**Just an ordinary man**

*"Ordinary men and women brutalised and murdered Jews out of ideological conviction and free choice, without psychological or social pressure."*

Christopher R. Browning

Chapter 1

The Expulsion

That day, just months ago, I remember only two things: my wife throwing me out, and the cold.

I had rented out my bachelor flat and walked around the city all night. I didn't want to go to a hotel, the idea of facing the loneliness of an anonymous room terrified me.

At dawn I went to the mammoth railway station of Genoa Brignole, located in what is perhaps the largest square in Italy: I sat in the large lobby next to a clochard in one of the two long rows of seats joined together and finally fell asleep.

In my sleep I felt cold on my feet: although I was wearing Timberland boots they were freezing cold. I had no socks, I couldn't stand them.

The British military jacket, on the other hand, kept me warm.

A few hours later I woke up, went to the toilet and came home; my wife, a primary school teacher, had gone to work.

I wandered from one room to another. The light-coloured, Nordic-style furniture was solid wood, perhaps a little heavy but certainly very elegant. Mafalda, I cannot deny it, had refined taste. Her style of dress was elegant, sober, and practical. Her ankle-length wedding dress wasn't white, but a pale green chiffon, subtly patterned, and designed by Giorgio Armani of Piacenza, one of Italy's richest men with an income of eight billion.

A swimmer since childhood, she now resembles Federica Pellegrini. She's the reason I love the gym. Neither of us had any interest in competitive sport.

"Armani dresses ladies, others dress sluts, and you Mariotto, who would have thought it, you married a very classy woman. She is taller than you, has two gorgeous long legs and her beautiful head contains a thinking brain... Her."

This brief description of the young bride was made by Cettina at the table, during the refreshment of our wedding, my consort's best friend. Her scornful tone insinuated that I was no match for Mafalda, in every sense.

The memory made me smile as I closed the second trolley with my belongings.

This insignificant man, a few days before the wedding, now tired from wedding shopping, left Mafi at his home and took the sensual Cettina, our experienced counsellor, back to her abode.

"Mariottino, come to my garage, I need to talk to you.”

He slipped his hand into his handbag and activated the electronic badge. I parked my beige Panda next to his red Mini Minor.

I was exhausted and wanted to return to Mafi with whom I was living.

"Well Cettina, tell me."

I could smell the strong odour of her body, which she accompanied with the penetrating *J'adore* by Christian Dior. In contrast to Mafalda, she was short in stature and looked very much like the actress Gina Lollobrigida: undoubtedly she was very erotic.

"Mariotto, why deny it, we are very attracted to each other. We always have been. I've noticed you, you know, when you glare at me. We make love."

I couldn't look her in the eye. I clung to the steering wheel like a life preserver. She had parted her legs, and I could see her red lace panties. I felt my face light up. I was very excited, but, I swear, I was not sexually aroused. My neck turned on its side hurt.

"Cettina, you embarrass me. I love Mafalda, always have."

"And she loves you?"

"I'm not Raoul Bova and I'm not rich either. But I think she loves me too."

"You grew up together, he loves you, but love is something else. The truth is that you do love very well. It's all there. He told me."

I tried to breathe normally. I looked at the white knuckles of my hands on the steering wheel and in a choked voice I shouted.

'Get down. Get down. Now."

My eyes felt glassy, glazed over. I was very scared. I was afraid of myself. I was trembling, I was upset. I felt an uncontrollable fury.

Cettina looked at me, rushed out of the car and ran to her house.

An hour later the phone shook me out of my stupor.

"Mariotto, what's going on, why haven't you arrived, where are you? Hello, can you hear me? Mariotto!"

I interrupted the memories, left the flat and before calling the taxi I put the house keys in the mailbox and, I don't know why, I kept a second old bundle that had been sitting in one of the two trolleys for a few years. That was a mistake, and I paid dearly for it.

The taxi took me back to the Genoa Brignole station, I headed for the luggage depot which had been contracted out to a courier company that also provides charging for digital devices. This is at the beginning of the long corridor on the right: that's where I left the two suitcases, put my mobile phone, iPad and PC on charge and went out.

I walked into the Giunti bookstore across the street, took a quick look at the shelves full of books and saw one displayed at the checkout.

"Give me that please."

I walked out of the shop, took a few steps and sat down again next to the clochard who was still sleeping (but how long do clochards sleep?). A sharp smell of urine crept into my lungs but I ignored it.

I pulled the book out of the paper bag and looked at what I had bought. It was an essay by the American historian Christopher R. Browning *Common Men - German Police and the 'Final Solution' in Poland*.

That reading during the weeks I spent in the station disturbed and perhaps changed me.

I placed the book on my lap and looked at the travellers.

The swirl of memories of my life mixed with images of Mafi. Sometimes I would stare at women who looked like her.

I have to concentrate to feel ready to return to the work I love. I must go on living. I repeated this inside me, like a mantra.

Since I had chosen that place as my home for a while, I went to the clerk to pack my book and get some things, I asked him if there was any problem with my luggage; he, a smart, pleasant, grizzled guy in his fifties, reassured me, scrutinised me and did:

"If I may, I would add that during the opening he can come as often as he wants. He can take toiletries and go to the toilet. I don't think he has a problem paying one euro."

"I... I mean, my wife left me. Can you tell?"

"Yes. Mine too. But I am luckier, I sleep in the back room, in my house the judge left my wife and daughter. My name is Ronaldo."

"I, Mario, or rather Mariotto. Goodbye. See you, I don't want to open the floodgates of tears."

I walked along the corridor past the nine tracks plus the trunk for access to the trains that are on the upper floor, climbed a ramp and reached the extra track that is the terminus of the metro.

I did not need to buy a ticket, I had an annual subscription.

I get off at the first stop, Piazza De Ferrari, the heart of the city and the most beautiful square. From there, behind the Doge's Palace, Italy's largest historical centre begins.

In that maze of ancient alleys, now a pedestrian zone and with most of the shops closed, in a ruined aristocratic building, in 1985, I was born; with my mother we were one of eighteen squatter families.

Life goes on and I want to live; however, I do not have the courage to die.

The woman who was the only reason for my life has left me and I have to get over it. I must try to think about her as little as I can and get used to living without her.

Palazzo Ademaschi, where I was born, is on Via della Maddalena, which is parallel to Via Garibaldi, the most beautiful 16th-century street in Genoa.

In that century it was called Strada Maggiore, and to build it they had razed dozens of hovels to the ground, which were replaced with grand palaces that still exist today. But the real purpose was to divide the Genoa of the time, the city that worked, produced and prospered with its enterprises in Europe, Asia and even America.

Above all, to this day it ghettoises the red-light district of Maddalena from the upper district of Castelletto where the upper middle class was settling.

The nobility, starting with the Dorias, the Grimaldis, the Brignole Sale, the Podestas, the Pallavicinis and many others had settled in the Strada Maggiore and their luxurious palaces with lush gardens had also become five-star hotels ante litteram. Nobles, high prelates, Italian and foreign dignitaries were hosted in the Palazzi dei Rolli, i.e. in the residences that were part of the lists of places entitled to hospitality.

In primary schools, I was known as the noble Mario De Rossi scion of the Ademaschi family: this is how my desk-mate, Mafalda Schiappacasse, described me. She knew that my family, namely my mother, Anna Mondolfi, and I, had been living illegally in the Ademaschi Palace, which had been damaged since the last war.

My surname is Rossi because my mother's cousin who was very fond of her, Giulio Rossi, wanted to give me paternity even though he was not the biological father.

In other times, people like me, without a father, were registered at the registry office and on the identity card as children of NN, nescio nomen, father unknown.

Chapter 2

Visits

"Sir, sir, sorry. Police, sorry to bother you, I need to ask you some questions. Can you hear me, do you understand?"

I open my eyes and look around the station concourse.

"Yes, I understand. What's going on?"

"The man lying on the ground is dead, he was sitting next to her. Did you know him?"

"What, like... No I don't know him. I thought he was asleep. Can I go?"

"Yes sir. But first you have to give me your name and address, a statement from you might be helpful."

"My name is Mario Rossi, I live in Via Albaro, here in Genoa, here is my electronic card."

"Thank you Mr. Rossi. You live in Albaro I see. Don't worry, ours is a routine operation. He is a distinguished person. Ah here, the magistrate, the coroner and the ambulance are coming. That's enough for me. You can leave if you like. I have recorded his data."

"Do I have to answer to the lady magistrate as well?"

She looked at me as if she knew me.

"Not necessary, give me your phone number if you haven't already left it with the commissioner."

I gave it to her and looked at her, I thought I knew her from somewhere but at the same time I felt it was just an impression. I turned away.

Later, Ronaldo, the baggage room attendant, while I was in the back putting three towels, two bars of soap and the soap dish in the trolley, explained to me that some kids joking among themselves had bumped into the dead homeless man sitting next to me and he had fallen to the ground. The coroner said he had already been dead for several hours.

"Every now and then it happens that with the cold some of them die here in the station."

"Ronaldo, why are you staring at me, it won't happen to me. I'm young and gymnastic. I think I'll only live here for a while, I have to tidy up. Besides, as a boy I already lived in a flowerbed in Martinez Square. Since then my life has taken a turn.

Besides, I have an income. It's just that I have my own way of reacting to life's blows. Maybe, inside, I am a stray."

"Mariotto, you loved your wife very much, didn't you?"

"Yes. And I don't want to talk about it, is that clear?"

"Excuse me, someone came into the shop. By the way, beyond the truncated track is a small shed, they used to use it to put tools in, now it's disused. You can safely hang your laundry there."

"Thank you, I will use it at night when there are very few people. In the toilet just opposite the sink is one of the five toilets. I slip on my rubber slippers, dip my towel in the water and sponge myself from hair to toe. I have an extraordinary spirit of adaptation."

"Excuse me, I'm going to serve. Take your time."

"Done. Is it done?"

"Yes, thank you. Now I'm going back to the carruggi, that's where I grew up. See you. Do you know the pigeons?"

"The pigeons, buth I don't know, why?"

"They are monogamous and faithful for life. I am like that. See you."

"Goodbye, Mariotto."

But I did not go into the alleys. I took the bus and went to Via Albaro. Mafi was at school but to be on the safe side I looked at the balcony of the beautiful Art Nouveau building. The shutter was closed. He would close it even if he had to go and buy milk. The flat is on the corner on the top floor, it has two balconies, one in the kitchen on Via Albaro, the other in the living room on a garden. It is the most beautiful apartment in the building.

I am proud of it. His father gave it to him when we got married. I designed the renovation. I had a wall knocked down to create a beautiful living room. I converted a pantry into a second bathroom with a shower, and turned a small alcove by the entrance into a convenient pantry. The walls that were whitewashed gave light and space. I also had other ideas.

In short, the two pigeons lived in a very comfortable hole. However, maybe Mafi was a blackbird. Now that I think of it, on that day, 29 January 2023, after dinner, she forced me to give her freedom. It was the first of the three blackbird days. There was a strong wind and it was bitterly cold.

I open the front door and head straight for the bedroom.

I opened his wardrobe and inhaled deeply, a sour lemon fragrance together with the smell of his skin made my heart fibrillate. I knew that perfume: it was Armani's *Acqua di gioia.* How many packs I bought on Amazon. I would get ten of them at a time, hide them in the box and then on every anniversary, or any other occasion, I would hand her a packet with my best smile and loving gaze.

I stroll through the rooms and relive. Why do I use this verb? Because I do not remember unpleasant, unpleasant things. No, far from it. They were all pleasant events, but now they made me suffer, so they were unpleasant.

Even in primary school I loved her, or not. I definitely desired her. The sex drive we have from birth. So do erections, even if they are barely visible. Mothers know it well, even if they pretend not to notice.

She was taller than me even then, yet I, being born in June, was four months older.

We both attended the school in Piazza Palermo. My best friend's father took me there, who for his own reasons wanted his son to study there. That was the first year, then father mother and son died in a car accident on the motorway. From second grade I went there alone by bus. Rather than change schools I would have got myself killed.

The alleys and Mafalda without his knowledge made me a strong man.

I am only 175 cm tall, which is average in stature, and I am muscular.

I always knew I wasn't as handsome as my friend Giancarlo who is now 186 cm tall. He has thick, curly brown hair. He has an athletic build and has never played any sport.

The girls ate him up with their eyes and he didn't seem to notice. The first girl who took him into her bathroom in high school got married: apparently the two of them and their three children are happy.

Since I was athletic but had no sporting aptitude for most of my life, I attended gyms doing weightlifting, gymnastics, wrestling, boxing, martial arts and other activities all at random. I was good but I didn't excel. Yes, after all in life, I never excelled. As early as primary schools, I used to write a date on the marble sill of the bedroom window with a pencil. It was an ephemeral date that the rain or my mother during cleaning would erase. Those numbers were the deadline of my puerile existence. I was alone and inadequate.

Even today in many activities I get by. There has never been any talk of competitions. In my carruggi no one has ever attacked me. If an argument degenerated, I would get a glazed eye, tense up my muscles and everything would be fine. I never lifted a finger against anyone. Nor did I shout.

It has to be said that as boys we were often in a group, and I stayed in the background in conversations. I had nothing to say. I didn't know about football, I listened to music and songs with pleasure but I was out of tune even when I sneezed. At the cinema I would get excited, I would dream but then I could not remember the names of the actors, the directors or even the title of the film.

Still, the teachers used to tell my mother:

"Your son is intelligent in his own way, he demonstrates this in his essays, he shows a depth of thought that he seems not to have and perhaps does not have. But even if the content is dubious, his grades in Italian are the highest in the class, we often reward him with a book that he does not read. But madam, excuse me, what do you think of your son?"

"Me? Well, I love him very much, he has never made me angry or worried. From the age of seven he has the keys to the house, he goes around on his own and is autonomous. But he doesn't seem to care about anything and for a child, a young person, that is unusual. He says he loves a girl. He is often sad, he is lonely."

"Do you write at home, do you keep a diary?"

"Now that you mention it, yes, he writes, but then he throws the writing away. By chance I saw on his computer that he sends emails to newspapers and periodicals. I asked him why he does this and he replied that he vents his urge to write by writing around randomly, that he is not interested in any replies.

Well, yes, I am not enough for him, I am convinced that he lacks a father."

Chapter 3

My mother

All mothers are the most beautiful and all children too.

But mine was more so. It was more than unique. It was unrepeatable.

My little friend was called Mario like me, because he was shorter they called him Mariolino, I was Mariotto.

His father, Vincenzo, was separated at home. Every morning he would drive us in his red Fiat Uno Turbo to the large tree-lined piazza Palermo and drop us off in front of the Anton Giulio Barrili primary school.

He was an unusual man. He was perhaps less than five feet tall. He looked like a cherub, he was hyperactive. I think he was an artist, he sang, danced, even tap-danced. He was a comedian and was a character actor in films and on television on local television in Liguria.

How he walked us to school every morning, I never understood. I was sometimes his wingman. I happened to be in situations where there were a lot of people and he, Vincenzo, was always the centre of attention. He would start his show by making fun of me and his son.

"I imagine you two when you go off to do military service. In fact no, Mariolino, they'll reform him immediately for being a gnome, I'll take him in one of my shows as one of the seven dwarfs. But you Mariotto they'll take you, but they'll have a problem. To make you a helmet they'll have to skin a tank.

With the big head you have you are definitely top of the class."

I have never been top of the class, quite the contrary. Written like that, his joke leaves one indifferent and even sounds like a joke in bad taste. But said by him, who did dance steps, moves, faces and hummed the words as he spoke, it made one laugh until tears. Because of his vitality, women were crazy about him.

After the first month of school he went to talk to our teacher who was young, beautiful and married, he managed to make an appointment with her. Mariolino hated his father because he had left his mother and also because he looked so much like him. That time he told his mother that he was having it off with the teacher.

It is true that they were separated but she was in love and for the umpteenth time ordered him to leave her home. She did not want to suffer any more. He prevaricated: despite the endless betrayals he loved her and doted on her son. In the end, he reconciled family with mistresses. His energy was inexhaustible.

A few months later his Fiat Uno Turbo on the A10 motorway crashed into a stalled lorry. All three died, he, his wife and my friend Mariolino.

I am sure that day, he, in the car, was intent on one of his gags to convince his wife to tolerate his peculiarity.

A week earlier, on the last Sunday in June 1991, the feast of St. Peter, the most important of the year, was celebrated on Via Casaregis, near the school in Piazza Palermo.

Via Casaregis is a straight avenue several kilometres long that ends at the mouth of the Bisagno stream. It is an elegant late 19th-century street. In summer it is shaded by tall plane trees. Every building is surrounded by a flower garden. Well, today many spaces are used for parking cars.

Anyway, on that beautiful Sunday morning Mariolino and I went to enjoy the numerous stalls set up between one plane tree and another.

A stall full of toys captured our attention. In particular, we were mesmerised by a basket overflowing with multicoloured mother-of-pearl-handled switchblades with a sharp blade, screwdriver, corkscrew, scissors, hacksaw and other functions that were useless to us but seemed indispensable.

"Mariotto, let's have one."

"But you are dumb, I don't have a penny."

"Whatever. Stare at the master when he looks away do as I do. Grab one and put it in your pocket."

We stole them. We picked up some branches to carve, took the bus without paying and went back to our homes to carve.

Even though Mariolino's dad was an artist, they didn't have much money. Perhaps almost as little as in my house.

My mum was a seamstress for ladies on her own account but could not manage. She charged low prices and was ashamed to ask to be paid. She was a dreamer. To customers she would deliver the dress she had sewn and designed together with one of her poems. She had a creative intelligence. She lived hoping to receive a nice comment on her poetic work.

And she was beautiful, a fine, classy beauty.

"Mummy, you are more beautiful than Sophia Loren. When I grow up I will marry you."

As a girl, together with her cousin Bianca, they had sung in the choir of the Genoese opera company. But they had been hired on a special condition. Since my aunt Bianca was small and not beautiful but sang like Callas, she was chosen along with my mother who was tall and beautiful and, like me, out of tune even when she sneezed.

The contraption was this.

My mother pretended to sing and stood in the front row of the choir, Bianca behind her sang for real. And she would narrate it to me like this:

"Your mother was sixteen years old, she was more beautiful than Botticelli's Venus and she pretended to sing in front of me and I, a stuffed turkey, sang like a nightingale from behind."

The whole city knew about it and filled the theatre. Then, someone broke the scandal and they were out of a job.

That theatre was the historic Teatro Margherita on Via XX Settembre. Today, an elegant shopping centre stands in its place.

But opera continued its activities at the magnificently reconstructed Teatro Carlo Felice house in Piazza De Ferrari.

Shortly afterwards, Aunt Bianca joined the railway as a cleaner at the Genoa Brignole station. Twenty-four years later when she died of a heart attack, she was stationmaster.

When I was little, my mother would sometimes take me to the station, we would go into her office and my aunt would give me a pen and a notebook to write in. I would enchant myself watching the trains arrive and depart. They were aerodynamic and some even double-decker. How many journeys I used to take with my imagination.

I never heard Aunt Bianca hum, nor play the violin she’d taught herself so well in her youth.

When she died, together with a volunteer from the work of St Francis, I went to empty out her unmarried woman's flat.

In the back of a cupboard, wrapped in cellophane, we found a violin bow and a toilet brush.

The day after Bianca's death, Mum also died, also of a heart attack.

But back to the feast of St Peter, that Sunday morning.

While in our room I was busy making a sling from a forked branch with my knife, Mum arrived.

"What is this?"

"Here... It's a sling."

"No, I mean that knife."

"I, I mean, I... got it at the fair. It's beautiful, do you like it?"

"What about the money?"

"Well... Then bit by bit I give them to him."

"Yes. You were with Mariolino, weren't you?

"..."

"I understand. Give me your hand. Let's go." He called a taxi on the phone and we went to the stall.

"Excuse me, sir. This is my son. He stole this knife from her. I put it back in his basket. If you see him again, keep an eye on him, for he is light-fingered."

My mum never slapped me. She never told me what was right or wrong. She showed me.

That, for her, was the only way to wash her dirty laundry.

That Sunday morning the whole town stopped to look at that tall beautiful woman with her hair in the wind and that skinny little boy stubbornly staring at his toes sticking out of his old blue tennis shoes.

That time was the only time I felt great shame. I will remember it for the rest of my life. On the bedroom windowsill I wrote, for the umpteenth time, with a pencil, the date of my death.

All children are beautiful and all mothers are beautiful and wise.

But some mothers stand out and are more so.

Chapter 4

The tramp in Martinez Square

Before I left my wife's flat I wrote in pencil, in tiny letters, on a corner of the windowsill, a date.

Many other times I would return to my wife's house, incognito, to relive my life and my absolute love.

Mine were brief, circumspect with the neighbours, apparitions, I would leave the house exhausted. That morning I went back to the station to rest. My head was hot, my mind a whirlwind.

At the station my seat was free, I took a nap and then walked through the alleys.

As I walked through the narrow streets I relived my adolescence in the 1990s. The catacombs of shops and craft businesses had not reached the intensity of today. The onslaught of supermarkets and shopping centres was contained by the municipal administration, but it was a losing battle.

My tour always started from Via della Maddalena.

There I was born in that beautiful tumbledown aristocratic palace, now modernised into an elegant apartment block. On either side of the main door are still two imposing Venetian-style marble columns, twisted. They were robbed from the Venetians at the time of the Maritime Republics, between the 11th and 15th centuries. The republics were Amalfi, Venice, Pisa and Genoa. Later, the Sicilian Ragusa was added.

I also remember other things because as soon as I graduated, I was an illegal guide in the historical centre. It was a short period. Then something happened to me and I went bivouacking in Piazza Martinez in the San Fruttuoso district.

Whatever.

Mafalda had just left me for the first time: 'Mariotto, I can't stand you any more, you're boring'.

The next day I was desperate, Giancarlo the tall, handsome and charming friend, to cheer me up arranged a double date with two girlfriends. He did not like them and yet they were beautiful. But he did it for me.

I immediately noticed that the blonde girl was interested in me. I clung to it like a lifeline. It lessened the pain of missing Mafalda.

I was morbid, perhaps clingy, moreover, all I did was talk about Mafalda. In fact, before a week had passed:

"Mariotto, you are insufferable, more, you are an insignificant common boy."

Life was unlivable I took it out on my mother,

"Let me go. I'm going to live in Martinez Square for a while, see you."

Many years earlier in that beautiful square two boys competed for the attention and support of the neighbourhood. One worked in a local television station, the other became nationally famous and RAI and Mediaset competed for him. He also became very rich thanks to his stinginess. Finally, he founded a political party that he paved with good intentions and some demagogy. Today, the party, divided and disillusioned almost as much as its supporters, is dragging its feet.

The great comedian pathetically tries again to make audiences laugh in theatres that are no longer crowded. From time to time I pass him talking to himself, walking down the street and with jerky movements, obsessively stroking his hair. By now, many people recognise Beppe Grillo.

In the square I had chosen as my home, some children, despite their parents' mistrust, came to talk to me. I had a beard and uncombed hair. In a pittosporum bush I kept a tin box with a padlock, inside was a plastic sheet, a plaid, books, a notebook and biros. And cartons of wine.

One day the priest, who stared expressionlessly at me and passed me by every day, stopped and addressed me. He was the parish priest of the church of San Fruttuoso opposite me.

"Mariotto, listen to me. Yes, I know who you are, I know you. Put your things in the box, let's go - he glanced at my wine box - have a glass of the good one."

As if hypnotised, I followed him to a nearby tavern.

His nose was big and red. His hair was thick and dishevelled grey, his clergyman was a worn and greying black.

And the eyes, the eyes, big and green. They entered my gut, if I had a soul that man at that moment took possession of it.

I looked at my glass of Vermentino delle Five Lands and did not know what to do. It had never happened to me before.

And yes, I am not a believer. After my First Communion I asked myself many questions about my existence and about God, but found no answers. I became agnostic, although I did not know that term at the time.

"Mariotto, you're not the type to work within four walls, are you?"

"Well, I mean, yes, why?"

"You don't want to command and be commanded. You are independent."

I took the glass in my hand and gave him a sidelong glance.

"I would have a job for you. You are a graduate, aren't you?"

"Yes?"

His eyes had become bigger. I was breathing with difficulty.

"Next Monday go to Palazzo San Giorgio to the port authority, apply for the public competition. You will take a course as a merchant surveyor."

"What is it about, what job is it?"

"Check and register the goods embarked and disembarked from the ships. Your signature will be recorded by the Genoa Chamber of Commerce."

"I mean, should I go on the merchant ships?"

"Yes, from one to the other. You will deal with the commanders, the officers, the camels, the dispatchers. Of course you will also have to speak English. I know you were good at Italian and English in school."

"One moment, don..."

"Happy, in name and in fact."

"Don Felice, my English is only from school."

"You will want to deepen it."

"Well, I'll try."

"Here, in this square you are finished. Go back home. Watch out, though, because I'm watching you. Your mother doesn't deserve you."

I take photographs of the façade, the gate and the columns. And of two windows on the first floor. In those days, the windows had transparent plastic sheets instead of glass. In winter we were cold and damp.

Then Mum happened to have work from a tailor's shop and we rented a two-room apartment in Piazza Sarzano. She was far-sighted. She had thought that the area would become beautiful and important.

The metro came there with even two exits, one on the sea side, the other upstream, on the square.

The integrity of the neighbourhood is now also maintained by the Faculty of Architecture. Students and teachers fill the bars and taverns.

In short, there is cleanliness and order.

When my mother died a short time later I took out a mortgage and bought it.

I went to the church of San fruttuoso to thank Don Felice but I did not find him, he was dead.

I have many regrets, I have made many mistakes.

I did not dialogue, how much I miss my mother now, and I did not thank Fr Felice. Come to think of it, I never set foot in his church.

On the very morning that I was photographing Palazzo Ademaschi, I received an email from Google informing me that my thousands of photos had exceeded 500,000 views.

I took the last photo and headed for Via dei Macelli di Soziglia.

Chapter 5

The infertile teacher

Apart from the fact that I can even sleep sitting with my chin on my chest, on platform eight there are two small rooms: one I elected as my suite. After all, they took me for a traveller, I had no bags and I looked well-groomed.

I went there because I remembered that one rainy, windy day with Mafalda we sat in the shelter and I noticed that the lock was broken.

We went to Lavagna, a beautiful and quiet town between Chiavari and Sestri Levante. Although Mafalda's parents were rich, apart from the ritual gifts when she became an adult, they did not give her any more money. As a teenager, she only had pocket money for her first needs. I must say that they did not spoil her.

When she married me they bought her the flat where we lived and lent her the flat in Lavagna; money, nothing. After graduating she won the competition and became a primary school teacher.

He never wanted to teach high school. He never explained to anyone why. I do, however. He couldn't have children and he never got over it. He wanted to sublimate the lack by being in contact with small children.

His suffering, his upsets, his mood swings affected our marriage. But I am to blame. I was never able to ease her unbearable pain. I could not convince her to resort to adoption.

Before retiring to the suite, I walked over to trunk one and reached 'my' tool shed, picked up the roll-up Japanese futon I had bought on Amazon and had delivered to the Kipoint mailroom, which was in fact the luggage room run by Ronaldo.

I reached the suite and sat down on the mat with my back against the wall and started to fiddle with the mobile phone.

Unbelievable. I had always used it very little, phone calls, emails and Dropbox, the super voicemail, never social. Until now.

In the secretary's office were all the photos, many of them, that I was taking, and the - very few - videos that I was shooting. And all the receipts and documents I was photographing and recording.

And the books I have written, am writing, have never published and will never publish. Why? Because I am ashamed, I am aware that I am a talentless amateur. I have no doubts. But I have always loved writing and doing it gives me peace of mind. I read with a critical eye. Writing fills my life. I am content.

When I was little, I would sit at the table where mum sewed her clothes, take my biros and flick clumsily at the fashion magazines.

"Mariotto, what are you doing?"

"Sclivo."

I was enjoying Wikipedia and the whole network as a universal encyclopaedia in real time. Just think, if there was a terrorist attack in the station lobby right now, I would know about it within minutes.

