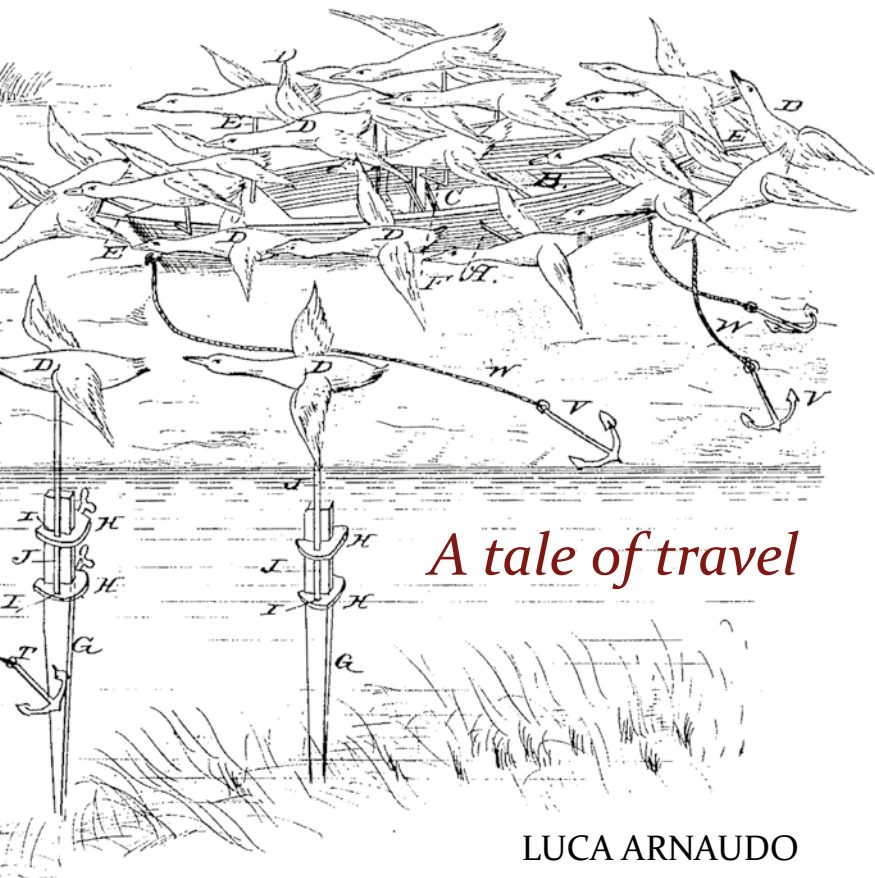


# SAILON



*A tale of travel*

LUCA ARNAUDO



# SAILON

*A tale of travel*

LUCA ARNAUDO

First Andante Books Edition, April 2018



All in all, for a flower to bloom, all you need is time and space in tune. Manure, weed-killers, the glossy scruples of gardening magazines, they do not count for much. What does matter instead is the subtle interplay of circumstances in which a plant takes root, develops, and grows, the crossbreeds originating from nature and care, and chance: that is all.

Such are the old man's early-morning contemplations while he breathes in a cloud of pipe smoke, enjoys the soil still wet of night under his boots, observes a primrose that has blossomed wildly along the regularity of a hedge.

In a while this man will take off his gardener's clothes and stash the spade, on which he is now resting both

his elbows and thoughts, in the shed at the end of the garden. He will slide the horn-rimmed glasses up his nose, traverse the well-combed lawn, enter the villa, walk across the spacious living room and along a marbled corridor to the walk-in closet nearby the bedroom. There, he will put on a grey suit – which, as a client recently pointed out, always impeccably matches his hair and mustache. Once in the mansion's garage he will eventually start his car, expensively German, together with a day similar to many others. As for the tool shed, it will enjoy the hesitant April's sun, the prospect of some rain and a guaranteed diuretic visit from Argo: neither of them – the dog or the cabin – will care, then, about the harsh looks of disappointment that the landlady will once again shoot at their neglected appearance, so inappropriate to the style of the property that spreads out the hill over the city of Turin in all its real estate grandeur.

In less than an hour, we were saying, this man will go back to being Mario Verbi, the renowned business lawyer. Now, however, after having suddenly woken up at daybreak, looked at his wife sleeping at his side with the usual estrangement, and resolved to do some work in the garden, he is simply a solitary old man, his eyes scanning the sky

for omens of rain, his body and mind feeling once more the stabbing pain that has been visiting his abdomen with startling regularity over the past few weeks.

It is a small oil painting on cardboard, which looks even tinier in its elaborate frame. At the center of the rectangle, on a dark blue background, the barely discernible shape of a ship, a patch of colors, points westwards. The hull is made by a progression of yellow, shades of red and brown, fields of green melting into ultramarine blue; above, a tint of white and some fierce patches of red and azure suggest a swelling sail. But the boat is not sailing, Mario thinks while looking at the painting that is hanging in front of him: rather, it seems to be suspended, floating in the night. A flying ship, that's what it is.

The old man doesn't know much about its painter, only the little he has managed to collect over time from old newspapers, a single meager exhibition brochure, a brief obituary in a local magazine. According to this information, Ego Bianchi, the artist, had lived just over forty years, spending almost all of his life in

a small town in northern Italy, not far from Turin; sojourns in sanatoriums, hosted in secluded mountain or seaside establishments, were his usual vacations, but he was also fond of frequent, brief getaways to the nearby Côte d'Azur. When Bianchi had died of tuberculosis, in the late 1950s, he was survived by only a small group of devoted admirers and a fantastic gallery of images bordering on abstraction. But *'always without completely dissolving the concrete view of things'*, as the art critic of the small-town leaflet raved, *'keeping an idea of reality transfigured by a feverishness of shapes and colors'*.

«Maybe his style of painting was dictated by his illness, by the fever that consumed him», Mario ponders as he stands up from his desk once more to take a closer look at the picture. «I must discuss it with Briss later. Who knows, his medical opinion may shed some light on the subject».

In the spring of 1957, during the last months of his life – and Bianchi had known these were his last months – the artist had dedicated himself to painting only ships, many of them showing estranging anthropomorphic shapes, a small set hanging on the cliff of purely transcendental forms. The one now before the old man was among the last Bianchi had produced, maybe even the final one: certainly the smallest, the

most ideal, and the most mysterious of all the paintings known. Mario had found it several years previously from a tiny junk shop near the city tribunal; it was a foggy day, when he had allowed himself the pleasure of enjoying an hour out of the agenda after the early conclusion of a court hearing. The painting met him by standing in the dusty middle of some empty old frames, hanging on the wall of the shop as a quiet epiphany of a different dimension; the old man bought it without discussing the price (it was cheap, anyway), and, since that moment, the painting has been comfortably hanging alone on a wall of his office, despite Marina's frequent protests.

In the other rooms of the boutique law firm, in fact, flashy mixed media assemblages and glowing light boxes produced by artists managed by the lawyer's daughter dominate the environment, showing off a sort of shrewd lack of connection to the old walnut furniture, the red silk wallpaper and the wooden floor of the spaces. But not here. Here there is only this little, evanescent ship, the keel that fishes into the deep blue, and a sail the man stares at one last time, silently, before going out frozen by a subtle angst.

“Sit down, Mar- io”.

The sound of his own name catches him off guard while he sits on the chair next to the desk, feeling the apprehension he brought with him growing. The old mate has been calling him ‘Martin’ – and he has been calling him ‘Briss – since they were high school students, in honor of the passion they shared for *Martin Eden*, the great Jack London book: and now, after so many years, to Fabrizio, in this moment, Martin is Mario again.

«Well», he thinks, «it must be serious».

The doctor is back at his desk, he busies himself with some papers for a moment, nervously plays with a pen, looks crossly at his friend, and finally decides to speak.

“You see, after last week’s checkup I didn’t tell you anything because I wanted to make sure I was right, but the tests confirm what I feared.” He catches his breath as if to prepare himself for a very steep run. “Unfortunately.”

Mario remembers a brief, still instant of silence at the end of his previous visit and he suddenly re-interprets it as the confirmation of an intuition that

he had dismissed straight away at the time. He stops listening. Words flow along the banks of attention, and he does not care to pick them up. He is stunned, unfocused on the details that the internist, his friend, is giving him, closing the ranks of their conversation from the other end of the desk. Rather, Mario is trying to secure himself to a thought of his own, to find a support to lean on, from which he can start again to put his feelings in order. He feels impermeable to his surroundings, and at the same time fluid with them. Not an unpleasant feeling: like a colorless void, a soothing dullness, a mental place in which he resolves to dwell for a while.

When Mario gets back to reality a few minutes have gone by outside of himself: he realizes that Fabrizio is silently staring at him. He can almost about hear himself asking whether it is really that serious, if it is possible to undergo surgery, do something, try those new biotechnological treatments he remembers to have read about sometimes in the newspapers. At the same time, however, he realizes he’s playing a role, and quits. By detecting his friend’s embarrassment, unsuccessfully hidden behind an elusive look on his face, he comes back to the present once and for all.

“Briss, how long have we known each other? Fifty years?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“Well, I am quite sure that in all this time you have never lied to me. This is why I am asking you to be frank, also in this occasion. How long do I have left to live?”

Fabrizio leans on the backrest of his chair, clears his throat. “This is something no doctor can ever say for sure.” Again, his eyes are looking for an escape from the gaze of his friend. “But, according to your results, I think we are talking about months.”

“Months that will turn into a year?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I understand. Will I suffer?”

“Not necessarily.”

Now Fabrizio recovers some confidence. He feels as if standing at a corner protected by his own profession, his statements supported by a knowledge that allows him to take a technical distance (at least while he is expressing it) from his real feelings. He looks at Mario, Martin, who is lighting his pipe again, consuming the match and his routine gestures with an experience refined over the years. Martin blows a cloud of smoke around himself; for once Briss doesn’t complain.

“You know, people often think that pain and suffering are the same for everyone, but it’s not true:

we all live and feel pain in our own way. In the case of your illness, it sometimes happens that a person leads an almost normal life for months and then suddenly, often for side effects that cannot be accounted for, starts regressing. Even if that is not the case, however, palliative medicine has made a great deal of progress. It’s really no longer necessary to suffer, physically.” The voice decreases again, “Martin, I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

“Oh well, me too.”

Mario tries to smile, then keeps silent. Some time goes by while his gaze is lost beyond the glass window into the rain that has resumed falling regularly on the city. He finally hears his own voice outside himself, coming back from a sudden thought.

“You know, I’d very much like to go back to the house on the island, the cottage you inherited from your Sicilian uncle. Do you still have it?”

“Of course. But, you know, I haven’t been there in a very long time. No one goes there any longer. There was a time when no summer would go by without a visit to Linosa, then it was all over. You know it, Francesca doesn’t like the seaside, Giovanni teaches in London and never comes back. As for me, I have my job: and so it goes, I have been paying the gas and electricity bills of the house for years as an ob-

ligation to the past much more than to the possibilities of the future. I don't even know what state the building is in, maybe it has fallen into pieces and is now only good for nesting seagulls."

Fabrizio's thoughts are lost into a present silence and far away memories. He speaks again, his voice clearer. "Martin, do you remember the last time we went there together? It must have been fifteen years ago."

"The most beautiful vista I have ever experienced: the blue sea, the black rocky shore with spots of wild green, everything illuminated by the sunlight. And framed by a bathroom window, no less."

The two friends share a laugh. Briss' is short, while the smile lingers on Martin's face. Now is Fabrizio's turn to look out of the window, embarrassed, losing himself in the afternoon mist.

"*April, the cruellest month*, the poet said."

"Well, for me, I gather the next few months should also be pretty wicked."

Mario regrets the wit: after all, Fabrizio only wanted to relieve the moment. Martin observes the face of his friend with tenderness, he discovers in it a fatigue he did not remember: maybe Briss too should enjoy a holiday somewhere.

"What about you? Is there a place you would like to go?" Having failed the attempt of pleasing his friend's

literary taste, Fabrizio sees the question as a way of easing the tension. Unexpectedly, he finds himself thinking about his own wishes, and speaking them aloud.

"I'd like to spend a few days in Rome, without commitments, all free. Yes, that is it."

"That is remarkable: I do have to go right there on business next week. Why Rome, though? It is dirty, chaotic, regularly out of order."

"Maybe you're right. Still, you know the years I spent as a university student there. It may not have been your legendary America, but for me it may well have been it. We were young, all were kings at the time, everywhere, we all lived our own legends. So, I suppose, I'd like to recover some of that feeling – to remember it on site, at least."

The two friends smile to that unexpected ambush of nostalgia, Fabrizio's voice warms up while turning again to his old friend. "Moreover, if I may, you don't have southern blood running through your veins like I do: not to mention your job, firmly focused on rules and order – and on how to manage them. My dear Northerner man-of-law, you just can't understand the sick charm of, say, a walk through an antique's dump or a messy cemetery under the sun, you don't know what it feels like to get really lost in

Rome: which, really, is both these things at once.” Martin immediately slides into the crack of conversation Briss opened up, and he forgets – for the moment, at least – about the present.

“How did Montaigne describe it? The monuments of Rome crumble, the ruins raise the grade until we can take a closer look at the peaks of ancient times. All in all, a sort of dust-driven spiritual elevator.”

“That wasn’t Montaigne, it was Gide introducing Montaigne. You gave me that book.” Fabrizio stops, lost behind a thought. “There was a café, for example, near Campo de’ Fiori, that was a Gypsy Republic indeed, I spent nights and days there. A great American poet, Gregory Corso, was often the special guest of the bar, always possessed by the Spirit of Poetry, and, well, of alcohol too. I owe him a lot of good times, many passionate conversations: for sure, the money I spent for paying his debts with the bartender were the best investment on my literary education I ever made. I heard that Corso has been buried at the non-catholic cemetery at Testaccio, a place I’d definitely go to visit again when in Rome. It’s right next to the magnificent pyramid that the magistrate Gaius Cestius had built for himself: another magic, hidden corner of the City. You know, I’d like only to sit near

the poet’s grave for a while, enjoy the light of a spring’s day, then go back to the Bar Peru, to raise a toast to the muse of Poetry, Euterpe. And to Mnemosyne, her mother.”

The old doctor falls silent, hesitating into memories and fantasies, something he hasn’t done in a long time. Mario’s words bring him back to reality.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll manage to go back there together one more time.”

“Where? To Bar Peru?”

“No, Briss, what are you talking about. To the island.”

“Sure, why not? Besides, we have been talking about going on a trip together for a while now. Without wives, without worries. I’ll see about getting some days off work.”

Mario, suddenly getting tired, sees his friend’s urgency to get organized and the fact that he won’t wait until the summer to leave as a sign of just how serious his own condition is. He doesn’t say anything, and finally gets up.

“Martin, we have to discuss your therapy, we’ll have to start as soon as possible.”

“Tomorrow, Briss, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. Now, let me take a breath: after all, it’s not every day you find out you’re dying, or at least you don’t

pay enough attention to it. And please, do not tell anyone about it just yet, I want to take some time to think about how to deal with – well, with this thing.”

Mario exits the clinic into a wave of cold wind, but doesn't feel it. The sentiment of isolation that hit him a little while earlier in Fabrizio's office keeps on wrapping him discreetly, like a woolen scarf around his head. He straightens his overcoat and takes out his pipe from one of the pockets. He smokes again, standing in front of a flowerbed in the middle of the clinic's parking lot.

The old man stares at a huge olive tree enclosed in a square of soil, encased in some overdesigned oxidized steel wall, ruthlessly disconnected from its surroundings. The log is still wrapped in an insulation foil, its leaves silently weep the day's rain. Martin briefly sympathizes with the tree, forced as it is to live in an environment to which it doesn't belong, uprooted from some southern sunny land only to contribute to the pretentious style of a northern parking lot. Mario studies the old, worn

out bark of the plant, the leaves made pale by the deprivation of their native light, then he removes abruptly his previous compassion.

«Olive trees are strong: this one too will survive, it will enjoy other summers. For sure, it will outlive me». He looks away, frowning at his car nearby. At that same moment an ambulance makes its way across the old man's thoughts and through the entrance of the emergency room. A young woman is dying inside it. Mario leaves, unaware by anything around him, and unconcerned.

He should go back to his office straight away: he has to finish a legal opinion for an important client, prepare documents for the meeting in Rome, correct the drafts of an article on bailout. But now, he doesn't want to do any such thing. Standing next to his silver car he decides to go swimming. He opens the trunk to check for the bag containing his swim suit, the slippers and the towels: everything is in place. He gets into the vehicle, turns off his mobile phone and starts the engine.

Of all the spots the city has to offer – this geometrical, shadowy, politely old-fashioned city where the man was born, has studied, worked, married and bred: to sum up, the place where Mario has lived most of his life – the swimming pool along the river is his favorite spot. Martin has never been the sporty type, he simply likes the bright atmosphere of the pool, the big glass wall that allows you to look outside while swimming. He loves the anonymity offered by a simple dive, the spherical rubber cap tight on the ears as if to deaden the rumor of his thoughts. He even finds the acute note of chlorine somewhat soothing, re-emerging along some incomprehensible chemical reaction to give him a sense of refined cleanness, from his nose to his brain.

