered quietly: “What do they want from me…,” she shook her head. “Why have they brought me here.” She turned to look at Alaimo and Orlandi: “What do you want?”

“Signora,” said Cecchi, while Orlandi placed a video camera on the table facing Carla and turned it on, and Alaimo sat down in front of her; for a moment he reminded Carla of a doctor.

“Why the video camera?”

“Nothing to worry about, it’s routine procedure,” said Cecchi.

“Signora,” he began again, talking slowly, in a low voice: “Can you confirm that you don’t want to call your lawyer?”

“My lawyer, what for,” Carla searched for the answer in their eyes.

“Answer yes or no.”

“No, no lawyer.”

Cecchi nodded. He sighed: “I’m sorry, Signora, but I must give you some bad news. I’m afraid that Vito Antonio Semeraro,” he paused, “your ex-husband,” he paused, “is dead.”

The gulls screeched more loudly. The room became swelteringly hot. Carla raised her head and looked outside. It was night, it must be night, yet it was so hot it felt like daytime, and yet the night was so dark and endless. Cecchi, Orlandi and Alaimo were there in front of her. She slumped forward and her shoulders sagged, as though she couldn’t help herself. And then she burst into tears.

The three policemen made no sound.
Carla was sobbing, though it was obvious she was trying to stifle the sobs. Through her tears they could hear incoherent words. At one point they could just make out “It can’t be true.”

“I’m sorry, Signora,” said Orlandi, “we identified a corpse found in a landfill at Spinaceto as your ex-husband, thanks to a receipt in his jacket pocket. This was quickly followed up with further verification.” The receipt was from a bar where Vito often went for breakfast, the police had turned up with the missing persons list and the people there had immediately recognised Vito’s name. It was only this that had allowed the investigators to be certain of his identity while they awaited the DNA test, because of the extent to which his body had been eaten away, had disintegrated and decomposed; but the inspector didn’t mention this. Then he left the room.

In another room in the police station, Milena, very pale, with dark brown circles under her swollen eyes, was gripping the edge of another table so tightly that her knuckles went white and she could hear something crack. She bit her lip hard and then she ground her teeth. “Oh my God!” she blurted out, as though about to explode, staring with a frantic, despairing expression at Orlandi, who had come into that other room.

Orlandi adjusted the video camera that was recording her.

“How did it happen,” she hissed, her hands clutching the edge of the table even more tightly. “Tell me, please.”

“He was killed.”

Milena turned her head to look at the window, swarming with seagulls; it was impossible to see anything outside, beyond the glass there was just a muddle of wings beating, dirty bodies, oily flesh, feathers and beaks. “Killed? What do you mean killed?” Her teeth began to chatter. Her body was shaken by a tremor that got increasingly violent. She couldn’t stop, and Orlandi became alarmed. “Shall I call a doctor?” he asked her.

Her teeth chattered, she could feel them repeatedly clacking against each other, she shook her head, she trembled, she looked at Orlandi and said: “Did he suffer?”

“I need to ask you a few questions,” said Orlandi.

“Who did it?” Milena’s teeth chattered loudly.

“That, Signora, is for you to tell me.”

*13 —

August the twenty-fifth was dawning and a bulging sun rose in the sky, seeping like melting fat. “Where were you on the night of August the sixth?”

Milena buckled under a weight that you couldn’t see but it was there, it was real, it was obvious to her and it was obvious to Inspector Orlandi, it was a third person in the room. “I told you, at home, with my daughter.”

“Do you mean Paola Spataro?”

“Yes.”

“Can your daughter confirm this?”

“I don’t know, she was asleep…”

“What time did your daughter go to sleep?”

“At ten o’clock.”

“You mean twenty-two hundred hours?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Can you confirm to me that the following day, August the seventh, your daughter Paola Spataro didn’t have to go into school?”

“Yes. It was the same for everyone.”
“And your daughter always goes to bed that early even when there’s no school?”

Milena sighed. “Well…” she said.

“Why is it, Signora, that your daughter Paola Spartaro takes your surname?”

“What’s that got to do with anything, I’m sorry, these are personal matters.”

“Nothing’s personal now. Please answer the question.”

Milena shut her eyes.

“I’ll ask you again, Signora, who is the father of your child, and why does his daughter not use his surname?”

“Because… the father was never around.”

“Is it possible that your daughter Paola’s father was Vito Semeraro?”

Milena opened her eyes wide. “No.”

“Is it possible, Signora — just possible — that your daughter Paola Spataro was born from an extramarital affair between you and Semeraro?”

“No.”

“And is it possible that you felt — rightly perhaps, understandably perhaps — maybe not hate, but at least a bit of resentment towards Signora Carla Romano and her three children, who had Semeraro all to themselves? While you and your daughter were, how shall I put it… alone?”

“Sorry, but what are you talking about? Vito and Carla had been separated for two years.”

“How long had you been seeing each other, you and Semeraro?”

“Since…,” Milena raised pleading eyes to Orlandi, and they filled with tears, “Can I just ask you, please, out of respect for Vito’s memory, can I ask you…”

“Days, months, years?”

“Years.” Milena’s head drooped. She suppressed a sob.

“How many years?”

“A lot.”

“More than two?”

“Yes.”

“More than three?”

“Yes.”

“So then is it possible, Signora, that Semeraro had promised, I don’t know, I’m guessing, that he would leave his wife and children, and hitch up with you and your daughter?”

Milena started trembling again. “Maybe that was what I hoped.”

“And in the end it happened, he left them, didn’t he? Did he do it for you?”

Milena put her head in her hands. “No. It was his wife who left him.”

“Are you telling me that Semeraro didn’t want to leave them?”

She looked at the table. “Vito would never have left them.”

“So it would be reasonable to assume that you were happy, Signora Spataro, that Semeraro and his wife had finally separated? We’re human, Signora, we can speak frankly.”

“Is that a crime?” Milena looked at him coldly.

“So could it be, then, that you were displeased by Vito’s continuing, how shall I put it, intrusions into his ex-wife’s life, by the fact that he carried on wanting to see her?”

“Is that a crime?”

“How many years had it been, Signora?”

“Sorry, what do you mean?” Milena looked up.

“Come along, Signora, there’s no reason now not to tell me. For how many years were you with Semeraro?”
“I don’t know, I swear.”
“More than ten?”
“Yes.”
“More than fifteen?”
“I think so…”
“How old is your daughter Paola Spataro?”
“What’s that got to do with it… My God…”
“I believe your daughter is sixteen years old. Am I wrong?”
“Sure, she’s sixteen, but if you’re trying to suggest…”
“All right then, Signora Spataro, let’s move on.”
Milena sighed.
“Signora, were you aware of the birthday party for Seme-
raro’s younger daughter, Maria Addolorata?”
“Yes.”
“Is it possible, then, that when you knew the whole family
was getting together, you became, shall we say, jealous?”
Milena didn’t reply.
“It would be normal, Signora, we’re all human beings, aren’t we?”
Milena looked at him.
“Is it possible that you felt betrayed? And understandably so.
That you feared a rapprochement between Semeraro and Romano and the whole family?”
Family, family, the word rolled around in Milena’s head.
Outside, in the street, there was a sudden loud bang. Orlandi
and Milena turned simultaneously towards the window.
“Signora Spataro, I’m going to ask you again, where were you
on the night of August the sixth?”
“At home.”
“And at dawn on August the seventh? Where were you then?”
“I was still at home, with my daughter, I was at home. I woke
up at six o’clock as usual, my daughter woke later, around eleven
I think, since there was no school.” Milena ground her chatter-
ing teeth, but she answered and answered and answered. Her
head drooped again, it felt very heavy.
“So your daughter, if I’ve understood correctly, goes to sleep
every night at ten o’clock, even when there’s no school, and
wakes up at eleven?”
Milena looked at him.
“The girl sleeps for thirteen hours every night?”
“Well…”
“Signora, where were you in the early hours of August the
seventh?” Orlandi planted his hands on the table.
“At home, at home.” Milena buckled even more under this
weight, she was almost brushing the table, any lower and her
mouth would touch its smooth, pale green surface.
“You’re sure about that?”
“Yes.”
“Are there any witnesses who could confirm it?”
“No, what witnesses could there be, I’ve told you, my daugh-
ter was asleep, it was just me and her, alone, as usual, and she
was asleep. What do you want from me, you must realise, have
some respect, some pity for…”
“For a widow?”
A gurgle rose in Milena’s throat, like something black, boil-
ing and bubbling.
“You are telling me, Signora Spataro, that on the night of
August the sixth you were at home asleep? Is that right?”
Milena said in voice that was not her own: “Yes.”
“And where were you on August the seventh? Semeraro’s
cleaner, Anna Abatangelo, also known as Nuccia, says that you
turned up at Semeraro’s place looking for him. Is that true?”
“Yes, it’s true,” said Milena.
“Were you playing the part of a desperate woman, Signora Spataro?”

“Where were you on the evening of August the sixth 2012?”
“At my brother’s apartment. We were celebrating my daughter Mara’s birthday.”

“Do you mean Maria Addolorata Semeraro?”
“Yes, sir. In the family we call her Mara.”

“Who was there with you that evening in the apartment belonging to your brother Francesco Ernesto Romano?”
“My children: Mara, Nico and Rosa. And Vito.”

“Are they all Vito Semeraro’s children?”
“Sorry, what do you mean?”

“Your three children. Was Semeraro the father of all three?”
“What a question to ask. Of course he was.”

“Could you speak more loudly, Signora.”

The gulls were screaming so loudly, outside, that you had to shout to make yourself heard. The windows were all barred so they couldn’t get in. They were skulking at window height, the beating of their wings sounded like a slaughterhouse, feathers flew in dirty white whirlwinds, they glared in at them angrily. Alaimo had left too, now there was only Cecchi.

“Yes, of course. Vito is the father of Nico, Rosa and Mara.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look, what are you getting at, of course I’m sure.”

“That’s the truth?”

“What are you saying, I’m sorry, what is this, I don’t understand. Of course it’s the truth.”

Cecchi noted something down.

“What time did Semeraro arrive at your brother’s apartment?”

“I don’t know, six o’clock. I think. Six fifteen.”

“Were you ever left alone in the house?”

“Yes. No. Mara was there.”

“Please explain yourself clearly Signora, don’t mumble.”

Carla sighed.

“Let’s start again. Between what times were you all together? You, your children, Semeraro?”

“Give me a moment, let me think… Vito arrived, I think, around six o’clock, as I said, or six fifteen. Mara and I were there. I was cooking, they were playing together. You must understand, they’d never spent much time together…”

Cecchi made an irritated gesture. She stopped talking. Then she started again. “Then the older ones arrived, around seven I think, I didn’t look at the time, I was busy, cooking, laying the table, the baby…”

“By the older ones you mean Giuseppe Nicola and Annunziata Rosa Semeraro?”

“Yes, that’s right. Rosa and Nico. Our children.”

“So, Rosa and Nico Semeraro arrived at seven o’clock. You confirm that?”

“Around seven, yes.”

“How were things between you?”

“They were fine, we were together, eating…”

“Carry on.”

“I’ve told you, we were together, eating…”

“It is well known, Signora Romano, that there was bad blood between you and your ex-husband. Can you confirm that?”

“Well, no…we’d had some quarrels in the past.”

“There are numerous reports, made by you, concerning Semeraro. Do you call those quarrels?”

“No, but by this time…”
“If you want I can show you the reports, Signora. To refresh your memory.”
“No, no, there’s no need, of course I remember.”
“So what are you telling me? Your relations were strained?”
“No, I’ve just told you they weren’t. Everything was fine. It was all water under the bridge. Everything was fine. We were relaxed. I promise you. It had been months since…”
“So then why, Signora, did you organise the dinner in your brother’s apartment, rather than your own?”
“What’s that got to do with anything… My brother’s apartment has more room. You can spread out more. Mine is small and…”
“Given the mountain of past reports, Signora, I ask you this: were there any incidents that evening? Between you and Semeraro, or between Semeraro and his children.”
“I’ve already told you sir, there were no incidents. And anyway…”
“Stick to the point.”
“There were no incidents.”
“Are you sure? Some of your neighbours say they heard shouting.”
“Shouting? What shouting?” She opened her eyes wide.
“You tell me.”
“But sorry, when? My children were there, they can testify…”
“So your neighbours are lying?”
“I don’t know sir, no, I don’t think so, why would they lie, but there was no shouting, truly, I promise you… Of course it was a party, perhaps we were a bit… merry, but everything was fine, we were all together. You can ask my child…”
“What did you do during the evening?”
“Nothing special, sir, the usual things, a birthday cake, presents, we went on chatting for a bit.”
Cecchi nodded at her to continue.
“And then,” Carla spread out her hands, “then they left.”
“At what time?”
“Nine o’clock I think, nine-thirty at the latest.”
“All together? Your children and Semeraro?”
“No, no. The children left slightly earlier. They waited to say goodbye to their father downstairs, but he stayed behind for a moment so they went off.”
“Who did Semeraro stay behind with?”
“Sorry, sir, but who do you think, with the two of us, with me and the baby.”
“With the little girl or with you? Listen to me, Signora Romano, this is really not the time for reticence.” He looked at her, his eyes glittering. “With the little girl, or with you?” he said firmly.
“With me, mostly with me, but it was no more than a couple of minutes.”
“Earlier you said it was a moment.” And he noted something down.
“For God’s sake, sir,” Carla took a breath, composed her features, and looked at him. She shook her head. “A moment, two minutes”, she looked at him again, and for the first time Cecchi lowered his gaze. Carla’s eyes were beautiful, frightened, pleading. There was a silence.
Then Cecchi pulled himself together, but he was worn out. “So you were alone together,” he said, almost gently. Carla nodded.
“Can you speak up, Signora Romano, for the recording?”
“Yes.”
“Yes, you were alone together?”
“Yes.”
“Was your daughter Maria Addolorata doing?”
“She was asleep,” Carla shook her head, “she’s so little, sir…”
“So, Signora, to recap, if the little girl was sleeping, logic says that Semeraro didn’t stay behind with you and Maria Addolorata, will you confirm that? He stayed behind with you only,” but Cecchi’s voice had lost its strength. He looked at her sorrowfully.
“No, no” Carla said softly, “with both of us, with her and me. Vito and I went into the room where Mara was sleeping. He wanted to see her sleeping, she was his daughter, sir, he... took us to say goodbye without the older children there. Two minutes. To say goodbye to his daughter. To stroke her hair.”
“For the last time.”
“For the last time, that’s right sir, it was the last time he stroked her hair. But we didn’t know that then.”
Cecchi sighed and looked down. “Signora Romano, at the time of Semeraro’s disappearance, were you and your husband still, how shall I put it, sentimentally attached?”
“Sorry, what do you mean?”
“You’ve just told me that you wanted some time to say goodbye to each other, you and Semeraro, without your children there. Why?”
“Sorry, sir, what do you mean, why?”
“Were you still sentimentally attached to each other. Answer me.”
“No. No, sir, Vito stayed behind because of the baby,” she sighed. She looked him in the eyes. “And yes, sir, of course there was something between us.”
“So you see the situation is far from clear? Were you or were you not together, you and Semeraro?”
“No! What are you suggesting!”
“So why did he stay behind to say goodbye? Perhaps you wanted to spend the night together? Signora, let’s speak clearly, it wouldn’t be a crime.”
“Vito and I had been together for a lifetime, sir, all my life. I was ten when I met him, we married when I was sixteen. I loved him more than... I’m sorry, but is it forbidden, in your opinion, for two people to say goodbye to each other, when they’ve had three children together, when they were married for twenty years?”
Cecchi made no reply.
“Of course we were still sentimentally attached to each other. For the love of God, sir, do you think it’s possible to have shared a life and not be sentimentally attached, as you put it? Or by sentimental attachment do you mean a relationship, and if so can you say so clearly and we’ll be done with it?”
Cecchi looked her in the eyes. “Signora Romano, at the time of Vito Semeraro’s death, were you and your ex-husband in a relationship? I mean a sexual and/or sentimental relationship. After the end of your marriage, I mean.”
“No.”
Cecchi looked outside, the famished gulls were still flying around in front of the window. But before he pressed her with another question there was a moment of silence, a moment too long. “And then, what happened?”
“He left.”
“At what time?”
“Half past nine, ten at the latest. But I told you, in terms of the timings... I wasn’t looking at my watch the whole time.”
“Go on.”
“We went downstairs to sleep. To our apartment.”
“Who do you mean by ‘we’?”
“I mean me and my daughter Mara.”
“Straight away?”
“No, not straight away, half an hour later, the time it took to tidy up my brother’s place.”
“So at what time did you and your daughter Maria Addolorata return to your apartment?”
“I don’t know sir, I’ve no idea. Maybe ten-thirty.”
“What was the little girl doing?”
“She was asleep.”
“So allowing for a margin of error, you can confirm to me that you and your daughter were home before midnight?”
“Earlier. Eleven at the latest.” Carla looked at Cecchi with two enormous eyes, beseeching but steady. The eyes of someone who is suffering but still proud, knowing her torment is undeserved.
“And what did you do when you got home, you and your daughter Maria Addolorata?”
“Mara was already asleep, I put her to bed. I was very tired too. As soon as I got home I got ready for bed and then I went to sleep with my daughter. As I always do.”
“What time did you go to sleep, Signora?”
“Half past eleven at the latest.”
“So, on the evening of August the sixth, you were asleep by eleven-thirty at the latest?”
“That’s right.”

* 14. —

Wait for me downstairs, I’ll be with you in a minute and we can say goodbye: those were the last words that Vito had spoken to Nico and Rosa. “It was the last time we saw him. And we didn’t wait for him,” said Rosa, still holding her phone, glassy-eyed. Nico and Livia — Mara in Livia’s arms, touching her mouth, her hair, her cheeks, singing a lullaby — were sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment where the two siblings lived, dirty yellow tiles, a bit dirty everywhere in fact; the door opened, one of the other tenants came in. “Ciao,” he said and went straight to his bedroom, Nico and Livia were looking at Rosa. “We didn’t wait for him”, she said.

Then Nico got up, and threw open the French doors.

He struggled to raise the blind. All he could see was the little courtyard, not much more than an alleyway, overlooked on all sides by the walls of other buildings, very close, more security grilles, more windows, the walls loomed over their apartment, hemming it in ever more tightly, from there you couldn’t see the street, even though it was there. Nico lit a cigarette.

“We didn’t...” Rosa’s voice could be heard from inside.

And Rosa was standing there motionless, still holding the phone, looking at Livia, looking at her brother Nico’s back, waiting for the wave of grief that would extinguish her, waiting to understand it within herself, now that her ears and her mouth had understood it, waiting to understand within herself that her father, her beloved father, who had taught her to swim in the dark blue waters of the Gulf of Taranto, Nico there too, also very young, eyes red from the salt and wearing armbands, thinking he was making bubbles under water when in fact his mouth was barely touching the blue surface that refracted the bright yellow sun, the kind of sun you only see when you’re a child, both of them thinking, she and her brother, that they were in the middle of the sea, a very deep sea, as far away as the
ships, the sea defences, the words you use as a child, but instead they were only a few metres from the beach and the mother, their mother, was laughing as she waited at the water’s edge, waiting for all three of them, the father and the two children, ready with towels for the little ones, like all the mothers in the world, the sun caressing her white-blond hair rather than beating down on it, her eyes squinting in the light, blue like Rosa’s own, or rather hers were like her mother’s, and she could hear her father laughing when her mother said Stamp your feet, come on honey, stamp your feet, you can do it, well done, that’s right, her father’s laughter told her that no one would ever hurt her, all the laughter of all the fathers in the world said the same thing, but Rosa didn’t know that, she was just a little girl, and everything was so full of sun, so luminous, so true, there were never any moments in adult life that she remembered being as true as those she experienced as a child, so real, she only realised it when she thought about it, and now too, as she gathered in as many memories as she could, like a herd of animals, her very own animals, knowing that she would have to understand within herself, as soon as possible — as her ears and mouth had already understood — what had happened; and now too when she recalled the day of the earth tremor, when she was at school, at primary school, she’d been terrified, frightened even of walking — what if my footsteps wake up the earth again, and the earth starts shaking again? — and while the other children were playing in the schoolyard as though nothing was wrong, she’d seen her father arriving, out of breath — because of course her father really knew her, and knew exactly what she’d be thinking, what his little Rosa would be thinking — and she’d thrown herself into her father’s arms, and he’d hugged her, he was sweating, he was worried, and then suddenly as soon as he’d hugged her he stopped being worried and that beautiful laugh of his had come out of nowhere, My God my father’s wonderful laugh, and then Rosa had started laughing too; now too, as she gathered in her memories in droves to help her understand what had happened, now too her memories of childhood seemed to be, more than anything else, her real life. But now she had to understand, as soon as possible, immediately, that her father was dead; forever.

Livia was holding Mara, they were sitting down. The little girl wriggled free. She got down from the chair and began to play with the grimy drawers below the cooker. She was pulling them open. She was singing. “Careful Mara,” said Livia, “you’ll hurt yourself.” And it seemed so out of place to be speaking, but what could she do.

She stood up. She picked the child up forcibly, and Mara began to scream. “You’ll hurt yourself, sweetie” said Livia, trying to make herself heard, more by the brother and sister than by Mara.

“You’re mean!” said Mara. “Leave me alone!”

“Come on Mara,” Livia raised her voice a little, feeling drenched in sweat then freezing cold, struggling again. “Come on Mara, behave.”

But the child screamed and neither of her siblings moved. “Shall I take her for a walk?” said Livia, and all she wanted to do was to kiss her Nico. What should she do now. What did Nico expect her to do, now, what was the right thing to do now, and what would be the right things to do, the right words to say, from now on? Nico you have to help me, you have to tell me what I should do. But how could Nico, now, remember that she was in the room, that she even existed. Would he ever remember again? Now that such a terrible thing had occurred, something so
horrendous that Livia couldn’t even imagine what it meant or what you were supposed to feel, what would happen? It seemed to her that until that moment she and Nico had been two similar creatures, in the way that two dogs of the same species are similar, but that now, since that phone call, they weren’t any more. As though what had happened had transformed them, inexorably, into two creatures of different species, who couldn’t know each other. What are you thinking, Nico? What can a person be thinking when something so horrible has happened to him? Why would he care about his girlfriend, or the seasons, or making love, or being kissed?

“He was killed,” said Rosa, as though in surprise. Nico turned around. He looked at her. Livia felt she was about to retch and told herself to stop. She didn’t have the right.

She had her arms around this slippery eel Mara. The little girl was whining, struggling to get free. Livia felt a vortex inside her, she was frightened, for herself too. What will be left of my life. Will I ever spend another happy day with him? Stop it, she told herself, you don’t have the right. But how can you control your thoughts. What must a person be thinking when he’s just found out his father’s been killed. How could anything else matter to him, ever again.

You’re being self-centred, Livia told herself, stop it. Rosa put the phone down on the table.

Nico looked at her.

Livia looked at them and saw that they weren’t looking at each other like brother and sister; Livia had a brother, in that respect she’d always been one of the same species as Nico and Rosa, she knew what it was to be brother and sister. Livia looked at them and they weren’t looking at each other like brother and sister, it was a look, Livia was sweating, they didn’t seem to sweat, it was a different kind of look, she couldn’t understand it, that look was filled with everything that she knew and didn’t know, everything that she’d seen, understood and experienced of life and everything that she’d never seen, that she would never see, it was filled with all the things that they two, the brother and sister, would never see, what had come before, what would come after, it was a look, Livia felt faint, it was too hot, Mara was really heavy, don’t faint she said to herself, you can’t faint now, if anyone’s allowed to faint, if anyone’s allowed to cry, it’s those two, or this child, you can’t, you don’t have the right, it was a look that Livia couldn’t even imagine, it’s about them, she said to herself, not you, and Nico moved towards Rosa still looking her in the eye, and Rosa met his gaze, they were breathing, you could hear their breath in the room, they were looking at each other as though they hadn’t seen each other for a lifetime and as though they had been lovers for a lifetime, as though they weren’t a brother and sister drawing close to each other, but two people looking at each other, burning, Nico moving towards Rosa still looking her in the eye, Rosa meeting his gaze, and when they were close, and there was all that breath in the room, and Livia was almost frightened to look, they touched.
Chiara Palazzolo  o6  Don’t Kill Me

To sleep. A little more. Bother. I want
to sleep. Noise. Neighbors, could be.
I want to sleep. More noise.
What neighbors. Don’t want to wake up.
It’s dark. Still dark. What time is it.
My darling. Is that you. Sleep. Want
to sleep. Sleep. Dark. Sleep.

Sleep. Don’t want to wake up.
It’s Sunday. Mamma. Where. I want to
sleep. It’s dark. Too dark. It’s night.
Robin. Is that you. So many voices.
Shut up. I’m sleeping. Dark. Sleep,

What was it. Robbers. There are robbers.
I want to sleep. Very very sleepy. Dark.
Sleep. No alarm. Sunday. Want to sleep

translated by
Frederika Randall


AIRRRRR!


Robin!

Okay, out of here. Lean on your arms. Oh. Already out. Too easy. Now let’s see what I came out of. A pit. A ditch. So dark. No light but the stars. And this sliver of moon. Can’t see anything. Oh where are we. The car. I really can’t see it. O MY GOD WHAT’S THIS!

I must stay calm. Or else start screaming. But if I start I won’t stop. Don’t want to scream. I must stay quiet and calm. Actually, I want to faint. Not feel anything anymore. Not see anything anymore. Faint. Why can’t I faint? The air’s so cool. Like it’s caressing me. I’d like to faint, but I can’t. I feel just fine. And yet it’s like I’m screaming. Like in a poem we studied the last year of school. Concentrate on the poem. You’re in the poem. The poem says I shout in this strange calm. Yes. I’m shouting in this strange calm. But I feel just fine. In fact, I’d be just fine if it weren’t for the hole. Concentrate on the poem. Don’t think about anything else. Pretend you’re writing a poem. Look and describe. What do you see?

A hole. No, it’s not exactly a hole. It’s a pit. There’s a pit in front of me.

Concentrate. Keep up the rhythm. The poem. You’re writing a poem. So, there’s a pit. Don’t be afraid.

And I came out of this pit.

Go on.

Right, I must go on. There’s a pit. And a lot of dirt around the pit. And pieces of wood. And metal sheets.

What do they look like?
Concentrate. Tell me. Why you were in the car. Don’t look around. Keep telling me.

We were in the car. Robin came by to pick me up at home. At my apartment in Perugia. It’s really nice. The three of us rented it. I mean, me, Miranda and Veronica. So we can study together. We’re all enrolled in Letters, the first year. The classics, we’ve always been a little nerdy that way. At first my parents were opposed to renting me a house in Perugia, but I managed to convince them in the end. They know Miranda and Veronica quite well. We grew up together. And all three of us have always been good students. And so we got this attic apartment. It has a large bedroom, and a smaller one, a living room and a kitchen. There’s also a little terrace, where Veronica put out her pots of geraniums and a purple climber.

Keep talking. Tell us, Mirta, don’t stop.

In fact, she’d planted another one before that. But I was allergic to it. Anyway, she didn’t want to remove it. Red, with big double blooms. Marvelous. But what were we going to do ... in the case of Robin. My mother especially. She said she was worried. That something bad could happen to me. An accident.

Don’t Kill Me

The body of a car? But where’s the rest of the car?
Look and describe.
I don’t know. I really don’t.
Concentrate harder.
It’s like someone tossed those things out of the pit. And then got out.
Like soho?
I don’t want to say.
All right, back to the poem. Look and describe. What do you see around you?
Trees. Stars. A sliver of moon. We’re out in the country. It’s a lovely evening. The gentle air. Seems to caress me. I’ve never felt better. Even though we had an accident. I’m sure of it. We were in the car. That I remember.
And then? Concentrate. Tell us.

We were in the car. Robin and I always go out at night. He says we’re night owls. I think night is sadder than day but also sweeter. More secret. I think we’re all more beautiful at night. Things seem more mysterious. Robin says he thinks sunny days are mysterious, and especially he thinks people who like sunny days are mysterious. But he’s always joking. He’s a provocateur.
Unfortunately, not everybody likes provocateurs. There’s a ton of people who can’t stand Robin. Beginning with my parents. But since I got an apartment in Perugia, in early autumn, I don’t have a lot of problems. Before, I always had to justify myself. Who I spent time with. Where I went. What I did. It’s totally pointless reaching adulthood, when it comes to parents. They just keep treating you like you’re five. Only. There’s this pit.
Don’t think about the pit. Concentrate on the poem.
But it’s there. This pit in front of me.

Concentrate. Tell me. Why you were in the car. Don’t look around. Keep telling me.

We were in the car. Robin came by to pick me up at home. At my apartment in Perugia. It’s really nice. The three of us rented it. I mean, me, Miranda and Veronica. So we can study together. We’re all enrolled in Letters, the first year. The classics, we’ve always been a little nerdy that way. At first my parents were opposed to renting me a house in Perugia, but I managed to convince them in the end. They know Miranda and Veronica quite well. We grew up together. And all three of us have always been good students. And so we got this attic apartment. It has a large bedroom, and a smaller one, a living room and a kitchen. There’s also a little terrace, where Veronica put out her pots of geraniums and a purple climber.

Keep talking. Tell us, Mirta, don’t stop.

In fact, she’d planted another one before that. But I was allergic to it. Anyway, she didn’t want to remove it. Red, with big double blooms. Marvelous. But what were we going to do about my allergy? We fought about it a little, well actually, we fought about it, hard. And that was terrible, because in all our years of friendship we had never fought before. On the other hand, we’d never lived in the same house before either. And there I understood that cohabiting with others is tough. And that’s why people quarrel in families. Even when people love each other. Because you all have to live under one roof but each one has her own way of thinking. Although parents always have the last word, when all is said and done. Or at least they think they should. As in the case of Robin. My mother especially. She said she was worried. That something bad could happen to me. An accident.
The professor of Romance Philology is Barzini, and he’s quite severe. In the lecture hall too, during lessons. He makes us turn off our phones, he doesn’t allow any laughing, or talking out loud. In the department he’s considered an old artillery shell left over from the war, but everyone’s afraid of him. He’s one of the senior professors in the department. And he’s a fairly well-known political figure. He served as a city councilor. Everyone says Barzini’s the boss, in the department and outside. I’ve gone to all his lectures. I asked questions. I feel pretty good about it. But he’s very strict. So everyone studies what he assigns. Yesterday Miranda and I studied all afternoon in fact, even though it was Saturday. Veronica was there with us until 6, when she went out to the dentist. We kept going until 7.30. Then we went to the cafeteria where Veronica joined us, although she hardly ate anything because she had a new filling in her mouth. When we came back I changed my clothes because Robin was coming over, and when I go out with him, I try to look good. Robin is super handsome. When we go out I always wonder how all the girls keep from throwing themselves at him. Although there are some, like Magda, who do try. Robin laughs when I say these things, but sometimes I cry. I get terribly frightened that someone will take him away from me. Because Robin’s unique.


I’m sitting on the edge of a pit. The pit I came out of. Don’t know how I did it. Pushed and came out. I know that’s not possible. But I’m touching the earth with my hands. These pieces of wood. And the sheets of zinc. And I lean over the edge of the pit. I can’t see much. It’s dark. Only the light of the stars and this sliver of new moon. But the car’s not here. There’s not even the road. Nothing that should be here if we’d had an accident. It’s dark but not very. Not so dark you can’t see anything. I can see the pit in front of me. I know I came out of the pit, pushing forward with my arms. Now I can’t see anything because I’ve covered my eyes with my hands. I don’t want to know where I am. I want to stay here. Concentrate on the poetry. About what happened when we were in the car.