I looked at the TV Guide, RAI play and Mediaset Infinity to choose which film or programme to watch. My subscription to the phone company had no Gigabyte limit.

But my mind was an active volcano. Thoughts were chasing each other, overlapping, scrambling for my attention. Mafalda was always in the background.

I opened the 'My Books' folder on Dropbox, and started a new Word file, *Just an Ordinary Man.* It will be my first book as a separated man, probably soon to be divorced, depending only on my wife. However, if she reconsiders....

What number does this book have, 8, 9, just count them, it must be the tenth.

'Show, don't tell', my friend Peter used to tell me.

He was a lecturer at the University of Genoa, teaching Anglo-American literature. Twice a week he was a moderator in our Anglophile group at the Italian-British Cultural Association in Piazza della Vittoria, which is opposite my railway station in Genoa Brignole.

There I met him. I did not want to be his friend but he invited me for a beer and then again and again. One summer he invited me to his home in Loughborough, an unpronounceable village for an Italian: it is located in the southern English countryside.

He lived in the classic English red-brick terraced house. In front of the entrance he had a kind of balcony with pots of red roses, at the back a thirty-square-metre garden full of flowers and two deckchairs.

England, in the sense of one of the four nations of the United Kingdom, is a civilised country and I have been an Anglophile for as long as I can remember. I love Italy, I feel Italian, but I have always dreamed of growing up in that country that has grown up prospering, exploiting a part of the English and a quarter of the territory of our globe.

Just as the Romans did two thousand years ago. And Mussolini tried to do last century.

"Kiss' Peter used to say to me every time he returned to his village in England.

His kiss was not the noun kiss, it was an acronym, keep it simple stupid.

He taught me his idiom and occasionally glanced at what I wrote in Italian in my secret books. He also wrote books that he never published and also poems.

"Um, um," he mumbled without clarifying himself. He had the same attitude when our group was conversing and sometimes transcended into heated arguments. "Um, um," and he would point to a new topic.

I wonder how we could have become friends.

He was a misanthrope, I am sure he never had a girlfriend and he was not gay. Maybe he was simply asexual.

He was the son of a factory worker and a supermarket clerk. And it showed. At least, a Briton could see it.

The United Kingdom is famously a monarchy, and what a monarchy! Today, most of its former empire is included in the Commonwealth of Nations, an association of independent and equal former colonies.

In short, just as the Germans condemn Nazi Germany, they, the British, in the majority condemn the cruelty and exploitation of the colonies, but right or wrong the UK is their homeland and Long Live the Queen, or the King, it depends.

And underneath they are classists. By Jove, by Jove they are.

As soon as a British citizen appears for the first time in front of a compatriot, opens his mouth and utters a word, his social class, his studies, the schools he has attended, whether public or private, are revealed by his elocution and bearing.

My friend Peter, skinny as a rail, in his two-metre stature, in his worn-out old dark suit one size smaller than he should be, with his dark tie and shirt, his accent slightly dialectal, showed from a mile away that he was a working class intellectual.

Whereas James, his colleague with whom they shared a rented room in Genoa, tattered, with half his white shirt, a little dirty, outside his trousers, his posh English from the public schools, i.e. private and shabby genteel looking, was middle and upper middle class, his parents were wealthy landowners.

One evening when they visited their son, Peter and I were invited to the Zeffirino restaurant, one of the most famous in Genoa.

So, father, mother and the handsome son in the suit and tie who tortured him, ate with their elbows clasped at their sides. The right hand held the knife and the left hand the upturned fork with the tips down and they prepared the morsels, even of single peas, which they very slowly brought to their mouths. The chewing motion was barely perceptible.

And their English speech, obviously posh, was a mumbled, muttered row of words strung together. They sounded like they were sucking on a gianduiotto. To try to catch something of what they were saying I would forget to eat and if I already had a bite in my mouth it would stay there.

I understood why James married an Italian woman and reluctantly taught his posh English to his children.

Peter, the working-class intellectual with the dialectal accent, spoke Italian with a strong English accent because he maintained his Englishness.

James, on the other hand, thought and spoke in Italian without the slightest accent and did not think about his Englishness and his high-ranking family. As I have already said, he married a decidedly unattractive Italian woman from a working-class family and spoke English with their two children because his wife forced him to.

As is often the case with those educated in an English boarding school, James, despite being a classy young man despite his scruffiness, was always awkward with women, especially beautiful ones. He acquired his 'Oxbridgean' English at the excellent Oxford University, which together with Cambridge and the American Harvard is among the top three universities in the world.

James had flaws and complexes, but he was a true gentleman, in the Italian sense.

Peter was a lonely, misogynistic English working-class intellectual who stuck by me and I never understood why. With his silences, his 'ums', he taught me many things, he was cultured and intelligent. He taught me, with many ums, how to interpret the subtext, which is everything that is not explicitly said in the dramaturgical text but is clear from how it is interpreted. It is the psychological and psychoanalytical trace of the character.

When I was about to return to Genoa, I bought a garden pittosporum and planted it in his garden.

The hoe struck a skull.

In between Peter had to tell me that the skull belonged to a beautiful nineteen-year-old girl, his neighbour. One day she brought him an apple and jam tart and declared her love for him. He strangled her and buried her in his garden.

I told him I had not seen anything and added that he should not look for me. He could have killed me, but I only thought so. He understood, resigned from the University of Genoa and returned to his country.

Cettina, the day she told me at the reception that I did not deserve Mafalda, added under her breath: 'You will end up alone like a dog'.

Now I realise he was right. Tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are. And what you're up to. God forgive me.

Chapter 6

Victory Square

I woke up before dawn. I went to the shed I put on my rubber slippers, took the soap dish, the safety razor, no shaving foam the bar of soap was fine. I also took two soft towels and went to the toilet, put a euro in the machine and entered my bathroom. I stripped naked, strained my ears to hear if anyone had entered. At four in the morning it is unlikely.

After a complete sponge bath with a water-soaked towel, a shave and the rest, I returned the futon and the toiletries to the shed and went to the lobby, grabbed a vegetarian sandwich and a juice from the vending machine, sat in my seat, read the news on my mobile phone and fell asleep.

When I woke up Ronaldo had opened the luggage room.

"Good morning, Ronaldo, am I the first?" We had become friends even though we had not conversed much so far.

"Good morning, Mariotto. Damn, do you always sleep here? You are clean, perfumed and freshly shaved. But how do you do it?"

"I told you I have an excellent spirit of adaptation. I sleep on a futon in the waiting room at platform 8, then I take a bath in my own way in the toilet before dawn and finally I have breakfast from the vending machine, sit in the lobby and have another nap."

"Mariotto you are strong. You organised yourself really well."

"Yes, and I also read the newspapers on my mobile phone. By the way, will you charge it for me? Before I go on my rounds in the alleys I'd like to write for a couple of hours."

"Give it here. What are you doing, writing a book?"

"That's right, it's my pastime. It fills my life, helps me to be balanced. In certain situations I risk losing my mind."

"Who are you telling, my wife turns me against my children, there are times I hate her... Sorry."

"..."

"Good morning, ma'am, can I help you?"

"Yes, as you can see I am at the end of my gestation, some guys who got into my compartment rushed my three trolleys here and left. Could you do me the favour of taking them from the taxi?"

"Of course. No favours, this is one of our services. Mariotto, I'm not closing the shop, I'll be right back. Please, madam, let's go."

"What was I saying? Ah yes, my wife, excuse me, you don't want to talk about our mess."

"It's really recent for me. I don't know what to say. I'm afraid of going off the deep end. It's that I'm afraid of myself. You can tell me anything you want, though. Don't worry."

"Afraid of yourself, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. I mean, I don't know. Is the battery charged?"

"Yeah, there you go. Do you want to open the trolley?"

"Ah yes, before I write I would like to read some of the book I bought."

"Go in the back and take your time. Good morning, can I help you?"

"Good morning, nothing. I would just like some photocopies. My friend would like to send his trolley to Rome, is that possible?"

"Of course, sorry, I'll put it on the counter to label it. Here is the form to fill out. After tomorrow it can already be delivered. Are you OK Mariotto?"

"Yes, Ronaldo, thank you, see you."

I took a couple of steps in the corridors and entered the interior café near the station entrance. I took my cappuccino and brioche and sat down at the small table outside. Before going to work I enjoyed the wonderful view of the most beautiful and largest square in Italy. I never see anyone do that. They don't understand anything, it's a shame.

Of course, it is a lived-in square, there is traffic and its beauty, like everything in our city, is discreet and modest.

The spectator must be curious and attentive. And know how to discover beauty and hidden secrets.

To the eye I would say that the square is more than two kilometres long, maybe more than three.

Just across the street from the taxi stop, in a space of more than one hundred metres, the most important bus lines intersect.

Then there is a double extension for flowerbeds, maritime pines, fountains and in the centre an open space for buses.

A wide freeway runs parallel to the station.

Beyond it is the great square of the E.U.R. No, I'm joking, it is not the Universal Exhibition of Rome. Piazza della Vittoria is built of travertine.

The great majestic Roman-style War Memorial, the monumental buildings flanking it on the two sides leave on the other two an open view of the railway station and on the opposite side the four flights of steps flanked by flowerbeds that end at the great wall almost a hundred metres long and entirely covered with evergreen ivy.

Between the first two parallel tiers of steps is a large flower bed in which three large floral anchors are modelled. Then, three more pairs of steps with a caravel of Columbus in the middle of each, made from flowers.

Well, a person with good eyesight, as soon as he puts his nose outside the station, has more than three kilometres in which to let his eyes wander, until he reaches the ivy wall. At that moment he is ready to face life again with renewed pleasure.

Behind the ivy is, elevated, the elegant district of Carignano.

But back to the monumental square, this and the tall monument are built entirely of travertine as I said, that is, the same neo-Roman style found in the Exposition district in Rome.

Yes, the monumental style made of bows is cold, no one can deny that. It commands respect. Perhaps it is reminiscent of the dead. And this, while suggesting reverence, instils a kind of awe.

So, in Piazza della Vittoria, the traveller takes an admiring look around and passes. He moves on.

Not me. Every time, ever since I was a child, when I pass by there I feel, I don't know why, protected. I have a sense of the long path our people have travelled over the millennia.

My grandmother used to tell of the time, in May 1936, when Benito Mussolini announced the birth of the Fascist Empire from the square travertine balcony in Rome. The construction of the square was Mussolini's idea.

On that beautiful spring day, the complex with its wide arches and neat arcades was crowded with a cheering oceanic crowd.

Do not think that I am nostalgic for that period.

For better or for worse, Italy is my homeland.

Also, my family is matriarchal. All the mothers, as far as our memory goes, for one reason or another, are single mothers. And all of them are of Jewish origin. Many of our relatives were murdered by the Nazi-fascists or sent to extermination camps.

My grandmother, Pierina Mondolfi, the surname is typically Jewish, was the daughter of the butcher of the Jews in Livorno. In 1938, her father, Giovanni Mondolfi, was forced to drink a glass of castor oil, he was beaten and the shop was closed due to the owner's disability.

Her grandmother, a milliner and poetess, together with her sister Bianca, an opera singer and cellist, in 1942 when Italy was bombed and battered by the war, fled to Genoa and in that city, also by the sea, they tried to forget Livorno and the war.

Bianca, together with her sister with their son in her arms on the day they left Livorno went to Piazza dei Quattro Mori, she played arias from Vivaldi's Four Seasons and sang a piece from Umberto Giordano's Andrea Chénier.

Pierina recited a poem by Vincenzo Monti against the Spartan war and one of his poems on the condition of women.

In that Livorno square, the two Mondolfi sisters collected the money to leave their city. Their family was very famous in the city at the time.

I return to Piazza della Vittoria. I love it and I love my city, Genoa.

Chapter 7

My father

At the little wooden table outside the café while I read the American historian's book on the explanation of the Shoah, I watch the hurried people entering and leaving the station. But my attention is drawn to Mafalda.

Here she is taking a taxi or crossing the street. Now she gets off the bus and comes towards me and enters the station, goes to platform eight and gets on the train that leaves for Lavagna.

I close the book, put it in the pocket of my green military jacket and start writing the first chapter of *Just an Ordinary Man on* my mobile phone.

*That day, just months ago, I remember only two things: my wife throwing me out, and the cold*

I get off the bus in Via Albaro, go in front of my wife's house, look up at the balcony on the penultimate floor. It is closed, Mafi has gone to school with her children. I see her interacting with them. She is strict and they respect and obey her. There is nothing to understand. She loves the children and her work. The secret to succeed in life is to do things with passion. The rest is an afterthought.

I wait for the two neighbours, standing on the pavement, to stop chatting then, quickly, with the key I open the door, take the lift and go up to the seventh floor. I enter the house. It smells of wax, of flowers. And his, very light and fragrant. I sniff it without difficulty.

I go into the bedroom, open the wardrobe, sniff some clothes and slowly walk around the house.

My mind slows its whirling I look at myself in the mirror. Mum leans down to kiss my cheek.

"Mariotto, it is time to go, they are waiting for us."

It is my first day at school. I look at her, she is beautiful, her long light brown hair in the wind.

Outside there's Mariolino the little friend, his mum and Vincenzo the hyperactive all-rounder, I've already said he's, by the way, a separated womanizer. Obviously a guy like that has already tried, albeit shyly, with my mum. She kindly put him in his place.

Vincenzo leaves us in front of the school and goes about his business.

Mariolino and I greet the mothers and enter the school. In the foyer are the teachers, who identify the multitude of schoolchildren and, having reached the number, go into the classroom.

Mariolino and I are together at the first desk in the middle row. We are there for more than a month until, late, a new schoolgirl arrives. Mafalda.

I remember being struck by her inconspicuous beauty. She looked around with a beautiful smile.

We were already all paired up and she was allocated to the last bench in our row.

"Madam teacher, may I sit with Schiappacasse?"

"You could, yes. But do your partner and Schiappacase agree?"

"It's all the same to me," said Mariolino.

The teacher stared at Mafalda.

"But I don't know. But if he wants to,"

"I do" and I sat down next to her. And Mariolino didn't speak to me for a while but then we made up.

A few months later, as I said, we stole a knife and he died along with his father and mother.

Mum emancipated me and gave me the keys to the house and a bus pass. I attached them to the military chain I wore around my neck. There was also a plaque with my name and phone number. I felt important.

I didn't just use the card to go to school. I used to get on a bus and go in every direction. But back then my favourite destination was the park in Genoa Nervi. There are three parks joined together that run along the cliffs by the sea.

They do ballet festivals and flower fairs there. For me it was a trip to Eden.

The subscription to the AMT, the municipal tram company, is the most beautiful gift I have ever had. Anna Mondolfi was an extraordinary mother.

I don't think he was familiar with the Steiner and Montessori methods.

But the daddy and mummy method definitely comes first. But I always felt the lack of a dad.

That Mum was truly exceptional was perhaps to be verified. She was ashamed to charge for the clothes she made. She only wanted to do her job, which she also loved because it was a creative craft. She would design models that were then exploited by tailors. She was only interested in drawing and writing.

He wrote poems that he gave to customers and if anyone praised them, Mum's eyes would moisten and she would fly into her reverie. And we lived in blissful poverty and precariousness.

I wanted a daddy with all my might. And I found him.

Mum met him in a shop in Via Sottoripa, in the old city. It is a long medieval portico that, as the name suggests, once, in the 13th century, the sea lapped the ripa, the harbour quay.

His name was Nino Serra, he had a degree in business administration and was born in Sassari. He was the owner of an old textile and yarn shop. He was of average height, very handsome and classy. Mother was a little taller than him.

In reduced form he was the Ray Milland look-alike. This American actor and director among the dozens of films he played in was one, a classic that every time it is shown on TV I watch it as if for the first time.

*The Perfect Murder* was directed by Alfred Hitchcock and the two protagonists were Grace Kelly, the future Princess of Monaco, and, indeed, Ray Milland.

Nino was also fully dressed for Ferragosto, complete with jacket, waistcoat, trousers and tie, made from his best fabrics,

In a pocket he always carried a magnifying glass with which he examined the tissues that interested him.

I never saw him with a drop of sweat. He had dark velvety skin, he looked like an Indian. Thick black hair, a sly expression on a perfect oval face. He moved with a loose natural elegance.

I loved him at first sight. That time in Sottoripa while he was talking about fabrics and poetry with Mum I decided he would be my dad.

I was wrong but never regretted it.

I should not have become attached to him because I still miss him to this day. He was everything, I was nobody. I didn't have time to become something more.

Having suffered a few shop robberies and the old town being a maze of narrow, dangerous alleys and having done his military service in the carabinieri, he had no problem getting a gun permit.

"Mariotto, should you ever in life have to resort to public force, turn to the carabinieri. It is one of the best bodies in the world for our defence."

One day he put on his carabiniere uniform, lay down on his bed and shot himself in the temple.

I managed to get a photo of him when he was dead. The face was intact. He was more handsome than Rudolf Valentino.

From him I learned to eat composed and with my mouth closed. I did not have time to acquire many things.

He wanted to marry Mum and look after my education. He was a widower with a twenty-eight-year-old daughter who was the light of his eyes. And his devil.

When he heard that he wanted to marry a woman with a child she activated her worst arts.

As there were financial problems and she was a lawyer, she took over the administration of Nino's property, which included the shop, the flat in the 17th century building in via xxv aprile, where he lived, the penthouse flat in Castelletto where his daughter lived, and other things.

One day father and daughter quarrelled.

"You are my daughter and I love you as I love your mother, but now I love Anna and I will marry her. Nothing can stop me."

"Nothing? Are you sure? Nino, I'm one of the best lawyers in town. That's because of you. You are a shopkeeper, you have a small pension. Yes, you are a man, I would say very well off because you have property."

"Exactly, and with my new family, the time has come for me to make up for the sacrifices and suffering made in the past."

"With what money?"

"Wh-what, you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You have full confidence in me. You sign everything I bring to your attention. Nino, you no longer own a single penny. I am the sole owner of everything you owned."

"..."

"You got that right. I am curious to see how you are doing now that you are old and have nothing left, yes, I want to see you with a wife and child."

That same evening he came to our house and brought me a small bicycle he had built in his small workshop on Via xxv Aprile, he was a hobby mechanic.

I remember him as if it were today. He had always been a man of few words. That moment at the table he was talkative, euphoric. My mother looked at him with dreamy eyes. He told us about our life in his luxurious flat with paintings by the 17th century painter Peter Paul Rubéns. He described the trip we would take to his never-to-be-forgotten Sardinia. At the end of the evening he kissed mother and held me to his chest.

"See you tomorrow, Mariotto. I wish you were my son."

I did not answer. I did not sleep that night.

The next morning the daughter went to her father's house with whom she had an appointment. She wanted to have a showdown. She did not have it, not in the way she had planned.

He rang the door repeatedly. Then, she made up her mind, took the keys from her purse and opened the door.

She found him lying and composed in his military uniform on the carved and antiqued Louis xvi-style bed.

Never was there a father in my matriarchal family.

I take some pictures of the flat, photograph and hug Mafalda's pyjamas. I go to the windowsill and on the marble slab I erase the previous tiny date and with a pencil, I write another one. Mindful of the noise on the stairs I leave.

Chapter 8

The Gymnasium

I go to Piazza Piccapietra, as always it is quiet: it is a pedestrian zone.

In that square in the Portoria district, then a narrow dirt road, on 5 December 1746, a boy, Giovan Battista Perasso, started the popular uprising against the occupying Habsburg Empire.

On that day, an artillery piece was stuck in the mud and some Austrian soldiers shouting and swearing ordered the people present to help them.

A boy throwing a rock at a soldier shouted:

"Shall I start it??"

I have decided. I'm starting a new single life. No more insane visits. On that ledge I gave myself a deadline.

I enter the Piccapietra gym and resume my training. I'm getting rusty.

I go to the cashier and renew my annual subscription. I ask for a piece of paper and write a note for the cleaning lady, Angelina. She rounds up her meagre income by doing the laundry and any mending.

*"Dear Angelina, I am Mariotto, surely you don't remember my insignificant face. In the secretary's office they have my photo and my details.*

*Get the passkey and open my cupboard. In the red bag there's some dirty laundry and a jacket with a torn sleeve. Take care of it, please. Then leave me a note in the sack saying how much I owe you.*

*I hope this will be the beginning of a good professional relationship between us.*

*Good work.*

*Mariotto'*

I put on my gym clothes and look at myself in the mirror.

I avoid looking at the face. I'm in no mood to see bland dumb faces.

I like my physique, though. I have lost some muscle tone but I have a bodybuilder's physique without being over-pumped. Muscles are matched by strength and agility. No anabolics. But in the end I conclude that real hunks are over 180 cm in stature. I am only average in stature. I am an average person, a nobody.

I am only 38 years old. In two years I will enter middle age. Belin!

I get on the treadmill and run for twenty minutes like a desperate man. The equipment wobbles noisily. When I stop, I notice sweaty men and women looking at me in bewilderment.

"Sorry, I'm in arrears. I have to catch up."

I do twenty minutes of free body work, twenty of weightlifting at the limit of my strength, and close with simulated martial arts strikes.

Overwhelmed but satisfied I go for a long shower. It's a cakewalk. As I walk towards the exit I look at the masochistic companions. There are all kinds. Men usually dream of an improbable Superman physique. Women only hope to be thin, toned, with two hard tits and two turgid nipples looking up. And to be sensual, erotic. In short, they want to make the male horny. Make him drool. Then if the unfortunate man wants to test or feel a buttock, they get pissed off. Because they want love.

'I'm in love, I was in love', is the passepartout for whatever stupid thing they do. Then, when they go to Forum, a real TV court presented by the ubiquitous journalist Barbara Palombelli (in my long days I enjoy this programme on my mobile phone), the ex-lovers would, if they could, have the judge sentence their ex to life imprisonment, maybe even to torture for betrayal or whatever, committed by her or him does not matter.

I was in love. They have a switch. I love you. I don't love you. I was in love. Now I am not in love.

Love cannot be commanded. If it happens, it happens. It's not my fault. It happens to everyone.

But in court, whether it is about betrayed love, contested wills, child custody, or even any belatedness, any dispute or claim ends only one way. Money, stakes. Not out of greed but as a matter of principle.

I open the door. See you.

I walk a few hundred metres and arrive in Via della Maddalena. Near my old building there are some little Ecuadorian women, they are small with low backsides, they don't bother anyone, they are protected, in the human sense, by the former mayor Marco Doria who lives right here.

Unbelievable? Perhaps, but it is true. He is a good, indeed a very good person. But I have the impression, with hindsight, that he is an idealist.

As mayor he administered the city from 2012 to 2017 and the metropolitan city from 2015 to 2017 without infamy and little glory. I am not versed in politics, but I can't think of anything particularly relevant in his decisions. I remember him, as I passed him in the carruggi, backpacking. He does the same now that he has returned to teach at the University of Genoa. I guess he is more successful there.

Marquis Marco Doria is descended from Andrea, the noble admiral who brought Genoa to the pinnacle of commercial success in the 17th century.

Marco's grandfather disinherited his father Giorgio because he joined the communist party.

The man, Marco Doria, lives three kilometres from the Prince's historic villa, built in the 16th century, or rather, the Palazzo di Andrea Doria.

Here in the alleys they enjoy the sympathy of everyone. Because their mayor has chosen to live with his family among the sluts.

I voted for him without hesitation out of sympathy even though I was not convinced that he had the entrepreneurial energy to administer our city.

As soon as the tenants leave I will return to my 17th century council house which is in Piazza Sarzano. More or less where the city was born, before Rome. Even if I don't wear the hook in my jeans, the tool used by camalli to handle sacks and crates, I belong to the old city. I am a man of the carruggi.

I go to Via San Luca, perhaps the most important street in the historic centre. Come to think of it, I never went there with Mafalda. Many people from the uptown don't know this part of the city. They don't say so, but if they think they are going to the carruggi they feel uncomfortable. Yet, during the day, the danger is the same as in all the other neighbourhoods.

A walk around here every now and then is pleasant.

Unfortunately, most shops are closed. I repeat, supermarkets and shopping centres steal the soul of cities. I for one love wandering around the shops in the centres and between the rows of supermarkets. It is comfortable and relaxing. It is also convenient.

In short, evolution cannot be stopped. One must adapt. Incentivising social initiatives, small artisans, it all adds up. I'm all for it.

I do my shopping at the supermarket. To choose fruit and salad I put on my gloves and button the fruit and the rest. If I did this in a shop I would risk giving the shopkeeper a case of bile. At the very least.

I admit that despite the negativity I like to wander around here. I regenerate myself. I have my roots here. Besides, if it is true that ancestral factors count on the present, my Jewish origin influences the pleasure of being ghettoised. But religiosity has left me. I sense it all around me. Every now and then I enter an ancient church without making the sign of the cross, leave a few euros in the box and leave, somewhat furtively.

Unfortunately, I am not an intellectual, nothing in me, by genetic predisposition, cultural and whatever else allows me to be one.

An average man has an average intelligence and memory. A moderate sensitivity. He cannot have passions, great ideals, overwhelming enthusiasms. At most he can read the newspaper every day.

I think the newspaper is the layman's Bible. It has everything.

Like many journalists I have a generic culture. Based on hearsay or naming.

Often in my adolescent graphomania I would send emails to newspapers mentioning classical philosophers like Plato, Socrates and so on, without ever having read them. As a reader, addict, of newspapers, I acquired a vast pseudo-culture.

Maybe I can even quote about it.

Just don't meet me with people like Corrado Augias, for me the most important Italian journalist, certainly one of the most cultured. Being, he, a Socratic doubter, would prefer to be described as someone a little less ignorant.

One day he was impressed by an email from me, for the first and only time, he gave up his space and published me in full in his 20-year column with readers.

If, as requested, I had interacted with him, I would have collapsed miserably at the first chat.

Everyone stay in their place.

The average man like me belongs to the majority that individually only counts when he votes, or manifests his thoughts. And in the polls. Because the collective results of mediocrity count the most in determining the personality and thinking of the collective.

Then in that circumstance we are somebody. And not nobody. As is almost always the case.

Chapter 9

The last visit

I promise, this is the last time.

I look at the kitchen balcony on the penultimate floor, the shutter is down.

My heart beats. I am breathless. I have not come for two days.

I know, it is not normal.

But I don't hurt anyone except myself.

I do not stalk my wife.

If I did he would immediately tell me to fuck off, and I would go.

Not possible. Unbelievable, the usual hags stand at the side of the gate gossiping. But is it possible they have nothing else to do?

At last. I get in, take the lift and get out on the penultimate floor. I enter the flat.

Familiar air. Deep breath. One moment, this is cigar. Her father's been there. She usually visits her parents.

Strange. She is more familiar with her mother. She loves her father very much, but has always been in awe of him.

His mum didn't come. If she had been there I would have distinguished her Dior Home Intense, the persistent perfume for men.

Father and daughter must have discussed something. There is no doubt about it.

I go around the house sniffing, all I need to do is lift one leg and pee on the leg of the kitchen table.

They did not move from the living room, more precisely from the sofa.

Surely they argued about something. They have no business in common. His money, I don't think it is much, is controlled by his father in the bank he runs. During our marriage they never talked about investments or financial matters.

She is neither greedy nor ambitious. Yes, she has some designer clothes from Armani, but nothing more. She usually dresses elegantly sober. Her make-up is not accentuated. The men look at her admiringly, but do not turn around.

I have always liked her like this. Despite being tall, slender and beautiful she is not flashy. I think she is not particularly intelligent. She's more or less like me. Only she's distinguished, maybe she has class.

A woman from a good family and it shows.

Of course, I have no class, I am the typical clerk with a gymnastic physique. I don't stand out at all. At the supermarket the cashier spends more than a month before she memorises me. Do I suffer? I don't know.

As far as I go with my memories, I have always felt inadequate.

I couldn't get passionate about anything. In primary school, middle school, high school evenings, almost all the boys I knew followed football and cycling. Also, many collected stamps, stickers, magazines. Me, nothing. And I was sorry.

I wrote, that I did, but I wrote nothing interesting. It was blah blah. I was watching others live and get excited and talk about girls.