Mario comes swimming two or three times a week. Years ago, Fabrizio prescribed him regular physical exercise to counterbalance the tendency of his extremely tall and thin body to bend – as well as the negative effects of his heavy smoking habit. Over time, keeping fit has become a good excuse to regularly get away

from daily obligations. In any case, he now thinks in a sudden rush of anxiety while looking at his naked body in the empty changing room, he will no longer have to worry about being out of shape.

Martin enters the swimming pool and closes his eyes. As usual, as soon as his body touches the water, his thoughts melt into an indefinite continuum, a flow where details do not hang around, rather they move gently, deeply into the blue lane. Today, however, Mario begins to swim clumsily, often interrupting the rhythm of his strokes and spending much of his time hanging on to the edge of the pool, his folded arms holding his gaze towards the river banks through the windows, lost in the streets animated by the usual traffic of cars and people.

Floating, as he is, in a pool not far from the river, suddenly seems to the old man the perfect representation of a reserved condition, of a life – his life – which shares the same substance with something bigger than itself: a life, however, that has never experienced the strength of the current, as it has always feared the drift. Martin plays a little with the idea that has just come to his mind; he considers it a bit literary but nevertheless authentic, and doesn't know how to escape from it. Besides, at his age and after having got this far, what else could he

do? At least for the time being, go on swimming, in a closed pool.

Having left the sporting center, Mario decides to stop by Marina's art gallery to pay her a visit. He will try to talk to her first; he needs to free himself of the burden the news has left him with, and he knows that he won't be able to do that at home with Margherita. As far as he knows her, his wife won't be of much support. With his daughter, he thinks, it will be different. In the past, he must admit, they have had their misunderstandings, but for some time now they have established a sort of mutual understanding, a truce at least. While thinking about all this, Martin hears a voice from inside himself whispering sharply between his thoughts: «with all the money you give her to keep her business afloat, the last thing you expect is that she still wants to bicker.» Annoyed, he turns towards the blurred images running through the car window. «Shut up, will you».

Mario parks the car not far from his final destination, gets out and crosses a downtown road decorated for the anniversary of the Italian Unification, his gaze is

caught up in a piece of wet red, white and green cloth hanging from a balcony. While his eyes dwell on the flag, he remembers what his friend Dante, the watchmaker, said to him, a few days earlier, when he went to visit him at his atelier and the two old fellows, as usual, spent some time commenting on the national political situation, silently relying upon the common ground of their old socialist convictions. "You see, this land has too much past to care about a future: just like me and you". Then, as usual again, Dante disappeared in the recesses of his laboratory to come back with a bottle of Porto and two glasses: "Which does not mean we don't have to make a toast. Forget the future and drink to the past – besides, that's an easy way to enjoy the present". If for no other reason than his friend's profession, Dante was granted a certain familiarity with time; now, the quip of the watchmaker resounds bitterly prognostic. Martin shrugs, then takes to the road again under the drizzle that keeps falling.

Through the window of the gallery he sees now his daughter conversing with her assistant. The two women, both dressed in refined and expensive scruffiness, are standing in the middle of the wide white room, next to the plastic replica of an ancient sculpture positioned in front of a mighty pile of

scrap computer parts: *Venus of the Rags 2.0*, it is the title Mario remembers his daughter told him, a few days before, while she was dissertating with some guests on the intellectual critical courage of the artist during the opening of the exhibition. Sheltered under a balcony across the road, the old man stares briefly at the assemblage in bewilderment, slightly upset by the inconsistency of the thing, its utter lack of spiritual necessity, then takes the phone out of his overcoat pocket and he dials his daughter's mobile. He doesn't really know why he is doing that. Deep down, the idea of watching Marina's unaware reaction simply amuses him: when she answers the phone, he will tell her to turn around and look through the window, and he will wave at her. Maybe this will help play things down, a bit of relaxation before having to decide together what to say to Margherita.

Marina moves closer to the phone vibrating on the design table at the end of the room and looks at the number on the display. She lets it ring, two, three, four, five, six times. While the phone keeps restlessly vibrating on the desk, with one hand the woman makes some annoyed circular gestures towards her assistant, with whom she is still talking.

On the other side of the road Mario hangs up and looks away, a subtle anger collapsing into a sigh. He

notices the entrance of the Egyptian Museum down the block, if only to move away from his spot he decides to pay it a visit.

The old man wanders about the museum rooms, aimlessly. All he wants is to get some distance between himself, the day's events, and the world standing outside. He walks past the high wood and glass display cases, looking at the objects inside them with a resolute lack of interest. In a big room dedicated to the '*Cults of Death*', Martin suddenly stops before a collection of sarcophagi. They are arranged so many and so close to each other that at first he finds it insulting. What bothers him even more is the label, on the explanatory panel nearby, related to one of the mummies: the upper part of the body being clearly visible through the bandages, it is described as '*Adult male, arms stretched along the sides of the hips*', with a reference dating Mario stares at silently. Irritated by the forensic rigidity of the depiction, the old man stands before the poor corpse tight in its cloth for thousands of years, feeling a deep sense of pity. An adult male, indeed, who died trusting his transfer to the Afterworld, intercepted

instead by some posterity with a fancy for collecting, and eventually stored in a dusty deposit at the mercy of tourist's looks and comments. «When my turn comes, I'll have to make sure I don't end up in this awful state», he thinks offended while he walks away. Martin keeps roaming the corridors and eventually he gets to another space where a guide is showing two old women the funerary furniture exhibited around them. He leans on the entrance door frame and lets his thoughts flow along the expert's voice who is talking about the *Book of the Dead*, recounting a courtroom dedicated to the weighing, the judgment of dead souls.

“Fine, this is exactly what I needed to learn today.” He hears himself say this aloud and immediately shuts up, embarrassed. He's planning on leaving but the guide just continues to entertain the ladies with a detailed account of the iconography of the solar ships, flying boats that in Ancient Egypt led the deceased through the night to the Kingdom of Osiris, the mighty god of death and fecundity. The speech ends, the visitors walk away with their cicerone, Mario is left alone with his own meditations, wondering about the amazing imagination able to create such boats. He tries to picture the mysterious darkness of their journeys, and a momentary sense of calmness

pervades him: despite everything, it seems, at least for somebody something will go on beyond the dead of night. Lost in his thoughts, he is about to step into the exit when he notices a girl standing in the middle of another room. She is alone, her attention rapt by an unfolded roll of papyrus she is closely observing in the display case. Mario stands on the doorway holding his breath, and, unnoticed, studies the young woman. He admires her captivated profile, the long black hair spread on a red woolen jacket. Her slender figure moves slowly, filled by the fascinating candor of beings who are unaware of being observed: she is beautiful. Martin feels a painful sensation of unattainability growing inside him.

«Well, here is something I will never experience again», he thinks dismally, and walks out the door.

When the old man gets to his office the law firm has already closed and, after the usual day's profligacy of legalese, has settled into the comfortable silence of the night.

Mario switches on only a decorative lighting in the hallway, lights up his pipe, and, once in his room,

turns on the bank lamp on his desk. On the pale luminescence of his computer screen floats the opinion he is supposed to correct, the one he left open before going to see Briss. Mario drops to the leather armchair at his desk, reflects without much enthusiasm on a footnote to be added to the text, corrects two printing errors, then turns to look at the lights of the railway station through the window. At that very moment, a train slowly passes before his eyes. He watches it disappear into the distance, wondering where the vehicle is going. No sooner has the question crossed his mind than he piercingly realizes the countless number of places he will no longer be able to visit.

There was a time, when he was young, when the only thing he cared about was travelling. Straight after graduation, thanks to a gift from his grandma – and against which his father, for once, did not object – he had spent six months in New York: “all free”, as Briss had put it, “all jazz”. All of a sudden, Martin sees himself smoking a cigarette in front of a Chinese restaurant in Brooklyn, unaware of how the flow of his thoughts has brought him back to such a far and unlikely address.

America. He had loved it without prejudice, as we do with something that does not belong to us, that is

so different from us as to give us the impression that other possible lives exist. But his portrait of the man as a young artist was destined to break soon, with an abrupt end. His father’s sudden passing cleared away the smoke of the piano nights, switched off his luminous illusions to bring him back to the cold daylight, back home. The family law firm had to be maintained. Then came Margherita, his wife, then Marina, his daughter. With a diluted disenchantment Mario settled into a life so very different from what he had imagined while rambling through New York: a comfortable, yet etiolated existence, every day a bit more distant from the vibrant light source it was originally longing for.

Now, he is here. His hands crossed behind his head, his legs stretched under the desk, Mario observes among the various picture frames on the table a double portrait of his father. He ponders briefly on the photograph, at the right side of the frame, on the silhouette of that middle-aged gentleman: a picture delicate and quietly enigmatic as its subject was, frozen by the camera in an armchair of his library. To the left, a much younger man beams by standing in front of an indefinite mountain, wearing the uniform of the alpine officer he was during the Second World War, shortly before Mario’s birth.

«Who knows, Father, maybe we'll meet again soon, you'll tell me again about the need to fulfil our duties. Well, I don't believe it really.»

Martin shifts to another black and white photograph on the desk: the image of the jazz quartet he had set up in Turin with his best friends, shortly after coming back from New York. «Briss hasn't changed a bit. Tito, he has been gone for years now. And Dante, the great trumpeter who turned out to be an even greater watchmaker. I should stop by his atelier one of these days, maybe I could buy yet another of his masterpieces. The last one of my collection».

The old man's eyes stop on his own face in the photo, hesitating on the unkempt beard that somehow survived his young wife's complaints. Just next to the photo of the quartet is a sepia portrait of Margherita: her aristocratic, distant profile makes him feel lonely. He tries to remember the moment in which the subtle passion he felt for this arcane woman had turned into the routine of living together with a vexing stranger, but he cannot figure a specific point in time when it happened. In any case, it was a long time ago. More than forty years of marriage, he never betrayed her – a fidelity Mario is not really proud of. He remembers a conversation he had with Briss, the day his friend confessed to him a love affair he had,

about the theological category of the involuntary sin; he wonders, now, if an involuntary virtue might also be taken into account. This would have been his case. «I have always been loyal, austere, I fulfilled all my duties. Maybe it was just a mistake.»

He inhales a last puff from his pipe and lifts his gaze to the picture of the boat that, on the wall in front of him, seems to be making its mysterious way between the smoke and the half light of the room. Mario turns off the lamp. «I forgot to ask Briss about Bianchi's fever. I'll ask him tomorrow – among the other things.»

When Mario arrives at the tidy gravel driveway of his house, beyond the automatic gate, he feels that something is wrong. Too many lights are on in the house, for one: above all, there is an inexplicable tension, very different from the usual soft feeling of nuisance that normally accompanies him on the way home. Mario parks the car, slowly. Through the living room glass wall he can see Margherita sitting on the sofa in the middle of the hall, near the Steinway grand piano. Her body of

blond hair is unnaturally lit by the light of a lamp, like the fantastic profile of an exotic bird. When he enters the hall, Margherita springs to her feet with an overwrought look.

“Mario, Francesca has just called. A car ran over Fabrizio on his way home. He is dead.”

It's Tuesday, shortly after lunch, the flight leaving for Rome almost empty. Mario takes a seat next to the window, unfolds his newspaper and flips through some pages without paying much attention to the information. He re-folds the newspaper, nauseated, and dumps it in the seat net in front of him.

«So, so easy to leave?» He thinks back to the day before, the surreal stillness at Briss's funeral, the slow parade of acquaintances, wreaths and regrets from the church to the graveyard. He relives the irreparable loneliness he felt in front of Fabrizio's family chapel, before leaving, and closes his eyes. The airplane takes off: the gentle ascension makes him feel gradually lighter, relieved, and he comes back from his temporary darkness. Through the window Mario looks at the snowy circle made by the Alps around Turin, and his mind suddenly drifts back to his father's funeral: at that time the snow was so thick the hearse could hardly make it to the hilltop graveyard. At his mother's funeral it snowed also. At least, this is what they told him about it: she died in his childbirth, and a deep white void was his way of holding on to the silent irreparability of her loss. The old man does not try to make sense of the flow of ideas that run in his head; he just abandons himself to it. His mind

goes back to Briss, some of the faces of people from the church, then to details of the business meeting planned for tomorrow. Mario is grateful his secretary could satisfy his sudden request to change the flight and book a room so he could arrive in Rome with a little time to himself.

"I just want an evening off", he told her, a decision that surprised even himself.

Sunk into his seat on the clouds, Mario considers again that Fabrizio's death had sealed – for the moment, at least – the secret he has kept with everybody else about his health: he removes, then, the idea, not knowing what to do with it. The compressed noise in the cabin lulls him to sleep. When he wakes up the plane is landing: a bright meridian light makes its way through the windows, it invades the airplane, it blinds the few passengers who are now busy turning their mobile phones back on.

In a short while, Martin figures, he'll have the chance to do what Briss most wanted to do, walking alone through the streets of Rome: something that he personally couldn't care less about. «Life», he grimaces, «I would not say it is unfair. Just unconcerned.»

Martin saw the pyramid in the distance, from the taxi window, and had asked the driver to deviate the ride to pay a brief visit to the cemetery that stands next to it. He walks along the gravel paths in a maze of gravestones and maritime pines, in search of the tomb of Gregory Corso that Briss mentioned him during their last encounter. He finally finds it, following the indications of a custodian. The headstone is located not far from the surrounding wall, in a slightly elevated position. In fact, the cemetery stands on a kind of hillock, which, together with the large number of monumental trees, offers to the visitors a relaxed impression of a country promenade: a feeling so profoundly different, Mario now thinks, from the sense of petrified motionlessness he experienced only few hours before at the place where Briss had been buried.

The eyes of the old man briefly follow the flight of a seagull crossing the sky, then quietly land on the simple marble slab, framed by a green bush whose nature he cannot understand, where he reads in a low voice the poetry engraved on it:

*Spirit  
is Life  
It flows thru  
the death of me  
endlessly  
like a river  
unafraid  
of becoming  
the sea*

He repeats the words to himself, admiring in the exercise the liquid flow of the letters: they do provide, it seems to him, an impression of water and light that, at the moment, cheer him up, like the concentrated feeling of a summer vacation.

«In his own way, without knowing it, Briss managed to give me the trip we talked about, even if this is not the way I thought I was going to live it.»

Martin smiles without cheer, tightens in his coat, then slowly starts towards the exit.

The cab leaves Mario in front of the hotel, on the central Via del Corso. Once in his room, he unpacks his luggage and

removes his tie leaving it on a leather couch. He takes off his three-piece suit – an elegant Prince of Wales grey weft, brightened with light blue yarns – and changes into something different. Together with the new blue velvet trousers and red cashmere sweater, the white shirt and the suit jacket lose their official character, relaxing in the widened gamut of colors. Mario looks at his image in the mirror next to the desk, pleasantly surprised by how important combinations can be in defining something, twisting the sum of usual elements into an unexpected set. He picks up his overcoat and goes out for a walk, heading towards the Mausoleum of the Emperor Augustus, whose bulk is already visible at the end of the street in front of the hotel.

«Well, here's a typical Roman site: Briss should definitely agree with me», thinks Mario while scrutinizing the square filled by ruins out of maintenance and cars parked randomly. A huge contemporary building made of white cement, erected in order to shield the remnants of an ancient altar dedicated by Augustus to the Roman goddess of peace, though, stands out against the jumbled background. The building looks utterly disproportionate to its content, as well to the ancient church at the back of the square, those

gently faded volumes are overwhelmed by the new structure. Moved by an impulse of architectural solidarity, Martin heads to the temple.

He switches off his mobile phone, enters the shrine, and is immediately astonished by the painting on the altar: the portrait of Saint Rocco whisks him back to his childhood, and he hears his grandmother's voice again. That petite Viennese, brought to Italy by love for Mario's grandfather, eventually became a new mother for her orphan nephew, as well as his first German teacher. Together, the old man remembers now with a calm emotion, they would read an old collection of Lives of the Saints written in German, a book containing on its same cover a reproduction of the painting that was now before his eyes: Saint Rocco, the benevolent protector of the wanderers.

Stuck by the image latent in his memory, Martin sits on a bench, pervaded, as always happens to him while inside a church, by a strange feeling of emptiness. What had Max Weber once said? Something about a personal lack of musicality when it came to religion. "Musicality". As far as he is concerned, he too is religiously out of tune, utterly unable to focus on the celestial sound of higher worlds. Anyway, he smiles bitterly, he will soon find out whether the rumors concerning the Hereafter are true or not.

Mario steps outside the church and consults the pocket agenda in which he has written the address of tomorrow's business appointment. When he lifts his gaze, he finds himself in the center of a wide circle drawn in white chalk on the ground. Behind him, starting from the edge of the circumference, a broken line leads into the distance, some arrows point in different directions. He also notices a tramp leaning against a wall of the church, a piece of chalk in his right hand and an empty bottle of wine by his feet. He stares at Mario, beaming.

"What does this mean?" Mario asks.

"AH, you must tell me. I simply draw."

"Are you an artist?"

"Sure, and many other beings too."

"I see. My daughter has a gallery in Turin."

"Sir, I don't care. Galleries are good for trains and mines: but arts, arts need fresh air. More light!"

"Fine. So, the circle is some sort of mystical drawing, or what?"

"Ego-trips, I call them. You know, I followed you from your hotel, all along your walk, I was intrigued by your evident discomfort. AH, and then I summed

up your path with that line there, behind you. From the way you walk around it's clear you don't have much to do, or you got lost. Both, maybe?"

"I think I am lost."

"Benissimo! Don't you know? One never goes so far as when one doesn't know where one is going."

