Giambattista Lettiere

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Furio

Part One

Their son, Furio, was not like his sister, not gentle, not expressive, never looking for attention. His was a secretive life. Working as a clerk at a petrol station was the pinnacle of all his wishes, all his ambitions, was his end game all along. This mundane job provided shade for his thoughts, sweet and transcendent. Thoughts that did not need to be shared. Thoughts that, if shared, would provoke a conversation. Thoughts which he was not keen to pour into his speech.

Every day, he would wake up at a similar time, when the sun was just about to emerge from behind the hills, which surrounded the town of Arezzo. Never taking sick leave, always volunteering to work on holidays, he walked down the steep, narrow streets, out of the centre of the town, into the belt of dull suburbia which immediately surrounded it. Each morning he noticed how different the historical old town was from the other parts of Arezzo. He appreciated the discreet lack of charm of the area where he worked. There were a few low-rise office buildings, a stand-alone café, where no-one who had a choice to do otherwise ever went. A scooter repair shop behind cheap tin fencing. Nothing called attention to itself, letting Furio’s gaze wander, untethered.

Among the employees of the petrol station it was customary to solve puzzles during the long shifts, to read books, when there was no-one in the store, to watch TV series when the station was in downtime. Furio did not do any of this. He did not occupy himself. He did not look for ways to pass the time. Instead, he watched it pass by him. He listened to the slow trickle of minutes, he was attentive to the fan, to the flickering light bulb, to the sound of refrigerators humming the sacred ‘om’, the word of words, the ultimate word.

Every day, there he stood behind the counter, a parody of his assigned role, a parody of himself, of what he was supposed to be. An exaggeration of how he was supposed to behave. This fact brought him a feeling of fulfillment, a feeling of satisfaction, he felt part of reality.

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When it was time, he would make his way back into the upper parts of the city, up the wide avenue, past the cafés where his neighbors enjoyed their cold drinks. Thus on days of fine weather, on autumn days of easy winds, on winter days of downy flake.

Different routes would Furio take to his father’s little old apartment. At times he would walk briskly and directly, hurrying for the sake of being in a hurry, enjoying the speed at which the streets scrolled beneath his feet. Not uncommon was it for him to stop to sit on one of the many benches on one of the many piazzas of Arezzo. Other times, he would wind around through to the green terrace which overlooked the town. Furio would fill his lungs with the air which hung over the low buildings, would inhale the calm winds on days of fine weather, would exhale into the sleet on days of early winter.

Once, under a clear, compassionate sky, Furio sat under one of the fir trees which grew on the terrace, squinting in the sunlight, blind to the views of the city. Tuned in to the sounds of the quiet, still air, he soon fell half asleep, not turning his face away from the sun for even a single moment. Moments passed, Furio’s mind wandered. Under his eyelids he saw a slender woman, commonly dressed, of olive skin and thick, strong, dark hair.

‘This is not the first time I see you sitting at the feet of that fir tree. I greet you, Furio. I hope I can learn much from you, and you from me, for even though we have not met before now, I feel such comfort in your company’ said the woman, leaning on the trunk of the fir tree, moving steadily closer to the sitting clerk. Soon her cheek was near enough to Furio’s lips, her ear so close to his brow that he could feel the heat mounting inside her, he could sense the tension spanning her every motion.

‘It is with a heavy heart that I say this,’ started Furio, ‘but I have nothing to offer you, nothing to share. There is no flame burning in my heart, such as there is clearly burning in yours. What you have to give so plentifully -- of that thing I do not have any at all.’ He appreciated the woman’s delicate touch, shared with her a few breaths, then lightly pushed her back, helping her up, supporting her as she regained her full height. Before he could take another look at her black, almond shaped eyes, his own eyes opened to the view of Arezzo, and he watched the city slowly retire into the night.

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As Furio took his walks round the town of Arezzo, seeing his neighbours through shop windows, taking in the scents of bustling marketplaces, listening to excited discussions, overhearing whispered rumours and confessions, he would, from time to time, consider the passionate character of these forever engaged people. He imagined their lives as rivers down which walked they, stubbornly keeping their feet on the soft and treacherous river bed, their movements inheriting the graceful heaviness of the water which surrounded them, which pushed them continuously downwards, which pushed them along with its currents. He knew, too, that this was not uncommon — after all, his own caring mother, as well as his most venerable father, also they led their lives like this.

When Furio was around the age of five, his parents would have heated discussions over what the best diet for him was, or which clothes were most suitable for the weather. They would disagree over which kinds of family holidays are suitable for a child his age. The would put their heads together to devise ways of instilling values they considered important in Furio, whom they saw at times as a lump of clay, ready to be moulded and shaped into a thing of unimaginable beauty, which would bring pride and joy to its creators.