When I went to bed before falling asleep I imagined stories in which the protagonist was now one, now the other, I was an extra following now this, now that. They would forget my presence.

There were times that small groups would form where they would talk about someone who was not present. I am sure that I was never the subject of their comments. Not even in criticism and faults. They would forget me.

When they wanted to vent because they had quarrelled at home or with, if they had one, their girlfriend, then they would hang out with me and tell me problems, doubts or whatever was on their minds.

I listened eagerly. They lived. I was a vent.

And I was thinking about Mafalda. We got along well, we never quarrelled. It wasn't possible, because I was subordinate to her. I always agreed with her. Ours, for Mafi, was a habit, not a love. And habits are addictive.

This is how I see it today.

I go to my bathroom. The shower is dusty. There is dirty laundry in the washing machine.

I pass into Mafi's bathroom. The large mirror is immaculate. Underneath, the long shelf with cosmetics, perfumes, cologne, brushes, combs, small boxes, bottles. On the opposite wall is the double shoe rack with her winter shoes and two or three spring pairs.

Hanging on the door is the pink terrycloth pool dressing gown with the hood. On the floor is the sports bag for the pool.

I take the bathrobe, bring it to my face and breathe deeply. I smell his usual smells. He has not changed his habits.

I go to the shelf and take the hairbrush and smell it deeply. The shampoo is the usual one, I use it too. It also contains conditioner.

My sense of smell is truly exceptional.

Reluctantly I look at myself in the mirror.

I have an upturned potato nose. I scrutinise myself and remember. But yes. The three little pigs. I look like them.

Timmy, Tommy, Gimmy. To find your confidence you have to work hard and be wise. This was the behaviour suggested by the fable.

But then, as a child, I preferred fairy tales with their morals. They are more natural. Their origin dates back to prehistory.

Yes, maybe I look like Gimmy the Wise. I like to think so, since I look like a piglet.

I put the brush back exactly where it was.

I am always very careful not to move objects from their place.

I go to the pantry and look at his backpack. I use a waterproof canvas shoulder bag. It hangs on top of his backpack. I forgot to take it away.

I take his backpack, open it and smell it. He has used it recently. I put it back.

For years, a large part of our savings was spent on travel.

A single cruise in the Mediterranean. Then to India, Ghana, Libya, Morocco, Ecuador. In Europe, in Paris, Sweden, Norway.

Then up and down Italy.

Little in our region. Sanremo, the Five Lands and Lavagna as a second home.

We were members of a cultural association that organised trips.

The holder of *Culture and Tourism* was an early retired professor of Italian.

Armando Botticelli loved good food and travelling right along with his beautiful little family. Gilda, a beautiful matronly lady, was his wife and the secretary of our association. Then Cristina, an efficient young employee, and Roberto, Armando's son, an excellent RAI journalist, who, like his father, acted as group leader during his holidays and free time.

In Ghana, a native interpreter had joined us. Roberto, already on the first day, called his father and complained about the guide. His father asked him to weld him, apologise and send him away. He was immediately replaced by an excellent guide who spoke not only Italian, but also English and other local dialects.

Incidentally, African dialects are not like the Neo-Latin languages but also, to some extent, English, which have grammatical and lexical similarities. African dialects are real languages without any similarities between them.

In addition, on that whole trip we had a good local cook with all his battery of utensils and a Canadian tent for the night. He also cooked excellent spaghetti carbonara.

Once in Libya, an elderly couple complained about their assigned room. Armando checked in, gave them his room and went to a hotel.

Now I wonder if he always managed to cover his expenses.

I have never met an entrepreneur of his level.

But it was not perfect. Once in Sicily, in Trapani, he left us free to wander around the centre on our own. Before leaving us, he recommended the cannoli, cassata and Martorana fruit from a certain pastry shop.

He said goodbye and quickly left in a taxi.

Martorana fruit is a world-famous Sicilian speciality. The marzipan dough imitates the shapes of fruit, vegetables and fish. The taste is distinctive.

In the evening at the table, humbly, Armando confessed to us that he had rushed to buy his favourite sweets at that bakery because he knew we would attack it.

Armando Botticelli, unfortunately, old and tired, passed the reins of the association to a young couple. I do not know if his passion for travel has continued with the new managers.

I have other thoughts at the moment.

Chapter 10

The meeting

As usual I leave my wife's flat reluctantly.

Maybe that's why I hesitate on the pavement and instead of going to the bus stop I go down to the garage.

I enter the garage, look at his red Ford Fiesta and my beige Panda. Both are clean. Mafalda is very tidy, both the house and the box are clean, 'I am a mule', she can't bear to take her car and see mine dirty. She lets me keep the car there.

I get into mine and breathe deeply, I have the feeling that it has been used recently. The keys are on the dashboard.

I have never liked driving. I am uncomfortable driving. On motorways and major roads I have a subtle sense of dread. To go to the harbour I use it but it is the usual journey, I am used to it. Within the port I have to go from one ship to another and I carry a lot of documents, ship manifests, boarding passes, customs forms and stationery.

I love to manage my working day. I am autonomous, independent. At the end of my shift I leave the day's papers in an office that can be different for each ship.

I always see different people.

I once had a big problem. I was in danger of losing my job.

One morning on the quayside platform, where the ship I was to follow was docked, a goods train was waiting to be freed of its cargo.

There were 12 out of 23 flatcars loaded with crates containing valuable machinery, including delicate optical instruments such as microscopes and telescopes. 14 out of 23 crates were of the same size.

In addition to checking the integrity of the packages, I had to measure them because the stevedore adjusted the stowage order and because the freight was paid by volume, not by weight, i.e. according to the space they occupied, which was considerable.

The shipper, whom I was seeing for the first time, handed me the boarding vouchers and said:

"Hi, what's your name?"

"Mariotto and you?"

"Fernando, that is Nando. My company is new in the port of Genoa. We want to make a good impression and have scrupulously checked the number of packages and their condition. So you can go peacefully."

He is a little taller than me, he has long, thick black hair, it is matted and combed back. He has an oversized smile, his teeth are very white.

The light brown dress is conspicuously striped. She wears high-heeled ankle boots. The satchel is made of calfskin. She has nervous movements. Or so it seems to me.

He doesn't take his eyes off me.

I mount the first platform and walk around the first crate and observe it, measure it and transcribe the numbers on the boarding pass.

He also gets on the wagon and approaches me.

"Mariotto, I will make you an offer, I have little time because I have to rush to customs."

"Tell me and go ahead."

"Just one thing. If you don't care, pretend I didn't say anything and continue your work."

"Yes..."

"I give you nine hundred euros, another hundred is for me. Just as long as you are *wrong* - wave four fingers - to measure."

It had never happened to me.

I stare at my feet. My eyes are glazed over.

I tense my muscles. I am afraid. Of myself.

He had studied me. That is, he had felt he could make his special request of me.

What an impression I made on him. But how am I, how do I look?

"Get off the wagon. Now."

But it is not over.

Towards the end of the shift, the shipper shows up with a big truck with small crates of machinery that are also part of the same consignment, but are accompanied by another boarding pass. If they had loaded them onto a wagon they would have run a great risk of being stolen.

I uncover the truck, look at them, measure them and count them one by one. Having managed to count them, I don't need to count them as the crane takes them one lift at a time.

I stand to one side and exhaust the boarding vouchers, I also calculate the cubage, I add some observations for some crates that appear to be repaired. This is to say that the contents may have been stolen.

Naturally, I have them checked and signed by the unblemished and overgrown shipper.

He signs my vouchers but his hand shakes.

Lean the weight of the rigid body now on one leg now on the other.

Yet, it seemed to me that since his return from customs he had calmed down after my previous reaction.

I make my way up the steps to take the boarding vouchers to the officer on board. I glance at the driver, who, having unloaded the truck, begins to cover the empty caisson.

Strange, what is the need to cover the empty box, I wonder.

The dispatcher watches it tense.

I rush down the steps.

"Driver, stop!"

With a leap I mount the empty truck body. The tarpaulin is piled partly on the front of the body and partly on the driver's cab. I grab the tarpaulin and pull it to one side.

"What are you doing, appraiser? I'm late, get out!" Shouts the driver. He tries to push me off the truck. I give him a strong push and he ends up on the ground.

I finish unwrapping the tyre and out pops two crates of optical machinery and special lenses.

I called a camal from another team who had witnessed the scene, my team had left.

I give the order to the crane driver to load the two crates onto the ship.

The truck drives off with the shipper.

The next day I stopped a financier I knew while he was shooting on the pier and told him what had happened.

"Mariotto, why are you telling me this?"

"Because this time it went well for me. But next time, I might get screwed. I sign for the integrity and quantity of the goods. If a package is missing, I may have stolen it or whatever. I mean, marshal, listen to me. If I am presented below board with goods, I don't work peacefully."

"You said it's a new company? What is it called?"

I told him the name of the company. Fortunately, I never dealt with his goods again. What happened to that company I never knew or even asked. Thinking back to that marshal, my esteem for him increases.

Yes, my job is demanding, but all occupations have problems.

I also like that in the port our category is respected and even coveted.

I have shipping friends who would be happy to do my job.

Now I am not ready to go back to work, but I miss the port.

I also miss my home. Which is opposite the harbour.

The living room window is opposite the Naval Repairs.

It is sunny from morning to evening.

There is the square with the children's games and the bar kiosk.

There is the ten-a-side football pitch and the two for playing padel.

Beyond that is the road. Then, there are the piers with the ships moored for repair and the tall cranes. And there is the breakwater.

As I move around the living room but also when I sit at the table to work, I occasionally look up and look at my sea and my ships.

When it is raining, there is a strong wind, I am on holiday and I cannot take a long walk in the alleys, I enter the underground entrance that is next to my door and take a long walk between the people crowding the two long corridors and the platforms of Brignole station.

I listen to travellers' speeches and draw ideas for short stories.

As I am looking at the two cars immersed in memories I feel myself being pulled by the sleeve.

"Mariotto, what are you doing here?" Mafalda asks me surprised.

Chapter 11

M'ama non m'ama

I am excited. More so than that time with the unleashed forwarder.

"Hi, Mafi. I, I mean, I was just passing by and thought maybe I could take the car. But I don't need it."

"Don't you work?"

"No, I'm on holiday. I mean I don't feel like working. I mean, no, I don't. I mean, I don't want the car."

"Yes, I understand. You look good."

"You too... You are beautiful."

"I, on the other hand, need the car. I have an appointment. I have to go."

"Yes, of course. Go ahead. I'm off. See you."

"..." He gets into the Ford and drives off.

I look at the empty place. I feel my heart beating, my face and ears burning. Slowly I close the box and return to Mafi's house.

I go into the living room, sit on the sofa and stare at the unlit television. I take a pillow and bring it close to my nose. I smell its perfume.

I remember that sunny 2 May 1999, we were fourteen years old, she was two centimetres taller than me. She had a long, slender and toned physique. Me, short and muscular. She had been dancing for seven years, I had been going to the gym for three and doing a bit of everything and nothing in particular.

His handsome face was graceful and not beautiful. I had a potato nose and eyes, as it were, not big, insignificant, common.

Her parents had left the flat free for Mafi to celebrate her birthday. On one condition.

"You and... that one there, yes, Mariotto, when the party is over, put the house back in order."

We were a couple of dozen boys and girls. We didn't do anything special that I remember, we certainly had fun.

But I got angry. Giancarlo, I have already said, was my friend. After Mariolino's death, he was always my best friend. He was tall, handsome, sunny. The girls ate him up with their eyes.

And that day, as always, he fooled around with Mafi.

Between the two there was always a strange relationship. He would tease her and pay her compliments in a tone that was now ironic, now passionate, and she would insult him and tell him that he was not worthy of her.

He, being my friend, did not criticise me but always asked a question.

"And how is Mariotto?"

"That's my business. You take care of your gimmicks."

Today, as an adult, he and his wife and their three children still live in the same building as Mafi's parents, who fervently wished that she had married him. Gian came from a good family and became an entrepreneur, selling large cars.

However it was, the party was good and despite my jealousy we had fun.

And we drank a little too much.

My head was spinning, Mafi was laughing.

Roughly we tidied up the flat and, exhausted, we threw ourselves on our parents' bed, who came home at a certain time and found us wrapped up and asleep. And on Mafi's side was a patch of blood.

Before we fell asleep we had made love and wrestled. At one point we were aroused and instead of the usual mutual masturbation Mafi screamed.

"No more playing and manipulating. Now let's get serious."

"Mafi, seriously what, what do we do?"

"Mariotto, you're still the same old klutz. But you are ready. Don't move."

She came on top of me and moved slowly, I tried to kiss her. She was guiding me.

From that day until the day before he kicked me out of the house in love he always guided me. All I needed was one of his glances with his tongue in my cheek, but also a sign of his head, and I, like an automaton, carried out the instructions. From the beginning of the love affair to its completion.

Go. Stop. Stop.

His dad looked at us that day and held back his laughter. His mum - no.

"Wha... what did you do?"

We were lying in our underwear on our backs.

Before we fell asleep Mafi had changed her slip.

I kept my hands clasped on my belly. Mafi held them under his buttocks.

"We had a good party and a good time, Mum."

And Mama pointed to the blood.

Mafi removed his hands from behind and jumped up onto the mattress, bent over and showed his mother his bottom. And she pointed.

"This half-drunk fool, while we were wrestling, dug his nails into my butt."

And she showed her bleeding buttock. But the nail had just driven it in. Besides, I had short nails.

Sitting on the sofa while smelling Mafi's pillow, I wondered for the umpteenth time if Mafi had ever loved me. And why she so beautiful and with so many suitors had married me.

"You grew up together, he loves you, but love is something else. The truth is that you do love very well. It's all there. She told me,' Cettina, Mafalda's best friend, told me a few days before we got married.

I had rejected her and she hated me from that moment on. She was confident and wanted to betray her friend. That Cettina was in love with me never entered my mind.

She was looking for a good match to settle down. I certainly didn't meet her standards. But in the meantime she wanted to have fun and took whatever came her way. Maybe even the betrothed of her best friend.

Perhaps because she hoped I would satisfy her sexually.

Perhaps she was jealous of Mafi getting married before her.

Maybe, maybe, I don't know.

But my wife, what I represented to my wife.

About myself, at least about my love, my lifelong love for her, I have no doubts.

Yes, Cettina I have watched her and I have had some erotic fantasies about her as well as others. But the thought of cheating on my wife holds me back.

If I had succumbed to the sensuality of a beautiful woman just once, my relationship with my wife would never have been the same.

I am sure of it, as I am sure I exist.

A man and a woman truly, deeply in love cannot cheat on their partner. They are like pigeons, it is in their DNA.

But betrayals in love have always been there and always will be.

If there is love there is no betrayal. There is affection, there is something else.

He who knows love knows the truth. To know is to know.

Truths can be more than one. Because there are different situations, which may appear the same.

I don't feel like going back to work. Yes, I know that work, especially when you love it as I do, can be therapeutic.

But now my mind cannot apply itself to the difficulties, the cares that require my dedication.

I have to decide what to do with my life. I have to convince myself that I can go on without my wife.

That is all. Life goes on and you move on, or, you let go.

But if I cannot choose, maybe there is another way. There must be.

I will find it.

I take another deep inhalation. I memorise it and return to the railway.

Chapter 12

The Angel of the Dead

As I enter I look for the Lady, I don't see her. I go to the little corner on the ground floor and see her sitting on the chair with the little radio to her ear.

I don't know whether to say goodbye to her or not. It's OK, I leave her immersed in her world. She is serene. I smile contentedly.

I sit in the lobby in my seat. The dead clochard's seat is vacant. I pull Browning's book out of my coat and read. It is a repetitive listing of massacres committed by five hundred clerks, workers, ordinary people like me, hastily conscripted into the army and poorly educated by the Nazi German government of the Third Reich.

According to Hitler's intentions, his government was the historical successor to the medieval Holy Roman Empire and the modern German Empire founded by Kaiser Wilhelm I.

I read avidly. Browning describes these ordinary, anonymous people like me well.

The few survivors of the war resumed their insignificant lives as before and as if nothing had happened. Yet each of them had gassed, shot and otherwise murdered thousands of people. Not only Jews, but also nomads, invalids, people unfit for work. And at times they slaughtered for no apparent reason other than to make people of a certain religion, ethnicity or health condition disappear.

Browning analyses their interrogations. Basically 'they had obeyed orders'. And this, according to many, is an excuse.

However, the author discovered, by analysing the details, that EVERYONE or almost EVERYONE had the opportunity to refuse, even they could have changed battalions.

That's enough for today. I'm going to the alleys. By the way, what did I do? Well, it's easy to say, and we all say it, I don't, never.

At school, in high school, there was bullying, even in middle school, in primary school, no. Sympathies, dislikes and incompatibilities are normal in any time and any place.

In the first year of high school, in the evening section, I well remember that ultra-repetitive boy who commanded six classmates, and often asked them for new tests to confirm that they were up to the task.

With me he would just stare at me with dislike. Maybe because I was going out with Mafalda who was the prettiest girl in school.

That was for the first few weeks. One day, however, in class, while the teacher was explaining - it seems to me the double game - the bully, in a loud voice, interrupted the teacher.

"Prof, this is a difficult point, let Rossi Satutto explain it to us."

The teacher was tough, he looked at him surprised.

"Parodi, what's wrong with you? I can't force you to attend class. And I can't stop you from bullying outside school, but here, you definitely don't. If you bother I'll throw you out."

I realised that from that day on I would be his laughing stock. I had to stop him now. I was angry.

I never got into a fight. Because when I got angry and got the glazed eye they let me go. But that time I raised my fist, that's all I did.

On the way out I blocked him.

Before speaking I went under his nose, he was twenty centimetres taller than me, stared at him and said:

"If you're mad at me speak here, now, or never."

He lowered his gaze and said nothing.

"Answer me. Speak."

"But no, you are wrong," and took a step back.

The next day he teased me again while the English teacher was there.

I sent Mafi home alone even though I didn't like her walking around alone at night. She told me to leave it alone, but after giving me a look she left.

"Here we go again Parodi. Apologise and promise not to do it again."

"But no you're wrong," he lowered his gaze and I understood.

But he also understood me. He was lazy but not stupid. He knew that if he stood by helplessly, I would not have the strength to beat him.

At that point my anger increased. I felt powerless. And I overcame myself.

I blocked him by the arm and looked up to stare at him.

"You don't leave if you don't promise."

Nothing. He did not react and kept his arms dangling.

He was right, I did not have the courage to hit him coldly.

Angry, yes, but lucid, and cold. My eyes were burning.

I did as he did, lowered my eyes, and my clenched fist shot out blindly. I didn't even know if I had hit him.

He lying on the ground stared at me in amazement. I was more amazed than he was. Blood was gushing from his fractured nose and the back of his head, which had hit the pavement.

Boys, girls and teachers stood still and watched us.

I pulled two packets of Kleenex out of my pocket and helped him into the bar opposite, the others left. I paid for a punch and put the napkin holder on the coffee table. And I left.

From that day on, they called me Red Forbidden Fist at school.

I mean, I know, I am not capable of harming defenceless people or animals. But.

Those Nazi policemen were at war, there was great pressure. And then there was the judgement of others, of your peers, the danger of being branded a coward. There was the ambition to get ahead. Values were changed. The civilian past was another life. A distant, hazy, memory.

Now I am here, wearing a uniform.

I kill one, mamma mia. I kill another one, drink a few glasses of cognac, maybe one more. And off I go, I kill two. You get used to it, though not completely. Consciousness, it goes down into the unconscious, even further down. In the meantime, today I am alive. Tomorrow, who knows.

What about Dr Josef Rudolf Mengele, German soldier, doctor and war criminal? The angel of death.

In the Auschwitz concentration camp, he used deportees, mainly children, as human guinea pigs for his experiments.

In his many experiments on people, the favourites were homozygotic, i.e. identical, twins, which he put together to see if they could survive as Siamese siblings. They almost always gangrenous and died. He would create gangrene with other children to study how to treat them. Children who became sick and mutilated for experimental purposes died by the dozens, perhaps hundreds.

Mengele had been a war hero, decorated for valour.

There is no record that he ever had any scruples or repentance. He died happily on holiday, accidentally. Dr Mengele had been an ordinary man before the war. Just as, after the war, in South America, he was considered the man next door.

I'm nobody special. As a child, I struck up a friendship with a friend who later, as an adult, became a researcher at the University of Genoa, because he used to catch flies, pull their wings off and lay them on the grass to see how they behaved.

I mean, could I ever kill someone? I think I am restrained. I could never close my eyes and beat an animal or a person to death.

Would I put my hand on it?

I put the book in my pocket and go to the gym.

In the cupboard is the jacket that Angelina sewed up for me and the washed and ironed underwear. I put the money on the little shelf and do two hours of intense work with my body and tools. I shower, put the sweaty laundry in the red bag and say goodbye to someone. See you.

At Piazza De Ferrari I go down vico Casana, one of my favourite carruggi.

Chapter 13

The kingdom of camels

The old town was once the kingdom of the camels, but not any more.

Although I am of Tuscan blood I speak, I think in Genoese, so I am.

My bachelor house is in the old town, at the beginning of the carruggi. Carruggio, this word, I like to say it with two 'r's and two 'g's. You can spell it with a 'g' and an 'r' and in other ways, it doesn't matter. You just have to understand it.

*Striscia la notizia*'s Gabibbo pronounces it like me, calcata, belandi ragassi. On the other hand, the Genoese use this term, gabibbo, when referring to southerners. And I, who am of non-Genoese origin, am a bit of a gabibbo.

I said I love vico Casana. Chasana in Turkey, in the Middle Ages, was the sultan's treasure room. They used to lend money in that street by loan-sharking, then, with the advent of the Monte di Pietà, fortunately, usury was reduced.

As a child, my mother used to take me for ice cream at the Café de Paris, a beautiful late 19th century retro Art Nouveau café. Of course the bistro, like so many places in the old town, I photographed it with my mobile phone. It is furnished in solid wood and has large mirrors. You have to go inside and smell the coffee and ice cream. My favourites were chocolate or lemon.

I relive the environment of an idealised time and dream.

Other beautiful moments of my childhood and adolescence are when we used to go to the carruggi together to buy cloth and other tailoring materials.

It was a special feast when we went for sciamadde, flames, old shops selling savoury pies and farinata. The real one is thin and slightly burnt on the surface.

With embarrassment I remember when, as a teenager, I used to walk stiffly and stiffly to look older and be mistaken for mum's boyfriend.

Sometimes he would let me into the tripperia of Cavagnaro, who founded it in 1890. A matronly lady spoke strict Genoese and only served tripe, fagiolane and sbira, the tripe broth that until a few decades ago was the breakfast of the port workers.

Today that tripe shop is the only one, of 200, that has survived.

I don't like tripe, but with mum I used to peel it, together with seven or eight beans. It's the same when I go there with colleagues. I look at and of course photograph the inlaid marble counter, the tiled extractor hood, the shiny copper pots and pans. Even the smell of tripe in that restaurant is something else.

Every time I pass the corner of Via Chiossone, I look up at the 17th-century aedicule of the Madonna Regina.

The Madonna, a masterpiece of the Genoese Baroque, is skilfully formed with stucco and can be found on many facades of old houses.

It is not a question of being a believer or not: when one observes them calmly and in the right frame of mind, one feels good.

Genoa, if one thinks of the famous thriftiness of its citizens, likens it to the Scots. But if one considers its discretion, reserve and foreign business sense then one likens it to the English. Both England and Genoa have the red cross on their flag.

Of course, the clever Genoese in 1190, in exchange for an annual tribute, ceded the use of that symbol to King Richard I of England.

Since I have always been an Anglophile, today I have a lager at the Britannia pub restaurant at the beginning of vico Casana. And I relive the dream in my drawer of emigrating to England.

The pub restaurant is furnished entirely in dark solid wood.

The months I spent in Derbyshire as a busboy and handyman gave me the England sickness.

I think of the cowardice of not having had the courage to give up the certainty of a job I loved for the unknown of facing the language and life in a foreign country.

*I wished I were what I was when I wished I was what I am.*

I would like to be what I was when I wanted to be what I am.

This English tongue twister was taught to me by a girl from a village near the five-star hotel where I worked.

On Saturday nights she came to help us as a waitress. I kissed her but went no further because Mafalda who was always on my mind stopped me.

Carol knew me well. She knew about Mafalda and the main events in my life. She was my only chance to improve my school English.

He lived with his parents and a little brother in a fairy-tale house made artistically from stones. If I were a dictator I would order buildings to be constructed only with stones and bricks. I would abolish the ephemeral plaster that deteriorates after a short time.

An engineer friend told me that we use plaster for a climatic issue. I didn't really understand that.

Anyway, I fantasised a little about accepting when Carol offered me to live with her and turn her farm into an agritourism.

Now I ask myself, did I refuse out of love for Mafalda, out of fear of adventure, because I did not love Carol? I will never know for sure. However, I am certainly monogamous and have always considered Mafalda my companion for life.

And to this day I have never betrayed her. This makes me proud. It gives me security, I have the feeling of living with my insecurities and frailties with greater strength.

I miss a child and Mafalda misses her very much. I would love to convince her to adopt a child, male or female, of any colour. I know that the would-be adoptive parents when they go around the children, they, the eager adoptees, look anxiously at the visitors hoping to be chosen.

I also know, because I read a lot on the subject, that there is often a spark between the two parties and they catch each other.

Why he does not want to, I do not understand. I will claim until my last breath that children do not belong to those who beget them: they belong to those who raise them.

I do not know who my father was, but I do know that I miss him even now that I am approaching middle age. I think of that distinguished man who spoke softly to me. Shortly before he shot himself he had promised to show me his Sardinia. I remember that man as a father. I have always tried to be like him.

Besides this fixation I also have a quirk.

I am very lousy, sometimes I think I am pathologically so, but the thought of changing my child's nappies does not upset me. I wouldn't even be upset if I had to change Mafi's nappy. I would just be focused on doing it the best I could.

Perhaps, I have an excuse for my grossness.

I was four years old when my mother befriended the Strambelli family.

When she would tell me we were going to visit them I would freak out. But she always managed to persuade me that I would have a good time because there were two little brothers there with whom I would happily play and we would tuck into pastries.

My problem was something else. As soon as we walked into their house everyone was celebrating me, I was really cute at that age, but soon after that I was ruined growing up.

Anyway, I come to the fact. The head of the family, Moustache, that's the name I remember him by, used to pick me up and throw me in the air, which I liked, the problem was that as soon as I landed on his arms he filled my face with kisses. His moustache was white, yellowish, damp and smelly because he smoked a cigar. Between the hairs, looking closely, I could glimpse bits of tobacco, food and nasal mucosa. What's more, in my imagination I would add everything to it. I would shriek until I rattled the chandelier. And everyone laughed out loud.

To this day I still hate moustaches and would ban them if I could. In any case, some paediatricians advise fathers against growing moustaches.

I would never kiss a girl who I know has kissed a guy with a moustache. They are a receptacle for germs, nasal mucous and worse. Ooh!

I leave the Britannia and go Sottoripa. The thing that pains me most on my rounds are the shutters that are permanently down. In the summer, when I was a garzonetto in shops, I learnt two things: shops are prisons and I am not cut out to be a shopkeeper. I would add that I did the same thinking for any profession. The same was true for professions. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects. Pharmacists then go to university and then spend their lives behind a counter serving packages to people. I cannot think of a more alienating activity than that. Some say they are gold mines.

I do the job I like, it won't make me rich, of course, but I will always have everything I need to live.

Besides, I have time to write and read, that's all I ask. Apart from family. But that is another story.

I go back to the station.

Chapter 14

The English certificate

I wander the alleys, visit Mafalda's house, live at the station and manage to live with missing her. I do my best to get used to it. Perhaps my reaction to her abandonment is not normal.

With Mafalda's first abandonment, when I was nineteen, to live with the despair I went out with a girl who lived in Martinez Square. She left me too, "I can't take it anymore. You're doing my head in with this fucking Mafalda' and I bivouacked in her square. It worked. A priest helped me find a job and my way.