"Goethe?" Mario asks, astonished by the unexpected reference.

"No, not today. Today I feel I'm more Marcus Aurelius. You know, Rome has its flair, I won't deny, nevertheless it's also quite voluminous – spiritually speaking. So I'm always finding some damned Roman emperor standing in my daily path of temporary reincarnations. Anyway. Talkin' about spiritual issues, don't you want to support the Art's Spirits?" The bum points at the empty bottle. "You know, it's for the refill."

"Of course." Martin pulls out his wallet from the jacket and smiles. "Besides, I have to thank you: this is the first time I find myself inside a work of art."

"AH, this is nonsense! It happens to you all the time, you just don't notice it."

The man puts the banknote Mario has handed him in the pocket of his dusty velvet coat and bids him farewell from under his beard.

"You're a benefactor, thank you Sir. Now, consider-

ing what you told me, try to be generous also with yourself.”

«I must hurry, then.» Mario thinks while standing in the middle of his circle, contemplating the square.

He takes a second look at the floor, his gaze follows the arrows: one of them is pointed towards the lively main street, the other draws his attention to a one-man-orchestra passing not far away. The tall, clamorous figure with a bass drum on his shoulders, rattles around his ankles, a saxophone and a mandolin dangling from his neck, attracts Martin, who decides to reach the man.

“Good evening. Do you know Otto and Barnelli?”

“Sure, marvelous artists, albeit quite neglected in the last few decades: the only two-men-one-man-orchestra, as far as I know. Pleased to meet you: I’m God.”

Caught by surprise, Mario doesn’t really know what to reply, but the friendly look of the musician puts him at ease.

“Mar- io, Mario Verbi. I saw you passing by and you made me think to those performers, I remem-

ber them playing on TV years ago. I’m sorry if I stopped you.”

“Don’t even mention it. But, look: I have just finished my show here and I’m heading to Campo de Fiori for another one. If you want to listen to the best single heir of your favorite duo, follow me.”

“With pleasure: is it far?”

“I see you’re not from Rome. No, just a few minutes’ walk.”

The old man stares again at the chalked circle on the ground, only a few meters away, and decides. “I will come with you.”

“No, God is not my real name. But, you know, when you move to a country that wasn’t expecting you and doesn’t even want you to stay, you have to change many things about yourself. So I changed my name to God, thought it would help my career in the show business more than the original one, Gezim: at least here, right in the Holy City of the Western Civilization, during the current eve of distraction.”

“What a jolly coincidence. Back in my country, Albania, I was a lawyer too. Criminal law, mostly. But, you know, one day I got fed up with all that courtroom drama: it happened when the communist paranoid regime finally collapsed. Everything was moving around me and inside me, so I decided to move too. You may remember the boat landings of Albanians on Italian shores at the beginning of the 1990s: well, I was on one of the first boats, feeling pretty much like Columbus when I first glimpsed my own America. *Terra!* Once in Italy I didn’t even think about resuming my profession: I needed a fresh new start, and, luckily, I could play. My grandfather used to say that you should always possess some universal skills, like being a doctor or a baker, so as to be able to get by anywhere: after all, an oven or a stroke work more or less in the same way anywhere. Pretty much like music. So, here I am. And see here, we have reached the square. Take a seat at one of those cafes while I’m playing. I’m sure you’ll enjoy your time.”

Mario sits at a table on the square, smokes his pipe, and considers the severe

profile of the bronze statue of Giordano Bruno in front of him. The juncture that the monument, erected on the same place where the philosopher was burned at the stake by the catholic Inquisition some centuries ago, is now a usual shelter for passionate conversations and inspired drinks, seems to Mario an extravagant validation of the struggle for free thought carried on by that heroic prophet of cosmic pluralism. The old man, by the way, is also having a generous glass of wine.

God is playing now, right under Bruno: a dazzling medley of cheap Italian popular songs chosen to catch the tourist’s attention, but with some bursts of tender, elusive originality. Mario closes his eyes. When he opens them again, God stands in front of him. “Hey Mr. Lawyer, I see you’ve have waited for me here! Now, let me reward your patience by introducing you to a very exclusive club, not far from here. Come with me, I’m sure you’ll like Bar Peru.”

«Bar Peru, what a way to find it. Briss would be proud of me.» Martin daydreams while standing in front of the cafe’s window, caught in the middle of a small square packed by people who are drinking

and speaking loudly; a black dog wanders undisturbed, the warm yellow light of the street lights reflects on the dark, shiny pavement of porphyry stone.

God, in the meantime, makes an entrance and is welcomed by a salvo of greetings, while Mario's is hesitant: he crosses the threshold, somehow confused, and wonders just how many times a young Fabrizio must have done the same thing. He sees him, then, next to the fridge full of bottles of beer and milk cartons: his old friend moves behind the jovial bartender, grabs one of the wine glasses on the bar, lifts up the cup, and smiles. It seems to Mario he is saying something to him, but the voices around are too loud to hear what. Waving his hand, the image of Briss leaves. Kidnapped by the whirl of people God is introducing him to, Martin is led to the next room, where the night goes in and out of a big window as it pleases. Time, then, relaxes his presence, diluting with the drinks and talks Mario is enjoying sitting at a table, next to some young men celebrating a university law exam one of them has just passed. Unusually valiant opinions flow wild from his mouth: he doesn't care.

"So, you study law but you want to be an artist: I'm afraid to tell you that your idea is not quite so un-

conventional. Anyway, If I may offer you some advice, find your real talent and protect it, first of all from yourself. So, law and literature, you say: I understand your anxiety, my young friend. Can I offer you another round? Very good. As for me, when I was like you, I wanted to do music. And I did it, but never without a safety net. Safety, security, you'll always have to pay for it, until you are fed up with the bills. This is why at some point, I believe, it is probably better to do what God did: leave everything, bail out. Men will manage on their own businesses or just keep on going with their usual disorder, some music or some good words may help them, but you don't need to feel responsible for them. And Amen, cheers." Martin pauses, his gaze lost into the night beyond the window. "Bail out, sail on. You know what von Eichendorff wrote, a remarkable poet, and jurist? My grandmother liked him a lot, she taught me this poem. Now, listen:

*Winde sanft die Segel rühren,  
Und ich lasse mich entführen,  
Ach! Wohin? Mag ich nicht fragen.\**

---

\* *Winds are softly stirring the sails / And I let myself be carried away / Ah! Whither? I do not wish to ask.*

Leaning with his chair against the wall, after having emptied his glass, Martin looks up, inspired as an actor on a rolling stage. And right then the curtain falls, lights in the room are switched off, voices are muffled, a pain he has never felt before spreads through his body starting from the bottom. The ache melts with the alcohol in his stomach, then goes up unrestrained, flooding the man's gaze as a dark tide, until he is totally swamped by darkness. For tonight, at least, that is enough.

“Good morning,  
finally. How are you?”

Mario opens his eyes and slowly takes in a place that is neither the bar, nor his hotel room. He turns onto one side, closes his eyelids tightly and feels God's presence nearby.

“Where am I?”

“You are a guest in my humble dwelling. Well, I think I might have to fill you in on the developments of the night you've just spent. After you fell asleep, when the bar closed down we didn't know where to take you. So, I loaded you in the car, together with my instruments. And here we are, in the

privy comfort of a block along via Prenestina. Well, now that you are recovering from the tender night's excesses, are you ready to face the intrusive forces of daylight?”

Mario feels a sense of dark worry growing inside him: he looks at his wrist watch, which stopped at four o' clock in the morning.

“What time is it?”

“Time and space are very relative issues, they say. In any case, according to the most wide-spread conventions I would say that it's just past midday.”

Mario stares at the flowers on the wallpaper next to the sofa on which he is lying. He closes his eyes, disoriented, and while he tries to recover from the inconsistent impressions connected to his awakening a vague feeling of panic for the meeting he has just missed grows inside his thoughts.

“Is everything ok?” God asks.

“I don't know: I fear I failed a business appointment.”

Martin sits up on the sofa, still wrapped in the old green blanket God laid on him for the night. He rubs his eyes, touches his face and finds on it an unexpected smile.

“I'll call in sick. Or, even better, I'll just be an unjustified absence. What do you do in these cases, when you play truant from school?”

God is placed at the other end of the room. He drinks up coffee, puts a cigarette out in the ashtray sitting on the armrest of his armchair, finally places the cup on a pile of books and gets up. “I’d say you have fun. Look, since you want to play the role of the naughty boy today, I suggest a trip to the countryside. After lunch I have to leave with a friend to go play in Apulia tonight. Do you want to join us? We could share the petrol money.”

Mario feels a strange electricity running up his back, a spark of energy that cuts through the dizziness that still dictates his movements. He hugs his stomach under the blanket, cautious. He feels beaten by the previous night, but he can stand up. What should he do?

“Fine, let’s go.”

God has gone out to stock up on cigarettes for the trip, Mario takes the opportunity to breathe some fresh air before the departure. He steps out in the street, take a glance at a suburban Rome he doesn’t know at all, so far away as he is now from the usual scenario of his previous stays in the City center, then walks slowly around the block and

eventually finds himself in front of the entrance to a park across the broken asphalt sidewalk.

Under the aerial geometries drawn by some maritime pines inspired by a subtle wind, a variety of people are at leisure: a bum reads an old newspaper on a broken bench, some senior citizens stand chatting, a number of young mothers push their strollers around, their dresses displaying foreign origins. A colorful sari passes, wrapping together a slender figure and a sleeping baby. Mario reaches a seat placed nearby a dustbin, shaded by the ruins of a Roman temple, and lets his attention mingle with the flying voices of the birds on the trees, the dialectal conversations among the elderly, the universal cries of newborn babies. A bunch of kids run shouting to a playground nearby: they are of different ages and colors, playing football together. Martin examines the scene, and fills the pipe. «Children, they make you feel more confident in the future, pacified – even if they yell so terribly. After all, something will continue after us. Even if only a game.» The ball stops a few meters away from the bench, a black kid runs to catch it and smiles at Mario. The old man waves his hand. «After all, what most politics cannot understand, not to mention to achieve, is best attained by life itself. The migrants

and then their sons can still keep faith in the future: and because they do not take anything for granted, they can still renovate this old country. Dante was wrong, there is hope: only, it does not depend on us. In a few years Italy will be a different place: mixed, more complicated, more living. This is good. If only I had the time to see it».

He looks at his watch, which has started working again after he has wound it up. He stretches his arms towards the clear sky, gets up, then makes a move towards where he will meet God again.

They have left long behind the urban mess of the suburb from which they set off, a forest of post-war buildings and shaggy businesses grown along the road. All around them, now, a relaxing countryside view stretches out. Mario stares at the road flowing under the old Volvo station wagon like a grey river in the green landscape, his mind lost in the sunset. Leaning on the front seat of the majestic rattletrap, a feeling of sound calmness pervades him in waves: he smokes his pipe undisturbed – the inside of car already looks pretty much like a moving ashtray –

and his thoughts drift back to the times spent in the swimming pool. The feeling, now, is peculiarly similar to the one felt in water, when his mind would liquify and flow freely, but way more relaxed. Go on, that's it. The thunderous voice of the driver, then, brings Martin back to the present.

“Well, all I am saying is that you can never fully understand how motionless this country is until you listen to the radio. In the US, man! Music on the radio is so vital it almost keeps the car engine running on its own: you just want to keep running ‘til the signal ends, which is never. Born to run! Thunder Road! But, over here, what do you find? Whining melodrama-mamas, football commentators fighting against basic grammar, a chorus of catholic prayers. You can't take seriously the fate of a nation with such radio!”

“He could go on like this for hours,” God says. “You'd better tell him he's right, especially when he starts talking about his parallels and meridians with Holy Mother America.”

“Tell me,” Mario asks by turning his head to the driver, “is Huck your real name or is it another stage name, like God?”

The gargantuan bearded man lets out a loud laugh while changing gear.

“It’s all true: Huckleberry Finn Guidotti, at your service. You know, my father had an insane passion for American literature, and my mother, who worked at the registry office of the small town where we lived, backed him up: that’s why my name.”

“This is interesting,” Mario ponders. “Just a few weeks ago I went into a bookshop and picked up a new Mark Twain edition. The text was followed by a critical essay that truly amazed me: the author simply tears the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to pieces, claiming that when Tom Sawyer arrives to help the slave run away the story loses all its meaning by turning into comedy, while until then it had managed to keep an epic dimension.”

“Well, that’s the typical problem of American culture.” God intervenes.

“Boom! Where does that idea even come from?” Huck turns and gives his friend a grim look, ready to start a new argument.

“From my experience as an average citizen of the world. Have you ever seen Hollywood movies?”

“Of course, like anybody else. What does that have to do with it?”

“Haven’t you ever felt caught by the intertwining plot, the brilliant dialogues and so on for the first hour, and then start to be increasingly annoyed by

a gradual loss of – clarity? It’s not so much a question of likelihood, as much as a problem of progress of the story. To me, Americans have surely gone through terrible times, but they are still too young as a culture to get what we may refer to as, let’s say, the awareness of the tragic.”

“The fact is,” Mario steps in, “that before an Iliad can be written many cities must be burnt.”

“Well, you can’t say they haven’t tried” Huck adds.

“To burn cities?”

“To write.”

“And what would the results be?” God inquires.

“In my opinion, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is even better than *The Iliad*, there isn’t much to be said.” Huck replies with a conclusive tone.

“Who is it by?” Mario asks.

“Kurt Vonnegut. Don’t worry, it’s not important. He’s only the best writer of the twentieth century.”

“For once Huck may be right. I almost agree with him,” God says. “And, what’s more, that book has a very good ending.”

“So: the conclusion is that endings are important,” Mario considers.

“Of fundamental importance! After all,” God says looking through the window, “people normally undertake something to see how it all ends up.”

“Or to avoid an expected conclusion,” adds Martin under his breath. God stretches out on the back seat, stares at him carefully, then manages to change topic.

“Come on, enough literary criticism, we’re nearly there.”

Mario turns to look at God. “I haven’t even asked you what kind of show you will put on. Although, considering all the instruments you have loaded in the car, I wouldn’t think it was exactly what you’d call a minimalist show.”

“Don’t worry,” the driver’s happy voice echoes, “you won’t regret the price of the ticket. Besides, the show is gratis.”

“Where did you say we’ll sleep tonight?” Mario asks again.

“You’ll see, First World accommodation. The festival’s promoter has invited us all to stay at his country house, not far from the town. A beautiful place, God and I have already been there a couple of times: water, electricity, movie theater. Everything. He’s a philosopher, a TV star, a comedian too, always eager to talk about culture, society, politics, whatever. Truly open to discussions – provided he’s the only speaker. Oh, here are the road signs to the town, here we are.”

The stage is crammed with all the things that Mario has helped unload from the car boot, the night is lit by the stage lights, by the glimmer of the lime walls of the surrounding houses and by some shops and restaurants along the stone paths of the old city center. Benevolent, loquacious people come in and out of the two cafés that look onto the square. The ensemble gives Mario the impression of having ended up in a sort of living crèche.

«So, this is the South. At least, a friendly version of it.»

He keeps his hands in his pockets and looks up to see the stars while he walks towards the stage, where for the past two hours, Huck has been performing his buoyant repertoire of protest songs and folk ballads: they truly refreshed the old man, together with some generous sips of red wine from a bottle his companions entrusted to him at the beginning of the show. While he raises the bottle again, Mario is startled by a warm grip of his arm: God is passing by on his way to the stage.

“I’m about to make things sound: listen – and observe.” God prepares himself on stage within a few moments. Now, from a pile of glazed tiles, he picks a few seem-

ingly at random. He hangs them onto a thin metal frame and begins to beat them with a little hammer in wide, harmonious movements. The sound is thin, fragile, but somehow creates a shape in the night unlike anything Martin has quite heard. Something similar takes place when, with a rubber pipe, God makes some water in a tin basin gurgle while playing a flute and spinning a bicycle wheel at the same time. A surreal melody rises, both liquid and aerial, no one can quite understand the source nor the end of it all.

Mario follows the music in rapture. What is this round sense of joy, this pleasure of the present, just present? All around, dozens of people are standing in silent contemplation like Martin. God is a novel pied-piper; were he to lead them they would happily jump in the water in the basin, or in the sea. Then this particular magic ends in astonished stillness, and another begins. A hidden recorder plays a lullaby in some unknown and distant tongue, God takes down the tiles and replaces them with seven mandolins. He listens carefully to the strings of each instrument and places a microphone next to them: from under the stage they look like flightless birds in a multiphonic zoo, perched on their gangly legs like metallic flamingos.

When the tape stops, God pulls some balled plas-

tic bags from his pocket and throws them one after another against the strings of the hanging mandolins. And a harmony begins to take shape, the notes vibrating one inside the other. It is impossible to tell whether the sounds come from inside the bags or from the strings, or even perhaps the electrical wires of the microphones that convey this strange spell. Mario looks around: some people, charmed by this sidereal music, stare up at the starry sky while others keep their eyes closed. As for him, he is moved to tears. Ashamed of his feelings, he fishes in his pocket for a handkerchief to dry the wet from his eyes. He finds a rolled plastic bag instead: God, standing on stage, smiles at him.

They are now inside a masseria, a big, fancy farm house lost in the night of the Apulian countryside, lingering in a wide and comfortable living room decorated with carefully researched reminiscences of rustic industriousness. Hung on the naked country walls are old plough points, twisted billhooks, hammers and sickles cleverly overlapping, complemented by long shelves full of books.

