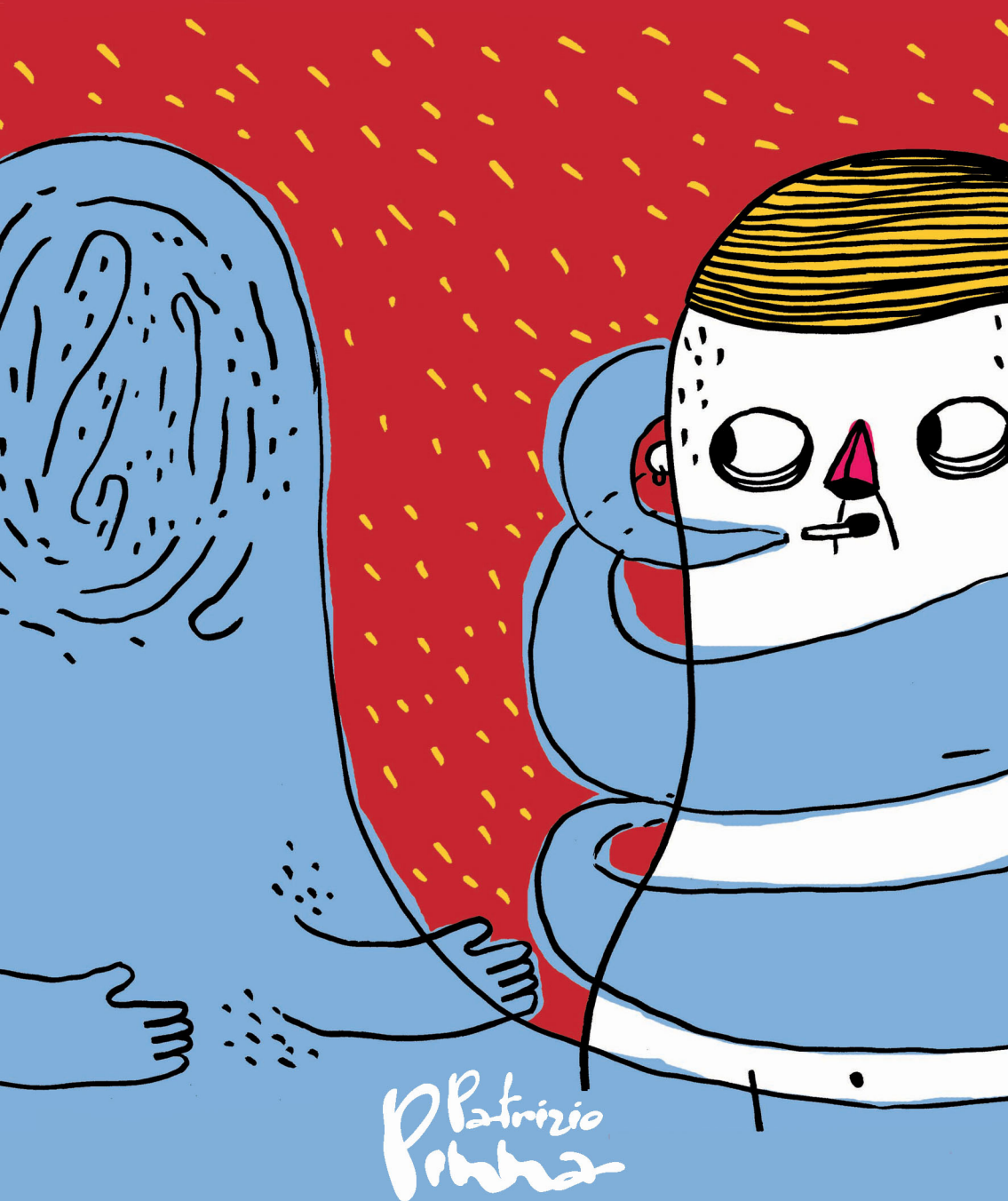


WEED BOOK

ADrift IN A SEA OF GANJA



Weed Book

(adrift in a sea of ganja)

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Chapter zero

The rise of the Cod

The disused municipal canteen we had set our sights on was located on the second floor of an abandoned building in a quiet neighborhood near the city center. The sign of the cinema below would provide us with the necessary electricity, and the tavern with which we shared the block would ensure a worthy alcoholic survival. Our choice seemed more than appropriate; even the nursing home that dominated the surroundings was a reassuring presence.

Seen from a certain perspective.

Thanks to the bolt cutters that Drugo borrowed from a fire truck, it didn't take us long to overcome the resistance of the padlock that barred our way. In no time, we moved into our new self – managed occupied social center: *The Indigestible Dirigible*.

We had no idea what we would find inside, and without speaking – since we had already smoked a fair amount – we scouted the place like seasoned secret agents. Siringa slipped into his harness, and Spino secured the mountaineering rope to the cast – iron radiator embedded in the wall opposite the windowsill. I had barely turned my head when Siringa was already on the wall, sabotaging the sign of the *Splendor* cinema, which was screening a classic adult film.

There were barely twenty of us punks, but we had nothing to envy the most skilled secret agents – at least, that's what I thought at the time. The fact remains that in less than ten minutes, Siringa reappeared on the ledge.

We waited for a confirmation signal to activate the main switch, but Siringa was swaying, staring blankly into space. We thought he had gotten an electric shock while dismantling the sign, so we pulled him inside and tried to shake him out of his stupor. Fortunately, he was unharmed – or rather, something had indeed happened, but nothing dangerous. After connecting the wires, Siringa had decided to roll one while still hanging on the wall, like a mountaineer conquering the Himalayas. And now, standing in the center – on the peak – he was not so much astonished by the fact that

nearly twenty people were up there at eight thousand meters but by the realization that he knew them all.

Everything was going according to plan. We had occupied the place for barely fifteen minutes, and we already had power. Now, all we had to do was draft a manifesto to send to the municipality and various city newspapers to inform the authorities of our proletarian expropriation. If we kept a low profile, the police batons wouldn't take long to disperse us; but if we engaged in a dialectical dispute with the authorities, we would be targeted by the media and therefore protected by them. A slap in the face for the cops who wanted to drink our blood.

I don't remember exactly what we wrote on the manifesto that Lupo delivered to the proper offices. I only know that we clumsily mixed concepts borrowed from the Constitution, the Civil Procedure Code, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the St. Crispin's Day speech. It was a success – a full – fledged success. The employees didn't just refrain from grilling our ambassador; they didn't even speak to him, too busy talking about fish. And it wasn't even lunchtime.

Lupo returned to the center, stunned to learn that both the municipal workers and the journalists would be eating cod that evening.

After midnight, having technically completed our first day of occupation, the celebrations began. The fog suddenly rolled in, and one hit after another, we found ourselves confusing day with night and night with day. We carried on like that for days, weeks, perhaps months, until, at some point, we experienced our first telepathic communion.

Honestly, I didn't believe that weed had such properties, but I had no choice but to bow to the facts.

I was inebriated – not so much by the telepathic experience itself but by the journey I imagined we would have to undertake to Stockholm. I thought, No one will take the Nobel Prize away from us now.

It was a disappointment to discover that we hadn't had a metaphysical experience. The cod were really strolling under our windowsill.

Drago was the first to uncover the truth. Suddenly, his withdrawal from sports news pushed him to leave in the middle of the festivities to grab *Guerin Sportivo*. I won't even tell you his shock when he realized that the sports pages had been evicted in favor of the news that had been crowd-

ing the columns of every newspaper, periodical, non – periodical, and even literary magazines for over a month.

“We have reached our thirty – ninth day of cohabitation with the fish species that have followed the now – famous Cod Uprising. Ichthyologists confirm that all species are now accounted for. The cod, pioneers of this atypical migration, have now settled permanently in Borgo Incrociati, while the pufferfish have invaded almost all the city's cinemas, so much so that this Wednesday's screenings will be suspended in favor of an Alastair Fothergill retrospective.

Good news for traffic on the Autostrada del Sole: last night, orcas and dolphins moved as a herd from the eastbound lanes toward Naples, settling in the highway rest areas. No disruptions for travelers, but we always recommend maximum caution. Keep in mind that these mammals weigh several tons more than your sedans, so be patient.”

So we weren't dreaming – the fish had really decided to rise to the surface. Unbelievable.

Spiccio returned from the newsstand with back issues and more exotic editions, and as soon as he came back, the effects of our last hit faded so quickly that we were almost tempted to report him. Spiccio opened the door, loaded like a camel, muttering something we couldn't understand, then stepped aside. We all thought the same thing: women.

But no girl appeared at the doorstep – just an entire hake brank that our friend had found wandering dangerously in the middle of the street.

So it was true. None of us had ever seen so many up close – at least not in good condition – and it left us quite perplexed. The fish, on the other hand, had little reaction. They slithered here and there through the center and, after getting used to their surroundings, nestled one on top of the other in a corner.

“Breaking News: The cod rise to the surface, causing panic in the city.”

The causes of such an emigration are still unknown. Scientists say humidity could be a determining factor, but not enough to involve the entire planet.

...

We are faced with an enigma more metaphysical than scientific, even though theologians have *no particular theories on the matter. Jesus certainly multiplied the fish, and Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea, but neither of them ever hosted a sea bass in their hut. At least, not a living one.*

...

The entire planet is witnessing a truly unique event, which is precisely why environmentalists, more aggressive than ever, have taken to the streets to protest against the abuses inflicted on our new guests.

◇

Unbelievable...

◇

Breaking News. Day five of cohabitation.

...

Our guests don't seem to be struggling at all. The cod are seeking refuge near Borgo Incrociati, while moray eels have been seen hiding in less accessible, dark places such as manholes, drains, and fountains. The sharks, which surfaced near the Foce last night, causing panic and destroying half a dozen vehicles, have moved away to the city's hills.

◇

Moray eels in the sewers and sharks in the countryside – better than the Afro – Cuban of '71!

◇

Breaking News. Absurdity upon absurdity.

...

The WWF barely had time to take a stand in favor of anchovies, now on the brink of extinction, before cats – having lived through their most prosperous culinary era – declared themselves vegetarians. A huge ideological victory for the WWF, though a major economic loss according to the association's spokesperson, Dr. Pand – Emonio: three hundred thousand pins had already been produced. But that's not all – restaurants, in just two weeks, have decided to completely revolutionize their menus. Environmentalists are pleased, though they suspect their success is due more to strict market laws than to moral enlightenment. No restaurateur could survive selling something that anyone can obtain for free on the streets. So, while

the wine list will remain unchanged worldwide, the Interplanetary Association of Restaurateurs and Related Professions – founded for the occasion – has decided to ban fish and meat in any form.

...

It's official, then. All of humanity is becoming vegetarian. It would be morally absurd, the Association comments, to continue eating any kind of living being. The Cod Uprising has sparked this transformation, and even though we now find ourselves living on a planet where we even doubt its spherical shape, that does not mean we can violate the most basic natural laws. If, following the Cod Uprising, even animals have stopped feeding on their own kind, showing a preference for vegetables, we can do nothing but bow before this great mutation – and put a veggie loaf in the oven...

...

No human being worthy of the name will ever again consume the flesh of a poor, defenseless animal – that much is certain.



The logic made sense, there was no doubt about that. The world was changing.

We had just occupied the place and hadn't even finished our supplies when the fish left the water, converting the planet to vegetables. This was news worth celebrating properly. And so we did.

Comfort foods came in rapid succession, as did the articles we read aloud in turn, trying to grasp the transformation we had not witnessed firsthand. Naturally, along with the fish came a flood of logistical problems, but nothing insurmountable in the end.

We celebrated our new home and our new neighbors until we ran out of supplies; then clarity wrapped around us, dimming our memory of the articles we had just absorbed. We stepped outside to search for our man, practically oblivious to what had happened – but once on the street, we perfectly understood how a fish must have felt in an aquarium before the Uprising. At any moment, I thought, a huge, distorted, and chuckling face would make us lose a few decibels by tapping the glass beyond which we, along with the rest of humanity, were now trapped.

Suddenly, we found ourselves disoriented in a new world, one we had read about but knew nothing of. We absolutely needed a drink.

We entered the neighborhood tavern, learning what couldn't yet be gleaned from the newspapers. The regular patrons, in protest, drank only white wine, openly mocking the new arrivals over the fried seafood they already missed. The old – time food lovers were the most affected by the Cod Uprising: “So much abundance and no damn dish,” they muttered, replacing their usual curses with the perfect summary of their frustration. Everything was still normal, after all. In taverns, the old folks were always angry – either because their party had screwed them over or because their party had suddenly abandoned them, hurting them in the process, or because their damn team couldn't score a single goal. The tune changed, but the melody remained the same. Except that even football, thankfully, lost the grip it had always held over the average citizen, and footballers – who once lived in sticker albums – began fighting moray eels instead.

Chapter one

Marione, autonomist punkettone

Marione was enjoying a little joint on the balcony of his house. His father was crying under the clothesline, thinking – prompted by his son's “bomb” – about the war. His tears soaked the laundry, so the clothes never dried and had been hanging there, moldy on the balcony, ever since Marione had officially started using soft drugs at home.

Mario felt a little bad about it, considering that under that mossy crust, his T – shirt with the Pope's photo smoking a joint was probably still there – unless his mother had made it disappear.

Marione was peeking at an old lady with what seemed to be her granddaughter. As they got out of the car, the girl noticed a squashed sole fish on the ground near a wheel. Seeing the poor fish, she gasped and turned to her relative, still holding onto the car door, exclaiming:

“Oh my God! I must have run over a sole...”

“A sole costume? But it's not even Carnival!” the Old Lady shouted, turning her hearing aid to maximum.

“What costume... I said 'run over'! Look...” repeated the girl, scrutinizing the injured fish with concern.

“Sweetheart, don't shout so loud – you'll drain my pacemaker...”

“Grandma, please! It must be hurt...”

“Oh, come on, it's not hurt! It actually looks like a nice sole to me.”

“Grandma, will you help me? Poor thing, what can we do?”

“I'd cook it in stew.”

“You're testing my patience,” the girl shouted.

Marione started laughing, catching the attention of the green – haired young woman.

“He doesn't seem too well... What should I do?” she asked for help.

“Who? The sole or your grandma?”

The girl muttered half a “fuck off” and turned just in time to see her relative bounce off a school bus. Luckily, the Old Lady – thanks to countless

silicone injections that had turned her into a human Gommaflex – rebounded off a lamppost and crashed into a guardrail.

“Damn arteriosclerosis,” she groaned. “You always have to make a scene. Crap, she’s not moving! She’s dying! We should call a vet.”

Mario knew Righetta, the sole, very well. She was his household’s center of attraction. Righetta spent her days lounging in the flower bed near the parking spot reserved for disabled people. Every time a car parked there, she would flop down almost under a wheel, flapping her fins to catch the driver’s attention.

Righetta had a foolproof plan – no driver of a disabled parking space vehicle could remain indifferent to the sight of a poor injured fish. After some hesitation, they all tried to ease their guilt with some bucks. Bucks that the sole, suddenly reinvigorated, would grab in an instant before darting off for a vacation at her favorite hotel.

Fish hotels were one of the many business transformations sparked by the Cod Uprising. In no time, all fishmongers were out of work. No one fished anymore, and no one dared eat or buy fish. But fishmongers were clever: after a short stint as choir singers, they repurposed their business.

They knew fish better than anyone, so they used their expertise to offer hospitality services to the new arrivals, dividing refrigerated display cases into tiny rooms and registering with the local hotel association. This way, for example, sea bass – who usually loved warm currents – could enjoy a vacation in a cozy, warmly lit room. Octopuses, preferring cold waters, could book chilled, well – ventilated rooms with rough, dark walls.

The only problem was with anchovies. They didn’t care about hot or cold; they just wanted to be together. No fishmonger – or hotelier – ever managed to get an anchovy to stay in a single room. They crammed into tiny marble cubicles meant for five, squeezing in at least a hundred, packed like... well, anchovies.

Thanks to this, Righetta could afford a suite at Iole’s Fishery, one of the city’s most renowned spots, just a few fin flaps away from Mario’s balcony.

“You knew about this?” the girl fumed, watching five dollars float away.

“I swear it’s the first time I’ve seen anything like it.”

“Yeah, right,” she snorted, spraying lemon on the car door to remove limpets from the lock. “By the way, my name's Mirella. And you?”

“Mario... Nice to meet you. What kind of lemon do you use?”

“Why? Want to shoot up?”

“I'm not a magician,” he replied, not getting what she meant. “It's just that those limpets you've got there are from Sestri, and for them, lemon is fine. But if you stick around a bit, the ones from Albaro will show up too, and then you'll need lime.”

“Lime?”

“They're terribly snobbish.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she said, looking at him with a bit more sympathy, while Mario raised his joint in a sort of salute. He looked like the Statue of Liberty or the guy with the Olympic torch just before the Games begin.

Marione's father, curious about his son's stillness, peeked out from behind the curtain of stiffened underwear to see what he was up to, but ended up scaring the little girl, who screamed:

“Holy crap, your clothesline just moved...”

“Oh, sorry – I forgot... Let me introduce you: Dad, this is Mirella. Mirella, Dad.”

The clothesline waved a pair of socks.

“Do you wear plywood socks?” she asked, while the Old Lady, now restless, was moshing with cars in the middle of the street.

“They're not wooden, they're petrified. My dad's been living under there, crying, for almost a year.”

“Why?”

“Because my joints – metaphors for my political stance – remind him of war.”

“Come on! And what war did he fight in?”

“None, but he's watched too much TV news.”

“Oh, poor guy... Why don't you quit, then?”

“And why don't you dye your hair pink?”

“Got it. Listen, I have to take my grandma to the nursing home. It'll take about an hour. Would you come with me afterward to look for some lime?”

“Sure...” he said, lowering his fist. Then he waved goodbye to his father and went to get ready for his date – with one little dilemma.

How could he tell the punk girl that she didn't actually need lime, and he'd just been messing with her a bit?

Eels gurgled in the toilet drain, splashing water everywhere. It happened in nearly every apartment, and no one had figured out why they felt so at home in such a place.

Meanwhile, his father, during Mario's outings, could finally step out from under the laundry curtain and plant himself in front of the oyster – shaped TV – whose design had nothing to do with the Cod Uprising.

Mario wanted to wear his Pope T – shirt to show the green – haired girl that he wasn't just some punk poser, but a serious, committed one. That even though he still lived at home with his parents instead of in garbage cans with moray eels, he knew what class struggle was and was even familiar with the autonomists.

Well, to be honest, he didn't know them *that* well. But once, a guy in their signature leather jacket had asked him for a light.

Then again, he could have been an English fisherman.

Chapter one and three quarters

C Conspiracy visions

I met Marione at the center, standing in a corner rolling oddly shaped ones, and he was struck by the Stratocaster I was finishing:

“Hey mate, that guitar is missing an octave...”

“I know, I ran out of rolling papers.”

“If you let me play a couple of notes, I'll give you one.

“I've already glued the neck... Won't it lose sustain?”

“It's a delicate job, I admit, but seeing how skilled you are, I'm sure we could play Hendrix on it afterward.”

Why not, I thought. The little punk kid fresh out of home seemed likable. At least he wasn't trying out some bold musical experiment to impress me – on the contrary, he was honestly citing Hendrix. Elegant as a black T – shirt, fitting in any situation. Universal.

“Okay, pass me Mr. Tambourine so I can adjust the octaves.”

We started playing. As the older one, I turned on the amp and nearly burned out the entire speaker, involving him from the moment the neck was attached onward. After all, I had built the guitar myself.

The extra octave also meant an increased active ingredient, and I, who had stuck to my fixed dose for years, underestimated the surplus and, without even realizing it, developed the concept of crustacean class struggle. Strange that I had never thought of it before. Everything was wrong, and the punk ideal was full of holes.

I had been holed up at the center since before the Rise of the Cods, and never – not once – had I ever seen a shrimp or a lobster around. Something had to be done. My comrades were probably applying classist racism with some kind of subliminal door selection. It wasn't possible that in all this time, not a single shrimp had ever entered our self – managed space.

I suddenly stood up, snatching the Strat from Marione's mouth, who stared at me a bit scared, and, brandishing what was left of the neck – more

like Luke Skywalker than Jimi Hendrix – I jumped onto the table where my friends were playing punker, a poker variant we had invented:

“Is it possible that none of us have ever done anything for the lobsters? Is it possible that in all this time, no one has ever wondered why not a single crustacean has deemed us worthy of a visit? I’ll tell you why... Because someone here is scheming against them. That’s right, someone is enacting a kind of ghettoization against this poor species, which has already suffered too much from us. We got it all wrong, I’m telling you. We are the ones who turned crustaceans into capitalist symbols – they have nothing to do with it... So I demand that this absurd discrimination come to an end, and I want the conspirators behind this disgraceful nightclub – style door selection to come forward and take responsibility!”

“Hey Pat, what did you take tonight? You’re really out there.”

My friends didn’t share my enlightenment and weren’t very gentle in putting me back in my place in front of Mario, who now looked around uncomfortably... I realized I had become part of a problem bigger than myself: the political integration of crustaceans. Sure, socially, almost all species had been accepted and integrated into common life, but as far as our microcosm was concerned, things were far from that.

Chapter one and five quarters

Small dilemma with adrenaline

Marione and Mirella met at the agreed time. Marione, all dressed up, showed up with two cannons depicting medieval miniatures:

“Do you prefer King Arthur or Conan the Barbarian?”

“Give me Conan, I’m feeling a bit down today...”

“Because you took your grandmother to the nursing home?”

“No, for her it’s like going on vacation. I’m just a little depressed because of the fish.”

“Why?! What’s bothering you?”

“They don’t bother me at all, actually... I’m happy they’ve surfaced to keep us company. I adore them, but I can’t recognize them. I watch them all the time, I play with them, I cuddle them, and then I go home, and if someone asks me what I did, I can’t tell if I played with a blenny or a scorpionfish...”

“Well, the scorpionfish has spines...”

“Exactly, that’s what I meant. I’ve been a vegetarian forever, my grandparents were, my parents too, that’s why my hair is green – it’s not dyed.”

“So your plates have never hosted a sea bass.”

“I don’t even know what a sea bass looks like.”

“Well, to be honest, neither do I.”

“See? You have the same problem as me. We know octopuses, sharks, and piranhas because they made movies about them. We know shrimp because they move backward and hake because we used to feed them to cats. But now that they swim around with heads and tails, we don’t even know how to recognize them. Tell me: when did you realize that cod isn’t born rectangular and that tuna doesn’t crumble with a breadstick? Tell me...”

“Well, let’s see... Humm... How did you say cod is born?”

“How should I know? Anyway, definitely not breaded.”

“Really?!”

“See?” she sobbed ironically.

“Come on, I’m joking. No one can know all the species that now live with us. Not even the fishermen of the past were used to such variety – everyone had their own field, right? The autonomous English... pardon, the English fishermen caught barracudas. Our Mediterranean neighbors caught sea bass, bream, and definitely anchovies, while the Milanese only caught trout and old tires. How can you feel depressed about not knowing what no one really knows? Sure, movies have helped us, but we can’t expect universal knowledge. We have to take what comes...”

“Maybe you’re right, maybe we should just take things as they come...” she said, breathing deeply near his face.

“Yeah, we should take things as... we should take...” Mario continued, crashing into her lips.

They stayed stuck together for so long that they had to spray lemon juice on their feet.

Marione thought he was dreaming.

“See, that thing in that carpenter’s belt is a hammerhead shark, while the one coming against the flow is a tench. Tench still haven’t figured out how one – way streets work, and unfortunately, they’re easy to recognize. Every car has one tattooed on its bumper.”

“No way! And here I thought it was the emblem of some exclusive club. Imagine, I even wanted to peel one off a Mercedes and stick it on my leather jacket.”

“Good thing you didn’t, environmentalists would have been really mad.”

“Well, I’d have been mad too in their place, but how was I supposed to know?! I’m glad I met you, Marione, really...” she said, while he struggled to keep his face from turning red.

“Me too... um... I’m happy I met you. Want to come to the social center with me tonight?”

“Of course I do, I want to go there every night,” she said.

Then she clung to his lips like a limpet.

Chapter two

Nursing home courtyard

Mrs. Spezzano made her entrance into the Victorian hall of the renowned nursing home with hesitant steps, causing a strike among the residents, who were too focused on keeping their tea from spilling. The doctors put on their formal white coats and prepared to welcome their best client with due reverence.

The Old Lady, fully aware that she had reached her destination, began to perform. Pretending a sudden drop in blood pressure, she staggered just enough to let herself fall to the ground when the shadow on her left was ready to catch her. Unfortunately, that shadow did not belong to the dashing Dr. Novelli – whom she was secretly (or so she believed) in love with – but to Cavalier Bonfiglio, who had long been convinced he was an integral part of a Byzantine mosaic. The Old Lady, bouncing off him, went on to shatter the Louis XV ottoman that had been proudly displayed in the hall. Two whole chapters were erased from school textbooks, and a well – known city antique dealer attempted suicide.

“Oh, my head...” the Old Lady whispered, following the script like a professional once she regained consciousness.

“Don't worry, Mrs. Spezzano, everything is fine. You took quite a hit, you really scared us, you know?” the doctor said in a harmonious and reassuring tone.

“Dr. Novelli, is that you?” she screamed, as if propelled into the middle of a U2 concert by the sheer force of love. “Is it you, doctor?”

“Calm down, Mrs. Spezzano, calm down. And there's really no need to keep your hearing aid so loud.”

“It's not loud, doctor.”

“Oh yes, it is, my dear. When you talk, I hear an echo.”

“You always love to joke,” she continued, getting up from the floor with ninja – like agility. “I couldn't stand being away from you any longer, you know? My migraines are tormenting me.”

“But madam, we've talked about this before...” The doctor held back. There was no point in reminding her not to glue her wig on with Bostik – at least not before reviewing the results of about seventeen different medical tests. “Come here, my dear, give me a hug... Welcome back...” he said, as a little dollar – shaped cloud materialized above his head. “I've reserved your favorite room for you.”

“What would I do without you, doctor?”

Mirella loved her grandmother, but she couldn't understand why she spent all that money on absurd treatments for ailments she didn't even have, instead of enjoying life a little. They had discussed the issue many times, but the outcome was always the same. The Old Lady refused to listen to reason. Just as kids needed Pink Floyd for their first joints, she needed her doctor. Dr. Novelli was her catalyst, her confessor, her lover, and her swindler. Without Dr. Novelli, even Valium didn't taste the same.

Unfortunately, the feelings the Old Lady had for her personal dealer were occasionally shared by other residents of the institution – not to mention the custodian. When that happened, it wasn't unusual to witness spectacular 19th – century – style duels between eighty – year – old combatants ready to tear each other apart. But without teeth to do so.

Six years earlier, for instance, Mrs. Spezzano had even locked Mrs. Di Masi in her room for a week, jealous of the seductive glances that, according to her, Dr. Novelli was casting at the other patient. Naturally, since the Spezzano bank account was significantly larger than that of the victim, the Old Lady was not prosecuted, and Mrs. Di Masi was scolded by the entire ward for repeatedly skipping meals.

After all, life in the nursing home would have been terribly monotonous without these little twists. The attendants served breakfast at eight, but all the residents were already up by five, waging their own battle against inevitable cellular decay with beauty creams and makeshift facelifts using adhesive tape. Then came the election of Mr. or Mrs. Nursing Home. The one who managed to keep the mattress sensors dry throughout the night – those linked to the reception's computer – was triumphantly paraded down the main hallway, earning the right to choose the day's menu. Though this privilege was rarely exercised.

After breakfast, they killed time until lunch, when, besides eating broth with star – shaped pasta and spitting bits onto their neighbors, they indulged in gossip. Then, they continued “killing” until dinner – unless they were taken out by indigestion – where the only variation was the shape of the pasta in the soup. Finally, after nine p.m., they would try to get used to eternal life by lying down and starting the “funeral lottery.” The more sprightly residents would place bets on the health conditions of their fellow patients, following personalized odds for each individual. Occasionally, even the doctors – officially excluded from the competition – would make some extra cash by selling tips in exchange for a proxy bettor.

The Old Lady, both loved and feared, had made record earnings in the funeral lottery. She didn’t play often, but every time the mephistophelian octogenarian reached for her wallet, you could be sure the poor soul in question wouldn’t wake up. You could set your watch by it.

After her fifth consecutive win, an investigation was even opened. For a few days, everyone feared she was rigging the game, so the authorities intervened. A thirty – two – year – old agent disguised as Methuselah infiltrated the crowd of senile residents, pretending to be gravely ill. For the entire duration of the operation, the Old Lady didn’t bet a single penny. The case was closed, and the police were deeply embarrassed when they discovered that the aging makeup applied to their undercover officer was permanent.

Chapter two and a bit

The social center cabaret

The sun had set. Cuttlefish and baby octopuses descended from the tops of the poplar trees, spilling onto the street and painting the sidewalks. The octopuses, hanging upside down from the lower branches, looked like ripe fruit in the twilight, and the multicolored fish scattered everywhere lit up the neighborhood like neon signs.

Marione had the feeling he had landed inside a screensaver. It was almost too beautiful to be real. Just like his new girlfriend.

"I've never been to this social center before. What do they usually do here?" Mirella asked after exchanging greetings.