Around the age of ten, his mother would swoon over every one of his little successes, prophesying a stellar career for him, and, in apprehension of his future, which suddenly seemed so doubtful and unsure, she would shake her head in true sorrow every time he misbehaved, any time he received a bad mark, always after she’d been admonished by his teachers to make sure he’d diligently complete his homework.

When he was a teenager, a lot of effort was was put forth by his parents to prevent him from falling into bad company, to make sure his hair was always cropped and that he looked respectable when going to school or attending to the various errands around the city, which his parents sent him on. They would hold long telephone conversations with the other children’s mothers or fathers, trying to work out if Furio had been doing worse, or hopefully better than their offspring, his classmates.

All this was carried out in the same excited voices Furio now observed in the streets of Arezzo. His parents would whisper the same whispers that could now be overheard in the town’s many cafés. The same unmitigated involvement, which they had shown when Furio was a child, he could see these days, too, manifest itself in the post offices, the tobacco shops, the supermarkets. Much respect had Furio for these people, who so bravely faced the difficulties they saw in their lives.

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Furio’s father, the venerable teacher, the irreproachable diplomat, lived now in the same apartment as his son, his son having been assigned the rather large master bedroom, himself being perfectly content with the somewhat smaller, if more cosy, former bedroom for guests. Having learned to remain calm through the years of his marriage, to retain cold blood in heated arguments, to always look for common ground, Furio’s father was able now to live a life that his son considered very close to perfection indeed.

Years passed, and the two never saw a reason to change their living arrangements. Furio’s father has for years now understood his son well, understood his motives, was well aware of what he wanted to achieve, of how he imagined his life should be. The old teacher sought continually ways to support his son, who did not need support, to console him, although he needed not to be consoled, to surround him with care, even when he did not need to be cared for. Furio’s father was well aware, too, that this was how it was. He knew, also, that softness is stronger than force, and he never pushed his views on his son anymore, never tried to influence him, but still always gave him the best part of every meal he prepared.

One late evening, when Furio returned home after his work, and customarily set about preparing tea for the both of them, the respectable teacher saw immediately in his son’s movements, in the stiffness with which he poured hot water over the tea leaves, in the ever so slightly excessive force with which he placed the cups on the tray, he saw in his motions that he was suffering. That he, who always brought such joy to all those around him, he was not able to bring joy to himself anymore. Was not serene. Was not tuned in to the sounds of the water as it filled the cups, as it soaked the tea leaves and surrounded them with its warmth.

This filled the old teacher with sadness and apprehension. Surely, he has done all that was in his power, all that he could, not to interfere with his son’s journey, he knew by virtue of the long years of his life that he was not to blame. What, then, could have brought about the long expression on Furio’s face? What could have happened that would make his movements, usually so graceful and refined, suddenly become thus rapt, thus constrained? But the venerable father knew very deep in his heart that words were not what was needed at a time like this, and so did not speak to Furio of it. Instead, he allowed the new, tense air to fill the rooms of their shared home, enjoyed the taste of the tea, prepared in such a new, unexpected way.

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The next morning, having woken up earlier than usually, Furio prepared coffee in the large cafetiere which had been serving him and his father well for so long now. Distractedly, he poured a cup for himself. Without thinking of it, he placed the cafetiere in its customary place, set it aside with enough coffee for his father. With the precision of a mechanical instrument, he prepared a saucer and a cup for the venerable teacher. Automatically, he placed a small, hard, sweet biscuit close to the rim of the saucer.

That morning Furio was far away from what surrounded him. He did not hear the china clink softly as he put down his father’s coffee cup on its saucer. For the first time since he could remember, perhaps for the first time in his life, there, at the edges of his consciousness, Furio could sense a yearning, a thirst, could feel there was something wanting, that there was something amiss, even though he would not be able to say what it was.

Walking down the steep, narrow streets, watching the town of Arezzo slowly lift itself from the daze of the early hour, all that Furio saw seemed new to him. No longer did it give him pleasure to see the owner of the café scoffing at an annoyed client. He did not feel the  same respect for the office worker who hurried down the pavement, muttering profanities under his breath, clutching a dishevelled wad of papers under his arm. Instead, seeing his neighbours be thus emotional, thus involved, seeing them like this made him sneer with contempt, made him think dismissive and contemptuous thoughts. A lot of anger had Furio, now, towards these people, who lived their lives so fully, who were so inside their lives.