There are paintings on the walls too. Some of them catch Mario's attention: an interesting female nude drawing by an artist he is not able to recognize, an ugly late Picasso lithograph, an extraordinary small blue watercolor by Orfeo Tamburi, a series of posters from the May 1968 protests in France.

At the other end of the room, a conversation has been flowing for at least half an hour around the host's fervent speech, a cavalier in his sixties with a black polo neck and cold grey eyes, loudly monologuing about new social controls.

As for Mario, he has resolved to keep as far away from the conversation as possible, and remains adjacent to the piano, sitting on the piano stool, idly playing with a glass of whisky, mentally begging alcohol to help dissolving the moment. He tries to subdue a growing feeling of intolerance against the histrionic appeal he recognizes in the talk, the superficial frenzy of wordly images: somehow, he recognizes there a trait of the Italian character, and, at the same times, he feels he has no patience for it anymore. Opera, it had never been his forte.

Stretched out on a big corner sofa, Huck and God seem to be having a much more relaxing time. The first has long been busy seducing a cognac bottle he has stolen from the bar, the other one is flirting with

sleep. Martin looks at them, grateful that they do not quite fit here. He places his glass on the floor, moves the stool closer to the piano, and begins to play. First, he touches the keys lightly, with restraint. Then he grows more and more indifferent to keeping down the volume of *The Communist Internationale*, which progresses from the bottom of the instrument until it attracts the attention of the rest of the room. He plays with enthusiasm, unstable, he lets secondary notes be thrown away along disturbing dissonances, to then quickly melt back into the main melody. After a series of variations on the same theme, all the people in the room have turned to look at him, the music drastically changes rhythm and takes on the sound of the musical *Cabaret* and its disenchanted advice about money making the world go round.

The show is over, a strong theatrical tune hangs in the silence of the room. Taking advantage of this moment of quiet, the host moves towards Mario, anxious to say something bitterly intelligent to this unknown pianist who has dared to steal the spotlight. But Mario anticipates him. He gets up from his stool, staggers towards his two friends, waves the audience off and drops on the couch. His gaze, tired of all the last few hours' events, lights back when it meets Tamburi's painting. Its deep colors

call to his mind Ego Bianchi's ship; he relaxes into an indefinite smile.

"God, do me a favor, give me a lift to the train station. I want to go to the seaside."

"My friend, the next train leaves at ten past six. You will have to wait almost two hours here on the platform: are you really sure you want to do this?"

"Definitely". Martin has already said his goodbyes to Huck, who has warmly remained in the car. God, instead, has followed him to the entrance of the station, and now looks at him slightly worried. Mario is discovering that farewells are easier than he had ever thought: if one does not have any particular claim on continuance, things seem to flow pretty easily. "Thank you, my – friend. I haven't had so much fun in ages. And it has also been a while, I must admit, since I have heard such good music. It is almost as if you have persuaded things to play for themselves."

The two men shake hands: God walks towards the exit, but comes back once more.

"I don't need to be a genius to understand you're

running away from something, and since you haven't told me what it is, I'm certainly not going to try and get it out of you now, with no more alcohol at our disposal. Anyway, I know a good person when I see one, and I'd be sad if you got hurt. Therefore, please be careful." God pauses, then smiles.

"In any case, don't worry. Huck and I will not call the police, we will not sell you to some missing persons TV show. But, if you really want to leave, I recommend you pay attention to the traces you leave behind, and change your looks a little. Grow a beard, dye your hair, definitely just get rid of that mustache. It makes you look like a Hapsburg official, people will recognize you wherever you go. Having said that, enjoy the rest of your journey, and salute the sea for me."

Mario walks alone toward the ticket machine. He dials the destination, softly whistling through his teeth when he sees how long the journey takes – almost ten hours, with three train changes. The price appears on the screen, and he is about to pay with the credit card

he has taken out of his wallet, when he stops.  
«God is right, I have to pay attention to the traces I leave. I'd better start paying cash, from now on.»  
He looks into his wallet again: enough for a while. Then what? He has still got his mobile phone, the gold pen in his jacket, his watch. When he gets to Palermo, tomorrow, he should find a way to get some money for them. The idea of having to look for a pawn shop in Sicily amuses him for its gap with his previous life, the life until just a couple of days ago. He breathes the fresh air of the very early hours of the morning and proceeds to the platform.

Where does the light of dawn come from? The sun, the stars: fine. But the simple logic does not help rid him of the feeling that light comes from things themselves, the same things he now sees running past him through the window. A new, radiant light, a rebirth of elements and their combinations, to which the morning only lends a helping gleam while passing away.

The train.  
What an invention. Mario dozes in his seat, his mind a well-greased revolving door of a grand hotel of memories and impressions. He has been like this for hours, half asleep, his overcoat thrown on him, more for the coziness than for an actual need of warmth, enjoying the solitude of an empty seasoned wagon. The other means of transport, he thinks while stretching his legs onto the opposite seat, just cannot compete with the train; at best, perhaps some ferry boats could be compared. Anyway, if it were up to him, he would always only travel by train – and he would never stop. It's a shame that western world evolution has worked so hard to replace the padded comfort of the slow carriages with the aseptic discomfort of high speed: however, thanks to the neglectful attitude of the national railway toward secondary train lines, the carriage in which he is traveling now happens to be one of the old ones. Martin enjoys the worn-out velvet of his seat, the adventurous feeling of being on the move, and the view. The light of the coast and the smell of the sea pervade him with a light blue gleam. Blessed be the traveling, the lightness of moving, thinks the old man, and amen.

Out of the station, on his feet again, the first impression that strikes him is the bright warmth, coated like enamel on the deafening chaos of the street. Mario takes a deep breath and a secondary road: he has decided to wander about for a few hours at least, but his attention immediately falls on a shop with a sign that gaudily promises cash for gold.

“Good morning, I’d like to sell a watch and a golden pen. In case you are interested, I also have a mobile phone to be sold.”

The redundant figure behind the iron grid gate takes the three objects through a gap in the grating. He examines them, wipes the sweat from his forehead and delivers his verdict.

“Five hundred euros for all.”

“I’m sorry, you must be mistaken. Have you looked carefully enough at these objects? They’re not counterfeit: the pen, the phone, I’m sure you must have recognized their brand names. What’s more, the watch is a very rare piece, handmade by a distinguished artisan in Turin, please read the inscription at the bottom of the case. A case made of solid gold: and the mechanism, it strikes the time on command. When I bought it, less than three years ago, I paid it more than ten thousand euros. I don’t expect to

get anything near its original price, that’s clear, but please make me an honest offer, considering the value of these things.”

Mario takes the watch into his hands and carefully makes it perform a little golden hammer sound. In the surreal silence created by the situation, when even the street noises have respectfully dimmed, the four clear notes that emerge seem utterly absurd.

“You see, it’s right because of the inscription on the case that I don’t like your fancy clock. Don’t want to have troubles with stolen stuff,” says the dealer with a wary look at Mario. “So, considering the risks, to me these things are worth five hundred euros. Take it or leave it.”

Mario takes a breath and runs a hand through his hair. He doesn’t know whether he should feel angry at the dealer’s innuendo and his offer, surprised by the situation, or amused by how quickly the value of things may change. He puts his hand on the counter, and hears his wedding ring crack against the plastic surface.

“Let’s do it this way: I keep the watch, but together with the phone and the pen I’ll give you also this ring. How much would it be?”

“Three hundred euros.”

Mario takes off his wedding band and looks at it: he feels no particularly memorable emotion, only a relief from habit, as if finally replacing a pair of shoes he was so used to putting on that he did not notice their discomfort.

He passes the ring through the grate.

“Fine, let me just take the card out of the phone.”

The old man wanders about the city, the pipe clenched in his teeth, a lukewarm breeze coming from the sea nearby. «It is a good thing that clichés are often true: take the sunny South. I feel like I just received an unexpected postcard from summertime – in Turin, just three days ago, I wasn’t even thinking about springtime».

Palermo. How long had it been – fifteen years? It was with Briss: their last trip together to Linosa. Time and its industrious assistant, Progress, seem to have scrupulously neglected the city center, it is still the same bright chaos Martin remembered from his last visit. He walks up Maqueda street without a fixed destination, ends up before the churches of Martorana and Saint Cataldo: the contrast between the flamboyant façade of the byzantine temple and

the metaphysical austerity of the Norman building amazes, once again, the old man.

While his eyes follow the fantastic mix of styles of the complex, he suddenly remembers the feeling of thickness he experienced instead in front of a fortified abbey, enclosed in an Alpine valley, he visited some weekends ago together with Fabrizio, during one of their usual mountain walks. It was a comfortable feeling there, concentrating and protecting, but so different. «When here people were busy making these rocky embroideries, up in the north we fortified mountains. No wonder in this country it is so complicated for us to understand each other». Mario remembers *The Leopard*, the novel Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote about the annexation of Sicily to the new Italian kingdom. A quote, taken from the dialogue between a tired, disenchanted Sicilian Prince and a young Piedmontese official, the eager exponent of the new order, comes back to his mind: «*We are old, Chevalley, very old. It is at least twenty-five centuries we bear on our shoulders the weight of magnificent, heterogeneous civilizations.*» Still, Mario ponders, «the old prince was simply too much of an islander to figure it. It’s the whole Italy that is too old, too tired, too proud of itself to change. This whole land doesn’t want to change, all

its tiniest parts just believe themselves to be already perfect as they are, with all the glory of their ancient defects. Or, these elements should feel themselves to be part of something bigger and new at the same time, something renovated, alive again. We'll see. Better: others will see.»

Martin waves away his last lazy cogitations, leaves the square and walks away into the sun. He asks a traffic officer directions for the Kalsa, a suburb Fabrizio introduced him to long ago, when they went looking for an abandoned church, Santa Maria dello Spasimo: for some reasons, the old man feels he needs to see that place again, to rest for a while within its open air ruins. When he reaches the spot, the evening is starting to pour its descending light on the piles of waste that fill the street. Martin enters the building, walks past an arcade where huge gravestones and pillars lie on the ground. Finally in the nave of the church, he lingers for a while in front of a sumac that extends toward the sky, beyond the building's walls. The sudden apparition of the giant tree reconnects his imagination to many broken pieces of memory. «It's like a ship», he fantasizes about the temple with this tree as a living mast. Then, through the unexpected, immediate connections a language is able to build through our memory and experience, a Piedmontese

way of expressing both loneliness and hardship hits his thoughts. «To be like a ship in the woods». An obscure worry of what is yet to come clouds Mario's mind. Where to, now? He doesn't know. At least for the time being, better to find a roof, then keep on traveling, moving ahead through the woods.

While Mario is the only passenger of the first morning bus to Porto Empedocle, the uneven road surface persuades him to abandon his efforts to take a nap. Sitting in the first row next to the driver, his head leaning on the window, he takes advantage of the awakening to observe the surrounding countryside, a series of views of dazzling beauty often interrupted by ugly, disturbing structures, built without any regular order. Suddenly, Mario's gaze is met by the giant smile of a well-known national politician on a billboard – a clownish, clever face, superimposed on an Italian flag together with an empty slogan. “Well, against such a lawless background this criminal definitely looks at ease,” the old man hears himself saying in the middle of the absent minded conversation he's been having with the driver while

listening to the radio, focused on the opportunity to ban any reference to love affairs from pop songs. The driver, a middle-aged man generously bearded, has noticed the poster too. "That cat, you mean? Don't worry, he's no big deal."

The reply takes Mario by surprise, reviving the pleasure to talk politics he used to share with his best friends, Fabrizio and Dante. "What are you saying, he's a national menace. He has ruined this country." The driver turns to one side to take a glance at Mario, amused. "Ruined? Come on, surely Italians did not need some contemporary scoundrels to discover the ancient art of breaking down. I mean, consider our tradition of replacing gods, killing emperors, busting economies: we are apt to the passing of time, and its side effects. Moreover, don't forget you are in Sicily: debris here has an even older, more distinguished tradition. As for your contemporary public enemy, I fear people are inclined to overrate this guy. He's simply part of the entertainment. Meanwhile, someone else is probably doing the real job, exploiting the ruin."

Martin scrutinizes the driver, perplexed. "Fine, it seems I just met a conspiracy theorist."

"Wouldn't say that. I'd say I'm a freethinker: a Sicilian anarchist public transport driver, to be more

precise. And, you see, also because of my line, I think I developed an inclination to recognize what does not change in the motion. Politics, come on: things always seem to be in a hurry, but the basics, spiritually speaking, remain the same." The driver pauses. "Let's put it this way. To me, the world is a grandiose, congested crossroad, always more congested. There are traffic lights and wardens, but they don't really regulate anything. Add some beggars along the street, sometimes a juggler who performs during the red light: you get the picture. As for you, you sit in your vehicle: you want to move away, but you are bound to watch the street show. Better, you are part of it. Eventually the green light appears, you leave with a screech of tires. Now, in my view, on top of all that there's a real power we cannot see and control, the one that drafts the traffic code, sets up the traffic lights. This power, it needs a wheel of order and disorder for keeping us all busy, while it exploits the energy of our vehicles. But when we are lost in the traffic we don't perceive this, we only complain for the beggars, the nasty policemen or the entertainers we dislike, without even considering to challenge the way we move. Your guy on the poster – he's just another actor of the road show. As soon as he runs out of business, some oth-

er will replace him. Don't you agree?"

Martin keeps quiet, his eyes lost in the seaside running away: while following such an amazing, moving landscape simply made of water and light, he has lost any enthusiasm in discussing. For too long a part of his life, he suddenly felt, he spent too many energies in argumentation: now, he needs to benefit from silence. He looks again at the panorama.

"What a beautiful day, along this empty road. You know what, after your peroration about traffic jams I'd really like to take a walk. Please, let me get off here."

The driver looks at him with a regretful gaze. "Have I upset you? I'm sorry, didn't mean to. Besides, I have to warn you, the port is still twenty kilometers away. A long walk, indeed."

Martin smiles. "Never mind, my dear transport thinker, I just want to enjoy my way by myself. I won't, after all, be passing through again."

Time follows the slow pace of his steps, silence is made even deeper by nature's noises, lost in its course of life. Mario has already been walking for a couple of hours when he decides to stop, and sits atop a guard stone.

In front of a wild landscape of abandoned orange trees, he observes absent-mindedly the botany that grows at the sides of the road: jumbles of pulpy stems, spiny bushes, dark flowers, a sensual garden made of plants whose names the old man doesn't know at all. Were it not for the strip of concrete that runs beside him, he could believe he was at the edge of the Pleistocene. Not far from him, half eaten by the sun and birds, is a cat's carcass, one of the many victims of car traffic found on the road. After lifting his gaze from the poor remains, Martin moves the overcoat that hangs from his shoulder like an old cloak and checks his wallet. There will be the ferry ticket to pay, something to eat: then, he doesn't know. He opens the elegant leather fold and looks at one of his business cards. His name, his titles, his addresses: all irrelevant now. Keeping a fixed stare on the letters that form the words, Mario wonders how many more combinations they could produce – and to what these combinations would correspond. The sun is high, it is time to move again. Martin folds two corners at one side of the card and slips the other side in a crack of the plastic guard stone. «Well, what an unusual signpost», he thinks, grinning, «pointed towards an unknown destination.»

Behind a dry wall along the road, when the first houses announce the town's approach, Mario sees an unexpected orange ball crossing the blue sky, followed by the joyous cries of some kids behind the fence. Suddenly, all this reminds him of a wider world, of the indifferent passing of other lives parallel to his own, of endless other movements he is not aware of. Martin slows his pace and admires the sea nearby, already flickering on the horizon as a line of light: then he carries on, with a newborn feeling of clearness.

It is evening when he gets to the port. He is physically tired, as he hasn't felt in a while, but at the same time he feels lighter, as if, like an hourglass, the strain of walking had cleared out the upper part of his body and shifted the weight from the head to the feet. Relieved by the sight of the shape of the ferry, silent and motionless at the pier, Martin has two hours before it leaves, which he spends at a cheap restaurant not far from the port, managing to wash with

a bottle of red wine the strong taste of a pasta and sardines. He steps unsteadily back to the ship, wanders along the white, empty corridors, and reaches the deck. Mario breathes the quiet night that surrounds him, looking forward to the bottle of brandy he has brought from the restaurant.

"I need some company for the night travel", he told the barman with slight embarrassment in his voice. "Then, honor your friend. One should never be disrespectful when drinking. And cheers!", the barman had replied, while handing him a surprisingly impeccable balloon glass that Mario keeps now in the pocket of his creased overcoat.

The cold brackish metal of the rail he is leaning on penetrates his bones. As the ship moves under his feet, he pours himself a generous sip of brandy and downs the drink, grateful for the burning heat that pervades him, while the air and the thin spray of the open sea refresh his face.

The night goes by as smoothly as the water along the sides of the ship. Mario smokes his pipe and drinks methodically, without rush. He's looking at the stars from the deck, while ly-

ing on a recliner he has found in a hold that had been left open. The whole sky at his disposal with no lights around to disturb, he enjoys creating astronomical maps as he pleases by connecting the lights that move above his head, giving the celestial bodies new names. Starting from the star Art Tatum and following to the Thelonius Sphere, he draws the Constellation of the Grand Piano. While he is busy at improving the connection between the dots of the tail, the moving lights of a flying plane cross the drawing, spoiling his image. «Some notes out of tune, escaped from the hands of the pianist», Martin considers compliantly, while going back to look at the water.