"Well, to be honest, I don't come here often either, but last night there was a cabaret show with this funny character who launched into a daring monologue about the social integration of crustaceans..."

"And it was free?"

"Of course, it's a social center, not a nightclub. If we're lucky, we'll catch him again tonight."

"Wow..."

The Dirigible opened up like an oyster before their eyes, and a thick smoke, as dense as the fog in Turin, engulfed them. Slightly disoriented, they looked around to get a feel for the evening ahead, then settled into a secluded corner. Mario, with great satisfaction, pulled out the stash he had set aside for the occasion:

"It's not much, but it's enough for a little trumpet..."

"Oh, more than enough. With this, we might as well get the whole orchestra going," Mirella replied, pulling out a hefty brick of pressed White Russian.

At the sight of such abundance, Mario practically turned phosphorescent and started stammering:

"D - D - Where d - d - did y - y - you g - g - get a - a - all t - that s - s - stuff?!"

“I have my suppliers...”

“H – h – holy c – c – crap... I – I – I sh – should c – c – call h – h – home to l – l – let them kn – kn – know I w – won’t be c – c – coming b – b – back t – t – to s – s – sleep...”

“Let’s not think about that now,” Mirella concluded as she expertly rolled a remarkably large Stealth.

Mirella’s skill in crafting such recreational goods was so exceptional that every time she finished rolling one, she had to wait for it to be photographed by journalists from the top modeling magazines. Her Stealth had to wait half an hour before being published on page forty – six of *Modeling Today*, while Marione found himself in the camera lenses of reporters, caught in a full – blown anxiety crisis...

“Come on, damn it...” he shouted. “At least light up one engine, let’s take a spin, come on... a little reconnaissance flight...”

“Hold on, I did such a good job on this one, if they publish it on a full page, I’ll make at least five hundred bucks... it’s worth waiting a bit.”

“Well, when you’re right, you’re right. Have they published much of your stuff?”

“Honestly, yes. Imagine, once I rolled a diorama with mountains and little trains going back and forth, and I made almost six hundred bucks. But when I smoked a bust of Berlusconi, all hell broke loose. They almost threw me in jail. At the end of the trial, the judge made me swear never to roll up historical figures in the process of beatification again. That’s why I became a punk – before that, I’d never even worn a pair of combat boots.”

“What a story...” he blurted out, adjusting his hair to be immortalized in the cockpit of the shadow aircraft.

Chapter two and a bit more

Die and win

When I arrived at the Dirigible, traffic was blocked near the nursing home by a horde of policemen, journalists, and ambulances. Climbing the stairs that separated me from the entrance, I saw strange people coming out with absurd cameras. I thought they were Japanese anarchists, their almond – shaped eyes widened in Western style by the weed.

They were talking about a pilot who looked nothing like a U.S. Marine, but they weren't speaking Chinese. I figured the secret services were getting ready to strike the local anarchist organization with a plane like that. I started trembling so much that the limpets living on my combat boots were evicted.

I considered running away, maybe seeking refuge at the Forza Italia headquarters, but I couldn't just let my comrades take a missile to the gums. I downed a couple of candies for courage and launched myself forward like a rocket:

"Comrades, we're in danger, we need to run immediately. I just intercepted a private and encrypted communication" – sure, I was improvising a bit, but the candies were starting to kick in – "between the head of state and the secret services. Our social center is about to become a battlefield. They want to level the whole neighborhood with one of those damn invisible planes, like... like... like the one those two are smoking right now. Do you get it? They want to send us all to the creator, damn it... We need to get out of here fast, move, hurry up! For all we know, that damned plane could... could... could already be here, since... since you can't even see it... We have to run... now..."

With that, I jumped off the table and bolted. With all those amphetamines, I could have kept running for a week.

"Well, we got lucky again tonight," Mario concluded. "Maybe they do cabaret every night..."

"Yeah, that was fun. Why don't we go for a walk? I'm starving..."

Mirella and Marione headed out in search of a sandwich shop, but the only thing they found was a tangle of emergency vehicles parked haphazardly in front of the nursing home.

“Damn, something must have happened. I need to make sure my grandma is okay...”

“Well, let’s push through and see what’s going on.”

The crowd of onlookers gathered around the vehicles had already lost interest in the matter: a ninety – year – old lady had kicked the bucket, crushed by a wardrobe. *What an absurd way to go*, they thought, while Mirella’s grandmother, in the distance, was hurling folkloric curses.

“Is that your grandma yelling in the background?”

“Yeah, she probably didn’t place a bet and is pissed about the loss.”

“The loss... of the Old Lady?”

“No, the loss of the winnings,” Mirella said, explaining the mechanics of the *funeral lottery*. “Let’s go find something to eat now. I’ll visit her tomorrow and have her explain everything in detail... It’s strange, you know?”

“What?”

“That my grandma didn’t bet on this death. She has a sixth sense for these things, she’s never missed one. There’s something mysterious about all this...”

Chapter three

The mistery of the clinic

“Hi, Grandma, you look well,” said Mirella, hugging the Old Lady in the hall of the institute, mourning the loss of Mrs. Stanziani.

“Aside from the usual aches and pains, I can't complain.”

“I'm glad, but what happened yesterday? I was outside with a friend, and we saw all those ambulances. They told me there was a tragedy...”

“Oh yes... Mrs. Stanziani is gone. She slipped on the bedside rug, probably because of a passing snailfish. The tremor caused by the fall made the Art Deco double – season wardrobe in her room topple over her. I just can't believe it. Imagine, I didn't have any premonition and didn't bet anything. You can't imagine how angry I was yesterday. Mrs. Stanziani seemed to be in perfect health. They would have given me five to one odds on her...”

“Come on, don't take it too hard. Maybe you didn't sense anything because it wasn't a typical passing, but an accidental death.”

“What are you thinking? Didn't I win eight hundred bucks when I bet on Cavalier Pedrozzi?”

“Sure, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with it! Pedrozzi was perfectly fine, he was in great health, but that evening I still had a feeling and bet hundred bucks. The next morning, I got a call from my broker: Pedrozzi's hot water bottle burst between his legs. He was electrocuted by a short circuit from the electric blanket.”

“Oh right, I had forgotten, but how do you explain this?”

“I'll tell you, my dear, yesterday was a plain and simple murder.”

“Grandma, what are you saying? A murder? Do you even realize what you're implying?”

“I realize it very well, sweetheart. I realize that yesterday I lost a lot of money. Oh, I realize it, all right!”

“I’m not talking about that. But a murder in the nursing home? These are serious accusations and could even put your stay here at risk – if they turn out to be true.”

“Well, don’t worry about me. I have Mick Jagger’s skin, you know that. What I don’t understand is the motive. Who would have wanted that poor woman dead?”

“Are you joking?! You don’t really think Mrs. Stanziani was killed, do you?”

“I don’t think so, my dear. I’m sure of it. I’ve been in this geriatric beauty farm for years, and in all this time, I’ve come to know my companions well. Mrs. Stanziani never got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom; she had no issues in that regard. She was elected ‘Mrs. Nursing Home’ two out of three days. Thanks to her, we managed to stand up to Mr. Suzuki, the one who forced us to eat fried seaweed. So why, then, would she have gotten up in the middle of the night?”

“But it was ten – thirty.”

“Exactly... At that hour, we are all asleep, and the only sounds in the institute come from the mackerels.”

“If you’re so convinced, wouldn’t it be better to go home?”

“Go home? Are you crazy? I want to get to the bottom of this. Just the thought of it excites me!”

Mirella didn’t believe her grandmother’s murder theory, but it seemed to give her a significant adrenaline boost, and for that reason alone, it was welcome. After leaving her grandmother to her investigations, Mirella went to Dr. Novelli to sign the reimbursement forms for the ottoman.

“Hello, Doctor,” she said from the office doorway. “Grandma already seems to be doing better...”

“Oh, Miss Mirella, good morning. I’m glad to see you... Of course, your grandmother is already in overdrive, as usual. We’ve talked about this before.”

“Yes, she pretends to be depressed just to stay close to you. She’s in love with you.”

“Well, you know how it is? It’s part of my job... Old age isn’t something you can treat with medication alone, at least not entirely. Sometimes I wonder whether my medical studies or my etiquette lessons have been

more useful, and I always come to the same conclusion: etiquette pays much more.”

“Right, that’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you remember when, two years ago, you promised me a free month’s stay if my grandmother stopped ambushing you to try and assault you?”

“Uh... Yes, of course...”

“Well, you wouldn’t go back on your promise, would you?”

“Of course not, Miss, as long as she doesn’t try to tear my clothes off again this year.”

“So, do we have a deal, Doctor?”

“Deal...” the doctor was forced to confirm, as a light fade erase the dollar – shaped cloud above his head.

Novelli would have preferred Mirella to forget this particular debt of honor, but what was done was done, and no one could say he didn’t keep his word. He was a man of honor in that regard. Even though the monthly fee was lost, there were still the generous tips that the Old Lady was known for handing out. Moreover, Mrs. Spezzano had never stayed at the clinic for less than twenty – four weeks. That hole in the budget would be recorded as an insurance investment aimed at keeping the hands of the frisky old lady at bay.

Chapter four point five

The Dirigible's stage

Political commitment was taking up almost all of my time, and my popularity at the center was rising – I was becoming the main attraction.

Every evening, I provocatively rolled a few lobster – shaped joints, then launched myself onto the tables, delivering monologues on crustacean integration, giving birth to a new school of thought: *po – littics*. My two biggest admirers – Marione and a sweet little punk girl with green hair – started spreading the word, bringing in new spectators who made me uncomfortable by applauding my rants. I didn't fully grasp the meaning of their gesture, but I fed my ego by thinking it was the bourgeois equivalent of their approval. I even started preparing my speeches before leaving my shrimp – padded room. I had become the spokesperson for crustacean dissent: the first *polittician* in history.

Unfortunately, I couldn't establish a dialogue with my housemates. They didn't seem to care about crustaceans at all, though they were extremely interested in my manual dexterity when it came to producing comfort goods.

I got a bit closer to Marione and met his girlfriend. Marione and Mirella started frequenting the center almost every evening, and given the quantity of models they introduced, their presence was more than welcome. Mirella told me she often came to the neighborhood because her grandmother was in a nursing home and that she had met Marione through Righetta. I knew the nursing home well – I had snuck in there multiple times to trade *Dolcetto* for psychotropic drugs. The elderly were always well – stocked, I explained, and they couldn't resist the lure of a red glass of Piedmontese nectar.

"So that's why my grandma always seems tipsy when I visit her," Mirella said, laughing. "And I thought it was just the medicine..."

"Yeah, but don't blame me. They've been swapping wine and pills with the clinic across the street for years. I didn't start it."

“But don’t the doctors know anything about it?”

“If you ask me, they tolerate it. Wine makes the old folks’ tips a lot more generous, and the doctors live off that. I’ve often thought about turning it into a business – all you’d need is a cooperative head physician.”

“It’s certainly an idea, but my grandma is in there, so I can’t support it. Especially since a patient just died yesterday.”

“No way!”

“Yeah, she slipped on her bedside rug and knocked a wardrobe over onto herself.”

“Damn, what a trip of a death,” I said, dodging a sea bass dazed by the smoke.

“If you say so... By the way, what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

“What do you mean?!”

“Isn’t there a cabaret show tonight?”

I suddenly realized that my admirers had completely misunderstood my political commitment. The only ones I thought I had influenced had merely mistaken me for a cabaret performer. They couldn’t have cared less about anarchic crustacean integration. They were only coming to watch me jump on tables and shout random concepts in every direction. Sadness took hold of me.

At least I had expanded my circle of friends, and Mirella was so sweet that I just couldn’t be mad at her.

Chapter five

Between one glass and the next

The tavern, as usual, was packed with survivors of decay, trying to uphold the nation's honor one glass of white wine at a time. The conversations were always the same. Once, it was football; before that, politics; now, it was the time of the Codfish Migration.

"I'll tell you what we need now. We need Him... these cod are like the immigrants."

"But Pinin, you're obsessed..." yelled Nello, an old reformist.

"Obsessed, my ass... The world is going to hell, you see that? And do you know why?"

"You tell me, Pinin."

"Phosphorus deficiency... that's the real reason. Why do you think NATO bombed the Africans, then? Maybe for that ridiculous excuse about Hawaiian shirts?"

"But Pinin, do you know what would have happened globally if Africa had adopted one of America's greatest icons, like palm – patterned fabric?"

"Listen, Nello, palm – patterned fabric was born in Hawaii back when they were still making those tin guitars they played in a weird way. So, it came from an underdeveloped country with a pretty decent climate. In that sense, Africa has nothing to envy about Hawaii – if anything, it's even hotter there..."

"There's no talking to you, Pinin, you're a damn extremist..."

"Extremist, my ass. Who do you think cooked more sea bream, Mussolini or the chef from *Gambero Rosso*?"

"For heaven's sake, you jump from one thing to another... First, you say Africans have the right to wear Hawaiian artifacts, then you want Mussolini back to cook your dinner... You're not coherent. We're all God's children, aren't we?"

"Yeah, sure... God's children! We may all be God's children, for Christ's sake, but I'm the only one who spent forty years in a factory, not

those damn sea bass! And where was this God when I lost my middle finger in the asphalt mixer, huh?! You remember when that happened, right? Just a moment of distraction...”

“But you were dead drunk...” interrupted Nello.

“Just a moment of distraction, and that damned infernal machine sucked in my middle finger! And where was God that day?”

“But you were totally wasted! Don’t you remember? We went to the factory after a weekend drowning in Lambrusco, and you got so pissed off talking about politics that you flipped off all your colleagues... Then, not satisfied, you started raging against the machinery and ended up insulting the asphalt mixer – which, unfortunately, was running at the time...”

“Go on, go on, you senile fool, you only remember what you want... Hey Sandro, will you bring out those damn anchovies before I bread myself?” he shouted at the bartender, who was already significantly affected by the Verdicchio.

“You’re a lost cause. All this hysteria over some poor fish – just let it go. There are more important things in life, aren’t there?”

“Sometimes I wonder... Sandro, bring me a white, for Christ’s sake. I wonder if you’re some kind of genetic experiment. You’re even weirder than that squid hanging from the chandelier... Sandro, for God’s sake, when are you going to clean that chandelier? Do you really think that if people had kept eating fish, they’d have turned into idiots like this? Didn’t you ask yourself any questions when they stole the wheels off your wheelchair?”

“What’s that got to do with anything? There used to be more cars, and thieves would steal car wheels. Now that there are more disabled people, thieves...”

“Steal paraplegics... You know what, Nello?”

“What?”

“Go stick your head in a gas pipe!”

This scene repeated itself almost identically at set intervals throughout the day. I only went to the tavern to stock up on Dolcetto, and every day, I had to endure the spying glances of the old – timers, who were looking for an excuse in a punk like me to launch a new soliloquy against modern society – before inevitably circling back to the monologue above. It annoyed

me to be the unwitting catalyst for such discussions, but Sandro's wine was a nectar worth any discussion.

Sandro, the long – time tavern keeper, had never aligned with the third – age classist policy that forced everyone to drink only white wine. He continued to secretly stock up on a Dolcetto d'Alba that was out of this world. "For everyone, not just the few," he would proclaim every time I loaded the demijohn onto my Ape, consistently butchering the meaning of his intended statement. Then he'd pocket the hundred bucks – never making a mistake there – and return to his duties, apron and all. He was one of the last true tavern keepers left, for whom even the WWF had taken a stand, securing, through a daring nationwide ad campaign, the abolition of drinking on credit – a practice that had been widespread in taverns until not too long ago.

At the back of the tavern lived a strange character who unsettled me. I couldn't explain why, but that man – despite his age – didn't seem resigned to it, nor did he appear senile. The poor guy radiated such sadness that even a serial killer would have felt uncomfortable. Every day, he sat on the bench at the back of the bar, drinking and reciting a sort of nursery rhyme in a monotone so peculiar it seemed deliberate:

"A few years ago, I was thirty, I was handsome, and lots of women were after me. I put on a uniform to drive them crazy and score even more. Then they threw me into a nursing home, forced me not to piss the bed, and just when I got used to the feeling of being clean, my superiors told me they'd made a big mistake and sent me into retirement."

I don't know why he made me feel so sorry for him. After all, even dockworkers couldn't retire at thirty. But there was something about him that disturbed me – as if he had aged suddenly and unknowingly, unable to accept his entry into old age.

I tell you this because that day, when I entered the tavern to load up the demijohn for the self – managed center, I noticed something odd in the air. At first, I thought one of the regulars had lost their battle with cirrhosis, but I saw that all the heavy drinkers were still in their usual spots. The difference wasn't in the number of people – it was in the noise. Everyone was talking in hushed tones, as if afraid of disturbing one another.

I focused, trying to figure out why, when at the back – right where I usually avoided looking – I saw Mirella’s green hair. She was sitting with the man who always unsettled me. I thought about slipping away to avoid any contact, but if I didn’t bring the demijohn to the center, I’d be subjected to atrocious verbal torture. And words, as they say, kill more than swords.

It was inevitable. Mirella saw me and greeted me hastily: she was handling a delicate matter, she said, and didn’t have much time for me. That piqued my curiosity – what kind of deal could she possibly have with a guy like that? He certainly couldn’t be her dealer.

I followed Sandro to the back to get the wine.

“Tell me, Pat, how’s your battle for integration going?”

“Bah... I’ll be honest, I’m not feeling very motivated... I should get some kind of feedback to keep fighting, but after all this time, I’m more and more convinced that crustaceans don’t really care about social centers like ours.”

“Well, don’t give up, Pat, ours is a mission...”

“Of course, mate. But tell me, how do you put up with all the bullshit that gets said in your bar?”

“Come on, you don’t get it because you’re too young... It’s all harmless nonsense, old folks have nothing left but their chatter. It’s amusing to see how far they can stretch it. And if I closed down, what would happen to them? They’d end up with the moray eels.”

“Poor things, they’d just go back underwater...”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. You can’t even imagine the satisfaction I get from running a place like this. Today, for example, after twenty years of running this joint, a girl walked in! You saw her, right? That sweet young thing with green hair?”

“Of course I saw her, she’s a friend of mine... I just don’t get what she’s doing with that guy. He’s always given me the creeps, you know?”

“Who, your friend?”

“No, you old fool... The guy who always sits at the back. He gives off a weird vibe, makes me uneasy...”

“Well, that’s the least of it, considering everything that happened to him.”

“Why, what happened to him?”

“You don’t know?”

“Not a clue.”

“Keep this between us, okay? It’s something the real old folks must never find out...”

“The real old folks?! What are you talking about, have you been drinking already?”

“Of course I’ve been drinking, it’s almost noon. Anyway, that old man who creeps you out is actually just a poor thirty – six – year – old cop...”

“And I’m Peter O’Toole...”

“Listen to me,” he whispered. “Dirk was about thirty when he was chosen for an undercover mission at the nursing home next door, where five residents had died in less than a month.”

“Murdered?”

“Not exactly... The poor souls all passed away from natural causes – or so it seemed – but the same person won the funeral lottery for all five.”

“Totofuneral?!”

“Exactly. So the police decided to send someone in undercover. They wanted to expose the scam, suspecting that the serial winner of the lottery might also be the one faking the winning tickets...”

“You mean the killer.”

“Obviously... and to do things with style, Commissioner Primavera called in, instead of the usual makeup artists, the entire team from Lucasfilm. After browsing through their sample disguise catalog – ranging from Obi – Wan Kenobi to E.T. – he opted for the Cocoon model. Unfortunately, the commissioner was better at Calabrese dialect than English, and the Hollywood makeup artists didn’t bat an eye when Primavera told them the disguise on Officer Scarcella – aka Dirk – had to be ‘permanent.’ No one ever figured out what the commissioner actually meant with that ambiguous phrase, but it cost the officer his youth.

After going undercover in the nursing home – without even uncovering anything suspicious – the poor cop found out he could never get his thirty years back, nor his Fiat 600 that he had parked outside the clinic, which got stolen, nor the girl you know about.”

“What a story!” I blurted out. “If cars could run on bullshit, you’d never run out of fuel.”

“Hey, Pat, I’m not asking you to believe me, but don’t go spreading this story around, or you can forget about your Dolcetto. Am I clear?”

“This is blackmail...”

“Exactly,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Alright then, count me in. See you, Sandro... Long live the cause, mate.”

“Long live...”

You learn something new every day, I thought as I headed toward my black anarchist Ape with the demijohn on its back.

What a story, though. If I had been tipsy or high, I might have believed it, but at noon? Still, Sandro was a good man – and his wine was even better – so I didn’t dwell on it. Or at least, that’s what I thought, because just a few minutes later, when I saw Mirella stepping out of the tavern, my curiosity got the best of me.

“Hey, Mirella, what’s up?”

“Nothing much, I had to see an old friend.”

“An old friend?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sorry, but there are some weird rumors going around about the guy you were talking to.”

“Well, that’s normal – bars are exactly the kind of place where urban legends come to life, don’t you think?”

“Well... uh... I guess...”

“Anyway, I gotta run. Bye, Pat,” she said, quickly kissing me on the cheek before disappearing into the metro along with the herrings.

I stood there on the sidewalk, motionless, with my doubts and my demijohn.

Chapter five point five

Only for your eyes

Mirella's grandmother got so caught up in her new role as a 007 agent that, in the evening, instead of chamomile tea, she insisted on having a vodka martini – shaken, not stirred. The nurses watched her Hollywood – style antics with amusement, at least until Mrs. Spezzano smashed Dr. Zamboni's Rolex against a wall, convinced it contained a laser. After signing a rather hefty reimbursement check, Dr. Zamboni didn't seem angry at all. In fact, he told a well – known local newspaper that he had grown tired of the champagne dial on his GMT Master and had wanted to change it for years.

The clinic staff even started placing bets on the detective's investigative techniques. By keeping an eye on both her antics and the national TV schedule, doctors and orderlies alike could predict her next moves. When an old Sherlock Holmes movie aired in prime time, the Old Lady dropped her James Bond obsession and terrified the entire ward by setting off the fire alarm while trying to light a pipe. As usual, after another signed check, the elderly woman was free to roam the corridors again, proclaiming to anyone who would listen:

“What kind of school is that, Mr. Holmes? Elementary, Watson, elementary...”

Four weeks later, it was Inspector Derrick's turn to be idolized, but that was a love story doomed to fail. The Old Lady didn't speak a word of German, and conducting investigations with subtitles didn't suit her leading – lady personality. Fortunately – or perhaps this is just a euphemism – everything changed on July 13. It was precisely 8:30 PM on a stifling summer evening when the Old Lady turned on the TV and met Serpico.

Derrick fell to the bottom of the rankings so fast the floor shook. For an entire week, the Old Lady abandoned her elegant wardrobe to wear ragged clothes she secretly stole from charity donation bins. She started hiding in the clinic's most obscure corners, contorting herself into bizarre positions to spy on the medical staff. The physiotherapist didn't approve of his pa-

tient's behavior, nor that of his colleagues who let her do as she pleased, but he had to admit – during a medical meeting he himself had called – that ever since the Old Lady had convinced herself she had uncovered a conspiracy, her health had been excellent.

Besides, Mrs. Spezzano wasn't even a source of bad publicity. Her investigations were nothing more than theatrical reenactments of more or less famous characters. In practice, she wasn't bothering anyone.

Still, Serpico was eventually eclipsed as well. His opponent was none other than Columbo. The cigar replaced the pipe, the cleaning staff offered a discount on their services, and the fire alarm system was disabled for the entire duration of the series. The Old Lady spent a fortune on eye drops to relax the eye she kept squinting for dramatic effect. It took Dr. Novelli himself to convince her to tweak the screenplay a little. Eventually, the Old Lady gave in. The result was a Lieutenant Columbo squinting to the right on even days and to the left on odd ones. As for the hunchbacked posture, she had a natural talent for that – thanks to osteoporosis.

The real betting began the day *The Maltese Falcon* and *Murder on the Orient Express* aired simultaneously. The doctors wagered three spring rolls on Marlowe, while nearly all the nurses placed their bets on Agatha Christie's Poirot.

The next morning, at precisely 7 AM, on a classic summer day, Mrs. Spezzano descended the stairs wrapped in a cream – colored trench coat, sweating profusely, struggling to smoke a cigarette butt she had picked up from a spittoon. The entire medical staff erupted in a celebratory wave. Then, once all financial disputes with subordinates were settled, the doctors went back to work.

"I knew you wouldn't resist Marlowe's charm, Mrs. Spezzano, but honestly, smoking at this hour? Do you really think that's good for you? And where did you get that cigarette butt – from the spittoon, am I right?"

"Doctor, what are you suggesting?" asked a softened Bogart, touched by the presence of his love. "Me? Recycling cigarette butts?"

"There's still a string of saliva hanging off it..."

"Must be the humidity, doctor, or maybe those limpets living in my room. Would you like to come up and see where they've settled?"

“I can’t, my dear, I have a lot of work to do now. But please, if they start bothering you, call the staff.”

“Don’t worry, doctor,” said Bogart, now sounding more like Tom Waits than himself. “I won’t run away just because of a couple of limpets. But you, do you have a safe place to sleep tonight?”

“Of course, in my bed.”

“Good. Lock the door and don’t open it for anyone. Strange things are happening around here. If I find out anything, I’ll give you a whistle.”

Chapter six

The Infiltrator

Dirk knew the Old Lady well – after all, she was the unintentional architect of all his misfortunes – and he certainly didn't expect, amid the daily drinking he indulged in to forget the fake wrinkles tattooed on his face, to return to detective work at the behest of the granddaughter of his former number – one suspect.

The day after his argument with Mirella – once he had sobered up from his daily alcohol intake – he showed up at the clinic with his “God of Thunder” cane, a gnarled sawed – off shotgun that his superiors had lacked the courage to confiscate after the infamous blunder that had prematurely thrust the young man into old age. The regular patients shuddered at the sight of him. During his previous hospitalization, Dirk had held the title of Mr. Nursing Home for a full three months, forcing everyone onto a heartier and harder – to – digest diet. Of course, no one knew that this time – due to his deep intimacy with the bottle – the poor guy wouldn't be eating anything beyond the standard broth. His return did not go unnoticed.

Meanwhile, the Old Lady continued bringing her characters to life, unfazed by the arrival of the real detective.

Bogart remained undefeated, but one evening, out of sheer good sense, Dr. Novelli had to make her give up the trench coat – by now blackened and soaked with sweat – which made her look more like Bela Lugosi than Marlowe.

Dirk picked up her protests with his directional microphone and intervened.

“Doctor, how violent you are! Are you trying to undress me now?!”

“Mrs. Spezzano, what are you thinking... It's August, you can't go on like this, I'm worried about your health. Even Bogart, in this heat, would be wearing shorts and a T – shirt.”

“Oh, please. Can you picture that? And where would he keep his gun?”

“Madam, don't make me say it...” the doctor snapped, exasperated, just as the detective stepped over the threshold of the Old Lady’s room.

“Mr. Dirk, for fuck's sake!” Novelli barked, having completely abandoned his professional decorum. “Put that broomstick down and give me a hand. Does it seem reasonable to you that, in this heat, Mrs. Spezzano should be walking around in a trench coat?”

The detective realized he had misread the situation and, luckily, managed not to fire a shot. “The doctor's right, ma’am, take off the trench coat, it’s boiling in here.”

The Old Lady wouldn’t hear of it. In fact, seeing that the audience had doubled, she abandoned the soft – spoken act that only the doctor had been privy to:

“Now cut it out, you two,” she growled, slipping back into the Tom Waits voice she confused with Marlowe’s. “You’re getting on my nerves. Get the hell out of my room unless you want me to fill your guts with lead.”

She punctuated the threat by pressing on the remote control hidden beneath her coat, simulating the bulge of a gun. The TV switched on, just in time to show *A Fistful of Dollars*.

Dirk heard gunfire behind him and acted on instinct: he shoved the Old Lady onto the bed, executed a half – flip, and found himself face – to – face with Clint Eastwood.

The television exploded, and the Old Lady jumped.

The detective feared he had blown his cover, but he relaxed when he saw the doctor berating the electricians. Then, however, it was his turn to be scolded:

“How many times have I told you that you don’t need to walk around with that cane? You could’ve hurt yourself falling with this thing!” Novelli shouted, yanking the gnarled shotgun from Dirk’s hands before he could even activate the safety.

The doctor then proceeded to hurl curses and orders left and right at the gathered staff, using the cane like an ancient laser pointer.

The orderlies had no idea what had just happened, nor did they understand why Mr. Dirk kept jumping up and down, yelling danger signals every time the doctor brandished the stick in the air.

And so, in Agent Scarcella's medical file, a new note was added: Arteriosclerosis.

Meanwhile, the electricians began their inspection rounds.

Chapter six point six

Musical interlude

Marione was spending more and more time away from home, thus limiting his daily THC intake on the balcony. His father, in turn, was putting his neurons to the test with excessive television watching. The limpets relocated from the overly damp clothesline and stuck themselves to the shutters, making their lifting process resemble a weightlifting session at the gym. Marione still wasn't ready to defrost the drying rack.