And so it was, first for an hour, then for a day, for two days, for two weeks... The delicate, subtle flow of his days did not bring him pleasure any more. With impatience he now passed through the streets of Arezzo on his way to the petrol station. With annoyance he now responded to the people who approached him to pay for their gas, to buy their cigarettes, to get their tokens for the car wash. He no longer took any joy from his afternoon walks, did not spend his evenings sitting under the fir trees which grew on the terrace garden, high up in the old part of the town.

Seeing him thus worried Furio’s father, who was attuned to his son’s moods, moods which he would have until recently thought so unlikely, so impossible, so not like his son.

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One day, as they sat down to have their morning coffee, the old teacher noticed in his son’s eyes a new quality, a new decisiveness, a fresh intent.

‘I must speak to you now, Father’ said Furio, a hard expression tightening his lips, a vertical line appearing on his troubled forehead.

‘Do, Son, tell me what it is you want to say. For weeks now I have been waiting for you to speak on the things that have so been bothering you.’ replied the venerable old man. ‘Do not think that I am blind to what has been happening, my dearest child, my only son.’

‘It is no longer possible for me to stay here with you, Father. Tomorrow morning you will not drink coffee with me here.’ Furio paused and looked at his father, then looked away to the half open window, through which seeped in fresh morning air. ‘I have been feeling like a blind man, Father, and I cannot stand this feeling any longer. The only thing I see clearly, the only thing that I am certain of, is that there is something missing, that I have become unsatisfied, unfulfilled. Like a blind man, though, I do not see what the lacking part is, I do not see what it would be that would quench this new thirst.’

As he spoke thus, soft tears filled the teacher’s son’s eyes. ‘It seems impossible for me to tell what I long for, what I want, what in fact it is that needs to be newly attained, or what it is that I need to rid myself of. Thus I have decided to leave Arezzo, to leave my work, to leave you, dearest, most beloved Father.’

‘My wonderful Furio, I cannot help but be relieved.’ answered Furio’s father. ‘For very long now I have waited for you to speak of this to me. On this thing that is eating at you so violently I cannot advise you, I cannot console you in your suffering. I must tell you that I have been waiting for you to make a decision, not knowing what the decision would be.’ The thin old man looked at Furio, and his eyes reflected the conflicting emotions which reigned now in his mind. ‘I think I see why you have made up your mind to leave here. I hope deeply you are right about this; that, by changing everything in one swoop, you will find the thing which will give you relief.’

Furio looked at his father lovingly, appreciating the softness of his approach, thankful for the faith he had in his son. He saw and held dear the compassion and the understanding the old teacher had for him. ‘I must ask you to kindly do one thing for me, though, Furio’ spoke his father, slowly placing his palm flat on the table. ‘When you do find out what it was that prevented you from feeling bliss, when you learn how to solve this puzzle that is bothering you, I want you to come back and tell me what you learned, teach me what you yourself have arrived at.’

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That afternoon, as Furio strode down the main avenue of Arezzo with his rucksack on his back, the warm sunlight seemed determined to show him his home town in its most beautiful forms, the easy wind seemed to purposefully bring out the most pleasing, sweetest sounds. The wooly clouds, having apparently developed minds of their own, arranged themselves behind the rooftops of the city, always coming together in such a way as to be just the right background for the old buildings, to complete them and complement them, their placement so perfect and final as if composed by a master painter.

Part two

Months passed by quickly as Furio moved from one town to the next, taking on odd jobs, working where he saw there was need of a worker. And so Furio has worked at one time at a warehouse, loading and unloading packages for a shipping company. Another time he was hired for a short spell as a driver of a school bus, filling in for someone who happened to fall ill. More than once he found himself washing dishes in restaurants and cafés. Weeks seemed short, their days filled from sunrise till sundown with menial labour, their nights spent in crowded workers’ hotels.

Wherever he happened to step he was always agreeable to those he met there. Naturally came between him and others a manner of respectful distance. Over time the strokes of luck, the mishaps and misfortunes of others, more and more of the passions which governed their day-to-day lives seeped into Furio’s field of view. After a while, having overcome the abashed constraint he had felt at first, he started paying attention to the stories he overheard, and many were the occasions when he had the opportunity to listen.

Once, during lunch break at a large warehouse owned by a prestigious furniture company, Furio stood together with two of his colleagues who were smoking away the minutes they had left of their break, having finished off the contents of their lunchboxes. One of them was of a very open disposition, as was often the case with him owing to a robust habit of smoking marijuana, which seemed to always provide him with a healthy dose of optimism, even if at some cost to his social graces. He said that he was now seven months out of prison and took employment at the warehouse to satisfy the conditions of his release. He said that he had been put in prison for manufacturing amphetamines, the profits from which mostly went towards supporting his dependent and mentally unstable fiancee. He said that in a spell of mania she gave an anonymous tip to the police which was what later resulted in his sentence.