He has been staring at the darkness before him without any particular thought in mind, when a shape appears on the horizon. Surprised, he holds his breath, and follows the appearance for a time that, to him, seems eternity. The shape moving west, the compound flickering of colorful stains, the dark silence of the sea around him: everything reminds him of Ego Bianchi's ship. It has come to take him away, Mario thinks. He feels a sudden cold, and starts to shiver. In the short time it took him to feel this sensation, the figure has already moved into the horizon, slowly disappearing in the dark bed of the sea and the night.

«If only I still had some time, just a little, to live a little longer.»

The old man wipes tears from his face, closes his eyes overwhelmed by emotions. Sleep, the patron saint of exhausted and sick people, takes the baton from the alcohol and wraps Mario into a deep peace, until the early morning lights.

Mario wakes up stiff from the night in an awkward position in the deck chair, mildly frozen, astounded by the sunshine. He lets the morning breeze wash his face from the night, runs his hands on his face with a sense of relief. His beard, which he hasn't shaved for a few days, has likely changed his appearance, he realizes, without him even having to worry about it. A growing uncertainty has taken over the previous discipline of a clean-shave mustache.

«Like an old philosopher. Or a tramp, which is what I am turning into, after all». He gets up shakily and he walks towards the ferry's cafe, anticipating the pleasure of drinking something warm, sitting at a table in the deserted room, looking out to the sea through the glass window encrusted with salt.

Meanwhile, the island is getting closer. It's moving toward the old man, in the ultramarine blue of the new day.

An uncertain circle, three little volcanoes surrounded by water: an island, in other words, more suited to the tales of some little prince than to nautical charts. What else? A few houses gathered around the vague idea of a town, others scattered around the land like white dices rolled by a careless hand. A paved street encircles the island and a few aimless paths extend here and there, the rough green of a wary vegetation mixed with the black of dried ancient lava, the brown of the earth and the bright blue of the sky and the sea. Linosa is still Italy, and, like Italy, an experiment of geography, histories, attitudes: only, far more isolated and neglected.

There are no ports to land, only a tiny pier that can barely protect the boats from the sea and the wind. Still, Martin thinks while the ferry is slowly getting ready to moor, nature has provided a generous compensation: the cove opens to welcome visitors with a dark volcanic sand embrace, incredible to look at. There is still a while before the high season in July

and August, when tourists arrive and consequent commercial activities boom. This is why there is hardly anybody waiting for the arrival of the ferry boat at this time in the morning. Once the mooring has been completed, the dozen people on the pier quietly wait for passengers to get off and lay siege on the newly arrived— a young French couple wearing huge backpacks, and Martin, – to offer rooms for rent in staggered English and ample gestures.

«Curious that they take me for a foreigner.» Mario thinks. «Perhaps the pipe, or the shaggy beard. *Gut*, I might as well go for it». He answers in perfect German, carefully choosing words that might easily indicate his new nationality and also his refusal for the accommodation offers. He then leaves toward the village, leaving behind him a cloud of smoke and a group of islanders wondering who this foreigner might be.

Mario inhales the air that smells of salty sand, steps out into the morning's sun and sets out, trying to recover a mental map to find the way to Fabrizio's house. He's wearing clothes that just a few days earlier he would never have thought

would get so worn: a jacket torn on the sleeve, the white shirt tanned on the neck and cuffs, the overcoat negligently hanging on his shoulders. He feels light, and moves at a fast pace. He's already past the village and on to the street that leads to the most impracticable side of the island, Cala Manarazza.

While he is walking, the landscape gets mixed up with his memories, leading him with more certain steps towards a path he has not covered in such a long time. Martin walks and whistles an old partisan song: a motif recently heard again during Huck's show, the same one he liked to fool with in his jazz quartet until it was altered beyond recognition. «How can things change so much and still remain the same? Music, it makes everything easier: it would be good if the same harmonic principles also worked for men.» He stops whistling, briefly wistful, but after a little while he starts again.

«I wonder what state the house is in, after being neglected for so many years. I hope I will at least find some clothes Briss has left behind, I definitely need to get changed.» The street curves, his thoughts are interrupted by a dazzling view of the volcanic coast, a shining sea, the big white house that dominates the surroundings, set out on the

top of a slight promontory surrounded by Mediterranean maquis.

“Ciao. Is it yours?”

The question surprises him almost as much as the person who is asking him from the top of the path among the garden's plants, hands on hips and a bright smile on her face.

«Pippi Longstockings.» He doesn't know whether he should first ponder about the idea that has come to his mind, or answer the person standing in front of him. Pippi Longstockings, he thinks, and remembers when Marina was a little girl, when he would return home from work and read, together with his daughter, the heroine's adventures, so wild, colorful and joyous. He's sure Pippi wore similar clothes, and gave out the same cheerful impression. «The girl from the museum.» This woman too has a slender figure and long, straight dark hair that lies on her shoulders, a deep look in her blue eyes. This woman, Mario thinks, is beautiful.

“So, is it yours?”

He recovers from the surprise and smiles. He does not really understand the question.

“Good morning, would what be mine?”

“The house.”

Mario scratches his head, unsure about what to say, then thinks that he might as well tell the truth, leaving it to run its course.

“No, it belongs to a friend of mine.”

“Oh, is he here with you?”

“No. He doesn’t come here anymore.”

“Good, so I won’t have to worry about negotiating the rent or start a debate about the concept of private property. What about you? Are you just passing by or are you planning on staying?”

“To be honest, I was thinking of staying a little while, but I don’t know if it is possible.”

“Why not? This castle it not mine, or yours, I understand: welcome, then. Come in, you want some coffee? I’ve just put the pot on the stove, in fact I’d better go and check. Ah, my name is Mia. What does one normally say in these situations? Something like pleased to meet you, I suppose.”

“Nice to meet you. I am Mar- tin.”

The house is even whiter than he remembered: the dazzling limestone rivals the sun to brighten the flowers and the grass

that covers the little hill just behind the building. In front of the kitchen door there is a small yard, the floor is made of old terra cotta tiles, broken in many parts. But Martin’s gaze now prefers to climb on the branches of the blossomed bougainvillea, happy about this once more unexpected spring. Mia and Martin go inside, just in time for her to turn off the hot plate under the smoking moka. Martin sits on one of the straw chairs around the wooden table in the middle of the room.

«Everything looks fine, in order. Who would have ever thought, after an eve of neglect? Briss was too paranoid, maybe there are houses that can simply manage themselves, just like living beings.»

His gaze briefly examines the space around him: there are some bookshelves on the wall, full of volumes, a worn-out sofa, a bowl of fresh wildflowers on a table. A corner that serves as kitchen is dominated by a gigantic old fridge and an L-shaped masonry bar along two big windows that look onto the courtyard. The bar’s surface made of old enameled tiles hosts four huge gas cookers; below it, behind a blue and white striped curtain, plates and pots have been piled on two wood shelves. Mia approaches the table carrying two coffee cups and a sugar jar on the tray, a calm expression on her face.

“When I got here the house looked as if it had been abandoned for decades, what a mess. So I cleaned it up a little. Do you think your friend will mind the fact that I’ve come to stay at his house?”

“No, you won’t have to worry about him.”

Martin allows himself a large, yet somehow sorry smile, then his mind is caught by a sudden impression of clarity. “May I ask where this nice, fresh smells come from?”

The girl sits down and sips her coffee.

“Hmm, let me see. Ok, you choose: wall colors or laundry. Since I have a lot of free time on my hands, I have freshened up the paint of the house, but I’ve also just hung the laundry. Not much to be said about it, only a few smells are better than white. So,” Mia says staring at Martin, “who starts?”

As had happened to him earlier on the doorstep, again he is taken by surprise, doesn’t know what to say. He does his best, however, and resorts to the ordinary trick of repeating the last few words in the form of a question.

“Who starts what?”

“Well, you are old and, at least because of the beard, you also look quite wise, so you should have already got the point. You said you want to stay here for a while, it must have occurred to you that we will have

to share the place. Therefore I think it is best we find out straight away whether either of us is a fleeing criminal, a secret agent, stuff like that, or if we are simply two harmless rolling stones. Don’t you agree?”

The man accepts the girl’s brusque wisdom, then thinks that, in actual fact, there are a few things he can’t get his head around in this situation.

“You are right. Let’s start from the ground: this house belongs to a friend of mine who hasn’t come here in years, and he is – unaware of my being here too. Now, I arrive, I find you painting the walls; may I legitimately ask what are you doing on this spot?”

“I’ve come for someone. And for myself. I don’t think I’ll stay here forever, but the house was abandoned and I needed a place to stay for a while, to take things easy. And you?”

The old man smiles again, unarmed by the comfortable ease of the unlikely, unexpected conversation with this fascinating stranger.

“This is remarkable, I could say the exact same things myself. So, I will carry on the investigation. You speak Italian perfectly, but you have a slight foreign accent: may I ask you where you are from?”

“Hey, you nailed me. I’m Italian, from Hamburg. Or better, a small town near Hamburg. I was born

in Germany from a German mother and an Italian father. He taught me Italian.” Mia pauses. “Mother tongue: well, the saying doesn’t fit to me. Ok, now it’s my turn: what did you do to make you flee to this island in April? Looking the way you do, I may add.” Martin swallows the last comment and clears his throat, trying to find a way around a direct answer. “I’m a lawyer, or it is probably better to say I was a lawyer until a few days ago. From then on, let’s say I’m on holiday.” He looks around, takes in the surroundings and the memories, then gets back to reality. “You know, years ago I spent great days in this place with my best friend, the landlord, Fabrizio. We used to come here when we were young, just the two of us at first, then we came back a few times with our children and our wives. Then we stopped, haven’t been here for many years.”

The old man looks up, his eyes follow one of the wooden beams on the ceiling, his gaze lingers on the wall in front of him. He finally comes back from the place and his memory to looking straight into the girl’s eyes.

“And now, here I am again. Well, it is my turn: what do you do?”

“At the moment, I’m translating chick lit from English into German.”

Martin’s brows furrow involuntary.

“To be honest, they are almost pornographic novels, but if they wrote that on the books’ covers, between the close up photo of two models’ entwined bodies and the title in bright pink, some housewives in Düsseldorf or Berlin would feel embarrassed at the news-stand, they would stop buying the books, the business would be ruined and that would be quite bad for everyone: first of all for me, obviously.”

Mia finishes her coffee, she settles on the chair and continues.

“In any case, Your Honor, in my opinion it’s not a bad job at all, I may add it’s also a respectable one: it doesn’t hurt anybody, and it’s comfortable. See, I’m always dealing with love stories that regularly end well and help readers spend some carefree time, they pay me quite well, I can work from wherever I want. There, for example, that’s my office.” Mia points towards the bowl of wildflowers on the table, and next to it, on a chair, a closed laptop with a book on it, its title printed in bright pink letters. Martin smiles, slightly unsettled. “I have never read a romantic novelette. To be honest, I have always thought they were quite vulgar.”

“Why? Do you think happiness and love are cheap? If so, everybody would afford them, which is not so. In

any case, as I was telling you, the ones I translate are a bit different. Let's put it this way, Platonic love is far, far away from their pages. It is also true that there are different degrees of passion, with their own series of novels, but the plot is usually pretty much the same every time: eleven chapters in total, a minimum of vocabulary – to the great advantage of the translator – and characters always pretty standard. One of the two lovers must necessarily be rich and/or noble and/or famous, the other can be a poor devil, but, in that case, necessarily good looking and good natured: of course, you'll never find two desperate souls or losers together. Oh, and they are always a man and a woman, for gays and lesbians there are other lines of business. So, once you have all these ingredients, you can go on to chapter three: a quick sex scene, just enough to warm up the readers. Then you leave them soaking for six or seven chapters, struggling with enthralling reverses of the destiny. Chapter ten, here we go: wild sex, fireworks, big cinema. Chapter eleven: a wedding party, no way to escape that. Whether the two lovers die in a car crash just after the party, or get wasted spending years of marital hate, we are not to know: it's not included in the frame, therefore they will always live happily ever after. And, you know what: I find all this pretty fair. Why should we think

about what happens to them after the photos with family and friends are taken in front of the wedding cake?"

"Maybe because after that, real life begins." Martin ventures.

"Well, even though you are old, you still have a lot to learn. I tell you a secret, hold tight: humans read and write novels right to escape from reality. Moreover, there is a big bunch of people out there who are simply not interested in the truth, not even in their own life."

Martin refills his cup with some coffee and smiles, amused. "You are right, again. But, if I may go back to my personal real life, could I get freshened up? I have been traveling for a while – quite wildly, I must admit – and I must look terrible. I really need to recover a little and, well, to tidy myself up."

"Sure. You are lucky: only yesterday I removed the calcium from the boiler and cleaned the glass window of the bathroom, so you'll be able to enjoy the luxury of a hot shower together with a magic view, straight onto the blue sea."

Mia looks at him, her head tilted on one side, her hands deep in the pockets of her patched tracksuit, stained with white paint.

"You know, I'm pleased you have come: I was begin-

ning to feel nostalgic.”

“Why nostalgic?”

“Because I probably should be somewhere else. When you have someone to talk to, it makes you feel lighter, and also stopping somewhere seems to be easier. All in all, if you really aren’t a maniac killer, I’m happy you have rolled here.”

Martin laughs. “Never mind, I assure you I’m another stone that has stopped on the shore.”

“*Sehr gut*, let’s see how new rocks are formed, then. Hey, if you need clothes, there’s a lot of old clean ones in the bedroom on the left; I washed and rearranged them last week. Man, we could organize a catwalk 1980’s style with all those rags. All right, while you get ready I’ll go downtown to get some food: what would you like to eat for lunch?”

Days pass. Neither Mia nor Martin feel like making new friends in town, they’d rather spend the time in the big house and its surroundings. As for the building, after having been neglected for so long it is now grateful for the new life that inhabits it, quietly reacting to it. A matter of tiny signs easily overlooked by passers-by: plants

flourishing with more polite manners, the kitchen bustling with everyday activity, windows and doors gently creaking while a sea breeze dries the blue varnish that Mia has just painted over their old wood. Martin deeply admires the girl’s restoration activities; every now and then he willingly takes part in them, but then, faced with his manifest ineptitude with practical things, he goes for a walk along the creek just beyond the road that runs under the house, along the edge of rocks and waves.

Yesterday, almost as if wanting to celebrate his first week on the island, Martin went swimming in the natural pool he recalled from the times of his holidays, happy to find that the spot was even better than how he remembered. Less than a kilometer away from Briss’ house, framed by a round ditch made of rocks, the pool looks like a transparent cave, filled with water that comes straight from the sea through a natural channel through the shore. Alone, protected by the rocky round hug of the pool, Martin had swum the little distance necessary to cover its diameter, enjoying the stinging, liquid cold on his limbs. Then he turned on his back, stretched out his arms, let his body float for a long time, his gaze lost in the sky and no particular definite thoughts on his mind. A comfortable feeling of

plenitude pervaded the momentary combination of man and environment, fading away with the evening sun.

“Mia, what a strange name. It’s nice: yet somehow unusual, too.”

The man and the woman are sitting on the rocks, enjoying an improvised picnic: some bread, an omelet and a terrible red wine, the only one available at the town’s little grocery.

Mia takes a sip from the bottle. “My father chose it. He was a big fan of an Italian singer, Mia Martini, he often played her songs with a friend of his. Do you know her?”

Yes, Martin knows her: pop music has never been his favorite, but the passionate, hoarse voice of that singer had certainly caught his attention, now and again, along some casual radio listening while driving.

“Well, he wanted to name me after her, and my mother had nothing against it. Anyway, I think she was already planning on running away, therefore I don’t think she cared much about the name of the daughter she was going to leave behind.”

Martin, surprised by this unexpected confession,

tries to find something to say, but only manages an embarrassed “I’m sorry”.

“About my name or my mother? I like my name, even though it’s not important. As for my mother, she’s not important either. I was raised by my father, and we were enough for each other. But I don’t want to talk about this now. Rather, we could talk about you, mister mysterious.” Mia looks straight into Martin’s eyes, “I mean, you’ve probably had your share of troubles too, otherwise you wouldn’t be sitting here with me now, eating bread and broken eggs on the rocks.”

Mia pauses, Martin remains silent.

“Martin. It’s a nice name, but I don’t think it is really your name: it is as if it only partially belonged to you.” The old man stares at her, his last bite stuck in his throat. «No doubts about it, she is dangerously smart», he thinks, once again grateful for having met her.

“You’re right. It is the name my best friend, our landlord so to say, gave me many years ago. We met because of Martin Eden, a book by Jack London. We had both requested it at the same time from the library of the high school where we were studying. To cut a long story short, we took turns reading the book, and that was the beginning of our lifelong friendship: I became Martin, he became Briss: like Brissen-

den, Martin Eden's friend. Back then, Fabrizio used to write poems and his ambition was to compete against *Ephmera*, the long astral poem written by Brissenden that is mentioned in the book."