There was a time when he was truly alternative, proudly showing off his irreverent t – shirt to disgusted passersby. But now, he was afraid – if that shirt still existed beneath the crust of drying laundry – of finding himself uncomfortable wearing it again. He feared that his anarchist conscience, matured with time and knowledge, would no longer allow him to express his discomfort through animalistic signals rather than conceptual ones. He didn't want to become one of those punks he had always mocked as “utopian homebodies.”

For this reason, at rather regular intervals, he forced Mirella to accompany him onto the balcony, so his weeping father could spend some time beneath the hanging laundry. However, Mirella's joints were far from the conical standard the father was used to. More and more often, by the time she had finished rolling such models, the drying rack would quiver with curiosity. The father was losing the connection between “Marione's trumpet” equals “joint” equals “war,” and he no longer felt so sad admiring the punk girl's creations. On the contrary.

The time Mirella, having gained enough confidence to roll with a parent present, quickly spun up a bust resembling Berlusconi – forgetting her lawyer's warnings – the drying rack started shaking with laughter, astonishing the passersby.

The octopuses living on Mario's balcony were accustomed to the small doses their owner used to season his protests, but Mirella's ingredients had a completely different and devastating effect on their psyche. Marione im-

mediately noticed that the octopuses hanging above their heads weren't used to dancing the rumba. So, he became entranced, trying to learn the steps.

When he snapped out of it, he saw his girlfriend exhausted from dancing and his father, dressed like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, with his feet twisted unnaturally. He must have overdone it.

The physiotherapist who should have examined John Travolta urgently was on vacation, so Mirella decided to take her father – in – law to the nursing home for a check – up with Dr. Novelli. Although he specialized in galloping arteriosclerosis, he surely wouldn't deny them his help.

"Doctor, you have to help us... This is my boyfriend's father. We were dancing on the balcony when Mr. Mario, attempting a jazz – style move with a seven – and – a – half rumba, spun around forgetting to lift his feet off the ground..."

"Oh dear, oh dear..." the doctor said, contemplating the patient, who was chronologically incompatible with his usual standards. However, Mirella thought the exclamation was directed at the physical injury.

"I don't know if I can be of much help. I'm not a physiatrist."

"Come on, doctor, please give us a hand..."

"All right, miss... I'll take a look at your father – in – law, but you must promise me you'll do everything you can to dissuade your grandmother from assaulting me. I'm tired of sneaking through the hallways like a spy to avoid her sudden ambushes."

"Thank you, doctor," she replied, hugging him. "I'll do my best."

Mario's father, Mario, was then taken to the doctor's office, where Novelli struggled to remove his pants. In the heat of the dance, the elder Mario had managed to squeeze into an old carnival costume from when Mario was twelve, cutting off his circulation in the process. The doctor immediately grew concerned. If they didn't remove his pants soon, the poor man could risk losing his legs.

Every attempt was in vain. The pants seemed tattooed onto the patient's legs, and the stitches – designed to withstand a twelve – year – old punk – showed no signs of giving way.

Mirella had an idea. Given her father – in – law's sensitivity to rhythm – which made him a thoroughbred Emilian – she suggested the doctor play

a Joe Cocker tape to get the patient moving and circulate some blood in his veins.

The first song set the mood. Mirella swayed her hips slightly, her green hair hesitant, probably due to the attention of the nurses who had gathered around the doctor at the sound of *Unchain My Heart*. Marione, for his part, was looking around frantically. He would have sunk into the ground to avoid dancing in front of all those white coats. Plus, his need for a healthy and robust trombone session was practically tattooed on his forehead.

By the third beat, Marione's father was already overflowing with new energy. After making a few tentative movements, he let out a loud curse in perfect Emilian dialect. The doctors were taken aback, accustomed as they were to Christian Democrat patients. Then they realized his anger stemmed from his inability to keep time with his foot.

The next song had such a groove that it certainly wouldn't spare the poor man. Indeed, after invoking every saint in existence, he couldn't hold back anymore and launched himself onto the floor with all the agility of someone who had lost their center of gravity.

The nurses rushed to his sides, helping him – like the bearers of religious statues at village festivals – complete the blues number without embedding their dentures in the floor.

The doctor was beginning to lose his patience. Sure, he considered himself a modern man, but turning his nursing home into a disco was a bit much. Unfortunately, he took more than two seconds to voice his displeasure, and when the first notes of *You Can Leave Your Hat On* echoed through the clinic – since Novelli had, in fact, left the sound system on – an uproar engulfed the entire neighborhood.

The nurses and orderlies, wearing only white coats over their underwear and plastic clogs, found themselves completely naked before the chorus even hit. Luckily, the colder elderly residents wouldn't have stripped down even after three encores of the entire concert.

The doctor recoiled at such unprofessionalism, then realized he, too, was in his underwear. So, he wisely decided to go with the flow.

Mirella, a professional, played her cards so well that she didn't even have to remove her boots, while Marione, huddled at the edge of the dance floor, was secretly rolling a joint that, unfortunately, he never got to smoke.

He was just about to seal his creation when, to his shock, it slipped from his fingers. His father, naked as a worm, stood in the middle of the room, waving his pants above his head.

Mirella had hit two birds with one stone – not only had she managed to restore some circulation to her father – in – law’s legs, but she had also solved the pants problem.

Marione couldn’t believe his eyes. Fortunately, the elder’s pubic hair, stimulated by the blood flow, stood rigid – like a limping cat facing a Nazi Doberman – covering his modesty.

The doctor regained his composure, got dressed, and ordered everyone else to do the same. Then he turned off the tape deck.

As soon as the music stopped, Mario Senior came to a halt, facing downward. Thankfully, the staff were quick to throw their coats back on and caught him before he could analyze the parquet brand too closely.

The operating room was prepared at record speed – at least for a nursing home – and Dr. Novelli made sure to equip it with a three – hundred – watt sound system.

As they finally assessed Senior’s condition, the doctor took a deep breath. “Miss Mirella, see this triple swelling right above the ankle?”

“Yes, doctor, what does it mean?”

“It means your father – in – law didn’t just spin once – he spun three times!”

“What were you dancing?”

“The Macarena...”

“Damn, Mr. Mario! You must have really gone for it to pull off three full spins in a dance that only requires a half – turn...”

“I don’t know nothing about math... I fought in the war...”

“I realize that, Mr. Mario, I do... But now we need to fix you up. It's going to hurt a little.”

“How much, doctor?” he asked, worried.

“Well, let's just say that if you'd been in Vietnam, this would be a taste of captivity...”

“Damn, that bad?!”

“More or less... Be careful not to bite your tongue... Are you ready?”

“I was born ready!”

“Good, then... one... two... and...”

Half of the attendants, like in a tug – of – war, stood on one side of Mr. Mario, holding him by the hands, while the other half, at his feet, tried to get him back into the correct position.

Senior screamed like a madman. He hadn’t bitten his tongue, but a nurse had turned the wrong way, setting his foot back in the right direction but shortening his leg by ten centimeters. The doctor’s instinct to grab a gun and shoot his assistant was strong, and he resisted only because he didn’t own one... He settled for stabbing him a couple of times with a syringe. Then he gave new instructions.

Mirella watched nervously, chewing on the fingernails of the idle nurses, since hers were too short. She felt guilty for her father – in – law, even though the smile tattooed on his lips – despite the pain of the realignment – didn’t seem to accuse her of anything, quite the opposite...

Once Marione’s limbs were repositioned, Dr. Novelli breathed a sigh of relief – at least until he realized that he had stabbed his subordinate with the syringe he usually used to inject grease into the creak of his office lock, which, like his patients, seemed to suffer from arthritis. He gritted his teeth and sent everyone back to their posts, hoping he hadn’t caused an infection.

Marione, outside the glass room, couldn’t see the events unfolding clearly. The operating room was the only place off – limits to the ichthyic species that always crowded the waiting room to watch. When Senior wobbled off the stretcher, chaos erupted: everyone flailed around in a futile attempt to clap their fins in praise of the medical team.

“Miss Mirella, we did it!” Novelli exclaimed. “However, it would be best if your father – in – law stayed under observation for a few days. The operation went well, but there’s always the risk of a relapse.”

“What do you mean by relapse? What else could happen to him?”

“You see, miss, muscle bundles are flexible and malleable, but Mr. Mario’s have suffered quite a trauma. We should keep an eye on them for about seventy – two hours. There’s a risk that his limbs could return to their previous state.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Once, back when I worked in the ER, a man came in with his wrist twisted around itself. He was a lazy bricklayer who had stolen his

wife's immersion blender to mix cement effortlessly. Unfortunately, one day he made a mistake and stuck it into a bucket of quick – setting cement, which hardened instantly while he was still mixing. As you can imagine, the blender stopped, stuck like Excalibur in a stone, and his wrist spun five times around itself... You wouldn't believe the disappointment when, shortly after we discharged him, we found out the poor guy was arrested for involuntary manslaughter."

"Involuntary manslaughter?" Mirella interrupted. "I don't follow..."

"After his recovery, our patient went back to work – on the thirty – fifth floor of a skyscraper under construction. He had climbed all the way up there to congratulate the foreman for the excellent work done during his absence. But when he shook his hand, his wrist twisted again, sending the poor guy somersaulting over the safety railing. He probably didn't even realize what was happening. Witnesses swore that the foreman didn't even scream as he plummeted from the thirty – fifth floor. And he had plenty of time to do so. Anyway, our patient initially lost his job and ended up destitute. Then he sued the ER and was generously compensated. We, on the other hand, were punished and banned from the coffee vending machines ever since."

"Damn, that must have been tough for you."

"You have no idea. Twelve – hour shifts without coffee – imagine that."

"Well... yeah, I guess..." Mirella mumbled, embarrassed. "How long did you say he needs to stay under observation?"

"At least seventy – two hours, but don't worry – I'll personally take care of him. If you, in turn, take care of Mrs. Spezzano. Do we have a deal?"

"Thank you, doctor, you're an angel..."

When Mirella walked out, she found Marione with his eyes bulging so much that two tiny squids were comfortably sitting on them.

"What happened? You look freaked out!"

"Quite a bit... Holding in the smoke almost killed me. I see a bunch of fish – I must be hallucinating."

"But there are a bunch of fish here."

"Really?!"

"Of course!"

“What a trip! Then I’m fine. I thought I was totally wasted. I figured there was no way they had to operate on all these fish in a single day. They don’t even look sick.”

“Maybe they’re here for plastic surgery,” she said, stopping herself from pulling her hair out.

“Oh wow, I hadn’t thought of that. Anyway, I’m not out of it! In fact, I feel great...”

Chapter six, sixty – five

First day at the nursing home

Dr. Novelli had ultimately been forced to give in. Not even he had been able to dim the spotlight on the Old Lady's top – tier performance, a cocktail of charisma that blended Bogart's charm, Serpico's grime, and Columbo's hunchback.

Luckily, the arteriosclerotic didn't take long to notice the new arrival who, while not as captivating as the head doctor, was still above clinical standards – especially in chronological terms. Good old Marione, at the youthful age of fifty – five, found himself cast as the helpless little lamb in a den of six ravenous cougars. That's how many shameless sixty – somethings were admitted to the facility.

Fortunately, the hunting grounds of these predatory grandmothers had always been well defined. Mrs. Spezzano, self – proclaimed pack leader, naturally preferred the doctor. Widow Gadolla was madly in love with Dr. Sarto, the physiatrist. Sweet Luisa secretly watched over Cavalier Veltroni, one of the most loyal regulars at the institute. Franca drooled over Dr. Carnevale, the oncologist. Marta – nicknamed Berta – desperately tried to catch the attention of Nicola, the anesthetist, though his services were no longer in high demand and his presence at the clinic was rare. Meanwhile, Annina had already attempted suicide three times, downing six packs of California prunes in a bid to attract the attention of the institute's doorman, whose brain had long since been molded into the shape of a portable television.

Marione barely had time to take in the psychedelic wallpaper of his room before he found himself surrounded by six toothless old ladies who, while ignoring each other completely, simultaneously unleashed their best seduction techniques:

“A new arrival... I spotted you right away. What's your problem, prostate?”

“What a handsome young man! You remind me of my dear Nanni!”

“I bet you fell off a horse. Otherwise, what would a fine young man like you be doing here?”

“Thyroid issues too, sir...?”

“Oh, what lovely eyes! Like a frightened kitten... But don’t worry, you’ll feel right at home here.”

And there they were, all present and accounted for – except for the Old Lady who preferred actions over words and was already studying the new arrival’s habits, planning to intercept him in the bathrooms where his escape routes would be limited.

Mario was stunned – partly from pain, partly from the wallpaper, and partly from the circle of nearly – decomposing women who loomed over him, showering him with lustful stares and flecks of saliva. Even flashing his wedding ring at their cataract – clouded eyes didn’t deter the wave of sensuality that had overtaken these Methuselah – aged grannies.

It took the doctor himself to disperse the lustful crowd.

Mario’s roommate, the illustrious Cavalier Bricconi, was an aging heir who had never done anything in life – except drink and sleep around. For sex, his noble title was no longer much help, but when it came to alcohol, it still served him well. That’s why he spent all day holed up in his room, reading Hemingway and drinking Daiquiris from a milk carton – a clever tactic devised by his lawyer to smuggle in booze unnoticed.

The Cavalier was not pleased to have his privacy invaded, even for an emergency. Above all, Bricconi was entirely self – sufficient – especially when sober – and highly irritable. And since he was almost never sober, he had no interest in having any sober person within his immediate vicinity. He had always been disturbed by people in good physical and mental condition, so the idea of sharing his suite with one was unbearable.

Dr. Novelli performed miracles and managed to convince Bricconi to be a little more flexible for a couple of days, though he also warned him to stay out of his guest’s way.

Mario immediately noticed the smell of rum.

“Wow, what kind of milk is this?”

“Premium quality, but I wouldn’t recommend it. It’s not skim... You won’t digest it well if you’re not used to it,” replied the Cavalier with concern.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mario shouted, his Emilian spirit kicking in, “I could digest rocks!” he continued, snatching the carton.

“Hey, take it easy! I’m running low...”

“Oops, my bad,” Mario said, licking his lips. “It’s been years since I had fresh milk. I forgot it could taste... hic... like this...”

“And good thing you forgot,” muttered the Cavalier, looking down at the now – empty carton. “Otherwise, we’d really be in trouble.”

“Anyway... hic... Name’s Mario. Room next door... hic... Ended up here ‘cause... hic... busted myself during a Macarena... And you? Hic... Why are you here?”

“Me? I’m here because the nurses treat me way better than my wife does. And my lawyer – who, by the way, is also my wife’s lover – makes sure I get two liters of ‘milk’ a day. But now that you’re here, I might need to adjust my orders...”

“Oh, no need for that. Whatever you drink is fine by me.”

The Cavalier chuckled, mistaking Mario’s honesty for sarcasm, and passed him another carton.

They drank without restraint, eventually forgetting to go down to the dining hall.

Dr. Novelli, who personally went to retrieve his charge, found Mario and the Cavalier in the middle of a loud, off – key rendition of *The Internationale*.

“Cavalier Bricconi,” the doctor said, knowing he had to turn a blind eye to his wealthy patient’s drinking habits, “I never took you for a comrade...”

“You see, doctor, one never stops learning. You just had to ask... I’ve always had money, never made it. All true rich people are comrades, if only out of guilt.”

“I never thought of it that way...”

“And I... hic... I’m a comrade ‘cause these damn... hic... riches, I never had ‘em!” Mario slurred, raising a clenched fist.

“Regardless, comrades,” Novelli continued, “you skipped dinner. I can overlook your drinking, but it must stay within these walls. And when it’s mealtime, I expect both of you to be present. This applies especially to you, Cavalier. Don’t make me remind you how much harm you’re doing yourself by drinking on an empty stomach.”

“Doctor, your sense of duty is anachronistic – and that flatters me – but you needn’t worry about me. I always consume something solid,” Bricconi said, waving a copy of *The Complete Short Stories of Hemingway*.

“It may be solid, but you can’t eat it.”

“Oh, can’t I...?”

“Hey, wait... Where did the first forty pages go?” the doctor asked, snatching the book from him.

“I told you, doctor, no need to worry about my sustenance.”

“You ATE ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’?! This time, you’ve gone too far,” Novelli snapped before calling the nurses.

Senior remained impassive – like only drunkards can – while the Cavalier was dragged off to the gastric lavage room.

Then, once things settled down, Mario snuck off to find another milk carton.

The sound of forced vomiting echoed through the facility like a summer thunderstorm. The toughest pages to expel were the ones where the wife shot her husband in the head – Bricconi, emotionally attached to that story, was reluctant to let it go.

Novelli acted wisely, introducing a liter of castor oil into the lavage tube. If the pages wouldn’t come out from the top, he figured, they’d come out from the bottom.

When Bricconi was finally brought back to the room, Senior barely recognized him. The Cavalier looked like an empty husk, more resembling lawyer Agnelli than a human being. The worst part, he confided, was the unbearable sobriety the procedure had forced upon him.

But Mario, on the other hand, had no such problems. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t even stay awake until the end of the monologue.

It was around ten – thirty when Senior, deep in REM sleep, was awakened by a dull sound that resembled a silenced gunshot – the classic TUMPFFF from spy movies. He jolted upright in bed, scanning the room for the cavalier who, according to previous conversations, was supposed to be tossing and turning all night. But he was nowhere to be seen. Strange, since he had gathered that the man wasn’t particularly fond of leaving his room.

Chapther 6,6,6

Latest drawings

I entered the center and was stunned to find myself face – to – face with *The Last Supper*. Christ, freshly restored, stood at the center of the painting, while Judas, on the left, clutched a receipt: thirty bucks.

I thought I had walked through the wrong door and into the lair of some underground art dealer, but not even Diabolik could have stolen such a fresco. When I saw Saint Peter burst into flames like the *Fantastic Four* character, I realized I was looking at one of Mirella's creations. Strange that there were no photographers around to immortalize such a masterpiece.

I went to greet my friends, but two – thirds of the twelve apostles had already turned to dust. Marione was growing well, and his drags could rival even the most experienced anarchist. They passed me Saint Paul, and I eagerly prepared for cremation.

"Strange that there aren't any photographers tonight... This fresco would have earned you a lot of dollars," I said, holding in the smoke.

"Yeah, I don't get why no one's showing up... Maybe they're on strike."

"Strike, my ass!" shouted Sergio, one of our perpetually paranoid roommates, who spent his days living at the window, constantly expecting a police raid. "All the photographers are busy downstairs. Something must have happened at the clinic..."

We crowded around the window – once again, a tangle of ambulances and photographers was blocking the entrance to the institute where Marione's father and Mirella's grandmother were hospitalized. The two immediately understood and rushed outside, forgetting the painting in my hands.

Widow Gadolla had passed away, while the Old Lady, judging by the screams, had missed the draw a second time.

The clinic was in chaos, with doctors running back and forth like lunatics, preparing for a press conference, while the administrators, accompa-

nied by their lawyers, tried to calm the swarm of journalists. It was the second death in just a few days, and now, in addition to Mrs. Spezzano, even Marione's father was convinced something strange was going on.

Senior had never been interested in the news, especially not when it concerned the elderly, though he couldn't ignore the recent passing of the almost ninety – year – old Mrs. Stanziani, crushed under a double – season *Art Déco* wardrobe. Now the deaths were two, and if statistics weren't just an opinion, then – despite the average age of the patients allowing for a plausible collective funeral coincidence – there had to be something behind it. All the more so since that very night, he had woken up with a jolt after hearing that strange noise.

Marione and Mirella returned to the center after making sure their relatives were in good health. There was nothing else they could do that evening anyway.

We sat in a circle, as usual, waiting for Mirella's cannabis – fueled monologues. But unlike what we were used to, she rolled a simple joint in the traditional conical shape. A chorus of disapproval, followed by murmurs, filled the room. Mirella looked around, holding her conservative creation between her fingers, as if apologizing to the disappointed crowd. She had other things on her mind.

Luckily, our green – haired hostess quickly regained her spirit. After the first puff, she tried to focus. Her thoughts kept drifting back to her grandmother, but rolling a wrinkled joint didn't seem like a great idea. She searched the room for inspiration and ended up staring at the ceiling, where octopuses hung as if they had watched too many vampire movies.

In no time at all, a massive octopus with long tentacles took shape in her hands – the aquatic equivalent of the king of the jungle, a mere *Dadaist* transposition of a hundred mafia documentaries. A joint bursting with meaning.

The social center erupted in a festive wave, and everyone waved their spliffs in approval, making me feel, for a moment, as if I had been catapulted into a Coldplay concert. Then we each grabbed a tentacle while Mirella prepared to set fire to the marijuana – stuffed octopus's head with an acetylene torch.

We sat cross – legged like old Buddhist monks, the creaks of our joints blending with the crackling of seeds. No one would have dared to sit any other way – it wouldn't have been professional, even at the cost of a meniscus.

The only difference was the shape: in the usual ritual, we passed the joint after a couple of puffs, but now – thanks to the tentacles that resembled a hookah's mouthpieces – everyone could draw directly from the octopus's head, turning the ancient tradition into a race against time where only those with the strongest lungs could get the biggest hit.

The octopus's head caught fire and, as if struck by a laser beam, instantly disintegrated into a cloud of smoke. Michele came in first, thanks to a false start that nobody objected to.

A few minutes later, we all fell asleep. And as often happened, we forgot to secure the shutter where Sergio spent his existence, fearing a police raid. Of course, he also fell asleep, cross – legged, with his nose pressed against the blinds.

When the night owls returned from the tavern, causing a draft as they entered, the shutter flung open, and the poor guy tumbled out. We were used to it, but this time, we got really scared when we didn't see him climb back up in a hurry.

Then we found out he had landed on a bus that was just leaving from the terminal right below our shutters. He only managed to get off on the other side of the city.

Chapter seven

Miwa, throw me the components

Senior found a carton of milk on the bedside table, a kind gift from the Cavalier, who was wishing him a splendid day in his own way. That nectar came straight from his private stash, so well hidden that even in his drunken frenzy the night before, Marione hadn't been able to find it. Probably for the best – otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to enjoy the hearty breakfast he was about to have. But alas, after finishing it, he discovered that widow Gadolla had passed away during the night. At the very same moment he had been awakened by that strange noise.

After emptying the carton, Marione's bladder cried for help, dragging him, staggering, to the bathroom. He leaned against the wall with his left hand to keep the room from spinning while his mind wandered to the mysterious circumstances of his awakening and that strange passing. Then a noise jolted him back to reality. Tensed like a violin string, he turned – forgetting to muzzle the beast in his hands – only to end up watering the floral leggings of the Old Lady who had spent the last two hours in the bathroom, disguised as a toilet paper holder, waiting for the right moment to strike.

The poor guy shuddered, realizing what had just happened, while the Old Lady, disgusted, tried to beat Mennea's record as she sprinted down the clinic's hallways. Once he had holstered his weapon, Senior went to apologize.

"Madam, I can't express how ashamed I am... This has never happened to me before, but you scared me... I was lost in thought about the mystery surrounding this passing when I sensed your presence behind me... It wasn't on purpose..."

"Wait... wait. Are you saying you don't think it was an accident either?"

"I'm confused about it. You see, at exactly ten – thirty, give or take a minute, I was woken up by a sinister noise and immediately noticed that my roommate was missing. Then I found out that widow Gadolla passed

away right at that time due to a cardiocirculatory collapse. I was thinking about this when a few splashes went in your direction. I'm sorry..."

"A few splashes, my foot, young man... When you turned around, it brought back memories of the '70 storm. But don't worry, I'm sorry for scaring you. So you're telling me the Cavalier was out and about at that hour of the night... and at the same time, Gadolla took off... Well, that's quite a piece of news. Do you think the Cavalier could be involved?"

"I don't know. After all, there might be no mystery behind these deaths. The two victims, if I may be frank, weren't exactly in their prime... But in any case, we wouldn't be bothering anyone if we did a little investigating on our own, don't you think?"

The Old Lady suddenly felt like the head of *Steel Jeeg* when his assistant shot him the components. Bogart's cream – colored trench coat, transformed into Bela Lugosi's cape, made its way to the laundry, and the Old Lady discovered the new thrill of teamwork.

Bogart, a legend, was swept away by Bonnie & Clyde.

Unfortunately, when the two sneaked into the last victim's room, they found nothing to support their theories. Everything was oddly tidy, even the bed was freshly made, and there weren't even the classic chalk outlines on the floor – the ones in every American TV show when the police suspected a murder.

After a couple of hours of searching, they left, disappointed, heading for the coffee machine at the end of the hallway. A machine usually off – limits to patients, but one the Old Lady used regularly, to the doctors' dismay. Meanwhile, Mario was racking his brain, trying to pinpoint a detail he thought he had noticed in the deceased's room.

Senior kept the lady Spezzano company every time she took a reflective break at the vending machine. It had been years since she could enjoy homemade espresso due to an enterprising case of hypertension, and the Old Lady's daily coffee ration, needed to fend off her afternoon naps, felt to him like a line of coke.

Chapter seven plus one

Visiting relatives

Marione and Mirella arrived at the clinic during visiting hours and, seeing their relatives so in sync, discovered new connections they hadn't known existed.

"Hi, Grandma, I see you've met Mr. Marione – my boyfriend's dad... Such a handsome man couldn't go unnoticed, huh?!" she exclaimed, hugging her tightly.

"What are you talking about? I hadn't even noticed he was admitted. At least not until he peed on me."

"He did what?!" she interrupted.

"Are you hard of hearing, my dear? He peed on my legs. Well, not exactly like a dog. I was standing behind him, and when he turned around, he forgot to close the valve. But don't worry, I washed up immediately, and my floral leggings are none the worse for it – if anything, the gardenias seem to have regained their vitality."

The Marione family conversation in the adjacent room was unfolding in a similarly absurd tone. It was strange how, in that environment, even people who, despite being relatives, had never had much in common, suddenly seemed close and in sync. Junior – better to call them that, given they were in the same room – appeared genuinely concerned about his father's ankle, while Senior, who couldn't even remember why he had been admitted (thanks to six cups of legal drugs), couldn't stay still and kept pacing the room, bothering the fish in the middle of the conversation.

"Damn, Junior, do you know what happened to me? You wouldn't believe it, you, who go around with a barracuda..." he said while peeling off some barnacles from the ceiling, just to keep busy.

"Dad, for the love of God, leave the barnacles alone – they're minding their own business. Why the hell do you have to mess with them?"

"Oh, don't nag me..." he continued, drawing concentric circles with a piece of chalk he had stolen from the meeting room.

“Dad, what the hell are you doing? Did they give you any medication?” Junior asked, worried.

“Medication, my foot, son... By the way, do you have any spare change?”

“Damn, you haven’t started using, have you?!”

“Using what? Are you out of your mind? I’m a self – made man, that’s what I am. I need coins for the coffee machine.”

“But you can’t drink coffee, you know that...”

“And you can’t annoy me, son, or I’ll go to the library, check out *The Perfect Parent Handbook*, study it, and then force you to smoke your joints in the bathroom like everyone else, instead of on the balcony... A father tries his best to be a good parent, and these kids – give them an inch, they take a mile.” He finished his rant by placing a dozen barnacles in his son’s hand.

“What am I supposed to do with these?”

“And you’re asking me? Aim for the center, let’s bet a few coins.”

“Dad, seriously? You feel like playing a game at a time like this?” Junior asked, sticking the barnacles back onto the wall, more surprised than angry to see his father in such a state. He even found it amusing. A little.

“Not a single hit. You owe me ten coins, son.”

“Come on, Dad, let’s talk about something serious. How did you meet Mirella’s grandma?”

“Ah, the old hag... Well, picture this: I was peacefully drunk in the bathroom, taking a leak...”

“Drunk?! This is a nursing home, not a coffee shop!” Junior interrupted.

“Oh, don’t start... Anyway, I was in the bathroom after a night of Daiquiris with Cavalier Bricconi and, honestly, more than a nursing home, it felt like Hemingway’s savanna. I was deep in thought about a murder that had just taken place a few rooms down...”

“Murder?!” Junior interrupted again.

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll write you out of my will,” Senior joked, pacing nervously like someone high on amphetamines. “Anyway, I was in the bushes behind the camp – well, in the bathroom – thinking about the strange noise that had woken me up at ten – thirty, the time of Mrs. Gad-

olla's departure, pulling me from my erotic dreams, when I felt a strange presence behind me. I turned around suddenly, and in a fraction of a second, I saw the toilet paper holder take the shape of the Old Lady. I don't know if she meant to harm me or not, but my splashes forced her to flee."

"Your splashes?" Junior asked, now convinced his father had lost his mind.

"Yeah, I had forgotten to put my rifle away, so I sprayed her legs."

"Oh Christ! You peed on Mirella's grandma?!"

"Well, damn, I'd like to see you in the savanna with lions lurking around. I told you, I was taking a leak in the shade of a centuries – old oak when I heard a noise behind me, and convinced I was facing the king of the jungle, I grabbed my weapon and fired. Luckily, I aimed for the legs..."

"Oh God, what a disgrace... Maybe I should just take you home."

"Oh, stop nagging, son. I'm fine here, and I'm having fun. Especially since, after going to Mrs. Spezzano's room to apologize, we became friends and started investigating to uncover the culprit behind these mysterious murders. We're certain," he continued in a whisper, "that these two deaths were no accident. A dark killer lurks in the clinic, and I, being the youngest of the residents, have a duty to use my experience for the good of the community. Don't forget, I took an oath."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was in the Boy Scouts, don't you remember?"