Good. That’s the best decision. Keep your hands over your eyes and your eyes closed. Now concentrate. Tell me what happened last night. When you were in the car. Look and describe. Tell me, Mirta.

We were in the car. Robin came by to pick me up at nine. I’d already had dinner with Veronica and Miranda at the university cafeteria. We’re not much good at cooking. Pasta with butter, grilled chicken breast, fried eggs. That’s all we know how to make. We study. I got 30, the top mark, at my first exam, and so did Miranda. Veronica only got 26 and she was a bit upset. The more exams you take at the beginning, the easier it becomes after that. In fact we’re studying for the second: Romance Philology.
Your classmates at school. The pub. The first time you saw Robin. Robin!
Mirta, don’t scream. Concentrate.
Robin! Where are you, Robin?

Okay. I’ll continue. I don’t want to open my eyes. I don’t really want to know where Robin is, not right now, and why he doesn’t answer me. I want to keep talking. Questions and answers. Let’s start again. With Robin. No, with the car.

We were in the car. We took the road that goes up in the hills. We like the hills at night. They’re full of lights. Of mystery. Sometimes there’s fog. But Robin is a fabulous driver. Nothing bad has ever happened, even though my mother is always saying we could have an accident. Wrong. Robin could drive the car with his eyes closed. Sometimes he does. He closes his eyes and says, Mirta, you drive me. It’s a little dangerous, but so much fun! I’m extremely careful. I give him the most precise directions you can imagine. Methodically, as if I was studying. Being methodical is very important. I picked it up the habit in liceo and it’s always going to be useful to me, as my literature prof says. It gives you a key to solving problems. All kinds of problems, not just when you’re studying. If I wasn’t methodical, for example, I wouldn’t have been able to win my parents over on the apartment question. I had to go about it stone by stone. Explain I couldn’t get up so early. That I risked missing the first hour of lessons. That the bus schedule didn’t always correspond to the hours of the lectures. Stone upon stone, never losing sight of the overall picture, that is, my objective — to rent an apartment in Perugia. So I could spend all my time with Robin.

It worked.

serious scars on his hands. He jokes about it. He says, Know what a werecat is? But I think he’s still scared.

And what else do you tell him?

About when I was small. And also about when I was older but he didn’t know me yet, although I knew him perfectly. I was the one to notice him, in town. It happened three years ago. In the pub. Back then I was in the first year of liceo classico. It was the birthday of one of my classmates, Sandro Ferrrari, and we all went down to the pub, the Leone d’Oro. I was eating a hot dog with the works, and Robin came in.

And then?

Forgive me, but I always get choked up when I think about it. So the door opened and he came in. The first thing I thought was: he’s so tall! Because he’s really tall. Six feet, even more. Tall and incredibly handsome. Dark hair, pulled back in a ponytail, dark glasses. And he was wearing crazy jeans, totally ripped. A black T-shirt. A super cool leather jacket. He looked like Kevin Costner. Even better. A truly hot guy. He was with some other people I didn’t know at the time, like I didn’t know him. Paco and Magda and Luisa. So, Robin’s group. He was with them, and I don’t think he even noticed me. But when he turned around to look for a table, he smiled at me. Maybe he was smiling at somebody else. At Paco, probably. But his smile went right smack into my eyes, and my Coke went down the wrong way, and I was coughing like I was almost going to choke, what a crazy scene. My dumb classmates couldn’t stop laughing. When I think about it, I get so furious I could.

You could?

What. What was I saying?

You were talking about your classmates.

Which ones?

Don’t Kill Me
And when Robin appears in dark glasses, turns up the stereo to the max and doesn’t even say hello, there’s nothing to be done. And in fact I got in the car without saying a word and we took off immediately. Without even a kiss. Nothing. Not even a nod. It’s not his fault. Sometimes Miranda gets on my case too, as if my parents weren’t enough trouble. She says Robin is a creep, period. I’ve tried to tell her that’s a mistaken impression. Robin is a difficult guy, but he’s very sweet. He wouldn’t harm a hair on my head. Actually, he’d go through hell and high water for me. She talks like that because she’s not in love. And especially, she’s not in love with Robin. She has a guy too. Gianluca. Nothing special. Insignificant. And selfish: he often goes out in the evenings with his friends and leaves her at home with the excuse they want to play calcetto and she’d be bored. He even made a pass at me. But I didn’t tell Miranda, because she would have made a huge drama about it. In my opinion, she’s settling for less than she should. She’s afraid to take a chance. To risk. That she might be left on her own. Or might really fall in love. I was afraid too. When I met Robin, not that first evening in the pub. That night, I only saw him. We really met two years later. Last year, I mean, at a party at the disco. I was with my classmate. Francesco. What a baby! Although he was cute, blond curls and green eyes. In our second to last year of liceo he switched desks to sit next to me. He helped me with math, the bane of my existence. A lot of guys were after me but I didn’t want to get involved. But I did get involved with Francesco. He was thrilled. He said he was crazy about me. He gave me all the math homework. He even wanted to give me all his Dylan Dog comic books. The thing that meant the most to him in this world. But I didn’t want them. They’re too scary — all those
ghosts, zombies, vampires, witches. I don’t even go to horror films. *Nightmare* was more than enough for me.

I didn’t tell Mamma about Francesco. She’s such a worrier. She would have been fretting right off. But I did tell Papà. He was happy. But also, not so happy. It’s a bit difficult to explain. Francesco is the son of his good friend, the director of the town bank. Papà’s law firm is one of the bank’s best clients and Papà and Francesco’s father are always going out to lunch together. So he couldn’t not be pleased. However, he also told me not to get too involved. Because Francesco is a great kid, but he’s a kid from this town. And who knew, when I went to university in Perugia, and then maybe even abroad with a scholarship, what opportunities might present themselves? He says that life in a small town has its limits. That I could reach for whatever I wanted. And the future could be wonderful for us young people. Travel. Work abroad. Get to the moon, even.

I met Robin at that party. He was a real trip. All the girls were looking at him. They were even a little scared. And the fact is, he’s a lot older than we are. He was almost twenty-nine at the time. A grownup, who was drinking at his table and wasn’t impressed by anyone. The hottest of hot guys. When he came over and asked me to dance, my legs were shaking so hard I had to support myself on a column. I looked like the dorkiest dork on the face of the earth.

Afterwards I had a terrible time with Francesco. He wept like a baby. Said he was going to kill himself. Then he said he was going to kill me. Kill me and then kill himself. He was going to run away from home and to find him they’d have to go way out to the wilds of southeast Asia. My girlfriends were so frightened they stuck by me all day long. Veronica never left my side for an instant. She thought it could happen. That he could kill me, I mean. It happens all the time. A girl drops a guy and he loses it completely. He waits for her on some dark street at night and when she comes home, zap, he sticks a knife in her heart. Breaks her heart like she broke his.

To tell the truth, I wasn’t all that worried. First, I really couldn’t see Francesco lurking on a dark street with a knife in his hand. Although Veronica maintained that someone that obsessed with Dylan Dog couldn’t not be disturbed. Second, I was anxious for another reason. Robin, I mean. Because Robin hadn’t wasted time. When we first danced together. He told me right off that he didn’t give a toss about dancing. In fact, he hated dancing. And he thought all those people who like to dance were weird. However, dancing was the fastest way to get to know me. Therefore, we would dance. For the first and last time. I want to be with you, he said. I was going crazy. I asked him, since when? And he said, right now, a few seconds ago, when I first saw you. I couldn’t make sense of what was happening. I couldn’t even believe I was there dancing with him. But there was one thing I did know. And I took care of it right away. That very evening, when Francesco took me home, I told him it was over between us. Francesco got off the motorbike, propped himself against the gate, and began to cry. I couldn’t have cared less. I’d been dreaming about Robin for two years. And now, the impossible had happened. Robin wanted me. He wanted Mirta.

The following days were terrible. Because I had a ton of doubts. That Robin was fooling with me. That this thing he had for me would be over in a few weeks. My girlfriends went on and on. Francesco wanted to kill himself, kill me, disappear. I was incredibly scared. I practically couldn’t sleep at night. I went over and over Robin’s every word. Methodically. Stone upon
I knew him top to bottom, long before he asked me to dance with him that evening. I would have died for him, even before he met me. And so I could see right off that it was just words. I believed him when he told me he’d never leave me. But I didn’t believe him when he told me he’d never shoot heroin again.

Last night, when we were in the car. He came to get me in the jeep. Parked near the dump. It’s a lonely place, an ugly place. There’s never anyone there. And it’s even scarier at night. The promise is essential, he said. I understood that he couldn’t hack it anymore. He’d been off the dope too long.

We talked about the promise at length over the summer. We made the decision together. There was no other way to do it, because it was based on a double promise. Muriel’s promise to Robin, and to me. That is, he could do the drug, but only together with me. If he did it to me too. That was the promise. Muriel only knew one part of it. You can’t tell parents everything, even if Robin’s mother isn’t a classic parent. More like a kind of friend. In fact, Robin would say: my best friend. The relationship between Robin and Muriel is hard to explain. But in any case, he couldn’t tell her everything. Only part of the promise, the part involving her. Her part of the job, Robin says.

We were in the car, near the dump. A place for junkies. I hate it. The first time we came here, in May, Robin got high in front of me. He wound an elastic tie around his arm and pulled it tight with his teeth. When he put the needle in, blood began to run down his arm. So I said to him. That it was the last time he shot up alone. From now on, we’d do it together. He said no. His head was resting on the seat. His eyes were empty, vague. He...
I met along the way. It seems absurd to me, but that’s how he thinks. That one day I’ll forget about him. I’ll be content, somewhere else. With another love. Among other people. And he can’t bear that. I’m his angel. And when his angel leaves him the world will become a void.

We were in the car. He said he wanted to shoot up first. He didn’t trust the stuff. I said no. Anyway I didn’t know how to do it myself. In the end, I convinced him. He lost his... the tie around my arm. I made a fist so the vein would stand out. I closed my eyes so as not to have to see the needle.

Keep going, Mirta, keep going. I closed my eyes. Keep going. Finish the story. It’s already finished. I had my eyes closed, like now. Come on, tell me. You closed your eyes, and then? I closed my eyes and he said. What he said? Tell me what he said, Mirta. I don’t want to. Why? Because then I’ll have to open my eyes. Certainly, you’ll have to open your eyes and go through hell. No. Open your eyes and tell me what he said! He said. What? We’ll be back.

I had my eyes closed. I didn’t want to see the needle. I was terrified. Something was wrong. I thought it would rip my arm...
I have a white dress. Shoes too big for me. And that’s it. No watch, no cellphone, no documents, no money. Nothing, zero. Not even my jacket. Or a decent pair of shoes. Life, I don’t even have that. Or Robin. I call out, but he doesn’t answer. I could try to pull him out. I can’t have used a normal force to get out of my grave. The gravestone is marble. And it’s broken in half. The casket lid is all splintered. The zinc sheet flew off in one piece. I could try to pull Robin out. But what if I damage him? Robin’s body, my God. Under this marble gravestone. And me here. Sitting on top. And it’s getting lighter. Maybe I’ll dissolve like a ghost. At dawn’s first light. But I’m not a ghost. My body’s here, and it’s all I have left. However. If it’s still February, it should be freezing cold at this hour. But I don’t feel cold. There’s a cool, caressing breeze. I’ve never felt so good as right now. I don’t feel cold. I don’t feel anything, to tell the truth. If I touch something, yes. Like the stone I’m sitting on. Cold marble under my fingers. The soft earth, that smells sweet when I press it in my hand. The silk dress. White. Long. A first communion dress. And big shoes. Also white. At least a size too big.

I’d like to see my face. But even if I had a mirror, I don’t know if I’d be brave enough to look. I stare at my hands. They’re white. But they’ve always been white. My skin is very, very fair. In two minutes under the sun I burn. The sun. Maybe it will melt me. The dead don’t tolerate the light of the sun.

Robin. I stroke his gravestone slowly. I let my hand run along the marble. It’s so cold. Robin’s under there, I say softly. But maybe not. Maybe this is 2023. Maybe he came out a long time ago and got tired of waiting for me and left. Maybe he melted in the sun. Or dissolved into nothing. Or is roaming around the world. Dead and on the move. And has forgotten me. Maybe he went back to Muriel. He told her he’d made it. And poor Mirta,
out. I don’t want to tell her that I loved him more than he loved me. Or the contrary. I don’t know. How can I tell her that you couldn’t get out of a tomb when you only had to push the cover away like a heavy blanket. Robin, where can I go without you. I’m only here because you told me we could do it. That our will would triumph over death. That love is will. You’re the one who convinced me. It would never have occurred to me. You know I’m even scared of Dylan Dog. That when I saw Suspiria I slept in the bed with my mother. That after Nightmare I never watched another horror movie again. That I’m scared being in this cemetery. With the stone angels and the lamps. And I’m about to scream. I have to scream. I’m a dead thing screaming. A foul dead thing come out of a grave screaming in the middle of a cemetery.

In any case, it’s pointless. I can scream and beat on this gravestone until I crack it. Robin’s not here or he doesn’t hear me. Or maybe he’s momentarily distracted. What a laugh. Anyway I already know what the next step is. First dead, then crazy. I can’t think of anything worse. I must do something. Because if I don’t, who knows what will become of me. However I can still think. And I can walk. Maybe Robin isn’t strong enough.

Forget it.

Why?

Because you can’t go back. You’re dead. You came out of a grave. You want to knock on the door of your house and say to your father: Surprise! Go ahead. But then don’t complain when he drops dead on you, struck down by a lightning heart attack.

Okay, but I can’t stay here. The watchman’s coming. Maybe he’ll only find a puddle of water. Or some mist in the air. But if he sees me? If I don’t melt and I don’t dissolve.

I don’t want to go see Muriel. Don’t want to tell her that her son died with me that day. Died for me. And that I couldn’t drag him
my open grave. Now it’s smelling the air. I thought it was. Not really sure what. But above all, I don’t know how I ended up in this tree. Because I’m in the plane tree. Among the branches. Perched where the trunk divides in two. I don’t know how this happened. I heard a rustling. And when I saw something moving, I thought. A wolf. Some wild animal. Or worse. And I jumped. That is, I thought I jumped. But instead I’m on the tree. I flew backward four meters. It’s not possible. For that matter, neither is it possible to emerge from a tomb pushing away the stone like a heavy blanket.

The fox is looking around. Maybe it’s looking for me. If it saw me. I can’t figure it out. I ought to come down from this tree. But what if it bites me. Do foxes bite?

I wish I had my encyclopedic dictionary. There are a lot of things I could check. Things I don’t know. If foxes bite, for example. However, no encyclopedic dictionary is going to tell me whether I’ll be smashed to pieces if I jump down from up here. Or simply float down like a feather. Live people would destroy themselves with a jump like that. Perhaps a few wouldn’t, but only the athletes. I can try to come down taking great care, of course, but if I don’t take the chance now I never will. Unless I begin to learn, I’ll be up here for eternity. On this tree, waiting for Robin. A dead thing perched in a tree, waiting for her sweetheart, who’s as dead as she is and even more so, to break a gravestone and come and save her. I’m sure I’ll get carried away. Singing and laughing and clapping my hands until they find me. Then they’ll come and get me and stuff me back in the pit. They’ll reinforce the gravestone with a sheet of steel and pour in concrete. They’ll say: she was confused. They’ll say: like many. They’ll say: like all of them. Just put her back to sleep. That’s

clothing. Shoes. And wait for Robin. But to wait for him, I’ll have to come back here at night. Now it’s getting simpler, no?

Sure, you’re doing great, Mirta.

One step at a time. The sun’s about to come up. And the watchman will arrive. If I don’t melt and I don’t dissolve into nothing, I can hide in the woods. I can find something to eat there as well. Eat. Do the dead eat?

I don’t know, we’ll discuss this later. We’ll see. What difference does it make now, Mirta. Go on. Go on!

I have to find some clothes. But to find them I must go into town. This white shroud makes me look like a ghost. Out of place. I need jeans, a sweater, some boots. Or a pair of Nikes. Maybe a jacket, although I’m not cold. But if it’s winter, I’ll be conspicuous without a jacket. So I can try to get all these things. Return to the woods tonight. And wait.

Certainly Mirta. Why didn’t you think of this before! Robin will maybe come out tomorrow night. After all, he’s a man.

Yeah, and?

Maybe it’s different for men. And he’s bigger. I mean, older than you. Taller. More robust. Robin’s twice as big as you. Maybe he needs twice as much time, what do you think?

Yes, it could be. Very likely he’ll wake up tomorrow night. And from then on, he’ll take care of everything. Maybe we’ll go to Belgium, to see Muriel. He always knows what he wants, and how to get it. Now I have to get organized. Get away from here. The watchman could come any minute. To clean up. To chat with the dead. Ha ha. Well, a laugh never did anyone any harm. What’s that noise? Robin? No, it doesn’t come from the tomb.

A sort of pitter-patter behind me!

There’s a fox under the tree. Red. With a big tail. It’s sniffing the
what graveyard watchmen are for. To put the ones who get confused back to bed. The ones who one fine day, toss aside the gravestone like a heavy blanket and take a deep breath of fresh air. They’ll say: come down little one, don’t be afraid, we’ll take you home. And when I come down, they’ll jump me and tie me up with iron chains. And they’ll drop me into holes in the earth, while I go on screaming until the end of time. In the dark.

JUMP, MIRTA!

Nice. Some aspects to this death are. Absolutely unexpected.

The fox has fled. Raised its tail. And off it went through the woods. Maybe I would have frightened it anyway, alive or dead. Because they’re wild animals. They’re afraid of everything. But that’s not the point. The fox saw me. Animals are different, though. They sense unusual presences. In any case, it’s something.

Something? It’s a lot more than something. You came down from the tree, with a little jump. A small four-meter jump. You didn’t get smashed to pieces. And the fox saw you. You’re making progress, Mirta, great progress.

Yes, but the problem is the watchman. What do I do? Do I wait to see whether he, too, can see me? Suppose I’m not alive. Suppose I’m alive.

Alive?

An apparent death, why not? Maybe they merely thought I was dead and they buried me. While instead I was alive. Am alive.

Well then, tell me how you got out of the tomb?

With the force of desperation. In emergencies some people find they have unexpected energy. There are quite a few cases on record. People who swim for days in freezing water. Who manage to overcome an aggressor far stronger than they are. Who fall from the fifth floor and don’t suffer a scratch. The brain has little-known powers.

You’re on the wrong track, Mirta. Track like a railroad.

Why shouldn’t it be true? I’m alive, that’s all.


I was scared.

Fear’s not enough.

Wait, let’s consider this. How did I determine I was dead? Why not reason the other way round? What makes you think you’re alive?

I’m here. The fox saw me. I’m just overexcited. Freaked out. I was buried alive, you know. I’m under shock. I had to overturn a marble gravestone to get out of there. And the whole time I thought I was dead. A filthy dead thing. Actually the miracle is that I’m still able to think.

And what do you intend to do at this point?

Wait for the watchman. Explain the situation. Call Papà and Mamma. An ambulance. I’m in a pitiful state. Utterly dehydrated. Nearly dead of hunger. That’s why I don’t feel the cold. Don’t feel the warmth. My thermal sensor, or whatever you call it, is shot.

Of course, Mirta. Of course.

Fortunately, I’ve been reasoning all along. Grasping every clue. Putting stone on stone. Methodically. To preserve my sanity.

Sure, Mirta.

Hasty burials were all but the rule in the Middle Ages. Later on, when they went and opened the tombs, the discovered that people had moved. They found them in, shall we say, shocking poses. Archaeologists found terrible things when they went to open the tombs. Over the course of the centuries and right up to the 19th century, and the 20th. They had no certainties, you know. They relied on empirical methods to diagnose a state of
Life. Check your wrist. And tell me what you feel.

In the diary he kept during the First World War while he was fighting as a volunteer on the Eastern Front, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed that his mode of thinking was dialogical. It played out, that is, as a conversation between himself and another. I always imagine I’m talking with a friend, he wrote. The philosophy professor last year told us that the dialogic form was one of the best ways to organize our thoughts. It goes back to Plato and his Socratic dialogues. Philosophy has always been one of my favorite subjects. So I read Wittgenstein’s secret diaries with passionate interest. And that was the subject of my final year thesis. About Wittgenstein, in his twenties in the inferno of World War I, making notes toward his Tractatus. I make particular reference, obviously, to the diary. Which represents the chronicle of his treatise. My paper was much appreciated...
The air smells sweet. Everywhere, birds are trilling. Squirrels race up and down the branches. An enchanted forest. I’m walking barefoot, shoes in hand. I can hear the frost crackling under my heels. It’s winter. It may still be February. Or maybe this is another winter. I don’t know. I don’t know where I am. I don’t know when. I’ve known these woods forever, but everything feels different. I’m lost.

I can hear car noise. In the distance I see the state highway, the road that leads down to my town. And climbs up toward Mt. Subasio on the other side. I’ve never been in the woods at this hour. I might risk meeting Papà. He goes hunting at the first light of dawn. But this is February. If it’s still February, 2002, I doubt that Papà will have a great desire to go hunting in the woods at dawn. He’ll still be in bed. With Mamma. Maybe they won’t even be sleeping. They’ll be crying.

My house isn’t far away. A couple of kilometers. A villa in a residential area outside town built in the 1950s, a kilometer from Porta Romana, the entrance to the center. My mother didn’t like the old, damp houses in town, so many stairs and dark hallways. So they bought one of these new villas, just before they got married. At the end of the 1970s. It’s a nice house. On the ground floor we have a huge living area. A kitchen. A study. Upstairs are the bedrooms. Even though Marcolino doesn’t like to sleep in his and always ends up in my parents’ bed. Until last year, he used to come into my room. But now that I have a house in Perugia. I mean, had a house in Perugia. Because I really don’t think they’ll let me go back there. I don’t think I have any place to go back to. Not a single place anywhere on this entire planet. Nowheresville, as Robin would say. But maybe I do. Muriel’s. But I can’t go to Muriel’s without Robin. And anyway, how could I get all the way to Belgium without documents, without money, without any shoes?

The top floor of my house is the attic, my playroom. I still have my dolls up there. And trunks full of things from when I was small. Toys, Carnival costumes, presents I was given. And then school notebooks, sketchbooks, brushes, paints. I used to like to draw when I was little. I call it the playroom out of habit, although now it’s become my study. I have a desk and my books. Things I write and then hide deep in the trunks. I spent the afternoons here when I was in liceo. Now I only go up there on Sundays when I’m at home. But I often stay over in Perugia on Sundays as well. To study. And for Robin. To be able to stay with him without family interference. Sunday’s always been a bad day for him. When I understood that, I began to go home on weekends less and less often. I’ve always worried that sooner or later he would do something stupid. And that he’d do it on a Sunday.

There’s a big yard around the house, almost an extension of the woods. There’s also a cellar, which Mamma has fixed up as a laundry room, so that when it rains she can still hang up the washing. Or rather Susy can hang it up. She’s our house help. We’re all very attached to her, and she to us. Actually, if it wasn’t for Susy, who comes over every once in a while, our apartment in Perugia would resemble a bombed-out junk heap. She knew about Robin, I told her. She said that if Robin had come after her, she’d have been a doormat for him in two minutes. And to hell with Fabrizio, her boyfriend. Susy was the first person to tell me that Robin was doing drugs. She knows everything that’s going on in town. But she sees it the way I do. She thinks love can cure all. He’s just a kid who’s grown up badly, back and forth between his father and his mother like a package sent from Italy to Belgium and back. Children get confused by
that sort of tug of war. So it’s best to think carefully before having them. Robin should have thought twice himself before dragging me out of that pit.

I’m sitting under an oak tree. It’s large, and leafy. I feel protected. Although I’m still keeping an ear out. Still thinking someone’s calling me from deep in the woods. I imagine Robin emerging from his grave, seeing mine all topsy turvy, and running into the woods immediately. And when he finally finds me, he breaks out laughing. Because of this absurd dress. And I laugh too, because it’s not like they put people in their graves wearing washed-out jeans. They probably dressed him in double-breasted, Or in wedding clothes. And so as soon as we find each other, we’ll start laughing and ripping these ridiculous clothes off and.

Do the dead do it? How do they do it?

Whatever, afterwards we’ll go into town. So early that no one will see us sneaking along the back streets toward Robin’s house. We’ll go up the stairs in the misty first light of day, and into the house. Then we’ll lock the door with a key, and finally have a nice hot bath. And decide what to do. Where to go. I’m sure that Robin will choose Belgium. Not that it will be easy to explain to Muriel what happened, but I’m sure she’ll understand. Plus, we’ll be free in a foreign country. Nobody knows us. We can go anywhere. Travel. See the world. Free and happy. Forever.

I have my arms tight around the trunk of the oak tree. I’d like to cry, but I don’t know how. I’d like to throw up, even more difficult. It’s not my head that’s spinning, it’s the whole world rotating on itself. For eternity. If I don’t stick close to the oak, it might slip away from under my feet and abandon me in the blackness of space. In the immensity of the universe. Floating on nothing.

But I have the oak. And I’m going to cling to it until the world stops being dizzy and slows down this crazy rotation. Until it comes to its senses again.

A ray of sunlight through the leaves.

My mother liked the woods. But she hated hunting. Like me, as it happens. We liked walking in the woods. When I was small and the weather was fine, we’d put on our heavy shoes and come here to walk. Mamma always had a stick with her. She was afraid of snakes. And also of stray dogs, a bit. We would walk under the leafy treetops, like now. The sun would shine through the branches, leaving a bright pattern on the grass. Now, too, there’s a bright pattern on the grass. Perhaps the world is coming to a halt, slowly. I stretch out an arm. I think, now I’m going to melt. Become one of these bright patterns interlaced on the undergrowth. Or a puddle of water in the grass. I loosen my grip on the oak tree. Stretch out my arms. Lie on the grass. The sun is shining on me. I close my eyes and wait. To die once again. Forever.

The first time I saw the sun I was three years old. I raised my eyes toward the window in Mamma’s room and I stared at it. Two days of red eyes. Everyone in the family remembers the episode and they still laugh about it.

The students always called strikes at school on sunny days. Nobody wanted to strike when it rained.

Sundays I used to go with Francesco to the amusement park Città della Domenica. We’d buy cotton candy. It would sparkle
I sit down on the grass. The sun floods the undergrowth. The rays stroke my skin. I look at my hands. They’re not melting. I lift up my dress. Look at my legs. Crazy, they didn’t even put underpants on me. But in any case, everything is as it should be. The sun doesn’t bother me.

In the woods, the important thing is to keep out of sight. But I really have to find some clothes. I can’t keep walking around barefoot wearing this white thing. They’re going to come ... The authorities will show up with their sirens and flashing lights. They’ll telephone Mamma and Papà. Wait. Think. I can’t. Think, Mirta, think!

I can’t even begin to think about being able to think. I’ve committed a terrible mistake. Irreparable. Get out. Get out of town. Immediately!

Robin. I can’t leave Robin. You can come back tonight, but they’ll be parking a police car there. You understand Mirta? They’ll say your grave was defiled. That people are stealing corpses from graveyards. Mirta, what were you thinking?

Nothing, I wasn’t thinking. What time is it. When does the watchman get here. Can I do it? Can I try and repair the damage? Repair what damage? Are you crazy?

I have to repair the damage. I absolutely must try. An absolute priority. Repair the damage.

like a golden ball of wool under the sun. But Francesco was too childish, he wasn’t right for me.

When my grandmother died I was ten years old. I was terribly sorry for her. But there was lots of sun. Many flowers. I felt so very happy.

The day before I died, the weather was gorgeous. Miranda and I, who were studying, regretted that the weather was so lovely. We could have put our books aside and taken a stroll to Corso Vannucci, it occurs to me now.

The first day of school, when Sonia tripped me, I fell down and hit my head, and instead of the sun, which was flooding into the classroom, poor Mirta saw stars, the teacher said.

There was a ray of sunlight shining on the white sink. I hit it dead center with the first surge of vomit. Luisa was holding my head and she never stopped talking so that I wouldn’t hear what they were saying in the other room — but I heard it all the same. Magda and Paco were furious with Robin, they were telling him that he should leave me alone. I would have liked to run in there and chase them away with a kick, but I was vomiting again, although I felt great. Then Paco told Robin that he was really a scary bastard. I wanted to run in and defend Robin but I threw up again, and then everything went black.

The terrace of the apartment in Perugia faces east. In the morning Veronica and Miranda lie out there tanning. Me, no. The sun gives me hives.

ENOUGH.
I wasn’t far away. I’ve arrived at our graves. But it’s no longer possible to repair the damage. The watchman’s talking on his cell, right in front of my open grave. Mamma mia, what a disaster. Pieces of wood everywhere.

Get out of here, Mirta, on the double. Five minutes from now and all hell is going to break loose.

I know I have to get out of here. Silly viper still in my way. Shoo, go back to sleep before I bite you. I have to leave. Don’t want to make noise. Although in the end this would be a good moment to find out whether he — whether the living — can see me.

There’s no time! Get out of here, Mirta, stop making excuses!

I’m hiding out in the woods. But I won’t stay here much longer. I don’t think this is a safe place. I leapt up into the oak tree. It’s huge. Up here I feel relatively secure and I can see what’s happening down below. Two police cruisers have arrived. Without sirens. Maybe this isn’t an emergency. Dead people, you know. There are at least five people around my empty tomb. The idiots are stomping all over Robin’s grave. Walking on his heart. Stay down there, my darling, don’t come out now. It’s awful being up here, unable to do anything. At least I can keep watch. One guy’s gone down into my pit. Hey, look around, buddy. My fear is that they’ll decide to search the woods. Whenever anything weird happens the police search the whole area. Put up roadblocks. But this isn’t a murder. Or a kidnapping. Or even a robbery. I don’t know how the police behave in cases like this.

I know jack all, that’s the point. All I know are poems, paintings, songs, books and encyclopedic dictionaries. And films. In the movies the police search the crime scene. And this is certainly a crime. Profanation. Stealing a corpse. They’ll think that someone came during the night, opened up my tomb and took

Where are you off to, are you crazy?
To the cemetery. Mamma mia, how fast I can run now that I’m dead. I’m flying.

* —

The cemetery wall. I have to climb it on the side away from the entrance. The watchman may have already arrived. In any case our tombs are in the newer part, and so there’s a chance I might make it. Throw everything in the pit, the earth and the pieces of wood, and try to fix the gravestone. I might even try to force it back together in the ground. Throw a bunch of flowers on top. Slow down the discovery. Okay, let’s jump here. So many graves. Obvious, there are more dead than there are living in a town. Wait, it’s a stone angel, kneeling. But what if there are two kneeling stone angels. Or three. Or ten. What’s that noise?

Crawl, Mirta. Crawl between the tombs.

The kneeling stone angel. This is the one. I can’t be far off. OH, GROSS!

A viper. A filthy, disgusting, terrifying viper. Inches away from my face. It’s going to bite me. It’s going to jump on me and. And what? Poison me? Arrest my heart?

Let’s have a look at you, nincompoop. Sleeping, weren’t you? Hiding among the graves. Did I disturb you? Let’s play. Little finger against your little head. No, don’t run away, let’s see you, come on. JUST TRY TO KILL ME YOU LITTLE PRIK.

The watchman!
growth. There are some tiny hamlets scattered along the road to Subasio. I’m thinking of those hamlets. There are many vacation houses there, open only in summer. I can find clothes there. Food. A flashlight so that I can walk at night. Last night I didn’t need one, really. However, the moon was out. Luckily it’s a crescent moon. Wait a moment. The night I died there was no moon. It was a beautiful evening, the sky over the dump was filled with stars, but there was no moon. So that was the phase of the new moon. Can it be that only a few days have passed? What’s the interval between the new moon and the first sliver, the crescent? If only I hadn’t always copied Francesco’s astronomical homework. Let me think. Last night was Saturday. No, the night I died was Saturday, Saturday, 16 February. Practically Sunday. Whatever. Tonight there’s a sliver of a moon in the sky. Two, three days, four? How many days have gone by? Maybe a century? A century, no. The police officers were wearing their usual uniforms. But they’re men. Men wear the same things forever. To understand if this is still 2002, I just need to see a girl. Certainly not a century, but years, yes, might have passed. However, there were no photographs on the tombs.