Martin's gaze is lost beyond the rocks, sticking out on a whirlpool of emotions. "What else could I tell you: we were adolescents, middle class high school idealists lost among books, dreams of greatness and romantic love – books being obviously the easiest ones to be reached. Moreover, we were young at a time when television was even younger than us, and cinema something special for the weekend: Briss and I belong to a generation, a civilization I dare to say, where the cultural filters of feelings and dreams were still firmly made by written words. Writers, poets, they were true heroes for us: we repeated their words, we memorized them with a feeling of solemnity. You may think this was naïve: it surely was, but it was also so comfortable to live in a book. Then, a deluge of images came, a flood of unstable, constantly changing impressions. It may be good, too, but it's not a place firm enough for me."

The old man takes a long breath. "In any case, to go back to the name issue, after all this time I no longer know if Martin is just a nickname or the name I would have liked to be called by. When I use it, I feel

at ease, that is enough to me now."

The man looks again towards the sea, then turns to study Mia's face one more time.

"Earlier, you said that names aren't important. Why?"

Mia gets on her feet and brushes some bread crumbs from her long orange skirt. She takes on an ironic theatrical pose, the right hand leaning on the brow, and performs:

*The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,  
It isn't just one of your holiday games;  
You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter  
When I tell you, a cat must have  
three different names.*

Then she sits back down, and grabs her sandwich.

"T.S. Eliot, you know him?"

"Of course, he's my favorite poet!"

"Good, so you might know his idea that a cat has three different names: first, a name to be used at home while the cat wanders around between its owner's legs, begging for some food. Second, a deeper name that suits only one cat at the time, a name that makes it straighten its tail. Finally, the third: the one that only the cat itself knows, and that keeps it busy med-

itating, while men think it is catnapping. I think that is how it works with people, too. There's a name people use in public, maybe preceded by some kind of title, like doctor or professor. Whatever. Then there's a more personal name, something given by friends, lovers, battle companions, occasions in which one must keep his tail up. This name suits only one person at the time: like your Martin, I guess. But even this name is not quite so important. The only thing that matters in the end, I believe, is to be able to find your real name, the one that rings inside of us, the one that gives us our own meaning. And amen, I say." Mia takes another sip of wine, wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her worn out green jumper, and turns to look at her companion.

"So what? Shall we go for a swim?"

Martin hasn't yet recovered from the cats. He feels the skin shiver under the cold water flowing on his stomach. "I don't know, we have just eaten. And where? The pool is far from here."

"What do you care? A sandwich will not make you sink. Come on, we'll dive from the rocks: look how beautiful the sea is right here."

"No, open sea is not for me. I have always been scared of it, I feel at ease only when I swim in a closed space. I guess you'll laugh."

"No, why should I? But it's a pity, you miss out the current, the wild shiver of the drift. Well, let's finish our picnic: but, because you sabotaged my proposal, it's your turn to make coffee when we get back to base."

As time goes by, Mia has started to carefully study the old man, trying not to be noticed. She takes in his presence, so unexpected and kind, during the long hours they spend together at home, or walk around the island, running their little daily errands. They are both trapped in a parenthesis of time, a season in their lives that – they both vaguely realize – cannot last. As for Mia, she can't help wondering about this enigmatic gentleman. She observes him while he's busy smoking his pipe and reading one book after another of the ones he finds in the house, lying on the bed of the room he has taken, or sitting on the patch of the hill where they have started to grow a garden and where they sit almost every night drinking wine, waiting for something to blossom, admiring the sun sinking into the sea. And, while observing Martin, she feels growing inside a sensation that had long been unknown to her: a subtle, yet possi-

ble happiness, fleeting like smoke around them. Yet, at the same time, there's a feeling of obscure un-avoidability, like a fissure slowly becoming a crack. Once, in the dead of night, Mia heard him moaning in the room next door: a low, muffled sound. She sensed his attempt to keep it quiet and figured a ring of pain and discretion around him she did not know how to take down. She stood at the doorway in a nervous silence, until she heard Martin's breath getting back to normal, in his sleep. She went back to her bed and stared at the ceiling, unsure of what to do about that mystery that had started to lightly snore on the other side of the hallway. She's usually very open, almost savage in addressing people: but not this time, not with this intriguing, vulnerable person. So, their time together gently goes on. Their sharing the house, that sort of holiday together that has already been going on two weeks, reminded Mia of the red carriages of the underground in Hamburg that she often got on when she lived in that big cold city. She thinks back to the times when, because of the changes of lines, a couple of trains would travel together for a short distance in the same direction and two people would happen to be staring at each other from different wagons running parallel. They would find themselves very

close to one another, from one window to the other, through the glass. Then, with the same suddenness with which they met, the trains would part. Normally, nothing more than a quickly forgotten image would remain of the other passenger. Other times, these meetings would leave her with the feeling of an entirely different possible life, immediately lost into the distance.

“You, with all your meticulous rites and related paraphernalia. How on earth can you puff so much?”

Mia is making dinner and she is looking at Martin sitting at the table in front of her, busy at cleaning the mouthpiece with a pipe-cleaner, then gently pressing the tobacco into the bowl. The ratty tape recorder, found by the woman in the warehouse together with some old music tapes, wears out one of the four seasons of Vivaldi. The man interrupts his gesture, leaving the pipe in front of him.

“Don't tell me you are against it.”

“Not at all, I even smoke too, sometimes. Well, mostly spliffs: besides, I don't remember if I already told you, there's a nice American on the island,

Doc, as they call him here, he cultivates great grass somewhere in the mountains and he shares it very generously. One of these days we have to go visit him together, I'm sure you'll get along very well together. To come back to your smoke, I was only curious. Besides, I like the scent of the pipe: it smells like autumn woods, comfortable solitude, countryside kitchens: better you interrupt me now or I'll go ahead with a whole catalogue of stereotypes."

"Good, I was afraid I'd have to give up one of the last vices I have left, the one of drinking this poison being more similar to a slow suicide than a pleasure."

Happily, Martin gets up from his chair, takes the flask of wine from the table and empties it into the two glasses that are lying on the kitchen bar, next to the pot in which the water waits turbulently for some macaronis to dive in.

"In fact, this business of smoking and drinking is quite strange," Mia considers aloud while clicking her glass against Martin's. "Most people live as dutiful prisoners of polluted cities, regularly stuck among the traffic gloom, they eat unhealthy food full of chemicals, all this without any complaint. But if you dare light up a cigarette in a public place, they look at you as if you were a criminal who is endangering the whole planet's health."

Martin smiles. "Maybe there's a plot for that, but most of all it is a trick we play on ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"A casual philosopher I recently met, he had an interesting theory about the plot we all live in. He maintained that someone, something is always taking advantage of our inability to challenge the rules, therefore more rules are always set. It makes sense. Closed in our comfortable societies, we are scared about driving after drinking a glass of wine, to smoke a cigarette. I know there are health issues at stake here, but this is not the real point: my point is that all this tiny constant tension penetrates our daily actions, it soaks our will, and helps strengthen an established order. We are surprised by the fact that people endure undeserving and unfair life conditions without complaining: but, this ends up to be normal, no one can seriously think about rebelling when they already feel they are bravely breaking the law when they decide to allow themselves the luxury of a glass of wine, provided they have been duly approved by some *connaisseurs*. As for me, I don't know. Maybe there are no puppet masters at all, it's just a matter of a poisoned social homeostasis. But, even if there are some people who take an astute advantage of this mediocrity, so they, too, must be

mediocre, they, too, are consuming their own spir- its. And I don't care anymore about them." The ten- sion of Martin's voice went diffused in a cloud of smoke. "I don't care anymore about anything."

Mia takes the pipe that Martin has left on the table, takes a drag and lets the smoke flow out of her nose. She concentrates on the last concept she heard, gives a Machiavellian smile and gets up, resolved.

"Ok, you may be right, but I certainly do not want to have my dinner spoiled by someone else's mediocri- ty: my own mediocrity is enough. There we go, let's eat. And while you are at it, open another bottle of that poison. To hell with all this fancy wine tasting and ratings: no stars at all? Much better to simply get drunk and watch the real ones. Which is what we'll do tonight from our private astro-garden observato- ry, on the hill."

Today is Martin's turn to shop for food. He wanders around the town that has come out not far from the pier, studying its weak, mini- mal structure: four roads badly paved, one square, the church, the grocer's shop, another shop special- ized in dusty and faded beach items, its window

filled with rubber sandals and bottles of sunscreen waiting for the following summer.

Careful not to forget his German accent, Martin goes into the grocery, takes some bottles of wine from the shelf, pasta, bread, milk: that's it. He hasn't even crossed the road when the grocer and her daughter, both sitting behind the counter, begin to practice the universal art of tittle-tattle by entertaining as- sumptions about that strange kraut and that other young German woman who sometimes comes down to do the shopping. The mother thinks they are un- cle and niece, the daughter launches into less fami- ly-related, much more imprudent deductions.

Once back home, Martin is taken aback by the surprise that awaits him in the kitchen.

"Do you like it? I found it in that storage shed be- hind the house. I've chased away a couple of spiders that lived in it, taken it apart and cleaned the con- nections. It works. Come on, try it out, we'll see if you are as good as you boast about."

Martin contemplates the old electric keyboard: he had bought it in Palermo and brought it to the island as a

present for the tenth birthday of Briss' son, a summer of so many years ago. Since then he had forgotten it, and yet here it is again in all its splendor of plastic and colored buttons, more similar to the bridge of a spaceship for kids than to a real musical instrument.

The old man sits on the chair that Mia has placed before the keyboard. He takes a minor key, careful, a few repeated tunes that slowly widen and seep through Mia's gaze, now perfectly still. While he plays, Martin realizes that the tune is the first prelude of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*: he moves away from it, subtly overawed by the sense of definite fulfillment emanating from that source, to give way to a counterpointed improvisation originated from the earlier inversions, until it rotates around a dry and yet harmonious point, balancing between minor and major tunes. Martin's hands go back and forth on the keyboard, revolving around a melody that he suddenly realizes is *Monk's Point*, one of his favorite jazz themes. He takes up the standard, only to leave it shortly afterwards, its impression confused with the previous theme, until he comes up with something new, something that belongs only to him. Now the music slows down again, gets more reflective, then speeds up slightly to get into the space of a deep, absorbed harmony. Then, it all resolves into a pitch that

fills the room, stretching out into the surrounding space until it melts with silence.

Martin looks helpless, enchanted by the keyboard. Mia approaches him from behind his back: she realizes they are both shaking, she bends over him and hugs him carefully, as if afraid of breaking something fragile.

She kisses Martin's forehead, his nose, his lips. "Come, let's go to bed."

Mia and Martin sit on a rock, at the top of the volcano. The gaze lost in the deep blue sweep of the sea and the sky, everything around resounds with that dazzling combination of land and water, history and imagination that the maps call Mediterranean: but here, now, there is only the green fragrance of bushes and capers, the prickling of brackish air in the nose, a subtle wind that dries the sweat from the two bodies, strained from the climb, and the two hands clasped into one another. Behind them, in the ditch of the extinguished crater, ancient efforts were spent trying to cultivate a round patch of land. Now, with the only exception of a frame of marijuana plants nursed by Doc, the

area looks totally abandoned, bordering with a primeval nature again. A couple of wild asses look out from a little valley in the background, then they move away again, quietly.

Martin, his back to the crater, looks self-absorbed. Before setting out on this journey, not even a day would go by that he wouldn't read in the newspapers stories about fights and mourning on the other side of the sea, wars, conflicts, boat people trying to reach the rich coasts of Europe whatever the cost. He would read them absent-mindedly, lost in the demands of his job and the easy efforts of his previous life. Now he is physically closer to all these tragedies, separated only by a stripe of water: he still feels distant, however, removed from massacres and shipwrecks. He turns to look at Mia, quietly admiring her profile while she is focusing her gaze in the distance, then clasps her hand to catch her attention.

"Do you ever think about death?"

"Oh, death. I wasn't really pondering about it right now. Anyway, I find it a pretty overrated issue."

Baffled by the answer, Martin takes it as an improvised arrogance. "Death overrated? What's your opinion on life then?"

"Life is overrated too. Extremely overrated."

Martin lets go of the woman's hand and puts his chin on his own hand.

"So, what is really important to you?"

Mia thinks about it, concentrated.

"Continuity, I may say. Yes, I guess you could take that. You know, what remains in the passage between one state and another: like life and death, for example. The majority of people worry too much about their origins and where they are going in the near future, they do not seem to care about what's in between, of how it is all part of a bigger movement, where all this fretting about for no reason is nothing but friction. However, whereas the bottom, the purest part gets simply transformed. Yes, the Continuum: what resists against the world consumption and goes on, like an endless energy, this is what interests me the most."

Mia takes Martin's hand, she kisses the tips of his fingers, then jokingly and abruptly drops it.

"I wonder, have you taken me all the way up here to have an existentialist symposium? Come on, instead of looking at it from a distance, let's go down to the sea. Today is definitely worth a swim off the coast, and if you want to stay again by the shore, well, too bad for you."

Life is easy with Mia, and so is love: it is like entering a freshly painted room, full of sunlight. How long does he still have left to enjoy this light? Martin doesn't know, he doesn't ask. He is happy inhaling the white scent of paint, slowly wandering into the bright room.

“The first time we met, you told me you were here for someone. Who is he?”

The two have had breakfast on the terrace of the house and have walked the whole morning along a stretch of the coast looking for old, rusted pieces of iron, wrecks that the current brings to the shore and the rocks keep, fragments of things polished by the waves that Mia has taken to store in a little cave near the house. Now they sit on an open stretch of pebbles in front of the sea, Martin's head on Mia's lap: his voice muffled by a fold of her long skirt that has been blown by the wind. The girl strokes the man's bristly beard, she combs his grey ruffled hair and breathes the wind that blows from the open sea.

“Nowadays I'm here with you, that's enough. I don't want to talk about other issues at the moment.”

Martin takes her hand, which is lingering on his face. He doesn't say anything, closes his eyes lets the sound of the waves take care of wiping off the lingering question.

That same evening, after having witnessed the sunset together from their garden observatory, Martin and Mia come down from the hill behind the house to prepare dinner. An appetizing smell of roast fish pervades the room, mixing with notes of freshly cut parsley; a welcoming silence, suitable for keeping quiet, or for having a deep conversation, fills the space. Mia looks at the smoking pipe on the table and sips her glass of wine, then begins to talk.

“You asked me why I have come here. The truth is that I came here for my father.”

“Is he here?”

“He's on the shelf.”

Martin turns to look at the wall. Next to the sofa, beyond the mirror enclosed in his own heavy gold frame, he can only see a shelf bent under the weight

of various household furnishings. He doesn't understand.

"I have already told you my father was Italian. But I didn't tell you he was born in Linosa. He lived on the island until he was in his twenties, getting by as best he could. It was the Sixties, the years of the Italian Miracle: business, consumption, everything flourished. But not here, here everything kept still. Until now, I may say. Anyway, my father worked as a mason. He worked whenever he could, whenever there was something to be put up or to be taken down; in the remaining time he helped his brother, his sister and my grandmother, who had lost her husband when she was still young, to cultivate a small patch of land. You know, my dad built this house where we are staying now. He often told me about it, back in Germany. He told me about this big, beautiful house commissioned by a rich family from Palermo, a bunch of doctors and lawyers who used to spend their holidays here. This is the last house he built, then he left. He once told me that this building was one of the reasons why he went away: he couldn't bear the thought of having built such a place for people who would come here just on holiday, not even every year, while he and all his family, on the other hand, lived in a room smaller

than this kitchen. Well, I think there must also have been some money issue with his brother, my uncle, involved. They fought over a handful of rags, quarrels among scroungers. Poor people, as far as I have seen, can be as evil as rich people: besides, they have fewer things to share, which is probably why they often fight more furiously over them. Anyway, I don't know the exact story, Dad did not like to talk about it, but I know he was hurt: he never wanted anything to do with his family again. At least, not directly. He left the island in 1968 and never came back. Shortly after my father's departure, his sister got married and moved to Palermo, taking her mother with her. I don't know anything about my uncle, and to be honest, I don't really care.

So, my father left, one of the many Italians that at the time emigrated to Northern Europe. He traveled a bit before settling down in Germany: he went to Belgium first, to the coal mines, but he couldn't stand it for long, then he moved to the Netherlands to work in a preserves factory. Eventually, he went to Hamburg, to work in the port. At first he worked as a stevedore, but he soon became a mechanic. To cut a long story short, after a few years working as a mechanic on boats, he got a German woman pregnant. This lady, well, she ran away just a few months

after giving birth to me. She fled from that dark faced Italian man, I guess because he couldn't really promise her a luxurious life and probably hadn't offered her much comfort in the short time they'd spent together."

Mia's voice lowers a notch, but then gets back to its lively self.