"Of course! If I recall correctly, they even expelled you from the Cubs for your fondness for the bottle..."

"Eh, what can I say, I'm a purebred Emilian, no? Anyway, there's a murderer in here, and the Old Lady and I are determined to get to the bottom of it. By the way, how's your mother?"

"She's doing well – she sleeps all the time and refuses to get out of bed. Says it's been years since she could rest this well without you kicking her."

"Good, I'm glad... Listen, son, I need you to do me a favor tomorrow."

"What kind of favor?"

"First, I want you to pay your debt and bring me the coins. Then, you need to sneak in some of that Dolcetto wine that your anarchist friends load onto the Ape truck every morning."

“You know you can’t drink... And how do you even know about the Dolcetto?”

“Don’t worry about that. Anyway, the wine isn’t for me – at least, not all of it.”

“What do you need it for? If we get caught, we’ll be in trouble.”

“Look, don’t lecture me – just bring it. Last night Bricconi treated me, and I don’t want to look like a freeloader. Everyone in the neighborhood knows that Sandro’s Dolcetto, the one you and your friends drink every day while pretending to protest, is top – notch. I just want to let the Cavalier have a taste. And don’t forget the glasses.”

“The glasses?”

“Of course... Just because you and your little friends drink that nectar straight from the jug or crude tavern cups doesn’t mean I don’t know how to appreciate a fine wine. So bring me at least three liters, two glasses, and a clear decanter to let it breathe.”

“Oh my God, Dad, since when does Dolcetto need to breathe?”

“Since I decided so, got it?”

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Well, just try coming back empty – handed, and I’ll give you a demonstration of my martial arts training,” he said, mimicking a Bruce Lee – style kick, followed by a sharp bone – cracking sound and what resembled the sputtering engine of a small helicopter.

Junior shuddered – not so much at his father’s athletic display, which he certainly wasn’t used to, but rather at the noise it produced. His father’s meniscus, forced into a more or less atrophic position for years, straightened out in his attempt to imitate Karate Kid, snapping some cartilage and producing a sound similar to a bag of chips being crushed in the grip of a mischievous twelve – year – old. At the same moment, while Senior, in his effort to demonstrate his power, tried to maintain his stance – causing tremors throughout his body – his right foot, stretched at his son’s face level, twisted on itself like a helicopter blade before bouncing elastically a few times and finally returning to its original position with the sound of a combustion engine.

“Wow...” Junior exclaimed, his hair ruffled by the displacement of air, before heading off to find Dr. Novelli and inform him of what had just happened.

...

“You see, Mr. Mario, what I meant by ‘relapse’?” the doctor asked upon entering the room, having been informed of the situation.

“Relapse, my foot... It’s my son who makes me angry.”

“Come now, Mr. Mario, your son is a good kid. What could you possibly have against him?”

“Oh, I know very well...”

“He wants me to smuggle in some wine,” Junior confessed. “And he even told me he was drunk last night... What the hell is going on, doctor? Up until yesterday, my father was completely different. Now he seems like a total madman.”

“I understand, I understand...” the doctor said, motioning for him to wait. “Mr. Mario,” he continued, “I’d like to speak privately with your son for a moment. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all, as long as you do your job. Just remember – wine and coins,” he said as he left the room with his fist raised, singing Piano Man.

Novelli knew that gallons of alcoholic substances were consumed in the Cavalier’s room, but he had always been forced to turn a blind eye. His was a private clinic, and unlike hospitals, the patients always came first. If Cavalier Bricconi had been drinking for years, there was nothing he could do about it, even if it put his health at risk. Bricconi, the doctor explained, would drink no matter what – either in his clinic or at the tavern downstairs. His clients didn’t come to the nursing home so much for convalescence as for a vacation. The least happy residents were those who hadn’t personally chosen to be there, and in summer, the clinic filled up with what the doctor called “bridge – jump survivors.” Essentially, his hands were tied. He couldn’t prohibit drinking or intercept the supply – not without losing one of his best clients. He had done so once before, and the Cavalier had stayed away for a year. But that time, he had no choice. He could no longer tolerate the Cavalier drinking gin and tonic directly from the bedpan. Which, by the way, held nearly three liters...

“Forgive my bluntness, but I admitted your old man here only as a favor to the niece of my most loyal client who, although a source of considerable trouble due to her infatuation with me, is also a breath of fresh air for all the patients. Including your father, who is benefitting from it.”

“Doctor, I’m sorry, but I don’t follow...”

“The Old Lady, as we all affectionately call her, belongs – like your girlfriend, of course – to a very special family. Their DNA, and I’m not speaking idly here since I have their medical records in my archives, resembles a drunkard’s game of *Tetris* more than a molecular chain. This gives their family an infectious vitality that is hugely beneficial to anyone who comes into contact with them. Surely, you’ve noticed it yourself?”

“Well, to be honest...” mumbled Marione, embarrassed.

“You see, that’s exactly what I mean. The Old Lady has a catalyzing effect, and even if your father seems strange to you, I assure you he’s in no danger. Sure, today he drank six coffees – I’m aware – but they were all barley coffee, which is harmless. His adrenaline rush is psychosomatic. You’ll see, once his body needs rest, he’ll fall asleep like a baby.”

“So the vending machine only dispenses fake coffee?”

“Of course. Otherwise, we wouldn’t leave it in the hallway at everyone’s disposal. It does the old folks good to think they’re outsmarting us by sneaking coffee from a machine they believe is off – limits. Meanwhile, to get a real coffee, you need the password.”

“Password?!”

“Yes, if a doctor wants coffee, they have to enter a sequence of: sweet tea, unsweetened tea, hot chocolate, sparkling water, ENTER. This dispenses a shot of caffeine in a large cup so as not to give away the real content.”

“And the smell?”

“Oh, that’s no issue. In fact, it attracts them to drink some barley coffee. Besides, there’s no risk of a patient spying on a doctor. They know the vending machine isn’t for them, and when medical staff are around, they avoid being seen.”

“Damn, I didn’t expect you guys to be so high – tech. But what about alcohol? That’s not fake, is it?”

“No, that’s real. But as I said, I can’t stop Bricconi – nor your father, who, by the way, seems to be in excellent health – from having a drink. It’s entirely up to them. If their health were in danger, they wouldn’t be here but in a hospital... Sure, Bricconi had to get his stomach pumped last night, but not because of alcohol – because of his arteriosclerosis...”

“What do you mean?”

“He ate an entire Hemingway short story – forty pages.”

“Which one?”

“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.”

Marione understood the situation. Just as he had every right to smoke joints on his balcony, his father had every right to drink Daiquiris – preferably not from a urinal. The doctor was already doing him a great favor by not charging him, so he needed to keep his concern in check. He apologized, thanked Dr. Novelli for his services, and the latter, feigning slight concern, convinced him to extend his father’s observation period by another two days. Since Senior had been admitted, the Old Lady had stopped showering him with her usual attentions, granting him rare moments of intimacy that he could hardly even remember. He couldn’t let an opportunity like that slip away.

Chapter eight

High – Risk investigation

Dirk was struggling to slip back into his detective role. The only significant progress he had made so far was discovering that Dr. Novelli had confiscated the sawed – off cane and stashed it in the umbrella stand in his office. The poor detective, worn down by years of indulging in Dolcetto wine, would have gladly returned to his favorite tavern, but Mirella’s advance – already spent – forced him to keep watch over Mrs. Spezzano. He monitored her from a distance using a directional microphone, a difficult task given his shaky hands and the constant interference from the Old Lady’s hearing aid.

Locked in his room, depressed, and painfully sober, he traced imaginary ellipses in the air while picking up fragments of conversation. These snippets, when pieced together in a Burroughs – style collage, sounded something like this:



“Pardon my honesty, but I think I’m in love, and I don’t care if I’m ninety – three and you’re forty, doctor. I only arranged for your old man to be here as a favor to my mussel – loving niece. Look at that mussel on the chandelier – she’s our most loyal customer. Even though... Come on, it’s not a mussel, your cataract has dropped, which has caused considerable problems because she’s in love with me. The cataract fell and created a fresh breeze for all the patients – two of them have already died, damn it. I think something’s going on here – one got crushed by your cataract, and you should really have that checked. Even your father, in this respect, is enjoying the Daiquiri. I’m telling you, my fine lawyer, I need more Daiquiri... Doctor, I’m sorry, but I don’t follow... I have a guest – holy shit, and he’s even from Emilia... Their DNA looks more like a drunkard’s game of Tetris than a molecular chain – this could send me to an early grave. The Old Lady has a catalytic effect – come on, Marione, you can’t roll a joint in the hall. And even if your father seems strange to you, I assure you, he’s in

no danger... I had to retrieve my backup stash from the dead widow Gadolla's underwear the other night. She pissed on him, I'm sure of it. Of course, today he drank six coffees, sucked down a whole carton of Daiquiri, damn it. Don't think we're not keeping an eye on the special vending machine with micro – cameras scattered around. Are you sure he peed on him on purpose? But the coffees he drank were barley, and they made me vomit out the whole story I had absorbed. They're artificially colored, so they do no harm. Yeah, yeah, more than fish... Mrs. Spezzano is a tramp. The adrenaline rush of your father – if you want to keep screwing my psychosomatic wife, I can already see you on the front page of every newspaper... Golden showers and mysterious murders. You'll see, when your body needs it, you'll fall down the stairs. If you don't double my daily dose, I'll sue you, my drowsy lawyer. What do orate (sea bream) have to do with this? Like a child. So, the vending machine dispenses fake coffee? Yes, but it's not plastic, obviously, otherwise, we wouldn't have left it in the hallway for everyone to use – my horns. It's good for the old folks to screw – it's the only thing on their minds. Screwing and trying to trick us by using the vending machine they think is off – limits. We have our password when we want to screw... That's all you know how to do – a real coffee. Do you remember when I hired you? Password?! Of course! If a doctor wants a coffee, they have to enter the right sequence: sweet tea, bitter tea, hot chocolate, shit – you're shit – and sparkling water, then ENTER. After everything I've done for you, you thank me with a dose of caffeine in a big cup – with a rack of horns... Horns... That's how you thank me. And what about the smell? You're the biggest asshole on the planet. Well, that's not a problem. In fact, shit – you're shit – attracts the old folks to drink some barley coffee. Besides, there's no real danger. Sure, horns don't hurt, but punches in the face do. They know the vending machine isn't for them, and when the doctors are around, they stay away, otherwise... We'll beat you black and blue. Double my doses if you don't want to deal with me and my enhanced laser pointer. Damn, I didn't think you guys were so tech – savvy... And what about alcohol? When it comes to alcohol, I'll burn your house down... I'll burn your house down with you inside, along with your 'excellent health' from having a drink. That depends entirely on my whore of a wife. If their health were at risk, they wouldn't be here but in hell – go

to hell... He ended up needing a gastric lavage, but not because of alcohol – because of arteriosclerosis... Tomorrow, I want four cartons, a full Hemingway story – four cartons, got it? Forty pages. *The Short Happy Life of You and That Bitch of My Wife*... A real connoisseur, then... By the way, give her my regards.”



Daiquiri, Dirk thought. That would definitely help with the shakes. He took out his trusty notebook, where he recorded all his clues and case developments, and in bold red marker wrote: Remember to befriend Cavalier Bricconi... Then he switched off the device and headed downstairs, perfectly on time for breakfast.

Marione and Mirella had already left, reassured – each in their own way – about the well – being of their loved ones. Marione was stunned. He had always thought of his father as a gentle old – timer completely out of sync with the younger generation. Now, not only did his dad seem to know a thing or two, but he could also hold his liquor better than him. That was hard to swallow.

“He wants me to bring him Dolcetto, can you believe it?”

“So what? He has every right...”

“Yeah, but I’ve never seen my father drink before.”

“Maybe that’s because you were never home much. You were always out. What do you know about your father’s double life?”

“You’re right. I feel just like when I was ten and found out that Paperinik and Donald Duck were the same person. Ridiculous...”

“Why ridiculous?”

“Because Donald Duck is completely different from Paperinik! It can’t just be the suit and gadgets... Dirk was struggling to slip back into his detective role. The only significant progress he had made so far was discovering that Dr. Novelli had confiscated the sawed – off cane and stashed it in the umbrella stand in his office. The poor detective, worn down by years of indulging in Dolcetto wine, would have gladly returned to his favorite tavern, but Mirella’s advance – already spent – forced him to keep watch over Mrs. Spezzano. He monitored her from a distance using a directional microphone, a difficult task given his shaky hands and the constant interference from the Old Lady’s hearing aid.

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“You’re right. I feel just like when I was ten and found out that Paperinik and Donald Duck were the same person. Ridiculous...”

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“Because Donald Duck is completely different from Paperinik! It can’t just be the suit and gadgets... Gyro Gearloose must be giving him some kind of enhancement drug...”

“Can you imagine Donald Duck on drugs?” she asked, linking arms with him. “Come on, let’s have breakfast before Disney sues you.”

Dirk entered the main hall wearing his best outfit: two – tone golf shoes with the cleats sawed off for better grip, large Prince of Wales plaid pants (practical for impromptu chess games on park benches), and a solid gray jacket lined with backgammon markings, with poker dice instead of cufflinks. The outfit, a relic from his police days, might have been fashionable once, but now he looked like a cross between a hobo and a dandy in golf shoes.

The cafeteria fell silent. Everyone was waiting for him to crack a joke to justify his attire, hoping he was some kind of decadent eccentric, like a French writer from the last century. Unfortunately, wit and humor were not particularly useful traits for a public security officer, and the poor guy found himself in the dining hall, without his cane, looking like an idiot.

Cavalier Bricconi sat at the back of the hall, across from Marione. His appearance was rough – gastric lavage had taken its toll, not to mention his argument with his cheating lawyer, which Dirk had more or less overheard earlier.

When Dirk asked to join them, the two were clearly not thrilled. But under the watchful eyes of the nurses, they had no choice but to let him sit.

The detective's intestines, overwhelmed by the steam from his hot soup, began to tremble violently. He excused himself, realizing – too late – that his meal had been sabotaged.

Marione and Bricconi exchanged a satisfied glance.

"You see, Marione? I told you! That weirdly dressed guy really wanted to sit with us."

"Yeah, you were spot on, Cavalier. We just managed to lace his soup with Guttalax."

"By the way... how much did you use?"

"About half a bottle."

"Shit... that's a lot. Hope the guy doesn't have digestive issues. He might crap out his intestines..."

"Well, better than throwing them up," he whispered, secretly opening a half – liter carton of long – life pasteurized milk.

"Thank you very much, my benefactor," replied Marione, handing him a glass. "I hope I can return the favor... I've ordered some Dolcetto, it's out of this world... You don't hate fish, do you?"

"What do you mean?" asked the knight, who, being a wealthy man, was unfamiliar with the old tavern etiquette.

"Well, in taverns, red wine is no longer consumed. The patrons are too angry about not being able to gorge on mixed fried seafood anymore, so now, in protest, they only drink white."

"Oh, don't worry, I have nothing against those lovely creatures," he said, pulling the whiskers of a seal that was lounging peacefully in the shade under the table. "Besides, I have a lot to atone for. I still feel guilty about all the lobsters I've devoured in my life. Before the Great Cod Uprising, that is..."

"Then, prosit..." said Mario, raising his glass.

"Prosit."

After finishing lunch and the first carton of Daiquiri, the two retreated to their room to celebrate their newfound friendship, while Dirk, completely unaware that he had been poisoned, was suffering terribly in the bathroom next to the dining hall, desperately trying to muffle his noisy flatulence.

However, one caught him off guard, and a thunderous explosion echoed through the dining hall, followed by the unmistakable sound of an electric storm. Even the medical staff misinterpreted the event, and the stench of sewage, which seeped into the soup of the slowest eaters, was mistaken for a burst sewer pipe.

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Chapter eight and a half

Noon at the center

“Mirella, there's something strange going on at the clinic, isn't there?”

“In what sense?”

“It feels like you're hiding something from me, am I wrong?” Marione asked at the entrance of the Dirigible.

“No, nothing strange, except...”

“Except...?”

“Listen... A few years ago, the clinic lost five patients in a row, and the Old Lady ended up under investigation for winning the funeral betting pool all five times. The cop who investigated – and you must keep this to yourself, got it? – couldn't prove anything, except exonerate her, luckily. But the poor guy, once he got back to the station, found out that the disguise they'd used on him was permanent. He was thirty years old, but the administration, for image reasons, had to force him into early retirement. He spiraled into a deep depression and ended up holing himself up in the tavern across the street. So, I thought of hiring him to protect Grandma, even though he's been drinking like a fish for years, hoping this might help both of them. But listen to me carefully – you mustn't tell anyone, not even your father. No one in there should know that Dirk is actually thirty – six. First off, the old ladies in the clinic, just to be sure, would rape him, and the less perverted ones would still think you're insane. And his cover would be blown to hell.”

“What a story! Is there anything else I should know?”

“Yes, be careful because Pat is already suspicious. Yesterday, he saw me at the tavern while I was arranging some details, and Sandro, drunk as usual, must have told him something. I really mean it, I haven't figured out yet what kind of weird punk that guy is, the one who had it out for crustacean integration, and I really don't want him knowing my business – especially from others. Do you get what I mean?”

“Perfectly. It’s just that I have to face him to restock my father’s wine supply. He threatened to cut me out of the will...”

“So?”

“Well, if Pat asks me something, I’d feel uncomfortable...”

“Don’t worry... If you go there in *optimal condition*, you won’t feel any discomfort,” she said, pulling a family – size pack of Rizla out of her purse.

I arrived at the center shortly after lunch that day, and finding myself engulfed in thick smoke alongside dozens of photographers, I thought the violent faction of Forza Italia had stormed the Dirigible with machine guns at the ready.

Luckily, my fear didn’t last long. When I saw the remains of the Statue of Liberty, I realized Mirella had even made the cover of *Time Magazine*.

No one survived after the torch was lit. The Dirigible’s windows had been hermetically sealed ever since Sergio had flown out the last time, and the mandatory ventilation fans had yet to be installed. The blackout that Mirella triggered was catastrophic. Fortunately, the more responsible comrades had managed to evacuate the little fish before the event... We couldn’t possibly have imagined what would happen to a sole in smoke like that. Only the salmon refused to budge – they were used to it.

Just two puffs, Sergio confided in me – who, as usual, was by the window, this time strapped into a mountaineering harness – and even the photographers, who typically don’t let their trips show, completely lost it.

I couldn’t say how much time passed between my entrance to the Dirigible and the moment I decided to take off my pants and start dancing, but almost everyone followed suit, turning the center into a seedy summer nightclub where the crunching of cartilage drowned out the old – time standards. I don’t remember much of what happened afterward... I think I fell asleep dreaming of filling five catheter bags with wine for Marione.

Chapter nine

Orson Welles, italian style

Mirella had gone too far. The entire world, upon seeing the *Time* magazine cover, lived through hours of terrible anxiety. Supermarkets were stormed as if it were the day before an impending nuclear explosion.

The image of the burning Statue of Liberty was misunderstood by practically everyone, to the point that the President of the United States ordered his best pilots – the ones skilled enough to hit cable cars with missiles – to raze the Dirigible to the ground. We remained completely unaware of this, and if it hadn't been for the immediate mobilization of model train enthusiasts worldwide – which sent Lima's stock prices plummeting to an all – time low within five hours – the President wouldn't have recalled the F – 16s.

At the clinic, however, where television was the main attraction, those were truly anguishing hours. The Dirigible was in their very neighborhood, and the American pilots – famed for their pinpoint accuracy in Kosovo – were hardly a guarantee of safety. The Old Lady was terrified, not so much for the life of her granddaughter (who she didn't know was there), but for the sheer absurdity of why the U.S. President would want to bomb a squatted social center just because a statue had caught fire. It wasn't as if the anarchists could have been the ones to set it ablaze.

Everything happened too fast. In a matter of minutes, after the President's nationwide address – where he declared that he would not tolerate such an insult and that he would resolve the matter just like that time when Africans thought they could wear palm – tree print shirts – the Stealth bombers took off, followed live by global news networks. When they exited the clinic's TV screen, they suddenly appeared right outside the window. The Old Lady swore she even heard the pilot's curse inside his cockpit when the President, pressured by the multinational corporation that hadn't

managed to sell a single toy train since noon, was forced to call his men back.

We woke up in the late afternoon, oblivious to the risk we had just run – at least until the flood of congratulatory telegrams from every other CSOA forced the postman to sign up for a gym membership.

Mirella and Marione were crowned Anarchists of the Year, but they didn't let it go to their heads – not in the slightest. In fact, they barely understood what had happened after Lady Liberty's cremation, and their thoughts – buried under a pile of telegrams – kept drifting to the pastry shop across the street.

Marione was the first to wake up. He opened the window to counteract the vacuum effect that the blackout had caused, but the sudden rush of air launched Sergio straight out. Thankfully, the harness kept the poor guy from splattering on the pavement as usual, and he remained dangling there, still unconscious, dreaming of himself as a climber scaling a rock face. Below him, in the Ladakh Valley, thousands of frenzied elephants were honking their horns.

We only noticed it on our way back, pushing wheelbarrows full of cream puffs toward the center, when we heard cursing from above. We looked up, fearing a water balloon attack, and only then realized what had happened. We rushed to help him – but not before properly refueling ourselves.

Chapter Nine and three – quarters

There will be only one

“Doctor... Doctor!” Mrs. Spezzano shouted. “Are they crazy, flying invisible planes so close to the clinic? My dentures even came loose!”

“Thank God,” replied Novelli, who had been worried ever since she glued them in with cyanoacrylate.

“But those planes were broken.”

“Broken?!”

“Of course! The news said they were invisible planes, but we saw them just fine. They came out of the television and made a terrible racket. One of the pilots even swore.”

“What are you talking about, Mrs. Spezzano? Even if you really did hear the pilot's words, how could you understand them? Do you speak American?”

“Oh doctor, don't make me angry,” snapped the Old Lady. “You know very well that I have Emilian blood in my veins.”

“So?”

“We Emilians know swear words in every language, including Sanskrit. It's a form of faith, in a way...”

“Well, you'd really have to look at it from a strange angle to see it that way.”

“How strange?”

“Forty – nine, fifty degrees.”

“Good heavens, I would've said sixty – three.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it's not.”

“I'll get used to it, doctor. Time heals all wounds.”

“And makes hard things soft.”

“But also, sometimes, soft things become hard.”

“No, they don't.”

“Oh yes, they do...”

“You can't consider them hard. Maybe dry.”

“This is pure dialectics.”

“I’ve never spoken in dialect, madam. What are you trying to imply?”

The Old Lady suddenly realized. What she had initially taken as an ironic and absurd exchange with her beloved doctor – a banter that would have deepened their intimacy – was nothing more than an optical illusion. Her cataracts had once again mistaken Engineer Dalesio for the doctor. Dalesio was a well – known senile lunatic, a long – time patient, who loved to take the chief physician’s place whenever he had to suddenly leave a conversation.

Dalesio, in fact, roamed the hallways in a white coat, convinced that he was there not to receive professional care but to provide it. He went to great lengths to insert himself into real doctors’ discussions, greatly aided by the patients’ poor eyesight. Convinced that he had once sworn an oath to Hippocrates, Dalesio spent his days wandering the clinic halls, eagerly awaiting new victims. The newcomers rarely escaped the clutches of the old fool who – introducing himself as Dr. Kildare – conducted a general check – up, forcing his unfortunate patients to chant “thirty – three Trentino men” as he examined their backs.

The Old Lady had to swallow her disappointment. Feeling slighted, she sought revenge in the conversation, refusing to cut it short:

“You are no doctor, Mr. Dalesio. You’re just a lunatic. Do you realize that?”

“Madam, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’ve never been on the moon, I’d like to stay a little longer.”

“Oh, you’ll be staying for a long time, Mr. Dalesio... Where else would you go?”

“I don’t know where else I’d go. Maybe I’ll mind my own business... What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything... You’re the one who tricked me into wasting precious time.”

“How can your time be precious if you can’t even weigh it?”

“And I won’t waste it with you, you vile impostor... You don’t even know who Hippocrates was.”

“Madam, Hippocrates and I used to play billiards when you were nothing more than a dirty thought in your father’s head. Ippo, as we affection-

ately called him at the bar, was a good man, a hard worker, and an excellent herbalist. He cultivated a ton of medicinal plants and was a real ace at *bersagliera*.”

“Bersagliera?!”

“Billiards, madam, billiards... The *bersagliera* is a variation of classic italian game called *boccette*. We all played together at the tavern, and Ippo was truly a monster. We could never beat him. Back then, there was this famous tournament in the neighborhood. Winning it meant becoming the most famous person around. Ippo had won too many times already – he was so famous no one else even existed.”

“Dalesio, get to the point...”

“Where was I? Oh, right... We had to do something, or we’d start hating him. Two days before the tournament, we decided to swap his usual soda for pure gin carbonated with CO₂. When he downed half a glass in one gulp, as was his habit, his eyes flashed for a millisecond, and then the green billiard cloth lit up with a warm red glow. The burp Ippo tried to stifle collided with the ember of his cigarette – held professionally between his fingers as he lined up a shot. That makeshift spark ignited his stomach gases, and the onlookers, catching the scene from the corner of their eyes, thought the circus had come to town. That evening, three hundred children – three hundred, I tell you – lined up in the square where the ticket booth usually stood...”

“Dalesio, do me a favor...”

Dalesio extended his hand: “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Pleasure,” the Old Lady replied out of habit.

“Where was I? Oh yes... After the billiard cloth finished burning, the match was declared a draw, and we all went home to sleep. We planned to do the same thing the next day, but we had run out of pastries. So, we opted for a strange gelatinous substance that my teammate, the Commander, had found in his son’s room. We had no way of knowing LSD looked like that. To us, they seemed like harmless laxative pills, so we dissolved half a dozen in his drink.

We started playing, and for the first few minutes, nothing seemed different. We were already losing sixty – four to eight when Ippo politely asked if we could remove a giant spider from the wall. We all turned

around, a bit scared. We knew no living creature could survive up there, and we were a little surprised to find, of course, that there was no spider.

Ippo got worse by the second. After the spider, he saw cockroaches, chameleons, crows, otters, toucans, a mad horse, snakes, and a panda. Finally, he collapsed, his eyes rolled back, and started singing *The House of the Rising Sun*.”

“Mr. Dalesio, I hate to say this, but you don’t even know what the Hippocratic Oath is. You shouldn’t be a doctor – honestly, you shouldn’t even be a patient with how uninformed you are...”

“Let me finish, madam, I’m getting there... Ippo lay on the floor, repeating the same verse like a broken record: ‘There’s a house in New Orleans... before the rising sun...’

I finally won the tournament, earning the respect of my children, while Ippo remained on the tavern floor singing for more than a week. When he came to, he yelled all kinds of things at Sandro, the bartender, and swore – before all the frightened patrons, who had mistaken him for a malfunctioning jukebox – that he would never drink another drop of soda.

I, sitting in the back with my head in my arms – not because I was drunk, but because I had lost a contact lens – cried. But I still don’t know if my tears were a tribute to Ippo’s noble resolution or just irritation from losing my lens...”

“Mr. Dalesio, you’re completely nuts... Amusing, sure,” she said with a pitying smile, “but nuts. Do you even know what year Hippocrates lived in? You’d have to be a Highlander to claim you knew the father of medicine.”

“You got me. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Connor MacLeod, of the Clan MacLeod, and I am immortal.”

With that, he stabbed himself with a rubber switchblade.

The Old Lady – accustomed to the scene – showed no reaction and burst out with a loud: “Go stick your head in the gas pipe!” Then she walked off toward the vending machine.

Unfortunately, the machine was under maintenance, and a confident young blond man was restocking it with caffeine. In a sudden flashback, Mrs. Spezzano vividly recalled her childhood – when she and her little

friends would stake out the old man Giuffra, the Space Invaders technician, at the bar, begging for a few extra credits.

Until that moment, at her venerable age, she hadn't even remembered her deep – rooted passion for coin – operated games. In the blink of an eye, she devised a clever plan to get an arcade machine in the ward.

She quickly retraced her steps in search of Dalesio, who – just a few minutes later – found himself signing a purchase order for the hottest arcade game of the moment. Naturally, in Dr. Novelli's name.

Chapter ten

On the edge of the fudge

The clinic rested in darkness while Cavalier Bricconi and Senior prepared, using makeshift ropes made from bedsheets, to retrieve the bags full of wine that Marione was hooking onto the end of their rudimentary fishing rod, seven meters below. Mario congratulated himself, in silence, for remaining lucid enough – despite Lady Liberty’s cremation – to remember the appointment.

The mystery of the clinic had taken a back seat, or at least it had to for the time needed to recover the five peculiar demijohns. None of them had any inkling of what was about to happen.

The Old Lady was asleep, and the Dolcetto company had just raised their glasses to the sky when Mrs. Luisa’s heart stopped beating. A muffled scream of pain spread through the clinic just as the two were about to drown out the futile cry for help with a toast.