Here it is, where the road forks. On one side it climbs up the mountain, on the other it coasts the road to Foligno. I’ll keep going along the one fork; I’m thinking about one of those hamlets. I used to climb up there with Robin sometimes. He was fond of Subasio.

I must wait for Robin. He’ll come out. And find me here, nearby. I’ll come back. Stay here on lookout, perched in the oak trees. Crouched in the shadow of the stone angels. Between vipers and tomb lamp. Waiting. As long as it takes. But now I must go away. Find some clothes. Something to eat. Money. A place to hide. Find out what day it is and what year, as the song says. And above all, I must not forget who I am. I’ve only been awake for a few hours, but I’ve already understood what the risk is here. Being overwhelmed by death. Forgetting who I am. Forgetting Mirta.

The police officers are still at my grave. Looking, touching, taking photographs. They’re all there talking around that empty pit. The watchman goes back and forth. Never stops talking. Their cellphones ring. I jump down from the oak. I could run like the wind, but I prefer looking around me. To remember the place. I’ll walk along protected by the woods, taking the road that climbs Mt. Subasio. To put some distance between myself and the town is my only precise goal. Away from the farmed areas as well. From the groves of olive trees. From populated areas, in short. The road up the mountain is ideal. With its stands of ilexes, its beechwoods, the great oaks, the dark under-
drive, to make it through the underbrush. It was very exciting. Knowing that the road was closed and there was no one but us for kilometers all around. Alone in the world. We made love slowly. Among the silvery grey bushes scattered up on the summit of Subasio. At sunset. Under a green sky, the roads red with limestone, the meadows, silver. It’s glorious, the summit. The road unwinding through cloud arches. The jeep suspended between the sky and the nimbo-cumulus. A lunar landscape. Robin spread a cover on the grass. He undressed me. And kissed me all over. We made love on the moon, under a green sky, among the silver bushes. Robin offered me the moon, that’s why I’ve come back. Many people want to offer you the moon. My parents did. So did Francesco. But it was Robin who gave it to me. He brought me all the way up here. Look at what life can be, he was saying. What love can be. Death. Look, Mirta, look!

There’s a cap of thick cloud around the peak of Subasio. Let’s hope it doesn’t rain this afternoon. I’m walking through a holm oak woods. I should be getting to the village soon. I’m keeping the road in view, so I don’t lose my way. But when I approach the village, I have to be very careful. Some old people still live here, An artist or two. And the cleaners come all the way up here to air out peoples’ vacation houses. I’m probably a disaster. My dress is in rags. Muddy. Ripped. I’ve been climbing trees since this morning. And crawling on the ground. My feet are covered with mud. I’m hiding for fear I’ll be recognized. Who am I kidding, who would recognize me in this state? Not even my cat.

The first houses. I run among the holm oaks, leaving the last shreds of my dress on the lower branches. I can’t wait to be free of this shroud. It’s ridiculous. Returning from the dead without even a pair of underpants. Untangling the snares of death without any idea where I should be going. But I must. Resist. Life, as well as death. Get dressed. Eat. Find some money. Wait. These are the priorities. And not let myself be seen by anyone. I’ll think about the rest later, when Robin comes back. When we’re together again, we’ll think about everything. Two people reason a thousand times better. And there’s not so much silence around when there are two of us.

This one. Why not? It’s slightly set apart from the other houses. The shutters are closed. And the sun is high. People get up early here. To take advantage of the sunlight. It’s probably uninhabited. These houses usually are. Vacation house, full of clothing, coats, shoes, provisions. And I’m so strong, I can carry a ton of stuff.

There’s a door on the woods side of the house. A service entrance. If someone’s asleep inside I can run away. I’m very fast. Run away and disappear in the woods. Why do I feel so... someone else too. And now this new Mirta must break down a door and enter someone else’s house, she has no alternative.
Carmen Pellegrino  07  Earth is Falling
It was after her husband died that Ada de Paolis began to shut herself in the poppy room, occasionally at first, then more and more often. As soon as I realised what was going on in there, I did everything I could to stop her, but she didn’t listen to me. I realised later that she couldn’t possibly have done otherwise: without her husband she was like a river without banks, a heart teaching itself to die, feigning death among the living and life among the dead. I wonder now whether she may have been right after all.

It is madness, really, to think it’s enough just to cling on to those who remain. The opposite is true. We sit among the dead and they become dear to us. As we listen to them, the meaning of their words lives within us, and we
though he were explaining something important. Now he was
all hard and black, a real tree trunk; the men who had heaved
him out of the church porch and carried him home set him
down on the floor in the hallway, removing their hats and
crossing themselves several times.

Ada looked at him. "What sort of a joke is this?" she said, covering her face first
with one hand then the other.

"Giorgio! Listen to me, Giorgio!" she kept saying.
"Oh Giorgio, do hurry and get washed. It's nearly dinner
time and you can't eat in that filthy state."

I didn't know whether this vision was part of my imagina-
tion or rather a sign of destiny venting its anger against the fam-
ily. I tore my eyes away from it and noticed that ...
visible, but I saw that she was holding an unfolded sheet. I beckoned to
her to come and cover the corpse, which she did.

"I don't recognise him under that sheet," Ada said, turning to
me a moment after the body was covered, and I could already
hear in her voice the moan that comes before weeping. The
moment before the outburst.

"Carry him through, into the poppy room. Peppa will show
you where," she said, turning back to the men who had brought
the body home.

Then, to me, "I don't know what will happen now, but I do
know that tonight Giorgio will speak, and I will hold him close
to me. My breast is still warm."

Then she shut herself in the poppy room, only reappearing
two days later when she finally consented to hold the funeral.
By then, at any rate, her face seemed relaxed: whatever pain she
had suffered seemed to be forgotten.

It began when they brought home the dishevelled body of
Giorgio de Paolis. Ada didn't immediately approach the strange
scarecrow that her husband had become — he who had been as
handsome as a film star: distinguished grey hair, a fine, straight
nose, and then his way of talking slowly, ever so slowly, as
should accept it. Sometimes they reward us by returning home
in the strangest of guises. Then again, none of the dead are ever
completely gone, just as none of the living are ever completely
here. With the dead, we can stop drowning out our pain with
peals of bells, stubbornly attempting to drive it away. Pain
makes its rounds, mysterious to us. Sometimes it is inert, like a
scar. Sometimes it jabs like a thorn under a fingernail, and stays
there. Always, it binds us together. So it was that Ada de Paolis
recognised her own pain in that of others, in the same sincere,
incontrovertible way, and she felt herself part of that pain. She
trusted in the appearance of signs, coincidences revealing the
fragility of the divide between us and them. She would say that
to meet them there was no need to go to a cemetery, and she
became convinced of this when she observed that, on some
days, the sun rose in an entirely unusual way; on such days she
would watch the water flowing by or sit on a swing under a tree.

I still struggled to understand, because I couldn’t believe that
this thing, the very thought of which makes us tremble from
head to foot, was something I would have to meet before my
own time came, and so frequently. Later, when I saw all those
who set up home within our walls, part of a pact that had noth-
ing mysterious about it, I understood that the great divide is
simply a threshold where we wait, as in the bubble of a dream.
This very house was partly spared from the landslide, with the
precise intention that it should be their final abode. That is why
they return. And why it is my home.
visit, Marcello turned unexpectedly to Maccabeo: ‘Have you seen the memorial stone for my father in front of the church?’ he asked, inspecting his fingertips.

‘It’s very nice,’ Maccabeo replied. ‘It most certainly is not! They made a terrible mistake writing our name: it says De Paolis, with a capital ‘D’ instead of a small one, which completely removes the aristocratic origin.’

‘It’s not such a great loss, young man. On the other side, among the dead, no one will mind,’ he said, folding his hands in his lap and settling back to gaze out of the window, waiting patiently for Ada.

Marcello gave one of his shrill bursts of laughter before vanishing from the room. The next day he insisted on preparing Maccabeo’s cup of tea himself. There was no dissuading him. He carried a long handled ladle, which he used to stir the tea in the teapot, and then used the flat part of the ladle to spread a thin layer of the mixture of squashed worms and warm water. He told me that himself, with a sort of bestial triumph.

* — Marcello

My home was besieged by vexatious yokels right up until the moment we left the old town, largely because my mother opened the doors wide to welcome them, although I have never understood why. They came to our house whenever they wanted and drank from the cups that Estella was quick to fill with coffee or cocoa, although they were disconcerted at the idea of absorbing any liquid that was not their usual daily broth. As they drank, they emitted the most frightful slurs and talked endlessly about other poor people afflicted with boring illness—
es, or about arguments and betrayals, so that eventually half the
town took to gathering at our house.

The whole business reached a peak when my mother was
persuaded by the local nuns to “offer the poor souls of the town
a few hours of comfort and joy on the occasion of the approach-
ing Christmas festivities.” This comfort was to be administered
in our very house.

The idea was received enthusiastically by the ridiculous elite
of Alento. They agreed on the necessity of a lovely, charitable
celebration, but what they really wanted was a way of getting
their consciences clear before Christmas. At our expense.

Estella’s face flushed with ominous happiness at the news
and she set off like a dog after a hare in her haste to have every-
thing ready in time. The mere fact of knowing that her own sort
of people would be coming into the house clearly sent her into
a state of high excitement. You could tell by the way her eyes,
usually a sort of fossilised blue, began to shine.

Within two days a gigantic Christmas tree was erected in the
hall, its branches laden with an explosion of little bags of choco-
late and candied fruit.

On the evening of the 23rd December, a few of the local peas-
ants’ offspring presented themselves at our door and immedi-
ately disappeared down the corridors, looking around open-
mouthed. One of them, decked out in a pair of short trousers in
Turkish style, caught sight of the brass banister. “It’s made of
gold!” he cried out, and I nodded; it would have been useless to
explain the difference.

When they had calmed down, I was able to observe them
more closely. They looked incredibly uncomfortable and, forced
into their party clothes, prematurely old.

Several of the boys had fierce partings dividing their heads in
two; among the girls one in particular stood out: she was wear-
ing a hat that had lost its brim. Her name was Lucia Parisi and
she had been in the same class as me for a few years. She was
modestly dressed, even clean, and she lived in the countryside
near Terzo di Mezzo, but she wasn’t stupid, far from it. The
teachers could see that she wasn’t a clod, unlike others. Despite
this, she soon stopped going to school, even before I did. When
everyone else removed their hats she tried her best to pull hers
off but failed, and wore it for the whole evening like a bonnet,
which gave her a particularly wild look. Her eyes shone out
from underneath the hat and darted about the room, wide with
amazement at finding herself in an enchanted place. She turned
around slowly in a circle, her gaze moving over the porcelain fig-
ures, the plaster mouldings on the walls, the silver, the crystal; she
even stared at the books and the paintings, never once taking her
eyes off these visions. It was as though she had set off on a voyage
all of her own and, through the dialogue between her eyes and
their surroundings, was discovering a world that had been closed
to her until now. At one point she tripped over her own feet and
fell over; she stayed there on the floor for a few moments, embar-
rassed, until Estella ran over and gave her a chocolate. She took
a large bite and immediately recovered from her fall.

That evening she was accompanied by her father, one Con-
siglio Parisi, who stayed and waited for her, slouching on the
front steps. My mother joined him at one point. Their conversa-
tion looked so intimate that I couldn’t resist going to eavesdrop,
but I was disappointed: he was talking about a dead daughter,
someone called Mariuccia, and my mother was comforting him.
I made a vulgar gesture and walked off. I saw him around the
house again several times after that, looking for my mother. She
allowed a closeness to exist between them that I simply couldn’t
understand. And, what was worse, she dragged me into it as well.

The other guests spent a lot of time staring around them that evening, but their main focus was the tree covered with treats, and they thronged around it when my mother began to hand out the sweets. They had seemed stunned up until now, but they suddenly woke up, wiping their watery eyes on their sleeves and rushing up to receive their gift. At one point, I saw one of them had got upset about a little puddle of urine that had formed at his feet. I looked at my mother incredulously but she simple turned the other way. When it was time to leave, they gathered in the hallway and, seen from the top of the stairs, they formed a ragged caravan ready to set off for the new world.

Except on these delightful, charitable occasions, the peasants were left to freeze. The cordiality shown to them, and the generosity with which the well-off treated them during the festive period, were no more than a show influenced by vast and complex self-interest. They only came up into the town on certain prescribed days, and the rest of the time they lived in the countryside around. Shepherds, drivers, cowherds... At school, their children were confined to the benches under the windows so that their stink could escape through the cracks. It was the same in church: they were right at the back, exhausted but standing up nonetheless, hearing all about sacred mountains but knowing nothing except their own mountains.

My father had donated two pairs of benches to the parish. One pair was lawfully ours and was reserved for us, a fact confirmed by the brass plaque bearing our name. This pair was near the altar, on the left, directly underneath the statue of the Madonna of the Landslide, certainly the best position given the context. The other pair did not have a plaque and was therefore available to anyone. Still, the peasants never sat on those benches, not even when part of the church roof fell down and, in need of strong arms to carry out the reconstruction, the gentry no longer felt it so vital to maintain the social order.

The benches my father donated were soon joined by others, given by equally well-off families, all very correct, religious people, locked in endless conflict about the positioning of the benches. The priests suggested a system of biannual rotation from which the peasants were excluded, naturally. They didn’t take offence, though. After all, they knew as well as we did that once mass was over they had to go back to their fields because the community was for other people. They had their sheep to shear three times a year, and the fertil pools that were never drained, and the wild plants: rye grass, clover and all the medicinal plants they could possibly want. Sooner or later some of them would go to the pools and find leaves to make herbal teas, poultices, philtres or remedies. Then, the community would pay up without a murmur. For once the peasants had the last laugh.

— Estella

Many of Alento’s inhabitants passed through this house: the town came in and then disappeared little by little, casting its shadow on the walls, a shadow that still falls now, the only inheritance of those years. What’s left to me isn’t much, I know. In any case, how could I hope to cling on to anything more than the grace of a shadow that passes over the walls, when outside the wind has broken the shutters, and inside the plaster is falling all around? I carry within me the memory of gestures and simpering words, but before me I have only the house, turned in on itself, bent over like a dying beast trying to find some repose.
I have no pointless belief in the everlasting: I know the house won’t be here forever. I see the cracks, the caving in. Whenever I’m near the walls I stroke their rough surface, touching it like wounded skin. If this big house keeps on resisting, I think — if it can endure, if it can endure even in this reduced state, if it holds out and holds out — then I can endure too, one day good, the next bad, from one wound to the next in this temporary dwelling of mine, in this place where I can exist, just a little longer, a little longer.

And then there they are, and the house still waits for them even though it’s been damaged by all those stormy nights, broken in so many places. I’d be lying if I said they didn’t notice: I see them looking around and glancing at the beams. Still, they’re full of anticipation and never fail to keep their appointment with the house, as though it were a bride. I receive them in the room looking out over the elm — the tree possessed by the night, which liberates us all from the great affliction of reality — and together, in our vigil, we believe we are levelling destinies.

Once, towards the end of a rainy March, even the priest came to request our hospitality when part of the presbytery fell down after a particularly violent landslide, and we had no choice but to take him to the house.

Don Basilio, hair carefully pomaded, appeared in the afternoon with a great rustling of vestments, and after discussing the landslide and his rheumatism with Signora de Paolis, sat down at the table well before the usual dinner time, announcing with a rumble of his stomach the hunger that was devouring him. He had nostrils that were permanently dilated and eyes that darted to follow the slightest movement of crockery, and then that round bubble of a stomach that could have provided shelter for several species of animal better than any tree. Once he had found a position that best accommodated his abdomen — an abdomen that sloped down and blended so seamlessly into his groin that he was known locally as the Sack — he summoned Peppa with a wave of his arm, ordering her to bring him a bowl of hot broth which would do no end of good to his bones. The rain had been falling and falling in torrents for days, as it does in these parts when it sets its mind to it. The priest seemed unperturbed: all he could hear was the call of his stomach, so after the soup, which must have barely taken the edge off his appetite, he invited us to be seated at the table so that dinner might begin in earnest. Ada was visibly annoyed by this but did not express her thoughts out loud.

We were only three at dinner because Marcello had decided to stay in his room, unwilling as always to accommodate intrusions of this kind.

"To have a well-functioning digestive system is to be enslaved," began the priest as soon as the roast served with potatoes and raisins was placed in front of him. "Yes indeed, because the whole mechanism works at exactly the same time," he added, taking his first generous mouthful.

"Which mechanism are you referring to?" Ada asked him. She hadn’t failed to notice the faint sound, rather like an ebbing tide, that was emanating from the priest’s guts.

"The insertion and expulsion of food, dear lady. Whatever people may say, both of these things happen here and now, at the table, even though the emission occurs later, when we are seated elsewhere. Our stomachs place us immediately and eternally at the mercy of our bowels, and this all happens at the table."

"Do you not think this an inappropriate subject for conversation at a table where we are all eating?" Ada asked, her proud little mouth trembling in amazement.

"As unpleasant as these things are, dear Ada, this is the..."
been obvious: this festival was a popular one, so much so that for the whole of June the town was busy with preparations, the streets filling up with brightly painted arches, colourful banners and flags depicting the statue wrapped in her long brown robe.

“Have you got anything strong for me? A liqueur, or a little whisky?”

I went over to the drinks cabinet, which was set within a large display case. I could only find the end of an old bottle of walnut liqueur — the cabinet hadn’t been re-stocked since Gior-gio de Paolis had died. I gave the priest his little glassful and asked him again what had happened to the statue’s robe.

“I found it was worn at the elbows and the hips from the pressure of the plaster, and was very surprised by this unexpected wear.”

“How is it possible?” I asked. “The church is always damp and it rained a lot last winter. I must point the finger of blame at the rain.”

“But it’s only a year since the last new robe was made. It takes time for damp to have that effect,” I said, utterly confident of what I was saying.

There was a pause, during which the priest eventually lit his cigar and took four or five big mouthfuls of smoke. Then he spoke again.

“Well, I must tell you that the new robe was never made. When the statue’s gold disappeared a year ago it was easy to convince the parishioners that it had been used to purchase... it only needed a quick wash and a touch of wax on the belt, and nobody was any the wiser. They’re idiots, these people.”

“And what happened to the gold?” I asked.

unavoidable cycle of every living being. There is no way around it.”

“It’s strange that you of all people should say that,” she replied, giving him a look full of disdain.

“Rubbish!” he exclaimed, “I quote Psalm 138, For thou hast possessed my reins et cetera, et cetera. I will praise thee for I am fearfully and wonderfully made, et cetera, et cetera. Marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well...” His mouth was full of meat as he talked and, never once putting down his fork, he shovelled in the rest of the potatoes on his plate one after another.

At that moment Ada, pleading an illness that almost certainly didn’t exist, got up from the table; as she was making her excuses I saw a scornful look in her eye that the priest did not seem to notice. I remained alone at the table with him and he seemed cheerful, although the gases that escaped his control every now and then made me think that there must be some unwholesome stagnation afflicting that Sack.

After dinner we moved to the sitting room and took our places near the window that looks out over the square and the elm tree. We decided to have some tea. By that time a few rays of moonlight were falling on the tree, making the great thing look like an old man with a white beard.

“This, dear Estella, is a night for ideas,” the priest said eventually, but it was as though he were talking to himself as he sank into the armchair that had belonged to Signor Giorgio.

“Ideas?” I echoed, looking at his fingers. As he rolled his cigar between them they seemed to mime the gesture of counting money.

“Yes, my dear. The festival of the Madonna of the Landslide is in four months and I need to get a new robe for the statue.”

“What’s happened?” I asked, and my concern must have
“Who knows! It’s a mystery, my dear, a genuine mystery. But the loot will soon be returned, you’ll see. These fools are too afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they’ll go without anything, down to the last trinkets they possess, to get themselves a place in the statue’s protective rays.”

“You make a joke of it, but I’ve heard how you encourage people to donate, in your most powerful, well-polished tones.”

“Certainly. It is my duty to encourage. I quote: Give, and it shall be given unto you, for with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. And this: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. Is that good enough for you?”

“These people haven’t got any treasure, just plenty of moths and rust. And yet they give what they have, whenever they can.”

“But it isn’t something that comes from the heart, my girl. Underneath it all there is always petty self-interest. Let me give you an example: one year a penniless man donated a gold chain weighing at least three ounces to the statue, a donation that could only be explained by certain filthy acts this man committed when his wife was admitted to hospital with arthritis of the neck. Another year a woman cursed her sister-in-law’s dead relatives in public. The sister-in-law responded by putting a curse on her, using a lock of hair that she herself had torn out the last time they’d had a fight. That year, both women felt the need to offer the statue a great big gold bracelet: they bought it together, sharing the cost, because they were both rotten to the core. I could give other examples but they would all show the same thing: their faith is based entirely on their wretchedness.”

“You shouldn’t insult them. They’re a flock, aren’t they? Your flock. You bellow as much from the pulpit, filling the whole church with the sound. It’s up to you to guide them.”

“What could you possibly understand, my girl? These people like being under the heel: you feel them bracing themselves, stiffening, but they’re never offended, and if you squash down a little more, they surrender. Tell them to come and they come. Tell them to jump and they jump. To go away, and they go. You can skin them alive and they don’t even notice. Their minds are closed. They’re stupid.”

“You still take their flour and their chickens: they go without, but your sacristy is full. You even take all the bequests and donations. And you don’t need me to quote Deuteronomy to remind you that priests are forbidden to possess goods or receive inheritance.”

“Quote away, be my guest! These people donate in order to save their souls, certainly not for my benefit. But leave me in peace now. I need to think, and you may unwittingly have given me an idea for making a new robe.”

“May I know what this idea is?”

“The provisions, young lady, the big sacks of flour, chestnuts, walnuts and eggs that they pile into my sacristy. There’s enough there to feed an army and it will soon go mouldy because the church is damp. I’ve already put the wine and the oil in a safe place. So here is my grand plan. I shall organise a fair where everybody can come and buy all this food, as much as they want, and pay a smidgen higher than they usually would because it has spent months in the church and been blessed each day by the Holy Mass.”

“Oh, well, that’s lovely, isn’t it?” I exclaimed, no longer able
to contain myself. “The grand plan is a fraud, then. You want to allow them to buy back, at an inflated price, all the things they deprived themselves of in the first place so that they could donate them to you?”

“Fraud my foot! They’ll be grateful, just you wait. What do they need, after all? A handful of sanctified grain to scatter in the fields and sow good luck for the next harvest. They want oil, holy oil to cure headaches so that they don’t have to visit the doctor. They’d murder one another for half a dozen consecrated eggs to revive their ailing progeny better than any meat, which in any case they can’t afford.”

“I see you’ve arranged the world to suit your own ends, just so that you need never lose out,” I interrupted him, because that was really the last straw.

“What would you know about it? I assure you that they will be delighted to buy back goods that have been so close to the infinite. I am certain that they will feel compensated for all the anguish that has been inflicted on them by the finite, which continues to spurn them like dogs. For my part, I shall purchase a new robe for the statue, identical to the last one but intact. Now leave me: I need to refine the details of the idea.”

Who could say how the statue felt about this state of affairs? Doubtless rather lonely and not at all proud of this destiny. The question did not even occur to Don Basilio, who immediately immersed himself in devising the grand plan. I left the room. Outside, despite the darkness and the rain, it was spring, you could tell from the first moths that were beginning to flutter around the lamps. Here, I thought to myself, everything that is reborn in spring meets everything that is never reborn. I detested the great immemorial pacts that, from one epoch to the next, forced men into the same places, exactly the same places. I had before me the latest links in a chain that stretched back over the generations to the very beginnings of subjection. The Church, even the Church, gave little thought to this, and left these stillborn beings to flounder in their own cold sweat: its reign obviously was of this world, because time touched it and made it variable and vain. Another reason why I abandoned the cloister and the habit.

I crept up to bed, feeling my way in the darkness. It was an unquiet darkness, broken by shafts of light falling through the curtains. It’s spring, I thought, but suddenly a winter spirit returned to place its frozen hand on my heart. I heard the almost metallic sound of the dog’s nails tapping on the cobblestones. I got up to tell him to stop. I could never understand why, although he did have a kennel, he never set foot in it even when the rain was soaking him to the skin. The fact was that old Gideon, standing there outside, had always known something that I kept on discovering anew, to my bewilderment: with his high forehead and bearing of one who carries a certain purity within himself, he asked me, “How can you squeeze blood from a turnip?” “I can’t,” I replied. “You can’t,” he said.

* — Marcello

“Today is a great day,” I said to my mother when she informed me that Estella would not be coming with us to the new town.

“A great day?” she retorted. “We’re about to leave our house even though it’s the last thing we want to do. Do you call that great?”

“She won’t be coming with us and she decided that for herself. That’s a good reason to celebrate.”

My mother looked at me as though I were a cockroach.
“Estella has decided to stay in the old town, which is a courageous decision. She will stay in our house and be its guardian,” she said, standing with her fists clenched by her sides.

“How do you know? The order to leave the town was categorical and she’s taking a great risk by staying.”

“Nothing will happen to Estella,” she said, curtly, and I noticed a strange concentrated look in her eyes. Then she turned round abruptly and left the room.

I couldn’t say what my mother’s prediction was based on, or whence her divinatory arrogance came. She has always had strange presentiments, aggravated by an unshakeable, even manic, devotion to the dead. In any case, I wasn’t interested in discovering its source. I was twenty-four years old and new horizons with infinite possibilities were opening up before me. There was a general stampede underway, a collective frenzy on the road from the old town to the new. Snarling men, snarling women, snarling children. The peasants, with their faces like frozen potatoes, had decided to leave their homes: some were happy because they were going to new houses, others were crying, stroking the walls of the hovels they were leaving behind.

As for myself, I was full of positive vigour and felt optimistic about the change: no more house of resentment and privation and, especially, no more Estella. I would bundle the memory of her up in some old rags and suspend it from the ceiling like the body of a traitor who had hanged himself.

I won’t see her any more, I said to myself, I won’t see her roaming lugubriously about the house that she’s taken possession of. My heart trembled and seemed to want to cry, to free itself from this barrage of sensations. It’s over, I kept on repeating. Her eyes, those harsh, sharp eyes, won’t stare at me any more. Her pale face will be gone, and her hair, I won’t brush accidentally against that stupid hair any more.

I felt a tremendous urge to hit her once more, as I sometimes used to when she least expected it. But then came a sense of lightness, as though many weights had been lifted from me: I was finally going to free myself from her and from my obsessions, which were largely one and the same thing. Estella hadn’t died, as I hoped she would, during the eight years of our cohabitation, but now I knew that she was simply a word that I could go without.
Letizia Pezzali 08 Loyal
In the hours after our encounter at the pub near the university, my love obsession started. Obsessions come on immediately really, very quickly, or never. I was convinced that Michele was intelligent and handsome, that the way he spoke and walked was superior, that he was special, that he was strong and kind, that he was the star guiding my heart. I also pondered less refined matters — fantasies of total physical surrender, of adoration, dependence, our escape, the far-off places we’d go, and everything we’d do. I thought about what I’d wear and how I’d move.

To maintain the semblance of rational thought, some part of me did make note of the situation’s shortcomings. Perhaps there was something wrong — not
We were not going to get married. People who really love each other don’t get married. One day our love would produce a baby girl. We would name her Olivia.

Michele returned to Milan two days later. He wrote to tell me that we could meet if I wanted. He would be free between 4:30 and 7:00 p.m. That’s exactly how he put it. I told him yes. We had dinner at a restaurant close to his place. We chatted about neutral things, I can’t even remember what we said. Then he suddenly interrupted: “I have a place in Milan.”

“Oh good.” And that’s how our physical relationship started.

I rang the doorbell, climbed the stairs, the door opened, I went inside. We kissed each other immediately. I walked backward through the house to the bedroom. He lifted my skirt, undressed me, took off his pants. I joked, “It’s so hard for men to know what order to undress in. Taking off your socks is powerfully intuitive.”

Then I stopped teasing. I moved toward him. I allowed myself to reach for my desire.

I enjoyed a lot of things, actually, everything. There were particular sensations that struck me. A new person. He seemed pleased by how uninhibited I was. When we talked afterwards, he said it had to do with my generation — an idea that he stuck with, as if he’d discovered something revolutionary. He was about the object of my obsession, but maybe in how fast it had come on. Was it really as inevitable as it seemed? But my eagerness snuffed out those doubts. My IQ plummeted. A love obsession is dictated by a kind of religious faith; there is no room for doubt — the mind can’t keep up, guardians of the sacred take control, sacred passion. The spirit of teenage girl infuses everything.

I thought I should respond to him immediately, compose an endless message that started out jokingly, moved into flirtation, and turned erotic. But it wasn’t that simple. We belonged to different generations, and my generation is defined by a greater facility with communication — at least in terms of technological progress. Set aside the generational part, Michele wasn’t the kind of guy who texted; you could see that in his face. Plus, there was his work, his family. I could already taste the anguish.

I sat down at my desk, and on the last page of my mathematics for finance textbook I wrote:

_We’re going to have to set rules from the very beginning. Human nature is weak so we have to establish boundaries that will protect us. Like going on a diet, even though eating a lot of whatever you want is more fun._

I wrote it with the idea that I could mitigate my anxiety, which instead got worse. Then, without having any claim on permanence, I fantasized about his divorce. Our wedding. My brain leaped ahead and rewrote all the rules of ever-after. I saw myself with my hair pinned up — no, loose and unstyled, but beautiful — a silky pale, pink dress; closed-toe, delicate shoes and, in the background, a long wood table for the wedding feast, which would be in the middle of a field. What season? September. Though it might be better to just live together. I changed my mind. We were not going to get married. People who really love each other don’t get married. One day our love would produce a baby girl. We would name her Olivia.

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I rang the doorbell, climbed the stairs, the door opened, I went inside. We kissed each other immediately. I walked backwards through the house to the bedroom. He lifted my skirt, touched me, not too soft, not too hard. I felt happiness. I undressed quickly, but kept on the special lingerie I’d purchased specifically for the occasion. I lay down on the made bed, I turned my body this way and that, so that he could see me. I got up on my hands and knees, then lay back down. He was sitting on the bed watching me, the expression in his eyes was serious. He took off his socks before taking off his pants. I joked, “It’s so hard for men to know what order to undress in. Taking off your socks is powerfully intuitive.”

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content and basking in it. He was looking for easy explanations and thrilling discordance.

I went home and thought about what we’d done and also about the emotional construct I was starting to perceive. I stopped fantasizing about marriage or living together, not because they weren’t attractive but because I was animated by something more complex, an impulse that felt less childish. I convinced myself I had entered a new phase of life. Was Michele the one person in the world who understood me and appreciated me? The one who was going to give me the strength I needed?

We started to see each other regularly, he had a number of Italian clients for work. And he spent half the week in London with his family — I found out that he had a little girl, which made me sad. The other half of the week, he lived alone in Milan.

Our encounters were the same in terms of how they went but distinct as the emotional stakes got gradually more complicated. I took note of what we said to each other before parting, and in the moments of calm laying stretched out in bed together. It wasn’t anything especially memorable, but I became intrigued by certain phrases and made myself repeat them in my head, scraps of conversation that I’d scrutinize. There was what actually happened between us and there was my subsequent, more elaborate, reconstructions of what happened.