As soon as I enter the station I go to the corner on the ground floor and stop to look unseen at the Lady. She is serene and listens to the little radio turned off. She keeps it glued to her ear. I am sure she can hear herself with her daughter. She will soon be waiting in vain at platform eight.

Later I will go there to lie down in the waiting room.

Cettina, Mafi's friend whom I had rejected, predicted that I would die alone like a dog. I look at Madame, think of my previous bivouac in front of a church, and imagine myself, one day, in Madame's place. It is written in my DNA.

I move to a restaurant, eat a piadina and a vegetarian sandwich and drink a beer.

It will be what it will be. I don't have to account to anyone. I've always imagined my life with Mafalda. I love life, yes, I am content with little. I'm a creature of habit and I don't bother anyone. Without her life has no meaning for me. Is that so?

I will never commit suicide, I am a coward. As a child I wrote the date of my hanging in pencil on the marble windowsill. One day I equipped myself with a rope, tied a slipknot, took the aluminium ladder from the cupboard and looked at the hook on the ceiling to hold the chandelier.

To give me courage I imagined the full action. I have imagination and I am empathetic.

I saw myself climbing the ladder, secured the rope to the hook, put my head in the noose and let myself fall from the ladder. I had read an article in the *Secolo XIX*. I felt a blow in my neck but the bone did not break because I was light, I was suffocating slowly, slowly, the minutes passed and I did not die. I was thrashing around trying to grab the rope. Nothing. I was suffocating. And it was darkness.

Mum found me unconscious with the rope in my hand. She called the doctor, examined me thoroughly, asked me a few things I don't remember, then gestured to Mum and they went into the living room to talk.

Mum never told me anything. I was ashamed and avoided the subject.

I had realised that I was a good-for-nothing. And a coward.

I concentrated on doing my duty and more or less succeeded. Yes, there was the Martinez Square interlude. Shortly afterwards mum died of a heart attack. Was my conscience clear?

I was alone, or almost alone. Mafalda helped me get by.

I was working in the port, paying the mortgage on the house opposite the *Naval Repairs.* After six months in England as an almost waiter, I joined the *Italo-British Association.*

After listening at the door to my first meeting with the group of members practising English, the headmistress suggested that I take the CPE *Certificate of Proficiency in English* at Cambridge University.

I was the only non-graduated partner. What's more, I was a dockworker.

The director had informed the group.

That evening after dinner I knocked on the door of the living room where they were grouped in a circle. They were waiting for me. I greeted them in English and looked at the vacant seat next to the moderator who was the only English-speaking native speaker.

He was the English reader of Anglo-American literature at the University of Genoa. Yes, it was Peter, the one who shortly afterwards became my friend.

But back to my debut in the Albion language, with reference to the Latin albus, white, like the white cliffs Dover.

To sit down I had to cross the circle, I was staring at the floor so as not to stumble. Peter would casually start any topic and everyone would intervene to have their say. Strictly in English, of course.

After half an hour of listening to English being hammered out by high school teachers, engineers, lawyers and various professionals, Peter looked at me and said, in English of course:

"Well, now let's hear the opinion of our new friend, Mariotto."

I had prepared myself for thirty minutes by listening to their babbling, albeit more or less understandable.

Giorgio said this, Maria said that, so did Roberta and so on. Yes, I agree. But I come to Maria who regrets the time when she was not in the chair but was a studious student. And that's when I unleashed the only sciogli lingua that I knew. It had taken me an hour to learn it when my almost English girlfriend taught it to me.

Anyway, I passed the entrance test and was admitted to the last level, the fifth. And I got the CPE in English. The only piece of paper I am proud of. In that exam I experienced how teaching and examining at Cambridge University works. It also helped me a lot in writing in Italian.

Incidentally, I am not bilingual. To really know English takes more.

I take the futon in the tool shed at platform trunk, go to platform eight, sit with my back to the wall and fiddle with my mobile phone. I fall asleep semi-sitting down.

Chapter 15

Waiting for Godot

I know: I promised. I must no longer visit my wife's house.

I thought I was ready, I was wrong. I feel better. I still need a little more time.

As soon as I opened my eyes, my thoughts went to her. I went through the usual rigmarole. Cottage at the truncated platform still in the middle of the night, total sponge bath at the toilet, return to the cottage to leave the personal hygiene things, sit in the lobby, read newspapers, especially *La Repubblica,* nap while waiting for the bar and restaurant to open, breakfast and the day, how to spend it.

I get off the bus, look at the door: there is no one there, the kitchen shutter is closed. The coast is clear. I hurry.

I run to the bathroom, sniff my pool dressing gown and hairbrush. I ignore the pool bag.

In the bedroom I open the wardrobe and breathe deeply.

I go into the living room and smell two cushions on the sofa. I sit down and stare at the unlit television.

The smells revealed nothing unusual, Mafi lives his usual life.

The mental film begins. The images flow freely.

I see a scene in black and white. It is December 1943. Freight wagons depart from platform 21 at Milan Central continuously for the next two years. They are crammed with Jews, partisans, political opponents on their way to the Auschwitz concentration camps. In the first convoy there is the whole Guttmann family, cousins of my grandmother Pierina Mondolfi with their children, as well as Jews they are communists and do not have the black card of the fascist party.

The Guttmann tailor shop made uniforms for the military, black shirts and civilian clothes for the hierarchs. They felt safe because they did not flaunt their ideas.

None of them returned. Their names do not appear in any list of concentration camps. They never existed.

I wonder if an atheist can recite the Kaddish of the dead.

American historian Christopher Browning's essay about the German police and the 'final solution' in Poland attracts me and at the same time I would like to put it aside and stop reading it.

I read two or three pages at a time and not even every day. Basically, I learn nothing that most average informed adults don't already know. Massacres in Europe and elsewhere. What else do we need to know.

Inside me, the image of Mafalda blurs in the pages of the book. The obsession with massacres joins my abandonment and everyday reality. I strive to behave rationally.

I should start working again, increase gym attendance, write more. Try to socialise, make new friends. And why not, maybe have a relationship with a woman.

In this I am restrained. I am afraid of hurting my eventual partner. I know I could not fall in love. Yes, I have scruples.

When I was dating the girl from Martinez Square, Giancarlo my very handsome friend saw me on the street with her and was struck by her attractiveness.

"Mariotto, are you sleeping with her?"

"What are you talking about, he's sixteen, and then..."

"And then even if she was of age you wouldn't do her, be honest."

"Assuming she wanted me without being in love with a virgin, no. I would have remorse."

"Mariotto, possible you do not understand, if it is not you, it will be someone else."

"Better another one. I am like that."

I am methodical, habitual, I have no ambitions. I just want to have a family with children. I don't need anything else. I'm nobody special.

I am not the only one. All over the world the majority of men and women are like me. No one can prove otherwise. I'm just an average Joe. Full stop.

I have never accepted my mediocrity, which I have always experienced as inadequacy.

Besides, I always took it for granted that Mafalda and I would live our whole lives together. I never had the slightest doubt.

I have a strong temptation to live in the Genoa Brignole railway station for the rest of my life.

I imagine myself in a year or two, dressed in rags like the Lady. Yes, I can smell her stale sweat. After an initial period of regard for one's physical order, I too would get used to it and let myself go. Gradually my gaze would be absent and I would become hopelessly lost in my reverie.

The little radio off, no. But a notebook of blank pages and a pen that doesn't write, maybe yes. It would be a farewell to a life lived and fought. But, you want to stop being responsible. Of conforming to free will.

Eating, defecating, sleeping, perhaps napping. Waiting for Godot.

Mafalda is also an ordinary woman. Yes, she is tall, beautiful, has long legs, but she does not magnetise attention. She loves her children's class, reading novels and walking. If encouraged, she likes to go on trips.

But then why break the routine, the daily grind, abandon the partner who understands you, indulges you, loves you. And asks nothing more from you or from life.

She has always been fearful of her parents and obedient. She passed her school and university exams with flying colours. She never had hobbies. She followed pop music with moderate interest, like me.

With males she related shyly and I believe she never had crushes.

She with me, well, we have known each other forever, our relationship cannot be passionate. Our love chart is slightly undulating. With moments of flat calm.

But in the last year something happened, I can say it now, Giancarlo separated from his wife and accompanies the children to school, one is in Mafalda's class.

The child experiences the separation of the parents badly. He throws tantrums, provokes them, tries to turn them against each other. He blackmails them.

Mafalda has known Giancarlo - also - forever. They often go for an aperitif together and devise tactics and strategies to calm Carlo down and entice him to study.

Belin, I am jealous. Giancarlo is too handsome, even I can see that I am a man. Too sunny. It's not possible that now as a single man I'm not attracted by Mafalda.

She says it has nothing to do with her decision to leave me. Maybe, but I have strong doubts. He is a big car dealer, he is not rich, perhaps because he is honest, however, he is well off.

He told me how he works and what he earns. He gets 5% of the cost of the car from which he deducts wages, running costs and taxes. Finally, less than 1% of the turnover is what he gets.

He owns a penthouse that the judge attributed to his wife and daughter. He now lives in the pied-à-terre in Via della Maddalena in which he lived as a bachelor. When I lived in my little flat in Piazza Sarzano we shared a cleaning lady.

We know each other well. Some of our friends nicknamed us the winner and the loser. Of course I was the loser, Giancarlo used to say and still says now that it was him because he lost Mafalda. Now I think he won the rematch.

I know he has scruples with me, but to a certain extent.

He is an honest man, but he is also a medium-high level entrepreneur and is used to competing hard with no holds barred. I've seen them together, they look great. They look like two models posing for advertising. He is eleven centimetres taller than her, I am like her 175 cm. It's not that I'm short, no, I'm average height. But it goes. But I am muscular.

As a boy, even in winter I wore a polo shirt one size smaller to show off my physique. I always wore Timberland boots with an insole to raise the heel.

Fortunately, I got through that phase. I wanted to be taller to increase the impact of the personality. I didn't accept that I was mediocre under any circumstances, just anyone.

I do a job I love, I am happy, I thank my lucky stars. But I am only a salaried man, an employee. Every now and then I do appraisals, I accept to work for big companies. They pay me but I don't do it for the money. I have never been interested in being a rich man. I have enough. I like being an entrepreneur.

I work with companies because I feel like somebody, I am appreciated. Sometimes they call me doctor. Despite my efforts the last day I was in my wife's house she said,

"It's no use trying: you are and always will be a nobody. Yes, in spite of everything I love you, perhaps I even loved you."

When I was an assistant waiter in England I often went to the theatre on my days off to see an amateur company performing plays by Irish playwright Samuel Barclay Beckett.

I fell asleep on Mafalda's sofa dreaming *of Waiting for Godot.*

In this comedy of the absurd, two men wait endlessly for something that seems imminent, but do nothing to make it happen.

Chapter 16

Via del Campo

Fortunately my sleep is short-lived and Mafalda has not surprised me in her house. I look and listen furtively up the stairs and sneak away.

I head for Giancarlo's car showroom, it's pointless to prevaricate, I need a relationship with someone I feel affection for. I just need to talk to someone about me.

"Hi Gian, am I disturbing?"

"Mariotto, finally. I knew you would come. You can come to my place even at night."

"What beautiful machines. I don't know any of them. Mah."

"And I don't know any of the books you read. Let's talk about us."

"Actually, I mean..."

"Imar, I'm going for a beer, watch out. If that ball player comes, call me."

"Sure, Gian, don't worry."

We go to Balilla, our favourite bar. It is famous for its ice cream cakes and especially its ice cream. We order two mixed ice creams and two lagers. The pale ale is our favourite.

"Your flat is occupied by a couple, where do you live?"

"So, you heard..."

"Sure, with Mafalda I see you at school when I pick up the child. I have no problems with schedules. I trust Imar and I take advantage of him a little. Where are you staying?"

"I get by, I'm, like, staying at Brignole station."

"Belin, Mariotto, you relapsed. You play the clochard."

"No, Gian, no, really, I organised myself. I even made friends with the manager of the luggage depot, I left my trolleys there."

"You will not leave there. You know, in my house is my wife with the child. I sleep in the pied-à-terre at La Maddalena. But if you want you can lie on the floor at my place. I don't want you to stay there. It scares me."

"Gian, I'm a fool, an ordinary man, but I can defend myself."

"I don't mean that, I'm bigger and bigger than you, but you knock me out with one hand. I mean, your head. Your fixations."

"I am reflecting. I'm trying to come to terms with it. But, Gian, you..."

"I, what. Do you know me yes or no? We know each other. I've always liked Mafalda. I never understood why she chose you. I still like her. But you should know that I would never move a finger to have her."

"I know Gian, I have faith in you, I always have. But we have our weaknesses. Situations can arise that can make us commit things we might regret."

"Listen, Mariotto. My mind is occupied with work, which is just recovering after the terrible pandemic. Besides, I love my wife, I have not yet lost hope of getting back together with her. Which you should do too."

"These are two different situations, we are different. Besides, let's face it, you have a much better chance than me."

"There, I knew it. Yes, if we walk on the pavement and pass girls, they look at me. But if we take them to a bar and have a conversation, the situation is reversed."

"Maybe, I don't know."

"Excuse me, tell me Imar. Ah, he has arrived. Good. Two minutes and I'm there."

"Thank you Gian, go ahead, I'll pay."

'Forget it, it's already paid. I have the account open. Call me on the phone even at night. And, belandi, stop masturbating your brain."

I walk up Via XX with its arcades, cross Piazza de Ferrari and its large fountain, go down the elegant Via Casana, Via San Luca and its beautiful shops, and slow down in Via del Campo, the street of fireflies, yes, Fabrizio De André's street.

*"In Via del Campo there is a whore   
with big leaf-coloured eyes  
, if you feel like loving her  
, just take her hand   
and you feel like going far away  
, she looks at you with a smile,   
you didn't think Paradise   
was only there on the first floor*.

"Shall we go?"

I look at her, she must be 20 years old. Maybe less. Her face is covered with a thick layer of make-up. Maybe she wants to change her appearance. Not to be recognised. In spite of her vulgar appearance, the hyper-miniskirt that gives a glimpse of her buttocks is really beautiful.

"Yes, where?"

The street starts from Piazza Fossatello and ends at the ancient city gate of the Vacca family, then continues along Via Pré to the Romanesque complex of the Commenda di San Giovanni di Pré.

"I have a flat here on Via del Campo."

"Really, on the first floor?"

The broad smile uncovers a brilliant white set of teeth.

"No, unfortunately, I am not that. I'm on the second floor, the same?"

"Yes, it's the same. I don't want that, though."

He no longer smiles.

"Oh no?"

"No. Calm down. Take me to a club you know, calm. I'll give you whatever you want. I just want some company. We go where you feel safe. Then if I'm drunk you call a taxi and tell them to take me to Brignole station. That's all."

"You have convinced me. I risk nothing and I gain."

"Well, let's go."

At the end of Via Pré, near the Commenda, on the corner, there is a bar that I have already been to with some colleagues; in the morning there is excellent focaccia and good dry white wine.

We go inside, at the counter, there are three policemen, they are two men and a woman drinking coffee and a glass of water.

The latter takes a look in the mirror and turns to look at us.

"Hi, Cinzia, everything OK?"

"Yes, inspector, all fine, thank you."

The inspector, or inspector, stares at me. He smiles at me.

"Good evening."

Outcome.

"Good evening..."

"No more homeless people died in Brignole station?"

"Well, no, not that I know of."

"Are you a commuter worker? I often notice you around."

So much for the ordinary, anonymous man.

"Who, me, no. I came with my friend for a drink. Excuse me."

We sit on the corner. The policemen pay and make their way to the exit. The inspector turns to our side and waves to us.

By now I am catalogued both by the police and, indirectly, by the mala, at least by the hookers.

Cinzia and I now look at each other like two acquaintances.

"Well Cinzia, what will you have?"

"A pear juice. Here I don't have to order champagne. By the way, what's your name?"

"Mariotto. A juice, for me, and a bottle of whisky."

"However. You don't have to either. You only pay me for the time I reserve for you. Don't worry."

"I am not worried. We are quiet now. Remember the taxi."

"Did you fight with your wife? Don't believe you, you are not the only one who doesn't want to make love, only to vent."

"That's how it is. I only made love with her. I would not be able with another woman."

She looks at me carefully, surprised.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I do."

I take a sip of juice and a full glass of whisky.

"One of these days, that you don't feel like getting drunk, come by and we'll give it a try. You're not bad."

"Cinzia, do you have a man?"

"I had him, I sent him to jail, right after he beat the shit out of me."

"You had the courage."

"The inspector you saw gave it to me, she's a gutsy one. Now I have phone references and more."

I take a sip of juice and a full glass of whisky. I look at her in hope of consolation.

"My wife and I have been together since primary school. She jilted me, threw me out of the house. I don't understand a damn thing."

"Women are smarter than men. They make you a cuckold and if they want to, they even make love to you as if nothing happened."

"If he had someone else he would tell me. With me he would not be afraid. I am not violent. Besides, I have always made love to her."

"Calm down Mariotto. You were making love. We, sexually, are different."

"I don't understand."

"Remember, a woman can satisfy two or more men. Two men can hardly be enough for one woman."

"Well, I more or less understand that. But..."

"You don't understand a belin. A woman can have sex even when she is dead. And it happens more often than you can imagine. An ex-boyfriend of mine works at the mortuary, he told me some good ones."

"So, what is one to do with a wife?"

"What to do? There must be a reason they put women in chastity belts. And if Muslims veil women and segregate them at home, they, like in sport, make rules for males and rules for females."

"Nice help you give me."

"Then you don't want to understand. I push you. Let her think. And she will brake herself. She will understand that she must give herself limits, herself, otherwise she will lose herself."

The juice is finished. I take the bottle and finish it gargantuan.

"Mafalda, Mafalda, why, why. I want... Call me the taxi. I feel sick."

Chapter 17

Cinzia from Via del Campo

"Mariotto, you are finally awake, are you sick, very sick?"

"Why am I here? My head is bursting."

"Get up, don't laze around which is worse."

"Let me lean."

"Sit here by the window, I'll make you a strong coffee, OK?"

"Yes, thank you. How did I end up here, and why?"

"The taxi would have refused you and we would have had to call the ambulance and you probably wouldn't have wanted to. The bartender is a friend, he loaded you into the wheelbarrow at the warehouse, we took the lift and put you to bed. My sister is staying in this room."

"What a mess, we don't even know each other. As soon as I can move I'll take off."

"I know you well enough. I like you. If you like you can stay with me for a while, I think it would be good for you. Maybe you don't have a choice."

"How I have no choice, why?"

"Last night you were very sick. I looked in your wallet, to see if there was a note, an indication. On the mobile phone I found nothing."

"The wallet?"

"Here, check if everything is there."

"But of course. Did you, did you read the note?"

"Yes, it says you live at Brignole station and the phone number of a friend of yours, Giancarlo, I called him."

"That's it, good, you blew me away, now I'm really finished."

"You are wrong, he loves you. He asked me to host you, and that he would pay for everything."

"From frying pan to fire. You also told him that you..."

"That I'm a whore? No, not right away. First we talked about you and finally I told him I was a call girl. That's what I am. I have a select clientele. Professionals and politicians. And do you know why?"

"I have no idea. They pay well, but that's obvious. So?"

"Because with them I am safe, they fear, they are terrified of scandals. They don't put the money in my hand, they leave it lying around the room, like in a game."

"One moment, but you picked me up on the way."

"True. But I also told you that I don't have a man. Girls like me hardly do without."

I look at her surprised.

"There is nothing more than prostitution that makes a woman suffer loneliness."

"And you fight it with further prostitution?"

"Right. You see, I was at the window crying to myself and wondering if I was right to send my man to prison."

I stare at her mute.

"At one point I noticed you pacing back and forth, like you were looking for someone like me. You're not the type to go for whores. You were also clumsy.

You're not very tall but hunky, Marlon Brando style. I hurriedly made up and dressed, went down the steps two by two and asked if you wanted to come with me."

"So you set me up, bravo, seven plus," I try to reason.

'That may be so. But don't deny that you like me. Maybe you wouldn't want to - with your index and middle fingers in the air - 'betray' your Mafalda, but I'll upset you!"

'What the hell are you talking about. You enjoy your coffee. I'm leaving."

"Stop right there. If I don't bleed you, then I have to change my profession because it means I don't understand anything about sex and how to awaken certain urges in a man."

"Well, honestly, I must say I enjoy your company. You know, at the station at night I'm writing a book. Maybe you could help me make it, like, more *peppery*."

"Mariotto, I thought, I could write a book where I talk about myself and sex. Despite the orphanage I went to classical high school. Italian was the only subject in which I got more than a pass."

"Were you without parents?"

"When I was four years old and my sister six, we were in the car with dad and mum and we were driving over a bridge that collapsed. They died and we survived, albeit with some fractures."

"And then?" He tells it like it is about other people.

"Then, there were many foster homes, all failed, because no family wanted to take us together and we agreed that we would always run away. And so it was."

"Do you love each other that much?"

"More, we are like twins. Yet, we are completely different. I'm dark-haired, she's blonde, I'm a vegetarian, she's a carnivore, I, ever since I was a child I liked children and made love to them. She the first boy she had married him and made us two beautiful boys. Unfortunately, my boys were always wrong. We are both beautiful, though. I am more flamboyant."

"You're not thinking of quitting?"

"Yes, I think about it. And I certainly will. It remains to be seen when. I'm putting money aside. I can't live without a man though, no one has ever exploited me. And do you know why?"

"You tell me," I am more and more interested.

"The inspector told me. I am high but not dumb. She says, and she has a lot of experience, that in general prostitutes have a lower than average IQ. And in a way they tend to be prone to prostitution."

"You seem even smarter than me."

"I had never heard that one."

"Well, I'm a sportsman, I always try to evaluate my interlocutors and recognise superiorities over me."

"You don't have any complexes, do you?"

"It can be. But it helps me, because in any kind of confrontation, I always give my best."

"Listen. I have to get ready, my first appointment of the day is coming soon."

"Do I have to go out?"

"No, I have a room for them next to the entrance. When I bought the flat I designed a rational renovation."

Everything I saw from the furniture to the towels and kitchen towels is from Ikea and it is stylish and clean. The rooms are bright, relaxing.

The walls are decorated with informal modern paintings and posters of two beautiful girls, one blonde and the other brunette, very graceful. The two sisters are photogenic. Cinzia could be a model or a modeless.

She is 175 cm tall like me, the difference being that she is a tall woman and I, on the other hand, am a man of average height. In short, if Cinzia wears 12 or 16 heels, next to her I disappear.

I may have delusions, but objectively I have my reasons for feeling insignificant.

"Mariotto, you probably want to write, don't you?"

"No, you're not wrong, how long is... Your turn?"

"Normally four hours in the afternoon. From four to eight. But sometimes I work all day. But listen. On the roof I have a shed that I use as a cellar and a terrace. There's also a canopy and some deckchairs. You can take my computer and open a folder in your name. In the folder you can put your book and any other files. With the password only you can open it."

"Thanks, yes, I'm going up, call me when you're ready. At the station I write, I surf, I document with my mobile phone, but I also like to use the computer."

"There he is, go ahead."

"Hi, give me an idea of the time."

"Let's say nine o'clock, time to shower and a few things."

"By the way. Apart from things like pasta and other simple things I am not a cook."

"Don't worry there's a big deli nearby that often brings me lunch up, plus I have a big freezer stocked with everything."

Chapter 18

Zena

The terrace section is somewhere between a garden and a greenhouse. It is full of plants, saplings, mini-hedges. There is also a vegetable garden and hoses for automatic irrigation. Under the canopy there are gloves, boots, tools and some papers hanging from a notice board with maintenance notes.

Surely Cinzia gets a gardener to assist her.

This girl intrigues me more and more. She makes me think of Dr Jekyll. She is a mix of strength and fragility. She can organise herself. But I must be careful, very careful.

I grew up in these alleys, I was a garzonetto in the shops, I went to high school at the night school on Via Lomellini right in front of Giuseppe Mazzini's house. I also earned money running errands for the hookers. In short, this is my environment, I'm at ease. Finally, I'm at home.

I am no slouch, I think astonished, I adapt easily to living with a prostitute. Cinzia is the first of them, now that I am an adult.

I look at the view. The building is one storey higher than those in the surroundings. You can see the rooftops and the mountains. The headache is gone.

I am relaxed, my life, loneliness, my wife, Brignole station are in another city, beyond Porta Soprana, the door with the guillotine, outside my Zena.

I turn on my PC, through the password I open my folder which is Dropbox, the super secretary, there are my writings, all the photocopies of receipts of all kinds, the books and everything I write. The thousands of photographs I have taken and do. I have had this secretary for more than ten years.

There is everything that passes between my mind and heart. I start taking pictures of the garden and the view again. Then, I will photograph the flat.

I am starting a new chapter of the new book and I am titling *it Cinzia di via del Campo*.

I write on the spur of the moment, I have the ideas. Not inspiration.

It is good to clarify one thing about writers. Inspiration does not exist. Either you have talent or you don't. Writer's block is not the lack of inspiration, it is the idea of the continuation of the story that you do not have at that moment.

It is enough to reread a few previous pages, or for a new story, come up with a story that can be summed up in one or two lines.

'Renzo and Lucia want to get married, a nobleman opposes and they run away divided, amidst the plague and hardships, a friar helps them and they get married', two lines that could develop into a short story of a few pages or a magnificent story of over six hundred pages. And perhaps work on it over twenty years as Manzoni did.

Or to the primary school student dictate three words to him, leash, muzzle, rifle and say, write an essay thinking about these words.

This here is the idea you have to work on. It is talent, not inspiration, that you have to use.

Woody Allen, who has talent to spare, once said: "Let me sit in traffic and I'll write, if I have something to say." In short, with every blank page look for a cue and move on.

The phone rings. It's her.

Arrival.

"Cinzia, I am embarrassed. You set a fabulous table."

"I wanted to do my best. Clients aside, a man like you never entered my house. You have the face of a good guy, and I have to be honest, those guys I would have introduced to my sister, but I would never have gone out there."

"So what have I got to do with it?"

"When I was left alone, I experienced a big trauma. I relived my life and mistakes."

"It arrives at the window of the day before yesterday."

"Yeah. I was remembering that I'm twenty-six years old and I wanted to do something important. But I didn't know what. When I see Marlon Brando, yes, you look nothing like him. But I'm talking about the body, the walk. You walked slowly looking around. You were awkward because at that moment you were out of place. I thought you were in a slump. And you are, in your own way, sexy."

"I had just talked to my friend Giancarlo and felt humiliated. When I am depressed I go back to my alleys."

"Your alleys?"

"I was born and raised on Via Maddalena. Cinzia, I'll take a shower and then we'll continue at the table. Look, read the last chapter I wrote *Cinzia from Via del Campo, it*'s four pages, it's a preface to our chat."

"Mariotto, I like the way you write. When I was at school between boys I liked to read, I am fast and have a good memory."

"Now you know who I am. I emphasise that my life has always revolved around Mafalda. When I married her I was sure that I would be with her all my life."

"I understood that. And that makes you interesting in my eyes, because albeit in your own way, to me you are the wrong man like all the others. Therefore unattainable."

"What do you mean?"

"That if you are wrong, I will change you, and you will love me. That is what all women think, in vain. Before they cry over the cynical and baroque fate that is against them."

"This is great lobster, it's fresh, how did you do it?"

"When you were in the bathroom, the deli boy brought it up to me together with quarantine potatoes from our Apennines. But the big salad is from my garden, I tend it with all the love I am capable of."

"But you are eating a veggie burger."

"I am a vegetarian."

"Me too, but I like eating fish."

' I guessed. And I also think you won't eat anything else. Right?"

"In fact, I am not a mansion."

"Well, would you like to sit on the terrace and look at the stars? We can also talk, let's see."

We told each other enough. Then we went to sleep. On our own.

When I got up I had breakfast, she was still sleeping, before I left I wrote her an e-mail.

'Cynthia dear,

we had a good time, very good, at least, me.