Bricconi and Senior downed almost two full bags of wine that evening. They then decided to go to bed once their conversation reached the classic standard of the average drunkard, along the lines of: You’re better than me... No, you’re better and kinder... No! You’re the kindest, there’s no argument there... and so on. Not even the commotion caused by the emergency responders and journalists disturbed their alcoholic slumber.

The reporters were more numerous than usual; while the first two deaths hadn’t made headlines, the discovery of Mrs. Luisa – immersed in the bathtub, her wrists slit in a classic suicide – would certainly be broadcast in prime time, interspersed with numerous commercial breaks. Never before, in living memory, had a woman over eighty taken her own life in such a manner.

“Doctor Novelli,” exclaimed Commissioner Zazà, “three deaths in just a few days... your clinic will need Forza Italia’s PR team to recover its reputation! What can you tell me about it?”

“Forza Italia?” the doctor asked, bewildered.

“No, about the disappearance, Mrs. Luisa...”

“Ah, right... We just found her in the bathtub of her suite, her wrists slit...” the doctor declared, shocked.

“I see... Please, take me to the scene.”

“This way, Commissioner.”

Commissioner Zazà had been on duty for nearly thirty years and had seen it all, but a wrinkled eighty – year – old, naked in a bathtub with her wrists slit, was a first.

“Was she in the habit of taking baths at this hour, Doctor?”

“It’s past midnight, Commissioner, everyone here goes to bed no later than nine...”

“Indeed, the water in the tub is cold. She could have committed suicide around eight – thirty. Officers!” he shouted. “Take the water temperature, the temperature of this room without any human presence, the humidity level, and the wind patterns of the last five hours!”

“But Commissioner,” an officer objected, “wouldn’t it be easier to check the watch on the poor woman’s wrist? It’s broken – it might have stopped at the time of the crime, if this is a crime.”

“Brigadier Primavera!” the Commissioner barked. “Do you think I’d miss such a detail? The victim’s watch stopped at eleven PM, meaning it could have broken during the crime, since she should have been asleep by then. However, the watch has no date display, so it could have stopped at eleven on any given day. Call forensics immediately and examine the watch. I want the degree of wear on the gears and the thickness of the dust particles that have settled between the crevices since the mechanism stopped... understood? And I want the report on my desk by morning!”

The brigadier was about to further question the Commissioner’s methodology, but he was silenced by the synchronized aim of two service pistols at his temples. Another word, and they would have been forced to examine every single cell of the victim. The brigadier swallowed his pride – if you’ll excuse the archaic expression – and began issuing orders to his colleagues.

“You see, Doctor, only by determining the time of death can we uncover the truth...”

“I don’t follow, Commissioner... She could have committed suicide at any hour, couldn’t she?”

“Of course, but didn’t you say everyone goes to bed at nine?”

“Yes, so?”

“How long had Mrs. Luisa been here?”

“She had been admitted for four years, why?”

“I ask the questions... And for four years, she always went to bed at the same time?”

“Yes, but I don’t understand...”

“Silence. Exactly how old was she?”

“Well, I’d have to check her file, but around eighty. But will you explain this to me?”

“I’m getting to the point... Do you believe that if a senile Old Lady, hospitalized for four years and accustomed to sleeping at nine, decided to end her life without divine intervention, she would do so hours past her bedtime?”

“That’s an interesting theory... It has a psychological – philosophical aspect to it... You’re suggesting that Mrs. Luisa, despite the rebellion expressed in her final act, wouldn’t have been capable of a defiance great enough to break her bedtime routine.”

“Precisely...”

“Because,” the doctor exclaimed, delighted by such insights, “if she had been capable of overturning her habits, she wouldn’t have had any suicidal tendencies!!!”

“Beautifully put, dear colleague,” the Commissioner concluded, giving the doctor a hearty slap on the back.

“Can I offer you a coffee, Commissioner? The night is still young.”

“Excellent idea. A coffee, and then back to work...”

The two headed toward the vending machine at the end of the hallway. Dr. Novelli had relaxed during his conversation with the Commissioner, even wondering if he had chosen the wrong university major. Psychology, he thought, I should have studied psychology – I was sharp enough to grasp such a complex concept.

“Hey, Doctor, what are you doing?! I don’t want sweetened tea... nor unsweetened tea, Doctor, are you listening?! I don’t want hot chocolate... Doctor, stop... I don’t want water...” Zazà yelled, pulling out his gun.

“Calm down, Commissioner,” Novelli said, using the barrel of the 9mm as a microphone. “There’s a password!”

“Password?!” the Commissioner asked, stunned.

“Of course. Pressing ‘coffee’ gives you a barley coffee. Only the doctors know the combination, to prevent patients who aren’t allowed to drink it from overindulging.”

“And you would have let yourself get killed over a coffee?”

Novelli didn’t understand and remained in the corridor, sipping his espresso, before having to face the scandal that the situation would inevitably provoke.

First, Mrs. Stanziani killed by a wardrobe. Then, the widow Gadolla, struck by cardiac arrest. And now, poor Luisa, found dead like a rock star in her own bathtub... It was all too much, even for him.

Not to mention – what on earth did the Commissioner mean by: *dying for a coffee?*

Chapter ten and a bit

My heart will go on

“Sergio, are you anchored?” Marione asked around midnight.

“Why?”

“I want to open the window. Something must have happened again at the clinic next door. There are cops and journalists everywhere.”

“Damn,” Sergio shouted, always in a state of paranoia.

“They’re not here for us, are they? They’re not going to evict us, right?! I have two ounces of Afro – Cuban, if they find it, I’m done for. I have to flush it down the toilet... fast, I have to flush it...”

But as he jumped up to carry out his desperate act – something we would have prevented at all costs – he tripped over the harness securing him and, bouncing off the couch, flew out the window, as was his habit. Fortunately, the rope was strong, we had spent a lot of money on a professional harness and his position outside didn’t alarm us.

Outside the clinic, the scene repeated itself: journalists, with their flashes, trying to turn a moonless night into daylight, and after a back – and – forth of cops, the usual ambulance arrived, carrying away a limp plastic bag.

“Damn, who’s next this time?” Marione asked without much concern, as the bag was too short, while Mirella could barely keep her eyes open, “and how much did you smoke while I was out delivering the wine, huh? You can’t even stand,” he asked his girlfriend, who, without replying, handed him a bag of money, a real bag o money. “What?! What the hell?!” he said, counting the money. “Almost three thousand bucks. Don’t tell me you did it. You actually...? No way, I can’t believe it... You cremated the Titanic?!”

“Yeah, damn...” Mirella struggled to say. “While you were out... Scale 1:10, it’s gonna be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*...”

“Holy crap, babe... I’m so proud of you. But where did you light it...”

“From the engine roo...” she collapsed.

...

I was there, and I assure you, I'm not making this up. Mirella had cloned and set fire to the entire Titanic. With this, she had set a record – not just a sporting one, but also a political one. In less than twenty – four hours, the young punk girl with green hair had managed to create and destroy two of the biggest Western capitalist icons. America would react harshly to this affront, Marione knew that much, but by then, the world's greatest power could no longer restore balance. A single girl had shown humanity that it was possible to fight the Western threat. Possible, and even fun.

Marione had sneaked out around nine to deliver the wine to his father, and Mirella, still wrecked from the Statue of Liberty, started playing with a pack of rolling papers. She rolled tiny busts of politicians and enjoyed watching them burn in a single puff. Then, the notes of *My Heart Will Go On* filled the thick air of the club. Never before had such a song violated the subwoofers of our sound system, but that night – as we learned the following week – the *Rockeffemme* headquarters was invaded by the violent collective *Se Non Prodi, Non godi*, who, after tying up Maxderiù – our trusted DJ – forced us to listen to a blood – chilling playlist designed to make our hair fall out.

Mirella shuddered. The notes of that horrid tune – amplified by her cannabis – induced perception – were the worst thing we had ever heard. We wanted to throw the stereo out the window, but our friend forced us instead to turn up the volume. We watched the ship take shape, while Mirella, guided by the jellyfish, who had seen the real Titanic, prepared to launch her creation at record speed.

I couldn't believe my eyes... I stood there – stunned among the sardines – and in no time, the Titanic took form before me. Even before that wretched song finished its refrain. I rushed to the entrance and flung the door open: the fish couldn't be missing.

I swear to you, the *Rolling Stone* photographers, who are real pros and not used to commenting on what pays their bills, upon seeing the Titanic – renamed *Ritzla* – resting at the bottom of the club, blurted out what sounded like a stunned curse in their unmistakable American accent. Then they pulled out their wallets. They handed Mirella a lot of money just to wait for

a few shots before burning the ocean liner – plus, once published, other substantial royalties.

After two rolls of film, we escorted the journalists out the door, pushed the fish out as well, then dragged the little boat ashore and set it on fire...

Chapter eleven

Virtual reality

The Old Lady got up as usual, her primary desires being to relieve herself and find someone to annoy. Preferably Marione. But as she made her way to the bathroom, she immediately noticed something was off. There were no doctors around, and the patients were strangely silent.

“What happened?” she asked Berta, who was sitting on a chamber pot.

“You don’t know anything?”

“What should I know?”

“Luisa killed herself... She slit her wrists in her bathtub.”

“You’re messing with me, aren’t you?” she shouted, shaking her fists in front of the poor woman’s face, who, in her excitement, trembled and splattered the contents of her chamber pot around.

“No, I swear! Didn’t you hear all that commotion last night?”

“What commotion?”

“Well, of course not, you snore like an ocean liner...”

“Hey... I don’t snore, I purr.”

“Anyway, up until an hour ago, the clinic was full of police officers and journalists. Poor Luisa took the ultimate step.”

“Damn it,” she blurted out, pacing back and forth. “Two’s one thing, but three is impossible... I’ve never missed a trifecta like this,” she concluded, dashing off to find Dr. Novelli.

“Doctor, doctor,” she shouted, bursting through his office door. “Doctor, I need to talk to you...”

“Mrs. Spezzano, please,” Novelli replied, exhausted from the sleepless night. “I don’t have time right now. You do know what happened, right?”

“Of course I know, Doctor. The mysterious killer has struck again...”

“Listen, Mrs. Spezzano, there is no killer. Mrs. Luisa slit her wrists in the bathtub.”

“I’m surprised at you. You don’t actually believe that story, do you?”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

“Listen, Luisa couldn’t even trim her own nails, let alone her veins. And how exactly did she cut them? Perpendicular to the wrist – the classic cut – or three horizontal slashes parallel to the radius – like a pro?”

“Like a pro...” admitted the doctor.

“Oh, give me a break... Luisa had early – stage Parkinson’s. She couldn’t even change the channel with the remote because she shook so much. If she had tried to hold a razor blade, she wouldn’t have been able to slit her wrists that neatly. At best, you’d have found seventy kilos of ground meat in the bathtub.”

“That’s disgusting, Mrs. Spezzano. Your sadistic imagination worries me. Though I must admit, you might be onto something. In fact, Mrs. Luisa wouldn’t have been capable of such a precise job... But maybe she recovered just before killing herself.”

“Of course, Doctor. She miraculously recovers from Parkinson’s and what does she do? She kills herself...” But then it suddenly clicked: “Dalesio, you senile old fool, it’s you, isn’t it? Where’s the doctor?”

“He ran to call the police. Your theory must have made an impression.”

“Well, damn it, I had to be the one to enlighten the police!” she exclaimed as she stormed back to her room.

The Old Lady tried to find a common thread between the victims, a clue that could link what she was now convinced were three dirty murders. That’s when Dalesio knocked on her door.

“Mrs. Spezzano, Mrs. Spezzano, it’s here... Where should we put it?”

“In my room, obviously,” she replied at the doorway. “And make sure no one sees you.”

“As you wish,” Dalesio grinned before signing the rental contract in the clinic’s lobby.

Carmageddon Turbo was then installed next to Mrs. Spezzano’s bed, stealing the power outlet from her beloved bedside lamp. However, the Old Lady was unaware that she had to pay for every game. She had wanted a video game all to herself, not a coin – guzzling machine. Unfortunately, neither of the two elderly swindlers read the contract, which stated that the company was providing the game for free while retaining 60% of its earnings. The Old Lady not only had to worry about finding some coins but also about playing enough – if the minimum weekly revenue threshold of

three hundred bucks wasn't met, the company would terminate the agreement.

The game's goal was the usual: driving a powerful sports car, you had to kill as many pedestrians as possible to earn enough to upgrade your vehicle.

And so, the Old Lady temporarily lost interest in the case and went to the clinic's chapel to strike a deal with the priest, who would set aside coins for her instead of depositing them in the bank. Only Dalesio, her accomplice, was allowed a few free games during the rare moments when Mrs. Spezzano rested her eyes with a chamomile compress.

However, the Old Lady wasn't drawn in by the game's mechanics. In all her years as a licensed driver, she had been blacklisted by nearly every insurance company. Running over pedestrians wasn't exactly a new thrill for her – it was a sport she had practiced for about sixty years.

Dalesio, on the other hand, had never had a driver's license and was exhilarated by the game's adrenaline rush. When, drifting into a church courtyard, he ran over an entire procession and earned enough money to upgrade his car, he suddenly recalled the first time he had an orgasm.

Sant'Anna Pelago, his cousin's house. A distant medieval past...

Chapter twelve

Lights and shadows

Commissioner Zazà – prompted by the doctor – decided to look deeper into the investigation. He returned to the clinic with his team of experts for further checks. From the medical file, the investigators realized the absurdity of the situation. Forensic experts had already determined the perfectly straight cuts on the victim's wrists, something quite difficult with Parkinson's at the third degree of the Mercalli scale. The commissioner's suspicions then turned to Mr. Rossi – a famous and renowned luthier with an impressive medical record – at least until the doctor cleared him.

"Mr. Rossi no longer uses our services."

"What do you mean?"

"He has preferred to rely on the competition for years now, ever since a camping gas canister exploded in his room."

"A gas canister?!"

"It's a long story, Commissioner, and absolutely irrelevant."

"OK, then who else could have such precision?" asked the commissioner after crossing Mr. Rossi off the list.

"I don't know, Commissioner, I don't want to think the killer could be one of us..."

"So, in your opinion, they came from outside?"

"Why not?"

"Didn't you tell me the institute's door was locked?"

Dr. Novelli suddenly lost all the respect he had built up for the commissioner and the police force. So it was true what those funny anarchists dressed in black, who lived in the adjacent building, thought. Zazà had gone through the standard initial investigation routine, then, after putting the unfortunate woman in the fridge, had disconnected his brain – assuming that a policeman's brain could ever be connected in the first place. The Old Lady, now she had a sharp and shrewd mind, he found himself thinking.

At this point, Novelli realized he had to dismiss the commissioner without seeming rude – after all, he had called him in the first place – and set up a private investigative team. A new avant – garde of special agents.

Novelli was itching to start the investigation as soon as possible when, luckily, he saw Mr. Dalesio approaching in his classic white coat with a pocket full of colorful pens. Dalesio promptly deciphered the doctor's knowing look, and in a moment of distraction from the commissioner – who was trying to study the institute's layout – the two switched places, allowing the real doctor to go recruit his agents.

"So, doctor," continued the commissioner, scrutinizing his interlocutor through his bulletproof glasses, "if the door was locked, no one could have gotten in."

"That's what you say. The door was locked, but we always leave the key hanging outside."

"What?!"

"Of course, the key is always hanging on the door..."

"Why?"

"Because Mr. Gullà, our custodian, has always lived in the countryside, and we've never been able to break him of the habit."

"So you're telling me that anyone could have walked in and taken out Mrs. Luisa?"

"Well, not just anyone..."

"Explain yourself better..."

"Only those who know how to open a door... The moscardini, for example, knock, even if the key is hanging outside."

"Doctor, are you screwing with me?!"

"I'm sorry, Commissioner, but I don't have any tools... Anyway, where would you like to start?"

"I'd like to take a tour of the institute, just to get a feel for the place... Will you accompany me?"

"Of course, with pleasure..."

The commissioner then began a cursory tour of the clinic with the fake doctor, who, improvising as a tour guide – like those he was used to meeting on overcrowded buses full of elderly people headed to improbable the-

atrical performances of kitchen sets in picturesque Swiss towns – began describing the clinic to him both in Italian and Spanish:

“Questo è la hall, in puro stile vittoriano. Esta es el hall, es puro estilo Victoriano. Nell’angolo alla sua destra, qualche giorno fa riposava un bell’ottomano Luigi XV che ahimè adesso è andato distrutto. En la esquina a la derecha, hace unos días había un bonito Ottomana Luigi XV que, por mala suerte, ahora ha sido destruido. La macchinetta del caffè alla sinistra lungo il corridoio centrale, accetta solo monetine da cento lire. La maquinilla para cafés a la izquierda de el paseo central acepta solo monedas de quinientas liras. Di recente è stata ritarata, altrimenti era possibile, qualche mese fa, imbrogliare la macchinetta infernale con i bottoni. Hace poco se las han llevado, porque si no se podía, hace unos meses, engañar la máquina infernal con los botones. Il corridoio che stiamo ammirando è percorribile in trenta passi, anche se la Vecchia: cioè la signora Spezzano, l’altra sera, quando il Marione le ha pisciato sui fuseaux, l’ha percorso, a grandi falcate, con circa quindici passi, detenendo così il record della clinica. El paseo que estamos mirando es largo treinta pasos y la vieja, quiero decir, la Señora Spezzano, la otra noche, cuando el Marione le ha meado encima de los fuseaux, lo ha recurrido con grandes pasos, cerca quince, estableciendo asta el record de la clinica...”

“Let’s keep going, but stop with the Spanish,” said the commissioner, pointing his nine – millimeter at the so – called doctor’s head.

“Bien... Ehmm... OK,” Dalesio continued, frozen by the metal barrel against his temple. “This is the men’s ward, separated from its counterpart by that beautiful open space you see at the end. This is an Indonesian Benjamin, the only plant capable of surviving at a nursing home temperature, and these are the restrooms reserved for patients...”

Just then, the commissioner heard a dull noise coming from the door to his right. With a kick, he smashed open the panel separating him from the patients’ intestinal problems and found himself staring at an old, collapsed figure slumped over the toilet.

Dalesio, who was watching the expert’s lightning – fast reaction, immediately recognized old Dirk’s suit abandoned on the toilet. But a loud curse from the commissioner made him realize that the suit was not aban-

doned at all. Poor Dirk – reduced by Guttalax to an empty shell – was hunched over the toilet. For almost three days.

“Inspector Dirk!” Zazà exclaimed, putting his gun back in his shoulder holster, while Dalesio had no idea why he was calling him an inspector. “Inspector Dirk, it’s me, Zazà... Do you recognize me? What are you doing in here? What happened to you?”

Dirk couldn’t say a word, he simply gave Zazà a pleading look and, unable to hold back, even in his arms, responded with a loud, desperate fart.

“Quick, doctor,” Zazà said, while Dirk – who could still see perfectly well – had no idea which doctor he was talking about. “Call an ambulance immediately, the poor inspector must have crapped out his lungs too... We need to hurry.”

Luckily, the specialists arrived quickly. Ambulances didn’t hesitate to respond to calls from nursing homes – not so much out of duty, but because these places often housed people with substantial bank credentials. They loaded not only Inspector Dirk – whom Zazà had just promoted – but also the toilet bowl itself, which had been properly detached, as it might still contain some of the unfortunate man’s vital organs.

I watched the scene from the windows of the social center. Sure, I was still quite shaken by the Titanic situation, so I couldn’t hold back my curiosity when I saw the ambulance leave. In my field of vision, logically narrowed by the active ingredient, only the neighborhood plumber’s yellow Ferrari remained, as usual with a demijohn strapped to the luggage rack above the engine. Driven by curiosity, I opened the window to get a better view. Sergio, as always, fell out, and I, who was clinging to a stud on his leather jacket, followed him.

They admitted me along with what looked like the casing of the guy from the tavern who used to intimidate me.

Chapter Twelve point three

Twenty thousand leagues under the toilet

Mirella widened her eyes. She still had that stupid little tune ringing in her ears, and she didn't feel at all like she had smoked the *Titanic*, but rather as if the *Orient Express* had run her over. She shook Marione, who was sprawled on top of her, and got up to stretch her legs.

Marione, half – asleep, cracked one eye open and jumped to his feet in shock when he saw, just inches from his pupil, the eye of a seal.

“What the hell...” he blurted out. “I’ll never get used to this. But didn’t we lock these fish out last night?” he asked while petting the little head of the poor mammal, slightly offended at being mistaken for a fish.

“Yeah, but the window’s open, and Sergio is hanging down there again... I don’t know what happened...” Mirella said as she tried to pull the poor guy up.

Marione was heading toward the window to help his partner when his blood pressure crashed under his boots. He had gotten up too fast, and the blood refused to circulate properly. Luckily, the seal picked up on it and, reassured by his petting, slid under him to prevent him from hitting the floor. Unfortunately, that day, a hake was also in the center and, seeing such altruism from a mammal, didn’t want to be outdone. It’s well known that hakes aren’t particularly bright fish, so the poor guy, fueled by an adrenaline rush of newfound generosity, threw himself under the seal to keep it from getting hurt by slamming into the floor with Marione on its back.

Carletto – that was his name – left behind a wife and more than seven hundred children.

Mirella, busy with the rescue maneuver, missed the scene entirely. She kept pulling on the harness to help Sergio gain a few inches up the wall. Each time the poor guy managed to climb a few more centimeters on the orange – peel – textured wall of the center, Mirella renewed her calls for

help to her friends, still wrecked from the naval cremation, losing the ground gained and scraping the poor guy against the facade.

Sergio begged her to give up and explained what had happened. That's when, shaking Marione to come with her to the hospital to check on my condition, even the seal got up, revealing a strange, unfamiliar doormat. The hake, the seal explained to Mirella in its own dialect, had lain down beneath it in a final chivalrous act when it was too late for her to stop her fall.

Carletto had to be buried immediately, even before heading to the hospital. Class demanded it. Mirella and Marione bid farewell to the seal, rolled up the unfortunate fish – now flattened to the size of a poster – and set off for the hospital. The old washhouse's drainage channel instantly suggested a Viking funeral. They rolled out a vessel and hung the good Carletto as a sail on its main deck. With two hits, they christened the *Flying Dutchman*, nearly burning down the entire hold. Then they consigned to the waters what remained of the ship, topped by the poor hake who had foolishly sacrificed his life out of misplaced chivalry.

"Do you think it'll reach the sea before burning up completely?"

"Well, sooner or later, it'll get there... The important thing is that his ashes reach it, right?!"

"Of course, love..." Marione said, hugging his girlfriend. "I never liked the idea of burying a fish... It's not their environment... Humans to the earth, fish to the water..."

"And what do we do with birds?!"

"How the hell should I know?! Birds are their own problem."

...

They arrived at the hospital high – if you'll allow me – like two lobsters. Despite their incoherent ramblings, I still managed to pick up on their concern for my condition. Then, before collapsing into limbo, they mumbled something about a Viking sail woven from a dead hake.

Two extra beds were added to our room, and I, the shell of old Dirk, Mirella, and Marione all found ourselves as guests of the ultra – modern *Fate Bene Le Frittelle* Hospital.

Dirk lay in the bed near the door, hooked up to four IVs shaped like vanilla milkshakes. I was across from him, stretched out in traction like a

joke character, while the two newcomers were placed beside us. I told the doctors not to worry about them – they weren't in a coma, just on standby thanks to Colombian Gold, obviously, and the elephants.

Unfortunately, the doctors – jealous of their years of study – disagreed. And to shut me up, they took their revenge by cranking the modern torture device I was strapped to another half turn.

They also insisted – just to be polite – that weed, even in massive doses, couldn't put someone in a coma – like state. I couldn't hold back and snapped that the amount they considered massive was just another day for us. This time, I got a full turn of the crank and had to hold back any further remarks.

Five minutes after the doctors left, the nurse's antithesis walked in: a short, overweight woman with greasy hair, holding a glucose IV shaped like a missile. They attached the warhead to poor Marione's arm, who, in a feline leap, jumped onto the bed and found himself face – to – face with her.

"Argh!!! Where did the elephants go?! What am I doing here?!"

"Calm down, Mr. Marione," the nurse replied gently. "Everything's fine... You were in a coma, but fortunately, you woke up. I'll go inform the doctors and get another IV for your friend..."

"Coma my ass..." he roared. "I was in the savanna playing with blue elephants and platypuses... How dare you bring me back to earth ahead of schedule?!"

"But Mr. Marione, you were nearly dead... We had a duty to treat you."

"Hey, hey... Let's go easy on the duties. I came to visit a friend, not to get hospitalized," he said, jumping off the bed and yanking the warhead out of his arm. "I'm not sick..."

"Oh no?! And what about this young lady here?" she said, pointing to Mirella. "She doesn't seem to be in peak health... We have a duty to treat her; this is an emergency."

"Emergency my ass," he bellowed. "I'll show you how to wake someone up..." and he whispered in Mirella's ear: "Watch out, it's the cops!"

In a fraction of a second, Mirella dumped half a gram of Colombian, blowing up the dome lamp, and ninja – flipped upright on the bed.

The nurse shouted something we didn't catch and ran off to call the doctors.

That's when the two of them finally managed to pay some attention to me. Guided by my groans, Marione loosened the torturous mechanism, allowing me to reassure them about my health. The doctors had done X-rays and said – although the chief surgeon's wife, also a doctor, upon seeing them, thought they looked like one hundred and forty pound of pudding dropped off the Genoa – Voltri bridge – that there wouldn't be any complications. The prognosis was three days. Not enough to recover, but the maximum time by law that the hospital had to provide care. After that, my insurance – which I obviously didn't have – would have to take over.

Their visit cheered me up, and for once, I enjoyed stepping out of the typical anarchist loner mindset. Too bad they had to flee almost immediately, chased by paramedics.

...

When they got back to the center, they suddenly remembered Sergio was still hanging outside and pulled him up. The poor guy, who, after reading a hippie book, only dressed in white, looked like one of those sheets Greenpeace used to test city smog levels.

"Damn," Mario said. "You're completely black... Just look at what we're breathing."

"There's too much traffic out there, trust me. I was only hanging for three hours..."

"Uh, yeah... Sorry, Sergio, but Pat flew out with you... We went to the hospital; he's fine, more or less... What about you? And why is your face all scratched up?"

"Go stick your head in the gas pipe, Marione," he snapped. "Ask your girlfriend. She tried to sandblast the building with me."

Marione had no idea what he was talking about.

...

Desolation reigned in my room. Dirk wasn't improving at all, and the doctors' concern sparked in me a strange sense of brotherhood with the guy who, on the contrary, had always scared me.

The poor fellow wasn't entirely intact – his lungs and liver had been recovered, but there was no trace of his gallbladder or his entire intestine.

The doctors brought the clinic's toilet bowl into the delivery room and prepared to remove the clog that Fernandin had already been complaining about for a couple of hours in the hospital lobby.

The gallbladder immediately floated to the surface, lighter than the dense intestinal miasma that spread across the operating table, while the intestine remained stuck in the siphon's opening. They had to use a laser to carve into the porcelain of the toilet without damaging the small intestine trapped in its grip.

After five hours of surgery, the doctors arrived and took the casing away to give it some thickness again.

In our circles, we don't pray – at most, for good luck, we roll a joint – and at that moment, I would have really rolled one for my new friend. If only I had been able to move my arms.

Outside, Dr. Novelli was wearing down the corridor, pacing back and forth. He was waiting for news about his patient's condition. Apart from the terrible publicity that could arise from yet another issue, the doctor was frustrated that he had to postpone his recruitment mission over a mere bout of diarrhea.

Zazà showed up at the hospital, and Novelli – who couldn't understand the commissioner's interest in a senile old man – was brought up to speed on the situation. In light of the new facts, the doctor breathed a sigh of relief: if Dirk was really thirty – six years old, then his clinic was out of jurisdiction.

Chapter thirteen

Old lady and engines...

“Mrs. Spezzano... Mrs. Spezzano...” the doctor shouted, bursting into the Old Lady’s suite without knocking.

“For crying out loud?!” she snapped at the intruder.

Dr. Novelli – fueled by adrenaline – caught her red – handed. Still frozen in shock, Mrs. Spezzano was glued to the video game, just as she was about to crush an innocent stroller.

“Holy cow,” the doctor gasped. “You just ran over a baby!”

“Fantastic, isn’t it?” she replied, keeping one eye on the road. “Now I can finally fix the clutch – it’s getting hard to run over those who don’t die on the first hit... it’s slipping a lot.”

“Mrs. Spezzano,” the head physician shouted, shaking off the horror of infanticide, “where did this video game come from?”

“I bought it,” she lied.

“Oh yeah? And how do you play? Be careful, for God’s sake – you just killed a lady with a little dog!”

“That’s the whole point, Doctor. You have to mow down as many people as possible. That’s the only way to earn enough money to upgrade the car.”

“Interesting... And why do you need to upgrade the car?” asked the doctor, who still insisted on driving a Printz too old to be considered vintage.

“So you can kill more, and better. When you start the game, you don’t get this eight – wheel – drive beast – you start with a sputtering Fiat 500. But as you mow down pedestrians, you earn money to progress.”

“And why did that kid you just hit pay more than the stroller earlier? Shouldn’t a newborn be worth more?”