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Once, when he had stopped in a larger city and was working as a water salesman during the hot summer days, while Furio was walking back up to the workers’ hostel he lived in, he was approached by one of the small groups of students that he had sometimes spotted as they did their tours between the bars of the central part of town. They insisted on sharing their drinks with him, which he accepted with gratitude, and told him that they had been celebrating a recent success of one of the girls. She was a special education graduate who had, after many months of regular exercise and patient oversight, managed to teach a seven-year-old boy with lifelong muteness to make his first sounds. The girl added that it made her feel very proud to have given the parents the opportunity to hear their child’s voice for the first time. Later, on occasion, the memories of these stories would come back to Furio.

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Never once, though, in these encounters, did Furio really engage in the conversations. He came to realise how much he must have had been neglecting his surroundings, how disconnected he must have been from others during his last years, for now when faced with another he found in himself no active element, no force of will which would support him in these talks. He found himself unused to making statements, unaccustomed to asking questions. His voice, even, sounded now strange to him, hoarse and dry, grating, as he contributed his mild agreement or expressed polite surprise.

Eating had become largely an annoying necessity, and he would go for a long time eating only small quantities of fruit. He felt disgust at the feeling of soft and wet food, half-chewn, filling his mouth, and any meal he had tasted was to him now dirty and off-putting. Thus he fasted for three days, another time for four days, then eight days. His flesh waned, and his cheeks became sallow.

His sleep was regular and took up all of his free time. By now he could be sure of waking up every two or three hours, at times because of hunger, at times because of the headaches, which now were becoming more and more frequent.

Moving thus through the various towns of Tuscany, Furio felt a constant sensation of mild drunkenness, even though he did not drink, an oneiric feeling of traversing life as though pushed softly from the back through and through a continuous series of rooms, each of which resembled all the others. He watched himself work until there was no more work to be done. He watched himself packing up his few belongings and moving, again and again, and it made him feel as though he were an insect scuttling quickly from one shadow to the next.

In this flowing, aimless state he did not find the change he was hoping for when leaving his hometown. Gone without question now, though, was the tranquility he has grown so accustomed to throughout his lifetime. New thoughts, new questions occupied his mind now, occurred to him in the most improbable moments. These questions, this line of inquiry was not altogether unfamiliar to Furio, but in the past words like ‘purpose’ and ‘will’ had to him only an airy, metaphorical meaning. Now his mind gravitated around them, searched for their outlines as when in a dark room one strains one’s eyes to make out the dim silhouette of an object. Solid, and yet unfathomable, meaningful, but impossible to grasp seemed these ideas to Furio. Thus he suffered, thus was his anxiety, thus was the reason for his preoccupation.

This was what ran through his mind one chilly night as he was walking along a hilly suburban road, returning from a roadside diner he worked in as member of the cleaning staff.

The shift had ended later than usual, too late for Furio to catch the last bus back to the hotel, and so he was forced to cover the distance on foot. Rubbing his hands together for warmth, he trudged along the black road, illuminated here and there by street lamps cast out of concrete. Along one side of the road ran a long and tall fence with flakes of paint peeling off of its wooden boards. On the other side, beyond the edge of the road, begun a sharp drop in the terrain, and a rail had been mounted there to prevent accidents. He thought of making the leap of faith, as he always did, as he now suspected everyone always did. The reflective signage of the railing shone brightly where it was under the gaze of the streetlights, and beyond it Furio could see nothing but the ambivalent darkness of the night landscape and the slim crescent moon which adorned the cold cloudless sky. The road curved this way and that in agreement with the shape of the hill and Furio could never see more than a few hundred meters at a time, could not make out how far he had left to go.

After a good while walking thus, Furio heard a sudden clatter coming from behind the last curve of the mountain road. There was the sound of an animal mindless with fear, or pain, or both. There was a gunshot, and another one, and two more. Furio’s palms felt cold and dead. He could faintly hear a man and a woman shouting in panicked tones. He could hear a dog snarling with rage, but this time Furio’s imagination placed it closer up than before to where he was standing, now, his skin crawling.

He knew to look around, to consider what the environment offered. As he looked back down the road from where he came, at the edge of the road cutting off sharply from the distance behind it, at the tall fence, which now looked sturdy but unscalable, at the debris and garbage strewn around along the fence, he could hear more shots, one after another, one after another. He could hear cries of terror, of fear, of anger. There was a metallic clanging sound of something heavy falling over onto concrete, then more squeals. He could swear that he heard the animal’s claws scratching the porous pavement, and heard the sound grow louder quickly.