We are young and single, I would like us to hang out for a while, platonically, I mean, I don't know if friendship between a man and a woman can exist. It doesn't matter. You know why you cultivate it, if our passion flower blossoms, it will mean that there is passion between you and me.

At nine o'clock I arrive with dinner and beer. I forgot to ask if you like beer.

I will use the keys you gave me.

With sympathy.

M

P.S. I hope I don't offend you, but it is possible that I will still be sleeping in the station in the future. As you heard from your policewoman friend, every now and then someone dies there for one reason or another. Therefore, I enclose the photo of the electronic identity card. Well, yes, also for my peace of mind.

Read my book on Dropbox. I have nothing to hide. Besides, you went to classical school, you are more cultured than me who graduated from evening classes.

P.P.S. Even great authors have one or more editors. I would like you to review the book. Even if negative your opinion I will take it into consideration.

Chapter19

The cleft

As soon as I enter the station I go to the corner and there she is. The lady has a serene look on her face, listening to the switched-off radio. Her daughter is talking to her.

I am happy.

I go to Ronaldo. It occurs to me that in my jacket I have the book on the Shoah and I haven't read a single page in two days. I take my trolley and put the book in it.

We make small talk and I go into the lobby to take my seat. I glance at the departures board and focus on the people passing by.

It's her, Mafalda. No, it isn't. Here we go again. My heart beats faster, I have left Zena and returned to Genoa. The other life takes hold of me again. Cinzia is distant, confused.

I sniff the air. I do not perceive the favourite smell of a lifetime.

I slip one hand into a jacket pocket and key the keys. It's ten o'clock, he should be at school. I go to catch the bus.

The shutter is down. The two chatterboxes are out of sight. I take the lift and enter the house.

I stand still in the hall. I breathe deeply. The smell of the cigar enters my lungs, I look at the sofa, I imagine the smoke, I distinguish Mafalda, shy, facing her father. He has something to say to her, she hangs on his lips.

I sit on the sofa, smell the cushions, they have been talking for a long time. Her father is a man of few words. He is intelligent, his daughter unfortunately has not lived up to his expectations, but he loves her and she knows it. Nevertheless, she does her best not to disappoint him.

Damn it! They put the key in the lock. I jump into the tiny pantry beside the front door.

He enters and I can smell the cigar. He approaches the sofa and moves it. He walks around the living room. He stops and moves again. What is he doing. Maybe he is looking for something. I feel suffocated.

"Mafalda, hello, can you hear me? I found him. He had slipped into a crevice in the sofa. I know you would have found it too. But inside there's the lawyer's business card, at noon we have the appointment. Yes, we'll talk about that too, don't worry. But I don't understand your hurry. I told you, six months of separation, then, a year waiting for the divorce. Of course, I'm sure it's a 2015 law. I have to go. Yes, if I can come tonight. Bye, but you're hiding something from me. You have to tell me. Bye-bye."

He goes out and locks the door.

A whirlwind of questions swirl in the mind.

Is Mafalda in a hurry to separate and divorce me? Why the urgency? What is she hiding? What does she have to discuss with the lawyer that is so important? What are they planning? What is her father planning? He is pragmatic. If he is so quick to talk to the lawyer, it means that it may concern his daughter, but above all the matter at issue concerns him. Mah.

He runs a bank and from what I hear he does it well.

I sit on the sofa, stare at the unlit television and tell myself not to fall asleep. I revolve around the same questions.

I go to the bedroom and open the wardrobe and breathe deeply. I go into the bathroom and smell my pool dressing gown and hairbrush. I neglect the pool bag.

I wonder why in two days I have not gone on to read the book on the massacres in the Shoah. Yet, we are inoculated by film, television and print media. I know why. Like everyone else, I wonder if I am capable of such a heinous crime. The answer disturbs me.

I get up and with my usual caution leave.

I decide to go and relieve tension at the gym. To resume with my work and my life, no way.

After two hours, I leave the gym and go to Zena. I pass by the 16th-century Via Garibaldi. Until the nineteenth century it was called Via Aurea, in these majestic sixteenth-century palaces lived the city's many notables. Palazzo Tursi, the largest and most impressive, today houses the Genoa City Hall.

I descend into alleys I have never been into. Is it true that the old city is one of the largest in Europe?

I go round and round, and I relive the meeting with Cinzia. She attracts me a lot, sexually and intellectually. I think about her chosen profession. Morally I am indifferent. Rather, it is the effort of wearing her mask of the sexual machine that strikes me.

Heavy cosmetics are not enough. To earn the rich Mercedes she has to look erotic and excite the client's distorted fantasy, or, despite her face involuted by cosmetics and her physique eroticized by transparent underwear, she has to assume a sympathetic expression that not even the confessor or the psychoanalyst would do, and listen to the whiny complaints that make her wish for a quick and liberating penetration and go.

Then there are the perverted days. The hardest ones. Then, he has to beat, whip and abuse the mentally disturbed person using his imagination.

There must be a minimum of participation.

Then, perhaps, he takes a shower and goes to church to talk to Our Lady or his son, or the father of his son.

It is easy for him to lie down in the bathtub and demand that she place her bottom on the edge of the tub and urinate in his face in a jet. Or he puts on a glycerine suppository and alternates urine and faeces.

When I used to run errands for the hookers as a child, I would often, curious, and sometimes even excited, listen to their conversations.

Once, when I was about thirteen, an Ecuadorian woman asked me if I wanted to be initiated into sex, I told her I had a girlfriend, which was true, because she had seen me with Mafalda.

There, if I go to Cinzia now, I don't necessarily have to make love to her. In the email I sent her I made it clear that I don't want to have sex with her at least for a while.

The fact is that her sensual beauty puts me on edge, I imagine her undressing, and I look at her as if I had never seen a naked woman before. Not only that, I see her turgid breasts with firm, red nipples. And the round buttocks like ancient Greek statues. And the face. Free of make-up, beautiful. Tumid lips desire me and I torment myself. I want to but I can't.

I probably couldn't do it. I would have to fight against performance anxiety and the dazzling image of Mafalda.

Tonight I am going to sleep at the station. I take the metro to the San Giorgio stop and get off at the terminus, Brignole. I phone Cinzia.

"Mariotto, why are you calling me? It's true, you didn't say you were coming, though, I was waiting for you."

"Cinzia, half an hour ago I was at your place in Via del Campo. But I didn't feel like coming up. I got anxious. I'll come tomorrow night though, I promise."

"I get it, I believe you. I'm reading your book, I think I know you. I was close to you last night, we know the chemistry between us. Don't worry about it. I just need you to be here, even in your own way."

"Cinzia, eh, I mean, I'm fine with you. If, you want it, I'll be there for you one way or another for as long as you want."

"I do."

"Yes, like to say, emotionally, I am convalescent. I need to recover."

"I know."

"See you tomorrow, Cin. Thinking of you."

"See you tomorrow, Mariotto."

From the shed on the truncated platform I take out my futon and go to the off-duty lounge on platform eight, sit with my back to the wall, pick up my mobile phone and resume writing *Just an Ordinary Man*, just a few pages. And I travel in my mind.

How come so far I have not thought about legal separation, let alone divorce? Because for me it doesn't exist. It's absurd, Mafalda and I are like Siamese brothers, we're indivisible. Or not.

But what does Mafalda believe? I am empathetic, I put myself in other people's shoes, I can think and act like others, that's why I write. But it doesn't work with Mafalda.

The famous surgeon who has his son operated on with an open heart by his less experienced colleague does so because he is emotionally involved. He fails.

I fall asleep with my mobile phone in my hand.

Chapter 20

Pinocchio

Around four o'clock I wake up, go to the lodge, leave the futon, take the toilet bag and go to the toilet. The euro coin doesn't fit, they've jammed in a different coin. I traffic for a few minutes and pull it out, insert mine and go to tidy up.

I sit in the lobby, take my mobile phone, as soon as Ronaldo opens I have to charge it.

I read the news, also from Genoa. Apparently they are building the new dam five hundred metres from the current one. It would be a cyclopean undertaking like the Mose in Venice. I am in favour. It is the rule of evolution as well as increasing the population to the bitter end in order to sustain the present one.

Of course, if we don't expand into space in time, we will end up like the population of Easter Island that became extinct because they exhausted the trees and resources on the island.

Probably the port I know and live in will change and I will struggle to adapt. And I will become obsolete. Amen.

I love Brignole station. I used to come there as a child, it was like going to the circus. There were so many people I was curious about, coming and going. They would get on and off the trains. I would get on and travel there forever.

I am at ease. But I miss Mafalda. I fell from the clouds. Separation, divorce, what's that. I just hadn't thought about it. If it's possible I feel even worse than when she sent me away.

My head is burning. I can't make up my mind. All my rationality where has it gone.

Yet, it is simple. I must come to terms with it. But let's reason. We grew up together, we have always loved each other, is it possible that all together she no longer feels anything for me? I don't believe it.

Is it possible that he still loves me but no longer wants to be with me? If so, why?

I feel as lonely as when I was a child and wanted to hang myself.

I learnt this from the first book I read, *Pinocchio*.

At school I always saved myself by the skin of my teeth, but with Italian I pulled myself up.

I always survived by getting five or six, that is, between a pass and a fail, until I graduated. At secondary school with Collodi's book I won a prize.

In the theme we were assigned, we had to talk about our favourite book or magazine.

I, who usually in everyday things am lamer than Fantozzi in the worst, or even tragic moments, a stroke of luck when I am about to plunge into the abyss saves me.

Just then I had read an article in the *Secolo XIX* about that book I had read a few years earlier.

And I have always carried that book in my heart.

I wrote that the story of the puppet and his father was inspired, even in style, by the adult verism of Giovanni Verga, a contemporary of Collodi.

In the article, the author explained that the ending of the fairy tale, at first, was completely different from the one we know. In fact, in the story we know Pinocchio at the end becomes a real boy and lives happily ever after with his daddy.

Instead, there had actually been a previous ending, which due to fierce and repeated complaints was changed.

When the child took on his new form in the flesh, the Cat and the Fox hanged him from an oak tree.

And this ending, when I was seven years old, my mum told me about it when she gave me the book.

And the story of the puppet Pinocchio hanging dead is my favourite book. The book, translated into more than 240 languages, the best-selling Italian book, if it had kept the original version, would it have achieved the same success?

Certainly, the original has always lived inside me.

Sometimes, like now, I think of a man who came from deep in Sardinia and wanted to marry my mother and be my father. His daughter, a lawyer, appropriated all his possessions and he shot himself in the head.

Here, I, on the other hand, one day as a child thought of hanging myself.

*Oh, my father! If you were here!*

*And he had no breath to say anything else.*

*He closed his eyes, opened his mouth, stretched his legs and,*

*Given a big shake, he stood there as if numb*.

I go into the gym and the personal trainer stops me, not mine, but we talk:

"Mariotto, are you OK?"

"Yes, why, do I have a bad face?"

"No, but you seem different to me. You train with doggedness. Not with the usual relaxed pleasure."

"Well, you are right, you do your job well, you have an eye. I actually have a little problem, but I hope to solve it."

"Mariotto, physically you are in very good shape, you just need to do some running. There is no need to slaughter yourself. And then talk serenely to yourself."

"Thanks, Alberto, I'll take your advice, I'll run a little on the treadmill. Listen. Would you give me a massage later, in fact, double, of course if you're free."

'Yes, go easy. Call me when you're done. It'll be good for you."

"Shall we go, Alberto?"

"Mariotto, here, on my neck and shoulders, do I hurt you?"

"A little bit. But I'm glad."

"I hurt you because you are very tense. Very. Try to relax. Concentrate on your breathing, yes like that. Don't worry, let go, if you fall asleep, it's better."

"I don't fall asleep, but I'm really well. Alberto, I have to make a decision, but I can't."

"I can see that. You're afraid, aren't you?"

"That's how it is, unfortunately."

"If you can, take your time."

"Right, I have to take my time. But inside, I always have the urge to run like I have to catch a runaway train."

"If you can, come every day, don't worry about my fee."

"You make a living from this, you have three children. I have no vices and I have a good job, I am on holiday now. My worries are not financial, I wish they were."

"There, the gentleman is served. You can take a shower now, lukewarm."

"Thank you, Alberto. Here's the money, it's well spent, go now, leave me with my thoughts. See you."

"See you, Mariotto."

I'm going to Mafalda's. And everything go to hell. I need it. One more time. Yes, I already said that, so what?

I knew it. The two chatterboxes stand by the door gossiping. If I dislike them, there must be a reason.

I look at the bar, there are two guys having a drink. I go in and ask for an orange juice. It is an anonymous but clean bar. A girl with a bored face serves me. I drink, pay and say hello.

The two gossips have vanished. I hurry to the lift and go to the penultimate floor. I enter the middle flat.

The smell of the cigar is the first I perceive. In the room, there is a faint citrus scent. In the wardrobe, only his smell. In the bathroom it's the same with the hairbrush and the pool dressing gown. It seems to me that the smell is less intense. The sports bag is open.

I sit in the lounge, watch the switched-off TV and watch my mental film.

Mafi, you want separation and divorce. Well, you'll get it. Ask me, let's talk about it. But what else is there, may I know? Because there's something I don't know and you won't tell me, isn't there?

We know each other well. We read each other's thoughts. When we met down in the pit, I felt there was something I was missing.

All right, I'm leaving now.

See you, Mafi.

Chapter 21

The former

I get off the bus at De Ferrari, do Via Casana, Via San Luca, Piazza Fossatello and arrive in Via del Campo, it's after nine o'clock.

I slow my pace and discover that I have a new anxiety.

Call-girls are a dangerous profession. Yes, the clientele is select and she is very scrupulous about staying away from scandals. But there is always the imponderable. For example, a wife who gets on her nerves and resents her husband a little and the prostitute a lot.

Or the man who falls in love and believes he is in love and wants to leave his wife for real, and start a new life with the woman who does not love him and that she would like him to be in her place.

I am not cut out to be a pimp and be violent to the ill-intentioned or pseudo-lovers.

If I have the physique I certainly don't have the psychology.

Instead of taking the lift I walk up the stairs, as if to delay my arrival. I try to put my thoughts in order. Physically I am really well.

But I am nervous. I am anxious to see her, to be near her, to smell her, but at the same time I am afraid. Afraid of what? Fear of myself. I am tense.

I pull out my keys and hear loud banging on a door, and a man's screams.

I had already heard them from the stairs but I was deep in thought.

In a moment, I don't feel any more. I am numb.

I throw open the door, which slams against the jamb and makes a loud noise.

He turns around and we square off, in a split second. I see a stout young man, a medium-major about my age, ten centimetres taller than me, in his hand he is clutching a switchblade, his eyes are those of a raving lunatic.

He sees a young man, smaller than him, medium weight, very gymnastic. His eyes clouded and fixed, expressionless.

I stare into his eyes and approach him slowly. His muscles are tense, ready to jerk. He stands still with his back turned to the bathroom door.

He raises his right hand, the blade is aimed at me. I approach as slowly as a cat. I do not look away.

Cinzia screams.

"Go away, I called the police. Go away, go away."

I seem to sense uncertainty in him.

"Who are you, go away or I'll kill you."

I do not reply and continue to approach slowly.

I am sixty centimetres away, I stop.

He swings the knife spasmodically.

I slowly raise my left arm towards him and he immediately tries to stab him. He misses.

I grab his arm with my right, lower it onto my knee, and with the help of my left arm he cracks and sags pendulously, his mouth letting out a shriek at the top of his lungs.

I trip him and he lies on the ground. I grab his right leg and twist his ankle, another scream. He can no longer run away.

I call 112 and give the address.

I sit waiting.

"Cinzia, it's over, open up."

He comes out of the bathroom and throws himself into my arms.

"He opened the door with the keys I didn't know he had."

"He's your ex. How come he's free?"

"His mother is dying, she got a permit."

"Well, now he won't have any for a while."

"You called the police."

"The 112, I don't know who will come."

The intercom rings.

' I answer. Lie down on the couch and say you don't feel well. Yes? Penultimate floor. The situation is under control."

"Cinzia, be calm. We take turns telling the fact. You your part, I mine."

"Please come in, I am a friend of the young lady."

"We are two marshals. Tell what happened."

We skipped dinner and signed our declarations.

The carabinieri called the ambulance, which loaded the ex and left.

I am worried, because legally I am married and live in Via Albaro. This means a long time for explanations to my wife's family and court appointments for the trial.

What my in-laws and acquaintances will say, I don't care.

For Cinzia it is less hassle, she only has to update her sister with whom she has a very good relationship.

We go out to eat, on foot. To relax.

"Mariotto, I tell you before we enter the restaurant, you are my guest. It is the least due."

"No objection."

"Cinzia, let's sit in the corner, it's my favourite place."

"Yes, Mariotto. Here in via Gramsci is a quiet place. Listen, he came to take revenge because I denounced him. He wanted to kill me."

"Cinzia, I know. Do me a favour, let's pretend nothing happened. Unless you need to inform me of something important, let's talk about us."

"Alright Mariotto. But isn't it late for you? Tomorrow you have to go to work, or not?"

"No. I am on holiday. Until I swallow my wife's bitter pill I consider myself convalescent."

"I gathered from the book that you love your job, so what?"

"Yes, but it is challenging, I have to be lucid, I will see when to start again."

"Yes, I think you do well."

"Cinzia, you don't even have a thread of make-up."

"I thought maybe you like me better like this."

"Yes, and you are beautiful. You are unrecognisable. When I met you you impressed me, you reminded me of *Doctor Jakyll and Mr Hyde."*

"Doctor Jekyll, even."

"Looking at you now, I can't imagine how you can split like that."

"I often ask myself that too. But if I go back in time and remember my dates and the logs I used to make to go out with guys, then, I realise that I was predestined."

"Well, as long as you are honest with yourself and others."

"That's what I try to do. It's difficult."

"The ultimate goal of religions and psychotherapies is to accept ourselves and the reality around us."

"Do you accept yourself?"

"Here's the question of questions, I try to accept myself. I struggle to live with my mediocrity."

"To me you are not mediocre."

"You have to see what you are referring to."

"You are a strong man."

"Muscles do not make a man above mediocrity."

"Excuse me, Mariotto, but then why do you bulge your muscles?"

"Even as a child I wanted to discharge my excess energy. And, then, Mafalda was swimming. I wanted to make myself beautiful with Mafalda. She's a strong woman and not competitive, like me. Excuse me, I don't want to talk about her."

"It happens accidentally, you have lived your whole life together."

"I too am strong, physically and emotionally. However, he suddenly burst into my house, and armed to boot. I didn't have time to react."

"I understand him. He was overwrought, is it not drugs?"

"Only occasionally, even with alcohol. But he has - had - no addictions."  
 "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"Gladly."

"This is corso Maurizio Quadrio, the continuation of corso Aurelio Saffi. See those cranes and ships? That's the port of the Riparazioni Navali. And that beautiful square with the children's games and the two sports fields is right under my window. Do you like it?"

"A lot, it's right on the edge of the historic centre. Genoa was born in this neighbourhood, wasn't she?"

"Yes, more or less. My palace was built in the 17th century."

"Indeed! But then there are ghosts,' he says, laughing.

"Unfortunately, nothing, not even a rattle of chains at night. Not even negative energy. On the contrary, especially when I look out the window at the ships and the sea my endorphins kick in, which are a positive drug."

"Too bad, I would have liked you to tell me about the presence of spirits."

"Cinzia, spirits and miracles and other things exist only for those who believe in them. I fervently hope that the couple in my house will leave soon. They are good, I believe they will as soon as possible."

"I wish you well and I envy you."

We went to sleep. And we didn't make love. But we had a good time.

The next day a surprise awaited us.

Chapter 22

The Cuban cigar

I get up at dawn, make myself a cup of orange juice, put five heaped tablespoons of muesli in it and read the news on my phone. I save the local news for when I get to the station.

I send a good morning message to Cinzia and go out. It's a great walk. I probably won't go to the gym today. I cross the alleys and reach Piazza De Ferrari. There's only one thing I don't like about the square, the façade of the Doge's Palace, it looks like a faded theatre backdrop.

If I won a rich lottery I would give two things to our municipality and city.

The construction of a neoclassical façade at the Palazzo Ducale to match the one in Piazza Matteotti and, secondly, the construction of the underground station in Piazza Corvetto, which by the way is already prepared.

I go down Via XX, pass Via Fiume and enter the station. She is sitting upright in my place in the atrium. At her side the seat is free, I sit down.

"Good morning, Madam Professor, may I?"

"Good morning, dear. Sorry, I'm busy. I said."

The little radio in her ear is switched off. She smiles. Her daughter probably reminds her to go and wait for her at platform eight.

I turn on my mobile phone, go to the Genoa edition of La Repubblica, and almost have a stroke.

I have a flashback in my mind. Every policeman, carabiniere, investigating magistrate, in short, anyone involved in the investigation of crime, pink, white or birulò has a special relationship with some journalist, because they exchange favours.

The fact is, that what happened the previous evening in Via del Campo, the street immortalised by Fabrizio De André, is recounted in great detail, complete with photos, on the front page.

Cinzia's ex, before going to see her, went to visit her dying mother in hospital. A few months earlier, after beating Cinzia to a pulp, he went into hiding in his mother's house in Via Lomellini, in a secret room built in the Second World War.

The mother, when the police came to ask her about her son and informed her what he had done, showed the policemen the hiding place. He, on special leave, went to the hospital to visit her and strangled her.

He then went to Via del Campo to kill Cinzia.

Photos of the three of us are prominently displayed on the front page.

Cinzia, the ex and myself.

As I finish reading my act of 'heroism', the phone rings.

It is Mafalda.

"What the fuck did you do?!"

"Me, nothing. I went to a friend's and got into a fight, that's all."

"That's it? What do you take me for. That's a prostitute who goes with everyone, who then are rascals."

"One moment, let me explain."

"You don't have to say anything. The newspaper was clear. Her lover is a murderer and that one is your friend."

"It's not exactly what you think. I..."

"I don't care, that's not why I called."

"Oh no, and for what?"

"Your shenanigans don't concern me, not any more. We need to talk to each other."

"Mafi, I don't ask for better."

'I think you're wrong. Anyway, I need to sort some things out, then, I'll send you a little text to tell you when you need to come over. That's all for now."

"Yes, Mafi, whatever. See you."

He needs to sort some things out. We need to talk to each other. To tell us what. Why? My mind is already a whirlwind. Now I'm even more confused. I miss her so much that I couldn't miss her more. I want to undress her, make love to her, cuddle her, smell her.

But I felt her distant. I must convince myself that I have lost her. My life no longer has any reason to exist.

Now I understand why when I confronted the ex I did not lose my head. I don't care about anything. Only Mafalda can excite me. The rest doesn't matter.

I am monogamous, I only want a companion at my side. I have no talent, no real passion. I can even do without children, but I want a woman to love. Isn't that normal? Almost all humans desire this.

The family, the rest is an afterthought.

My rationality suggests that I overcome myself and look for another woman. But love the real one is toxic, very toxic. It is addictive, getting it off is a Sisyphus-like feat. I roll my love up the hill and when I reach the top, at last, I feel free, but he rolls, again, down below. And so on.

I get up, Madame is no longer there. She has gone to platform eight, to wait for her daughter.

Dying I do not want, I cannot. But oblivion, yes. I envy the Lady.

When I was bivouacking in Martinez Square, I had almost reached the Lady's stadium, but that priest stopped me at the edge of the abyss.

Do I really save myself?

I have to go, I have to understand, I have to meditate.

The shutter is down, the entrance to the gate is free, I go.

I walk in and immediately feel it. It has a soft, intense flavour. And an aftertaste that doesn't leave you. By now I know the cigar, it is the strong, light Habanos and it takes you prisoner.

Luckily Mafalda's dad doesn't have a moustache, I could never have gone near him. Even without those wisps under his nose he already smells bad enough.

One of these days I have to ask a woman how she can kiss a moustached man.

Mah, maybe I'm too fixated on hygiene. But the many carcinogenic substances contained in cigarettes and cigars I am not making up.

I go into her bedroom and open the wardrobe. No cigar, it's a healthy smell of woman, of a female still young and active.

In the bathroom, the pink swimming dressing gown is piled uncomfortably on the sports bag. She is able to swim, briskly for more than an hour. Too bad I'm not good at swimming, because it is invigorating.

Swimmers are very strong. And Mafalda on our trips when we walked from morning to night was tireless. I only had to struggle to get her out of bed. I always slept well but little. For a while when I was a boy, as soon as I went to bed and turned out the light, I would start counting with the intention of remembering, when I woke up after four or five hours, what number I had reached before I gave in to sleep, I never remembered, but I probably never reached twenty.

Well, I'm going to the gym, hopefully to meet Alberto the personal trainer. He's intelligent and smart. He is balanced, also because he has everything. He has a job he loves and a close family. He doesn't need anything else. He is also an ordinary man.

If Italy invaded Switzerland and he, even considering his physical condition, was conscripted into the army, put under pressure and ordered to participate in genocide, how would he behave?

The man is all gym and family. And he is happy. One day a boxer from Veneto came to the gym who was to fight a very important fight three days later. Partly out of stress, partly because of who knows why, he was persuaded to take drugs in order to be able to train hard.

He was probably not used to getting high, however, that morning under the fumes of drugs he became aggressive. Two employees approached him to calm him down and he didn't hit them, he picked them up, one in each arm, and threw them against a huge weight and barbell rack that crashed to the floor.

Alberto intervened, put a belt around his neck and held him down on the floor. When he got him up, half choking, he convinced him to take a shower and leave.

That boxer was a heavyweight of 99 kilos and 201 cm in height.

No one in the gym has ever seen Alberto altered. I have, however, seen his wife, she is a beautiful psychiatrist and in love with her husband.

If my wife were like that I would stop masturbating my mind all day and probably also at night.

Chapter 23

The Zena cake

"Hi, Alberto, can you manipulate me a bit, do you have time?"

"How much do you work?"

"Not long, about an hour."

"Alright, when you're done give me a sign. Put a stick between your teeth, because I'm going to take you apart and put you back together."

"Belin, Alberto, that's how you scare me."

"Go, go, with you it takes more."

I did some treadmill work, some weights and some floor work.

Then I made a sign to Alberto and went to the massage room.

His hands on my body feel good afterwards. But what I want most is to hear those few persuasive and balanced words of his that put my thoughts in order.

Someone here and there in the gym looked at me with curiosity.

They obviously read the paper. Alberto seems not to have. Just as well.

Gym goers have different motivations.

They range from caring for one's body to wanting to socialise and perhaps find a partner.

In my case, I said, it was emulation. Mafalda loved the sea and swimming from a very young age, I almost simultaneously wanted to make myself beautiful and strong in her eyes.

Unfortunately, I realised that even then my appearance did not stand out from the other children. Giancarlo, on the other hand, stood out among them all. He was taller than his peers, had a slender physique and his face, in particular, was bright. Round, the dimple on his chin and his light brown, curly hair adorned him like a painting by the great 19th-century Austrian portrait painter Friedrich von Amerling.

I like 'my' gym, it is very big and above all well ventilated.

Today, as then, I enjoy doing abdominal exercises on the Swedish wall bar and climbing the rope without the use of my legs.

One evening when Mafalda had come to pick me up from the gym, she watched me practise on the rope for a while. When we left, she said to me with a laugh:

"Mariotto, you should go to a nightclub and do pole dancing, which is a mixture of dancing and pole gymnastics," he added seriously, "but you should wear a mask, to hide your identity and your face, which is not sexy. However, the physique is erotic, especially the pectorals'.

After the shower I greet Alberto, he gestures for me to stop.

"Mariotto, if you need me, call me at home. For anything and at any time. Put a stick between your teeth."

"Thanks Al, I'll keep that in mind, I need it."

He also read the newspaper.

I'm going to Zena. I can't wait to lose myself in my carruggi.

I start down Via Lomellini where there is the house-museum of Giuseppe Mazzini. I stop to look at the 16th-century portal of Palazzo Giorgio Centurione, one of dozens of Palazzi dei Rolli protected by UNESCO.

The portal is made entirely of marble. The pilasters support the semicircular broken tympanum that houses the Queen of the City, i.e., the Madonna and Child. The arch underneath, at the key, has traces of aristocratic arms abraded in one of the many aristocratic feuds.