“Doctor, you don’t get it at all. Small kids are worth more because they’re harder to hit – they’re faster. Babies in strollers don’t even move. The highest payouts are for those between twelve and eighteen years old.”

“And old ladies?”

“Old ladies don’t pay much – they’re too slow... But it’s fun to cripple them and run them over again in reverse. At your own pace...”

“Interesting... Can I try?”

“We might as well play doubles. Got any change?”

The Old Lady took the lead – she knew the route and the church schedules by heart. She pocketed ten million points by massacring a procession while the doctor watched, stunned.

“Holy smokes,” he blurted. “Even the guy carrying the cross – you ran him over too! You’re a menace.”

“The procession is nothing,” she grinned. “Watch this – if I can squeeze into the preschool parking lot just as the school bus unloads...”

With surgical precision, she cut off the yellow bus and drove into the wide courtyard where the children, standing neatly in line, waited to be taken home. They died in formation, like the British.

The game controller, the doctor discovered with growing excitement, vibrated whenever someone got hit. But that wasn’t enough to make him forget his real mission. Novelli wanted Mrs. Spezzano and Mr. Marione to become part of an investigative team tasked with rooting out crime in his nursing home. He, too, had begun to suspect that there was something odd about all those sudden deaths and wanted to get to the bottom of it.

“But right now, Doctor? Right now that I’ve finally learned to use the manual gearbox?”

“Come on, Mrs. Spezzano,” he said, running over a beggar asking for alms. “We can play after we’ve brought the killer to justice.”

“Careful, Doctor!” she yelled. “Those guys with squeegees will take your money! They throw themselves under your car to wash the windshield, and if you hit them, they drain two hundred bucks from you!”

“Thanks for the heads – up,” he said, skidding to avoid one. “So, are you in?”

“Of course,” she admitted, blinking repeatedly.

“Then let’s go,” Novelli concluded, sending the car drifting into a shopping mall.

They found Marione hanging from the chandelier while Bricconi, like an Olympic judge, scored the dives that Senior executed onto the mattress

below. Both of them were drunk out of their minds. Five empty IV bags lay discarded on the floor next to some milk cartons – almost like poor old Dirk in the hospital.

Just then, Marione launched himself into a stunning pike dive with a triple twist. Bricconi gave it an eight, while the Old Lady, convinced her protégé deserved a nine, marched over to scold the judge.

Novelli watched helplessly, perhaps paralyzed, at least for the time it took him to recover from the shock of such unprofessionalism. Then, snapping back into military – boy – scout mode, he barked an authoritative, “Attention!” and took charge of the situation, marching his two new recruits to his office.

He launched into a long motivational speech, meant to psych up his agents: “We’re strong, we’re smart, we’re the best, we’re too intelligent...” and in his fervor, he couldn’t help but add a thunderous, “*Forza Genoa, morte ai lebbrosi!*”

The two barely listened. The Old Lady was contemplating the most delicate maneuver to yank down the doctor’s pants and pull them over his head in one go, while Marione struggled just to stay upright, bouncing off the furniture at random.

Novelli had no choice but to postpone the investigation until the next day. To help Marione sober up, he ordered his subordinates – who were somewhat puzzled – to lock the poor guy up in the old dungeon of the building.

Chapter thirteen point eight

One hundred and forty pounds of Pudding

On the third day, the doctors released the straps and sent me home. At the center, Mirella and my friends had built me a comfortable container, resembling the old – fashioned pudding molds from the past. My grandmother had one that could hold two pounds; this one contained one hundred forty: my entire body.

The nurses in white coats who gently placed me into my new iron lung stood in stark contrast to the black uniforms of my housemates. Micky – derailed as usual – thought the center had been invaded by Imperial soldiers from the Death Star. Rolling on the floor, he started shooting at the rescue volunteers with a water gun. One of them, already drenched in sweat, nearly caught pneumonia, and Mirella and Marione had to intervene, shoving a joint shaped like Rosy Bindi into his mouth – just as the Imperial warrior was about to provide his employer with a new client via a perfect Californian chokehold.

The nurse then laughed, looked at it, and even cremated it. Just a moment before he started dancing.

I was happy to be home. From my new position, I had a commanding view of the street, and I could spend my time watching Sergio throw himself off the balcony while also observing the clinic's courtyard, where lately, people had been dying faster than in the trenches.

Marione was worried. His father – hospitalized for a few days – was dodging his tears out on the balcony, forcing him to attach a humidifier beneath the crust of hanging laundry. He still didn't feel ready to solve the ancient enigma, and that stressed him out a bit. On the other hand, his mother gave him no worries at all. Ever since Senior had been admitted, she seemed to have gone into hibernation, refusing to leave the bed – not even for a plate of pansoti. She kept saying she had never slept so well, that she had the bed all to herself, and that no one should dare bother her.

That evening, Mirella organized a party in my honor. While I was distracted, admiring from the window as the clinic's head doctor marched two strange, not – so – jogging – fit individuals down the street, she secretly prepared about twenty artichokes shaped like chocolate puddings and handed them out to our friends. They lit them all at once, singing a rousing rendition of *Bandiera Rossa*.

Sergio, convinced as usual that the cops had cut the power, leaned too far out and – of course – fell. Luckily, the bungee cord Mirella had given him to soothe her guilt bounced him just enough so that, after a few rebounds, he managed to find his way back home on his own.

“Holy shit, what a trip!” he exclaimed after reclaiming his spot by the window. “This rope is amazing... We should make it an Olympic sport!” he concluded before launching himself out again.

“What the f – ?!” we shouted in unison.

Everyone, except me, rushed to the window to watch him bounce back and forth. Sergio was onto something – this really could become a sport. Everyone lined up, inhaling their pudding – shaped joints eagerly as they waited for their turn. From my container, I watched the scene, amused.

Sure, my friends were weird. Having already fallen once myself, I didn't see the appeal, but they were clearly hyped about it.

When they pulled Sergio back up, it was Micky's turn, then Paola, Spiccio, Drugo, Berto, Fru Fru, Danny, Terry, Pippi, Lupo, Drago, Nero, Fumo, Spino, Siringa, Micro... and finally, Mirella and Marione.

Berto was the only one among us who had tried enrolling in university, and in fact, he had attended a few physics lectures. Probably because of this, he got a little agitated – despite being in a semi – comatose state from White Diesel – when Spiccio and Siringa started tying the elastic cord to Marione's ankles, given that he wasn't exactly a lightweight.

No one paid attention, though, and Junior stepped onto the windowsill, arms outstretched like an angel.

He jumped, and the first thing he felt was his loose change abandoning him. Then, the gray pavement of the bus stop below began zooming terrifyingly toward his face.

When we saw him pass the imaginary boundary where the other contestants usually started bouncing back up, we realized Berto had been trying to tell us something.

Luckily, Marione landed on a manhole cover, which, as our scholar friend later explained, had a different specific density than concrete. He didn't suffer any injuries that couldn't be healed with a couple of trombones. Except, of course, for the four letters that got stamped onto his cheek during the impact – letters that would stay with him for a while: *AMGA*.

"Damn, are you hurt?" we asked in unison when he returned – this time taking the stairs.

"Nothing serious," he said before collapsing like a pudding dropped from a viaduct.

Mirella built another mold.

"How are you, love?" she asked, handing him a trumpet shaped like an angel.

"So – so... This social center is turning into an Elah factory. Why don't you guys just squat a ground – floor building next time?"

"Because when we did," I replied, "they evicted us in no time. They came in through the windows and caught us off guard. At least here, the only way out is through the windows..."

"Well, that's just f – ing great," he sighed before setting fire to the angel.

We strapped Sergio back onto the bungee cord and lost ourselves in our delirium. Everyone was busy fighting against – or alongside – their own blue elephants, and no one had the heart to point out to Marione what had been stamped onto his face when he jumped out the window.

Chapter fourteen

Secret mission

Dr. Novelli had led his elite squad into the courtyard for training. Marione, suffering from a terrible headache and having woken up locked in a dark, damp hallway believing himself to be the Count of Monte Cristo, was not pleased. He had never run in his life and had no desire to get in shape. The Old Lady, on the other hand, cared a lot about her appearance – but she relied on silicone enhancements rather than exercise.

So when the doctor ordered them to run twenty laps around the courtyard, they nearly wet themselves laughing.

“Doctor, please...” Marione chuckled between snickers. “You don't seriously expect me to start running at my age, do you?”

“My dear gentlemen,” the doctor declared, standing too upright, “we are the vanguard of a new special unit tasked with defeating the crime plaguing our clinic. We have a mission to complete, and we must strive to accomplish it in the best possible way. By accepting this heavy investigative burden, we have taken on an enormous moral responsibility towards our fellow patients...”

“What the hell are you talking about, doctor?” Marione interrupted, still reeling from the alcohol. “What difference does it make if your patients meet their final appointment five minutes earlier? That doesn't mean we should be running around like idiots...”

“Listen,” the doctor continued, pointing to the windows of the social center, “would you rather have a good running workout, or should I force you to jump out of the window like those future paratroopers?”

They both agreed to choose the lesser evil and began briskly walking around the perimeter of the care home's courtyard while the doctor – who had even been a Boy Scout leader – briefed them on his method:

“Tonight, once we have completed our training, we will go searching for clues. Under the cover of darkness, we will inspect the rooms where the crimes took place and see if our specialized preparation doesn't make the

police look like a bunch of amateurs! Understood? Remember, we are on a mission from God!”

“I’ve heard that one before,” Marione muttered before diving into a flowerbed.

Back in his office, the doctor thought about assigning code names to his agents, perhaps based on their age.

When the two finished their training, they found Novelli dressed as Diabolik. The question arose spontaneously: where the hell had he managed to get that outfit?

“Excellent, my dear ones, we will begin our patrol starting from the scene of the first crime – assuming it was a murder at all.”

Deep down, he was uncertain.

The room of Mrs. Stanziani was in perfect order. Even the wardrobe had been repositioned, and a faint imprint of the deceased’s face could be seen in the lacquered door if one looked against the light.

Agent 0048 inspected the bathroom. Lots of colorful jars, perfume bottles, and talcum powder... Senior was surprised that the victim still had a toothbrush instead of the usual effervescent denture tablets. But then, his attention was caught by the label on the bottle of Chanel No. 5 sitting on the shelf above the sink. It read: *Chanel No. 5, 60% alcohol...*

Instinctively, he acted. There was no use in opposing Emilian intuition with logic, and he was quite astonished to discover that his palate did not dislike the taste at all – in fact, he was used to it.

Damn, he thought, forget Chanel – this is straight – up Talisker whisky... Could it be that Stanziani’s bathroom hides a secret liquor cabinet?

He took a sip of the cologne too – a liter – sized bottle resting next to the bathtub – and found that it was actually pure gin, likely Tanqueray.

Outside, the doctor – still dressed as Diabolik – and Agent 0080 (Eva Kant’s grandmother) were thoroughly examining the victim’s room, unaware of Marione’s, pardon, Agent 0048’s discoveries.

The bottle labeled *Eau de Moschino* contained ouzo, a mildly hallucinogenic Greek liquor he had no desire to taste since he disliked anise. But he more than made up for it by sampling a bottle marked *Guerlain Paris* and another labeled *Eau de Rochas*, which turned out to be Sambuca and Amaro Averna, respectively.

His headache was gone, he felt at ease, and he barely even remembered the twenty laps he had suffered through in the cool evening breeze.

He uncapped all the bottles and tasted every specialty available. After all, he had been elected investigator, and his duty was to gather evidence.

And evidence he gathered – fifty – two samples, to be precise, which was the number of perfume bottles scattered throughout the victim's bathroom.

Fireworks exploded in his drunken mind, and an uncontrollable urge to sing *Vola, Colomba Bianca, Vola...* took over. He held back to avoid waking the patients and merely performed a few dance steps, using the talcum powder container as a makeshift microphone. But as he spun around, the lid popped open, showering his face in a fine white dust.

He instantly realized that this was no ordinary talcum powder.

As a child, he had used plenty of it, slathering it all over himself after every bath. But never – never – had it ever caused an erection like this.

The Old Lady and the doctor, seeing him standing there, anything but discreet, with his member proudly displayed, had no choice but to run for their lives...

The entire clinic was awakened by the commotion, and the doctor barely managed to remove his Diabolik costume in time.

"So it's true!" Bonfiglio shouted, climbing down from the mosaic where he had been resting. "You're secretly testing a Viagra treatment!" he added, pointing at Marione's impressive arousal.

"I'll give you a secret treatment," Marione growled, aiming his new-found weapon at Bonfiglio.

Fortunately, the staff restrained him just in time.

Dr. Novelli's blood pressure dropped at the mere thought of the headlines that could appear in the newspapers the next day:

RAPE AT THE CARE HOME

CAVALIER BONFIGLIO ASSAULTED

Of course, everything was covered up. The Cavalier was promised a place of honor in the next clinical trial, and Marione was locked up in the basement again – not before filing his report, of course.

Novelli sent Agent 0080 to bed and continued investigating alone.

Mrs. Stanziani had such a diverse stash that she could compete with any professional dealer. Alcohol in all varieties, cocaine hidden in the talcum powder jar, hashish in tablet form disguised as pumice stone, LSD blotters tucked inside callus pads, and various pills stored in Ziguli candy boxes.

Depending on the flavor, each pack contained a different active ingredient:

Pear: Plegine

Blackcurrant: Rohypnol

Green apple: Mescaline

Lemon: Lexotan

And so on. There was truly something for everyone.

Had the police seriously overlooked all this?

But that wasn't all.

Before Senior had emerged from the bathroom with his... *instincts* running wild, the doctor and the Old Lady had already discovered that the shroud – like imprint on the wardrobe contradicted the police's theory that the woman had died by accident.

Accident, my ass, thought Novelli.

If Stanziani had slipped and fallen backward onto the rug, she would have hit the wardrobe with the back of her head. In that case, the impact should have left her facial imprint on the lower part of the wardrobe door – not the upper part.

At dawn, Novelli woke his two agents and snuck them into the victim's room for a reconstruction of the crime.

Marione, now getting used to his morning headaches, was locked inside the killer wardrobe. The Old Lady, who was about the same height as the victim, was laid on the bed.

Novelli suspected that the killer had been hiding in the wardrobe.

When the signora had heard a noise and stood up, the murderer must have been trying to escape and, in doing so, struck her with a fatal blow to the face.

Indeed, when Novelli gave the signal, the Old Lady jumped to attention, listening for a noise, while Senior, who was supposed to flee, slammed the wardrobe door against her silicone – filled face – which, fortunately, cushioned the impact.

Gleeful, Novelli explained his theory.

Morning had arrived, and before continuing the investigation, they had to attend the customary breakfast in the main hall. The Old Lady and Senior took their seats at the table again, eagerly waiting to finish their coffee with milk. Cavalier Bricconi sat next to Agent 0048, even more drunk than usual. His guest had missed the party the night before, and the knight, slightly disappointed, had to finish alone the stash he had received from his lawyer:

“Two liters I can handle just fine,” he said, “but four give me trouble. Why didn’t you show up last night, Mr. Mario?” he asked, his breath reeking.

“I had to take a sick day, sorry,” Mario replied, sticking to the script the doctor had trained him on. “An angina attack, the doctor was at my bedside almost all night.”

“Really?!” Cavalier Bricconi asked, surprised.

“Of course, why?”

“I could have sworn I saw you in the hallway last night... chasing Cavalier Bonfiglio... completely naked, no less.”

“Come on now, what are you thinking?” Senior said, blushing. “You must have already been quite drunk...”

“Ah... that, my dear colleague, is more than certain... more than certain, I tell you...” And with that, he collapsed face – first into his breakfast cup.

The nurses, well accustomed to such dives, carried him back to his room and hooked him up to a glucose drip in the shape of a Fernet Branca bottle.

Chapter fourteen and a half

Analytical therapy

I hadn't had a great night in the mold; sleeping while standing was hard, even when high on marijuana, so I looked pretty rough. Mirella also got up early. She was worried about Marione, who, unlike me, seemed to be sleeping like an angel.

"Hey Mirella, everything okay?"

"More or less. How are you feeling?"

"Well, I barely got a wink of sleep. You can imagine in this position... But Marione here has been sleeping like a baby all night. He hasn't opened his eyes since last evening, he looks like..." A dreadful doubt painted itself across my face. So much so that Mirella also shuddered: "Dead?!" she blurted out and smacked him hard across the face.

"What the hell..." he shouted, "why are you hitting me? It's not my fault I was dreaming about being assaulted by twenty bisexual nymphomaniacs... But wait," he continued, puzzled, "was it showing?!"

"What the hell were you dreaming about, you filthy pig?" she snapped, forgetting the scare she'd just had.

"Uh... Twenty nymphomaniacs..." Junior replied, blushing.

"Oh, I see," she interrogated, "does this happen often?"

"No, no..." he tried to justify himself, "only once a month..."

"Once a month?! And when does it happen?"

"Only on the twentieth of each month..."

"And the other days?"

"Uh... Well... On the other days, either less or more..."

"Wait, are you telling me you have this dream every day," she exploded, "and the number of nymphomaniacs depends on the date?"

"Uh... Yeah," he admitted, embarrassed.

"That explains why you're so hyper at the end of the month... And to think I believed your parents were giving you an allowance..."

“Come on, Mirella,” he apologized, “what can I do if my subconscious is all messed up? It’s not like I enjoy this.”

I would have smacked him for that lie.

“You really don’t like it?” she asked. She had bought it.

“Of course! I started having this dream when I was twelve, and since then, my assailants haven’t aged at all. Now I’m thirty, and what used to be an erotic fantasy has turned into some pedophilic nightmare... Don’t think this is fun for me...”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she said, rolling one up in the shape of Sigmund Freud. “Why have you never told me about this burden of yours?”

“Because I’m ashamed, dammit,” he replied, burning the father of psychoanalysis.

Mirella, who had once seriously considered enrolling in psychology, felt automatically compelled to step in. She laid Marione down along with his pedestal, sat beside him, and started the classic standard repertoire. And he – who still hadn’t figured out when he was supposed to start crying – split open like a cracked skull.

The poor guy had started having this kind of nightmare after a three – day countryside trip to visit his uncles. There lived Lorena, his third cousin – third in terms of bra size, that is – two years older than him. As often happens, the cousin took him to the barn to play doctor.

After playing around with his little thing for a bit, as she called it, she shoved her large breasts in his face, talking about a “baptism by fire.” Marione, naive at the time, had no idea what to do with boobs, and fire, frankly, scared him quite a bit. Still, he awkwardly nibbled on a nipple, just to break the tension.

That bite, however, was interpreted by his cousin as a sadomasochistic statement, prompting her, in her erotic delirium, to whip him hard with her pony’s riding crop.

Luckily, Marione managed to dodge most of the blows – the pervert was touching herself while hitting him – and fled, deeply shaken.

From that day on, the poor guy couldn’t stop dreaming of an army of twelve – year – old nymphomaniacs... and, naturally, developed a profound hatred for the countryside.

Chapter fifteen

Secret mission: second extraction

The investigation resumed after breakfast. The agents were called to report, and after wiping their mustaches clean of milk coffee, they clandestinely made their way to the widow Gadolla's room – the second one extracted.

The victim in question – lower in the economic ranking – could not afford a suite with a bathroom like Mrs. Stanziani's, so the three had to work together in the only bedroom available. Fortunately, the doctor had the good taste not to wear a disguise.

The widow Gadolla owned nothing more than a wardrobe and a one – and – a – half – sized bed – an heroic choice for a woman her age. The double – season wardrobe, which in theory should have contained nothing more than the clothing of an ordinary family, instead revealed eight decades of memories and absurd knick – knacks. The three of them, as they cataloged fragments of Mrs. Gadolla's life, embarked on a colossal task.

From the drawers assigned to Dr. Novelli, a rag doll emerged, completely bitten, probably by an old family cat that, alas, must have died all nine times by now. A Baron Karza action figure – an extraterrestrial gadget from the industrial era – which the victim had likely confiscated from one of her students when she was still a teacher and had never returned. A cigarette butt preserved in a crystal case, and from this, they could catalog nothing – given the victim's longevity, it could have belonged to Winston Churchill or Jimi Hendrix.

An entire collection of snow globes, the kind once kept in dining rooms to atone for some strange guilt. A life – sized photograph of a young twenty – year – old Mrs. Gadolla, embracing Gianni Morandi. An inflatable duck – shaped life preserver, still intact, an original model from the 1930s, whose auction sale could have covered the deficit of a nation like Uganda.

A set of collectible iron soldiers, arranged inside the drawer like Napoleon's army at Waterloo – but without Napoleon. Napoleon, however, was

found in the upper drawer, firmly glued to a diorama depicting a tropical island.

Twenty – five years’ worth of Playboy centerfolds, onto which the widow had drawn missing teeth and fake mustaches. Fifty monstrous battery – operated dolls, similar to Gremlins, which, once turned on, started walking back and forth, chatting among themselves as if nothing had happened. A piece of rope that, caught up in memories, Novelli might have interpreted as a Lagostina clothesline left out in the sun – although it was just a piece of rope.

An out – of – tune violin, a tuned one, one missing a string, and one with strings but no violin. A sandcastle mold in the shape of the Bastille. An A3 – sized ex – libris featuring the symbol of the widow Gadolla’s ancestors: a stable.

An entire collection of signs reading “Toilet,” which the doctor did not immediately realize were the ones that disappeared monthly from the men’s bathroom. A puppet theater featuring the complete cast of The Muppets.

And a collection of baby Jesuses from nativity scenes, which forced the doctor to do some quick math.

“Four!” he exclaimed. “These are the baby Jesuses that disappear every year from the nativity scene at the entrance!” he concluded, counting the small porcelain figures.

“Are you saying,” Mario continued, pretending to play the guitar, “that the widow was a kleptomaniac?”

“It seems so...”

“What a story!” exclaimed Mrs. Spezzano, handing him a box full of audio cassettes.

“Damn...” he blurted out. “Our answering machine tapes... One disappears every fifteen days.”

“And this?” Mario asked, holding a marble bust of an old man with round glasses and a serious gaze.

“Grandpa!” the doctor exclaimed, hugging the statue, which weighed heavily in his arms. “And to think I believed I had lost you forever,” he shouted. Then, realizing he was being watched, he composed himself: “This is my grandfather, the eminent Dr. Novelli, first edition...”

The other two immediately stood at attention, interspersing the doctor's exclamations with their own thoughts:

"He's the one who founded our clinic."

We've become partners.

"He's the one who laid the first stone of this love nest."

Where they now die like flies.

"He is responsible for the development of our fundamental theory: Live and let live!"

And who knows how many he knocked off while experimenting with the others.

The doctor realized he had gotten carried away and, clearing his throat, explained that his ancestor's bust had once stood in the atrium atop a Byzantine marble column. The bust had vanished into thin air twelve years ago – precisely during the widow's first hospitalization – and the column had followed suit a week later. They found it ten minutes later in another compartment. No one would have ever imagined that old Gadolla was such a professional.

As the doctor continued cataloging the stolen items, he felt a sudden dizziness, and then his mind opened, bringing everything back to the surface.

The rag doll had belonged to Blackie, the first clinic caretaker's dachshund, who suffered from depressive episodes whenever his beloved chew toy was taken away. The poor dog ultimately committed suicide by throwing himself under a steamroller after the toy disappeared one spring, shortly before the Cod Rise Festival.

The Baron Karza figure was that damn black magnetic toy stolen from a mentally challenged nephew visiting his grandmother, Mrs. Franca, forcing the boy into another six months of psychiatric medication.

The cigarette in the case was the lucky last cigarette of Cavalier Rusconi, who, after eighty years of smoking three packs a day, decided to quit after watching *Blue in the Face*. The case disappeared from his bedside table, replaced by a pack of Marlboros. The day after the theft, Rusconi, stripped of his talisman, was killed by a robber inside a church.

The collection of snowy landscapes had been stolen from his ex – head nurse’s office. She resigned over these constant thefts and went back to being a stripper.

The photo with Gianni Morandi didn’t actually feature Mrs. Gadolla but her twin sister. That photo was the most precious thing she claimed to own, and it vanished three hours after her hospitalization years ago, causing her to flee without a trace.

The life preserver had been stolen – mid – air – from Commander Pasalacqua during a trip to Fiumicino. He was about to dive into the pool with his beloved “raft,” as he called it, but an expert thief deprived him of it mid – jump. He landed in the water unprotected, swallowed so much that he preferred to sleep in the bathroom for three months.

The Waterloo and tropical island dioramas had disappeared from the antique shop below the clinic, forcing the owner to convert his store into a fast – food joint.

The battery – powered monsters had been meant as gifts for children in the new city orphanage. All fifty kids had received empty boxes instead, cried, and some even demanded to return to the parents they had been taken from for obvious reasons.

And so on, piece after piece, until they realized: Both victims, despite appearances, had been part of a highly respectable criminal organization.

Mrs. Stanziani had turned her bathroom into a modern coffee shop. Not even Amsterdam allowed smoking where drinks were served. In her restroom, it was permitted. Meanwhile, widow Gadolla made Arsenio Lupin look like an amateur.

The doctor shuddered at the thought of what they might find in Mrs. Luisa’s room.

What skeletons might she have hidden in the closet – the one who seemed to be the sweetest and most pleasant client of the clinic? Never, ever would he have thought that behind the respectable façade of his patients, such moral emptiness could be concealed.

Of course, one had to remember that all the residents had once possessed great wealth, and even though they now took pride, in their old and decrepit state, in having voted for the Communist Party for sixty consecutive years, not a single party membership card ever surfaced.

Even the oldest clients, the ones who still had the two S's tattooed on their wrists, once they passed eighty, claimed they had gotten tattooed back when Sid Vicious wore a swastika T – shirt in London's Jewish quarter. They weren't Nazis, of course – not at all. They were simply punk prototypes from World War II.

All the rich were accustomed to a certain lifestyle – let's say, one with a theme: mountains of cocaine for the younger ones, and a bunch of raped cousins for those further along in years. It wasn't the hedonistic act itself that mattered – that changed with the times, while always maintaining the same significance.

Meanwhile, Marione kept pulling out objects, and each one brought back to dear Novelli some old embarrassing situation that the clinic had had to deal with over the course of its existence. Unable to finish the inventory, they paused and went back downstairs to the main hall for lunch – just as the Old Lady, still in disbelief, managed to find in a secret drawer the 19th – century diaphragm that had inexplicably gone missing sixteen years earlier, during her first hospitalization.

How Mrs. Gadolla could have gone so far, unfortunately, was never known.

Chapter sixteen

Grandchildren on the attack

Mirella found her grandmother in great shape, but after hearing about the progress of the investigation, she opposed her staying in the clinic. Things were getting dangerous. Of course, the Old Lady wouldn't hear of it. They weren't dealing with a *cereal killer* – the doctor had pronounced it that way – but with a dark avenger, and her name couldn't possibly be on his list. Unless, of course, her ambushes on the doctor were being misinterpreted. Never before had her grandmother seemed so determined, and the sweet green – haired maiden certainly couldn't put her own will before hers. Mirella returned to the center, worried about the developments, and while Marione was asleep, she rolled one up in the shape of a question mark.

“How can he sleep so much?” she asked.

“Oh, if you don't know... It seems he finds it easier to fall asleep standing up. He's been snoring ever since you left.”

“Men... go figure,” she said, handing me the question mark.

“How did it go? Everything okay with the Old Lady?”

“She's never been better, that's not what worries me...” she confided.

“Well, if she's fine, everything's okay. Or are you eyeing the inheritance?”

“What inheritance?! I'm the one who gives her a monthly allowance. It's just that strange things are happening in the clinic, and I'm worried about her safety...”

Mirella, perhaps driven by concern, trusted me and told me everything. Marione kept snoring while I, ever curious, hung on her every word. So, three mysterious deaths, a commissioner reduced to a deflated balloon, and a team of improvised secret agents roaming the institution in search of the culprit. Too good. If I had been thirty years older, I would have checked myself in too.

So, the story Sandro had told me at the bar was true, which explained why the guy made me feel so sad. Not just any eighty – year – old – he must have been seriously depressed, damn. It must be terrible to learn to play bowls so young.

Mirella had confided in me, which strengthened my newfound faith in interpersonal relationships. I felt like taking action. I jumped out of the mold, and together we came up with a plan. Since we couldn't operate from the inside and our infiltrator was lying pale in a hospital bed, we had to monitor the clinic from the outside. The mission seemed anything but simple. If even a professional hadn't managed to maintain his cover in a madhouse like that, things wouldn't be easy.

We set up four surveillance shifts, during which we would keep an eye on the clinic with operational teams ready to intervene. We mentally formed the four groups that would cover the twenty – four hours of the day: Team A consisted of Michi, Paola, Spiccio, and Drugo. Team B included Berto, Fru Fru, Terry, and Danny. Team C was made up of Pippi, Drago, Nero, and Lupo, while Team D included Micro, Siringa, Fumo, and Spino.

Mirella was to oversee the latter, I would lead Team C, Marione Team A, and Sergio, from the lofty height of his elastic post, would command Team B.

We could act in various ways – either surveilling the clinic from the street, maybe collecting some spare change to avoid suspicion and fund ourselves a bit, or quietly hiding in the shadows of the center's windows, ready to pounce like hungry felines.