Michele had another life so everything between us had to happen in the few hours we were together. I had things to do too, but he (he told me repeatedly) had a family. A family. I grew to hate the word, it seemed profane. There was an asymmetry between us.

We had some difficult conversations.

“So you have a daughter.”

“She’s six. She’s in primary school.”

“I had a boyfriend when I was six.”

“My goodness. There are probably some things I shouldn’t know.”

“I smoked my first cigarette at twelve.”

“Come on. Stop it.”

“I don’t smoke anymore.”

“That’s good. But I do, and I think I’ll have one now if you don’t mind.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“OK. Sorry. I don’t want to bother you. I won’t smoke.”

“Michele it doesn’t bother me. I’m saying for your health.”

I’d become worried that he might not live forever.

“My health? In that case, I’ll smoke.” He lit a cigarette.

I said, “So you don’t want to talk. I mean, really talk.”

“Of course I do. It’s just that I don’t feel like talking about children and health.”

“But I can’t. See? You’re making me nervous.”

“I love being like this.” I emphasized the word, love.

One day he told me that we needed to take a little break.

“I go back to London tomorrow and will be staying longer than usual. There are some family matters I need to resolve. It would be best if we didn’t talk on the phone or text. Will that be a problem?”

His manner of saying things, the last part of his question landing precisely when he was looking for his underwear was not helpful. Something crumbled in me. Everything is clear
again. We are not inexhaustible. Desire is fragile, it needs attention, and you need few tools to cultivate it.

Michele had been with a lot of women in his lifetime, not all of them beautiful. He explained that there was significance in the fact that they weren’t all beautiful. Looks are important but that’s not everything. I was attractive in his eyes. But that was not the main reason he was interested in me. I asked him to tell me what the reason was and he said it was hard to explain in words but that deep down, he hoped his actions would be an explanation. They weren’t, but I didn’t admit it.

Once I told him a story from my childhood, one of those little anecdotes that sooner or later you always tell people, to explain your history. He listened attentively. I was touched by his attention.

Despite his request for some distance, I never stopped thinking about him for the entire duration of our relationship. The image of him ran through my head continuously, like a wave, or pertinently, I couldn’t stop telling him, via text message, that I was thinking about him. I wrote him about everything:

— I’m thinking of you.

Or:

— It would be amazing to wear your coat. What could be more amazing than wearing your coat?

When he started to text back saying that we couldn’t be in constant touch, I answered that I didn’t understand. That made him nervous even if he was trying to be gentle with me. But one day he lost it:

— How can someone as smart as you not get it. Giulia, pull yourself together!

today: I’m not fragile. I’m a big girl. I belong to a category of people who can be modified, but in larger terms, I am not breakable. It depends on what you’re made of. I am made of the same material as the marketplace — unstable but we never entirely disappear. We can influence events and sometimes, we end up reaching for goals that we just lose track of, and then refine. The marketplace pictures itself above the fray, even though the way it works is totally volatile. It’s a basically functional illusion — though not necessarily an intelligent one.

Michele, on the other hand, started to seem fragile to me. After sex he was sitting, his back against the headboard, the sheets pulled up halfway, smoking a cigarette. He subtly tried to redirect the conversation in another direction — an item from the news, some story about his childhood. The whole time he was monitoring his movements, picking his words carefully. It was obvious that he felt insecure about how to act, but didn’t know how to change.

While I watched him, this phrase came into my head: “post traumatic stress syndrome.” I had read about it in an article about soldiers coming back from war. He’d been so energetic just a few minutes earlier, and now he had the face of a survivor. Vulnerability is mysterious. Everyone is vulnerable — men and women — but it comes out differently.

One day I thought, what if he stops wanting me? What if that happened while we were together? They say that men lose desire entirely after a certain age, and just have the memory of it. But he was too young for that to happen.

At the time, sex seemed like an obvious question to me; it was proof of something. I didn’t know yet that we actually have fewer fantasies than we think we do. We eventually figure out that we’re just repeating the same perversions over and over again. We are not inexhaustible. Desire is fragile, it needs attention, and you need few tools to cultivate it.

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— How can someone as smart as you not get it. Giulia, pull yourself together!
Michele was confused; while I was following a mental strategy that put everything in terms of pensions and fiscal incentives. The fact is that you need a long time to reason before you can accept pain. If you stand at the end of your own life, on the point of death, and observe everything backwards from that perspective, you might allow in some painful moments — to give it some sense. Human beings can’t see themselves in their entirety, but fiscal incentives, for example, can be useful. It’s how you convince people to put money in their retirement fund. It’s painful to save money instead of spending it. Knowing there’s a financial advantage takes the sting out of saving.

Michele kept trying to get the situation back under control:
“Giulia, you have to learn how to manage your obsession with texting. You can’t text me constantly. You didn’t use to be like this.”
“I only send you around three messages a day, roughly.”
“You sent me almost thirty yesterday.”
“I had a final.”
“I know you had a final and so that can be an exception. But you need to figure out how to go a few days without texting me. I have to work and when I’m at work I don’t have a minute to spare. You know that I won’t answer but you still get mad.”
“Fine.”
“You have to get some distance. Do it for yourself. I’d prefer it if you could do it for yourself. I’d like that instead of writing to me you would think about yourself and about your dreams, about who you want to be.”
“Look, I have to study. I can’t waste that kind of time.”
“Studying isn’t enough and you know it. You’re worth more than that, damnit. It’s such a shame.”

The words, “you’re worth more than that, damnit” should be meaningful. Michele was convinced he was saying it honestly. It was a reflection of his moral code. He valued both himself and the people he liked. He forced himself to be an optimist, to believe in self-actualization, in possibility. And yet at the same time, he got an erotic charge out of asking me to distance myself from him: a sense of weakness. Only something physical can attach or detach — he knew that. He also knew that I was a physical something that didn’t detach. This generated fear, turbulence, a sense of affliction in him, but also desire. Alongside a feeling of omnipotence that he, naturally, didn’t have the guts to confess.

Things did not improve. I went up to sixty text messages a day. There was a variety of kinds: compliments (always), disconnected thoughts, oddities. He rarely answered but I...
One afternoon I sent him the millionth message:
— Hello handsome.
He later told me that at that moment he was home, enjoying a rare moment of tranquility away from work. He was in the middle of building a Barbie house for his daughter when he felt the phone vibrate. He saw “Hello handsome” and fell apart. He kicked the pink plastic house and almost ran out of the room. His wife asked what was the matter and he answered, “These bastards will be the death of me.” His wife thought he was upset about work because he said “these bastards,” which was how he often talked about his colleagues, plus she was accustomed to work drama. He had used the phrase intentionally as a cover up. Michele went to the front door and said he needed a breath of air.

His wife screamed at him: “Tell them to go to hell! Enough already! We can’t go on like this!”

Once he was out on the street he dialed my number, heard the ring, and then voicemail picked up. He walked, staggering like a drunk, and then tried my number again. I answered: “Hi. What’s up?”

Michele said in a low voice, “Would you like to talk to my wife, perhaps?”
I hung up. He called back.
“I don’t want to talk to your wife.”
“I know, I didn’t mean it.”
“Oh.”
“Do you know that I’m crying? I’m forty-one years old. I’m a big fat grown man and I’m crying.”
“You’re not fat. You’re beautiful.”
“Giulia, this has to stop.”

Then he calmed down. Just like that, from one moment to the next, as if there were a switch. He explained to me, rationally and patiently, why this texting thing had to end.

“Okay, Michele. I get it. I apologize. I’m very sorry.”
“You don’t need to apologize. Just try to get better. If you want, we can meet for coffee the day after tomorrow. I’ll be in Milan. Just coffee. I mean, we’re not going to my house. Understand? I have a present for you.”

The heat of his voice, the gentleness, the grace — I absorbed the death blow. I had no more strength. From that point forward something shut down in me.

The day after tomorrow arrived. In the meantime, I proved myself to be disciplined — I mean, I didn’t text him. I was suddenly able to restrain myself. It was a new phase in the pain, pain that spread everywhere and didn’t leave any space for texting.

We saw each other for coffee. We exchanged kisses on the cheek, barely touching. Even though I was exhausted, I had prepared carefully. My hair was washed and pulled back into ... as if I were going in to take a final exam. I had a stomachache. For a moment I thought I’d have to run to the bathroom.

Michele’s present was a pen with a logo from a store on Brompton Road. There was a notebook with the pen; it had a lavender cover.

“Giulia, this is what I thought you could do. Every time you get it into your head to text me, you can write in this book instead. You can’t wrong on the computer either — that’s important. You have to write in the notebook, with a pen. By the end of the week you’ll have quite a collection. If the messages still make any sense to you, we’ll talk on the phone and you can read them to me. Like a letter. You’ll see, this will work. Do you want to give it a try?”
“Yes, I’d like to try. Thank you.”

I have no idea if I wanted to try. I probably did want to but then changed my mind. I told him that I had to go. I had something I needed to do. I lied. The fact was that I didn’t want to be there anymore. His face, the familiar face, petrified me.

I never wrote to Michele again, not by text and not in the notebook. I lost the pen immediately and it never turned up. I didn’t even look for it. One night, maybe because he was feeling a little down, he texted me, ellipses:

— Giulia…

I didn’t answer. Anyway, Michele isn’t the kind of person who pushes. He’s a good man. That’s how our relationship ended.

Months later I received a long email which more or less went like this:

Dear Giulia,

I’ve heard that you are out doing job interviews and that you met Seamus. This is excellent news. He’s very good and his team makes a lot of money. It would be the best place for you to learn. You will be a superstar. In a few years, you’ll be running everything. I’m not kidding. As for me, I quit the bank. You might already know that. After all, life change is good, forward movement. Here’s some advice: Seamus has a thing he does. Sometimes he pretends to be stupid, he’s not. He’s a powerful man; he’s got a way of working inside and simultaneously outside the system. No one can rattle him… Just so you understand my advice. Break a leg. Whatever happens, don’t tell him that you know me. (Seamus hates me. He is the most competitive person I’ve ever met. Once I told him that I was born poor and he went to great lengths to prove to me that he came from an even poorer family; he had statistics and lifestyle calculations…). I’m sending you a big hug. (You don’t have to answer this email but you can if you want to. You really can do whatever you want.) I love you. I’m sending you kisses. I’m much calmer now. Another big hug. Michele.

I didn’t write back.

[…]  *18. — The Era of Stories

These are the artifacts:

You know how to make someone think about you. I think you have some special power to make yourself appear in other peoples’ thoughts. And I think you know it. It’s a unique and deadly power. How did you come by it? Is it because you’re so pretty? It can’t just be that. I wonder if it comes more from your capacity for disruption.

I think a lot about how beautiful you are. I see it in my mind. It never seems to mean less. I feel your beauty on my skin. This desire makes me almost physically uncomfortable.

Michele wrote both these text messages. They date back to when I was starting to get obsessive, but he hadn’t gotten bored of it yet. I copied them onto paper and put them in my vanity box, where I keep memories: pictures, written words. I like the sensation that comes over me when I read them. I relish the repetitions, his childlike use of words like “pretty” and “beautiful.” The elegy. But I’m a victim of desire too; that’s not just a male affliction.

At the base of my instinctive behavior, I often find basic human truths that strike me as both masculine and feminine: gratification and disappointment; pleasure and pain; love and violence. The
put aside some money — a callow business, many would say. He’d saved, but hardly a fortune. He certainly hadn’t built the kind of wealth he’d expected to. His wife came from a rich family and it didn’t take much for him to feel like a kept man.

“She likes to maintain a certain lifestyle and if I didn’t work, I’d be like a hired husband. I stay on at the bank to keep up appearances. But, at the same time, I’m bored. I’ve never ... I said, I have to keep up appearances — out of pride. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you all this. You’ll stop liking me.”

That was a little true — the risk I wouldn’t like something, not necessarily him, but maybe the conversation. There’s always that moment when the lover undresses more than usual and ... kept hidden. Yet, if you can make it past that point it probably means you should get married and have a bunch of children.

“You are lucky that way. You’re the kind of person who could get the most interesting job in the world. You have the right spirit for it.”

My “era of stories” starts with the trip to Trier in Germany. We were at the hotel in the evening, after a tour of the Karl Marx house. Michele was happy and a little tired.

“You shower first,” he said.

If we were together, I always wanted us to shower together too. But I also thought that it would be better if it didn’t become routine. He showered second; he took a long shower and used a lot of water. I waited for him in bed, wearing a tank top and nothing else. I watched TV while I waited, German cartoons. He emerged from the bathroom, put on a pair of clean boxers, sat down on the bed and started to talk. He never was the one to start conversations.

It was all casual; he said things, for example, about how nice it was to stay in a hotel, a hotel with a bunch of stars. He loved the blank rooms, the moment of arrival, the virginity of a room — a false virginity, of course, because those rooms have seen it all, but you can’t tell. You cross the threshold and bring disorder: you dirty the surfaces, profane the sheets, open the bottles of shower gel, desecrate the towels and bathrobes. You turn on the TV to murder the silence.

The night before, he had, for the millionth time, gone over his options. Quit his job: working in finance he’d been able to put aside some money — a callow business, many would say. He’d saved, but hardly a fortune. He certainly hadn’t built the kind of wealth he’d expected to. His wife came from a rich family and it didn’t take much for him to feel like a kept man.

“She likes to maintain a certain lifestyle and if I didn’t work, I’d be like a hired husband. I stay on at the bank to keep up appearances. But, at the same time, I’m bored. I’ve never admitted that to anyone but that’s the way it is. I’m not one of those people who needs to be doing a million things to feel alive — people who love to be challenged. I hate challenges. I’m attracted to shiny things. Put all the pieces together and you have me. But I don’t like it and I want to quit, or else I’ll go mad. I was alone in the conference room the other day and I thought, I’ll undo my pants and take a piss on the carpet. I didn’t actually do it, but I have these demented thoughts. I stay where I am because I like the security that comes from having money. It’s a simple feeling. And also because, like I said, I have to keep up appearances — out of pride. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you all this. You’ll stop liking me.”

That was a little true — the risk I wouldn’t like something, not necessarily him, but maybe the conversation. There’s always that moment when the lover undresses more than usual and the unexpected nudity is something that was better kept hidden. Yet, if you can make it past that point it probably means you should get married and have a bunch of children.

“Not true. I still like you. You can tell me anything.”

“You’re just being nice.”

“No, I’m not. If you’re bored of your job you should get another one.”

“You are lucky that way. You’re the kind of person who could get the most interesting job in the world. You have the right spirit for it.”
“Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m not adventurous like you. There are things that frighten you and you like to protect yourself from risk, but in your heart, you’re an adventurer.”

He looked at his hands as if trying to find the missing adventure. But he was happy. He liked to be fresh and clean, to feel loved by an adventurous woman. I gave him the idea I was in love with him and he could feel it. Maybe this was all he needed. A shower, a fancy hotel, a half-naked girl willing to listen to him. That was the picture that I responded to.

“No one gave rats permission to exist,” I said. “Everyone hates them; they are chased; they live in filth, immersed in quiet desperation. And yet they can bring down civilizations.”

“Bastards.”

“I didn’t make that up. I’m not even sure I got the quote right.”

Michele lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

“Tell me a story,” he said.

“About what?”

“I’ll lie here with my eyes closed and you tell me something sexy from your past… I don’t know — like the time you had sex with multiple men at the same time.”

“I’ve never had sex with multiple men at the same time.”

“It doesn’t matter. Pretend that you did and tell me about it.”

“I went to a swingers club, once.”

Michele opened his eyes and sat up like a shot. “Really?”

“It was my first year at university and I went with a boy I was seeing. It was a bank holiday weekend and we went to Paris by train. Do you want to know why we went to Paris?”

“Actually I was thinking about how hard it was to arrange for you to come with me to Trier, but evidently going off to Paris with your friend was no big deal.”

“What does that have to do with anything? My mother doesn’t ask questions if I go off with someone my own age. Either way, we’d picked Paris because we were good children and it seemed like a very lovely place to go — apart from the swingers club. Don’t laugh. We spent a couple of days doing tourist stuff; we saw a ton; we paid attention; then we went to this club. I remember walking into a long, narrow room and there was a naked woman on her knees on the ground, surrounded by men. I remember her mouth.”

Michele had laid back down and his eyes were closed. He was breathing heavily, like his nose was a little stuffed. For a moment, I could see the nineteen-year age difference between us.

“The boy I was with went over to the woman on her knees. I didn’t have any particular emotions watching them. It was like seeing the hundredth episode of a soap opera — there’s nothing new that could possibly happen in the story but you’re glued to the screen anyway. Am I boring you?”

“Seriously? What do you think?”

“After a while I decided I didn’t want to be in that room anymore so I left. I wanted to look around for myself. I went into a room that had a giant heart shaped bed in the middle and…”

“And the women, looked at me, but nobody came up to me. Everyone was very respectful, orderly. I took off all my clothes.”

“Just like that? All of a sudden? The way you sometimes do?”

“Yes. Then I sat on a chair, curled up, and did the strangest thing — strange for a place like that — I fell asleep. I’m not sure how long, maybe half an hour. I woke up suddenly and nothing
much had changed. The same people were still having sex. There was a man sitting on the arm of my chair. He asked if I wanted to go with him into another room. And I went.

Michele’s eyes were open and totally glued to me. I could see nostalgia, or jealousy, or a mix of the two, in his expression.

“Have you ever done anything like that?” I asked.

“I’m repressed. Nothing more to say. Go on.”

“Ok. But I’ve come to a kind of crossroads. I had two possible endings in mind and now I’m not sure either one works.”

“Tell me the true ending. I’m sure this is a true story.”

“Nope. It’s made up.”

“I think it’s true. Go ahead.”

“I went to a room. There were more couples. I didn’t know if I actually wanted to have sex like that, in front of all those people, in public. I don’t know. Sometimes I’ll picture something but I don’t know if it means anything.”

“What kinds of things?”

“I’ll imagine I’m with you in the bedroom but there are other people in the apartment. I don’t know why they’re there. Either way, there’s a door separating us from them. It’s closed. Protection. So we go on as if nothing is wrong. As usual. You aren’t hesitant, you’re decisive; me, I move, capitulate, then again, and again. Basically, we have a lot of sex and I want the people in the other room to hear us. I want them to know that I am grown up and have passionate sex. And at the same time, I know they’re not an audience and that there is a door between us.”

Michele was almost holding his breath. I kept talking.

“Getting back to Paris… I was watching all these people and I didn’t know what to do, when my friend showed up and grabbed my arm. He didn’t seem angry but there was something offbeat about him, like an instinct, something like jealousy. Or else maybe something awful had happened to him. He pulled me away. He said it was getting late. I told him that it would be fine with me if we left. The whole time we were standing there naked in the middle of all these people who were staring at us. We were talking loudly. We got dressed and went back to the hostel. We got the train home the next day. That was one of the least erotic experiences of my life. It’s a very sad story ultimately.”

“I liked it. I hope you’ll tell me another one. Not now, but whenever it strikes you.”

He kissed me and we embraced for a while, watching German cartoons on the TV. He took some pictures with the Polaroid he’d brought. He’d done it before and I didn’t mind. I actually liked it.

After that, I’d earned him insisting that every time we saw each other, I had to tell him a new story. I told him that I had to make them up. Michele said that was fine, of course, and then I’d start fabricating something. We’d always get to the point when he’d exclain, “This really happened, right?”

Over time, I got the plot lines down, perfected for my audience of one. Michele’s fantasy was having a lover with a past—that might have been the extent of it. I didn’t fully understand, and asked him to explain.

“I like picturing you in my mind and I also like the idea of you using your imagination. I like that.”

And so, all these possibilities extended before him. He relished the scenes I built with my words. The result was a figment.

The storytelling game gradually gave me a sense of mental exhaustion—always looking for the right word, little edits as I spoke, making up scenes and costumes. It was like a Hollywood production. I often thought of it as a sacrifice, a kind of suffering
for love, the obligations of affection. It was the closest to marriage we ever came.

One day I said, “Now you tell me something.”

“Please, no. I’m not good at it.”

“Try.”

“When I was a young man I had sex with two women at the same time. But I didn’t like it much. I was only attracted to one of the women and really wasn’t interested in the other one. I don’t know what else to add.”

“You must remember more. Or, maybe, try a different story.”

“I dream about you a lot.”

“Really?”

“Not erotic dreams. Well, not exclusively.”

“Give me an example.”

“I dreamt about you two nights ago. You were a little girl dressed in yellow. You were walking with your mother. You had a music book in one hand and a can of Coke in the other. You were on your way to your violin lesson.”

“Violin?”

“In my dream, you took violin, yes. You tripped and spilled the whole can of soda on me. You were upset and your mother scolded you a little — the way mothers do. I said it wasn’t a problem and realized that the Coke had gotten on your book. I picked it up and wiped it off with my hand. Your mother offered me a paper napkin and I thanked her. She was very tall. I thought that I’d seen you playing the violin in the park the day before. I said, ‘Look, it’s no big deal. Your face was very serious. I said, ‘I’ve heard you play. You’re very good.’ I handed your book back to you and told you my name. But you still looked very serious. Actually, you had quite a lot of authority. You were the most authoritative person in the world. I thought to myself,

one day, she’s going to be a great violinist. Then I thought to myself, I’m really old.”

He fell silent for a moment and then looked at me. “Have you ever talked to anyone about us? I’m only asking because of how your ideas flow when you’re telling stories. I don’t know… maybe you told a friend.”

“No, never. Why?”

“Maybe you will one day?”

I didn’t know what to say. I wondered if Michele was the kind of man who liked talking about himself. Did he want me to? Was he imagining his young lover bragging about him to other women? At the time, I couldn’t see any reason to talk about us to anyone. I told him: “I’d rather not. I’m not that kind of person. But if I were in pain, I might want to tell someone. Though at the moment that seems like a strange idea. And you? Have you ever talked about us to anyone?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Which means you have. Who did you tell?”

He closed his eyes and rolled onto his side, away from me.

“If you do talk about us,” he said, “be honest, be loyal.”
Domitilla Pirro 09 Kilography
To grasp time you have to let go of words. The words for things and the words for bodies. The words that are bounded, the ones you can count.

These are the things: an axe, two big basins, a basket, a large butcher block and then a smaller one, the boiler, twenty-one empty bottles, at least six buckets (including one with a broken handle and one made of wood); a calendar on the wall from Vettori Cured Meats in Monteluparo, three bundles of tomato canes, three different cleavers, various cords wound together in one coil, the cupboard of pickles and preserves; eight demijohns, three discs for the meat grinder, the flight of uneven stairs leading from granddad’s cellar up to grandma’s kitchen, three funnels,
The grandfather was: Franco, the carob tree with the playhouse, catching tadpoles (but never fireflies), corduroys with a plaid patch, crates of figs cherries blackberries apricots, ... the Tre Pinihill with the olive grove at the bottom, what a devil of a tomboy your sister was as a little kid, a real diavolacciu. Now he is: dead of a heart attack while slaughtering a pig.

Then there’s a word that’s body but acts like thing. Palma. Palma was: the daughter of Sauro, a girl eleven years, eight months and nine days old, happy to be on Christmas break, the ... empty composure of the letter O. Crouched at the foot of the stairs with her hands over her ears and her eyes wide open.

Then there are two words that were body and are now thing: a sow and a grandfather.

The sow will become: belly and chops, cutlets, fatback, hams, headcheese, hocks, jowls, lard, offal, pancetta, prosciutto, ribs and riblets, rinds, roasts, salami, sausage, shoulder (blade and picnic), sirloin, suet, tenderloin, trottters. Right now the sow is: aorta, bladder, bristles, cecum, ears, small and large intestines, kidneys, liver, pancreas, ribcage, snout, spine (cervical thoracic lumbar sacral and caudal), tail, teats, teeth (molars premolars central and lateral incisors canines), toenails, uterus.

The grandfather was: Franco, the carob tree with the playhouse, catching tadpoles (but never fireflies), corduroys with a plaid patch, crates of figs cherries blackberries apricots, falling off a bike, the father of Sauro, getting back on the bike, let’s pick some cyclamen for your Nonna Gisa, Rossana candies after mass, step once on an adder and you’ll run from every lizard, stubs of cigars smoked in a hurry, the town butcher, the Tre Pini hill with the olive grove at the bottom, what a devil of a tomboy your sister was as a little kid, a real diavolacciu. Now he is: dead of a heart attack while slaughtering a pig.

Then there’s a word that’s body but acts like thing, Palma. Palma was: the daughter of Sauro, a girl eleven years, eight months and nine days old, happy to be on Christmas break, the sister of Clara (upstairs because she didn’t want to come and is mad at Stefania, who’s back in Rome with her boyfriend). Palma is: the stillness of pebbles in a stream, the precarious hardness of a walnut, the brittleness of old bones, the empty composure of the letter O. Crouched at the foot of the stairs with her hands over her ears and her eyes wide open.

Then there’s a word that is not body and not thing. That is uncountable. That simply is, and is unbounded. It’s blood. Blood has no plural.

As she pulled the hatch of the car shut with a gentle tug, Stefania felt two hands on her shoulders.

“Done playing Tetris with those beach umbrellas yet?”
“Hang on, let’s go back upstairs.”
“Don’t you want to?”
“Oh yeah. But we should check if Palma is asleep.”
“Who cares if she’s awake, babe. We’ll be quiet.”

Stefania had packed the ax with towels and stuffed a beach ball between the wicker baskets. She’d defrosted the fridge, emptied or eaten everything emptiable or edible, put the watermelon on ice. She’d brought in the laundry and taken Clara to her dad’s without any major blowups. Departure at dawn with Pierpaolo and the kid, oodles of sunshine at the seaside, Sabaudia mon amour.

Palma was definitely awake. With her bargain-bin underwear twisted between her thighs and calves and her rear end planted on the toilet seat, she was thinking how she’d never get used to the smell of men’s deodorant on the towels, or the menacing hairs that sometimes floated in the bidet. Pop didn’t make such a mess, he was bald.

Over the sound of the flush comes the blast the impact the bomb. They’re laughing up a storm. Palma sits frozen on the toilet. Then gets up, wipes. A drop of pee falls on her shin. She doesn’t even need to see them. She can tell he’s nibbling her mother’s whole face, tickling her maybe. Better than two warring silences, no question. But she feels an emptiness in her belly when they do that. She’ll have to go in the kitchen. Even though there’s nothing left in the house. Or rather: almost nothing.

Mum always says the key to everything is assembly.

At the back of the bottom shelf is a jar of honey from the village, and next to it a whole box of Plasmon baby biscuits. Stefania bought them for the son of the young gypsy girl who’s on the steps of San Tarcisio every Sunday. Honey and biscuits will do fine. You have to stack them up, like lasagne, like tiramisu. Same goes for the jar of Calvé mayonnaise in the fridge. That can be used to layer the last two packets of Unsalted Tops. Those were behind the napkins. The broken bits go in a spoon. The mayo holds them together. When even the crumbs are gone (you have to suck them up straight from the tablecloth, or lick two fingers and dab) you can scrape the jar. It has a wide mouth, the spoon goes right in. By alternating mayocrackers and honeybiscuits Palma can keep the queasiness at bay for a while. It’s not lasagna, more like bricks. She washes everything down with a swig of water: no soft drinks, those swell your stomach right up but don’t fill the hole in your belly. Then back to work, look what’s hidden behind the blender. A packet of Mon Chéri chocolate cherries past their sell-by date, and then the breakfast of Clara the champion, a box that’s off-limits to little Palma, at least in theory. The frosted flakes can be poured directly from the packet; Palma ferries them to her mouth with a cupped palm, in handfuls, in gulps, swallowing them whole like drinking from a bottle. She doesn’t even try to chew. Now there’s an open hand over her belly, pushing hard, pressing down. It’s the centre of the body; still feels a little strange. There’s an unopened box marked COLOMBA & SPUMANTE among the jars of tomato sauce stacked behind the door; it was supposed to be for Easter two months ago, the one nobody enjoyed because Pop was still mourning granddad and Pierpi had taken mum to the seaside to gobble her in peace.

No one will ever devour Palma. Now she opens her mouth wide, like a good girl. She breaks the head off the almond-studded, dove-shaped cake. (Oh gross, pistachio filling. Whatever. She’ll eat it anyway.)

Palma goes ahh.
The Pennant is a staff with a dirty flag at the top and various trophies (unidentified fuzzy objects, scoobies in the Patrol colours, a plastic fang). Whereas Plumpa means Palma. That’s her only name here. When she asks the others to please knock it off, the Tigers always say she only has herself to blame; and if Plumpa keeps getting plumper, that next year her Totem animal, her spirit guide, will be a puffer fish. Then they laugh. The Tigers are jerks. But better not use swear words at scouts. If the Scouters hear you they might confiscate your Neckerchief. Like on 25 June 1993 when that happened to the newbie in the Puma Patrol, Carlo B., who’s just a kid but said something super bad at flag raising. Whereas Plumpa never swears in front of anybody. She only just got her Neckerchief, but she’s already proud of it. Especially because of all the crap she’s stuck on there, including her Sylvester the Cat key chain.

The Tigers are jerks. Stefania says it’s because they’re all girls. That groups with just girls get nastier than the boys. But Palmaknows how things really stand. She isn’t a locomotive after all, at most she’s a train car. The kind that’s sealed shut and has freight written on the side.

“How long till we get there? Hold up a sec gotta tie my shoe.” If it had been one of the twins, Meggy the Leader would have been seriously pissed off, and the others would be authorized to rag on her. But it’s Sofia the Ginge, who for two months now has also been Assistant Leader. Ever since she got promoted, Sofia has been an authority figure, a minor deity; if for some reason Meggy skips a meeting or is late then she’s the one who hands out merit points and demerits.

Palma knows this. So she’s not surprised when Meggy, who’s fifty yards ahead by now, comes to a sudden halt. As the Ginge bends over to fix her boots on the guardrail, the Patrol
He looks pretty hot on his bike. Not that he isn’t hot in the Fiat, he’s always hot. So that day Meggy sat in the back seat, and quietly slipped her hand between the door and the passenger seat, and Assistants do when the Patrols are out on Hikes? Ok, now she’s stressing. She picks up the Pennant and sets off again.

“Get a move on, will you? You really want to stay over with the nuns?”

The bleached strands of hair on her forehead give her a threatening look. They’re like the antennae of some stinging insect. Palma would like a fringe like that, but she’s too puffy-cheeked, and Stefania says she’s still too little, and Clara laughed about it for two days. She’s a jerk too.

“Single file! Single file!” Sofia waves the others to their feet, fulfilling her only duty as an Assistant. She raises her voice too.

“Tiii-gers, single file! Plumpa, keep it straight, we haven’t even moved yet and you’re already weaving around?”

Palma does her best, amid the buzz of cicadas and stench of manure. Her breath is starting to fray against her teeth. Her thighs are itching behind her knees, but closer to the middle, where there are two fistfuls of fat; her eyelids are earlobes are gluey with sweat. These acetate shorts were a dumb choice and not the only one: they set out very late. And if they end up having

lers by the side of the road. Then a water flask and mess tin clatter onto the gravel, startling sparrows from their nest with the sound of metal on metal.

“Really though you could tell us how far it is or show us the map after all we’re supposed to learn too you know” says Franci Navarra as she picks up what she’s dropped. Her sister nudges her, but it’s too late. Meggy heaves a sigh. “Jesus, I can’t believe it. You always have to be such babies. They shoulda kept the two of you in Brownies another year.” Lena is about to defend her twin, then thinks better of it and chews her lower lip.

Palma bites her tongue too and bounces over. She never did Brownies at all, that’s why she’s at the bottom of the food chain. After nervously sizing up the guardrail, which looks like a fragile barrier against the abyss, she gives Meggy a sidelong glance, hoping there’s time to sit down. She presses her hips with her hands. Maybe she can slow her heart down with her mind, if she wills it hard enough, and it’ll stop trying to explode. Palma wonders if that’s what happened to her granddad.