In this building, about a couple of decades ago, in the evening school that no longer exists, I graduated.

During the day I did heavy work that I don't want to remember, in the evenings I came to doze in the desks and the beautifully frescoed classroom on the second floor.

Among my companions were Mafalda and Giancarlo who had followed me as a sign of their friendship (and love from Mafalda) for me.

Moving on, I don't know why I have never visited Mazzini's house and papers. Thinking about it, I reflect that when as tourists we visit a city, we enter museums and churches that few inhabitants of that neighbourhood know about.

I take a few steps and sit down at an artistic wrought-iron table, it is the Pasticceria Liquoreria Marescotti, founded in 1780.

This place, yes, I have visited it. I am fond of it. It is right at the end of Via Lomellini, in Via Fossatello. There would be a book to write about this beautiful shop furnished with the finest pine wood, fine black marble speckled with white and antique mirrors. The building, some parts of it, dates back to the 13th century.

When the Marescotti family had to retire from management, they preferred to keep the patisserie-bar closed for a few years rather than hand it over to someone who did not guarantee the integrity of the premises.

I enjoy some pastries and an orange juice. And I watch the people go by. Of course this magnificent historical find, photographed is in the city folder of my digital super secretary. From time to time I discreetly photograph the little old lady with the dog, the unsuspecting tourist who pulls straight ahead without appreciating this place and the shrines with madonnas and saints walled in facades and street corners.

But tourists apart from selfies in front of fountains, monuments, churches, panoramas, what do they enjoy looking at? Maybe they wander through the halls of a museum and the next day they don't know the name of the artist to whom the museum is dedicated. Mah.

By the way, what will there be to see in Giuseppe Mazzini's house?

I would drink a beer, though. Just that one, because with sweets I am satiated. I like wines and spirits such as grappa, whisky, cognac and so on very little. Whisky, I resort to in extreme cases like when I met Cinzia.

I pass by the Romanengo confectionery, which has been on Via Sozilia since 1780. Here I do not linger because as the name suggests the main product is candied fruit. That is, boiled and simmered in a concentrated sugar solution. Which for my palate is intolerable. I look at the super-candied display case and move on.

The Klainguti bar and pastry shop in Piazza Soziglia is completely different from Marescotti and Romanengo, but shares their elegance and class.

The 19th-century furniture is made of light and bright beech. The glittering chandeliers are made of Murano glass.

I order a lager, I ask them to wrap the Zena cake for me because I am going to Cinzia's later. I have them bring me a pen and a sheet of paper, I accompany the cake. I paraphrase *Bocca di rosa* De André*.*

They call it a rose's mouth

He puts love above everything

Love does it out of passion

Sacred love and profane love

But Rose's mouth loves only one.

How is she? I just informed her that I'll be there after nine.

The cake is made with almond flour and milk cream, which makes the dessert not cloying. La Superba, in Italy, not only competes with pesto, trenette and sciacchetrà. It also competes with pastry. Viganotti's chocolate, in Via dei Castagna, goes around the world.

Incidentally, in the harbour, Via dei Castagna is a myth. The Castagna, until 1958, the year that it and all the others closed, was the most famous brothel, but number one was the Suprema. So many stories of casinos were passed down among the dockers. I got a 'casinara' culture, which added to when I was a child and teenager, I used to garzonetto the bagasce.

That experience developed in me a deep respect for shopkeepers and whores. For me, both categories provide a similar service to their customers, one sells goods, the other commoditises one's own body.

Like all human activities, service can be offered either well or badly, with passion or not.

People may like it or dislike it, but it has always existed and always will.

I pick up the package and walk towards Via del Campo. I am in a good mood. I put on my earphones and listen on YouTube to Fabrizio De André, the greatest of all great singer-songwriters. The king of Via del Campo.

Halfway down the street *is La casa dei cantautori genovesi*, at Via del Campo 29.

This museum of music, from the 1960s onwards, where singer-songwriters such as Luigi Tenco, Gino Paoli, Bruno Lauzi, Fabrizio De André and many others have been to Italian music what the Beatles were to the UK and Rock'n'Roll to the US.

I have always avoided it, because I have no musical ear, I am out of tune even when I cough. And I suffered a lot from that as a child.

Successes like Paoli's *Il cielo nella stanza and Sapore di sale* or De André's *Bocca di rosa* and *Créuza de ma*, well those I hear and they move me even the first time I hear them. But many other songs of almost the same success leave me indifferent.

Hence, my escape from music, which I experienced as an impairment.

Apart from these modern classics I occasionally listen to classics like Mozart, Beethoven and a few others.

I shake off my thoughts and look at the light on the second floor.

As I walk up the stairs, unconsciously, I focus on the noises. A few words from a flat, but voices from the television prevail.

No noise comes from the door with the number plate Cinzia Costa. I open the door trying not to make any noise, as soon as I perceive her presence I whisper 'It's me'.

Chapter 24

Mouth of a rose

"Hello, Mariotto, are you relaxed, have you been to the gym?"

"Yes. So are you, Cinzia. You are beautiful."

"If you tell me again that I am beautiful, I end up believing it."

"That you are beautiful you know, you don't know how much."

"It's just that I wake up better. You are new to me. I'm glad."

"Even happy."

"If they had described you to me and predicted that I would meet you, and that we would even go out together, I would have replied that I thought it unlikely."

"I, on the other hand, am not surprised to be happy being with you."

"Yes, I understand, you grew up here in the old city and from what I read in the book as a child you used to run errands for hookers."

"Yes, I did. I got together early with Mafalda who is middle-class and grew up in Albaro, one of Genoa's wealthy neighbourhoods. I got used to the two societies. But my heart beats well here in Zena."

"I had never heard the ancient city called Zena."

"For me, the real city is this one and the appellation Zena represents it well. Sorry, I'll put the cake in the fridge."

"I thought the package was something for you."

"I had a beer at Klainguti's and got the idea to have their speciality."

"Mariotto, wash your hands, that dinner is ready."

"Actually I only see salad, potatoes and fruit."

"In fact, there's only one thing missing - he opens the oven - here it is. Baked sea bass."

"Damn, that smells good."

"If you still have an appetite there is cheese."

"It's fine like this. I eat very little. Of course, then we close with dessert."

"Before or after fruit?"

"First, first."

"Shall we watch some television?"

"No, let's talk a little and I'll go to sleep. Cinzia, I'll do the dishes tomorrow. No, no discussions."

"All right. You get up at dawn?"

"Yes, I leave early, I am used to it."

"You're undressing me with your eyes, what should I do?"

"Nothing, that's what I wanted to talk about. I'm just asking for a few days of, shall we say, adjustment, for me."

"I know. Don't worry, I can wait."

"Cinzia, I told you, I only loved Mafalda. And I want to be honest, despite everything, I still love her. If you have doubts or anything else, tell me."

"Yes, yes, I understand, don't worry."

"Apart from Mafalda, I have never desired any other woman like you. But I hope you understand me if I tell you that I would like to make love to you, but I cannot."

"Mariotto, let's talk about something else, it's OK. Take your time."

"Cinzia, one last thing. I don't want to humiliate you with a fiasco of my own."

He kisses me quickly on the lips.

I pull my mobile phone out of my pocket, go to YouTube and type in the best of Fabrizio De André. I take the paper I wrote for Cinzia and read.

"Cinzia, I paraphrased De André, I forgot to let you read it. The last line is mine."

'They call it a rose's mouth

He puts love above everything

Love does it out of passion

Sacred love and profane love

But Rose's mouth loves only one'

His eyes are shining. He puts his face on my chest and hugs me tightly.

We fall asleep in each other's arms.

After four hours, I wake up, lift her up and put her to bed. I have breakfast and toilet. Before leaving I go to her room and look at her, I feel like she is smiling. I kiss her lightly on the lips and go.

It is beginning to dawn. A garbage collector is washing the street with a water hose connected to the tank of the truck.

I follow the washing with my eyes, but I actually keep an eye on a couple of young men, one, short in stature, looks Italian, the other, tall and sturdy, looks Arab to me.

The Italian, as soon as I walked out the door, elbowed the Arab.

I take out my mobile phone and take a photo of the AMIU fire engine. Beyond the vehicle are the two suspects. I resume my walk.

I crouch down to tie a string, behind me I see no one. This could mean that the Italian pointed at the Arab to memorise me and they left.

The metro opens at five, I go to the dock and take it. I get off at Brignole, 'my house' at the moment. I go to the corner, Madame is in the chair, she is sleeping. I go and sit in the lobby in my seat and read the news on my mobile phone. I glance to my left and see that the café has just opened. I just grab a warm milk and walk towards Albaro.

I think. I have many thoughts to put in order.

Mafalda is the first. I came out of Zena and my life there immediately faded. Cinzia is now far from my heart. I am approaching Mafalda's house. The heart accelerates its beats.

He said we have to talk to each other, but now is not the time.

I am afraid. I felt her cold, detached.

I hope that my visits, maybe my hormones, in her house will influence her. Maybe they will awaken her to miss me.

I am not superstitious, I am referring to the traces we scatter around us. It's scientific, dogs sniff them out and if they make us look, they find us. Therefore, Mafalda could, unconsciously, "feel" my presence.

That is why I sit on the sofa.

As usual I go to my room, sniff the wardrobe, then in the bathroom I do the same with my swimming dressing gown and sports bag. Her swims continue. When I saw her in her playpen she was beautiful and with a powerful physique. She is very strong.

No cigar smell. They're up to something, I can smell it, I'm sure. And I'm in on it. I'd like to put a bug in the living room to record their conversations, but I don't feel like it. Besides, if they found out they'd definitely report me and I'm incensed.

If my wife took me to court, even if it was to separate us, it would be the first time for me to go in.

Of course, for her, her parents and relatives who are discreetly true Genoese, to read that the husband of the upright Mafalda is involved in a brawl in the alleys, and even got into a fight with a murderer, perhaps even a pimp, is very traumatising.

By the way, what is the relationship between Mariotto and the call girl from Via del Campo?

After all, what can you expect from someone who was born in the alleys, a dockworker who only thinks about bulking up his muscles and is not sure how he does it.

But what on earth would a girl of her lineage, a classy Schiappacasse, have seen in that energetic man? That common man, because, finally, that is what it is all about, Mario Rossi, as his name indicates is just an ordinary man.

Insignificant. Exactly.

I recognise that I am not indifferent to criticism. However, I act like one. I have good self-control. Moreover, I have never been ashamed of my origins. Moreover, I wonder if they knew that I, like my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, am the son of NN. That is to say, a bastard. Apparently, it's a tradition on our side.

With Mafalda I never had the chance to talk about it. I myself never gave it any importance. But I always felt the lack of a father. That yes.

I'm leaving. I must stop this obsession to come here. Am I also a masochist?

Chapter 25

Petru the Romanian

Arriving at the beginning of Via del Campo, I look at the lowered shopfronts: they are the majority. This is a worldwide problem, shopping malls, supermarkets, online sales, they steal the soul from cities that are increasingly reduced to dormitories. It is sad.

Apart from the few well-lit and well-maintained streets that lend themselves to strolling and the opening of hopeful shops, the rest of the city is little lived in. Vehicles with special permits are rare. Pedestrians too.

Two talking quietly attract my attention. They are Arabs, the faces are frightening. One I know: he is the one to whom I have been pointed.

As I walk slowly I read my mobile phone. I activate the mirror function, look at it and clearly see what is happening behind my back.

They are following me, no doubt about it. I think I understand why. I have to intervene, before it's too late.

I observe them carefully. Between the two I have to choose one, the one in charge and the one who decides. I keep fiddling with my mobile phone and try to get them closer. I turn from vico della Madonna and watch them to see who decides what to do. He is the tallest one, the one I saw when I left the house at dawn. His nose and left ear are crumpled.

He could be a former boxer, but also a mercenary soldier, which seems more likely. An assassin, or rather, a hired killer.

I could be his next target. If so, why. Who's paying him?

It is not necessarily Cinzia's ex who sends it. At least not directly.

If I eliminate drugs, among the major sources of income here in the alleys, prostitution comes next. But Cinzia told me that apart from occasional gifts of money, she has never given any to anyone.

I will stop here for now. There would be other sources of illegal gain, such as gambling, protection money, i.e. bribes from traders, then, usury.

There is a recess in the wall, it is the door of a warehouse. I wait, my eyes have lost their expressiveness. I have no physical sensitivity. The muscles are tense and ready to snap. I activate the voice recorder.

The moment they realise my presence beside the two of them is too late.

I hit the smallest one in the choke and he fell unconscious on the ground.

I grab the older man's arm with both hands and break it against the corner of the wall. I make him kneel down.

I bend down in front of him, grab his head and press his eye sockets with my thumbs, I am about to pull out his eyeballs. The pain and terror of being blinded are unbearable.

"Why are you following me?"

"..."

I press harder. Scream.

I press even harder.

"Enough, enough. It is Petru the Romanian."

"Why?" I always hold.

"Stop, I say everything."

"What does Petru want?"

"That we give you a bad beating and if you don't get out of Cinzia's life, you have to die."

"Why?"

"Don't you know Petru?"

"By name."

"He has control over gambling and whores."

"But Cinzia had a man who had nothing to do with that racket."

"Yes, he's in jail. They convinced him to leave Cinzia alone."

"Ah, so what?"

"Cinzia is very beautiful and young. She is worth a lot."

I slam his head against the wall and leave him there with his partner moving. I turn off the tape recorder.

I go to the dock, take the metro and get off at Brignole.

I enter the lobby and look for Madame, she is wandering among the people with a small radio in her ear. She approaches a Senegalese man with an armful of umbrellas.

Like many of his compatriots, he is over two metres tall and has his trousers slightly down, his pants and the beginnings of his buttocks are visible.

I approach her as she addresses the 'Vu cumprà'.

"Pull up your trousers. Now. I said."

He bewilderedly obeys and the lady with the mobile phone glued to her ear walks away.

I smile fondly. I love her. I sit and stare at the departure board. And I meditate.

I would like to read Browning's essay but I left it at Cinzia's. I grab my phone and go to Amazon. I look for the digital version on Kindle and buy it, add it to my library of over a thousand books.

I read again about the massacres of the Nazi policemen. The American historian is good and accurate. He is in controversy with a fellow countryman, they argue over quibbles and whether or not the killers, not only German policemen but also Jewish kapos and civilians, were really free to carry out orders.

The evidence shows that despite possible conditioning, everyone could have refused to kill defenceless people including women, children, invalids and the old.

Would I have killed those two? At that moment, if he had resisted, I might have gouged out his eyes. But can I now, me, consider myself at war?

I have always observed the laws. In port, given the work I do, I could have been bribed. I have never done that.

The time has come for me to turn to the law. I may be a potential murderer, but I am a man who respects civilised rules.

Tonight I have to talk to Cinzia. Her image in my mind makes my heart race. I don't want to compare her with Mafalda. They are too different.

However, with Cinzia, our relationship, our attraction is completely free. We didn't grow up together. We met, we liked each other. That's all. And we don't sleep together. I sleep in her sister's room. To date, we haven't had a real kiss.

The thought of taking us to bed, letting go of our senses makes me anxious. And I think of Mafalda. Who by now doesn't give a damn about me.

As I am watching, without interest, that the train to Sestri Levante is leaving, fear rises up through my body. I look around, people are moving normally. There are those who enter and those who leave the station. Those who arrive and those who go to the tracks. Everything is regular.

But I am afraid, nay, terrified. I am about to be killed.

What is happening to me.

I get up slowly. I leave the station. I look at everyone. Slowly I walk towards Zena. Cinzia, help me. Help.

I need to walk. I must get home before dark.

As soon as I reach Piazza De Ferrari I go down Via San Lorenzo, it is crowded. It is safe.

I pass the cathedral. I cut right from via di Canneto il Curto. I go straight ahead and after a kilometre I arrive in via del Campo under Cinzia's window. There are still a lot of people on these main streets.

The grip on my chest has loosened.

The sentences I have to say to Cinzia overlap. I must not lose the sense of what I want to say.

I have never been in this condition.

When Mafalda sent me away I did not understand what was happening to me.

I was humiliated, demoralised. I was ashamed. Right away I did not want to tell anyone that my wife had disowned me.

I am thirty-eight years old and it is more than thirty years since Mafalda and I have been together.

But how can we, all of a sudden, become strangers. Running into each other on the street and ignoring each other as if we had never met.

We slept under the same sheet. We have made love. We have and we have. Now, no more. It's all over. My wife said so. Not me.

Women can be meaner than men. Men are more violent, they kill more frequently, but only because they are physically stronger.

I have arrived. The light in the guest room is on.

Chapter 26

Fear

I open the door quietly, look at the customers, hear laughter, a dim light filters from under the door.

On tiptoe I go to my room. Then I go to my bath and take a shower, a long shower.

I sit down at my desk, switch on the PC and start writing the book again. Only one page, on the second I stop. I jump between newspapers and read the news. Then, I look past the window, behind the window opposite there is a child jumping on the bed. He is watching television, which I cannot see. He is happy. Lucky him.

Strange, that I didn't think of it right away.

I google Petru the Romanian. Many answers from different newspapers appear to me.

They are having fun over there. They must be playing sex games. Will she be naked? While laughing, joking, and performing sexual practices what will she think about? Will she give furtive glances at her watch?

Does she have to prove that she is really turned on? And how?

The two sexualities of woman and man are two different planets. No wonder the rules have to be different. If they are the same, then it does not apply.

In sport, men and women are divided, why?

Well, for the same reasons, evaluations must be different in sex as they are in sport.

A man if he has several women is gangly, if a woman has several men she is a slut.

If the man is physically stronger, the woman is sexually stronger, much stronger. Therefore, interpretations of behaviour must, as in sport, take into account the different physical and psychological conditions.

So much so that the number of psychosexual illnesses in men is considerably higher than in women.

In conclusion, the man in sex is the weak gender. Full stop.

So, Petru, 42 years old, emigrated from Romania and left behind him many legal cases that have become statute-barred.

He travelled around Italy for a while, where he was reported to have had a couple of fights, was denounced by some women for sexual and physical violence, but then, the complaints were withdrawn.

He has been resident in Genoa for nine years.

Romania has been a member of the European Union since 2007. Therefore, its citizens can travel freely in Europe.

He settled here in Zena, in the old town. He lives in a luxurious penthouse on Via Garibaldi, next to a Palazzo dei Rolli.

He is tall, athletic, has black wavy hair, wears a moustache and looks every inch like Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind,* only he is in a vulgar version. Women easily fall in love with him and hope to change him, of course. And they justify their every weakness, every violence towards them, using a passepartout: 'I am in love'.

Then, when they realise that their 'love' has no chance of being reciprocated, and that, on the contrary, they are used as a toilet brush, then, magically, if they feel physically safe 'magically' love turns into ruthless hatred.

Petru is suspected of having had nine people killed who were bothering him.

He is said to be the head of the gambling and prostitution racket.

He certainly owns two nightclubs and a restaurant in Via Gramsci, which seem to be the fruit of laundering the proceeds of racketeering.

What interests me is that I will be the ninth chosen one to be made to disappear.

What time is it. Nine o'clock. I stretch my ears. I hear a murmur. Hi. Yes. Good. Definitely. Thank you. I'm here.

Am I jealous? I don't know. Maybe in the future. We'll see.

Now, I have other problems. I have never been so afraid as I am now. I feel like I control it. For now.

Cinzia has taken a shower and is busy in the kitchen. Did she see the light from my room filtering through the door?

She is humming. Women have seven lives like cats, even more.

They work, look after the house, the children, go to the gym, and even give birth to six or seven twins if they feel like it.

If my doctor told me in the morning that I was pregnant, my hair would stand on end at the thought of handling the baby and giving birth. I would abort to the bitter end rather than face childbirth. Even if I wanted a baby as in fact I always did.

On television I have seen a few childbirths. Rather than go into a delivery room, I would rather face two professional killers and go on the loose.

"Mariotto, may I?"

"Come Cinzia, bye."

"Hi, you're early, how come?"

"I need to talk to you calmly. But let's eat first."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, you too?"

"Everything regular."

"Well, let's go into the living room."

"Have you seen your police inspector friend again?"

"Yes, often, but in passing, when he passes on patrol from the street. He greets me with sympathy."

"Good. I have a problem, listen."

"Mariotto, they want to kill you?"

"I told you everything. How did you meet Petru?"

"One night I was in a nightclub with a wealthy client, he sat at my table and asked to make my acquaintance, I invited him to leave my table and he did. He told me we would have another chance. He is handsome but not my type."

"But did I know who it was?"

"The owner told me when he left. Then, I looked it up on the net. Since then, some of my friends have told me about it."

"There, well the one I beat up told me he will kill me because he wants to have you in his stable."

"Yes, and I think it helped get my ex out of my life.."

"Cinzia, we need to meet with your inspector friend."

She looks at me doubtfully.

"You believe. Are you convinced?"

"Not you?"

"Yes, you are right. I'll call her right away."

"Good evening Inspector, I'm Cinzia, am I disturbing you?"

"That's it, it's serious. It is big. It's about Petru the Romanian."

"If it's OK with you, I would see you in my house. There is also my friend, yes, he is the one you met in Brignole."

"Well, we are waiting for you."

The inspector looks like an American policeman, the kind you see in the cinema. In the neck, a tattoo can be glimpsed from the shirt. She is an attractive woman in her forties, black hair, slightly dark complexion. A tough woman who has lived through difficult experiences. She loves her work.

"Cinzia, you were right to call me. This is serious. But, Mariotto, you are tough."

"Inspector, I had no choice. Fortunately, I attend the gym regularly."

"I can tell. However, I have the impression that he is hiding something from me."

"Yes, that's right. I didn't feel like talking about it now."

"Look, I am bound by professional secrecy. At this point you'd better tell me everything you think is relevant."

"Yes, it doesn't take much. My wife sent me out of her house a couple of weeks ago."

"Did he tell you why?"

"She told me she got tired of me. We have been together since primary school."

"A good story. Doesn't she have a lover?" He stares into my eyes.

"Apparently not. I went on holiday, I don't feel like working. I'm a merchant surveyor in the One Company, do you know it?"

"I know you well, go ahead."

"Here, I have a small flat here in the old town, in Piazza Sarzano, but I rented it. Since the idea of living in a lonely room in a hotel scared me, I left my things at the luggage store and bivouacked in the station."

"So his luggage is at Ronaldo's."  
 "Yes, you know him too?"

"Yes, and then what?"

"And then, because I was born and raised on Via della Maddalena, I often walk around the carruggi."

"And Cinzia?"

"Yeah, I was passing by Via del Campo a few days ago and we met",

Cinzia bursts out laughing and speaks her mind.

"Inspector, the thing is, I was looking out of the window, I was depressed, I see this hunk looking around awkwardly, I put my make-up on quickly, I went down to the street and said *Shall we go?* and we went to the bar where she met us, he, he didn't want to make love, he just wanted some company."

Chapter 27

The police inspector

"I understand, Cinzia. Mariotto just wanted to vent about being left by his wife."

"That's how it is inspector. We sympathised and I hosted him in my sister's room. He is not disgusted by my trade."

"Well, since he grew up in the alleys. Tell me Mariotto, what does your wife do?"

"She is from a well-to-do middle-class family, her father, a bank manager, bought her the flat where we lived when we got married. But no money, she has always worked and is autonomous. As I told her, she is a teacher. She cannot have children. I think this has destabilised her."

"It is possible."

"I feel like I've told you everything. Then, this morning at dawn when I left the house I saw those two. And one of the two I saw again in the afternoon with another one. And this I told her."

He has a hard stare.

"They looked like two Arabs to her. You could recognise them, couldn't you?"

"Definitely."

"He went down hard on them, though."

"I think I adapted to the situation. I wanted them to understand that Cinzia and I are not easy to manipulate."

"Maybe this is a problem."

"Inspector, what do you mean?"

"It's just that if Petru the Romanian wants something, he goes for it, whatever it takes."

"So what should we do?"

"Only what we tell her to do."

"Meaning?"

"We will put policemen in civilian clothes in the area. We will tell you how to recognise them. You two, you will have to act as if nothing happened. You will have to wait."

"You mean we have to wait for them to beat up Cinzia and kill me?"

"I didn't say that."

"Are there alternatives?"

"I don't see any. This time the Romanian will have to reveal himself and we will catch him. Mariotto, are you up to it?"

"Inspector, what do you say?"

"That you and I will get along well. Save my phone number, you can contact me any time, day or night. Keep on keeping fit and alert."

"You can count on it."

"Well, I salute you. Eh, one more thing."

"Say."

"It's none of my business. You two look good together, though. See you again."

"Mariotto, what will happen now?"

"I don't know. I know I don't give up, though."

"We have to behave normally."   
"Cinzia, now in the evenings, you can no longer go out alone."

"All right."

"If there is a need we will go out together."

"..."

"Let's go to sleep. I leave at dawn. See you tomorrow night. Of course we'll talk and text each other. OK?"

"Yes. A kiss, right?"

"Also two."

The street is quiet, it's ten past five. The underground has been open for ten minutes. I prefer to walk. I like to look at the portals of the aristocratic buildings and the shrines above our heads, there are so many of them. I have my mobile phone in my hand, in the mirror function. I look over my shoulder.

Brignole station relaxes me. I remember coming there as a child with mum. The hustle and bustle makes me feel alive. I go to the corner and look at a pile of rags on a chair. It is Madame sleeping. On her head is her bonnet, in her hand her little radio. Just once I would like to hug her.

I sit in the lobby, glance at the departure board and read the newspapers on my phone. Of Petru the Romanian, nothing. Of the alleys only a Sottoripa fight.

I walk down the two long corridors, go to the bar and drink an orange juice. I step out and my gaze crosses the immense square, goes over the wide street, the little gardens, the great war memorial and the travertine buildings and the long four steps flanked by the flower beds with the three caravels and anchors.

I go to Albaro, no bus. I am tense but at the same time I have a feeling of pleasure. My life is at a turning point. Maybe I have hope.

I am content. The contentment has joined that hint of fear, of anxiety. It is like in war, when you hear the piercing hiss of the approaching bomb and you do not know where it will hit and explode. I am happy because I feel that the end of the conflict is near, I am afraid because maybe I will die sooner.

The kitchen shutter is down. The two chatterboxes are out of sight.

I need to breathe the air of what was also my home.

As soon as I enter, I feel like I have never left it. I begin my pilgrimage.

There are three sacred places.

The room, where I would make love to her, and then set the mental alarm clock so as not to wake her up.

The bathroom, where through the ajar door I used to peek at her while she was soaking in the tub. Every now and then I would get in there too and we would joke around. The living room, where while watching TV we would chat and comment on the programme.

I can smell him everywhere. And I can also smell the cigar. It shouldn't be there. Yet, there must be a reason. This is not a social call. I'd better go.

I take the bus and get off at Principe. I reach the Commenda and enter the bar that night I drank half a bottle of whisky and Cinzia and the bartender carried me asleep into her house.

I ask for an orange juice and sit down at the table. I look around.

I focus my attention at the back of the room. Clark Gable with a rogue's smile is staring at me. His shoulders are protected by the two corner walls that come together. On either side of him he has two men's wardrobes to watch his back.

Cinzia's bartender friend brings me the juice.

"Are you OK?"

"Very well, and thank you for the other time."

He turns away, embarrassed.

The bald-headed cabinet gets up from the table and comes towards me. Clark continues to smile at me.

I switch on the recorder and put the mobile phone back into my jacket pocket.

The big guy grabs a chair and sits down at my table. I look at him seriously.

"I don't know you and I don't want you at my table."

"I, on the other hand, know you and want to talk to you."

"Talk and leave."

"Right now you are in the historical centre and you don't have to come here any more."

"Who tells me?"

"The boss."

"And who would that be, I am no longer familiar with the environment."

"We know you were born and lived here. Now you are an unwelcome stranger."

"You did not answer my question: who is the boss?"

"You are not up to date, but you know that Petru the Romanian is in charge."

"You have spoken. Leave."