"But he was funny, my father, he would always laugh. He knew how to repair things, he loved to cook, he played music: he was a maestro with his harmonica, always eager to entertain. You know, the harmonica is a very simple instrument, but the sound it makes can also be very deep: like a pocket organ, my father used to say. See, my mother mustn't have been very intelligent to leave such a man. In short, I grew up with my father, just the two of us in a small town near the Elba river, on the edge of the Nord-Ostsee-Kanal. Do you know it? It's a huge canal that cuts the Schleswig-Holstein region from side to side, connecting the two German seas. When I was little, my father, who had found a new job as a mechanic on one of the ferry boats that shuttled from one bank of the canal to the other, would sometimes take me with him during day work. I felt as if I was on the open sea: it was marvelous, every time. From the middle of the canal you couldn't see the banks, only

water. White, cloudy water there, like the sky. I really don't know how my father managed to get used to the North, to its clouds and flat lands, considering he came from here, a sunburnt sharp-pointed volcano island, lost in the middle of the Mediterranean. When it lightens up, however, everything on the canal becomes transparent, bright. You know, I think that any place can be beautiful. Beauty, it's just a matter of vision. Anyway, our life was pretty normal: we lived in a small flat in a town that was as tidy and neat as a Playmobil set, I grew up, went to school, Dad was proud of me. What else. Not that much, really: he worked, in his own way he enjoyed life. In the evenings he would often help his friend Sergio, another Italian migrant, with his pizza restaurant right in the main square of our town. Then, after closing, they would play harmonica and guitar together. For me the restaurant was a second home. I would work as a waitress, or study behind the counter, or spend the evening listening to my father and Sergio speaking. Two Southern men that after so many years spent away up in the North, lived in a sort of stateless condition. You know, it was strange: in Germany they thought like Italians, they only spoke Italian between them, but I'm sure that if they had gone back to Italy they would have

acted like Germans. I listened to their conversations, I spoke Italian too, and so, without much of an effort I found myself with this other language on my tongue. When I think about it, it is a bit like an inheritance, and, well, I think I have been much luckier than many other heiresses." Mia pauses briefly, absent-minded. "Maybe not, they weren't stateless, Dad and his friend kept their own country: it was their language. Anyway, among the many things my father talked about, he often mentioned Linosa, always with a mix of anger and nostalgia. He said he did not want to set foot on the island again, he never wanted to see such a backward place again. You could tell he was hurt, even though he did not want to show it. Consider that: he had never wanted to bring me here, to visit the island together. This is the first time I see it, now that I am with you. And so, time went by. After finishing high school I moved to Hamburg to go to university. I supported myself with occasional part time jobs, working as a waitress or as a model for painters. It was cool. You know, I started making my own life away from my father, and gradually went to see him less and less. Meanwhile, he carried on with his life as usual: he had his job, his friendship with Sergio, the restaurant, the music. I guess he also had a few women af-

ter my mother, but never a stable relationship. As a matter of fact, he ended up living alone, but I don't think he was too bothered by it." Mia pauses again. "But I should have visited him more often, it was wrong of me not to. Last year I went back home no more than two, three times: a couple of weekends, a very cold Christmas under the snow."

Mia remains silent without looking at Martin, takes the pipe abandoned on the table, puffs briefly, and starts again to recount.

"I think my father was happy in Germany, he made his own life. But, during his last few years, he started to speak about returning to Italy with a persistence I didn't know he had in him. He was about to retire, and he said he wanted to go back to the sun. What could I have said to him? If that was what he wanted, he should have gone for it. After so many years of hearing him damning the country he was born in, I was surprised by this desire to go back: it seemed as if something had surfaced from very deep down inside him, and Dad couldn't push it back under. A couple of months ago he called me late on a Friday night. He must have just come back from Sergio's pizzeria. I understood straight away that he was drunk because there was a sort of obliterating joy in his voice I had learnt to recognize when he had

had a few drinks. He told me he had finally decided, he wanted to go back to Linosa and buy that white house overlooking the sea, the one that he had built before leaving the island. I discounted it as a drunken fantasy. I mean, it was nonsense: nobody could have told him that the house was up for sale, what state it was in, who the owner was. But at the time he probably just needed to think that he could have done it. I never heard from him after that. Then, a few weeks went by, I went on with my life as usual. I had started to translate a new book, went out, closed a silly love affair, had good time with friends, carried on as usual. And then, you know, I can't explain it, but one day I felt I had to go back home, I really had to go and see my father. I got there around eleven in the morning, during the train journey I thought about what I could have prepared for lunch that would have made him happy: it was a Sunday. As soon as I opened the door I felt that something was wrong, a feeling of absence hung in the air, you could only hear the sound of the TV. When I called out to Dad, nobody answered. I kept calling him, I walked through the door and into the living room. I found him sitting on his armchair, in front of the television. He had died a few hours earlier, the doctors told me later, of a heart attack. He hadn't suf-

fered, he had died suddenly, probably in his sleep, they said. I hope that's how it was. I stood before him for I don't know how long. The TV broadcast images of an earthquake somewhere. You know, it was a surreal feeling: there was so much death and destruction happening on the screen, terrible images that kept on repeating, counts of the rising number of homeless or displaced people. But I couldn't feel anything, I stood motionless in front of just one dead person, and that was already too much for me. A whole country had been destroyed, thousands of people had died, but I was looking at my father, my only father, and the only death I could feel was his own. Maybe not even that. I only felt a void that paralyzed me, a sense of absence that swallowed me, and nothing else.

Then, there was the funeral, the paperwork, issues to be dealt with, checks, and discoveries." Mia clenches her hand into a fist, then lets it go slowly. "When I went to the bank to resolve my father's accounts, I found out that all the time he was in Germany he had been sending money back to his sister for his mother. And he carried on, even after my grandmother had died. Every month, until the end. I have never seen my aunt, I hardly knew she existed, and now I don't want to look for her. I

don't care: my father was my family, that's all. But this thing of sending money to his country, to his family, that shocked me. No one ever seems to remember or celebrate much the migrants, people like my father, who work for two countries, the one they went to and the one they left behind: they are twice invisible. Well, this is unfair. Anyway. Once, while we were watching together a documentary on funerary rites, my father had told me that when he died he wanted to be cremated. And, he didn't want any priests around. He wasn't religious at all, despite having taken all the catholic sacraments as a boy. I think that he thought this thing about cremation was more German style, more practical. Deep down, my father was above everything else a practical person. Practical and cheerful. So, I did as he wanted, and then I came here. You see, inside that metal cylinder on the shelf are his ashes: it's no longer important, I know he's not really here, but I wanted to bring him back to the island, to this house. After what he told me the last time we spoke, I thought it was the right thing to do."

Now Mia is quiet, the fingers playing with the rim of her glass, then she gets up all of a sudden, she stands in front of the big window in the kitchen, watching the night. The fish, meanwhile, has burnt to a crisp:

Mia smells the air and giggles. "I'm afraid tonight we'll not have our dinner. Better to find some fresh air. I'll go out for a walk."

Alone at home, sitting quietly, Martin considers the sea horizon out of the toilet window. He observes his naked legs, he notices they are leaner than he remembered – when was the last time he considered them? It was at the swimming pool, a life ago. Martin stretches his limbs to experience the feeble strength of the muscles, relaxing them after a short while. The relationship with Mia, together with the illness, have given the man an unprecedented feeling of his own body, the sentiment of an immediate presence – like the one he is now perceiving in this moment of privy concentration – he was not aware of. Better: it is a sensuality, Martin recognizes, anaesthetized along the dullness of his previous ordinary life, that simply resurged from a newborn urgency of life.

He stands up, flushes the toilet. With one of those memory drifts he had learned to trust notwithstanding their apparent incongruity, the concentrated falls of water within the bowl remind Martin of a French

journey he took with his wife and daughter, during a springtime of many years ago – Marina was still a teenager, maybe twelve or thirteen. It had been a quiet time, a short holiday by car through the Savoy Region where everything gently set right, even the usual coldness of Margherita relaxed into a cautious warmth, her body more relaxed and reachable than usual. And there, Martin recalls, while standing together in front of a tiny country waterfall, a sudden fondness forced him to embrace his wife and his daughter, the surrounding silence magnified by the sound of the leaping water. Something, he understands in a flash of ripeness, survived all the adamant unfamiliarity and misunderstandings that preceded and followed that moment, reaching him now again. After all, nothing gets completely lost, something always survives, connects with us, and outdoes us. Martin's eyes raise from the bowl to the outside throughout the window, once more, and an idea of a grandiose, liquid connection of everything suddenly captivates him. He imagines the tiny waters of the toilet, the negligible residues of his own body running together into the sea nearby, mixing with faraway waterfalls, the waste of whole continents, tears and streams. The old man beams. «Everything flows, everything blends into something different, something bigger

than us: that is good. I forgive everything, I hope to be forgiven. And, I don't care anymore about the remains of me. They'll just be something else, flowing, blooming again.».

When they go downtown together, one of the few places Martin and Mia like to go to is the turtle house. It is not far from the wharf, next to a big open space of beaten earth, once a football pitch, just in front of the black sand beach of Cala Pozzolana. Some years ago, the town council authorized a marine biologist to use the building – formerly the changing room for the soccer players – as a research center dedicated to the tortoises born on the island. Linosa is one of the most important egg laying sites for loggerhead sea turtles, one of the last places in the whole Mediterranean Sea where these ancient, mysterious creatures find a place to come into the world. For sure, judging by the neglected state of the center, one would never guess that.

The director of the center lives in Rome, he spends only the summer on the island. For the rest of the year there is another man who takes care of the turtle house and its activities, a slender middle aged

American: Doc, as everyone calls him on the island with a funny accent that twists the foreign word.

“In Italy the only stable thing seems to be instability”, Martin considered aloud one day last week, while watching his new friend fixing a scale with abundant scotch-tape, having been refused public funding for new equipment. Doc grinned, abandoned the scale and fetched a joint together with two cold beers. “Well, at least it compels you to be creative. So, let’s toast to instability, and its loyal servant: scotch-tape! Cheers.” And they clinked their bottles.

Today, when ‘the Germans’ – as Martin and Mia are known in town – come to visit him, Doc is treating an animal that a fisherman has found in his net, its head caught in a plastic bag. “They are very interesting beings, but very stupid too.” He explains while carefully handling the tortoise.

“Take this one. It’s the third time it has caught its head in a bag. Look at the tag on the carapace: I put it there more than five years ago. Man, they just don’t learn from their mistakes”.

“So, we are in good company.” Mia grumbles, and everybody laughs.

Doc leaves the turtle to rest in a pool and the three of them have a drink, sitting on the rusty chairs in

front of the building. Their look is the one of gentle, peaceful runaways: an old man with a white beard wearing flip-flops, blue shorts and a faded red t-shirt, a young woman wearing a vest and a checkered skirt made from a tablecloth, a tanned man, with long blond hair in a ponytail hanging over the back of an unlikely flowered tunic. Not far from them is a magnificent lava sand beach, waiting for the turtles who will come to lay eggs, as they always did for the last few thousands of years.

“The other day,” Martin says while admiring the panorama, “you told me how turtles, as soon as they are born, make their way through the sand towards the sea, and swim away. But what do they do then?”

Doc turns his head to Martin with a satisfied smile on his face, happy to delve into one of his favorite puzzles.

“Excellent question. Nobody knows. They are born, they swim, and, when they reach the strong currents of the continental shelf they simply disappear. Despite all the efforts made by research, we still don’t know where they go then, what they do. Eventually, after many years they come back to the coast to lay their eggs, sometimes to slip their head into a plastic bag.”

Doc pauses, his eyes vaguely scanning the sea horizon. “It seems as if the sea swallows them and protects them at the same time, hiding them from the

world. Somehow, when they return, it is as if wanting to complete a circle.”

“A mystery, a deep mystery,” Mia mocks with a dark voice, “that I leave you two clever boys to explore until dinner time. Today is my turn to cook: Martin, if you are not too tired from your mystical-biological investigation, try to hunt a decent bottle of wine from the shop, the ferry came yesterday and there may be some new supplies at the grocery. OK, I go. See you at the white house.”

Doc breaths in a puff of smoke, he passes the joint to Martin and turns back to look at the horizon before him.

“Ah, my friend, I really don’t know. It is too wide a question – even though, dealing with the sea, I’m supposed to be quite an expert of wide things. I think it must be typical of human nature, well, of nature itself, the need to find some origins.” Doc’s voice becomes more soft. “Take my case. I was born in a very cold place, a city always on the top chart of the snowiest US spots: Syracuse, don’t think you have ever heard of it. A few kilometers from Syracuse there are Ithaca, Rome, Athens. You know, I have often won-

dered about the Italians, the Greeks, those Mediterranean migrants who found themselves thereabouts. I mean, they lived a life that was totally unthinkable, back in their home country. Up to their knees in snow and loneliness, locked into brand new places with their history yet to be written. And, despite all this, they gave to those blank, cold spaces of their new lives some old names made of southern light, full of myths, the ones reminiscent of the greatest cities of all times – well, at least of the Occidental ones. Don’t think that was humour. Rather, it was a biological need, the attempt to keep origins alive in order to turn to them, to feel connected to a bigger sense of life through them. You want some real humour? That is what happened to me. All in all, I wanted to follow back the path of my family origins, my mother’s grandfather was from Sicily. So, after graduating with honors in economics, after a few years of an insanely well-paid finance job, I took a long vacation and came to Italy. And here am I. I never went back to the US, settling not that far away from grand-grandpa’s village, putting collars around stupid turtle’s necks, living in a shack. Where I’m happy.” Doc pauses, lost in his thoughts. “Anyway, to get back to what you said, names are important because they give away meanings, especially if we are the ones who give them a meaning. Look, economists like to

talk about path dependency, but it's only an academic term to say that history is important, and that for better or worse it influences us. What's interesting, to me, is that we do trace our own path with some dim reminiscences of the ones that put us at the starting line, and somehow become dependent upon it."

Doc stops talking, takes the joint Martin is passing to him, and studies the relaxed profile of the old man.

"My friend, how is it going with your troubles? You need more weed for keeping pain under control? Tomorrow I may go to the garden crater: just in case."

Martin swaps the joint to Doctor, his eyes half-shut. "I'm fine, thank you, these last days have been calm. Sometimes I even think that the disease lost my traces along the road, together with my past." Both men smile, then Doc stands up.

"Hey, speaking of path dependency, from here to the white house it's a pretty long walk, and I'm hungry. Let's go."

Mia comes back from one of her explorations to the big storage room built into a cave behind the house, Martin sits in front of the keyboard, absent-minded, following an improvisation

which is mixing John Coltrane with Erik Satie. He hears Mia's footsteps echoing in the courtyard, lifts his hands off the keys leaving the last notes scattered around the kitchen, and when he turns around, he sees her standing in the door frame, enlightened by the sun outside.

The old man is moved by the light beauty of that domestic moment, and cannot refrain from giving a voice to his thoughts. "For a long time I have lived in a mansion full of expensive things. I have left everything behind, I don't miss anything. Well, I miss Argo, my dog, but he has also probably left after my departure, and gone somewhere by himself. I don't regret anything, I only wish I had left sooner. Now I realize that all I really need are these four walls, a keyboard to play, and you to come home to me."

Mia gets close to him while he is still sitting, then gives him a soft slap on his head. "I'm truly flattered. Despite the plagiarism."

"What plagiarism?"

"Weren't you quoting Reiser?"

"I don't even know who this gentleman is."

"Well, in that case you deserve an instant concert: dedicated to Rio Reiser, my favorite German singer, and the author of a song that says exactly what you have just told me. Come on, give me the piano.

You're not the only one who can play this toy."

Mia sits in front of the keyboard, starts carefully with a major tune, fits in another, less confident one, but then she gets more sure of herself and begins to sing with a deep, dark voice.

*Vier Wände, meine vier Wände,  
ich brauch meine vier Wände für mich.  
Eine Wand für mein Klavier,  
eine Wand für ein Bild von dir,  
eine Wand für eine Tür,  
sonst kommst Du ja nicht zu mir\*.*

She turns around and finds Martin, leaning on the door jamb, silently staring at her, his eyes shining. She goes towards him, hugs him and kisses him lengthily.

"Today in the cave I found the last piece I was searching for, now there's everything I need. Do you want to build something together?"

"Sure, what am I supposed to do?"

"Let's go up to the garden, I'll show you there."

---

\* *Four walls, my four walls, / I need my four walls to myself. / A wall for my piano, / a wall for your portrait, / a wall for the door, / without which you couldn't come to me.*

The two have been working for a few hours on top of the hill behind the house around a log, the remainder of an olive tree struck by lightning a long time ago, polished by the time and the wind. The slow noise of the sea and the beginning of sunset keep the couple company while they are busy building their fantastic invention: a totem, a sculpture, maybe both. Slowly, the wooden corpse has become a mechanical tree on which a fantastic array of iron pieces has grown: a rusty trowel, the tip of a shovel, a kitchen knife, cogwheels of every size.

Mia, her hands planted on her hips, looks pleased at the result, then slips a hand in one of the skirt's pockets. She takes out a harmonica, climbs to the top of the tree and sticks it in a crack in the wood with the reeds facing out and positioned, like a small branch that has grown from the top. When she comes back down, she turns around to take a final look at their work, tells Martin to wait there, and she goes down to the kitchen.

The old man sits on a gentle dip of the ground. He stares at the composition with a calm sense of beauty: all of a sudden, he feels part of a larger composition,

as if the assembled tree were projecting, together with its shadow, the imagine of a possibility of an unexpected harmony established between the endless range of things and spirits, all in silent agreement.

Mia comes back with a bottle of wine and two glasses between her fingers, and under her arm the metal urn that was on the shelf. Martin takes the bottle and glasses, he doesn't say anything. Mia, then, slowly pours the content of the urn into a shallow pit they have dug at the foot of the tree. She makes sure the ashes don't fly away, she adds some fresh soil, and in that still soft patch places a small plant of laurel oak. Silently, she presses more soil around it, arranges the shrub so it will stay where it is. She pours water from an old tin bucket that she has put aside, presses the soil again with her foot, and moves a few steps away. "We are a bit out of season for transplants, but I'm sure it will make it. It's a plant that can stand up to anything; it will be fine here, by the sea. You know, my father loved to use it for cooking."