The Leader pulls her compass out of her backpack and checks it, but hey there’s no point. Meggy knows the way perfectly well: Chicco and Silvia showed it to her from the car when she sneaked out to join them on a supply run at the beginning of Camp. It was that day when the Scouters stayed holed up in a tent for two hours. So Meggy left Plumpa and the Navs to the Ginge, and jumped into the car with the Assistant Scouters. In theory no one from the Troop is supposed to leave Camp, but as everyone knows Chicco kinda likes her so cool. If Sara and Diego found out there’d be hell to pay but that’s Chicco’s problem in the end: he’s older than her, eighteen come September. Silvia was the one driving, he doesn’t have his license yet, even though he’s had a scooter for two years now.

Kilography
Plumpa contemplates the possibility of saying something. She’s not up to it. Her hair is drenched and her calves are trembling. She feels the way she did at the beginning of that dream. Plumpa once deposited two glistening bags of fat on the concrete playground at school, in the middle of PE, then appeared in all her slender new glory in front of Andrea Tomassini from 3C, tracksuit hanging off her like a tent, and he said wow! Then she woke up.

“Meggy pleasepleaseplease no. Please. I don’t feel so good, my stomach was hurting already and now my foot does too.”

“Uhuh forget it. It’s your turn, you’re last.”

Then, perhaps moved to pity by Plumpa’s grey face, The Leader adds “I swear it’s not far now, you guys. All that’s left is the steps.” She waves a hand toward the top and says “Sign’s up there, see? We’re still in good time. We do the mural, take a couple pics, thank the nuns and we’re back at Camp by eight.”

Maybe it’s the word \textit{steps}. Maybe it’s the idea of the sign, which Palma pictures as reading \textit{Hermitage of Saint Grunta}, six-thousand kilometres farther up. But now even Plumpa’s eyeballs are sweating. The Navs step around and overtake her, slipping back into single file and whispering to each other.

“Tigers march, Tigers march, single file!” The Ginge does her best. It has no effect. Palma is stuck halfway up, where the climb gets steep enough to make a mule think twice. Her face is purple and she isn’t moving a...

...but that Stefania says she has to keep on because otherwise she’ll get scoliosis and Dr Mauro will make her wear a brace.

to sleep over who knows what it’ll be like, how the night will go, how scary the nuns will be.

Meggy turns right. They’re off the asphalt. The path snakes up to the big thicket at the top of the hill. But the Tigers aren’t there for the view. They have a Mission and they’re in a hurry.

“Swiiiiitch!”

The next-to-last girl unburdens herself of bags, paints and brushes. The Tigers can’t believe their luck, another longed-for excuse to rest, and they stop short. They stop so short that Franci comes straight down on Palma’s heel with the toe of her boot. Plumpa stumbles, Meggy’s braid is too far ahead to grab, and there’s no handhold behind her. Her ankle gives out and Palma tumbles to the ground. The Tigers laugh.

“Nuh-uh. Don’t even try it, Plumpa. It’s your turn now, we’ve all carried the stuff. Get up.”

Then, all of them yelling louder, “Meggy! Plumpa isn’t taking the paint!” and as the Ginge is looking toward the road, the Navarra sisters exchange half a flask of stale water.

“Knock it off.”

Meggy comes crashing out in front of the scouts like an avalanche. With similar grace, she heaves the bag of Mission materials at Palma, who has more or less righted herself again. The bag falls on the ground, since of course Plumpa has butter fingers. The cans clank around. The container of red rolls out of the bag towards the ponytailed twin, who stops its journey with her foot. She bends down and passes it to Meggy.

“Thanks Lena. Fine then, I’ll tie it on if you won’t, turn around Plumpa.”

As Palma stands motionless, the Leader fastens the bag handles to the flask hanging off her pack. She ties them to the metal carabiner using a simple square knot, easy-peasy.

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Kilography
The Ginge, the last to overtake her, nudges her arm in passing and says softly, “I’ll wait up for you at the steps if the others don’t stop. But give it a try, I dunno, at least pretend.”

It’s not every day the Assistant shows pity. Palma doesn’t react at first, but then wipes her mouth and nose, dries her hand on her shorts, throws her pack on the ground. There’s a mark where the strap has creased her shirt, and a huge damp patch on her back. She bends over the pack, barely touching the carabiner, and says, “I’m gonna carry it by hand, ok? I’ll carry it” and that’s when hell breaks loose.

The bag of paint comes undone and slips down the side of the pack, opening up so that the cans fall out in the middle of the trail. But this time it’s not just the red, it’s the white, the blue, the tube of brushes. And there’s no one to stop them. Plumpa watches, powerless, imagining hands quicker than her own, a providential boulder blocking the way; but no, the cans are free to roll. The Tigers notice the disaster only because of the noise Plumpa emits, a whimpery yelp. Plumpa, who’s just standing there: part of the landscape. Plumpa whose gaze is still tracking the flight of the paint cans, which have reached videogame speed. Plumpa who can feel the judgement the eyes the voices of the whole Patrol bearing down on her shoulders, the twins whispering, Sofia swearing, Meggy yelling. She yells even louder. It drowns out all the other sounds and hushes the cicadas, razes the meadow, irons out the path.

And Plumpa starts to run.

Plumpa plunges down the trail, avalanche style, eating up ground like no one’s business, bouncing from branch to branch, she feels like a rabbit, a creature of the wild; no thought of the climb back up, no thought of the thirst clawing at her throat. For once she’s only thinking forward: thinking how fast she is, incredibly fast, for once. She’ll grab the cans before they go over the cliff, she’ll save the Mission and be the toughest little engine of all. And she’ll get a great Totem name.

But she’s Plumpa the Pufferfish.

And Plumpa doesn’t see the pothole. But the Tigers see her. They see her hit it square on and bounce up in the air over the road. They see her soar toward the guardrail, light as air, its metal the only potential obstacle to her rubbery substance.

Will Plumpa fly down into the beeches far below? No more climbing, no more sweating? It’s at this point, waiting to see if she’ll ever land, that Plumpa realizes: gain enough momentum and you no longer weigh a thing. So fuck the paint cans, fuck the cliffs, the falls; fuck the water flasks and bleached fringes. Fuck the nuns and the Andrea Tomassinis and all the Leaders and Assistants of the world, ginger or not. Above all fuck the rule that you can’t tell them to fuck off. Because this day, 20 June 1993, at approximately a quarter to five (pm), was the day that Palma busted her knee, but also the first time she seriously thought about killing herself.

* 65. —

It was a well-known restaurant in the Capannelle neighbourhood, a noisy one, with salmony walls and a salmony menu. Its selection of pasta dishes had stayed the same for twenty years, as had the CABARET WITH BRAZILIAN DANCERS featured on all its flyers for New Year’s Eve parties. It was the place where Palma asked and learned what “exciting door prizes” meant.

The female customers often wore thick pinky rings, dressy gowns in primary colours — for Sunday luncheons celebrating
baptisms, first communions — and well-filled chenille tube dresses. The male customers smoked at the table, wore the same gold rings as their girlfriends wives daughters mothers, and sometimes had a few gold teeth to match. If it was hot enough, given the lack of air conditioning and the cocktail-sauce curtains blocking the breeze, shirts would gradually come unbuttoned to reveal dark garlands of intertwined hair and crucifixes. Jackets, already stained at pit level, would be draped over the backs of chairs. Belts would loosen of their own accord.

Throughout their daughters’ childhood, the Vettoris had never gone there on their own. It was always on someone else’s invitation. Sauro thought it was silly to spend that much for four glasses of prawns, and Clara didn’t even like scampi risotto. But when Palma’s confirmation came around, Stefania was categorical: they had to celebrate at Ai Giardini dell’Eden. And if Sauro and his relatives stayed home, so much the better, their family looked different now.

As the two girls walked into the Ivory Room, Clara down the carpeted steps and Palma along the black rubber ramp for the disabled, they were sure all eyes were on them. Clara because she was seventeen and no fucking way would she borrow some boxy tailored suit as her mother had suggested: instead her dress was sleeveless, hemline well above the knee. Her wedge heels made her legs look a mile long. She’d grown into a real hottie. Whereas Palma was Palma, and the zipper that already felt strained that morning, before Mass, was now threatening to give way at chest level; and this threat seemed to hang over the whole room, the whole restaurant, the whole neighbourhood, Palma thought.

The people already seated at tables were staring mesmerized at the piano bar, or shouting into Ericssons and Motorolas that couldn’t conceivably be silenced. The waiters scooted around with trays of lamb and sweating bottles. After a while the maitre d’ came up to them; having identified Palma’s white-swaddled form as the table for thirty-six at the back of the room, he waved them towards it with a gesture that was supposed to be courteous but which looked to Palma like a fuck-off.

She was nervous. Stefania was outside with Pierpi, directing carloads of cousins through the vast, overflowing lot, and the first official encounter between her dad and her mother’s boyfriend would be taking place any minute. Trying in her own way to shield her daughters’ different adolescences, Stefania had sent them inside “to hold the table” — as if Ai Giardini might give away a spot booked for almost forty people without even a phone call of warning.

Clara sat down at the head of the table, facing the entrance with her back to the wall. Then, thinking better of it, she got up and picked a seat right in the middle: the place of...
“major” being the military rank she assumed at those events. She was never, ever to be called grandma, and she had no sympathy on tap.

“Cut it out now and come on back, Stefi’s looking for you.”

“No.”

“Don’t be such a baby… What’s the problem?”

“Clara.”

“Right, Clara. So, this time it’s Clara, and then it’s your uncle, and then it’s the frigging kids from the fucking sports league, and then it’s the kids from school. Don’t make me swear, sweetheart, come on. You listen to Giusi now and get your behind out of this pisser. It’s nice but it’s still a pisser. And you’re a piss-and-moaner, not a pisser, but a piss-and-moaner.”

Palma looked at her. Giusi’s hair was still dark: most of it was dyed, but didn’t even seem that way, not on her. She had earrings that to Palma’s mind rivalled Russian satellites in size. Her thick, shiny lipstick clearly involved careful assembly but nonetheless always left a slight smudge on her incisors. Her hickish accent was plastered over with mongrel Roman speech tics that turned her into Giusi (sometimes spelled with a y) and Palma’s mother into Stefi, and made obedience seem inevitable.

“Now Giusi’ll give you a special treat when we get back to the table. I think it’s high time, isn’t it? What year of middle school is this? Next-to-last?

“I’m done with middle school, grandma, I start secondary school this September.”

“Jesus Christ, sweetheart, stop calling me grandma, you make me feel like an old bag. There we go. Come on, sweetie, you gotta taste this.”

The bubbly wasn’t the usual bubbly. For one thing the label said ESTR ESTR ESTR with exclamation points, plus it was sort of sour, and left your teeth feeling sticky. She liked the Frascati better. Giusi filled up Palma’s glass and Palma sipped it, toasted, laughed. Go grandma go, she thought. Clara, swimming in a wild sea of cousins, was laughing at her, but Palma laughed harder, laughed right back: and when she had to go around the table, for photos with the seated groups of relatives, and got to her father’s side, she didn’t notice the wall of ice she’d crossed to reach him. The wine had made her belly warm, her cheeks flaming hot: it felt like a special kind of fever, without the headache. Her father smelled different. She hadn’t even looked him in the face. She’d hugged him. He’d changed cologne, apparently. Palma kissed the top of his head the way a grownup would a child’s, with pity, as the restaurant photographer clicked and clicked and clicked and with every flash the noise in the room seemed louder, the smiles more twisted, Palma’s cheeks rounder and hotter.

The first cramp came just outside the restaurant. Palma leaned on a big flower pot and said something. No one was listening. They loaded her into Pierpi’s car, talking in terribly loud voices; they made her lie down in the back seat, at first with her legs up and then with them bent because she wasn’t a baby anymore, and they said the girl needed help, she had no self-control. Supposed to be her confirmation, for god’s sake. The wave of spasms brought her stomach up to her ribs. Palma got scared. When she was little she was absolutely forbidden to eat junk in front of her mother — no Nutella, no sweets had ever entered their house — so every time she went anywhere, by herself or with her family, she would fill up her plate and her mouth and then spend the
afternoon writhing in other people’s bathrooms. Her parents would apologize. Saying she had a weak stomach. Saying mushrooms do that to her, they sit heavy — even when alongside the mushrooms the girl had eaten five finger sandwiches, a helping of chips and three pastries (chocolate logs, whenever possible). They’d call Dr Mauro and give her orange-flavoured Biochetas. That tasted like puke too.

Pierpi turned to ask how she was doing. Palma pretended to be asleep, she was an expert at that. For the first three curves she lay eyes closed and belly up. She remembered the bedsheets with the bear (was it lavender? pink?), she remembered her mother’s white Fiat Panda with the number plate full of zeroes. She turned her head just in time, heave after heave, filling the car with sour fumes as Stefania yelled.

* 78. —

Welcome back everyone, how was your summer, fuck off and die. Eighth of October, a Tuesday. First Latin test of year two: failed, outright. Decaro didn’t give a crap that Sauro had paid for private lessons with hottie Lorenzo-from-upstairs, for the whole month of August; Decaro didn’t give a crap in general. Upon handing back their translations (whatthefuck does “attributed to Cicero” mean, anyway, either it’s Cicero or it isn’t), the teacher made a wry comment about the title of the passage assigned to Palma, In Praise of Beauty! The girl was standing there in her tracksuit, with her roll of belly squeezed by the elastic and with her eau de old sock et volleyball.

Palma wrote down the mark in her planner, a big strawberry-coloured Smemoranda, with the middle pages bent back alternate ways to take a bite out of the centre, a triangular bite. She shoved a couple of pens into the big pocket of her bookbag, waited for the bell, went out.

It was Sauro’s turn to pick her up.

Pop did give a crap, about those lessons he’d paid for in August. Bellowing mouth, bad teeth, spit flying all over the car. He came to pick her up every other weekend, hoping that Clara would be there too; but when only the passenger door swung open he’d say nothing, just shuffle his younger daughter on the endless trip to her grandparents’ house. It took a little under an hour, a long stretch of beltway and half of Palma’s walkman battery to get there. Then Nonna Gisa would peer through the window when she heard the SUV pull up out front, and come down to hug her granddaughter with glistening eyes and a “where’s Clara?”

That was every other weekend. But 8 October 1996 was a Tuesday.

Sauro had parked the SUV to the right of the school gates, just past the rubbish bins, because the weekend before that the appointment with his daughters had been called off. Pierpaolo Schiavaro, who’d been fucking his wife and sleeping in his bed for fifteen years now, had taken the family out of town “to see friends.” He’d taken his family, Sauro’s. “Friends” meant the country house of that skank with the pastry place across the street from the shop, Grottaferrata or somewhere like that: in the classic golden October weather they were having that year it was so nice and peaceful to sit in those plastic lawnchairs on the patio, by the new pool, alongside the minifridge and trampoline, the floats, the long pole for fishing out leaves and dead wasps. Fuckthefuckers, thought Sauro. He thought that and said that a lot.
Palma decided to spare herself the Fuckthefuckers and Your-bitchofamothers and the lecture she was sure to get for failing the Latin test. Turning away from Sauro’s SUV, she headed for the bus stop. She tried to go straight there, but then stopped, went back. She’d passed right in front of the bakery. It was called L’Oasi del Pane: two words that Palma didn’t think went well together — oasis and bread sounded like sand in your pizza — but the pinkish aroma of yeast and cheese always smelled like peace of mind. She went in. Two slices with ham and mozzarella and no tomato sauce, squarish but wider than they were long, with a glossy edge, the inside part so satisfying to rip off with your front teeth that it’s almost sad to feel it reach the back ones where it’s almost gone, almost down the hatch, one scrap still left then no, you’ve really swallowed it, lost it, you need another bite, let’s hope this one lasts longer. The pizza was so warm. And lingering in the bakery was so warm. There was the nice big-boobed lady in her early sixties who always gave her a free croquette. Palma killed time fiddling with her change, with the straw of her coke, then with a rice ball (they were out of croquettes). She dragged her Niked feet all the way up the hill.

There was almost no one left at the bus stop.

The doors of the 765 made the same puffing noise as the equipment in the hospital room two summers before, when grandma had that emergency operation on her hip. The smell was different. Buses have an afternoon stink, like quadratic equations, like the bed you made or forgot to make before leaving the house in the morning; they stink of winter even when it’s hot out, and then they stink of dogs. Sometimes of rain. Hospitals stink of old age, and of greyish green. But mainly of old age.

“God, you’re so cynical.”
“Cynical, huh? Define cynical for me, then, let’s hear it.”
“You define it, that’s hard, I suck at that stuff…”
“Give it a shot, babe.”
“It’s like… Like you’ve got a sense of humour that cuts people down.”
“That’s not cynical, babe, I’m cynical, verging on evil, I like to make them suffer.”
“No, that’s being sadistic. Being cynical is more complicated, it’s a bunch of stuff all together.”
“You’re so full of it!”
“Whatever. But when you going to get a fringe? It’d look good on you. And it’d hide your zits.”
“What, you don’t like me this way? C’mere.”
Laura Pugno  The Half-Wooded Island
Salvo Cagli opened his eyes to blinding sunlight on the water: day had dawned. He must have fallen asleep on the bridge of the ferry that was taking him to Rhodes. Since his insomnia had started, that was the only way he could sleep: for minutes at a time, when his body was utterly exhausted. When he left the cabin carrying his bag — he had only a backpack with some food and the bare essentials — the light was white and the sea the color of obsidian, even though in the distance you could already glimpse the land.

It was July, and the day promised to be hot and clear. In a few minutes the other passengers on the ferry — even fewer than Salvo had expected, in fact — would come out onto the bridge to watch the island of Rhodes drawing nearer, or would begin the descent into the depths of the ship so they could take
Against the new enemy, Salvo had activated the entire repertoire of techniques that he knew and taught his patients: healthy living and sleeping, changes in diet and habits. With the collusion of a couple of trusted nurses, he had subjected himself, in his own department, to in-depth monitoring of his breathing cycle and his cerebral activity, and had spent nights — sleepless, of course — lying on a cot with electrodes attached to his body and head. But it had been in vain. The tests, the results, were all marvelously normal. He had undergone a CT scan and an MRI, without discovering anything, and had even, with a trace of embarrassment, had recourse to acupuncture, which he couldn’t believe in, but anyway it didn’t help. Drugs had been the last resort, and he would have preferred to avoid them — like many doctors, in fact, he distrusted medicine — but those, too, after an initial improvement, turned out to be ineffective. He had quickly gotten used to them and had stopped. It was as if his body refused to give in, his breath remained contracted in his chest, and no relaxation technique could unblock it: his mind continued to race wildly.

[...] It had gone on like that for weeks, until Vicedomini, the chief, summoned Salvo to his office. He was a man known for his severity, who had never addressed to Salvo more than a look and an intimation, with a tone of an order:

"Take all your back pay, rest. You’ll comeback and it will be fine," he’d said to him, in the tone of an order.

Salvo had left the room stunned, tripping over his own feet, infinitely relieved. Now he just had to figure out where to go to lick his wounds.

their cars out right after the boat docked. Who knew if there was still gas in Rhodes.

He glimpsed the harbor in the distance, but there was no trace of the activity that he recalled from his previous visit, with Kostas, although quite a lot of time had passed since then, when they were both still medical students. Here and there he could see little knots of people waiting for the ship, with large empty spaces in between. The crisis in Greece, which had begun years earlier, was now out of control. What the European Union had been able to do had served to save a semblance of government on the mainland, but on the islands it was different, or at least so Kostas had told him. He had returned often to Greece recently, to look after his family’s properties — the Lazaridis family had always been very rich and very rich they remained, crisis or not — neglecting his professional work as a doctor.

Salvo and Kostas were colleagues at Sant’Efisio, although Salvo had not long ago been transferred, with an irony that now seemed very clear, to the new Sleep Unit. A few weeks after the transfer, sleep had become a memory for him, as it was for his patients, undermining his credibility and causing him to be taken for unreliable in the eyes of the department head, Professor Vicedomini. For a while Salvo had tried to ignore the problem, to pretend nothing was happening, to make it all disappear under the surface of his conscience, but now summer was in its splendor and the insomnia that had possessed him for weeks made it almost impossible to continue to do what he had always done: the hospital, the ward, the student interns, the office visits almost every day of the week. His lucidity obscured by weariness, he had even reached the point of believing that his insomnia was the result of the unusual activity of sunspots — suddenly increased — that occupied the science pages of the papers that summer.
“So now I can’t even hand my patients over to you and go on holiday in peace.” Kostas’s reaction had been veined with irony, just as Salvo had expected, but right afterward his friend had proposed that he spend that sort of enforced summer convalescence, to which Vicedomini’s ultimatum obliged him, at the house that the Lazaridis family had always had on the island of Halki, in the Rhodes archipelago. Salvo didn’t even have to ask if Kostas and his family needed the house that summer. The Lazaridises had many other properties, better situated and easier to reach, but that wasn’t the point. Stella, Kostas’s wife, had never loved Greece. At twenty she had left Athens, and the number of times she had set foot there again could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Every year, far in advance, she rented a place at the sea, always an island, but the Aeolian or Tremiti islands, sometimes magnificent remote corners of Sicily or Sardinia, if not more exotic spots. Kostas had long ago stopped trying to make her change her mind, if it had ever been possible to make Stella change her mind. Maybe that was why, Salvo thought, Kosta’s marriage had lasted. When he and Adele were still together the four of them often went out; then, after his separation, just the two of them, he and Kostas, had gotten in the habit of occasionally having dinner together at the end of the work day. “Stella’s afraid you’re a bad example for me,” Kostas had once confessed. He was laughing, but it was out of embarrassment.

Meanwhile the pizzas had arrived, and Salvo had accepted Kostas’s offer. It was his body, even before his mind, that said yes. Halki, a place like Halki, a place at the last frontier of something, was all he wished for. The house on Halki, which Kostas called the olive-tree house, was a short distance outside the town and the harbor, but still easily accessible on foot, and had been renovated a few years earlier. Salvo remembered it. The summer they were twenty, the two of them had gone wandering around the islands, fishing, and hunting girls, half in sleeping bags, half guests of aunts and uncles of Kostas’s who were scattered around the Sporades, the Cyclades, and the Dodecanese, and at one point they had ended up on Halki. A few weeks before, crossing Mt. Helicon on motorcycles, headed for the second or third of countless ferries, they had passed through a mountainous area at night and seen the eyes of wolves shining in the dark. Greece had changed a lot since then; surely there were no longer wolves on Helicon, or maybe, with all that had happened in recent years, they had returned.

Halki, Salvo recalled, was also called “the white island.” The olive-tree house had a rectangular shape and an open internal courtyard, where the ancient, gnarled tree that gave it its name grew. It was a one-storey building, whitewashed, and with the traditional deep blue windows, but it was in ruins. He and Kostas had spread their sleeping bags on mats on the ground and had spent the days exploring the seafloor around the island, which was exceptionally rich. The few inhabitants of Halki hadn’t been especially friendly, and the fact that Kostas was remotely a native of the area seemed to make them still more distrustful. At the time Halki hadn’t yet been touched by tourism. That had happened several years later, although in a minimal way compared with other parts of Greece. Almost all the small properties on the island, with the exception of those which belonged to the Lazaridises and a few others, had been acquired by Hektor Neumann, a businessman with a Greek mother and a German father, who at a certain point had seemed determined to invest in Halki.

Things had then taken a turn different from what the island’s inhabitants expected, Kostas told Salvo, after Neumann
acquired ownership of two small islands that faced Halki, Alimia and Krev. It was in fact a question of a ninety-nine-year lease, but in the eyes of the residents Hektor Neumann had been transformed into the owner of the two tiny islands, if he wasn’t already of all Halki. This had happened shortly before the crisis, Kostas explained. Right afterward, for reasons that had never been clear, but certainly the crisis had to do with it, Neumann had abandoned all the projects he’d started, the conversion of apartments and houses into bed and breakfasts, small hotels, bars and restaurants. He had withdrawn all his people from the island and kept only his private villa. Silence had again fallen on Halki.

Kostas drank the last drop from his now empty glass and ordered two more beers and some water. Around them the pizzeria was starting to clear out, the traffic on the avenue to slow down. The waiter arrived right away and Kostas poured sparkling water into the glasses. He looked at Salvo, who seemed suddenly happy, as he hadn’t seen him for years, and resumed the story. Now the only people on Halki were the residents, most of them old, and it had again become a ghost island, even more than when they had camped there that long-ago summer in the old family house. Salvo thanked his friend again.

The few days spent on Halki hadn’t seemed to him, at twenty, especially thrilling, but in memory their splendor had silently increased, and if he closed his eyes he seemed to see the island’s dry gilded earth, where water had always been scarce (and in part was desalinated sea water and in part was brought there by a water-supply tanker), the deep sea, and, to the north, flat Alimia and the savage-looking small island of Krev, mysteriously, in those dry, wind-beaten places, half covered by woods, whose existence no one could explain. The only explanation could be that there were karstic streams in the depths, or that in some way over the centuries the vegetation had adapted to the scarcity of water and it managed to survive with almost nothing — but why only on Krev? There were innumerable islands in Greece with those same characteristics. Salvo recalled that the few houses on Halki had their backs to Krev, because according to the inhabitants the island brought bad luck, with stories of drowned men, of fishermen who never returned. It must be a matter of currents, which in that short channel were turbulent. He and Kostas had even thought of swimming to Krev, that summer when they were twenty: both had swum competitively and even won races. But then, for some reason that Salvo didn’t remember, nothing had come of it. They had departed, leaving the island behind. Strange how for years he hadn’t thought of it and now suddenly everything returned to mind clearly, unlike many memories of that time. Maybe because that memory was shared with someone, with Kostas, who had preserved bits of his memory, and the same was true for him.

Kostas explained to him that, once he disembarked in Rhodes, he couldn’t count on the normal transportation system. The smaller ferries, for the smaller islands, had been suspended, and to reach Halki he’d have to meet the tanker or arrange for passage on a launch. If he paid, he would find someone willing to take him there. Once on the island, he wouldn’t have any problems. But he wouldn’t be able to rely too much on his phone: on Halki cellphones hardly ever seemed to work, which was good to be aware of. In the olive-tree house he would find Nikos, the son of Kostas’s older brother, Elias. He, too, was headed there, on holiday.

Salvo smiled. Elias was also a doctor. It was he who had paved the way for Kostas, and he lived in Rome, or rather outside Rome. Years ago they had met more than a few times. He barely
remembered Nikos as a child — he must be sixteen by now. Anyway, the house was big enough. He knew well that Kostas would have liked to be in his place, departing for Halki or somewhere in Greece. The times he went for work, as he called attending to the Lazaridis family property, he said, didn’t count.

“ When you get to the island,” Kostas concluded, “go to the town, to the chora, look for Magdalini’s house.” He tore off a piece of the paper tablecloth and wrote something in Greek. “She’ll give you the keys.”

 […]

Returning early in the morning, Salvo found the olive-tree house empty, with no sign that betrayed the recent sleep of his two young friends. He thought that Nikos had finally decided to make up with his mother, and decided to go look for him and Cora in the town, in the square or at Magdalini’s house. They could drink something together, as they hadn’t yet done. Walking toward the house in the town, he noticed an unusual ferment, the port area animated as he hadn’t seen it before, and an indeterminate number of boats — tiny, seen from above — making their way toward the Krev channel.

It was Magdalini who told him the whole story, as soon as Salvo set foot in the town, while Nikos was sleeping, sedated. Salvo wondered how Magdalini had gotten drugs, then he remembered something Kostas must have told him long ago. After her marriage to Elias, so many years earlier, Magdalini had suffered from insomnia, for months. She had been able to sleep again only with the birth of Nikos. She had never taken the sleeping pills, but had kept the habit of always having them in the house. When they saw each other days earlier, Salvo hadn’t remembered that remote detail, he hadn’t associated Magdalini’s old problem of insomnia and his. Not that it any longer had any importance. He asked her what had happened.

The second night after Salvo’s departure, while he was a few kilometers away, boiling water and sage leaves picked from the wild plants on the spirit stove before going to sleep outside under the dark sky of Halki, and feeling pleased with recovering the strength of his body, Nikos and Cora had decided to make a nighttime excursion to the island of Krev.

It wasn’t surprising, Magdalini said, or rather it was surprising that they hadn’t done it before. The island of Krev, with its dark legends — the houses on Halki that turned their backs to it, the drowned fishermen, over many centuries, in a stretch of the sea so surprisingly tranquil, the stories in the town about the wives, or even children, who went to Krev to mourn their bodies and then stayed there and starved to death after consuming the little food they’d brought with them — was the perfect goal for two restless youths. Except that in Krev there was no danger, or there shouldn’t be, today, with a motorboat. You just had to be careful.

Magdalini was pale, her eyes sunken and tired. Maybe, thought Salvo, the relief that at least Nikos had returned alive was keeping her going. The boy had been unable to tell her anything of what had happened. He was wild with grief, trembling, desperate to go back to Krev to look for Cora. He seemed about to have an epileptic fit: it was unthinkable that he should join the search. As far as they could understand from Nikos’s babbling, Magdalini said, the girl had fallen into the sea from the boat that she and Nikos had borrowed at the harbor and drowned. Two adult men had had to restrain Nikos, the same who, as soon as he had collapsed under the sedatives, had left to search the channel between Halki and Krev where Cora supposedly fell into the water, according to what the boy had said.
She had died of a gunshot wound. Salvo didn’t understand right away. Iordanis placed the fish on the table, two of them, and took them out of the wrapping. The smell filled the room. He explained again what the police had told Hektor Neumann, which would soon be known in the town. The girl hadn’t drowned. She had been shot in the head and the right arm, had fallen in the water, and had died there.

Iordanis had just finished speaking when Salvo turned, hearing the sound of footsteps. Behind them, at the top of the stairs leading to the floor above, was Nikos, white in the face. “Is that what happened?” Salvo asked, in disbelief. “You were attacked?”

The boy nodded. He came over and drank from a glass of water sitting on the table, as if thirst were still devouring him. He seemed to have found a whisper of voice. “It was like that,” he said. “There were some men, they saw us and shot at us.” His voice broke, but he continued. “We ran away, we took the boat, but Cora fell in the water. I … they kept firing at us. My mother didn’t believe me, maybe she was afraid. Now they’re also saying that Cora was killed.”

“The police will want to talk to you,” said Salvo. He took the glass from Nikos’s fingers, which trembled violently. “It was like that,” he said. “There were some men, they saw us and shot at us.” His voice broke, but he continued. “We ran away, we took the boat, but Cora fell in the water. I tried to pull her on board but she went under, while they kept firing at us. My mother didn’t believe me, maybe she was afraid. Now they’re also saying that Cora was killed.”

“The police will want to talk to you,” said Salvo. He took the glass from Nikos’s fingers, which trembled violently. “No,” Iordanis stopped him. “They’ve already left. They saw the body, they talked to Neumann. The girl can go home.”

“Smugglers,” said Iordanis. “There are a lot of them, more and more. Things go badly and the police won’t do anything. You can’t expect anything from them.”

Salvo turned. Without saying a word, Nikos had disappeared. He had gone back along the hall like a ghost. They heard his door slam upstairs.

The sea gave up Cora’s body the next day. It was found just before dawn, by one of the returning search teams, on the shore of a smaller beach on Halki.

The next morning at dawn, there was knocking on the door. The crowd had slowly dispersed during the night, and someone who was going down to the harbor must have pointed out the Lazaridis house to the two men in uniform who had come from Rhodes.