My team and I took the first shift, opting for the feline technique, staying alert – without smoking – from three to nine in the evening. Honestly, caught up in the adrenaline of the mission, I never thought spending six hours without smoking would be a challenge. I started off at full speed, hopping from window to window with the binoculars in hand, scanning the clinic's yard and its daily hustle and bustle, which, unfortunately, held nothing interesting.

Visiting hours were over, and the only suspicious movements I noted in my notebook were the shift changes of the doctors on duty. Everyone came and went, bouncing daily between their routine and the nursing home –

everyone except Dr. Novelli, who seemed to live there. That's what I was thinking – after having scribbled an entire page with the staff's schedules – when the classic cheek itch made itself felt.

The bells that usually played rock in my head were fading. The fire-works and blue elephants I used to see whenever I closed my eyes were disappearing. Even Marione looked fatter than usual. Drago and Nero were more impatient than me, constantly saying that a joint would improve their focus and that we had no reason to torture them like this. But in the end, common sense prevailed.

Unfortunately, in the following four hours, we discovered nothing of interest – except that, without the effects of weed, time seemed to fly.

After twenty – four hours of surveillance shifts, we still had no leads. Novelli remained holed up in his clinic, while the other staff members adhered to their schedules perfectly.

We decided that the action teams could manage on their own, and I, Marione, Mirella, and Sergio joined forces into a federal supervision unit, calling ourselves: *The Four of the Other Mary*.

Mirella and Mario only had to inform their relatives about the arrival of their two new nephews – Sergio and me – so we could have four extra eyes during visiting hours and try to spot anything unusual from the inside.

Said and done.

"Grandma, what a pleasure..." I exclaimed, hugging the Old Lady.

"Sergio, my love," she replied, while Mirella prepared to crack a couple of her ribs with an elbow jab.

"Sergio... Humpf... Pat, my love, how are you?"

"Good, Grandma, how are you?"

"Great, dear. Come, let me introduce you to the doctor. Dr. Novelli, this is Patrizio, my grandson who just arrived from Australia..."

Oh, come on, I thought, did this senile woman really have to bring up Australia? Sure, I had seen all the *Crocodile Dundee* movies, but that didn't mean I knew anything about the place...

"Australia, no kidding!" the doctor exclaimed, shaking my hand. "I went there at your age, more or less, for two months. What a dream vacation... Incredible places, right?"

"Absolutely," I replied. "Amazing places..."

“And tell me, where exactly did you go?”

Things weren’t going too well.

“I was in a small town. It’s called Angus... Angus Young...”

“Angus Young? That name sounds familiar. Where exactly, north or south?”

“To be honest, I didn’t have a compass. I was where the beach ends, and the desert begins... With kangaroos hopping around and those huge worms falling from the trees,” I improvised, summarizing the story of a guy who had actually been there.

“But there are only snakes in the desert, no trees.”

“They installed fake ones to promote tourism in barren areas,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“Are you pulling my leg?!”

“I would never,” I replied. “They placed artificial rubber trees throughout the desert, each containing a tap that dispenses either water or beer for a few bucks, depending on your preference...”

“Rubber trees?” he asked, bewildered.

“Yes, to also encourage black tourism,” I said, mixing up Australia with South Africa in my head. “The rubber tree is supposed to bring together both whites and blacks.”

“That sounds like a strange decision...”

“Don’t ask me. I would have planted banana trees...”

Mirella was growing impatient, and so was the Old Lady. On the other hand, I just couldn’t stop talking nonsense. I had smoked a joint before leaving, and now, whatever dumb words came out of my mouth seemed like pure philosophical revelations.

Then, luckily, the doctor’s pager started beeping:

“Doctor, doctor,” I jumped in, eager to show off, “you have to feed your Tamagotchi...”

“No, unfortunately, it’s not my virtual chick; it’s room thirteen, Mr. Suzuki – I have to go. Excuse me...”

Mirella stared at me as if she wanted to strike me down, while the Old Lady paced up and down the corridor, adjusting her bra. I didn’t understand what I had done that was so strange. Apart from the small geographical blunder, I had conducted the conversation brilliantly and hadn’t bored

my interlocutor. Sure, I had sprinkled in some imaginative embellishments, but what was so weird about that? Everyone on TV did it.

Sergio, meanwhile, had his own troubles to deal with. Fortunately, the doctor had been made unreachable by the emergency, and the two Marionones were able to discuss at length the presence of the new grandson. Senior refused to listen to his offspring and refused to acknowledge any kinship with the poor guy, who, increasingly paranoid, kept looking over his shoulder. Senior didn't want his son to be involved in the matter – there was a murderer hiding in the clinic, and Junior absolutely had to stay out of it. They were enough to conduct the investigation; his only concern should be filling the bags and delivering them at the appointed time. The *Dolcetto* could not be missed.

Sergio was starting to get nervous; he paced hysterically back and forth, looking for any undercover cops. He didn't want to take part in the father – son argument. If he could, he'd gladly lend a hand – someone else's hand – to put an end to the tragic murders, but it wasn't exactly his idea of fun. Moreover, as head of security, he wasn't thrilled about being away from his post. The last time he had to step out to get his work booklet stamped, the police had almost stormed the place.

Junior fought hard, but it was no use; in the end, his arms dropped to his sides in defeat, just as the wailing of police sirens could be heard in the background. Sergio flinched, jumped onto the back of a little shark passing by chance, and had it rush him back to the center. He entered hastily, heart pounding, bolted the entrance, and took position just as the patrol cars stopped in front of the nursing home. It wasn't the center in the cops' crosshairs, but the clinic he had just fled from.

Mr. Suzuki had been found dead – strangled by a rubber *Pink Panther*.

Chapter sixteen and a half

Carnival of death

Commissioner Zazà entered the clinic dressed as Rambo. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he said, setting down his M16, “I was trying on my carnival costume when the call came in...”

Of course, no one believed him – it was August, after all – especially after the doorman dislocated his wrist trying to catch the commissioner’s rifle, which he had assumed was fake. Around Zazà’s neck hung a chain made of large beads, which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be hand grenades. He wore knee – high combat boots and a black armband, the kind used for mourning, which, instead of encircling his arm, was tied around his forehead. His deputy, significantly shorter, was wearing a strange greenish uniform with a red cape. He was dressed as Robin.

Dr. Novelli must have called the police during a costume party, and the officers, too professional to admit it, came up with rather flimsy excuses. From the following patrol cars emerged Batman, Spider – Man, an unlikely Superman with the physique of Mahatma Gandhi, the actual Mahatma Gandhi, and four silver – painted policemen: the Rockets.

Rambo led his team inside and began the investigation.

The cleaning lady had entered Mr. Suzuki’s room to tidy up when she spotted the victim lying supine on the bed, the Pink Panther wrapped around his neck. Embarrassed, she closed the door, thinking the old man was engaging in some erotic position with an anorexic inflatable doll. But when she realized that geishas looked nothing like the Pink Panther, she flung the door open again. After screaming profusely, she called the doctor, who examined the unfortunate man. The Pink Panther – standing a meter and twenty centimeters tall – was tightly coiled around his neck in a deadly grip.

The chief physician was on the verge of despair. The clinic’s stocks would now plummet. Novelli tried to fight off the darkest period of his career by regularly swallowing strange pills he kept in his coat pocket.

Zazà had Robin Hood – who arrived late – carry out the necessary forensic tests in the victim's room, and Zorro couldn't bring the murder weapon to the station because he didn't have a plastic bag of the right size hidden inside his cape. So, the Pink Panther was laid on the deceased's bed while the latter prepared to leave the clinic under a sheet.

The paramedics – thankfully dressed as paramedics – loaded Mr. Suzuki onto the ambulance, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. No one seemed particularly sad; on the contrary, some couldn't help but show their joy at the sudden passing of Mr. Sushi, as they had gotten used to calling him due to the raw fish he had forced them to eat when he was elected *Mr. Nursing Home*, before converting to *The Rise of the Cods* and fried seaweed.

Mr. Suzuki, who had never harmed anyone in his life, was heading to the afterlife amidst general merriment. The broth, at last, would reign supreme.

The commissioner – or perhaps I should say Rambo – asked the usual formal questions but did so in a rather hasty manner. We understood that the costume party was yet to begin, and the entire police force was eagerly waiting for it.

Rambo wasn't very verbose; he took a quick look at the victim's room, placed the usual seals, and rushed off, sirens blaring, to his appointment.

At the clinic, only the patients who had escaped the homicidal threat remained, along with the usual on – duty doctors, still in shock over what had happened. But twenty minutes later, panic struck the clinic once more.

King Kong burst into the institute's hall, wielding a gun.

Poor Gullà flinched and swore he would quit drinking if he made it out alive.

Unfortunately for him, King Kong was none other than Officer Marsano, who had arrived at the crime scene significantly later than his colleagues.

Once the misunderstanding was cleared up – and after the patients had screamed themselves hoarse – Marsano left as quickly as he had arrived.

In no time, Dr. Novelli kicked out all the relatives – he had to prepare for the arrival of journalists, and he only had half a bottle of pills left.

Chapter seventeen

Superman against everyone

When I returned, I found everyone in a state of apprehension. The control team assigned to guard the clinic's entrance had not been as diligent as we were, and after consuming a fair amount of active ingredient, they had watched in disbelief as a series of strange characters passed by, unable to categorize them. It took us about twenty rolling papers to calm down our companions, who had seen Rambo, Superman, and the whole masked gang emerge from the patrol cars.

"Damn, Pat, what a story!" Drugo shouted. "We saw Rambo rushing in to the clinic; we thought he was going to massacre everyone. Then, luckily, Superman showed up to save those poor old folks. Only he wasn't in shape – he looked thin. So, we called Amnesty International, and from the next patrol car emerged none other than Mahatma Gandhi. Then we relaxed, but right after that, the Martians arrived... What the hell happened?"

"Nothing serious," I said sarcastically. "Mr. Suzuki was strangled to death by the Pink Panther."

"And the UFOs, then? Didn't they have a death ray?"

"Oh, they did, but Superman managed to beat them. Didn't you see that they all left together afterward?"

"Well... more or less..."

"What do you mean, more or less?" I asked without thinking.

"I mean that Superman managed to arrest Rambo, Robin, and the Martians, then left with Gandhi himself. Only..."

"Only what?!"

"Only Grumpy slipped out after them and disappeared down Byron Street."

"You're telling me one of the Seven Dwarfs walked out of the clinic?!" I asked, utterly stunned.

"It was Grumpy, in the flesh. I saw him clearly with the binoculars."

A shiver ran down my spine. I had witnessed the scene in real time and hadn't seen any dwarf. This meant the murderer hadn't escaped after the crime but had left alongside the police.

I exchanged puzzled looks with Mirella and Marione. We needed to think. It was unlikely that Grumpy would strike twice in the same day, so we dissolved the surveillance and tried to take stock of the situation. As Drugo confirmed, Grumpy had left the clinic after the cops but before King Kong arrived, slipping away down a small, romantic side street – Byron Street, to be exact. Marione was furious. He snatched the joint from Drugo's mouth and accused him of negligence.

"What the hell were you doing? What was the point of watching if you saw Grumpy leave but never saw him enter? Didn't it seem odd to you?" he shouted, enraged.

"Of course, but what were we supposed to do? Chase after him? He bolted like a flash – we thought he was running from the Martians."

For a moment, we were overwhelmed by frustration. After rolling another joint, we tried to piece the puzzle together.

The killer had acted undisturbed, strangling Mr. Suzuki with the Pink Panther. Then he must have hidden inside the clinic before escaping unnoticed with the police. The whole story smelled fishy – Grumpy couldn't have just found his disguise inside the clinic. He must have planned ahead, which meant he knew perfectly well that the entire police force would be attending a costume party.

Some unsuspected individual could have used this opportunity to escape, disguised beyond recognition, without raising suspicion. The problem was that no one inside the clinic, not even the patients, was a meter and twenty tall...

Between one theory and another, we kept smoking until dinnertime, when Mirella went out to pick up three pizzas. When she returned, she brought back a *three seasons*, a *red gorgonzola*, a *Pugliese*, and Dr. Novelli.

"Hi, love," said a visibly exhausted Marione. "Who the hell ordered the doctor?" he blurted out before lunging at the *Pugliese*.

Mirella hadn't been able to resist – while waiting for the pizza, she had gone to the clinic and invited the doctor to join us for dinner so we could discuss developments in the case and pool our investigative efforts.

The doctor, who had never set foot in a social center, arrived carrying a stuffed calzone. After we kindly asked him to remove his lab coat – to avoid unnecessary shootouts – we began eating while exchanging information.

The doctor, though biting into his calzone, was at his wit's end. At least, that's how I interpreted his complete willingness to cooperate. If he truly trusted guys like us, it meant he had no idea where else to turn.

He told us about the team of detectives he had assembled and what they had discovered in the rooms they had searched so far.

Mrs. Stanziani was a drug dealer, and Mrs. Gadolla was a skilled thief. Damn, I knew this wasn't exactly a model neighborhood, but I never imagined even people in their eighties would be dealing. If I had known earlier, I could have saved myself a lot of trouble.

Novelli wanted to act that very night. As soon as dinner was over, he planned to call his agents to search for more clues the police had missed.

We wanted to help, but there was no way we could roam the clinic at night without drawing attention. Sure, if Dirk had recovered, we could have counted on him, but the poor guy still lay pale in his hospital bed, hooked up to drips pumping fluids into him in an attempt to restore his frail frame. He would need at least a couple more days before being discharged, given his already precarious health, weakened by *Dolcetto* wine and depression.

Mirella, Marione, and the doctor devised yet another action plan: we would all work together, sharing all the information we had so we could operate with the most complete set of clues possible.

I didn't want to get involved in this whole mess. It was getting too complicated, and I had no desire to think too deeply – especially after a good joint. I wanted to help my friends and prove my loyalty, but figuring out who was hiding behind Grumpy's mask was another matter entirely.

That's why I ate in silence, without proposing any bizarre theories. I didn't want to be dragged further into this. Especially now that I was ex-

pecting a fresh delivery of three ounces of *Northern Light*, which, like a newborn, would require all my time and attention.

At the end of the evening, the doctor took his leave and returned to the clinic just as miserable as when he had arrived. I had bet Drugo that we could get him to smoke, and I lost a couple of bucks.

Chapter eighteen

Back in action

The detectives gathered after midnight. Objective: Mrs. Luisa's room. Her suite welcomed the three after the doctor tampered with the police seals using a scalpel. In the west – facing bedroom, nothing seemed out of place – except for the fact that the cops, before sealing the room, hadn't even bothered to remove the soles of shoes stuck to the reproduction of the pastoral Corot painting that dominated the room.

After thoroughly searching the room without success, the three moved to the bathroom – the crime scene.

The doctor swung the door open nonchalantly and instinctively stepped back to let Mrs. Spezzano go first. Unfortunately, she gasped and fainted.

The police had left the bathtub full of water, the very tub where the body had been found. The tape meant to outline the corpse's position had been attached using floating markers. However, the tape had become a tangled mess, and at first glance, it looked as if Mrs. Luisa had been put through a blender before being placed in the water.

As usual, Mrs. Spezzano was saved from a broken femur thanks to the silicone implants in her buttocks, and the doctor quickly revived her with four slaps. But not before straightening out the tape outlines, which even he found disturbing.

Marione was already at work – he had practically dismantled the entire bathroom cabinet and was preparing to inspect the toilet with a scuba mask. Every jar was opened and analyzed, every container emptied, every powder sniffed, and every liquid tasted – everything except the bathtub water.

The doctor, after inhaling everything from talcum powder to face powder and rubbing everything from pain relief gel to diaper rash cream on his gums, despairingly opened the pill bottle he kept in his coat pocket and swallowed one dry – like a true professional.

The Old Lady refused to give up. After the first round of searching, she forced them to start over. This time, Marione even took apart the wardrobe, unstitched the linings of the deceased's clothes, and broke the heels of her shoes.

The doctor cut open the mattress with his scalpel and dissected the stuffed animals that sat on a shelf beneath a reproduction of Andy Warhol's canned soup, finding nothing.

After scouring the room and bathroom at least five times, the three threw in the towel. Mrs. Luisa really did seem to be the sweet and kind old lady everyone believed she was. At least, there was nothing in her room to suggest otherwise.

The doctor let himself fall onto the victim's bed, visibly depressed, as a cloud of feathers rose from the gash in the mattress. The poor woman's room looked like a bomb had gone off – it would take all night to restore some semblance of order.

The furniture had been meticulously dismantled, the paintings removed from the walls and inspected, all her clothes ransacked, and every little bottle emptied. On top of that, Marione had managed to rip out the bidet in an investigative frenzy.

To make matters worse, the doctor couldn't help but notice the ten stuffed animals sprawled across the floor like innocent victims of a brutal serial killer.

For a moment, he was overcome with despair, swallowed another pill, and ordered them to put everything back in place. He would take care of the plush toys.

He placed on a stretcher a giraffe with a severed neck, a cat cut in half, a small hippo missing its rear end, a Bugs Bunny with its ears chopped off, a Yogi Bear with no legs, a penguin without a beak, a skinned pelican, a Huckleberry Hound missing the dark patch on its chest, and a Wolf Alberto without hands.

Only the plush toy resembling the famous cartoon ostrich was tossed directly into the trash – to avenge the thousands of injustices suffered by the poor coyote.

No one objected, of course.

Only four hours later, the doctor managed to put Mrs. Luisa's stuffed friends back on their shelf, in critical condition.

The three parted ways in the main corridor just as dawn peeked in. The doctor retreated to his office, sleepless, swallowed another pill, and sat down, brooding over the victims' medical files.

Mrs. Stanziani was a drug dealer, Mrs. Gadolla a skilled thief, while sweet Mrs. Luisa didn't seem to have any skeletons in her closet.

To be fair, she no longer had a closet at all – Marione had failed to reassemble it.

Novelli sank into the standard – issue faux – leather chair, wiping his sweat with a handkerchief. All the accumulated stress suddenly boiled over. In a swift motion, he swept everything off his desk, cutting his finger on a paperclip.

Regaining his composure, he dabbed the small cut with a clean tissue. He was a doctor, after all, but the sight of blood – especially his own – put him in a foul mood.

The doctor was more worried about a killer roaming freely than about his patients' deaths themselves. He knew it, but he couldn't be blamed.

Mrs. Stanziani was almost ninety, the widow Gadolla was seventy – eight, sweet Luisa eighty – two, and Mr. Suzuki seventy – five. Honestly, getting murdered at that age might have even been a welcome change of pace.

Still, this thought didn't comfort the chief physician, who kept pacing nervously, clutching the mysterious vial in his hand.

On the floor, the victims' medical files were all mixed up, and the doctor had to put the archive back in order.

Sorting through the certificates and reports wasn't too difficult since they listed the patients' details, but the X – rays were trickier. They were labeled with a small number etched onto the negative's edge, a number also recorded in the corresponding diagnosis.

It was while organizing these documents – trying to restore a minimum level of professionalism to his office – that he noticed something interesting.

All four victims had pacemakers.

Thinking about it, this wasn't a huge revelation – almost all the clinic's patients had pacemakers. That's why, at night, the place ticked like a watchmaker's workshop.

But one particular detail caught his attention: all four pacemakers were the same model – Non Stop 24h Turbo, a revolutionary, expensive, and entirely maintenance – free device. The top of the line.

He rummaged through his papers, looking for the brochure about the device. He was sure he had kept one; the advertising campaign had intrigued him at the time.

The leaflet read:

Non Stop 24h Turbo – The Sedan of Pacemakers... Non Stop 24h Turbo – Dying Has Never Been Harder.

Not exactly the best clue. Not even great marketing.

But it was worth a shot.

Besides, the company that produced it wasn't just in the city – it was just a few blocks from the clinic.

Novelli let his two assistants rest, but before heading to *Global Pacemaker Ltd*, he came to pay us a visit.

Almost chapter nineteen

Global Pacemaker Ltd, last extraction

Global Pacemaker Ltd was only five blocks from the nursing home. The doctor hadn't left the clinic for days, and the sunlight blinded him as he stepped outside. We all watched our companions from the windows, at least until they turned onto Byron Street. Then, thankfully, we could return to our favorite pastime.

Novelli walked the five blocks like a child returning from summer vacation. The city seemed noticeably different after being locked up in the clinic for so long. They were digging a tunnel on Isonzo Street to prevent people from crossing at street level, even though the road was tiny and barely trafficked. Probably the city council had some funds to use up before the end of the year; otherwise, there was no explaining the massive parking lot they were building on Sagrado Street, where the population density rivaled that of the Australian outback.

They also passed the new elevated roller coaster towering over Gorizia and Brenta Streets before finding themselves in front of the loop – the – loop, which dominated the entrance of the factory in question. Carefully crossing the tracks – since the loop nearly touched the ground – the three detectives found themselves face to face with the classic yellow tape they knew all too well:

Police Line Do Not Cross

Marione shouted something at his companions, who were frozen in awe, and moved them just in time as the roller coaster car shot past at 60 mph through the metal loop.

The factory was surrounded by police cruisers. The commissioner was conducting the usual investigations, as the three deduced when they saw two officers exiting with a row of six sinks still attached to a large concrete support beam.

A Global employee had been murdered in the staff bathrooms, shot in the head and heart with a silenced 9mm. Professional work.

What had started as a casual stroll to stretch his legs after his period of isolation turned out to be more promising than expected – so promising, in fact, that the doctor had to swallow yet another pill.

“Damn, Doc,” Marione burst out, “nothing ever happens in this city, and you don’t seriously think this is a coincidence, do you?”

“Of course not, but at this point,” Novelli admitted, as a veil of fatigue and sadness clouded his eyes, “I don’t understand anything anymore.”

“Come on, Doctor, don’t get discouraged,” Mirella replied, rolling one up in the shape of a myocardium. “You must have sniffed out the right lead. Global is hiding something, and the poor employee murdered in the bathrooms probably knew too much. All we have to do is investigate in this direction – it’s only natural...”

“Sure, Miss Mirella, but now there’s no doubt that we’re dealing with a ruthless killer, and I’m not sure we should continue. It’s too dangerous, and I can’t ask you to risk your lives. That’s what the police are for. Maybe we should back off...”

“You really think the cops can crack a case this complicated?” she asked, pointing at Commissioner Zazà, who, in the distance, was exiting the factory dragging the rectangle of tiles where the victim must have collapsed.

“You’re probably right, Miss Mirella. Leaving the case in Zazà’s hands would be like killing all my patients ourselves and going on vacation. What do you say?” the doctor asked cynically.

“Sounds like a great idea,” Marione replied, having just inhaled through the aorta while holding down the mitral valve.

Mirella had overdone it. The mix of excitement and fear had led her to fill the muscle tissue of her little trumpet to a level Marione still wasn’t used to. By keeping the mitral valve pressed, Junior had allowed air to mix with the active ingredient, passing through the aortic arch. And just like a proper carburetor, the right air – fuel mixture sent his poor psyche spiraling in a matter of seconds.

So overwhelmed was he that the doctor’s sarcasm instantly convinced him of its validity:

“Let’s kill them all, Doc!” he shouted in the middle of the street, drowning out the roller coaster’s roar. “Then we’ll go to the beach... Maybe Jamaica. A killer cannot be a killer without victims, problem solved!”

Mirella glanced around, detached, thinking that maybe she should feel a little ashamed of her boyfriend’s behavior. But she couldn’t resist either, pressing the interventricular septum just right.

“Here, Doctor,” she said, handing him the myocardium, “it’s time for you to take a hit too... And throw away those awful pills. Do you really think they’re helping you?”

“They’re certainly not hurting me,” he replied, raising the perfect anatomical model in the air as if to study it.

“Damn,” he muttered, “this is a top – notch model... Everything’s here, from the papillary muscle to the left atrium... Did you study medicine?”

“No,” she replied, encouraging him with a hand gesture to bring the superior vena cava to his lips, “but an ex of mine studied medicine for a few years. He always rolled his joints like this.”

“What a story!” the doctor exclaimed as he followed her advice – just before heading off to buy three tickets for the roller coaster.

Sober, he would never have set foot on that deathtrap...

Chapter nineteen

Gunfight at the OK Corral

Everything was flowing smoothly at the center; my supplies had finally arrived, and I felt the need to celebrate properly. So, after a few hits, I suggested to my companions that we head down to the tavern.

I only ever went there in the morning, when the place wasn't too crowded, and even then, the fishy antisemitism of some patrons irritated me quite a bit.

Pinin was sitting at the counter behind a bottle of Vermentino when he saw a swarm of punked – out misfits pour into what he considered his domain. Sandro greeted us warmly and motioned for us to take a seat. Of course, he was happy – we didn't have livers turned to mush like his usual clientele, and it would take a lot of wine to get us drunk. What he didn't know, though, was that we were already quite wasted before even setting foot inside. So that afternoon, maybe, we wouldn't overdo it. I say *maybe* because, as usual, events would soon sweep us away.

We pushed three long tables together and ordered a decent amount of Dolcetto. Up until that moment, Pinin had pretended not to notice us, but when he heard we were planning to drink red wine, he couldn't hold back:

"Look at them, Sandro," he shouted loud enough to be heard, "all dressed in black, they look like a bunch of mussels clinging to a rock..."

We ignored him; after all, we were there to have fun. Sandro brought out the bottles – *room temperature*, according to him – but he'd actually chilled them in the fridge to make us drink more. Otherwise, there was no explaining the frost on the green glass, where Drugo traced a tench with his finger.

We filled our glasses and toasted to the delivery – that is, to the local dealer, who that afternoon had erased that looming sense of precariousness we always felt whenever we realized our stash was running low.

The piedmontese nectar, which we were used to drinking even at home, seeped into our oral cavities like a canker sore and plunged down our

esophagus, freezing our guts. The effect was something like a lemon sorbet, and we all had the same thought:

“Damn, Sandro, do you keep the Dolcetto in Siberia?”

“Oh, quit whining, it’s August, isn’t it?” he replied.

“Sure, it’s August, but ice – cold Dolcetto tastes like crap...”

“Wine is meant to be drunk cold, you bunch of mussels!” Pinin belated, downing a glass of Vermentino.

I ignored him, but Siringa turned beet red – partly from anger, partly from the thermal shock of the wine. He had chugged his first glass straight from the bottle, and now, stiff from the cold, his abs looked like those of Yuri Chechi.

“Well, tell me something,” he roared at the sneering old man, “what do you miss more? The *cacciucco*, the steak, or a free ‘go fuck yourself’ that nobody’s dared to hand you yet for fear of giving you a heart attack?”

I saw Sandro’s face contort – no one had ever insulted Pinin before. His expression turned a deep shade of purple, and, moving with the slow deliberation of a Western gunslinger, he rose from his stool without taking his eyes off us.

What he hadn’t considered, though, was that his drawn – out, tension – filled movements might be misinterpreted by people as high as we were.

Once he was finally on his feet – after what felt like an eternity – with his arms dangling like Clint Eastwood in one of his movies, we just couldn’t hold back. We all stood up, giving him a standing ovation for his flawless imitation.

Pinin changed color three times while we clapped until our palms were raw. And in the end, with a loud thud, he collapsed onto the floor, drunk. He’d been there since the morning, and that was his third bottle.

Sandro regained his normal complexion, laid Pinin out on the pool table – turning a couple of poor guys’ billiards match into a mini – golf course – and even agreed to warm up our wine in the microwave.

We drank all afternoon, discovering that we quite liked a couple of cloves in our wine as well. And after sneaking a few joints, we all felt like we were on a ski trip.

Sandro warmed up every bottle, and with each round, we egged him on to raise the temperature.

By late evening, we were drinking *Dolcetto brûlé*, arguing with the innkeeper, who absolutely refused to let us light the fireplace. Then, deep into the night, we decided to head back.

We paid, and Sandro blinded us with thirty – four pieces of ceramic embedded in his mouth – no old man had ever spent so much.

On the way back, I almost thought I saw Mirella, Marione, and Dr. Novelli in the distance, but I didn't pay much attention. I had drunk too much, and it seemed impossible that the three of them were walking arm in arm, belting out Rino Gaetano at the top of their lungs...

Chapter twenty and a bit

XXX

The Old Lady and Senior immediately noticed the doctor's absence but attributed it to the lack of rest that Novelli had been subjected to due to recent events. So, they decided not to disturb him. Instead, they chose to continue their investigation on their own after lunch.

Everything in the clinic's hall seemed normal; Mr. Suzuki's disappearance hadn't particularly saddened anyone. Although no patient considered themselves racist, they were all – consciously or unconsciously – relieved by his absence. Poor Suzuki came from the other side of the planet, and to the residents, he stuck out like a sore thumb. Firstly, like Don Lurio, he had never learned to speak English. He ate things that would have made even a goat nauseous and took a good forty minutes just to have breakfast, occupied as he was with turning his teacup in his hands as if he were about to deliver a sermon.

The Old Lady immediately noticed that both Cavalier Bricconi and Miss Franca – who, at seventy – nine, still insisted on being called “Miss” – were missing, so she and her assistant rushed to the room of what she already suspected to be the fifth victim. When Mario suddenly slammed open the door with his shoulder, he found Bricconi – stern as Hemingway – holding a glass in hand, dressed only in his psychedelic boxer shorts, an ironic gift from his eighteen – year – old nephew.