Mia turns around, her face furrowed by quiet tears. She takes the bottle, opens it and pours the first gush on the ground at the foot of the laurel, then fills the two glasses Martin holds in silence.

"Let's drink now. To memory, and to what continues."

How do stones come into being, how can they set off, how do they start moving until they roll to the place where we then find them? His body lying on the beach, his head resting on a rock, Martin shares his afternoon with the regular movements of the sea and the equally consistent movements of another old man, the owner of a small house not far from the white house. Since the morning, the neighbor has been busy putting up a dry wall with the bigger stones he has found on the upturned ground, around a small garden patch sown with lentils. As for Martin, around him, he is surrounded by endless pebbles smoothed by water, similar to motionless high waves. In the past few days he has often admired their minimal uniqueness, sealed by veins left by eruptions and glaciations: but now his thought is rather focused on the slow, constant, upward construction the neighbor is making. The rugged surface of the rocks and the industrious hug around the garden patch remind him, with a sudden pang, of the mighty, remote circle of mountains around Turin, up north. Often on Saturdays Briss and he used to go on long alpine hikes. Once, he remembers, short of breath on a steep slope, they talked about whether it was better

to live by the sea or the mountain. Still today Martin cannot make up his mind. «They have opposite direction, pointing either upwards or downwards. At the end of the day, it is always a matter of depth, the one we better correspond with.»

Martin turns to look at the endless water horizon before him, he stretches his arms behind his head, and gets up without haste. He bends over, picks up a pebble, the one he finds the most beautiful: he will take to Mia, to carry on with the ongoing joke he likes to make about a jeweler's shop that has opened on the island, of which he alone knows the address, specializing in precious stones.

He slips the treasure in his trousers pocket: it is a small white stone, round and smooth like an egg with a subtle grey line crossing its surface, the colors refreshed and enlightened by a wave that came shortly beforehand to wash it on the sand. «Humans, we too need a fresh wave to brighten up. And then, to roll away» Martin breathes in the brackish air, and sets off whistling.

«What is this bliss, this predatory happiness, this expanding liberty from all

constraints of time and space. So fun, to discover that the perspective of death gives perspectives to life, to the moment. Being just here, everywhere always : *lirios*, sailor. The night, the fire dancing, dancing in it. It's not just being wasted, it's the move all around, the dance of everything. And I'm in it. I'm it.»

The morning is cool, from the sea comes a subtle wind that clears out the sun: May has just made its mild entrance on the calendar's scene. As for Martin, he finds himself in town, at the turtle house.

“Well, my friend, the dinner turned out to be pretty wild. That was cool. You, any hangover?”

Martin smiles with a mixed feeling of shame and childish happiness in dealing with an answer to Doc's question, until a Spanish word, very apt to the site and the occasion, comes to his mind from a faraway night talk in the watchmaking atelier of Dante: *resaca*, backwash. He has been chatting with Turtle Man, as Mia calls their American friend, for a few minutes, quietly pondering over the rip-tide along the beach, when, on the horizon line, a boat appears. The old man stares at it for the time it

takes to get confused and startled, but then his eyes focus on the image of a tender without sails that proceeds at a modest speed. Martin and Doc share a look, then, without saying a word they walk at a pretty fast pace towards the pier where the boat has already moored and a multitude of people are getting off: sixty, seventy people at least. It is difficult to imagine that they have all traveled in such a confined space, but the moment's excitement does not allow for calculations. The last passenger, a pregnant woman, has just gotten off, when a carabinieri, one of the few service persons on patrol on the island, arrives. He speaks on his mobile phone and at the same time gestures to the few other local people nearby, as if wanting to give the impression of supervising some kind of action. As for the passengers of the boat, they remain on the pier exhausted, finally still after days of rough travel. A tired smell of sweat and saltiness hangs on the square, opposing a slight resistance to the breeze that is blowing from the open sea.

A boy takes a step forward and moves away from the rest of the group. He speaks in a slow but flawless Italian, says there is a person who needs medical assistance, he probably has a broken arm, something must be done. The carabinieri, worried about this

last complication, asks Doc to take these two people with him to the turtle house. Martin follows the little group.

"See," says Doc when they reach the hut, "in this European Union outpost, this last beach of the First World, there is no hospital, not even an emergency room. When someone gets hurt, we need to take them to the nearest island, bigger and better equipped, hoping the sea will not be rough. But at my center I have an x-ray machine: I use it for turtles and, when needed, for Christians as well, as they call people around here. Or for a poor Christ like this one here."

While Doc is busy taking an x-ray of the wounded boy's arm, who moans in Arabic, Martin sits in the small office of the center, with the one who spoke earlier on the pier.

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm from Libya, but now I have set off from Tunisia. I left Benghazi at the beginning of March."

Martin looks at the boy before him. His thin body is squeezed into a pair of jeans and a jacket soaked in water, under his black hair a pair of dark eyes moves restlessly around the room; on his forehead the journey has drawn reefs of salt, thin white branches that run around his eyes.

“Stay here, I’ll fetch you some dry clothes and something warm to eat.”

Martin comes back a few minutes later with a towel, a pair of trousers and a t-shirt that he has found in Doc’s wardrobe. He lets the boy get dry and dressed, then returns with two cups of coffee and a packet of biscuits.

“You were right, your friend’s arm is broken. How did you know?”

“I am studying medicine. Third year.” The young man pauses. “Or at least I was. Now, we will see.”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t properly introduced myself. My name is Martin.”

“Rashid, pleased to meet you.”

“Rashid, you speak a fluent Italian. How did you learn it? Watching Italian TV in Libya?”

The young man smiles. “No, I learned it at home: my whole family speaks it well. My grandfather used to say that foreign languages are very important, especially those of the invaders. So, even when Italian occupation ended, after the Second World War, he always insisted we spoke the language at home for a whole day each week.” Rashid chooses his words with care, like an amateur wandering in a gallery of precious objects.

“When he was young, my grandfather worked as a

waiter for a fascist chief in Benghazi. When the boss ran away, leaving his house behind, my grandfather took all his books. A whole wall full of books, almost all literary works. Grandpa carried them in a wheelbarrow back and forth, through the insurgent city, for an entire day. Since then, reading and speaking Italian has become a sort of family tradition: I hope this knowledge will come in handy now. I’d really like to stay in Italy.”

Doc has just entered. “It’s possible, we’ll just have to see what they will do with these newcomers. They usually sort out immigrants from Libya in the various Italian regions, provided they can get the status of refugees. Do you know anyone in Italy?”

Rashid looks worried. “Nobody.”

Doc leaves the room again. “I’m going to put your friend’s arm in an emergency cast. If I need help I’ll call you.”

Martin nods. “We’ll come straight away.” The old man turns to look at Rashid again, mesmerized by his confidence in himself: but he is still a boy, after all.

“Why do you want to stay in Italy? It’s a country of troubles. Opportunities grow elsewhere.”

Rashid laughs bitterly. “I’m sorry, but it is evident you’ve never tried to live in Libya. Anyway. I like Italy, I like its culture. And, after all, it is a Medi-

terranean country. We share a sea, we can't be that different!"

Martin smiles. "Look, I don't think I can personally help you much, but I'll give you the address of a man, try to get in touch with him." He takes a piece of paper and a pen from Doc's desk, writes some lines, halting from time to time to search for the right word. Finally, he hands the folded piece of paper to Rashid.

"He's a friend of mine in Turin, his name is Dante. Go find him and give him this message. And this." Martin takes off his watch and hands it to the boy. "Give him this watch and tell him that Bill Evans' lawyer sent you, he will understand. I wrote him that he should buy the watch from you at the same price I paid for it: I'm sure he will give you the money. Take it as the goodwill for your new life. With my truly best wishes."

Rashid holds the present in his hands, he looks at it and then at Martin with a mix of surprise and happiness he cannot control.

"May God bless you!" Is all the boy can say, and embraces the old man. Martin shines: "I doubt God will waste his time on me. Right now he is probably too busy making things play some music, entertaining the crowds."

The two men stand on the doorstep, they shake hands when the carabinieri reaches them.

"Good morning gentlemen. We're just about to organize the transportation of the immigrants. I have to take the two boys here on consignment and transfer them with the others to the shelter in Lampedusa. Departure is immediate."

The day has just begun, the light on the island is still half-asleep when Martin wakes up. He lies next to Mia, on the big bed in the room they have been sharing for a couple of weeks; before slipping out of the sheets he keeps still for a few moments while listening to her breath, regular like a minimal breeze, its sound merging with the voice of the sea waves coming from the beach near the house.

The old man rises lightly and walks to the kitchen. An ultramarine air comes in through the open windows, bringing with it an impression of summer, gently struggling with the intense smell of the coffee Martin is brewing. While he waits for his breakfast, he runs a finger along the spines of the books that Briss has left on the shelves. He randomly

picks one, a collection of Pablo Neruda's works, and feels vaguely disappointed. Standing in front of the bookshelves, Martin remembers a disagreement he and Briss once had on the subject: the old friend was a fervent admirer of Neruda, while Martin disliked that style, too ardent for him. Again, he thinks, it was probably a matter of his own Northern attitude, as Briss recalled during their last encounter; but now, after all that has happened, maybe he may be able to feel something different through the words. He browses the book, without looking for anything in particular, until he comes across a page of verses underlined in pencil. Martin sits at the table, fills and lights his pipe. He reads:

*Quiero que vivas mientras yo, dormido, te espero,  
quiero que tus oídos sigan oyendo el viento,  
que huelas el aroma del mar que amamos juntos  
y que sigas pisando la arena que pisamos.  
Quiero que lo que amo siga vivo  
y a ti te amé y canté sobre todas las cosas,  
por eso sigue tú floreciendo, florida.\**

---

*\* I want you to live while I, asleep, await you, / I want your ears to go on hearing the wind, / I want you to smell the sea's aroma we loved so together, / and to go on walking the sands we walked. / I want what I love to go on living. / And you, whom I loved and sung above all else, / for all that, flourish again, my flower.*

He closes the book and takes a deep breath. «See, Briss was right. One can only like such a poem when feeling warm passions. Maybe this is why I like it now.» Martin pauses, intimidated by his own confession, «Well, I'll read it to Mia later.»

He puts the open book down on the table next to the pipe, gets up to pour the coffee into his cup, goes for a swim.

Martin's first intention is to go to the little natural pool past the street's bend. A brief swim in his quiet pond, then straight back home. But today is too bright, too radiant to stay in so confined space: eventually, he sets for the open sea. He changes direction and walks to the cove where he knows he will find a good opening through the rocks to get into the water. Standing on the rocks, in front of the waves of light coming from the sea, Martin takes deep breaths of salty air, and hugs himself. As soon as he feels the impression that he is thinner than usual, he lets go. He looks around, there is no one in sight. Reassured, he undresses until he is completely naked, leaving the little pile of clothes on a rock. Then, he dives into the water. The sharp cold feeling of the water surrounds him and

makes him feel present. Martin swims away from the shore with a series of confident strokes. As it occurred to him many times back at the swimming pool in Turin, he just needs that simple, regular movement to see his thoughts quickly melt away behind himself, to start flowing until his whole presence and perception become one with the water, making the body feel lighter in its forward movement. A light current helps him forward, supporting him and at the same time pushing him further off the coast. Martin leans on it, stops swimming and turns on his back to enjoy the view of the island, now a few hundred meters away, and of the blue sky above him. He is filled with a renewed calmness that comes from inside him and at the same time surrounds him: he closes his eyes, pacified.

An acid wave of pain hits him suddenly, violently. When he opens his eyes he finds them already full of water, as if the throe had pulled him down to the seabed, like a weight. He tries to get back afloat, but at the same time, following his instincts, he hugs himself so as to protect his body from the attack that comes from within, from inside himself. Short of breath, he tries to resist the sea and the pain, a feeling of instant desperation running through him. He keeps afloat just long enough to feel the pain still there. The shock has gone, and his eyes open to a shade of blue he can no

longer distinguish as to sea or sky. Then, he decides. He uses his remaining strength to push himself down, he no longer holds his breath: rather, he swims with his mouth open, towards the depth. When the water inside his body has won the battle against air, not even the suffocating grasp, that he found unbearable just a few moments earlier, can take his mind off the moment. A powerful sensation of aerial verticality pervades him, he can no longer discern whether he is moving upwards or downwards. Fast, constant lights cross the solid blue in which he now finds himself: they are fragments of lines that connect before his eyes into a magnificent, mysterious drawing. He abandons himself to the alchemy of shapes and colors, with an unprecedented feeling of calm and comfort. The flashes gather together in a long, diaphanous form before his eyes, around his body, shaping the hull of a boat sailing at night. A music, the distant voice of all the previous rumors dissolving harmonically into the present, resounds crescendo. Then, in that supreme combination, hosted by the sheltered quiet of his boat, the man sees lines and sounds shaping into his name, his only true name, made of his entire life. And at the instant he knows it, he pronounces it, he is it: he becomes the air that makes the word, the water, the light of the darkness, an endless energy unafraid to flow. Again.



Days have followed nights, weeks have turned into months. Mia sits on top of the hill above the white house, alone. She clenches the pipe in her teeth, a thin cloud of smoke wraps around her. The sun is about to dive into the sea, as it does every day. A strong wind cools the end of summer air, blowing a chord through the little harmonica on top of the mechanical tree behind the woman. The notes are just hinted at, they slip unnoticed between Mia's thoughts, the scent of tobacco, the green perfume of the laurel patch not far from the deck chair. Soon, autumn will come, then winter will come, a baby will come. Mia puts the pipe out and places it on the ground next to a book she has just stopped reading. She rests her hands on her bosom everyday more stretched, dressed with a loose flowery dress. Tonight, as usual, the sea has welcomed the last beam of the sun, the eternal diver: it will keep its light and cherish it in its bed throughout the night, until the next day, when it will hand it back to the world. Darkness descends. Mia notices the reflections of the stars on the waves, then raises her gaze to picture the constellations that are taking shape above her. She smiles, grateful for that moment, she doesn't need anything else. To-

morrow, she will think about the future tomorrow. Now she is here, peaceful, and she lets things run their course, lets them follow the order in which occasions present themselves, lets them keep on happening. In fine, the old man already thought it too: in order to blossom, all you need is just time and space to be in tune. And that is all.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

All the characters mentioned in the book are fictional,  
except for Ego Bianchi (1914-1957).  
The picture reproduced in the first pages of this volume  
belongs to the painter's astral ship series,  
possibly being his very last painting.

The author wishes to thank the amicable readers  
who helped him in reviewing the text.

This novella is dedicated  
to the loving memory of Adolfo Presno Alvarez,  
and the living energy of Fedro Arnaudo Presno.

*Al continuo.*

## **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

This book was published by Andante, an independent publishing house established in Rome, Italy.

The text was set in Constantia, printed and bound by Pressup S.r.l., Nepi, Italy.

The book cover was based on image no. 1 of US patent S261910A (Decoy, 1882).

All rights reserved.



«What is this bliss, this predatory happiness,  
 this expanding liberty from all constraints  
 of time and space. So fun, to discover  
 that the perspective of death  
 gives perspectives to life, to the moment.  
 Being just here, everywhere always:  
 linosa, sailon.»

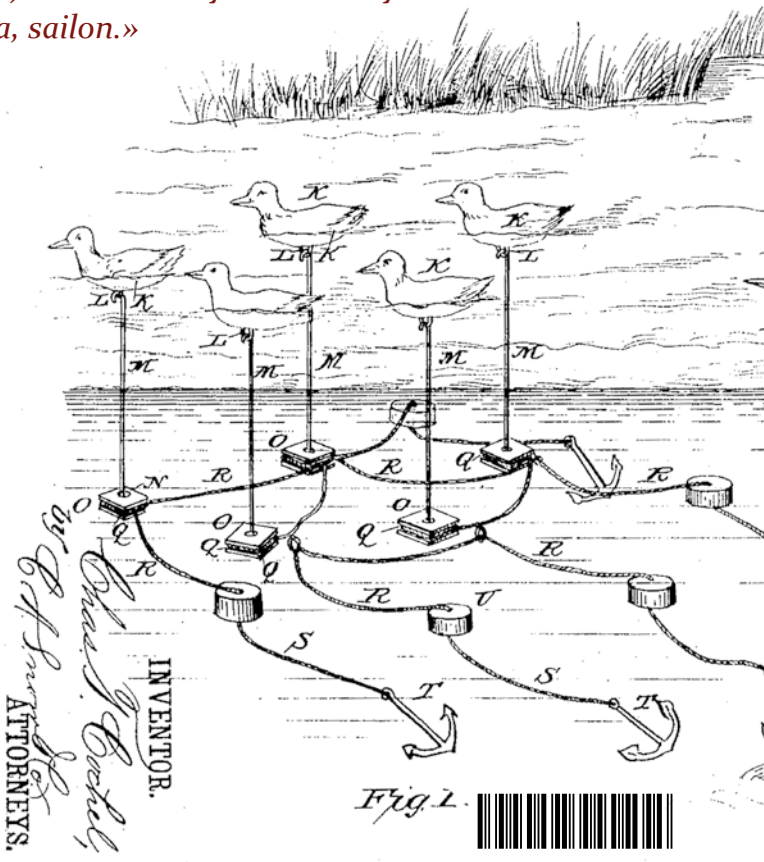


Fig. 1.