Salvo was alone, with Nikos still shut in his room. He had placed a bottle of fresh water and some bread outside the boy’s room — he hadn’t eaten since the evening before — and went down to open the door. The two men — they must be policemen — spoke only Greek, but Salvo understood that they were looking for Hektor Neumann. With gestures he indicated how to get to the villa, and even went along with them for a short distance.

When he returned to the house, the door of Nikos’s room was open. The boy was lying on the bed, eyes closed, forehead bathed in sweat. He had drunk almost the whole bottle of water, but hadn’t touched the bread. He seemed thinner, as after a high fever. Salvo entered the room softly, taking small steps, as if there were a wild animal inside. There was a wooden chair next to the bed where Nikos was lying. He sat there in silence, without even trying to touch the boy. He would wait.

Later he found out what had happened. Iordanis stopped at the house in the town, bringing fish caught by his son, and explained to Salvo what had been said at the harbor. The police had examined Cora’s body and had found something strange.
obvious choice, though also risky, if someone was watching them. The crossing was brief, now and again the moon appeared from behind the clouds that covered it. Of the two beaches — marvelous by day, with very pale sand — where he could pull the boat up on dry land Salvo chose the more hidden, where piles of old seaweed could provide some cover. He pulled the boat to the point most in shadow, and in order to conceal it a little better piled seaweed on it: the damp matter felt living against his palms.

If Nikos had arrived, Salvo thought, he must have gone toward the larger beach, the one they called the golden beach, which was more in line with the current, or so Iordanis had told him during the search for Cora. If the boy was crazy, he was proving to be just as mad — he should have gone to Magdalini, warned her, asked for help from Neumann, who had men and very likely weapons. Mechanically he checked his cellphone, which he’d brought with him, and saw that, as he thought, there was no reception on Krev. He got his shoes from the bottom of the boat and, carrying them, set off, feeling the cold sand between his toes. It was too dark to see footprints, but with a branch found on the ground he tried anyway — pathetically, he thought — to erase his. He passed a small stretch of cliffs and the big beach opened before him. Everything was peaceful, no one in sight, not Nikos, not the armed shadows that had inhabited his mind since Cora’s death. Fortunately, he saw no fires anywhere. There was only darkness and silence. Where was the boy? The dry half of the island extended in every direction, and not far away were the beautiful pools Magdalini had told him about. Had Nikos gone there? He regretted not having a map of the interior of Krev, but — this, too, Iordanis had told him — no map existed. On shipping maps the island barely appeared, a faintly sketched mass near Alimia, north of Halki.

He awakened suddenly one night, roused by something, maybe a nocturnal bird, a predator. Ever since he arrived on Halki his sleep had been happy and had continued to be complete and perfect, even after Cora’s death, so that he felt ashamed of his own body. He had gotten up, gone to the bathroom, and something in the part of the house where Nikos slept — the part in ruins — had caught his attention. If someone had asked him, he wouldn’t have known what to say. Every night the olive-tree house was silent, without movement. That night, Salvo might have answered someone who asked, it was as if the absence of movement had become sharper.

He looked into Nikos’s room, to see if he was asleep, and found it empty. The sleeping bag was open, lying as always on the air mattress on the floor, but it retained no trace of heat. If Nikos hadn’t slept there, where was he? Salvo looked around, the boy must have only his t-shirt and bathing suit on. He had also taken the water bottle and the underwater gun. Had he gone night fishing? Nikos was a champion swimmer, and yet the idea of a swim in the dark, in that boy’s mental condition, frightened Salvo. Unless he had in mind something worse, dying in the sea or returning to Krev.

He got into the small boat, careful not to slip. It was simple — as if his hands knew more than he did — to loosen the knots of the cable that moored it to Iordanis’s biggest dock. He rowed until he was outside the harbor, and decided it was more prudent to continue rowing, rather than use the motor, despite the labor and time it would require, in case someone could see them — him, and Nikos — from Krev. The boy had decided to cross the channel at the shortest distance from shore to shore, a cautious but
light, the height of the grass. Nikos had lighted a fire? How
could he be so foolish, so ignorant? Salvo thought, and began to
run, stumbling on the rocks and roots of the wooded half, the
breath pounding in his chest.

When he reached Nikos, where the light was, what he saw
took away his breath completely. Nikos wasn't alone. Next to
him, just as he'd last seen her, was Cora.

Salvo closed his eyes, as he'd done moments before, sure he
was having a hallucination, and then he opened them. He was
still a few steps away, in the thicker darkness beyond the ... were, had always been, andCora, Cora was the same as he had last seen her, alive. It was as if
the sea had given her back.

Salvo staggered, leaned against a tree, but what he saw was
stronger than him. He stepped forward, in search of an explana-
tion. "Nikos," he almost shouted, "Nikos, what is this? What's
happening?"

"It's you," Nikos said smiling, and he, too, seemed to have
returned to what he was, grief suddenly erased. He got up and
Cora with him, in a single fluid movement. She had the ... slightly longer, the
same clothes — a pale dress, torn — in which Salvo had seen her
when the body was found on the beach.

"Cora?" he said, in a trembling voice. The girl went toward him and unexpectedly hugged him,
held him tight, repeated his name, whispering: "It's so long
since we've seen you, and you were always so kind to us."

Her flesh was warm and her natural odor was mixed with
the smell of salt. She must have been swimming in the deep sea,

The first thing Salvo saw on the small beach where he pulled up the
boat were the wild bees. It seemed to him that they were whirling
madly, their golden color picking up the last glimmers of daylight.
It lasted only a moment, then the bees vanished as swiftly as they'd
arrived, leaving him to wonder whether he'd been dreaming.
Maybe once there had been hives on the island, and someone tend-
ed them. Magdalini had told him that the bees of Krev were differ-
ent from the ones on Halki, smaller and more poisonous, of a dark-
er gold. Their honey belonged to the dead and shouldn't be
touched, that was the superstition on the island. Maybe for that
reason, in earlier times, on Halki, the lips of the dead were bathed
in honey, but the custom had long since disappeared, and no one
had tried, Salvo thought, to rub honey on Cora's mouth.

For a moment he felt that his vision was obscured, that he
was tottering and about to fall, then the feeling passed. He
squeezed his eyelids and tried to calm down. When he opened
them again his forehead was bathed in sweat and he had the
sensation of being in another world. He shrugged. It's only fear,
he said to himself.

He hid the boat as well as he could — the darkness deepened
with every step — dragging it into a cave that, he'd noticed in
the morning, remained accessible even at high tide. Then he put
the packs on his back and set off slowly, stopping every few
steps to erase the footprints on the sand behind him. In the
darkness he would have trouble finding Nikos, he thought, but
meanwhile the anguish had disappeared from his body and the
night sounds of the island seemed familiar to him, as if he had
known them in childhood and now were simply returning.

Suddenly the fear reappeared, and it was when he saw a low
Salvo thought, that was the odor of a living body, what’s happened, what is this, who is she?

He moved the girl away from him. “You’re not Cora, she’s dead…” and Cora smiled again, the same smile as Nikos, who now had his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m dead,” she said. “Yes, I’m me.”

Again Salvo felt that he was reeling. Nikos helped him take off the backpacks and settle himself beside the fire. “Maybe now you can understand,” he said, “why I came here.”

“Why did you come?” Salvo asked at this point completely confused.

“I wasn’t sure,” said Nikos, “but it’s the legend of the island. That is the legend of Krev. Here the dead return. That’s why people come from Halki to mourn, it’s been that way forever.”

“Forever,” Salvo repeated.

“It’s not something automatic,” the boy explained. “My mother told me.”

“Magdalini,” said Salvo. “Magdalini,” and he understood what she had wanted to tell him, in the olive-tree house. _You mustn’t be afraid for Nikos._

“It’s not something automatic,” Nikos repeated. “On Halki, when someone dies his family comes here and waits. That’s why there’s the house, the one you see — it’s in ruins now, because people don’t believe so much in these things anymore. They come here and wait and sometimes the dead return, other times they don’t. There’s no law, you can’t predict. When they return, though, they can’t leave.”

“So Cora can’t leave the island?” Salvo asked.

“No,” Nikos said. Cora now was close against him, like a wild animal that lets itself be tamed, with her blond head resting on his shoulder. “No, Cora can’t leave.”

He caressed the girl’s arm and continued. “Some of the people who came here didn’t want to leave the island, leave their dead, others found nothing and started to hate Halki and all those who instead had been lucky. But nothing grows here, you can’t cultivate the ground, and after a short time those who stayed were forced to leave. Over the years people have been abandoning Halki, and the memory of these things is being lost. My mother is one of those who remember and now the island is hers.”

“The island is hers,” Salvo repeated, not understanding.

“Hektor Neumann’s,” Nikos said, with a scowl. “But now it doesn’t matter to me.” Cora gave him a kiss on the cheek, blew another kiss toward Salvo.

“We,” Nikos said, “are going to stay here.”

Then it was all as if nothing had happened, the death of Cora, the past days. Nikos picked up the two backpacks, took out some cans, and carried the rest to the house in ruins. Salvo, following him, noticed that the two youths had tried in some way to make it orderly inside, pulling up the weeds and piling the stones in the corners.

It was impossible that Nikos could really think of being able to stay on the island with the ghost of Cora, if that was what it was. And yet the girl seemed as alive as him, as Nikos, now that he had his arms around her. Her gaze had become more direct and clearer, she had lost the childish timidity, though not the grace.

Nikos had found some big flat stones and arranged them near the fire so they could sit more comfortably, and that afternoon, as he recounted, he and Cora had gone in search of wild edible grasses. “You’re not afraid someone will find you?” Salvo asked Nikos, trying not to let Cora hear, but the boy shrugged and didn’t answer.

Soon afterward Cora squatted in front of the fire near Salvo, opened a can of tuna for herself and one for him and handed it to him. She ate with her fingers, licking the oil that dripped from
Salvo lay still, listening to the sounds in the darkness, trying to figure out if the youths were awake, too. It seemed to him he heard breathing, and he got up silently, peered into the darkness, in the direction of the house in ruins. He saw the bodies of Nikos and Cora entwined, the girl’s bare legs, he heard her groan softly. Trying not to be heard, he went back to lie down beside what remained of the fire. He closed his eyes again and felt guilty, as if he had seen what he shouldn’t have, that intimacy of the living with the dead. The two stopped and soon afterward started again, and at a certain point Salvo had the impression that Cora didn’t want to continue and that Nikos was forcing her, but he did nothing, he waited.

He heard Cora cry out, then silence. The two separated, Cora rose, completely naked, as if her body had nothing to do with her, and headed toward where he heard a stream running in the darkness. Salvo lay still, listening to the sounds in the darkness, wanting to cut her lips, the same mouth that should have been smeared with the honey of the dead. Before, Salvo recalled, she didn’t eat fish. “What’s it like to die?” he asked her suddenly.

Cora raised her eyes to Nikos. The boy seemed annoyed, as if Salvo had disappointed him. “No, he’s right,” Cora said, and added: “It’s very painful in the body, then nothing. When they shot me I fell in the water but I was already dead. I didn’t drown. A few days later I was found on the beach in Krev where you hid the boat today. It was early morning, and I felt stiff all over, as if someone had beaten me. Little by little the pain went away, I could breathe more easily. For a few days I didn’t eat or drink and then hunger and thirst returned, too. I hid and waited, and the next day Nikos arrived, but I stayed hidden, I don’t really know why. I saw you come and talk to him, but then, too, I was afraid. Only when you left, and I knew that Nikos was alone, I came out and showed myself to him.”

Cora looked down, as if ashamed of what she had just said. Nikos squeezed her hand, tenderly.

“Did you know you were dead?” Salvo asked her. Cora looked up at him again. “Not really,” she said. “I felt strange, I was afraid. I knew that something had changed compared to before. It was only seeing Nikos, talking to him, that I understood what had happened to me.” She took her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” said Salvo. “I’m sorry, Cora. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Later he fell asleep suddenly. Maybe that was how his body defended itself, denied the impossible. He reopened his eyes and everything was darkness, the fire almost out, the stars very thick and high. He was lying on the ground, and someone, Cora or Nikos, had put a blanket over him and a sweater under his head as a pillow.

Salvo lay still, listening to the sounds in the darkness, trying to figure out if the youths were awake, too. It seemed to him he heard breathing, and he got up silently, peered into the darkness, in the direction of the house in ruins. He saw the bodies of Nikos and Cora entwined, the girl’s bare legs, he heard her groan softly. Trying not to be heard, he went back to lie down beside what remained of the fire. He closed his eyes again and felt guilty, as if he had seen what he shouldn’t have, that intimacy of the living with the dead. The two stopped and soon afterward started again, and at a certain point Salvo had the impression that Cora didn’t want to continue and that Nikos was forcing her, but he did nothing, he waited.

He heard Cora cry out, then silence. The two separated, Cora rose, completely naked, as if her body had nothing to do with her, and headed toward where he heard a stream running in the darkness. Salvo couldn’t help staring, from under his half-closed eyelids, at the pale stain that was her flesh, and it seemed to him to see her lean over the current and lap the water like a cat. Cora turned toward him, squatted in front of him and touched one of his calves, forcing him to open his eyes. “Are you all right?” she asked. She knew he was awake.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, was about to offer her his blanket, but Cora dodged it with a gesture, she was naked and didn’t care that he was looking at her. “Are you all right?” Salvo asked, he extended his fingers toward the girl’s cheeks and saw in the very faint light of the moon and what remained of the fire that blood was dripping from her nose. Cora also touched her lips and touched her fingers, covered with blood, as if she were seeing it for the first time. Then: “Cora, where are you?” called Nikos’s voice, and she turned her back on Salvo and merged with the darkness.
Evelina Santangelo :: From Another World

* — Chapter 1

September 10, 2020, Sicily

“Flies are biting. We’re going to have a rough autumn.” Which is all that the Coast Guard Commander said after the umpteenth rescue of an approximate number of refugees, immigrants, or whatever the hell they were. He lifted his eyes to the sky when he said it, causing a number of his men to wonder whether he had been speaking of the especially turbulent weather that season, or of the thankless work they carried out every night in that puddle of a sea. “The middle White sea” is what the Arabs called it, though what did they know about the sea, wondered the Commander, the image of boiling black water still in his eyes.

Whatever it was, most preferred to assume that the Commander was talking
about the weather, because it was effectively an exceptional autumn, or just superstition, not to feed thoughts of more drowning people, sea rescues, estimated victim counts, and the attendant risks and politics: because they were doing too much... because they weren’t doing enough... because they should do everything differently while heaving aboard slippery clumps of bodies clinging to each other, so wrecked, so depleted they seemed more souls than people.

... that’s what his grandmother used to say.

* — Chapter 2
September 10, Brussels

She’s a tortured soul. Or, something like that, thinks Khaled of the woman lost in the aisles of Hard Discount where he’d ducked in for shelter from the rain. She was standing, sausageed into her flowered dress, staring at some indefinite point in the display of chocolate snacks. She didn’t notice the puddle he’d left right there on the ground, his trainers like drowned ships and bare legs streaked with hair and mud.

He didn’t like it when she turned and started, looking at him as if she’d seen a ghost. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He hadn’t touched anything. He had no intention of accepting the pack of biscuits she had taken off the shelf and was handing to him, a sickly smile on her face. Maybe it was the fluorescent lights that were sickly.

He doesn’t trust kind people, or sad people either.

Then he thought, who cares? He gestured to the woman to follow him and led her to the luggage section and pointed to a red trolley on top of the shelf with the special offers.

Yes, he really wanted that. He nodded his head. He didn’t need anything else. And, he had no intention of telling her his name, even though she had asked, spacing out each word, gesturing helpfully, trying to make him understand.

He left Hard Discount with two full bags: new sneakers, a pair of trousers, a checkered shirt, a warm jacket, and the pack of biscuits the woman had tucked under his arm.

Now he is sitting in front of a fire making smoke and not much more, in a ditch not far from the highway, around him the remnants of a grove of spindly trees. He feels a little... to go around telling people his name. “The fruit of peace hangs in silence” — that’s what his grandmother used to say.
was as if an avalanche of mice had been spilled ashore. Or a flock of migratory birds who stopped along the way and left not a trace of their presence, “not a feather... nor the distant echo of their call” which was how a local newspaper reporter would put it, poetically.

Looking at the indigo sea vibrating under gathering gusts of wind gave the impression that multitudes of mice or birds or something else that no one had seen, unknowable entities, had metamorphosed as if a spell had been cast, into blinding whitecaps cresting off the shore from Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, even Morocco.

A good cup of coffee sipped while looking out at the dusty sand being dragged toward the electric lure of the sea — like a show — was all the beach sweeper needed to abandon all that speculation and thinking. At least until that day in which he heard the guard who stood outside of the bank say that he had nothing special to report except for the fact that the night before while he was standing near the sea, it seemed less hot.

“ That's all?”
“ That's all.”

[...] * — Chapter 7
September 16, Palermo

Electrical surges and short circuits had been a daily event for quite some time in the city outskirts.

Some said it was yet more proof of neglect and others blamed the residents themselves. "Scofflaw types... wouldn’t think twice about pirating off the electrical grid..." That was how people in the gated communities thought of it, where shrubbery and fences protected them from prying eyes but not from the nimble wiles of burglars who, on the occasional weekend, might creep out from the farthest reaches of the neighborhood, the most abandoned, the most infamous.

The Northern Expansion Zone was like a sea separating the outermost city limits from the first outposts of villas and mansions announcing the stately Mondello waterfront, with its beaches so pearly white that no one could have imagined its marshy past, "mud harbor." The Arabs called it Marsa 'at Tin.

It may have been the whiff of nobility that still dominated the coastline but no one realized that the momentary short circuits were originating from the former swamp and moved outward toward the Zen dormitory with its buildings-like-islands: those little fortresses with their shabby engineering. The plaster had started flaking off the minute construction was completed and everything after that was patchwork over deep cracks that periodically emerged on the interior walls.

The greasy fumes rising from heaps of abandoned rubbish made it difficult for the children to conceptualize exactly what had happened that one autumnal afternoon on the Mediterranean, in the patch of cement and weeds that had been deemed a football field. Everyone — from the day they learned to put one foot in front of the other — called it la Spianata, the esplanade.

Everyone had been sweating like crazy. There was that.

A hot African wind was blowing that afternoon, giving the villa facades a more yellowish tinge. Sweat mixed with mud from wells of undetermined origin where they had fallen when they pushed each other because that was the last game of the summer season, then there would be winter season. Though many were inclined to think of it as a transitional tournament, mid season, was what they called it. Everyone had a different name for it. And that was fine with everyone, just as long as they could play!
Despite the heavy air, the mud and smoke, whatever had transpired between four and eight on that September afternoon would go down in the history of the esplanade, including that moment at seven-thirty when, on top of everything else, they turned on all of the spotlights. “Like the stadium, San Siro!” said the older kids — they spent days recounting the stratospheric proportions of that game. “We’re not talking eleven to eleven,” said one kid, “but fifty to fifty… or, like, five hundred to five hundred!”

Not everyone could even count the final score, something like 100 to 150. It was as if the entire Zen building complex came out to play — fathers, cousins, jailed brothers, and everyone else, was the way one little boy described it, stretching his arms wide to indicate the whole universe. He would have sworn to that when he was talking about it to his cousin from the other side of the city, nestled among the sumptuous buildings and prizsd facades of the historic center, down an alley the name of which was written on the street sign in two languages, Italian and something swirly that must have been Arabic — though no one spoke either language.

“Hey,” he said, “the other night at the esplanade, we played against, like, the whole world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, but I swear it’s true.”

Upon that oath, he spat three times on the ground.

* — Chapter 8
September 16, Brussels

There is the taste of earth and musk in his mouth. His eyes shoot open, terrified, it must have been a nightmare. But his red trolley is still there. He’d held it between his legs all night long. He must have been tossing and screaming because his throat is parched and there are clumps of moss all over his skin. One of his blankets ended up in a little ditch half a meter away, but he has the other one close by, rolled and tied up. He’d clutched it to his chest and used it like a pillow for his head.

Before waking and sitting up to look around, Khaled shifts the improvised pillow with the delicacy you reserve for fragile things. You can’t see anything around you. There’s just a...
that the guy behind him in line didn’t have any hair on his head. The blade in Padre Buono’s hand made him think of the time he and his brother had slit a lamb’s throat in secret, so that they could eat properly for at least a couple of days. “Full service for you!” Laughed Padre Buono, nudging the guy down onto the stool, “One scalping and you’ll be all set!”

His mother would have surely laughed if she’d seen it. Maybe she did see it from the other side of the ocean. Maybe in a dream. He reminds himself of her like that every time he gets ready just like she did before he’d leave, “It doesn’t cost anything to comb your hair,” which was corollary to another thought, “you can tell how much a person loves their children by observing how she cleans and grooms them each morning.”

He can’t tell if it’s his mother who is guiding him but he feels as if if he needs to do things properly before setting off. He washes his face and hands, then puts on the trousers and shirt from the woman in Hard Discount. He doesn’t put on the coat and sneakers yet though, that’s for later.

He retrieves the blanket from the ditch, refolds it, kneels down to try to organize everything into the trolley. It’s big enough inside since Khaled cut out the pearl grey lining. He was sorry to do it but he didn’t have a choice. Either way, it was the right choice to pick a suitcase that wasn’t too big or too small.

He leaves the suitcase onto his cart and takes another minute to survey his work. He’s pleased with the bright red, so bright it can be seen through the fog.

Anyone passing by that way that morning would have seen the tiny boy, not older than thirteen, alone in a clearing surrounding by a few spindly trees, by the side of the highway. Very carefully, Khaled puts on his new lined jacket and sneakers, and leaves the old ones behind, not far from the burnt wood scraps of the fire; he goes through all the same motions as a person getting ready to leave the house in the morning.

When the first truck comes into the lay-by for a breath of air and to stretch his legs, he can see a red dot fluttering in the distance, as if suspended in a milky landscape, and little else.

Just a trick of the eye from exhaustion, too many hours staring at the road, day and night.

Ms Iolanda stood, eyes glistening, by the desk for endless minutes. She had no desire to be seated, thank you. Inspector Vitale looked at her disconsolately. At this point it was an “epidemic.” Her drawings had gone viral on the internet. They got posted to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumbler, Snapchat: sketches plastered on every tree and streetlight in the neighborhood. Someone said that it had all started with a WhatsApp message sent out as a joke.

The first consequence was a written warning from her supervisor — as if she hadn’t been the one to bring the drawings to the Carabinieri herself. Now the teacher feared not merely a formal reprimand but that she would be suspended for “behavior not in conformity with her responsibilities and duties, nor the rectitude inherent to her position.” The same charges that were already being rattled off.

She wasn’t explicitly asking the Inspector for help. She just wanted to fill him in. Nor did she mean to accuse him of anything. She’d drawn the pictures with her own hands — and with her own hands had delivered them to her supervisor. She was not the...
known as “an enigma of worldwide significance.”

“Social Alarm” was the language that newspapers adopted when they reported on any event that could be associated with other alarms and a fear that had some time ago morphed into dangerously unacknowledged tensions. Like the story of the bruises.

“What bruises?” asked the editorial director.

“Swollen bruises of unknown origin appearing on the arms of several children — not just one or two, but a bunch. Just like that, one day they come out of school with these bruises.”

The journalist could not identify the exact location of the event — San Zenone — but which one? San Zenone al Lambro, or al Po, or degli Ezzelini?

Also unmentioned was the hypothesis ventured by an entomologist that the bruises had come from tiger mosquitos: an aggressive species, black and furry, that started to proliferate thanks to the unusual temperatures being recorded throughout Europe as a massive high-pressure system moved across the continent.

“It’s not an issue of these ‘irregulars’ actually going around classrooms sticking needles or syringes into children’s arms,” the journalist clarified (he was really stuck on this newsitem), “it’s a matter of perspective. My perspective is that they may not exist — I can be frank, there’s no evidence they do. But people fear… that does exist. It does. And that is what I am obliged to report.” The severe tone his voice took on as he reached his conclusion influenced the director’s decision.

The fear he was talking about concerned an area on the border of Lombardy and the Veneto.

A retired schoolteacher who had served in the Local Civil Surveillance unit had attempted to nab a couple of those children in front of several schools. But he couldn’t do it, “they kind of person to shirk responsibility. But… It was hard to believe that everything was falling apart so fast and it was all on her.

The thought of which made her burst out into silent tears, drops running down her face. That she didn’t pull out a handkerchief was a question of being ashamed. She was not accustomed to showing her feelings in public.

Inspector Vitale had his own share of trouble over the past few days. The more those sketches circulated from person to person and from one social network to the next, the more reports of “irregular” children were coming in, along with complaints against unknown persons, a slew of out of focus cell phone pictures: blurry figures, curled up, perched, elusive, indistinct — and in several cases captured in free fall as if they were stones from the sky.

At first the sightings and complaints were coming directly into the Carabinieri station — because they were in the area where the sketches appeared. But when the news came out about the beach sweeper who’d screamed “Mice!” on the morning of September 11 (“it’s been more than a month!” one fired-up blogger complained), when it became clear that this thing had been going on for a while, then that story spread like lava, crushing Carabinieri outposts, as well as regional and local police stations. Even the cross-regional Brigadier General found himself reluctantly placing a telephone call to Vitale to find out the substance of the threat or… of “all that mucking about.”

The first news agency to give serious consideration to the fears snaking across the country, even up to the north part of the country, was a local tv station in the Veneto. At least in as much as it was an eminent reporter from Lombardy to whom would be attributed the first mention of what would shortly become known as “an enigma of worldwide significance.”

Also unmentioned was the hypothesis ventured by an entomologist that the bruises had come from tiger mosquitos: an aggressive species, black and furry, that started to proliferate thanks to the unusual temperatures being recorded throughout Europe as a massive high-pressure system moved across the continent.

“It’s not an issue of these ‘irregulars’ actually going around classrooms sticking needles or syringes into children’s arms,” the journalist clarified (he was really stuck on this news item), “it’s a matter of perspective. My perspective is that they may not exist — I can be frank, there’s no evidence they do. But people fear… that does exist. It does. And that is what I am obliged to report.” The severe tone his voice took on as he reached his conclusion influenced the director’s decision.

The fear he was talking about concerned an area on the border of Lombardy and the Veneto.

A retired schoolteacher who had served in the Local Civil Surveillance unit had attempted to nab a couple of those children in front of several schools. But he couldn’t do it, “they
slipped away,” he sputtered, “right out of my hands. Totally. Holy sh…” But he couldn’t explain how. He repeated the story while looking into an empty distance, as if the boys were standing right in front of him — taunting.

A number of parents gathered around the retired teacher and said they were sure that these were the same children whose photographs had been circulating on the internet for days. No one bothered to say that it would be more accurate to describe the images as charcoal sketches. Those same sketches that, on the other side of the country, kept Ms. Iolanda up all night. Such an insignificant being! She repeated to herself as she scrutinized the bags under her eyes in the mirror, half lit by an emergency flashlight, trying to convince herself that at the end of this all it wouldn’t be her head on the block.

Ultimately it wasn’t terribly clear what kind of individual to be on the lookout for, to stop, or to turn into the authorities. However, an abundance of local administrators encouraged the formation of special coalitions against the “irregulars” who slithered from the “farthest Southern coastline up toward our North.” A mayor in Lombardy didn’t mince words: “We should dress them as rabbits and shoot them with rifles, pow, pow, pow.” His tone was ironic but he was gathering support among his electorate.

That this was the course the phenomenon was bound to take was soon confirmed by an equally inexplicable and chilling fact that Inspector Vitale would have preferred to keep to himself — had someone not seen fit to feed it to the press, probably one of his own men who was concerned about appearing irresponsible. This was the term the Inspector chose when he commented on the idiocy of circulating Ms. Iolanda’s drawings with such hap-hazard recklessness, although it was clear that what the inspector was actually thinking as he spoke, was “bunch of imbeciles!” Someone couldn’t overlook the offense and turned it into a news leak.

The Mystery of the Living Children — the headline that the Palermo edition of a national paper ran to inform its readers of what had happened a few days earlier at the Carabinieri station. A regrettable, disheartening, and at times gruesome situation that Inspector Vitale would have preferred never to have read in his morning newspaper on October 30. In fact, after glancing at the first lines of the reporting and seeing photographs of him and of Corporal Genovese with his haunted expression, pictures secretly taken, he closed the paper and waited for something irreparable to happen. And the irreparable did happen just a few hours later in the form of an urgent phone call, so out of the ordinary that he leapt up from his seat, forcing him to uncomfortably explain to the Defense Department Commander in Chief that “it was something you had to be in the middle of to underst…”

And this unfinished sentence would be the most coherent one that Inspector Vitale managed to utter concerning the situation on October 28 at, yes, the Carabinieri station, which was, yes, under his command.

The rest of what he told was so incompressible that even he was hard pressed to believe it.

[...] * Chapter 21
October 22 — 30, Brussels

For days Karolina has been carefully paying attention to every bit of news, poring over every picture, her eyes burning from
hours spent in vigil in front of the computer. She has no determined criteria, she looks at everything and listens to everything, voraciously: when they pick up a band of drug dealers in a nearby neighborhood; when there’s a heated conflict, armed fighters and bombings in places about which she knows nothing; when a presumed terrorist is arrested; when there’s talk of dogs being saved by a group of clandestine fighters — Andreas loved dogs (he’d come to blows with some “bum” who was kicking a “living creature”). Even when there’s special coverage of volunteers lending a hand in some part of the world recently hit by catastrophe — she sits, totally concentrated, waiting.

What it all comes down to is that her son could be anywhere, doing anything. He might even have disappeared and that would be that, decided to erase all trace of himself. It would be his right. For her, it’s a consolation, at least a way not to lose hope.

The only thing that Karolina cannot bring herself to think is that Andreas could be dead. Which is why she is so convinced that sooner or later she will somehow, if not find him, at least see him, even spot him — if only a passing glance in a video on TV or the internet. All the videos that people post day after day from every part of the world. Or else maybe she might dream of him. She would settle for seeing him in a nightmare. She nurturing no hope, however, of ever hearing his voice again — at this point she’s worked herself into total exhaustion. She had even sewed herself a little bag to wear around her waist so that she would always have her cell phone with her, close by, sitting on the same hip in which she held Andreas as a baby, his little legs wrapped around her body.

That’s how, on the evening before the day she decided to cross back over the Charleroi Canal, to really look at the police tape in Rue de Ribaucourt, across Molenbeek, it was natural for her — given how much news she’d been watching and listening to all this time — to notice when there was an abrupt shift in how the news was being reported.

The “terrorist threat” seems to have almost disappeared from the local news. Instead there is more urgent discussion about the new waves of refugees coming in off the Mediterranean, even if it seemed that for a while, judging by recent statistics, people fleeing seemed to gravitate more to the Balkan route. “Unaccompanied minors” repeated like a mantra across television channels, along with a separate news item that seemed to always immediately follow, which had to do with the imperative to adopt new security measures in schools, the way they have already done in other European countries. It’s the same on the radio. And the same for the notifications coming in on her cell phone — all the information following the same pattern.

It’s what Karolina thinks about always, even during the hours spent in the solitude of the real estate office among the deserted geometry of the desks she has to polish and the vacuum she runs. It’s a distraction perhaps, a way to keep her mind busy thinking about something that isn’t her son.

On the metro, heading toward the canal, it’s all already slipped her mind. She’s reviewing her itinerary. It’s been more or less the same path for the last month: Quai des ... Place Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Rue du Comte de Flandre, Gemeenteplaats, and then back in the direction of Rue de Ribaucourt.