From behind him, Furio heard the sound of an engine, and saw his own shadow stretch out in front of him, with fantastically long fingers, fantastically longer and longer legs, the head beams of the car cutting his shape into a sharp silhouette. Inside the shadow, he noticed two blindingly bright stars, moving in concert, wobbling this way and that, leaving wavy afterimages on his retina. All he could see now was his own shadow, dark, tall, foreign, with green fires for eyes. He felt a rush of air as the car passed close to his right shoulder, and then a soft and heavy push against his chest. He did not fall immediately, rather, he stood his ground at first against the invisible, snarling mass that hurtled into him, head twisting violently, splashes of foamy saliva in Furio’s hair. The only way to avoid contact was to lean back, lean further back. Just before his back hit the concrete, Furio managed to get a flimsy hold around the thrashing, hot animal, owing to luck only that his fingers had not yet been bitten off. He flailed his legs parallel to the ground, his hands desperately occupied, hoping to kick off of something, the fencing, to push himself off into a better position. Instead, his foot hit upon a rock, or a brick, and he could not help yelling out in pain. Soon he heard himself grunting and screaming wildly, almost drowned out by the hideous sounds made by the rabid dog. Now it bent its entire body at such an angle, and with such flexibility, that to keep his hold Furio had to follow through and scramble on top of it, only to be thrown down its other side. Twice more they rolled on top of each other, neither giving up their war cries, their yells of despair and fear. Furio was now on top, with the advantage of his weight turned against him, his left forearm stuck under the furious, dark, disgustingly wet shape. Now he could feel the hot panting breath, the spit, now he could feel the dog’s growls resonate through his own chest, when his heart suddenly gave a stronger beat. He felt a rush of cold euforia as his right hand reached for a piece of a brick that he had seen, miraculously, and then as he heard the soft, violent sound it made on contact with the side of the animal’s head. He must have struck well, as the dog gave only a rather quiet, surprised whimper. His hand did not stop, stuck in this victorious loop, this motion that saved Furio’s life, until the wet thumping became dry again. By then, the animal had long been still.

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The exhaustion that fell over him at once now made it impossible for Furio to be disgusted with the dog’s head, no longer recognizable. Panting, unable to breathe deeply, his breath hurried on by his heartbeat, he rolled limply off of the dead torso and let himself lay there on the concrete sidewalk, his arm almost embracing his disfigured, macabre lover. He could feel the blood, now thick, coursing in triumph through his veins. His forehead throbbed, his eyes felt like overblown tyres. Soon, nothing felt like anything so much anymore, and he drifted off, melting into the night around him.

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As he woke up, he saw the sky above him now gray. Autumn birds flew over, their silhouettes fuzzy, their movements mechanical. He stood up, but hunched over immediately and vomited onto the pavement. Tears running down his face, he spat into the small, translucent puddle of nothing that gazed at him from between his feet. Again and again he retched, until there wasn’t anything left except the bitter-sour taste of human gastric acids.

What now? he thought. Somehow, walking away seemed a strange idea to him. He felt like there was something he should do after what had just happened to him, and to the dog. The thought to bury the body crossed his mind, but he couldn’t tell if it was to hide it or to honor it. He sat down, letting his back rest against the tall fence. He wanted to look around for something to help him decide, or just to put the cadaver out of his sight for a while, but could not stop staring at a fixed spot about an arm’s length in front of him. And still what he felt most acutely was a dry sense of absurdity and disbelief.

Part three

It was still early morning, and there was no work at the restaurant that day. Furio had intended to spend it looking for a job in another city. After he got back and swallowed a rich breakfast at the cafe next to his hotel, however, the last of the adrenaline seemed to dissipate and he barely made it to his bed before he lost consciousness, not to regain it until the early hours of the day after.

Furio got on the bus to work earlier than usual, impatient with a vague anxiety over the dead dog. As he passed that fragment of the windy road where the long fence stretched out above the steep hillside he did not take his eyes away from the window, worried that he might miss the spot that has been present in his dreams during all these hours he had spent in deep sleep.

The fence ended suddenly, the corpse was nowhere in sight. Furio could not remember if he’d moved it or let it lay there, and so on the bus back from work, that evening, he strained to see bloodstains, to see any memento of his struggle against a brutal death. Dissatisfied, having noticed none of these, he got off as soon as he could and walked back to the spot, now bathed in cool sunlight, but found nothing at all. He supposed that the dog’s owners must have found the body and brought it away. Against his better judgement, he felt offended at this. He did not want to face the dog’s owners, to ask them to answer his questions. In the same breath, he decided to leave the job at the roadside restaurant.