"Listen. None of us want to mess around in here, do we?"

"True. But if you don't leave I'll throw you out without a fuss."

"Let's do this, let's go out nice and quiet together."

He gives the leader a knowing look and stands up.

I also get up. I put five euros on the counter.

"Thanks, keep the change."

I go out first. He is a heavyweight of about 190 cm, I am an average weight, he is muscular, however, he has a few extra kilos, I do not.

He is quick, in fact he immediately starts with a jab which I dodge, I bend down, in less than a moment I headbutt him in the testicles and grab him by the legs, throwing him to the ground. I squeeze his throat until he loses consciousness.

I rummage through him, from his wallet I take out his identity card and put it in my pocket. While he is recovering I put his wallet in his hand.

I walk down Prè Street. There is a beggar, young, shoulder-length hair, with a German shepherd dog lying on a rag by his side. In one ear he has a phosphorescent ivy leaf, he is a policeman.

I memorise the card's data and combine it with a euro, exchange a look of understanding with the 'beggar' and place the two items in his hat.

I call the inspector and send her the recording of the conversation I had with the living wardrobe.

"Good morning, inspector," I tell her about the encounter in full. She is pleased, and makes a wry joke about my martial arts skills.

'Inspector, there is little to mock with other people's skins. By the way, I put a euro in the expense account. Because I gave a policeman a handout."

"Mariotto, you did well. Keep it up."

I doubt that I can continue like this. Because they get to know me, and adapt their strength to mine. Underneath, the fear increases. But I don't see what else I can do. I fear they will shoot me in the back.

Why don't they do it? Because they know very well that they are in the crosshairs of the police and carabinieri. If I get a cold they immediately think that they have infected me.

The afternoon is still long. I go to the old port, it is a short walk from my house. The people of Genoa should make a monument to Renzo Piano, the architect who created this great structure, full of cultural attractions and recreational places.

Chapter 28

The ancient port

Since 1992, the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America, La Superba has awoken from its long hibernation and returned to its former glory.

Tourists, as well as the Genoese, queue up to visit the aquarium, the Children's City, the cinema museum and the ten theatres at The Space Cinema. In other words, the Old Port.

I came here many times with Mafalda. She was not enthusiastic about walking in the alleys, but about coming here.

Sometimes we would sit on a red bench, the unusual colour is a symbol, a reminder of a woman taken away by violence.

We stood still and silent and looked in front of us. The undulating forest of tall trees that incredibly are planted in the centre of the yachts. The glass and steel biosphere containing a tropical microclimate. Brightly coloured birds, tortoises, stick insects camouflaging themselves among the branches. And then, the Sea Museum, Neptune, the real pirate galleon, the chariot with the panoramic lift, the ice skating rink, the big tourist motorboats. And the island of barges.

I, in particular, wandered through my memories. In 1992 I was only seven years old. Yet, I can see myself wandering among the cranes of the Cotton Warehouse, right where the cinemas, bars and restaurants are today. The cranes are always there as an ornament.

I remember as if it were today, Berto, the camal who lived in the same staircase as us in the left aristocratic building.

One day he told me about an event his grandfather experienced at the beginning of the last century.

That day Berto, his grandfather, together with six other colleagues, used a special cart to transport bales of cotton, unloaded from a ship, to the warehouse.

At a certain point all the camels, three dispatchers and a foreman stop working and approach the wall of the warehouse.

In total silence they stare at the start of the abseil.

It should be pointed out that Berto, 180 cm of muscle, had just won the Italian heavyweight boxing championship.

I would add that in those years in the port of Genoa, when a camallo came in front of a colleague with a soda on a tray, it meant that that was a challenge to fistfight.

Having said that, a two-metre man with a bodybuilder's physique was approaching the group of dockers that morning. He was carrying a soda, yes, but not on a tray, but rather, on an iron buffer of a freight wagon.

Grandpa Berto was paralysed with fear.

"Would you be Berto the boxing champion?"

"..." Berto cannot make out a sound.

The colossus with the wagon-bumper in his hand stares at him seriously, bursts into a hearty laugh, with his free hand sweeps away the soda, lays the buffer on the ground and in strict Genoese shouts.

"Nice to meet you. Let's go have a glass of Coronata."

The Molosso was called Bartolomeo Pagano, a crane operator, who became a film hero in 1915 playing the role of Maciste.

When Grandpa Berto told about that day, he said he felt more fear than when, years later, he fought in the trenches in the First World War.

My friend Berto made me fall in love with the port and ships and taught me the Genoese dialect, which unfortunately only a minority speaks in Liguria today.

I speak port Genoese, but there is also that of Castelletto, the upper, refined neighbourhood. But their dialect, the few who speak it, has an accent as stingy and cheap as the proverbial Genoese thriftiness.

That's it, I leave the bench and before walking away I take another look at the mountains surrounding the bay like an arena.

I can safely say that the view from the Old Port is one of the most beautiful in Italy and the world. You have to start the view from the head of the Magazzini del cotone.

I go to Barge Island. There in the middle of what looks like a lake is peace and fantasy. I sit there. Usually few people go there. It's a shame for them. It is located at the end of the aquarium.

I keep going back. These creeks when I was a child were still crowded with camels, shippers, truck drivers. The feverish activity was full of voices. The camalli, most of them, spoke in dialect.

What struck me most about their appearance was the hook for handling crates and sacks. When they finished work they would put it in the back pocket of their jeans.

Sometimes Berto would take me under the mediaeval arcades of Sottoripa to eat farinata with white wine at Sciamadda, which in old Genoese means food stall. It is a cake and farinata shop that also fries fish, panissa and other things.

It is not that everything has always worked out well for me, but I must admit that I am a lucky man. When I bought my little flat in Piazza Sarzano, on the sea side, they had not yet built the underground with the stop next to the door and a huge three-storey underground car park for over six hundred cars with a beautiful square above it with gardens, bars and two sports fields for playing football and paddle.

It is an oasis of tranquillity in the city centre.

I am a city animal, a better place could not be desired.

But to die at thirty-eight, holy shit, I'm pissed off.

All right, now, I am a lonely man and I cannot stand loneliness.

The date of my suicide written in pencil on the marble windowsill in the living room, now that I am an adult, does not even cross my mind.

It is true that I have no talent, I can't make a pretty face and if I die, no one mourns me. I don't know why but I like life.

Certainly, the sun will wear out and so will the whole universe, but who can deny, that everything does not start over again, like this, to infinity. If it is true that time does not exist.

I shake myself out of my stupor. 'Keep it up,' the inspector tells me. That is, I have to react. With my ex(?) wife I don't know how it will end. Although I can't get her out of my mind and continue with my obsessive behaviour, at the same time, I also think about Cinzia.

The inspector sees us well together, and me, how do I see myself? And would the policewoman if she saw me with Mafalda say the same thing?

Cinzia is very beautiful, even more than Mafalda, she's also twelve years younger. It's not that it takes much, but she's also more cultured than me, if that's what it is, Mafalda is also more cultured than me. Both of them are better educated. They went to more qualified schools than me.

It is true, however, that Mafalda attended the same high school as me until high school, but then she went to university.

Even as a child I always, more or less every day, read daily newspapers. There is everything. The news, everyday life, pastimes such as crosswords, culture with articles by people at the pinnacle of thought. There is sport.

Everything is written in the newspaper, history, science and philosophy. There are the columns where readers send in their thoughts. And when I was suffering from graphomania, I used to send meaningless litanies left and right.

Probably, in the midst of that rubbish, there must have been something good, because to an e-mail from me, one day, Marco Travaglio, through his secretary, replied. He let me write that if I went to Bologna where he was doing a show, he would be pleased to meet me.

He concluded by suggesting that I continue writing, perhaps, a book inspired by the letter I had sent him.

Naturally, I did not go to Bologna. I didn't want to expose my nullity.

That letter was just an accident. And the newspaper published it. It can still be found on the net today.

I recovered from my pathological urge to write. I rationalised it and started writing books, which of course I never published.

I have decided. I go into all the bars in Via del Campo and Via Pré.

Although I don't like to talk, with strangers I am not capable, I want to chat with many people. By now whether I like it or not I am at war.

The inspector wants Petru the Romanian to come out into the open so that she can impale him, i.e. arrest him.

He told me clearly, I have to provoke him. I mean, I have to be the bait.

I enter the first bar.

War it is.

Chapter 29

The final solution

"One orange juice, please."

At the counter I am the only customer.

I take my glass and sit down at a small table.

It is more of a dairy than a bar, probably working more in the mornings.

Four pensioners play cards, a child is doing his homework at a small table. Three elderly women are having tea.

A middle-aged man in a suit and tie enters and asks for a long coffee.

Everyone ignores me. I am the only one who looks around.

I wage war against nobody.

I walk slowly first on Via del Campo and then on Via Prè.

The prostitutes in these streets beat in the evenings. In the mornings and afternoons, there are only South American women, and they are in the basses of Via della Maddalena and some of its cross streets.

Only call girls work in Via del Campo during the day.

At night, prostitutes can be found here and there throughout the old city.

However, unlike a few decades ago, they no longer gang up on each other apart from the South American women.

Unfortunately, each is for himself and God is for all.

Now I understand why Cinzia has only two friends among the call girls.

Most of the shops, the handicrafts are closed. There is no more life. As soon as it gets dark it is a general stampede.

The shopkeepers, even those in San Luca, Via Luccoli, Via Casana, Via Garibaldi, people who, for the most part, live in the upper districts such as Castelletto, Carignano, hurry home at around seven in the afternoon.

Nightlife is only present in nightclubs.

On the streets are the local time-wasters and men, mostly married, who go in search of mercenary women.

Of course, there is drug dealing and the movida, which is frequented by boys and girls.

Everything is organised in an unwritten, spontaneous way.

With the pandemic then, all Italians have learnt to queue.

Even now that it is outdated, people, without being asked, queue even on the pavement.

I am only making these reflections now because I want to give the underworld an eyeful.

And this one doesn't give a damn about me.

Petru the Romanian is the only one who is perhaps taking an interest in me at the moment and is thinking of the best way to kill me and not get caught.

It is a difficult time for drug dealers and pimps because the investigating authorities are having many successes. That is why Petru is so interested in subduing Cinzia. She is very beautiful, young and, if pushed in the right way, can make a lot of money.

Petru, you smile at me like Clark Gable and I look at you with cold eyes, let's see who's quicker to strike.

Well, I have made up my mind.

If I want to live here, and I do, my home is in Sarzano, I have to make a mess. Otherwise, if I relax I'll end up with my throat slit.

I'm not saying I'm in love with Cinzia, no. My mind has not yet got rid of Mafalda. I admit, a thread of hope that one day she will say:

"Mariotto, I made a mistake, sorry" I got it.

I say I hope and immediately my nostrils get a cigar smell that makes me think of something else.

However, with Cinzia I am at ease. We have a favourable chemical reaction. I feel our bodies give off a warmth that attracts us. We communicate without speaking, proximity is enough, as if we were connected by short-range, wireless Bluetooth.

She has the face of Luisa Ranieri, Luca Zingaretti's wife, at the age of twenty-six. The actress is a Mediterranean beauty, with black hair, one metre 73 cm tall. Her light brown eyes are blazing.

When Cinzia stops selling herself, what will she do?

Outside the harbour I don't know how to do anything. It is also true that I love my job. Could I, perhaps, improvise something? We shall see.

"Inspector, am I disturbing you?"

"Mariotto, it doesn't bother me at all. In fact, I like to hear it. He's not the type to call at all."

"Look, I have a feeling. Do you have any idea how many men make up Petru's gang?"

"Yes. For the dealing he delegated a cousin in charge who gives the drugs to about ten men, all Romanians."

"What about prostitution?" I ask.

"What about prostitution? Most probably, it has an entourage in the police and one in the carabinieri, they live terrified under blackmail. It may sound unbelievable but we don't know who they are. We haven't discovered them because we have two suspects from us and three from the carabinieri, but there are two who are corrupt."

"I understand, but how many protectors are there?"

"There are thirteen of them. And they collect a lot, a lot of money every week. Several hundred thousand euros every week. The clients are politicians, lawyers, doctors, industrialists, high-level businessmen. If not all of them, almost all of them are blackmailed to a greater or lesser extent. In order not to live in anxiety they pay more than they have to, and so they live comfortably."

"I understand, inspector. And I understand why Petru is so interested in Cinzia. Besides being beautiful, she's smart, if she wanted to blackmail those customers she could skin them alive and take over some business. He could even go into politics. We Italians know some glaring examples."

"Exactly, Dear Mariotto. You have hit the nail exactly on the head."

"And tell me, inspector, am I right in thinking that my life has a very short life expectancy?"

"Unfortunately, he is also right here."

"So, you need to cut to the chase immediately. Look, I've been thinking about prostitution and dealing, and my dangers. From tomorrow I'll spend my free time at the Terrasanta bar in the Commenda."

"But that's Petru's headquarters."   
"True. But we have no choice. Inspector, listen, it's a public bar, so no one can stop me from going in. I go there and he has to throw me out with the bad guys in order not to lose face."

"I see where this is going. I need a day. So, after tomorrow is Friday. Yes. At four o'clock in the afternoon she goes into the Terrasanta bar and starts Operation *Crusade*."

"But you have to prepare the scene in great detail."

"Yes. As I told you, the bar is under our control. The owner, the one you know, is our informant. Tomorrow I'll have him 'hire' a colleague from Genoa who is working on the western riviera. He's a good bartender."

I sit down.

"One of his men in the club, fine, but outside?"

"Right. That's why I asked for a day. Petru works at night. He controls call girls and sends to collect lace on some nightclubs. His business at Terrasanta starts at three o'clock in the afternoon. He receives prisoners' wives to distribute financial aid."

"What about the drug dealers' organisation?"

"As I told you, he delegated his cousin. But he has to show up in the afternoon at the bar and be accountable. In addition, there is the parade of drug dealers who are located in the city centre and, albeit very sparse, in the rest of the city as well."

"But there are no dealers in their own right?"

"It happens from time to time, but as soon as he hears about it, and it does happen, he nips it in the bud."

I begin to see clearly the inspector's plan of attack.

Chapter 30

Implementation

"Inspector, let's recap. The day after tomorrow, Friday, at four o'clock in the afternoon I turn up at Terrasanta, sit down at the table and order.

At the far end of the club, in the corner, is Petru flanked by the two guards. He has already been there for an hour. He sees me and what happens?"

"We can only imagine it. It is up to her and us to react, improvising. Of course she will be miked. When she says *I'd like another squeeze*, a young man and a girl arranged as punkabouts with a German shepherd dog will come in to sit at a table and consume. They will be armed, you can bring a knife if you like."

"Absolutely not. No weapons for me. Inspector, you think about managing your men, women, police dogs and magic piper, I manage myself."

"Don't be angry, Mariotto."

"And who gets angry, I'm just a bit tense. But when the dance starts, I do what Mennea did when he ran the hundred metres. As he heard the starting gun, his whimpers, his many aches and pains, disappeared, he felt nothing and took off like a rocket."

"Let's hope well, I'd settle for her not overdoing it."

"I imagine that all over the area there are Petru's men ready to intervene."

"Definitely. But there will be a removal truck to unload furniture and take it to a flat. Behind the furniture there will be six policemen. In Via Prè there will be an Aster road maintenance truck, five fake workers will start digging a hole in the middle of the road fifteen metres from the bar."

'Inspector, it's fine. We can say goodbye. If there's any news we'll be in touch. Tomorrow I will be partying together with Cinzia. A day off will prepare us for the next day."

"Goodbye, Mariotto, take care not to hit anyone in the meantime. Above all, calm and chalk."

At a steady pace I take the metro and go abroad. That is, I get off at Brin, the terminus. I go for a walk in Certosa, the beautiful suburban district along the Polcevera stream. There are two parallel streets, Via Canepari and Via Jori. I take a nice circular walk there.

It is a nice and quiet neighbourhood, all the shops, maybe some with difficulties, are active. There is life.

Nearby, there is the shiny new Genoa San Giorgio viaduct, designed by architect Renzo Piano. Before that, there was the old Morandi Bridge, which collapsed on 14 August 2018. 43 people died.

The bridge, knowingly, had not been given the required maintenance.

After the tragedy has occurred, the team of lawyers and blah blah enter the field....

I wish the trial, in order to find and convict the culprits, was as fast as the record opening of the new bridge, i.e. only two years later!

It will not happen.

I walk for a few hours that include two stops at the bar. I drank two orange juices. Sitting at the little table inside, I did nothing but pretend to fiddle with my mobile phone and watch the people around me and those entering and leaving.

Everyone sitting has Clark Gable's face and smiles at me ironically.

I imagine saying the same sentence to him repeatedly,

"Rhett Butler, I will die here today".

The broader smile uncovers all the white teeth that stand out in the beautiful tanned face.

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Sadly, I return to the metro. I get off at the dock and cross the street. Every time I look at it, Piazza della Commenda strikes me. The three-storey stone building is well preserved. The whole complex comprising two churches is nine centuries old.

I have seen some exhibitions there, the latest being the creation of the National Museum of Italian Emigration.

I keep my distance as I pass by the Terrasanta bar, glancing at it from behind.

I arrive in front of the house and look at the time. It is ten past nine. I get in.

"Hi, are you ready?"

"How is it ready, are you at the hotel?"

"Not really, in fact, I usually sleep on the railway."

' All right, joking aside, I prepared a strictly vegetarian dinner. Crepes cannoncini with slices of mozzarella, courgette and, mint. Then ratatouille and fruit, is that enough?"

"Yes and advance."

"You're worried, is that it?"

"A little, we'll talk about it after we eat, quietly."

"Mariotto, you can't hide anything from me. What is it?"

"I spoke with the inspector" and tell her everything. She listens attentively.

"We knew, didn't we, that it would come to this?"

"Yes, Cinzia. That does not detract from the fact that there will be a battle where there may be deaths."

"Yes, and it's all my fault. I cannot ask you to get killed. Now you should leave my house and the old city and return to your life in the city."

"Today, this is it, my life. I am afraid, for sure, if I die, don't interrupt me, I will be cremated. I am registered with Socrem, cremation society."

"Alright, anything else?" He stares at me with two big eyes like this.

"Yes, I ask for sobriety and no tears. You know, I am not a believer. But one thing above all, if I were to remain in a coma or in great pain I would not want any treatment to the bitter end. That is all."

"Well, I could die too."

"You know very well, that you for Petru are, potentially, a treasure to be preserved."

"Yes, but I would never give in to his wishes. I would do anything to rebel, even to the point of being killed."

"Could you disengage tomorrow? Before the showdown the day after tomorrow, I would like to have a day of celebration, just for us."

I will not add that it might be the last one for me.

"Yes, I can, I have no problem, what would you like to do?"

"Time is short, we are staying in the city but not in Zena. I have a simple but pleasant programme."

"I am a simple woman, tell me."

"You'll take your car in the garage and we'll go to Nervi, I've booked two days at the Hotel Villa Cinese on via Capolungo."  
 "But that's wonderful, yay! But didn't you tell me you don't like sleeping in hotels?"

"I said that when my wife drove me out, I was terrified of sleeping alone in a hotel room. With you I would sleep even in hell."

"Nervi, the parks, the rock promenade and the sea. Once a lady who lived there took us in, me and my sister."

"You were at boarding school as a child, weren't you?"

"As I told you, we were irrepressible rebels. Because we did not want to split up and nobody ever wanted to take us together. We agreed that if they divided us we would always run away. And so we grew up at boarding school. And we never complained. As long as we were together we didn't ask for anything else. And so it was."

"And you are different."

He bursts out laughing.

"We always argue, to the bitter end. But there is never resentment."

"I envy you, I have always lacked a father and a brother."

"Guess what scares her the most about me."  
 "I know. Men. Your complicated or wrong relationship with them."

"It is so. But as long as there is life there is hope."

"Now I'm here."

"Yes, and even with you the relationship is not normal."

"You are right. But you believe me, at least I hope so, when I tell you that as soon as I finish the problem with my wife we will make love and live a complete and happy life."

He jumps on my neck and kisses me.

"I believe you. I believe you. Otherwise it would mean, that in my field of which I am an expert, I don't understand anything at all."

And everyone went to sleep in their own room.

Chapter 31

Chinese Hotel

As usual, I slept well, deeply but little. Three hours.

I had breakfast, packed my suitcase which I put by the side of the door and before going to the railway I wrote a little message to her.

"I went to Brignole, at eight thirty we leave. I love you."

I take the metro and get off at Brignole. I go into the lobby and look for her. I find her. She's sleeping with the little radio in her hand.

"Good morning, Madam. You go on sleeping. I need to talk to you. I'm at an impasse with my wife. I beg your pardon? Is it time to forget her? Yeah, I agree. You know something? I met a beautiful girl, maybe she's smarter than me, you think, who accepts me as I am. What does the girl do? She's sort of a masseuse who receives certain men in the house and makes them feel good. She helps them. I beg your pardon? Prostitute? Well, in a way. I guess I love her. I came to say goodbye. Yeah, I gotta go. It's just that I have a problem with a bad man. I could die, yes and true, he's a pimp who wants to take my girlfriend Cinzia. I don't want to lose her, she needs me. Now I must go Madam, goodbye. Goodbye, keep sleeping. You'll see that your daughter will come. She loves you. See you later."

I sit in the lobby, looking at the train departure board. The train for Sestri Levante is not yet announced, Mafalda and I get off at the previous stop, at Lavagna, when we go to her second home.

I read the newspapers on my phone. There is no mention of Petru.

I resume my digital reading of the essay on the holocaust of the Jews and others. And I meditate on the men and women, also Jewish, who participated in the massacres. Ordinary people like me. Yes, with a face as insignificant as mine.

I go to the bar and get a hot milk.

I get on the bus and go to Albaro. The kitchen shutter is up, Mafalda hasn't gone to work yet. I breathe deeply, I can't smell her. It's half past seven. I have to go to Cinzia's.

We will go to the Hotel Cinese in Capolungo, near Nervi. We'll spend a memorable day. I can feel it.

I take the bus and get off at Piazza De Ferrari. The large fountain erupts waves of water jets, on the pavement all around, here and there gushes of water.

Years ago Vittorio Sgarbi, the pyrotechnic figure of art and politics came to Genoa, and as soon as he saw the fountain he blurted out.

'Goats. Goats. Goats. They put a condom on her," and began a campaign to restore her to her former glory. Naturally, nothing came of it. Piazza De Ferrari still rejoices in its vigorous watery lushness.

I get off Via Casana and go to Via del Campo. I look at the light on the second floor. Next to the door is, lying on the ground, the 'punkabbest' with the ivy earring and the German shepherd dog. The policeman gives me a knowing look.

Almost opposite, there is Via del Campo 29 red, the 'House of Genoese Songwriters'. Before this museum was Gianni Tassio's famous record and musical instrument shop, frequented by Fabrizio De André and his friends, Lauzi, Paoli, Tenco and others.

"Hi, Cin. You slept like a log last night."

"You, on the other hand, apparently do not."

"On the contrary, I sleep little but well. I also dream of you."

"Mariotto, I am ready, if you want we can go."

"Yeah, let's go. Cin, have a biscuit, downstairs is our policeman friend with his dog."

We give the dog the biscuit and, with our trolleys, we head down Via Gramsci from the garage that until a few decades ago was a large watch and souvenir shop. The Casio I have on my wrist I bought there when I was still a child, I paid for it with the tips the hookers gave me. It even has a night light.

Finally, we park at the Chinese villa-hotel. It is splendid and in classical Chinese style.

In the early 19th century, a wealthy Genoese merchant had it built in memory of a beautiful almond-eyed girl he met in China on one of his business trips.

We are greeted by a handsome young man dressed in a 19th-century Chinese-style uniform. He makes us leave our luggage beside the beige mini-minor and immediately guides us to our room and we are enchanted. The highly polished floor is pinkish beige marble. The light pink brocade curtains are open and present a view of a large swimming pool surrounded by a lush garden. Beyond is the public park and the sea.

On the small Venetian-style table are pastries and a bottle with a greenish non-alcoholic drink scented with lavender. We taste it and go to the Anita Garibaldi promenade, which I call the Nervi Promenade of Love.

Below the path are the rocks and the transparent sea as blue as the reflecting sky.

We turn under a stone archway and enter the public park, which is a collection of three villas. In summer, there are many events. The international étoile (very tall and beautiful) Roberto Bolle with his dance company also comes here.

Like all Genovese, as children we ran and played on this well-kept grass. And we threw nuts at squirrels. So as we walk we are in a nostalgic mood. Just the right mood to momentarily distract us from our anxieties.

Secretly we look at each other and study. Were it that...

We hold hands. We're fine, the rest doesn't matter. For now.

Our closeness, the feeling we have, encompasses a room of sin where perversions and erotic games are reconciled with the bivouacs of a clochard in a flowerbed in Piazza Martinez and on a platform of the Genoa Brignole railway station. And the haunting furtive visits to the home of a separated wife.

The police inspector, observing us, says that we are good together. And she knows about it. Mah.

As we smooch our minds are shot through with these bizarre flashes.

I try to imagine how the older couples we pass see us.

He a young hunk, gymnastic, not tall, with a face a bit like that and she very beautiful with an intelligent, intense face, like a film actress. Like Luisa Ranieri when she was young.

We return to the promenade and arrive at Capolungo.

From the small port of Nervi, the walk to the small beach of Capolungo is almost two kilometres. It is worthy of those in the Five Lands Including the Via dell'Amore in Manarola.

Yes, that very village with the world's largest illuminated nativity scene. The figures of lights are scattered all over a mountain. You can see it from several kilometres away. At night it is very impressive.

At one o'clock we went to lunch. We pass by the terrace on the first floor and are fascinated. Large pine trees and palm trees from the Canary Islands, below the ground floor, surround the villa.

We ask for lunch on the terrace. Unfortunately, we have not done the chef proud. Rather than eating, we peel, or perhaps better said, peck at our food like two canaries. In short, we are not gourmets.

However, the grilled fish with chips and sautéed vegetables, the dessert and the fruit salad fully satisfied us.

But the real treat was the musical company. A young man played 18th century arias on the Bechstein grand piano.

When I booked I asked for a violinist to play Vivaldi.

We were lucky. We found two boyfriends from the conservatory, he, very distinguished, played the piano, his girlfriend, very pretty, took turns on the violin.

After lunch she followed us into the garden and discreetly played at a distance.

We sat for a few hours punctuated by silences and chatting. We had to recharge for the next day, which we pretended to ignore.

We deepened our knowledge, indeed reinforced it.

We were also fine with our thoughts.

I want to dispel an evil name that teases us Genoese.

We are cheapskates. So, the truth is that in everyday life we divide the penny into four and calculate how best to spend it. But when we travel, we don't look at prices and we only take the best. So, what are we really like? It depends.

Once when Mafalda and I were cruising the Nile, we were sitting at a long table at dinner one evening and a couple of Milanese people our age, seated opposite us, picked up on a joke that had been going on in the afternoon and because he was an industrialist, according to him, successful, he had had market research done in Genoa.

The tone was between joking and serious. In short, it was unclear whether the research was real or invented.

Since it turned out that the city where the fewest fridges were sold was Genoa, one of the hottest cities in Italy, the research established without a shadow of a doubt that the reason for the very low sales of fridges is that not even the best Italian sellers are able to convince potential buyers in Genoa that when the door of the appliance is closed, the light also goes out.

Here, of that day I know absolutely nothing about how much it cost me.

But because I promised myself that in writing my book I have to be absolutely honest, I admit that when I first bought the refrigerator the previous day, on a pretext, I visited a friend of mine and for five minutes I opened and closed the refrigerator door. Well, yes, when we close the door, the light goes out.

Chapter 32

Petru the Romanian

I got my usual amount of sleep, a little, but just enough. Incidentally, yesterday at the Chinese Hotel, after lunch, accompanied by the pretty violinist, we fell asleep while she played Vivaldi's *La primavera.*

Cinzia went with her two friends to Genoa in the morning for errands and shop visits.

I visited Brignole station.

There is an ambulance in front of the entrance and two police cars alongside.

My heart beats fast. Suddenly, my eyes water.