Except that today it is rainy and very cold. The uninterrupted veil of droplets, like vapor, the unrelenting wind that blows everywhere, under umbrellas, through raincoats, into windbreakers — it all bothers her and her coat is hardly enough to keep her warm and dry.
She could not have imagined the shock that awaited her in Molenbeek. And it wasn’t the desecrated and fear-filled streets, not at all. As soon as she left Rue de la Prospérité, which is always bare and sad, she finds herself in a busy rush, people going in and out of shops, fish mongers, butchers. A crowded to and fro, a forest of umbrellas. Karolina gets to Gemeenteplaats, the market square, where there are carts full of fruits and vegetables, shopping bags stuff to the brim, carts rolling over peoples’ toes, paper scraps stuck to the ground.

Even the narrow Rue du Prado, an alley, sways and overflows. Karolina stops in the square to look: there is an overflow of market goods kept dry under plastic canopies streaked with rain, and a river of people focused on making their purchases and bargaining, moving peacefully from one store to the next… It is as if from where she stands that this isn’t “the Lair,” the “Belgistan” that needed military guards, zoned off and forbidden, the poison heart of the nation, of all Europe. As if she had not been there just a few weeks before, a month at most, as if she’d not seen with her own eyes the fear filtering through the walls, from the red brick buildings, from the darkened windows, on the face of the old man with the yellowed hair who went back and forth, bringing people to see.

She looks everywhere hoping to see a team, a beat cop from the local precinct, the state police or at least the familiar face of the psychologist or special forces agent who came all the way to her house to tell her about Andreas, about the tape, about the terrorists of Rue de Ribaucourt. A sign is what she’s looking for, something that gives her at least one single comprehensible reason for how she has ended up here, searching for some clue about her son.

The agonized wail of a baby in a buggy looking her way, hits her. A shot that brings her back to herself. Now she realizes what she’s doing. Standing there between the market square and the mouth of Rue du Prado she’s been staring like a guard dog at the covered women passing all around her, trying to see their eyes through the slit in the niqab. She can’t say whether it’s because of all the black surrounding them or the silent unexpected sweep of their long garments, but the fact is that she’s standing there staring, observing every gesture, trying to see what’s hidden by the niqab. There’s only one thought in her mind, to retrieve her son, to liberate him from these quasi tombs.

“I’m going crazy,” she says, the rain dripping off her. She’s ended up calling her ex-husband who answers with silence.

“I said that I’m going crazy…”

“Go crazy alone. As far as I’m concerned… that one… he’s gone, finished, dead.”

“There’s no trace. Nothing. How is there no trace of him?”

She’s desperately wondering about “the Lair,” the sealed off store where her son had worked, the high alert, the news she doesn’t hear anymore, as if along with the news coverage Andreas had vanished, along with all hope.

“The psychologist… That woman said that he’d ended up there but now there’s nothing there, no anything. Can’t you understand?” she murmured finally.

“Yes, you are going crazy.” Which is the only answer she gets before she hears dead silence once again through the receiver.

— Chapter 22
October 31, Brussels, Rome, Palermo

The Chief Commissioner of Brussels Police, Western Division;
What Inspector Vitale had for some time feared most. This, on top of the disaster at the Carabinieri station on that ill-fated day, October 28, that had obligated him to confront an embarrassing telephone call with no one less than the Italian Chief of Defense himself.

That was why, upon hearing those words, he kicked away the chair on which he was resting his feet and stood, about to vaporize the colonel and his weather report with a click of his remote control.

The Chief Commissioner of the West Brussels Police and the Italian Chief of Defense, however, could make no claim that their perceptions were altered by nerves. They were taken . . . left to expect from the day. Which also perhaps explained how slowly they responded, defenseless before the unpredictable.

All three men had the impression of seeing — followed immediately by a certainty — in the empty blue brightness of their television screens, someone seated, rather perched, . . . keeping their full attention on the absurd apparition neither of the two officials even attempted to turn off the tv. Only Inspector Vitale attempted to erase the figure, to wipe him out with the dark screen.

The Chief Commissioner of West Brussels Police, who was generally a steady man, took a minute to come up with a thought
that seemed a sensible response to all that was incomprehensible: If there was really a child there, in his living room, near his couch, he just needed to get close enough to the television to grab his skinny arm before he scampered away and pull him down. He would figure out everything else later. Except that as soon as he turned to take a step, he was seized by a terror he couldn’t explain. Not that the child had moved, pulled out a knife or gun. He hadn’t moved an inch. It was the steadiness of the child’s gaze that paralyzed the commissioner. Those eyes. Black and steady, black like the deepest sea. He couldn’t have imagined that he would spend the whole night in that position, watching a child watching him.

The Italian Chief of Defense spent the whole night standing and wondering if Inspector Vitale had felt the same sense of the inevitable when he got caught up in the story of the “living children.” He stared into the murky depth of those eyes and felt even more as if he should look away, and as if he entirely comprehended the explanation that the inspector had used to report on the events at the Carabinieri station in Palermo: “You had to be there…”

Although even the fact of having been there, in the middle of it all, hadn’t given Vitale any protection from the turmoil. The face of the boy perched on top of his TV was surprisingly reminiscent of one of Ms. Iolanda’s sketches.

Standing petrified in front of the television screen in his house, convinced that there was really a child there before his eyes, the inspector reviewed in as much painstaking detail as he could muster, the events of the morning of October 28, despite having promised himself he was done thinking about it, and that the story of the “living-children” should remain — at least as far as he was concerned — the sensationalist findings of a daily newspaper angled to create a media uproar.

… It was a day like any other — late October, slightly hazy out. The cleaning lady prepared the coffee, which tasted, as it did every morning, burnt. It was a simple matter of measuring that she refused to take into consideration — more water, less coffee. The obvious solution: “Why don’t you get an automatic coffee maker that does it all for you?” Inspector Vitale’s standard response: “Because I like to smell the aroma…” which was the way he’d been answering the same question for years.

Apart from the lingering bitterness in his mouth that persisted through three watery coffees from the Carabinieri station coffee dispenser — the way it smelled like heated water each time it emitted a serving — and apart from some hassle that he sorted out with a couple of telephone calls, after several rough days trying to minimize the ordeal of the sketches in the public eye, his mind was primarily occupied with debating himself on whether he should invite the waitress from the bar across the street to dinner. She was outgoing and radiated joy, which he thought was something that he really needed — a little devil-may-care that might carry on through the night.

The first indication of what was going to unfold over the next few hours had been an odd, actually quite bizarre, event. Gradually, one a time, foreigners — all from different places — began to gather at the Carabinieri station, and they weren’t there to report a crime. They wanted to talk to the Inspector. They didn’t say “the Inspector,” specifically but rather asked for whoever was in charge. Meanwhile they sat in the waiting room, a silence hovering amongst them that seemed to grow heavier and heavier. Corporal Antonio Genovesi had already been in Vitale’s office at least three times. There were a number of “immigrants” he reported, and each was holding a piece of folded paper. They wanted to talk to him. There were more
The next morning there was no trace of the boy who had perched on his television set.

No matter how little they were able to reconstruct the order of events that had transpired inside their three houses, miles away from each other, on the night of October 31, 2020, none of the three men, and perhaps especially Inspector Vitale, entertained for a moment, the possibility that they had seen a ghost…
started as a game, a way to pass the time. Some insisted that it was the owner of the bar’s fault for making fun of him: “If these ghosts appear in flesh and blood we can cook them for dinner!” Joking, teasing Orso for the jumble of thoughts that had come out of his mouth. Others said that Orso was just doing what he always did; he caught a whiff of festivity in the air and high-tailed it for his house, the way he did every year. “If it starts a month early…” said the proprietor, who didn’t let anything get by him if it had to do with Orso, “that Orso,” — whom he didn’t like at all. “Hard headed, stubborn as a mule. Useless to talk to him about anything…” There were others who thought that Orso must have fallen ill, bronchitis or something, since the last time he was seen, it was in the Prewar Pharmacy (that’s what everyone called it), and he bought milk and honey. And his voice was hoarse, kind of scary sounding. Another guy said that Orso was in perfect health because he’d seen him not more than three days earlier at the hardware store. He was buying poison and glue traps for the mice. “His passion!” he added sarcastically, referring to Orso’s obsession with the mice that hid out in his shed, their regular invasions drove him crazy. “He’s an old man baby and a big drunk,” others said dismissively, which drew criticism from the older people who didn’t like it when someone was tossed aside like that, just because he had his difficulties, and if you only knew what it was like, the isolation, and aging. “When he was a young man, Orso, he could knock out a bull with his fist,” they boasted, rapping their knuckles on their foreheads. “He still could if he wanted to… Those Gypsies — he could eat them alive… That’s what this is all about. Not ghosts! Pretty politics from certain politicians, the dirty bastards!” With that the speakers cast glances over at the group of teenagers gathered around the pinball machine. They were the ones caught up in the stories of “presences” or “entities” which was what some called them.

One of them even said that he’d seen a presence with his own eyes a few years back. It wasn’t a child though, it was a pregnant woman, barefoot in a white slip. She was standing in the middle of a parking lot, staring at nothing. It was four in the morning. Werewolf-dark out. He’d seen her silhouette in the headlights of his moped. “A horrid memory.”

“These must be that slut’s children,” joked one of the boys, the youngest, he was trying to be funny but was also a little serious. Someone else claimed that something like that had happened to his ex-girlfriend when she was on vacation. She was with a bunch of friends and the lights went out suddenly and then they heard noises all around them, strange sounds, like animals and wailing babies, so they all turned on their cellphone flashlights. “It was like fear quadrupled,” she’d said to him.

The unofficial leader of the group, Rambo II — because Rambo I was Stallone — was the most scientific in his explanation for the entities. He was also a big talker! He’d found a home protection website that advertised motion-sensitive video cameras against intruders — the sensors could even pick up presences. That must mean something.

A few weeks passed and no one mentioned Orso. Everyone’s attention was focused on a political op-ed that was claiming to have the best security plan for the citizens of the Po Valley. The articulate editorial eulogized the prophetic spirit of the communities who predicted what disrupted peoples’ sleep for a period — Good peoples’ sleep.

Who or whatever was generating the upset was not a force for good. This was the sense that all devoted readers understood without any need for it to be stated explicitly.

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From Another World
The public was united in its thoughts and feelings on this matter and that was one of the strengths of that newspaper and the party it represented. Consensus had grown around this business with the “illegals” as the Party Leader had instinctively predicted.

The “prophetic spirit” had to do with the solidity and lack of sentimentality in which the community had protested, in even uneventful times, the presence of families of “illegals” in their territory, which was popularly referred to as “our house.”

Their house was the church where the priest had timidly resisted protest when he offered to shelter four women and two children. “Forced into it by who knows who…” several of the faithful noted; they preferred to think he had been forced and blackmailed.

Their house was the Carabinieri station where someone had proposed putting up tents to shelter a few families after a terrible drowning that had dotted the southern coastline with dead bodies. News that the party leaders had referred to as “innocent victims of shipyard workers and dogooders” — a headline that had given rise to a great deal of debate across the nation. A debate that had, nonetheless, done nothing to dissuade “local communities” from waging a battle against the invasion of people who were too different, too out of place, for that area of the Po Valley. They already had their own problems and their own innocent victims; they had their own troubles to deal with.

Looking over the most recent news items in town, there had been no complaints about the presence of “illegal ghosts,” wrote the editor with pointed irony. He was a well-known hawk, who was appreciated for the logic with which he defended the interests of his fellow citizens who were taking back, nothing more or less, “their natural right to be lords of their own house, and,” he added, “to save the white, Christian race from extinction.”

No one could therefore debate the obvious connection between the two things: families of illegal immigrants and children who wandered. What’s more, the prognosticators said, and also wrote in the online comments section of the newspaper, these groups of “families” and “women who appeared defenseless” were mere “harbingers” of the coming waves of much greater proportions that could be expected if things went on this way, telling everyone that they were “welcome!”

The bar owner had taped the article up on the wall and it animated discussions for days, the tenor of conversation becoming increasingly heightened. The teenagers who came to bar felt that it was a distraction from the top issue. The top issue that everyone had on their minds, but no one had gotten to the roots of, was the Gypsy camp over by the highway, where the “mice” were coming from, the “ghosts” someone called them, evoking the final chapters of the video game, Call of Duty: those “parasites” overrunning the place. In that same area a number of truck drivers had seen “redish stuff” hidden in the brush. People ran to social media to try to figure out the dimensions of the problem. “Storm of posts.”

There was one guy at the bar who drank a lot and spoke little, which made him a good customer in the eyes of the bar owner. The guy said to the old men “you all are the same people who go to church every Sunday and exchange wishes for peace…” Which almost brought the bar to blows. Some of them there had a “red” past from when there had been a party that was really The Party, with leaders who stood with the people. Those were serious comrades! They ate the priests up, fucking Judas! Ignorants, the bunch of them!
Ultimate the bar owner, who didn’t want to lose his best drinker and most reliable payer, threw a few punches at those teenagers who, once in a while, felt obliged to defend the arguments of the old men, who they called “those pain in the ass-pensioners,” but on that evening had gotten fired up about the families, businesses, and grandchildren that needed protection, and what would be the best way to go about doing that.

“Whoever comes into my house doesn’t get out alive. Call of Duty, Infinite Warfare,” concluded Rambo II, crushing his can of Coke after downing it like a cowboy drinking whiskey in the old west.

Orso muttered something very similar to himself that lunatic night of November 2, as he pointed his rifle at one dark corner then another in his shed. “You come into my house, you don’t get out alive.”

His dog, Lupo, had pulled down to the ground everything that Orso had spent years carefully organizing in that small storage space. It constituted an unstable but durable fortress. It was hardly easy to make it from one end of the shed to the other without tripping and falling. The moon, however brightly it shone through the gleaming black night, could not find its way into the tightly lined planks along the solid walls of the shed.

The standoff hadn’t changed for a good half hour. Lupo was barking and picking his way through the fallen piles, while Orso, on one knee with his rifle aiming wildly, repeated, “You, you won’t get out of here alive.”

Then something suddenly happened that Orso would have been unable to explain.

The shed door slammed against its frame, as if from a violent gust of wind — though there wasn’t the slightest breeze. Lupo turned and leaped at him, almost as if he were going for his master’s throat. Orso almost shot him, but, a moment before pulling the trigger, he realized that Lupo was aiming for something behind him, actually, no, it was something out in the yard, outside the door.

He whipped around, keeping his feet planted, and in the night, he saw a very small black figure, just visible in the crystal dark. It stood petrified watching Lupo ready to spring and devour.

His rifle aimed and his index finger on the trigger, Orso moved out of the shed, and the creature, awkwardly lifted its hands to its head, covered its eyes, and turned away, folding completely to the side, trembling.
Carola Susani 11 The First Life of Italo Orlando
Even though the sun was beating down on him, he brought the car close to the well, where there was no shelter, and worked in the summer heat with the wires and the battery. He kept a bucket next to him and drank from it every now and then. The carob leaves, high above my head, were motionless, weighed down by the sultriness. A lament with the name Irene buried somewhere in it was calling to me but I pretended the kitchen was too far for me to hear and stood under the carob, enjoying our guest. He took a number of things I’d never seen before out of the boot: pipes and wires I then realised were water pipes and electric wires, and even a pair of lightbulbs. I wouldn’t have known where to buy these things in Casteldorto, so I wondered if Italo...
was familiar with our district; could the Marsala engineering student Margherita talked about know the shops around Casteldorfo that well? Alternatively, he might have just asked for directions (though I couldn’t really picture it). Who knows what would happen to his yellow head in the sun, I thought, besides getting bleached; but I didn’t have the energy to move and find him a straw hat although there was bound to be one somewhere in the house. He didn’t take off his white shirt and wasn’t even sweating. I recalled that afternoon — it seemed like years ago but was only a few days earlier — when I’d found him in the middle of the field, and thought he didn’t look altogether human. I took a picture. The overexposed photo included the pipes, the wall and Italo. He could feel my gaze and I imagine he didn’t mind because he’d occasionally turn to look at me.

Suddenly, I heard sounds coming from the kitchen: my grandmother had got up and was fussing over the stove. It was a day for surprises: while Italo was working, she couldn’t be idle either; thankfully, she’d be too busy to keep calling me in her lamenting tone. I wondered what she was cooking, what food we had at home. I hoped for some kind of wonder, for an aubergine parmigiana or a pasta bake but I knew that the contents of our larder ruled out any such hope.

Like in many southern regions, here, too, families make tomato sauce at the start of the summer. It’s a working celebration, in the open air, that involves all generations: a lengthy simmering of tomatoes which are then jarred and the jars then boiled once more for reasons of hygiene. Families stock up for the winter, like ants, just as they do with oil and wine. We’ve only ever done this with almonds. We’d never have had the energy to make tomato sauce, just as we’d never have had enough of it to go to the mill to get our wheat ground, then mix it into a dough, leave it to prove, and stick it in the oven. Back in the days when my family had some social standing, there was somebody appointed to do this (had it been up to us, we would have died out by now). Fortunately, you can buy bread now. You can also buy ready-jarred tomato sauce in any shop in Casteldorfo. Even so, at the beginning of the summer, Mangiaraccina would bring us bottles of it made by his wife Moira and his sisters (never once did we give him any almonds; it was photos, instead), partly because, for no good reason he felt indebted to us, as our customer, and partly because small and inept as our family was, he felt sorry for us. Except that he’d skimp on it and never gave us enough to last the whole winter; so it was hard to make the sauce stretch until spring, it would run out, and we’d have to either beg for some or buy it.

That year, the bottles were empty as early as May and nobody had yet shown up with fresh sauce, so I struggled to picture what my grandmother could be improvising for dinner.

Italo, on the other hand, has performed magic, he shouted to summon us. Out of the shade the heat was oppressing. I approached the car. My grandmother stuck her long nose out. The brightly-coloured electric wires he had strewn all over the lawn moments earlier led to a light bulb nailed next to a black switch. Italo made a gesture to ask us to wait a moment and ran to the car. He bent down behind the empty bonnet. I took another step towards him. My shadow didn’t reach as far as his back. The leather belt I had picked for him was tight. I moved to the side to get a better view of his yel-
low hands fiddling with wires without getting a shock (he had long, strong fingers). He looked up and nodded at my grandmother. Nonna Lucetta turned the switch. “Fiat lux,” she uttered out loud (I think she’d been repeating these words for effect ever since Italo had started tampering with the electric wires); a very faint light came on; it wasn’t three in the afternoon yet and the sun wasn’t relenting.

“In our Casteldorato house,” I said, “there’s water in the bathroom and electric light in all the rooms.”

“Yes,” he replied, lifting his chin and his cheeks, “but can you do this?”

My grandmother had made Trapani-style pasta with tomatoes from Tito Stella’s vegetable patch (had he brought them? When? Had she stolen them? Had she sent Italo to purloin them? Or ask for them?). We had last year’s almonds, garlic and basil.

We ate on the doorstep until long past sunset, the lightbulb drawing moths and mosquitoes to it. The crows were cawing at the top of their voices but kept away from the light. Papà didn’t have the heart to complain, looking at Italo as though he were a divine creature and a new son, and the Fiat 600 as a gift since he was unable to be his first-born as that was me.

* 7. — Our Nights

There are four bedrooms on the upper floor of Sette Cannelle: my father’s room with its small bed, my grandmother’s room with its large bed where no one ever sleeps (Nonna prefers to rock in the hammock the entire summer); the room overlooking the neglected landscape, where we put Italo, and which has a large single bed; and, finally, my room with its little bed. My father’s bedroom has a door leading into my grandmother’s. All the rooms, except my grandmother’s open onto a single, tiny hallway at the top of a staircase. The floor is made of ancient bricks, not the red kind, but brown, concave ones. Italo’s room has a wooden ladder that goes into the attic. At night, the mosquito screens are closed and the windows open. When there’s a moon, you can see it from the window in my room (and his), descending into the grey valley (and it’s more than just descending because it reveals a wide succession of shades, some almost transparent, as though traced on greaseproof paper).

Nothing happened on the first night Italo stayed with us at Sette Cannelle; it was the night of Italo the chimney sweep and he slept — if we can call it that — his breathing as always so unusual-ly regular. I know because that night I was too excited to sleep so I got up to check more than once. On the second night, I heard someone moving into the next room. He wasn’t there but the imprint of his body was on the bed. I rustled softly, searching the rooms: Papà was sleeping wrapped in a sheet as though he’d suddenly felt cold during the night. I found Italo in my grandmother’s room, not on the perfectly made-up bed but on the floor, behind it, by the window; naked, curled up. Until that moment I’d thought he was straight as an arrow, a gentle exterminator, but now for the first time I sensed a kind of anxiety in him: who was he? An angel from no religion with a ruthless task his heart was fleeing from? That’s not exactly how I phrased it back then — how could I have? It was a thought that occurred to me much later.

I never opened the windows in that room; I’d sometimes sweep and wash the floor but would escape after giving it just a
For as long as I can remember, my father subscribed to the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, would get it sent to his office in Casteldorto and read it at home late in the evening or at his office the following day. Among the journalists who wrote for the *Corriere*, his favourite was Luigi Barzini Jr., who was eager to write about our island. I remember that once, in the spring, when I’d just come home from school and was still in my jacket, Papà recited to me a piece about our industrialisation. My grandmother stretched her neck out from the armchair in order to hear the article was enthusiastic, excited and rhythmical even in its prose: it was about roads, infrastructures, hydrocarbons and dams; about people rushing around, at once technicians and dreamers, about a world of possibilities unlocked at one and the same time. I didn’t take in each and every one of the facts that inspired this euphoria but it triggered in my body a need to move, a frenzy, as well as a feeling of impetus and anticipation. I imagine my father had also taken that article to the café and read it aloud to the time-wasters and wisemen, as he used to call them, and received in exchange quite a few comments. Fefe nodding thoughtfully, Fiore, coarse, incontinent and ready to prophesise doom, disaster and waste just for the pleasure of disconcerting...
and disappointing those who, like us, clung to hope. Ciccio Miraglia, more measured, determined to weigh up the situation and establish what and how all this miraculous feat could really be brought about and in what form. Then Ciccio, glancing at my father and immediately looking away, would have enquired after my studies, and Papà would have replied, “None of her clothes fit her anymore, I must buy her a new wardrobe.” Then they would have stretched out their arms all together and called Margherita who, in my mind, is walking down the street — three or four frames, always the same ones, cut out of the film — and waved the pages at her: “They’re all waiting for you. When will you graduate? There’s going to be lots of work.” She would have asked them for a cigarette and, a smile on her glossy red lips, would have said: “You go ahead and get industrialised, while I go to Northern Italy or abroad.” One of the three would have been upset, perhaps even my father. That’s when one of them would have uttered more or less these words: “Have you seen the plane that flew low across the sky towards the sea?”

What I remember is that my father reported the event to me. Maybe Papà heard the news from Mangiarracina, who doesn’t completely abandon the countryside even in the winter. He would have gone to see him at the office and said, “There’s an airplane flying low over our properties.”

Was it a military aircraft? Or an exploratory plane? My father didn’t enquire further or try to find out if it was true: but airplanes and industries were preying on our imagination. I remembered it that evening we ate and drank by the faint light of the electric bulb at Sette Cannelle for the first time. Papà and Italo finished the bottle of white wine and my grandmother also had two fingers’ worth with a little added water. I was afraid of alcohol: when I was a child, my grandmother would sometimes get drunk and slap me; but now she was older, she would restrain herself.

+ 9. — Sette Cannelle

The following morning, or the one after that, or perhaps on some other day that summer, the sound of the key clicking made me open my eyes and I heard my father and Italo talking on the other side of the door, laughing and going downstairs unconcerned about waking me up. Papà hadn’t gone to Casteldorso; it might have been a Sunday (it’s hard to tell the days apart in our house, with school being closed and our not having special holidays or rituals, unless you count the almond harvest). The air at that time was cool and sticky.

I let myself lie in the white sheets for a few more minutes. I pictured them finishing the dinner leftovers, dipping black bread in soup like peasants about to go to the fields. I slid down from the bed barefoot, wearing my grandmother’s old nightgown (she’d given it to me especially so I wouldn’t sleep in my knickers). The morning light was a dark blue and made the grass a yellowy-green, like the one I’d seen on a postcard of the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe: the green of the beginning of time, of heaven on earth, the green enjoyed by our ancestors the dinosaurs.

I saw them already heading up the path, though I wasn’t sure what it was they were carrying: Papà would have certainly had his light meter and a large, stiff bag, and Italo perhaps a rod or a walking stick? I walked a few metres behind them: they were chatting merrily, Italo a couple of centimetres taller than my father, who was stouter, wearing identical clothes, Papa’s step more composed, more restrained. Chaffinches were singing
They returned in the evening, highly excited, accompanied by Mangiarracina and Tito Stella. Their jackets and shirts were wet and they were laughing. Tito cried out to my grandmother, “The water! The water is flowing!” Nonna emerged from her slumber dazed and cross-eyed but as soon as she realised what he meant, she slid into her clogs and went after him. Italo kept quiet, not allowing a single word or hint of a laugh to betray even an ounce of his satisfaction. Papà looked tired and happy, like after a hand-to-hand fight, whether lost or won. He called me: “Irene.”

Wearily and infinitely slowly, I let go of my phantom lizards and we set out on our procession: my grandmother next to old Mangiarracina with whom she had an understanding: they played at being the duchess and the gabellotto, the man who rented her farmland, even though Mangiarracina was infinitely wealthier than Nonna and was obsequious towards her so she wouldn’t forget it (it was a familiar game, and ever since she had started to feel the future closing in on her, she enjoyed all that was familiar); then came Papà, Tito Stella and Italo, and a few steps behind, there was me.

So that had been their aim: they’d gone in search of springs, and what Italo had taken with him was a dowsing rod. But instead of the splashes, water games and shrieking children I had ... wetting a small area of the ground. “What about the other springs?” “We found them.” “Are they all like this one?” Papà nods, pleased.

In order to get wet, he, Tito and the others lie down on the ground and remain there for a long time, letting their clothes get soaked. Even my grandmother. Even Italo: through a capillary action, the water reaches his chest, revealing his natural yellowness.
Beyond the slope, about a kilometre from Sette Cannelle, there’s a fishing village I rarely go to since neither my father nor my grandmother like the sea, the former through distraction, the latter through disdain (salt water is a pleasure for the destitute). That morning, however, I woke up before everyone else, the sea on my mind, got dressed as if I was going to school, with my pleated skirt and my shirt, filled my satchel with books and drawing paper, put the Comet camera around my neck, and walked down alongside the paved road. The sky was still very pale, with a pleasant breeze blowing. The road was totally deserted. No cars, no Ape vans, no carts. Why was I going?

It felt as though since Italo had arrived to Sette Cannelle, I had been deprived of my inner life: where had the time for books gone? I’d brought Horace and Stevenson from the house in Casteldorte but hadn’t even had a chance to open them. I no longer wrote in my journal and couldn’t take photos. My footsteps echoed on the asphalt, tip-tap. The sky was white, the shutters in Tito Stella’s little house, with its two cypresses, were closed because of his foreign wife and three emaciated children who slept in. A little further, on our side of the road, stood the Mangiaracinas’ house. The father had already gone out and Moira was calling the children. I walked past quietly from fear that she’d see me, invite me in for some watermelon and focaccia and not let me go. In the field, her children were throwing a rope to try and hang off the helicopter tail. On both sides of the road, the olive trees were becoming more coloured: grass grows beneath them. Beyond the circle of foliage, the soil is naked and the shadow falls, as sharp and precise as the trunk is crooked. I took pictures of the circles then resumed my walk, daydreaming about a bizarre cortege of snails, dung beetles, grasshoppers and lizards following me.

I walked down the road, the only one that leads down to the village, the same road I had been driven along by Italo a few days earlier, with the screaming children. It seemed like such a long time ago.

Where did I want to go? Perhaps I just wanted to give my family a fright but that’s not what I would have said back then. Then, I would have said that I wanted to be alone. My little shoes with straps resounded on the cobbles: tip-tap.

At the crossing with Via delle Acque Calde, a mule cut me off and the peasant stopped it and said, “Where do you belong?” “Sette Cannelle,” I replied.

His face twisted into a sickly-sweet expression, he wet his lips and moved them, revealing the purple inside of his mouth, and the lines on his face became flabby, making his eyes very small. He remarked that I was right to leave home, since the devil was living there, but since the devil had visited my house anyway I might as well climb on the mule with him, he knew a spot where no one would see us (there was a shady carob tree and a stream). “I don’t have any devils at home,” I protested, and when he tried to grab me by the arm I pulled away and ran.

I ran downhill at breakneck speed, slipped because of the smooth leather of my soles, and rolled down the asphalt. I scraped my knees and legs and lost my shoes somewhere on the way, but my satchel was still firmly on my back. I got up and turned back a few steps. The left shoe was covered in scratches, my shoes were made of delicate leather. Trying to keep my balance I put one on first. I’d left the peasant and his mule beyond
the slope, and perhaps he’d gone along the dirt track. I slipped the other one on and put my foot down. The sky was huge and very high: I felt as though I’d stuffed a black, hot stone in the middle of my chest. I shook my head and carried on walking. From above, I must have looked like a tiny, insignificant form amid the green and grey. A dirty dog emerged from an alley or a gate and started barking. I hadn’t forgotten what my father had taught me: Stand still. If a dog barks, don’t move, don’t breathe, don’t blink. But my instinct urged me to run away. I closed my fingers and began running again, pursued by the dog. Appearing from nowhere, other dogs joined him, hairy, practically bald, large and small, chasing after me, all barking. I slipped and fell again, brought my arms up to my chest in order to protect my camera and ended up flat on the ground, banging my right cheekbone. The dogs started snapping at me, biting at my skirt, and one of them, fur standing on end, sank his teeth into my ankle.

I’d always imagined that oil company engineers and workers travelled in jeeps. I pictured an open-top, American military vehicle carrying people dressed in grey-green or even in camouflage suits. Ever since my father had uttered the name of an American company, I connected oil exploration with an end-of-the-war atmosphere I knew from photographs: and I thought joy was also akin to that. Instead, what stopped next to me was a cream-coloured van from which a man in civilian clothes emerged. He got out brandishing a metal bar and shouted at the dogs in a high, gentle voice. The dogs left without any hurry. The man was clean-shaven, with a long, pointy nose, and asked me if I was able to get up. I nodded, but first disconcerted him by taking a picture of his van. He made me sit in the front, next to a bearded guy who showed me how he put lighters out with his fingertips. In the back, there were two other men, one blonde, the other with ash-coloured hair receding at the temples, and they talked over each other, asking me, “How do you feel? Are you all right?” I couldn’t tell them apart. I indicated the road to Sette Cannelle. They pulled up next to where the path began.

Papà had only recently woken up and really hadn’t noticed my absence, assuming I was somewhere in the almond grove. The two men who accompanied me had put a jacket over me because I was shaking; my left cheekbone was starting to bruise. Papà slapped me right across the cheek. I lowered my head but I wasn’t sad, and didn’t feel an ounce of anger. On the contrary, the pain and his act were reassuring. Then my father introduced himself to the men with his usual politeness. And they told him who they were. From the porch outside the kitchen, where they were having bread and milk for breakfast (I don’t think there was any coffee), Nonna and Italo sat up straight and perked up their ears. The men explained to my father that they were there looking for oil. Papà invited them to come in for a couple of minutes. They looked tidy and friendly, clean-shaved or with well-cared-for beards, and fair skin; next to them, even my father looked wild and somewhat dirty (to me Papà had always been Prospero, I’d read The Tempest with him, and if I was Miranda and Italo Ariel, then who else would my father have been?). I returned the engineer’s cotton jacket abruptly (I called him an engineer in my mind, and that’s what everybody else called him soon, but eventually I found out that he was a geologist, just as the men with him were probably geologists and paleontologists); he grabbed it just as it was falling on the floor.