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Soon he took the train headed towards Firenze. Town after town seemed to all cry their last farewell to warmth and sunlight. Leaves were raining down heavily, swirling in the mean winds. Furio had been eating hungrily in the last few days and his strength was coming back quickly, the headaches were subsiding and his sleep went on without disturbance. He felt his mind at rest, and the train ride passed quickly. With each intermediate station he felt his spirits rise and by the time they reached the terminus Furio’s face was bright, his mind open to whatever was to come his way now.

He stepped out at Santa Maria Novella onto the very end of an exceptionally long platform, moist from the drizzle and dark with traces of mud brought in on the countless shoes that continuously passed through here. None of the worker’s hotels had any vacancies to offer, which might have been a sign that there was a lot of work in the city, but which forced Furio to book a few nights at one of the backpacker hostels. During that time he hoped to find both a job and some less expensive accomodation. He had saved up a small amount during his period of fasting, but it would not be enough for more than a few days in this proud city.

Apart from three bedrooms, crammed with six beds each, the hostel comprised of a large open space divided by a counter from a small kitchen. In this living room there stood a few couches, a dining table, a bookshelf and a desk with a computer on it. The supervisor, who was sitting at his little station next to the kitchen, spent his working hours on his laptop, pausing whatever he was busy with from time to time to register a new lodger or do minor chores around the hostel. He played funky, life-affirming rhythms on the speakers, which at times sounded ironic, at times when the weather was at its saddest.

Most of the other guests were there on vacation, but, because of the poor conditions, they would not leave the hostel for hours during the day. There was a perceptible air of despondency which lended the place a hospital-like atmosphere. Even so, the tourists seemed eager to make friends with whoever they could, most of them travelling alone. They would approach each other, at first shyly and carefully, and then almost immediately launch into long descriptions of where they had stayed before Firenze, where they planned to go afterwards, where they came from and what they would do after their holiday was over. Furio got into these conversations especially often being the only Italian there except for the supervisor, and far more approachable. He met Zack, an American from Ohio who was given as a graduation present from his parents the funds for a three-month-long trip around Europe. Afterwards, the plan was to start at a mid-level corporate position in finance which he secured for himself before he left. He said after Firenze he would visit Pisa, where he had a distant cousin, a cook. His voice grew excited when he fantasized about the wonderful dishes he was sure to share with him and his family.

‘This is the last holiday you’re going to have for a while, no?’ Furio asked without much thought. Zack’s joy now slightly subdued -- ‘I guess it is’, he admitted. ‘After that it’s twelve days a year for the first three years, and then maybe a few more after that.’ Furio sat up on his bunk, careful not to hit the underside of the bed above him. ‘How does that make you feel?’ he asked, somewhat surprised that this was what came to his mind, and at the sincere curiosity he now felt. Had he been merely projecting his own thoughts on people before now? He never did talk to anyone much, rarely asked questions, trusting his reasoning that he could know, that he could notice all without engaging.

Zack, too, looked like he got lost in his thoughts for a while. ‘I’m thinking that I better take good advantage of it. But, to be honest, now I’m here I feel that maybe I’m not so much of a globetrotter type. I’m homesick, I guess.’

‘Don’t you think it might just be the weather?’ asked Furio in a tone which he now heard more and more often in his own voice, one of caring and at the same time of benign mockery, but mockery of the kind that one does not later regret. They both looked out the window, absentminded. Before them, their laundry was soaking up the raindrops which were falling on it.

‘Oh, by the way, do you know what Jochen told me? The German guy, sleeps over there.’ said Zack, motioning towards the lower bed in the corner, beside the balcony door. ‘He’s so embarrassed by this bad luck with the weather that when he emails his family back home he attaches photos of Florence in the sun that he finds on travel agents’ websites.’

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These lonesome travellers often clumped together in small groups, of three people at most. While smoking on the balcony they would commune in disappointment over the weather. They would gather in the kitchen and while each of them had a good excuse to be there, carrying a mug or a carton of orange juice, an empty beer bottle, they would often stop and, if the supervisor wasn’t there, in the evenings, they would complain about the locals acting rude towards visitors, and about the condescending tone they sometimes adopted. Furio, too, would start thinking up excuses to move closer to the others, and so ended up chatting with two well tanned girls from Australia at the refrigerator and playing two games of chess against a Belgian chemistry graduate. A dark, bearded man from Greece, each night without fail, asked the others to wish him good luck as he was preparing to leave for a date. Someone said that they wished they knew how he got all those dates, and that they didn’t sound like they were all with the same person. Another man, possibly another American, spent all his time on his laptop, hidden away in one of the couches.

Furio was happy with this new burst to his social life, he laughed out loud at jokes and personal stories, and even though he rarely thought to do any sharing himself, he would listen with interest and get involved, engaged in the lessons others took away from re-telling bits of their lives. He felt for them in their loneliness, and it resonated in his own heart, too, consonant with his own longing for something, for what, though, was unclear. For the piazzas of Arezzo and the terrace with its strong fir trees that cast such dark, meaty shadows under the blindingly blue sky? Maybe. He could not tell.