I run to that corner. Ronaldo tries to stop me.

"Mariotto, come with me. You don't need to see it."

I don't listen to him, they are putting her on a gurney. On her head is her crooked little hat."

I approach the inspector.

"Ronaldo told me you were friends."

"Yes, very much. Let me get in the ambulance, please."

"Mariotto, believe me, I cannot, I cannot."

"Then promise me that you won't be autopsied, promise me that."

"I give you my word that I will do everything I can. When the funeral takes place I will inform you. You have my word."

"Yes, thank you. Thank you inspector."

He stares at me hard.

"You, you have an engagement at the Holy Land this afternoon. Yes?"

"Yes, Inspector. I will not fail. All is well. See you."

I go to look at the train departure board.

For the first time since my mother's death, tears stream down my cheeks. The Lady, I never hugged her, even when she was dead.

I get on the bus and go to Via Albaro.

I stare at the kitchen window. The shutter is down. She is at school.

I stand watching the balcony and the time goes by.

The two chatterboxes arrive and stop to talk by the door. I don't care, I'm not going up there.

I am not cured. Not yet.

I walk towards the centre, slowly. I walk.

I have flashes. The Romanian, his henchmen, the camouflaged policemen, Brignole, the Signora, platform eight, the truncated platform, the maze of Carruggi (Genoa's characteristic narrow streets), Via Maddalena, Via del Campo, Cinzia, Mafalda.

Mafalda or Cinzia?

My throat is dry. I sit at a small table near the magnificent 17th-century marble fountain. The octagonal, porticoed square is Piazza Colombo. I love it, even if it is not in Zena, in the alleys.

In 1997 I was twelve years old, there was still the lira and in the evenings I went to night school in Via Lomellini. But during the day I worked. I was a shop assistant. How many shops I knew. In those days, the garzonetti were the vent for angry or dissatisfied shopkeepers' wives, but also for the hookers waiting for the man to redeem them.

For a couple of months only, I worked at a historic 'Colonial' shop. It was and still is in Via Colombo, on the corner of the square of the same name.

I particularly remember the antique wooden furniture and the smells. Virgin wax, pink pepper, paprika, turmeric, whitebait powder for whitewashing tennis shoes and many other scents.

One day, the master sent me to one of his bitter competitors to buy something. The competitor was the gruff and experienced shopkeeper Gamalero.

"Mr Viganego told me to get 50 lira of pesto wall from you. And he told me that if you don't have it, you will beat it up for me."

Old Gamalero took me by the lapel of his jacket, lifted me up and put his face in front of hers.

"Baletta, how would you prefer me to beat you with my fists or slaps?"

So, I didn't speak dialect then. 'Muro' pronounced muru, in dialect, means face. I had asked to step on my face.

Viganego had played a joke on me and mocked his 'enemy'.

I may be biased but Piazza Colombo is one of the most beautiful squares in Italy. The shops are Genoese institutions, a real guarantee.

Clothing shops like Viberti, or, the Tarigo's home things. When I got married, Mafalda went to that beautiful shop. I followed her around like a little dog, but I felt like an elephant in a crystal shop.

If I had been there, they would surely have asked my mother for damages.

How many times have I crossed that square with a corba full of groceries on my shoulder, which I carried to the many guesthouses and hotels in the area. Fortunately, I only did it for two months, in my carruggi I struggled less.

The appointment at Terrasanta is for four o'clock. In the area, in addition to the policemen, there will also be carabinieri. The drug dealers would be out of a job for a long time if the Romanian was arrested. With mobile phones, news spreads in real time.

Petru the Romanian. I will have to provoke him, humiliate him. Unacceptable.

I don't know how I will do it. The only way is that I have to be determined. I have to identify with my part. I must believe in it. The fear I hold must not shine through.

I also have to hide it from Cinzia. And that is more difficult. She has penetrated my soul, just as I have penetrated her mind.

I've known hookers forever. I have talked to them, been their friend. I have never understood how they can have sex, perhaps without limits, with many men, and at the same time love their man like an inexperienced young girl.

The woman, instinctively, knows that she must limit herself. That is why all over the world we see so many women veiled of their own choice. Otherwise, it would be the end of them.

I go to the gym. I don't see the personal trainer. I undress. I do some gymnastic exercises. Then, I get on the treadmill and run slowly. I don't want to get tired. I can't concentrate. They are all concentrated in their exercises. I would have liked to have a chat with someone.

Come to think of it, I am not familiar with anyone except Alberto, the personal trainer. That's it, I'm leaving.

"Hi Mariotto, are you leaving?"

"Hello, Alberto, yes, I'm not gearing up today."

"Later I have the appointment with the two sisters, if you want I can manipulate you a little."

"I wish!"

"Come."

"Alberto..."

"Close your eyes and relax. Like this. Your shoulder muscles are tense. My girls came home late from the disco last night. My wife freaked out. You have to think twice before getting married and having kids. Don't you think so?"

"What, mah, I don't know."

"While parking, I listened to the news about the earthquake tremor last night."

"Earthquake? I didn't feel it."

"Nothing serious. But I heard that someone shot the Romanian you were having trouble with."

"What, they hit him?"

"No. There is tension in the alleys. Probably the dealers want more freedom of movement, they want to deal more."

"That's how it is. My problems are not solved."

"From what I had read, I understood. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Thank you, Alberto. Think of your family. Forget about them. I have to go now."

"Good luck, Mariotto."

"See you."

At six o'clock I cross the threshold of the Terrasanta bar. It is as beautiful a day as in the morning.

I greet and order juice from the barman, next to him is the new waiter with a small ivy leaf in his ear, he is an undercover cop. In the cinema they say 'undercover'.

I sit down and look around the large room, thirteen of the fifteen tables are occupied by young people. At one table there are two hookers who seem to be telling each other their business. There is nothing special about the bar.

I look at the back of the room and see the Romanian at a table flanked by two different behemoths.

Petru flashes me his beautiful Clark Gable smile.

I hear the external sound of a jackhammer drilling into the road surface. It's the fake Aster workers who have paved six square metres.

There is also the punkabbest lying on the ground nearby with his German shepherd dog.

The operation to arrest the Romanian is ongoing.

But he is now, at the table, talking quietly with two drug dealers who are arguing heatedly. One of them puts an envelope on the table and continues to gesticulate.

Petru looks at his watch, crosses his hands and shakes his head. Time is up. The two leave.

I decide it's my turn. I'm miked and anyway, I turn on the recorder on my mobile phone.

Slowly, seriously, I make my way to his table. I sit down.

The two next to him, threateningly, get up. With a brief gesture he blocks them.

"Mariottino, what is the reason for your visit? You know you are not welcome, don't you?"

"I know. And you know I'm staying in the neighbourhood. So what?"

"Then I know you will leave and never return."

"We will see. We'll decide it now, once and for all. Look me in the eye. I'll tell you in front of your two energetic witnesses. Forget Cinzia."

Again it stops them.

"There, you've come to the point."

"Yes. To the big guy from last time, I made him realise who I am. He told me that you are the head of the racket and that he orders me to disappear."

"But are you sure of what you say?"

"Yes, because I registered it and together with the behemoth's identity card I handed them over to the police."

"He told you lies. As you know, I was shot at yesterday, it is a feud against me and the one you call the beast, he is part of it. That is why he wants to discredit me and turn the police against me."

"They hunt you no matter what."

"Look, let's go in the back and I guarantee we'll clear the air once and for all."

The two guards' eyes sparkle and they hint at a smile.

I accept.

"Well let's go."

We enter a room where there are small tables covered with green cloths. Inside they are gambling.

My juice arrives, he stares at me smiling, I drink it slowly and order another. That is the signal for the pair of fake punks to enter the bar and sit at the small table.

"Before we argue I want to tell you something. You think I want Cinzia to exploit her. Absolutely not. I want her as a lover and - she stops me with a gesture - I am sure, that in time she will love me."

He falls silent and watches me carefully. He has stopped smiling.

I think I laid my head on the table and everything went dark.

What I say now I learned from the inspector and from reading the newspapers.

Petru the Romanian committed a unique act. He gambled everything.

He is a man of exceptional intelligence. He knows everything the judiciary and the police know. Partly because he has contacts with corrupt agents and partly because he blackmails a famous journalist.

He knows that the new bartender is a policeman, and that all the men and women in the area who have an ivy leaf in their ear are policemen.

Therefore, Petru the Romanian has concocted a terrible prank that ridicules the police, carabinieri and judiciary. With a single purpose of addressing and speaking directly and exclusively to politicians. Especially to the Minister of the Interior.

Why the minister?

Because he has jurisdiction over public order, he is the highest authority. He protects not only public order but also his own safety.

The decisions of the President of the Republic and the commander of the armed forces depend on his measures.

The minister is very attentive to the opinions of foreign politicians regarding Italy.

In other words, he thinks differently politically than magistrates, policemen and carabinieri.

Absolutely, whatever the cost, no state can afford to have its highest authorities ridiculed.

Therefore, drug dealing, prostitution and crime in general only need to be kept under control. As they say, they can exist, but at a physiological level.

Like tax evasion. If you apply the rules to the letter, the economy grinds to a halt.

I give an example that can be extended everywhere, not just in Italy.

Drug peddling. These enter Italy mainly in containers.

Apart from snooping, containers containing drugs are mostly discovered by snooping. That is, by opening a container every so often. If from tomorrow the hundreds of millions of containers that are landed in Italy were opened and checked, the world would come to a standstill in a matter of hours. In reality, this total check is technically impossible.

Because animals, including humans, more or less, act by chance to survive. Most of the time they get it right.

Understood?

Here was the full-page headline in the *Secolo XIX* the day after my kidnapping.

JUDICIARY, CARABINIERI AND POLICE COVERED IN RIDICULE.

Their bait to catch Petru the Romanian is kidnapped before their eyes.

This is how things went. I report them as succinctly as possible.

I have already said, Petru was informed of everything concerning his planned arrest.

As soon as I entered the gambling hall I drank my juice drugged by the police informer bartender and fell into a deep sleep.

At the same time, one of the two guards drank a caffeine concentrate that caused him Takotsubo syndrome, i.e., broken heart. These are the symptoms of a heart attack, but it is not.

An ambulance was called and arrived within minutes. The infarcted man was loaded into the ambulance and it immediately left. However, in a ruse, the patient was removed and they put me in his place.

The injured man's brother also took his place in the ambulance, i.e. the second attendant who diverted the ambulance to a flat in via Prè.

There, the *infarcted* person, that is me, was held hostage for two days.

On the third day, alive and well, I was dressed and made up as a clown.

The bartender called a press conference at Terrasanta bar at ten o'clock. He said he received an order on WhatsApp that he could not oppose.

Right at ten o'clock the truck distributing the drinks arrives, the driver, unaware of an addition to the load, opens the door to unload the order. In front of the drinks station is a clown with a red clown nose with his hands tied and a plaster over his mouth. And a sign around his neck making a request.

WE WANT TO DIALOGUE WITH THOSE WHO KNOW THEY MUST. UP THERE ON THE EMPYREAN. OTHERWISE.

The 'press conference' was attended by foreign journalists as well as national ones.

News reports were published even in the most remote corners of the earth.

Naturally, after the universal uproar, absolute silence fell.

But everyone knows that somewhere, someone high up, very high up, is talking. The silence continues.

Chapter 33

The girls' meeting

"Mariotto, don't you think you all made a mistake?"

"Yes, in hindsight. But what will happen now?"

"That Petru gets stronger. But the war continues. A new tactic is needed. In the days that you were away I thought about it. Petru stopped me in the street and told me that if I go with him I will be his companion. He added that he is not resigned to not having me."

I try to restrain myself and be natural.

"He didn't tell you anything else?"

"That if I am his woman he will respect me."

"And that's it?"

"No. I gave him a natural response that you know well."

I look at her from behind:

"What?"

"That if he knew me he would not behave like this. Men, since always, even as a child, I have always chosen them for myself. On my own initiative. There are no exceptions."

I smile.

"Yes, I agree. You rushed down the stairs to meet me. Or should I say catch me?"

"With me he can't be violent, but if he was, I would get killed."

I say nothing but I am happy. I feel the need to redeem myself from the humiliation I suffered.

She plants her bright eyes on me.

"Anyway. I have something in mind. The day after tomorrow is Sunday and I've given some girls a date. Please don't ask me anything. It's a big deal."

"As you wish. However, if you think I can be useful, don't hesitate to tell me."

"All right. We've been in touch with the girls for many days. We are planning something that could be decisive."

I straighten my ears.

"Decisive for what?"

"Nothing, let's go to sleep. Kiss?"

"Also two."

I sleep five hours, a record, since my wife kicked me out.

I go to the station and go to that corner. I miss her. I couldn't hug her. Another one of my failures. I don't know why I got so attached to the Lady.

I think I could have found access to her mind. Somewhere, somehow, she had contact with reality. She could live in two worlds.

I caught fleeting glances that seemed to me as if he wanted to say something, but he was soon absent. I am only thirty-eight, I look at myself, maybe one day, too, who knows.

I go to Ronaldo's and open a trolley, rummage inside. But it's just an excuse to have a chat. He always has a bitter tooth with his wife who turns the girls against him. It's been six months since their separation and now she's filed for divorce.

I don't know what to say to him. I have failed with the family. When I think about separations, divorces, I conclude that they are all fools, that they don't understand anything about life. That they waste it. The end of a union is a tragedy. Only fools fail to avoid it. Perfection does not exist. Absolute love does not exist either. Life is a compromise. The family must survive. In any way.

I take the bus in a hurry. I get off on Via Albaro. I take a look at the balcony and run to the front door. I open the front door and breathe deeply. I hear her. She comes out of the room and goes into the kitchen. She prepares the latte.

She is beautiful even with her face full of sleep. I always look at her long legs. I go into the bathroom and look at the sports bag, I sniff the pool dressing gown. On the shelf is the hairbrush, it's clean, but I can still smell her. I go to the bedroom and open the wardrobe. Everything looks the same to me. Everything is unchanged. I go into the living room, sit on the sofa and watch the television. It is magic. I look at the blank screen and see the films.

I see myself as a child writing with a pencil on the marble windowsill the date by which I will commit suicide. How many times have I updated that day?

Then one day, after I fainted with the hanging rope in my hand, poof, I no longer thought of suicide.

I thought morbidly about Mafalda. My inadequacy was always there, but I lived with it.

The port, the job. Another world, another life. When I cross the harbour gate I leave one life behind and live another in front of me.

Why don't I phone the office and inform them that I'm going back to work?

I don't know. Maybe I am afraid that I no longer feel in tune with the people, the environment. I am no longer what I was before. I am someone else, a failure. A fake man who pretends to play a part that is not his own. And he fears that others will notice.

I look away, get up and approach the front door. Reluctantly I ajar it, listen to see if anyone is in the stairwell and leave as soon as I have closed the door.

I go to the station, pick up a trolley from Ronaldo, make a ticket to Lavagna and wait for the train to Sestri Levante.

I finally decided to take a train, I needed one. One day I'll travel around the world by train. In Lavagna I pass Mafalda's second house, her father lent it to her. A hundred metres away is the beach of stones polished by the sea. I reach our spot where, armed with a beach umbrella and everything else, we spent beautiful summers.

Pebbles if polished I prefer them to sand, which is nice to look at but if you lie down on it and take a bath in it, there is no shower that can hold, you take sand to bed.

I loitered for two days, until Sunday evening.

When I arrive at Cinzia's, I open the front door, stand still and look around the living room. It is invaded by about fifteen girls, all beautiful and all whores.

We squint at each other. In the middle of the room is a massive oval oak table. In the middle of the table is a pile of pendrives. These are portable memory sticks that connect to the computer via the USB port.

"Mariotto, those memories are our weapon with which we will deliver a mortal blow to Petru. Don't ask us for anything. Girls, get your PCs and take the curtains off. Mariotto and I need to talk. I'll see you all tomorrow, I've rented a coach. It will be our victory trip."

I am impaled with a dumb grin. Finally, they leave.

Our journey of victory. Mah. We have, I have, suffered a humiliation that almost took away all hope.

"Cinzia, now you have to explain."

"There is little to say. Your 'Friend' - shake four fingers - Petru the Romanian, tomorrow, to taunt the two of us, will hold a press conference at the villa Hotel Cinese."

I look at her surprised.

"So what?"

"Then we'll surprise him, the girl gang and the two of us. In fact, you, you'll dress up as a clown, go on YouTube and study two or three clown exercises, you're a trained athlete, it's no problem."

"And then what?"

"Then, I will tell you the details. It's all simple. You will see the results," and he looks at me as if to ask what I think.

"For me, nothing to object to. I've lost face by now. At this point, I'm all in. It's do or die."

"La va. Mariotto, la va. It must go," he puts the pendrives in a bag and hides them on the mezzanine in the kitchen. Once, before there was direct water, there was a small cistern.

We joke a little and go to sleep, in each other's rooms.

Chapter 34

The clown has returned

I look at my watch, it's Sunday. Since I'm living as a homeless person I don't even know what day of the week I'm living on.

I go on YouTube and search for clown exercises and tricks. It only takes me a few minutes.

Waiting for the departure for Capolungo-Nervi on Sunday is twenty minutes from via Gramsci.

I go for a walk to prepare myself mentally.

Cinzia explained her programme to me and convinced me. I am thrilled.

She is intelligent and, unlike me, she is charismatic, for her colleagues she is a reference.

Of course, since it is a decisive confrontation, hopefully, with Petru, I am aware of the probable contingencies.

I am excited.

I walk in the old harbour. At the aquarium there is a thirty-metre queue. In the city centre there are many tourist buses. On the streets, groups led by guides look around with interest. The whole of Italy, the majority of the 9000 municipalities make themselves beautiful, and offer the best. Almost all of them have something to offer, to sell. Two thousand years of history full of extraordinary events.

Near the bigo there are many people around two young men cracking their whips. Between snaps they say who they are and where they come from.

Their town is Venzone, in Friuli, whose history dates back as far as a thousand years before Christ.

Apart from its famous architecture, it is the only place where they still make whips that are known all over the world. They also have a whip museum.

Among the biggest customers are the Germans who use them to drive herds and as a means of communication. Whippers talk to each other with snaps that are not all the same.

This instrument consists of a finely inlaid wooden handle and a string woven in a complex manner.

It must be the mountain ranges that are present in all regions and that have isolated people and created the many magnificent diversities that characterise us in everything. In art, cuisine, speech and other things.

When I worked in England as an assistant waiter, a country I loved and still love, I often compared it to ours. I did this often because I could not find the courage to settle there for good.

Well, both are rich in history and progress in many branches of knowledge.

However, Italy ranks first in the world for UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It has 53, China 52.

I'm going home. Cinzia is ready. We take the bag with the pendrives and go to the bus in Via Gramsci. The girls have all gone up already. There is a cheerful nervousness. The driver departs. At ten past ten, the group enters the terrace. A policeman lets us through. There is a slight breeze, it feels good.

On a small stage Petru is speaking.

In a corner, out of sight, is the inspector, three other policemen are scattered among the side plants.

The parterre is full of journalists and other people not clearly defined.

The Romanian has a 1970s mafia-style language and smile.

I am the first of the group, dressed as a clown and with the stern, precise and authoritative moves and bearing of the white clown.

Everyone is turned towards us. Petru puts his hand in his pocket and smiles ironically, he is Clark Gable in handsome.

I do a few pirouettes and somersaults, stumble and fall noisily and blatantly. I apostrophise in a saccharine tone the one sitting in the front row who looks to me like a politician.

Suddenly, I turn abruptly to face Petru, he, with his gaze, restrains the guards.

Meanwhile, Cynthia and the girls distributed the pendrives to everyone, hotel staff included.

The inspector does not take her eyes off me. She looks like a statue.

I put myself in a traverse position, look quickly at the audience and Petru.

I insist in the clownish and barking voice of the white clown.

"Siore e siori, venghino, venghino. I am now going to illustrate the contents of the sacred, sacred memoirs, which have just been kindly donated to you by the beautiful little whores. In there, ladies and gentlemen, are the sworn, heard, sworn and filmed statements of the aforementioned sluts.

There is one, whore, filmed in hospital where the inpatient claims, supported by the medical report, that she was slaughtered by the henchman to the right of the pimp king here. Hear ye, hear ye, their sires!" I do a backflip.

The inspector, the only policewoman in uniform, strides onto the stage and places herself beside Petru. Both remain motionless.

"Ladies and gentlemen, hear me again. On the terrace of the super pimp's attic there is a big pot in which a lush palm from the Canary Islands is planted. It is beautiful and the same as the ones you see around here.

Hear, hear, ladies and gentlemen, the San Martino hospital patient mentioned above recorded a threat made against her in hospital by Pappon de' Papponi. *If you talk, I'll kill you too as I did your sister who is fertilising my beautiful palm tree*."

My pirouette follows.

"Sior Inspector, hear me out, por favor. Do you wish to arrest Petru the Romanian here, alias Pappon de' Papponi?"

Take out the handcuffs.

Him, he pulls out the knife,

he throws himself at me and screams.

"I die, but so do the Philistines."

With my left hand I block his wrist, with my right hand I snatch the knife and cut his wrist tendon. He screams and sits on a chair, takes off his jacket and wraps it around his wrist.

Petru is loaded into the blue police Land Rover and leaves with two policemen.

"Bravo, Mariotto. Was it really necessary to injure his hand?"

"I don't know. I lost control. I was his prisoner for two days. I will never tell anyone what I went through."

"I understand her. Cinzia is eating it with her eyes. Go. You two look good together, though."

"Yes. I will see you in your office for the statements."

"Mariotto, calm and chalk."

"Girls, listen up, I have a surprise for you. For me, today is a big day, more important than you can imagine. When you have finished talking to the journalists. And everything has calmed down, don't leave.

Let's stay here all night. I'll pay. Don't worry, I'm from Genoa, I know what I'm doing. What's more, I'll ask Petru for damages. And his property and money will come out all over the place. But the first to be compensated will be you and you will have priority."

I turn to the middle-aged headmistress who followed the whole tragicomic scene as unperturbed as a sphinx.

"Are we having the pianist for dinner tonight?"

"That is by default."

"If a violinist could also make up for it, that would be even better."

"Count us in!"

"One more thing. Since we improvised our stay here, could you provide us with slippers, combs, and I don't know what else?"

"We are prepared. The staff will contact you. Just think about having fun!"

At dinner they prepared a long table for everyone.

At the two heads of the tables are the piano with the pianist and at the opposite side the violinist from the previous time.

The customers at the other tables found nothing strange about our clique. We behaved as if nothing had happened.

However, there was one curious thing. I was the only male in the group of beautiful girls who, for the occasion, without being asked, did not put on a single shade of make-up.

Selfies were taken in spurts.

Cinzia and I slept in the same room for the first time.

But in separate beds.

Chapter 35

Holocaust

Back home, we resumed normal life. But I was worried the moment the trial against Petru and his gang would begin. I couldn't help thinking about the bureaucracy. The commitment, the lawyers and the court attendance.

It's enough to think that if Mafalda wants a separation and divorce, I get the jitters. The judge asking us if we don't want to reconsider. It puts me ashamed. For me, marriage must last a lifetime.

I leave shortly after six o'clock.

As I arrive at the station I head for the corner. I am overcome with emotion. I try to imagine myself in the class of the lady who calls me in for questioning.

Would I have loved her anyway? Would I have liked her? What kind of student would I have been?

I go to Ronaldo. Ever since he read about my misadventures in the newspaper he looks at me in a different way and I am embarrassed. Our conversation is artificial. After I recharge my phone I say goodbye to him and go to catch the bus.

It's all clear, I'm going up in the lift. My head is down, I'm over thinking.

I enter and the strong smell of cigar assails me. I have never smelled it so strong.

Sitting in the long L-shaped sofa are Mafalda, her dad and, I hold my breath, Giancarlo who after Mariolino, my primary schools friend, is my only real friend. He has offered to pay for my hospitality in Cinzia's house.

My heart is pounding.

Dad gets up, locks the front door and puts it in his pocket. He is seventy-three years old, taller than me, has been a very good water polo player for years and still goes to the pool. That's why his daughter is also a keen swimmer. He has very broad shoulders and a powerful chest.

He looks at me hard.

"Sit down, Mariotto. We want to talk to you."

"Giancarlo, what are you doing here?"

"It's not what you think. When you separated, I give you my word, only later, Mafi and I became closer. You know, I always loved her."

Even though he is so awkward, so clumsy, he is very handsome. Men and women like him can dress in rags, not wash for a week, not sleep for three days, and still be attractive and charming. Yet he has never been aware of this.

"All right. So, now you are lovers."

"Yes, Mariotto, but only a little."

He is serious, he is not making fun of me.

"Watch this film, it's a short mix" the father manoeuvres the remote control and signals me to look at the Murano chandelier. Between the glass fronds is a tiny rotating camera that follows the movement.

All my furtive visits were recorded.

I don't need to watch the film, I remember everything.

Dad glances away. Mafalda looks ahead.

"Despite the fact that my daughter has never had the opportunity to squander money, I am, shall we say, very wealthy. Before you got married, for tax and other reasons - other, he says with embarrassment - I gave her almost all my possessions."

"..."

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say, I don't care. And I don't understand the reason for this talk."

"A no? If my daughter asks you for separation and divorce, what do you say?"

There you have it. I am not a believer, I believe I have no superstition. However, I do believe in love and family. I've always thought so, love, whether it's parents, a sibling or a friend like Giancarlo, lasts a lifetime. Despite disagreements or quarrels.

"I'll answer no," I thought and thought about it, but since I'm a coward about certain things, I never asked the question, stark naked. But now I must answer it.

"There, you see? You see, you two, you fools? I told you so."

"I am against it, so what?"

"So, Mariotto, you are a fool yourself. You got married in community of property. Do you understand now?"

"I, your money, will never touch it."

"You are young, I read in the newspaper that you have a beautiful and healthy young woman, it is possible that you will have children. Whether you want it or not you, in the case of my daughter's death, will be her heir. You are not interested in money, but your partner and eventual children certainly are."

"Be that as it may, your speeches do not interest me."

"But I do. Besides, if my daughter marries Giancarlo, he is currently having financial difficulties. He is about to go bankrupt. And he has three children. They could be my heirs and I would be happy. I would like them to get married and my money, that is, the money I gave to my daughter, would go to the heirs I don't have at the moment."

I get up to leave.

"Stop. Firstly, we can report you for stalking. Secondly, you, now here, state that you agree to separate and divorce."

"No."

"Ah, that's right. Well, since you are all muscle and a notorious abuser and since you attacked me and since I am a poor old man, I will defend myself and kill you."

We are sitting next to each other. Quickly, he pulls his gun out of his pocket, I punch my hand and the gun flies away, he puts his hands around my neck and squeezes. I squeeze his throat. Giancarlo all the time remains motionless, staring at the ground. Mafalda, also tall and strong, jumps on me and claws at my face, looking for my eyes. Crack. The father collapses on the floor with his head dangling. I grab my wife and with a strong shove I slam her against the column, her head hits the marble, she slides to the floor. Her eyes stare at me.

Giancarlo with his head down weeps.

I take out my mobile phone and dial 112.

"Hello? I killed two people, I'm calling for two ambulances and the police.

Yes, I repeat, I just killed two people. Via Albaro 261. Two sixes one."

The cell is very small. It is very crowded. In one corner is the bugliol. I was better off on the railway. However, I am alone and that is good. I made the appointment with the lawyer. The inspector recommended him to me. He says I'll get off by getting self-defence or at most excessive self-defence. The tragic visit was also recorded.

Cinzia brought me the book on the Shoah. But I have just finished reading it in a digital version on my mobile phone. It was left to me but without the internet function.

The book is the story of people who freely participated in the genocide of men, women, old people and children. Murderers, ordinary people like me.

But I only think about what the inspector told me again.

Mariotto, you and Cinzia are well together. My heart is in my throat. I miss her.

Mine was a typical, obsessive case of feminicide. My love was obsessive.

I could and should have dosed my strength in repelling her. I did not.

The murderer and the whore.

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Any reference to existing persons or real events is purely coincidental