“Bring the wine,” my father commanded. I limped to the kitchen, took out the best glasses, poured the white wine my father had sent from Florence, put everything on a tray and brought it to the guests.
The switched off Fiat 600’s bonnet was open and the coloured electrical wires were coming out of it, lying across the grass and climbing up the wall. The bearded man frowned, half-opened his lips to smile and took a few steps towards the car.

Italo bounced up from his chair and ran to the car, looking very young, a child. His quick hands tampered with the wires: without needing to turn the switch (one of us had left it on), the light bulb came on, though it was the usual disappointing faint light. The man tilted his head to one side and laughed, a tinkling laugh, as sweet and insincere as a pat on the back or a hand on your head. The other man, an engineer, paleontologist, geologist or what have you, also smiled, seeing Italo emerging so proud from behind the bonnet. “Tomorrow we’ll bring you a power generator. What’s your name?” Italo stared, eyes wide. “He’s a boy,” my father replied, shaking his head. “We found him in the middle of the field.”

I searched for my grandmother’s eyes but she wasn’t even looking at us. She was killing fruit flies, drowning them in milk as though there were no guest present.

* 11. — Italo Plays Big

From the day the seven sources resurfaced, Italo became famous among the neighbours: small landowners were fighting over him. Mangiaracina and Vanni di Tito’s children and sometimes also the twins, Annina and Betti, would come to Sette Cannelle, stand lurking behind the Fiat 600 and throw their arms around him as soon as they saw him come out of the kitchen; Italo would allow them to cling to his back, fight with them, and let them climb on his stomach. He was very strong and managed to hold as many as three at once between his shoulders and his chest. The children’s skin, pale and dull, almost sickly in the twins, or dark in the boys, was a contrast with his golden colouring as though both them and he were creatures from a different species. I’d follow them to the edge of the property and watch them. They’d drag him away across the fields to their parents’ small farms, make him run, trot, neigh and bray. They’d climb on the old war helicopter: inside the cockpit, one of the twins would scramble up on his lap. Sometimes, the engineers would linger at Moira’s house, persuaded by her pressing hospitality. I would hear their voices when I plucked up the courage to go beyond the boundary of Sette Cannelle. If Moira noticed me and beckoned me, I ran away. Italo would come back in the afternoon, groggy after the men had made him sample their sharp wines and the women, playing at being ladies, had given him fragrant rosollio. I was afraid alcohol would have the same effect on him as whisky on American Indians, that it would rip his liver to shreds and drive him insane. Nonna hated this invasive procession. We hated them taking him away from us — even though they acknowledged our right over him and, every evening, would bring us, in exchange for his company, one or more bottles of their sharp, dreadful wine (it was sharp and dreadful according to my father; I didn’t drink).

I wasn’t in when it happened, on a late morning of some other day that summer, as late as July, perhaps. I’d spied on him other times, but seeing him being grabbed by those snotty, violent children (sometimes they’d kick him and soil the trousers I prepared for him every morning), seeing him hold in his arms those pale, sweaty girls; finding them all clinging to Italo, intent on pouring fuel from the white van into a jerry can then, all flushed, wetting themselves with buckets, wasting water, then throwing themselves on the ground, all of them on top of Italo,
while the adults around laughed, was something I found repugnant. You may well ask: why didn’t you join them?

They were young children, the eldest was nine, so I would have felt embarrassed, too tall, too old; besides, the boys had a pungent smell of sweat and sun.

But I was sorry not to have been there when Italo took flight: all I saw was the war helicopter rise half a metre above the almond grove, I looked up and still felt the pain from the bruise on my cheekbone. The helicopter cast its shadow here and there on the field. The euphoric cries of the children left on the ground, trying to secure a spin, sounded as though they came from another world. Devastated, I thought I’d lost my place, that I should be up there, that Italo would have let me take the commands, his hands over mine. Nonna was running with her head up in the air, chasing after the shadow, shouting, “Away!” (she wasn’t mad, not completely. Only even though the black form above her head wasn’t that of a bomber, it reminded her of the war: she did the same thing with airplanes).

In the wheat field behind Sette Cannelle, the helicopter lost altitude and Italo lost control a few metres up from the ground: the aircraft nosedived. I pictured the crash, the explosion, thought of the fire, then about the wheat field already charred with just a few red embers still glowing. But it was as though the air between the field and the nose of the helicopter grew thicker (you could see it, oily, like on very hot days), forming an almost invisible diaphragm between him and the ground, transforming the disastrous fall into the delicate landing of an insect. The cut wheat pricked my feet through the soles of my shoes; it extended for a kilometre, without changing colour, along the main road, and ended just before the row of eucalyptus trees. I ran to the helicopter. I opened the door with difficulty. Italo jumped down, laughing. He dragged me away, shielding my shoulders with his arm. A scirocco wind had started to blow, waving my skirt about. If the helicopter had exploded, the blaze would have engulfed Sette Cannelle. Fighting against the wind, the engineer or geologist with the long nose and the blonder, paler one were coming towards us. They were smiling at Italo: “Well done!” they said. “You’d never even been in one.” They were urging us away with their arms. Were they also afraid of an explosion? The helicopter didn’t catch fire, and the only result of that short trip was that it moved from the Mangiarracina property to just beyond ours. We walked past the hammock, where my grandmother was rocking with her feet in the air, wiping tears with her knuckles. I didn’t stop to comfort her. Italo took my hand and squeezed it (I can still remember the childlike softness of his palm); at that moment I felt at peace and followed him to Moira’s house, where the smelly children were still clamouring for their spin in the helicopter while the adults were laughing, slapping him on the back, congratulating him on his feat and offering him drinks. If I stepped aside to get some water, Italo would grab hold of me, bring my shoulder to his chest and hold me back. Maybe he felt uncertain without me, more alone. My father’s face emerged from the shadows. When had he arrived? Mangiarracina proffered a glass to him, his lips parting in a wide smile, but Papa barely motioned a refusal with his chin. He clasped my arm and pulled me away.

He’d searched the rooms, the almond grove and behind the Fiat 600, he’d felt a pain in his chest and was afraid someone had abducted me by car, and then found me there, celebrating with that merry group. He was angry. He hadn’t even noticed the
helicopter, so I dragged him behind the house to show him. When he saw it grazing in the yellow field, he got angry again.

The time had come, he said, to restore Italo to his fate, to his entrepreneurial, land-owner sisters, which could only be to Italo’s advantage; if he really wanted to drink, then he’d have better drinks at his sisters’ in Marsala, and rosolio would also be of a superior quality there. The instinct to defend Italo made the heat rise to my temples but words got stuck in my throat. Then my father apologised for having been too harsh with me.

* 12. — Hopes

Italo, grey beneath a grey sun, in the grey grass, Italo waving from behind the bonnet of the car, with a smile so broad that it throws off balance the harmony of his beautiful teeth and makes him look like an idiot. Papà is holding the box in his lap and I lean over to look inside. Nonna isn’t up yet, she’s lying in the hammock in a foetal position, now more outraged than frightened. And Italo? I can’t remember, but no doubt we’d taken advantage of his absence to choose the photo. He might have been asleep in that peculiar way of his, breathing with a constant, soundless rhythm, or else he was already out in the fields, getting fed at other people’s expense.

With a gesture of annoyance, Papà discards the pictures of Italo lying down, drops on the grass the one of him behind the car, puts on the step, irked, the long shot of the walk to find water (he excludes photos in which the subject is laughing, winking or even slightly moving his cheeks), and throws a picture of the road and grass on the ground, wondering what it’s doing there. I pick up every one of them carefully and put them in my pocket.
larger kitchen. Moira hugged me tightly. I sank into her bosom; her bodice was soft and I felt as though I was plunging into a spongy hill inflated with fat. She’d seen me the day before, at the helicopter celebration, but she reacted with surprise even so. “You’ve grown so much.” She was sweaty everywhere, her face, her hair, her armpits, between her knees: she smelt of bread. Papà asked her to take care of my grandmother and she nodded in earnest, giving me the impression she was the most reliable creature in the world. When we got into the Fiat 600 and finally headed into the world, it was Moira who waved us goodbye, not Nonna or Italo.

I couldn’t wait to enter a substantial city. That morning, even Casteldoro wasn’t enough for me, though I was glad when we stopped at the café where Fiore and Ciccio Miraglia where already passing the time. “You’re so grown up.” I must have been wearing something that made people notice it but Fiore’s expression was intense, mellow. “Isn’t it time you developed?” I stared at Fiore, sucking my cheeks in with contempt, and he smiled because it was the most natural reaction, exactly the one to be expected. “Pay no attention to him, Irene.” Ciccio Miraglia was looking at me, squinting. I gave him a stern look to make him stop: pleased, he remained staring into my eyes. I was hoping with all my heart that Margherita would suddenly appear from the house in Via Giolitti. I wanted to take her picture and hear the sound of her voice (and even if she didn’t appear, I enjoyed my hope: it made her into a lanky self-assured imaginary ghost that would walk again and again from Via Giolitti to the café, and never the other way around). Fiore decided to buy me an orange juice and I sipped it, sensing their insistent eyes. Papà produced the photo of Italo and they finally got distracted and nodded: nothing untoward, he could be the brother of the Orlando girls, he didn’t look retarded or like a village idiot. At most, if he wasn’t the Orlando’s brother, he could equally be a conman, a fake amnesiac with designs on the family fortune (but I was sure that wasn’t true). Ciccio Miraglia asked my father if he still had his coins. Fiore laughed, “Watch out, that Italo’s after something. He’ll steal them from you.” But Papà said no, they were in their place, where he’d left them. It was a memorable trip, my father and I alone in the Fiat 600. I’m not going to tell you anything about the landscape because neither he nor I paid attention to it that time.

“We’ll leave Casteldoro and Sette Cannelle,” he said. “You’ll see, it won’t be long now.”

“I don’t like waiting for Nonna to die.”

“We’ll take your grandmother with us.”

I started to laugh.

“We’ll lie to her. She enjoys getting into the Fiat 600 so much.”

“What about Italo?”

“We’ll leave him with his sisters.”

“And what if they don’t want him?”

“He’d follow us like a dog.”

“Italo’s not a dog. He’s not loyal.”

“We’ll put him in a suitcase.”

“Dead or alive?”

“Alive, of course.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“But you’ll see, they’ll take him: isn’t he handsome?”

“Not in the picture you picked.”

“At least in that picture he’s clean and tidy.”

“You don’t think it’s him, do you?”

“Why not? If they want him and decide to keep him, who’s to say he isn’t Italo Orlando? Besides, I’m sure they’ll like him.

Carola Susani

The First Life of Italo Orlando
Then we’ll leave Sette Cannelle and leave the village. We’ll sell them to Mangiarracina.”

“Even the village?”

“Why not? It might as well be ours, right?”

“He’ll be pleased.”

“In that case we’ll make him angry, we’ll let him sniff them and we’ll give them to Tito Stella for a round million, then sell the coins in the bag to collectors and we’ll be so rich we’ll spend the rest of our lives photographing only lizards and flying fish.”

“I’ll photograph you.”

The Orlando sisters met us at the coffee roasting plant. They looked like Margherita and at the same time didn’t, were ten and fifteen years older but also wore trousers. Quick and dismissive, they seemed like a caricature of her, thinner and wirier, with no grace or beauty, their hair jet-black with curls cascading down their shoulders, and a moustache. One of them was taller and more formal. “Thank you for coming.” She attempted Tuscan vocabulary with her native intonation. “Our father mourned his loss for years,” she said, staring at the photograph. “I wonder if it’s really him, I guess it could be,” she continued, her eyes drifting from the picture to the bruise on my cheek, “I don’t remember Italo being so handsome and graceful.” The other sister, who had long fingers, took the picture from her. “Our brother was more lopsided, unwell, but his features do seem familiar, a little as though it’s an emptied Italo, without…” She didn’t say without what, and I added in my mind: without brain, without us, without duties, without wealth. The tall one kept offering us coffee, coffee without froth, coffee with liqueur. She made it very fast with her brass machine that gleamed in the light from the French window. Papà didn’t bother stopping me from drinking it, so I, too, took a sip from every one of those cups. The more we drank, the more we became like the Orlando sisters, highly-strung.

“I don’t know what to say, we’d need to see him in person, see him move. Italo was the family pet for years, you know what I mean: inept.” They looked intently into each other’s eyes and the shortest one said, “Sometimes we miss him.” Her sister burst into a shrill little laugh and poured me some liqueur coffee. “Sometimes we miss him,” the shorter one repeated. “We’re very sorry he, well, he got lost.” She poured a skillfully-prepared cappuccino with powdered milk and froth, heaps of froth. “But it was to be expected. The one you took in, the amnesiac, does he drink coffee?” “I couldn’t tell you,” Papà replied. “Please try and remember because Italo would never, ever drink coffee.” “Though people change,” her sister said, looking at the sacks full of arabica blend with an odd kind of emphasis. “He could be drinking coffee because he’s homesick. Could you bring him here? We can’t leave the roasting plant, the pace slackens when we’re away, the machines break down, so we’re sort of indispensable.” Papà asked them for a photo he could show Italo, they agreed to pose in front of the brass machine and I threw the door open to let in some more light: everything turned gold in my eyes: the Orlando sisters, the coffee, the brass. At that moment, the coffee roasting plant became what it truly was: a wondrous Aladdin’s cave. When we developed the photo in Casteldorto, we saw that some of that glow, that hidden celebration, remained impressed.

* 13. — The Crow’s Funeral

Even before we’d reached the turn into Sette Cannelle, we heard a racket and it took us a while to realise it was crows. It was the
time of evening when they arrive, when the trees, the grass and finally the horizon turn a grey-blue. Except that they were cawing louder than we’d ever heard them do, energetically and with something else in their calls, something I didn’t immediately recognise but which must have been anget. We left the Fiat 600 in view of the house, with the headlights on (that evening, the house and the almond grove were about to plunge into darkness without the car) and ran.

A black cloud of crows enveloped the almond trees and everything else was silent: no cicadas, no crickets (the season for fireflies was over). Nonna was screaming, however, sitting on the ground beneath the hammock. Tears were streaming down her face, unhindered. I ran to hug her; she didn’t react, didn’t send me away, didn’t welcome me. Her body was stiff, shaking with sobs, her house dress soaked in sweat. Italo was on his feet, looking at the crows and sneering at them: “You’re foolish,” he was saying, “you’re silly; what, are you challenging me?” He stood tall, imposing in the headlights, in a white shirt tucked into his green trousers, and all that sallowness. I looked beyond him: the cut open body of a crow was nailed to the first almond tree. Disconcerted, Papà watched the scene. I also went into the midst of the crows, shouting.

Italo called me back, “Leave it, leave it,” and reached out to stop me. “If you take it off the tree you’ll confuse them, at least this way they’re learning.” He pulled me towards him and held me by the arms. Nonna kept crying, my father was leaning over her and touching her, embarrassed, comforting her. Italo held me by the forearms and said. “Look. All the crows are here. It’s a funeral, you see.” “What have you done?” “Keep still and look,” he said. “They’re mourning their friend. Lucetta hated crows. I did it for her. I cut one open today and nailed it to the almond tree.” “But look at Nonna!” “She’ll be all right soon, you’ll see, she’ll be happy. They’ve all come now, from Mangiarracina’s field, from Tito’s field, from all the fields, and they’re mourning. Let them mourn, and you’ll see how happy your grandmother will be tomorrow. They’re not stupid, they know I’m stronger, they’ll go away, you’ll see.”

The crow funeral lasted until late into the night, none of us went to bed, but stayed up without eating or drinking, lying on the grass. I got up only to take a little water to Nonna. “Did you give her something to drink?” I asked Italo. He looked at me as though not understanding. My grandmother knocked the water down on the ground with a sharp gesture. We left the car headlights on because we were anxious but perhaps also because we’d now got so used to artificial light that we couldn’t have faced the dark in Sette Cannelle without even a tiny electric bulb. We must have fallen asleep at some point, with Italo lying in the hammock. I must definitely have fallen asleep because I woke up shivering, still on the grass, dawn still distant even though there was a glimmer of light in the East. The crows had left. There was an unnatural silence and the Fiat 600 headlights were still on. I took down the dead crow, pulling out the nails with my bare hands. I went to the side of the road, where the ground was soft and wouldn’t require shifting with a spade, put the dead bird next to me, and started digging. I felt a presence behind me, Italo put a hand on my shoulder and I froze, stiff, as stiff as I could. Not letting go of my shoulder, he helped me dig with his other hand. As soon as the hole was big enough, I laid the little body in it; Italo threw soil over it. When all that was left was a little mound, Italo picked dandelion and wood sorrel from the road. I was hoping he wouldn’t come close or touch me again. But he put his arm on my back again and placed the little bunch on the grave. It was very slowly getting light.
Women Writers
This is the story of two brothers, Lupo and Nicola, the sons of a baker, different from and very close to each other: the first is impetuous and wild, the latter is fragile and intelligent. It is also the story of a nun born in Sudan, kidnapped as a child and converted to Catholicism, who then becomes the abbess of a cloistered monastery. This is the second novel of Giulia Caminito, born in 1988. Her debut novel *La grande A* won the prizes Premio Bagutta Opera Prima, Premio Berto and Premio Brancati Giovani. *Un giorno verrà* narrates the grand history of the early 20th century from the perspective of Serra de’ Conti, a village in the Marche. But Caminito actually brings back and reinvents the history of socialist ideas, anarchy, the Great War, the Spanish flu — the last beliefs and events to be submerged by the flow of change. The three protagonists share the concept of faith and sacrifice. Each in their own way, they all dream a different era, when misery shall only be a distant memory. This is a remarkably rigorous novel that recovers the true story of Sister Maria Giuseppina Benvenuti, known as “Moretta”, but born as Zeinab Ali, who shall soon be made a saint. Caminito pays great attention to language and chooses the setting of the family and the region in order to explore conflicts and changes. Unlike many autobiographical narrations published today, Caminito makes no mystery of the fact that she really struggles to talk “of the present and of myself” and that she is extremely fascinated by “phenomena that are almost considered taboo in Italian culture such as colonialism, banditry and anarchism.”

*Tutto chiuso tranne il cielo* is the second book of a trilogy begun in 2018 with *Le ferite originali*, a novel that explores the emotional fragility of its young protagonists from different points of view. Caruso used to be a very popular fan fiction writer and wrote under the pseudonym Caska Langley. She debuted with *Comunque vada non importa*, published by Indiana. Her new novel confirms her particular ability to dissect male-female relations. She thus captures readers in a web without exits, where sex and the relations of power and abandonment it generates can neither be defined nor catalogued, and tell us a great deal about the outside world, implacably reflecting its changes. The first episode of the trilogy narrates the static life of Davide, an ex obese child; Dafne, who feels constantly guilty about her privileges, living in the Expo quarter of Milan; and Christian, a doleful and fierce model who is bipolar. This novel instead places Christian’s nineteen-year-old younger brother at centre stage — Julian with his blue hair, mobile phone always in hand, prone to carresses and escapes. He has just returned from Japan, as hurt as the others. Together with him, we meet his closest friend An, who is Chinese; Leo the supermarket check-out assistant; and Cloro the YouTuber. Once more, the writer is interested in deep and ineffable sorrow. In her style every detail becomes essential in capturing the complexity of youth.
Teresa Ciabatti has published a number of novels including Adelmo torna da me, I giorni felici, Il mio paradiso è deserto, Tuttissanti, Matrigna. In La più amata she creates one of the most interesting experiments in terms of forcing the genre of autofiction. Childhood has always been at the centre of her writing. But in this novel, the author creates a first person who coincides with her own identity: “My name is Teresa Ciabatti, I am four years old, and I am the daughter, the pride, the love of the Professor.” Whether the first person is real or imaginary, it allows her to explore the bourgeois world of the Professor himself. Namely, Lorenzo Ciabatti, head physician at the hospital of Orbetello, a benefactor, perhaps a saint, perhaps a mason, perhaps close to Licio Gelli, the notorious master of the clandestine lodge “Propaganda 2”, though this will only be mentioned in footnotes or within a sentence in brackets (“isn’t this gentleman with his back to me Licio Gelli?”), “in my memory he surely is Umberto Veronesi [the famous oncologist and politician], or maybe he is not,” “someone says Raffaele Cutolo [the famous Italian mafia boss]”), because history here runs along the margins, and rightly so. What interests Ciabatti is narrating the family as a place of secrets, just as Italy is. There is also a mother who sleeps for an entire year, certainly in order to heal; a kidnapping, a twin brother, a financial breakdown, a little girl who later as a teenager discovers unimaginable truths and that secrets have tricked her in the most savage way. Because families are like novels: they lie and delude, even if lies and illusions are indispensable to life.

Maestoso è l’abbandono, a novel by the Veronese Sara Gamberini, is one of the most impressive debuts of the last few years. At the bone, the story is that of a little girl, then adolescent, then adult and mother, who after years of therapy with Dr Lisi backs out of it. The estrangement wears out because after all not everything can be understood, and even when you are able to understand trauma you do not necessarily find a solution, or not the desired one. Maria, the narrating voice, is an expert in abandonments. Over all, the one she suffered at the hands of her mother Lucia, an archaic and magical figure, a woman of love potions and love spells, or simply of desires to chase. As a consequence, she inflicts abandonments on her companions of one night or of just a few days. They never match the double dimension in which she lives and are therefore earthly creatures of habits where Maria is lofty, irredeemable in seeking higher love because of its uselessness, and mysteriously stubborn in interpreting the world as a sacred territory. Until she meets Lorenzo, and through him experiences surrender, even if they are very different. The potency of Gamberini lies in the precarious equilibrium she finds in between two worlds, the tangible world and the one we only see in dreams or in visions. She offers us a novel full of emotions, that is never banal or casual, always in the name of an immense trust in words, that happily fails to comply with the manifest “simplicity” that captures readers.
Antonella Lattanzi 05 Dark Story
[ Italian edition pages 71 — 96 ]

Again a family story, or rather a story of domestic violence. But the linguistic and deconstructive ability of Lattanzi, already proven in her previous novels Devozione and Prima che tu mi tradisca, overturns the norms of a wife abused by a violent and savage man. Vito is the savage man, and he disappears on 7th August 2012, after the birthday of his youngest daughter. His wife Carla, who has separated from him after years of punches, kicks, blows and insults, has invited him to dinner out of love for their little girl, and also because after all she still loves him, as he loves her. But Vito cannot be found, and their two other sons, almost adults by now, look for him desperately, as does the other woman with whom he had rebuilt a life, to some extent. Una storia nera is a novel about truth and the difficulty of separating good and evil. Lattanzi intervenes on the painful theme of femicide, emphasising both the Italian social reality and psychological dependence. “It is difficult to help a female victim of violence, because the boundary between hatred of violence and remaining love inside her is a subtle one. I think we all have this boundary. We can all experience a love story that hurts us without exiting it. It is up to each one of us to understand that if a person hurts us it means he or she does not love us, even if they are good to us straight away. This is the trap, especially with violent men who turn into angels straight after bashing you up.”

Chiara Palazzolo 06 Don’t Kill Me
[ Italian edition pages 17 — 61 ]

Chiara Palazzolo (1961-2012) is one of the most important Italian writers of fantasy literature. She debuted in 2000 with a non-genre novel, La casa della festa, followed by a disturbing short story, I bambini sono tornati, for which she was longlisted for the Premio Strega. With Non mi uccidere, the first book of a trilogy that includes the sequels Strappami il cuore and Ti porterò nel sangue, she reinvents the gothic genre starting both from her very personal and experimental use of the language and by transforming the research carried out by Carlo Ginzburg in The Night Battles and Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath into literature. Mirta, 19 years-old, dies of overdose in Umbria together with her boyfriend Robin. But she wakes up in her tomb, breaking the gravestone. She slowly becomes aware of her condition of “undead” after long conversations with the ghost of Ludwig Wittgenstein. She shall discover that she is not the only one to have returned from death, that she has to eat the living in order to resist in her death, and that there is an organisation that fights against those who return, the benandanti. In the course of the three novels, Mirta becomes a new person, transforming from the young studious girl in love into a new creature, Luna, who later meets and loves Sara, one of her species who works as a surgeon and to feed herself selects her prey among unpunished paedophiles. Luna will eventually betray all her companions, Sara, Robin, and the other undead to gain freedom. With her last novel, Nel bosco di Aus, Palazzolo reinvents another fantasy icon, that of the witch.
We owe a neologism to Carmen Pellegrino, born in 1977: abbandonologa, “expert of abandonment.” It was coined expressly by the Istituto Treccani, the Italian-language encyclopaedia, and denotes a person who “scours the territory in search of abandoned hamlets, buildings in ruin, neglected structures and activities in order to document them and study their history.” A historian and essayist, with this novel Pellegrino dedicates herself to the memory of abandoned villages. She considers abandonment a science, since recovering the past of a place equates to restoring its memory if not indeed bringing it back to life. *Cade la terra*, which has won the prizes Premio Rapallo Carige Opera Prima and Premio Selezione Campiello, narrates the story of Alento, a village that gradually collapses and is destined to disappear. Estella, who arrived there at the age of eighteen to become Marcello’s preceptor, tries to keep the place alive by summoning its ghosts with a sumptuous dinner every year, and recovering the lives, the exclusions, and injustice. Because almost every mountain has a dying village, and with each downfall entire communities shall disappear. Estella is the priestess who tries to make it resist: “As long as I live I shall sketch out the history of this village, of its badly alive inhabitants, of their unhappened days.” To do so she visits empty houses, collects the objects of inhabitants who are no longer there, gives voice to a fresco of invisibles and stories: those of the anarchic Cola Forti, of the severe Consiglio Parisi who believes in law and shall be destroyed by it, of Giacinto the town crier who utters the sentence that gives the novel its meaning: “Only that which is told has actually happened.”

How do men and women who work in finance fall in love? Letizia Pezzali was born in 1979. This is her second novel after *L’età lirica*, finalist of the Premio Calvino prize. She narrates how desire cannot be learned. It explodes, collapses or consolidates itself following chaotic paths, just like financial markets. Giulia is thirty-two years old, works in an investment bank in London, a place founded on almost religious rules where she is far from being happy, but is not uncomfortable. Her context consists of a lot of money, very little free time, and relations that, except for sex, aim especially to maintain one’s reputation. A privileged ecosystem that the rest of society, alien to the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, the huge business district on the shores of the River Thames, is suspicious about. Michele, a married man towards whom Giulia had developed a sentimental and erotic obsession when she was still a student, used to belong to this world. Then he resigned for no apparent reason. However Seamus, Giulia’s brilliant boss, had a clear role in Michele’s choice. On a special morning he pronounces his name. It is as if he has opened a blood vessel. Giulia finds herself compulsively reminiscing over a story she thought was buried, investigating the emotional dimension of love and pain, their genetic origins. Interrogating herself about the fragility that beyond all differences, generations and habits, concerns us all as human beings.
Chilografia is the literary debut of Domitilla Pirro, born in 1985, director of creativity & development at Fronte del Borgo at the Scuola Holden in Turin. This is a novel that cannot be pigeonholed. Plumpa, called Plumpa, is born and grows up in between the 1980s and 1990s, in an extremely normal and therefore complicated family: a restless mother, a perfect sister, a marginalised father, a stepfather. This is partly why she eats, eats too much, and eats more and more, in front of the scornful gaze of her sister, female schoolmates, and all those who consider her a monster. She becomes thin when she finds a boyfriend, but her thin new body is alien to her, and in any case hunger does not disappear. Being cheated on will suffice for her to become once again Plumpa and abandon herself without any sense of guilt to food and a video game, The Sims. She meets Angelo on the video game players’ chat. He is one of those men who have a morbid passion for fat women, based on domination: they force-feed them to make them get even fatter. And this will happen to Palma-Plumpa, who will however manage to find a path to free herself, albeit a terrible one. This is not only a novel about eating disorders, violence, or the family, because Pirro’s tone is a light one, almost as if she was smiling even in the most savage passages. She plays with the dialect of the Lazio region and photographs the false myths that passed through the beginning of the new millennium and have arrived to the present date.

Salvo Cagli, a doctor of the Sleep Unit who paradoxically suffers from insomnia, accepts a friend’s invitation to visit the Greek island of Halki. The sun’s summer glare seems to placate him, quietening his memories of his wife and daughter who are no longer part of his life. But after a boat trip to the nearby isle of Kef, a young girl, Cora, falls into the sea and disappears. She is found a few days later on the beach, killed by a gun. The author is not setting up a crime novel, but rather a journey of initiation to grief that is both painful and calm, desperate yet without dismay. With La metà di bosco Laura Pugno confirms her talent for telling stories at their limit. A poet and novelist who currently runs the Italian Cultural Institute in Madrid, she has explored the border between humans and animals in her previous novels La Ragazza selvaggia and, still earlier, Sirene. Generally speaking, she does not fear letting realism slip into fantasy — as if there even existed such a separation: there is no such thing. This is not only a crime story, nor is it entirely a ghost story. It is a light, poetic, and unforgettable story of visions.
Evelina Santangelo 11 From Another World
[ Italian edition pages 3—5, 8—9, 16—21, 64—68, 73—82, 115—120 ]

“If I found myself behind a market stall — and I would quite like to — I would say ‘Come, read this novel that in less than 200 pages weaves fully together four stories. Even better, it contains a whole world, actually two worlds!’” This is how Helena Janecek, winner of the Premio Strega 2018, nominated Santangelo’s novel to the same prize. The author, born in 1965, has won numerous prizes such as the Premio Franciacorta, Premio Mondello Opera Prima, Premio Fiesole, and Premio Berto for her previous novels. Da un altro mondo was chosen as Book of the Year 2018 by the listeners of Fahrenheit, the most popular literature radio programme in Italy. It narrates the complexity of our times like no other book: migrants and the hostility towards them, foreign fighters, growing fears about the others. It does so following three characters: the young Khaled, who has escaped from a war in the Middle East and does the inverse trip of migrations, traveling from Brussels to Sicily with a red trolley suitcase, crossing an Italy full of abandoned warehouses, black labour factories, and basements. Marshal Vitale of Palermo, meanwhile, investigates the “Living Children” who appear in the city’s schools and really are ghosts. In addition, the Belgian Karolina looks for her disappeared son, thus learning the language and horrors of the jihadi and Neo-Nazi galaxies. There is a fourth apparition, Orso, a solitary old man who lives in a farmstead in Emilia. He too goes through an existential journey. This is a novel of great courage, because it recounts our reality thanks to unreality, that alone can bring to life our fears.

Carola Susani 11 The First Life of Italo Orlando
[ Italian edition pages 36—70 ]

Also Carola Susani, born in 1965, has chosen to tell her story using a fantasy expedient. It is set in Sicily at the end of the 1950s. Irene, a young teenager, finds a boy with yellowish skin in her family’s almond grove. He is naked, asleep, has appeared out of nowhere and has no memory. Irene’s family, her photographer father and landowner grandmother, welcome him and name him Italo. In exchange, Italo gifts them with good fortune: he transforms whatever he touches, rekindling obstructed fireplaces, bringing electric light and running water, finding lost water springs. He even brings gifts to the families of the other farms. Meanwhile Italy changes because petrol is discovered in this area. The boy bonds with the engineers and the technicians. What relation is there between Italo and the country’s extraordinary changes? And what will happen in the two other novels of the trilogy? Carola Susani, who has already written many novels (Il libro di Teresa, La terra dei dinosauri, L’infanzia è un terremoto, Eravamo bambini abbastanza and the short story collection Pecore vive), brings together visionary ability, historical curiosity and a flat, almost reassuring language, despite the incandescent material she narrates. She causes readers to experience the same enchantment of Irene towards this possible incarnation of the sacred: “Italo is destined to us, we will never be able to free ourselves from him. Maybe he is a triton, a mermaid, maybe he really is the serpent man.”
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