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He was quite fortunate and the city was full of business, and so it only took him two days to find employment at a restaurant, this time as a waiter. It was situated in a small, old building which was built to be a brewery, but now sported two spacious dining halls, one on the upper floor, where offices used to be, and one on the floor below, with its high ceiling designed to house large fermentation tanks. Each of these halls had its separate kitchen, although certain dishes would still often be sent up or down through the small elevators cleverly installed in strategic locations of the staff area. The dishes on offer were so many, and so exotic, some of them needed such intricate tools and dedicated workplaces, that the various kitchens and corridors, washrooms and laundry rooms, formed into an unintuitive, meandering and obscure space. Furio had to expend a lot of effort in order to keep up with the waiter that was leading him to his prospective boss, was forced to dodge a few trays full of dishes, squeeze flat against the wall here and there, always careful not to miss one of the sharp turns that his guide kept surprising him with.

He made a good impression on the manager, who gave him a fresh set of formal attire with precisely folded and pressed cuffs and a collar stiff as inch-thick carton. This was a tough job, with all the numerous staff always striving to keep perfect timing with their tasks. Furio would hear one of the waiting staff telling a delivery man off for being five minutes late, which for some long-winded reason was now going to cost the waiter half of his lunch break. One time he saw one of the bussers slip up in the corridor, just outside the entrance to the kitchen. Trying to keep his stack of dirty plates in balance, the boy used his other hand to grab a hold of what turned out to be a senior waiter just coming out with a dish, which in turn made him spill a small part of the contents of a sauciere he had on his tray. The busser started screaming at the maintenance man, who was unlucky to have been passing by, for leaving the floor wet. The waiter shouted about having to go back for a clean set of tableware, and repeatedly stabbed the cleaner in the arm with his index finger. Soon, the head chef joined the fray, stuck his large red face between the waiter and the busser, and hissed a few sentences under his breath, turning his gaze from one to the other. These few phrases might as well have been a magic spell, because by the time the chef turned to go back to the kitchen, the cleaner had already left, having tidied up the results of the pile-up, the busser had secured his cargo and sped away, and the waiter only remained where he was because the chef’s wide and bulbous figure was blocking his way back into the kitchen area.

Furio found himself enjoying this constant heat, this fevered tension made it easy to pretend like so much was at stake here. It came naturally to him to treat all of it as not much more than a game, he approached each problem as one does a logical puzzle, a test of intelligence and the ability to think on one’s feet. He found great pleasure in immersing himself, in playing along this way. He took up smoking so that he could accept when he was offered a cigarette, and he begun to carry a lighter in his pocket. He ate quickly, between this and that, often swallowing the last bites on his way to a table, the wine or coffee or dessert already on the tray he was carrying. He wondered how busy the restaurant must be in the summer, but could not imagine it enduring any more business.

His job paid reasonably well, and he could afford to rent a room in a flat near his workplace. He shared the flat with an exchange student from Madrid, who was keen to complain about his various problems any time they met in the living room or kitchen. Furio grew tired of it quickly, at first, but as the days passed the Spaniard’s lispy voice turned out to be soothing, in its own fashion, after a day of giving and receiving not much other than curt, precise utterances. The room Furio rented looked rather impoverished and bare, once because of the sparse furniture, and twice because of his own meagre belongings, almost impossible to arrange in any rational order on the shelves and in the drawers, which looked back at him awkwardly, empty and disappointed, from the low walls. He would look up at them as he lay on the retractable bed, which during the day, when put back, was disguised as a door, making room for a small desk to be pulled out. With the days getting shorter and colder, he was glad that work took up so much of his time, as otherwise he would be forced to stay at this new home or splurge on cafés. He was at times impatient with the sorry state of his lodging, looking forward to some imagined point in the future when he could rent something more comfortable. These thoughts were of a new kind to Furio, and he doubted if his Father would embrace them as cheerfully as he himself did. He felt good every time he had a good night and could later set the tips he got aside in a small tin box.

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Although constantly scrambling in the quick paced thither-hither of their workdays at the restaurant, the workers did manage to develop a certain kind of bond with each other, their conversations sparse, the few links between them thin as spiderwebs, but equally strong, strengthened by the slow rhythm of these short exchanges. One man especially called Furio’s attention, a cleaner who would without fail artfully disappear every time a superior was just around the corner on a quality control routine. When asked about it he would blow a raspberry, and his fat, wrinkled face would widen in a grin. Guessing about how he was able to do so and about why the superiors never questioned his absence was a regular topic of conversations among the cleaning staff. Having spoken to the older cleaner on various occasions, Furio would after a while start to actively seek out his company, and soon they developed a semi-daily routine of meeting up during lunch break at one of the back doors of the establishment, dispreferred by the other employees because of the large garbage bins which made up most of the scenery. The winter was coming steadily, week by week.

A busy restaurant, among its various quirks and oddities, turned out to be an excellent breeding space for gossip, where guests’ conversations were carried swiftly over to the staff area by the waiters, who would also, on occasion, interject on clients with a meaningful and poignant observation. Long-time patrons asked their favourite waiters for their opinion, which never failed to make an impression on all the junior staff. Once, mid-january, Furio and Gianni, the elderly cleaner, were sitting at their spot out back, smoking. They were discussing a rumor that had been going around the restaurant lately. It told of a girl who had been found dead in one of the apartments nearby the restaurant. Apparently she had killed herself over a romantic disappointment. After two years gathering up the courage, she had confessed her love to one of the city’s more prominent bachelors, and been rejected. ‘Good for her,’ said Gianni, now uncharacteristically serious, ‘good for them both.’

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On Tuesdays and Wednesdays the restaurant was closed to the public, and waiters weren’t needed. Tuesday was the designated day of rest, and on Wednesdays the cooking crews had the kitchen reserved to themselves. The restaurant boasted of bringing out an all new menu every week, and there was always a lot of competition between chefs to think up dishes both complex, interesting, and possible to make efficiently enough to keep up with the demand. Some guests would have a favorite chef, and would always order from the same cuisine, and occasionally, to the chef’s great pleasure, they would ask to send their regards. ‘Please tell the chef he really surprised us this time!’ was a message that Furio was always happy to pass on, and he loved to watch the chef’s face swell with pride, waited for him to call to one of his crew members, ‘See?’ Mixed in like this with the tangle of ambitions and intentions, warmed by the hot friction of causes and effects, Furio barely noticed as the winter passed, giving way to an abruptly hot, wildly unpredictable, child-like early spring.

On his days off, now, he would flan through Firenze, just as he used to in his hometown. He lived on the top floor of a building which seemed, instead of having been built, to have grown in some natural, fungal phenomenon, guided like a bonsai tree in its development by patient and clever oversight from a master groomer. The rooms were awkward and small, with low ceilings which seemed to be sagging slightly under the weight of time. He would wake up around nine o’clock, take a shower, and then immediately launch into one of his long walks. He would bow his head, as if to a crucifix, to duck under the doorway, for which he was too tall, and carefully descend the twisting stairway, so narrow that passing someone here would not only be very intimate, but most likely also impossible. Walking down he usually tried to figure out how many floors there were in the building, as the height of the various landings between top and bottom didn’t add up in his imagination to a coherent image.

Out on the street, a bedrizzled alley not wide enough for a car, he passed the miniature doors of the other tenement buildings. Going left, he would be headed towards the basilica of Santa Croce and its magnificent, empty piazza, and towards a small café where he sometimes took his breakfast. Going right would take him to the market of Sant’Ambrogio, where he liked to look at the wear and tear of old toys, tools and obsolete electronics. From time to time he would take one of these curious objects home, thus slowly filling up the empty space of his room.

Furio did not, during these treks, give much conscious thought to route or destination, changing his mind on impulse, always on the lookout for some pretext to alter his course. When he came up on a sight that he hadn’t yet seen, some opening between buildings through which he could look at an unfamiliar part of the city, he would turn and start walking in that direction. And so he would rarely visit the same spot more than once, covering more and more of the city with his brisk march. He appreciated these escapades for the solitude which they provided him, and by the time he was back at the restaurant he was ready to face the buzzing, teeming beehive that was his workplace.

After some weeks of this steady rhythm, he noticed his movements around Firenze concentrate around certain areas, certain parts of the city which he happened to visit more often. Walking through the tightest of these knots put him in an introspective mood, and the more he walked certain streets, the less he would now come to notice them at all. Looking around from time to time, he felt as if he were magically jumping between these various points, walking through portals of concentrated, but abstract thought. Most of his reality, now, consisted of a vivacious, but violent carnival of responsibilities and challenges, and all the more needful he was of these moments of respite.

A favourite place for his meditations was the Giardino Torrigiani, squeezed in between the streets of Campuccio, at the foot of the hill Bellosguardo. It got its name from an old family whose crest, a white tower, found now an echo in the middle of the mid-sized garden, where a neo-gothic observatory of a similar shape had been erected. He liked to sit near it, and periodically change his position, spiraling around it together with the moving shadow of the tower.