Miss Franca, lying in bed, began to scream, while Bricconi, with the composure of a man who – being a Cavalier – must have found himself in this situation thousands of times before, remained diplomatic:

“My friend, what manners! I left a carton of fresh milk on your nightstand.”

“Uh, well... um...” Mario stammered.

Luckily, the Old Lady took control of the situation:

“Miss Franca, Cavalier Bricconi, please forgive our intrusion, but you know how it is when passion calls... We thought everyone was in the din-

ing hall and wanted to sneak away before ruining the magic of the moment... We will, of course, pay for the damage to the door and maintain absolute discretion.”

“Well, well, old rascal,” Bricconi chuckled, repeatedly slapping his own companion’s groin, “there’s no need to apologize. When passion calls, it calls... Now, off you go. I won’t be back in my room for at least three or four hours.”

“Thank you...” was all Senior could whisper, clutching his stomach in pain from the unexpected blow.

Once at a safe distance, he shouted, “What on earth were you thinking? Why did you have to make them believe that you and I were looking for a place to have sex?! Aside from the age difference, don’t you know that I’m married?!”

“Oh, listen,” she said, delivering a retaliatory blow to his groin, “would you have preferred I told them we busted down their door because we thought they were murderers? What kind of impression would that have made... Not to mention the embarrassment we caused them by catching them practically in bed together. With this little lie, we’ve shared a secret with them, so they won’t feel uncomfortable around us. Sure, it’s a lie, but they don’t know that,” she concluded, wrapping an arm around his neck.

“Listen, Mrs. Spezzano, I agreed to help you with this investigation because... because... Oh, I don’t even know why anymore,” he said, gently removing her arm from around his neck. “But remember this: stop hitting me in the groin. Between you and that other womanizer, you’ve caused me a world of pain.”

“Oh, someone’s grumpy! We’d better get back to the dining hall – you get cranky when you don’t eat.”

The doctor had indeed been singing Rino Gaetano songs and was now holed up in his office, trying to piece the puzzle together. He would have loved to take a look at the commissioner’s file, but that wasn’t an option. Too many things didn’t add up – like where the police station had managed to get evidence bags big enough to hold an entire row of sinks, as he had seen the cops carrying out.

The morning paper’s front page reported the murder at Global. The technician killed in the bathrooms was named Franzoni, Pietro Franzoni,

and he was a researcher. He was the one responsible for the prototype of the Non – Stop 24h Turbo, the revolutionary pacemaker that could be powered both by battery and combustion. According to the paper, the device extracted alcohol from its elderly user’s daily consumption, supplementing the small lithium batteries with a tiny two – stroke engine that activated when the blood alcohol level reached an optimal state. This way, the Non – Stop was guaranteed to last longer than any other product on the market.

Novelli was sure he was on the right track, but the situation was becoming increasingly complicated. He and his detectives had no access to Global, and their investigation had to continue within the institute, with the risk of failing to prevent the next “extraction.”

“The killer must be a Global employee...” Mirella announced, bursting into the doctor’s office.

“Hello, Mirella. It’s not visiting hours,” he replied, visibly exhausted from the previous night.

“Listen, Doctor, we were quite overwhelmed yesterday, but today it’s all clear: Global is located right across from the police station. This means the killer must be an employee – otherwise, how would they have known that the cops would be attending a costume party that day? All we need to do is stake out the place and see how many of their employees are under four feet tall. Then, case closed.”

“And the motive?”

“We’ll get the motive from the killer once we catch them. What does it matter right now?”

“That’s true... But I can’t leave the clinic unattended for so long. What if the killer strikes again while we’re gone?”

“Well, that could be a problem... How many other patients are in danger?”

“How should I know?”

“Have you been smoking again, Doctor? Didn’t you check how many of your patients have that kind of pacemaker?”

“Oh, Christ,” he blurted out. “I didn’t even think about it...”

They scoured the archives, searching for the unfortunate patients carrying the device that had made them living lottery numbers. After an hour of

searching, they reached a conclusion: only one resident had such a pace-maker.

“I found nothing here, Doctor. You?”

“Uhm... Yes, unfortunately, I did...”

“Well, tell me – it’s better one than ten...”

“Sure... But...”

“Go on...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, handing her the file. “It’s your grandmother. Mrs. Spezzano.”

“Oh, holy crap,” Mirella cursed. “We need to warn her and find her a safe hiding place.”

“I have a feeling the Old Lady has no intention of hiding. She’s so thrilled by this case that if we told her to step aside, she’d probably beat us up.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take...”

As expected, the Old Lady had no interest in hiding. At her venerable age, she said, she wasn’t about to fear some stupid dwarf serial killer. She wanted to continue contributing to the investigation and had no intention of parting ways with her hunky partner.

Mirella tried everything to convince her, but nothing worked – until she had the brilliant idea of hiding her at her boyfriend’s parents’ house. Sure, they would be disrupting his mother’s hibernation, but at least the Old Lady could stay near her man for the duration of the investigation.

Everyone was thrilled with the idea – except for Senior, perhaps, but that didn’t matter much at the moment.

Thus, under the laundry hanging in the Marioni household, a second armchair was added, and Mirella’s grandmother, reluctant due to her rheumatism, was forced to take her place alongside her partner.

From there, at least, they could watch the street without being seen.

As long as Junior didn’t let the laundry dry out completely.

Chapter twenty one

Murphy's law

Things got worse by the minute. Mirella, Marione, and the doctor went to the roller coaster to take pictures of Global's employees. They spent three hours next to the loop – the – loop and another three in the darkroom, where, due to poor ventilation, Marione was prevented from rolling a joint. Unfortunately, none of the factory's employees were of the right size. The shortest one was 1.70 meters tall, and the female employees – usually shorter than the men – must have been carefully selected. The ugliest one looked like a young Kim Basinger.

After wasting four rolls of film trying to sync with the roller coaster's passing, they ended up with nothing in hand – except for ninety – six snapshots. But that was just the beginning...

By the time they headed back to the clinic, it was already late at night. They stopped at the newsstand, bought a freshly printed newspaper, and learned about the investigators' latest developments in the Global case. Commissioner Zazà had closed the Franzoni case. They discovered that the engineer had been one of the company's major shareholders and had a significant voice on the board of directors. According to the police, the motive for the murder was Global's refusal to sell a wing of its factory to the owner of the roller coaster, who wanted to triple the size of the loop – the – loop at that location.

For the commissioner, the killer was the roller coaster owner, a certain Caloggero Gennaro, who had gone into hiding, seemingly confirming the investigators' theory.

"Damn," Mirella blurted, "if this Caloggero can't be found, it means he really has something to hide. If that's the case, our theory is worthless."

"That's true," the doctor added, "but with a name like that, he might be running away on principle."

"We just have to hope they find him soon," said Marione.

"Yeah, but in the meantime?" Novelli asked, swallowing another pill.

“It’s past midnight, but we could still examine the last victim’s room to get ahead in the investigation.”

“Yes, but be careful. If I were caught wandering the institute at night with a couple of patients, no one would think twice about it. But I wouldn’t be able to justify your presence at this hour.”

“But Doctor,” Marione interjected, handing him a party horn, “what the hell are you saying?! The clinic is full of senile old folks – you could make them believe any story. What are you worried about?”

“Well, yes... Actually...” Novelli said before taking a deep puff.

They approached the clinic stealthily, as if they were already preparing to violate the privacy of Mr. Suzuki’s room, when suddenly, the police car’s top spotlight blinded them in the middle of the street.

From the vehicle emerged Commissioner Zazà, wearing a strange expression. The judge had signed an arrest warrant for Dr. Novelli, as the Deputy Prosecutor found that he had no alibi for any of the four murders.

Novelli took the situation lightly, swallowed yet another pill, and followed the commissioner without protest. But not before sneaking his agents into the clinic.

The commissioner didn’t personally know Mirella and Marione, and with remarkable presence of mind – perhaps induced by the active ingredient – Novelli introduced them as his two new collaborators, there to assist him in this difficult moment.

Then he improvised to make his story more believable:

“This is your first day, miss. I’m sorry to leave like this, but don’t forget that you now have full responsibility for my patients... Make sure that everything is in perfect order when I return. And remember, this is a serious clinic, so I don’t want to see you with green hair anymore, understood?!”

“Of course, Doctor,” Mirella replied, bowing her head. “Don’t worry.”

Marione watched the scene unfold, laughing under his breath, but his amusement vanished when he realized Novelli hadn’t yet passed the joint.

An eminent doctor of his caliber was about to step into a police car with a joint in his hand. If they put handcuffs on him, they would definitely notice.

Chapter twenty – one and a half

Punk at the nursing home

At the police station, the doctor effectively handed over his duties to his assistant, Dr. Carnevale, secretly calling him instead of his lawyer and asking him to host his nephews, who had just arrived to visit him for the holidays, at the clinic. And, of course, to get him a good lawyer – Matlock, preferably.

Thus, the two punk kids were accepted into the clinic. As soon as they stepped inside, they found Dr. Carnevale handing them the key to Dr. Novelli's room, as per his request for their stay.

Novelli was clearly not getting rich; they realized this immediately. His room consisted of just a small bed, a desk, and a tiny wardrobe. Of course, Novelli owned an apartment downtown, but he hardly ever went there – at least, not recently.

Mirella and Marione waited until late at night to inspect Mr. Suzuki's room, smoking small joints by the window. But only when everyone was already asleep did they realize they had no idea which room it was. So, the mission was postponed.

The doctor's one – and – a – half – size bed was too small for his "nephews," and their sleep was quite restless. Marione dreamt that Dr. Novelli was actually guilty, confessing to summary justice carried out purely out of boredom. Then he dreamt that Novelli was an innocent victim of a complex espionage plot in which he – Marione – was ten centimeters taller. Finally, he dreamt that Novelli was sentenced to ten years of forced labor in a corporate consulting firm.

Mirella, on the other hand, barely slept, but at dawn, she finally dozed off and didn't wake up until nearly noon.

Marione was already wandering around the clinic, familiarizing himself with the place. They met in the dining hall, where the patients' soup was steaming in their bowls. Fortunately – thanks to the head doctor's recom-

mendation – the two of them were allowed to eat at the doctors' canteen, avoiding the broth and mashed potatoes.

Mr. Suzuki's room was number 609; Marione recognized it because of the classic police seals, and Mirella briefly shuddered at not having thought of that sooner.

The newspapers mentioned nothing about the roller coaster owner, and the poor doctor had likely spent his first night in a holding cell. Carnevale reassured the so – called nephews about his colleague's condition. He had gone to the station early in the morning and spoken at length with Commissioner Zazà.

Unofficially, Novelli was suspected of murder, while officially, no charges had been filed yet. His detention was a kind of preventive imprisonment, which Zazà explained roughly as follows:

"...we're keeping him in jail for a bit because he doesn't have an alibi, and in the meantime, we'll see... If someone else dies, we'll release him; otherwise, it means he really is the killer, and then we'll charge him."

Novelli had nothing to do with it, but if they wanted him out of jail soon, they had to hope the killer struck again quickly. Grotesque, to say the least.

The plan was simple: Marione would hide in Mrs. Spezzano's suite, waiting for the killer to make a move. What he couldn't understand, however, was the motive – why would a murderer choose victims based on their pacemakers?

It didn't make any sense unless the device worked so well that no external help was needed to end a life.

The more time passed, the more Junior became convinced that his theories were correct – helped along by the active ingredient. In his view, the poor Global shareholder had indeed been killed by the roller coaster owner, and the serial killer they were looking for was operating according to a pattern they had yet to uncover.

So, to pass the afternoon, he suggested to his girlfriend that they try piecing the puzzle together under the influence of a substantial joint. Perhaps, by coming up with strange and imaginative theories, they might manage to focus on something that still seemed to be eluding them.

Chapter twenty – two

The game

“Seven!” exclaimed Marione, smoking like a chimney in January. “The killer strikes following the seven deadly sins. Let's say so far, he's managed to hit wrath, sloth, lust, and greed... Then he strikes again and wipes out gluttony, pride, and that other one I can never remember, driving the doctor to the brink of a nervous breakdown. After that, he shows up in Dr. Novelli's office, confesses his crimes, pulls a hammer from his pocket, and smashes the billiard scoreboard hanging on the wall – the one thing the doctor values more than himself. At this point, Novelli snaps, grabs the paperweight, and commits a heinous crime, killing the psychopathic murderer who had orchestrated this infernal scheme solely to get revenge for who knows what wrongdoing!”

“I don't think you're close,” replied Mirella, rolling one in the shape of a bunny. “Maybe the killer just wants to sew himself a suit with the skin of his victims because... because... oh, I don't know why, but psychopaths are psychopaths...” she continued, lighting the bunny's ears. “No?”

“Far off, far off, I think we're way off... Maybe he's a collector, think about it. Besides, he always kills in different ways: Mrs. Stanziani was crushed by a wardrobe, widow Gadolla suffered cardiac arrest, sweet Luisa's veins were cut, and Mr. Suzuki was strangled by the Pink Panther... Your grandma is in danger, and wouldn't you know it, just like in the book, you're her granddaughter.”

“What are you talking about?” she snapped, handing him the now – mutilated bunny. “In the book, the niece was the victim, and the uncle was the investigator. Anyway, I don't think I have what it takes to play the role of the victim, and besides, my grandma is my grandma, not my aunt.”

“Well, I hadn't thought of that,” he sighed. “But there could be a blonde hitchhiker involved...”

“I'd quit smoking if I were you. What does a blonde hitchhiker have to do with this? The victims were all around eighty, and they hadn't had their

driver's licenses renewed for at least twenty years. Where the hell would they have picked up a hitchhiker?"

"Maybe on a virtual highway. Do they have Internet here?"

"What did you just say?" Mirella asked, startled.

"Do they have Internet?"

"Yeah, I got that part, but go on, I'm getting goosebumps."

"The hitchhiker picked his victims while hitchhiking, but the movie was set in the past. Our highways now are the digital ones – it couldn't be otherwise. Can you picture someone standing with their thumb out on the Genoa – Milan highway? It's full of sharks, and everyone's stuck in traffic – it's impossible. But online..."

"So, you're saying there could be a psychopath luring old ladies on Facebook and then killing them after seducing them?"

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time."

"That's for sure, but I find it hard to believe that even one of the patients here knows what Facebook is. Can you picture widow Gadolla glued to a screen, talking about sex and ejaculation?"

"Not really, no. But why? Is that not what the Internet is all about?" asked Marione, a good punk who was completely clueless about computers.

"No, never..."

"And why not?"

"I never understood," Mirella, also a solid punk, admitted, "but I think it's forbidden."

As the two continued this conversation, Commissioner Zazà arrived at the clinic with his entourage. Carnevale checked on his colleague's legal status, and the commissioner could only reassure him: the murder charges against Dr. Novelli had been dropped in the afternoon when the doctor finally decided to prove his alibi for Mrs. Stanziani's murder – by bringing up a married woman.

However, Novelli still couldn't be released, as he was now facing drug possession charges. At the station, while an officer was about to take his fingerprints, the doctor was found in possession of a mandolin – shaped joint containing about six grams of marijuana – more than the legal limit for personal use. Novelli argued passionately, saying that since there were

three of them smoking, the quantity should be divided among the participants. But since he refused to betray his companions, the judge opted for the hard line. Not to mention that his son had recently failed a pathology anatomy exam.

Carnevale and Zazà stopped to discuss just outside the doctor's room, where the two undercover operatives were cremating bunnies and coming up with original theories. Mirella couldn't resist and pressed her ear against the door to listen to the commissioner. She pressed so hard that the door swung open, catapulting her into the middle of the conversation.

With extreme composure, she quickly greeted them and rushed to the bathroom to make her urgency seem obvious, even before the commissioner could ask why she still hadn't dyed her hair. The cover held, Carnevale made no mention of their supposed family ties, and Zazà didn't ask either – partly to hide his own instinctive dislike for a doctor so unprofessional as to walk around with dyed hair despite his boss's orders to the contrary.

The afternoon seemed endless, and the two found themselves – impatient for action and active ingredients – pacing the narrow confines of their room. Mirella wanted to check out the last victim's room to get a feel for the situation. Marione would have gladly gone out to eat. The doctor never wanted to find himself in such a situation, and Zazà wanted to figure out what had happened to Mrs. Stanziani's wardrobe.

"Damn," he muttered, looking at the forensic photos. "There's a whole double season missing in here... Do you know anything about this, doctor?"

Dr. Carnevale was taken aback – he didn't even need to look at the photos. Every room had at least one wardrobe.

"Hmmm..." the commissioner grunted, deep in thought. "Strange things are happening here. Someone broke in, made the wardrobe disappear, replaced the figurines with these monsters, and swapped the painting."

"Actually, that painting has always been there."

"What are you talking about? Look here," he said, handing him the photo of the Corot painting covered in sole fish. "There used to be a seascape, not a pastoral scene."

Carnevale didn't have the courage to argue. He asked if his presence was still necessary and then returned to his duties. Even he now had no

doubt: the commissioner was arteriosclerotic. The only problem was, he had no file to document it.

Time passed slowly. Mirella and Marione impatiently waited for darkness to fall so they could act. The more impatient they became, the more they smoked; the more they smoked, the slower time passed; and the slower time passed, the more impatient they got.

They were trapped in a vicious cycle they could only escape if they ran out of rolling papers or – like what happened – if Mr. Dirk, now discharged, showed up in the clinic lobby.

Mirella was stretching her legs in the hallway when she saw the detective, escorted by the nurses from the *Fate Bene Le Frittelle* hospital. She hugged him warmly, genuinely happy for his recovery, and whispered her cover story in his ear.

Dirk, alas, still under sedation, didn't seem very receptive, but he managed to stay coherent enough to understand that Dr. Novelli had ended up in jail and that the Old Lady was hidden in a safe place.

Chapter twenty – three

Mister Sushi

Mirella opened Mr. Suzuki's room by sliding her credit card between the frame and the latch. It was around eleven p.m.; all the patients were asleep, and even the attendants were resting when Marione suddenly lit up the victim's room as if it were broad daylight.

A large, low table dominated the room, surrounded by small rectangular straw mats in perfect Japanese style. Four large – format books, neatly stacked on the table, were more pleasing to the eye than to the intellect. One of them was an old fantasy book in a rare and incredibly expensive edition printed on real parchment. A rich man's book. Marione wasn't particularly fond of the genre – he considered it a hobby for model enthusiasts – but this was a book that transcended its purpose. The leather cover revealed that it had been published long before the Cod Revival. Marione felt drawn to it; he would have read it not so much to uncover its secrets but to fully appreciate its exquisite craftsmanship. A dive into luxury, disguised as noble curiosity. Unfortunately, that wouldn't help their investigation, so after repeatedly trying to stuff the extraordinary edition under his shirt, he had to give up.

The bedroom contained only a tatami mat and a wardrobe, inside which reigned an obsessive order: a few silk robes, three pairs of black shoes, five Western – style suits, a dozen shirts, underwear, and, inside a soft hanging bag at the bottom, a ninja outfit.

“Damn!” exclaimed Marione when a katana emerged from its sheath. “This is a ninja outfit! I can't believe it.”

Mirella, who had already moved to the bathroom, rushed back.

“Are you saying Suzuki was a samurai?”

“Not a samurai, a ninja...”

“And what's the difference?”

“Ah, I've never really figured that out.”

“It doesn’t look like a Halloween costume,” she said, testing the sword’s edge.

“As if Dr. Carnevale would walk around dressed like this...”

Mirella gripped the sword and, with a swift motion, sliced in two the cigarette Marione had just lit.

“No smoking during investigations. How many times do we have to talk about this? The fire alarm could go off. Not to mention that when you smoke, you stop thinking straight.”

Marione froze in fear. His girlfriend had swung the samurai – no, ninja – sword right in front of his eyes, as if she wanted to slice him into pieces. Once he regained his composure, he wanted to yell out his reasons – she couldn’t just try to kill him – but it was too late, and he certainly couldn’t argue in silence. He swallowed his frustration, keeping it hidden from environmental activists, and tried to stay calm. At least until sunrise.

In the bathroom, where the eels were never still, they found nothing of interest. At least until Junior, visibly nervous, threatened them with the toilet brush, telling them to calm down. Mirella turned to scold her man for making a racket, just as she saw him aiming a spearfishing harpoon at the bottom of the toilet bowl.

“What the hell are you doing?!” she shouted. “Where did you get that harpoon?”

Marione, looking at what he was holding, jolted in shock. Resting at the toilet’s edge, disguised as a brush, was an old fisherman’s harpoon. Apparently, Mr. Suzuki couldn’t live without sushi.

“Unbelievable...” Marione said, closing the toilet lid. “Suzuki was fishing straight from the toilet. I can’t believe it...”

“Yeah, it’s crazy that a human being could still kill a defenseless animal.”

“Well, that’s not exactly what I meant...”

“Then what?”

“I find it insane that someone could get their food from the same place they go to... relieve themselves. It makes me sick.”

“Well, maybe he wasn’t fishing in the toilet. Fish are everywhere now,” she said, pointing to a school of pike.

“Yeah, but that means we can’t call someone guilty just because they own a harpoon. Fish aren’t afraid of us anymore; they let themselves be caught easily. Plus, Suzuki was Japanese – he ate them raw.”

“That’s true. Maybe he just put the harpoon there by mistake...”

“Yeah, but then where’s the real toilet brush? They use those in Japan too, right?”

“Now things are getting complicated... If Mr. Suzuki kept a harpoon disguised as a toilet brush, it means it had a very specific function in this part of the apartment. If he needed it in the living room, he could have hung it on the wall. And look, the harpoon’s handle matches the container perfectly, meaning he meant to keep the weapon in this room. Camouflaged and within reach...”

“You don’t seem convinced, though.”

“Yeah, I just can’t picture Mr. Suzuki fishing for eels in the toilet.”

Saying this, Mirella lifted the toilet lid and leaned in, careful not to wet her hair.

“Trainspotting!” Marione shouted, as if they were playing charades.

“Wrong, I just want to hear if I can pick up any sounds.”

Leaning in, Mirella tried to detect any cries for help, but everything was quiet. The eels didn’t seem frightened, and none of the survivors seemed to be reporting anything. She closed the lid and, out of habit, flushed. But instead of the usual sound, there was a sinister metallic click. Mirella found a nunchaku in her hand.

“Look at this!” she exclaimed. “A Japanese flail. Are you saying Suzuki really was a ninja?!”

“This is getting crazy. Okay, fine – a ninja outfit in the closet, a sword, a harpoon disguised as a toilet brush, and now a nunchaku instead of a toilet chain... But why would he need all these weapons in a nursing home?!”

“Maybe Suzuki knew the truth and was expecting a visit from the killer. But the killer caught him off guard.”

“Damn, okay, Suzuki was seventy – five, but a ninja is still a ninja. How do you catch one off guard?”

“Maybe the person we’re looking for isn’t just an ordinary killer. Maybe they’re a professional, like...”

“Another ninja!” Marione blurted out, a cold shiver running down his spine.

“You’ve watched too many movies. We’re in a nursing home, not a sixteenth – century Japanese village.”

“So what?”

“Things don’t have to be that strange. There’s no need to talk about ninjas, samurai, or anything like that. We’re dealing with a ruthless killer, that’s for sure. What we don’t know is the motive – the common denominator in this bizarre deadly equation.”

Mirella was convinced that all the oddities they were uncovering were nothing more than eccentricities of an old man meant to throw them off track. Maybe Mr. Suzuki, being from Japan, had always been fascinated by ancient assassins, enough to keep a “seductive” disguise in his closet, along with various matching decorative items around his room. For Mirella, the real lead was something else. The victims had to have something in common – something beyond arteriosclerosis and possibly even the brand of their pacemakers.

She didn’t believe the murderer of Engineer Franzoni was the same one responsible for the patients’ deaths. First, because no one had heard anything about the owner of the flying eight since. And second, if the Global assassin had been short, the entry wound on the engineer’s forehead would have been at an angle, not perfectly perpendicular to his skull.

She was sure of it: there had to be two killers.

Chapter twenty – three point eight

Breakfast at Sandro's

The night brought no wisdom, only back pain. The doctor's bed was too small, and the mattress was anything but orthopedic. Marione tossed and turned the whole time, trying to find a comfortable position, and just when he did, he heard life at the institution resuming. Only after the bathroom queue had dissipated and the residents had headed to the cafeteria did he get a few minutes of peace. He was about to fall back asleep when someone knocked on the door.

He woke Mirella, who, in contrast, had been dreaming of multicolored ponies and mountains of marzipan, and they went to see who had the audacity to disturb them at that hour.

Dirk, in his classic suit, was asking for an audience.

Scarcella looked thinner, worn out, but otherwise in fairly good shape. His recovery wasn't complete, but all in all, he wasn't doing too badly. He had been sober for days and was eager to get back into action. In fact, it was six in the morning.

Mirella and Marione got dressed and asked if he felt up for going out for breakfast, away from prying ears.

The tavern was only a few meters away.

Sandro greeted everyone warmly and extended a bottle of Dolcetto toward the investigator. Mirella shot him a death glare. Realizing his faux pas, Sandro simply took their orders: three cappuccinos and nine cream croissants. Then he retreated behind the counter to read the instructions on the coffee machine. It had been years since he had last made a cappuccino.

Dirk was brought up to speed on everything – from the intrusion into Miss Franca's room to Dr. Novelli's arrest; from Cavalier Bricconi's psychedelic boxer shorts to Mr. Suzuki's ninja outfit; from Mrs. Luisa's immaculate room to the mysterious disappearance of a double – season wardrobe.

A good half – hour had passed when, finally, from a cloud of steam – like in an '80s concert – Sandro emerged, holding a steaming liter – sized jug of cappuccino.

“What do you use for cappuccinos?” Marione asked. “Pitchers?!”

“Listen, this is a serious tavern. You should be grateful I even made it for you... Do you know what Pinin would’ve said in my place?”

“Oh, don’t start. Pinin is senile – no doubt about it – but cappuccino is supposed to be served in cups...”

“I’ll bring the cups, don’t worry. I’m not an octopus,” Sandro concluded, setting the jug in the middle of the table.

Dirk was disappointed by the lack of clues they had shared with him. The case seemed like a massive puzzle, with pieces mixed in from other images that had nothing to do with the one on the box. It would take a hammer to make them fit together. He also found it hard to believe that the Global murder could be linked to their investigation, but he promised himself that once he regained some energy, he would go talk to Zazà to get a broader picture of the situation – maybe even convince him to release the doctor.

They needed to start over from scratch. Go back through the rooms, gathering as much information as possible about the victims’ private lives. Trace their pasts to determine if they had any conscious or unconscious connections. There had to be something linking them.

In the meantime, the Old Lady would have to stay hidden.

Scarcella spoke in a somber and detached manner, like an old sage. Every so often, he interrupted the slow flow of his words to dip his croissant into the cappuccino or to turn his head toward the table where, for years, he had drowned his troubles in wine. Mirella realized her mistake and felt ashamed – she shouldn’t have brought him there. Dirk seemed to sense her unease. He gently caressed her face with his cream – covered hand and reassured her, telling her not to worry.

There was something cathartic about that breakfast, and it wasn’t the cappuccino.

Chapter twenty – four

Old Lady on the run

The Old Lady was getting fed up with watching the city's comings and goings from under the clothesline. The humidity was unbearable, and the laundry was starting to drip heavily. Junior had missed their daily appointment, caught up in the investigations, and his T – shirt was at risk of seeing the light of day again. At first, the idea of spending some time at the young man's place had appealed to her, but once she settled on the balcony, she realized she wouldn't feel comfortable with his wife sleeping in the other room.

She decided to leave the hideout and return to the clinic.

Senior tried to stop her, but it was pointless:

"You're making a big mistake. You can't leave – it's dangerous. Don't you realize that?"

"I realize it perfectly well, but this is a free country. I thank you for the hospitality, if you can call it that, but now I'm going home... and you won't be the one to stop me. Especially since this crust is starting to melt. Look... look at my perm," she said, pointing at a trickle of Bostik glue running down her cheek from under her wig. "This drizzle is ruining it... How can you expect me to stay? Of course," she continued in a whisper, "if you had offered me a proper bed, say, one with embroidered sheets... we could have spent a few relaxing weeks together. But not only did you fail to show such consideration, you went as far as to park me under a miserable clothesline, with your wife snoring in the next room. I'm almost offended."

"Mrs. Spezzano, come on, this isn't about sex, it's about your safety, if you catch my drift. You know perfectly well you're in danger. You should trust those who care about you and stay put until the investigation is over."

"The investigation won't end without me, and in any case, if I have to die, I'd rather it not be from rheumatism. That said, goodbye."

She stood up, knocking over a pair of semi – petrified underpants.

“Don’t try to stop me, or I won’t hesitate to report you for kidnapping. Have I made myself clear?” she concluded, adjusting her bra.

Marione stood bewildered under the hanging laundry, the steady dripping landing annoyingly on his bald head. He couldn’t do anything to stop her, so he decided to follow her. He would keep watch over her until he had the chance to alert the others about her defection.

The Old Lady headed toward the nursing home. Senior rushed out into the street, trying not to draw attention to himself – a difficult task, given that he had forgotten to put on his pants.

A little while later, the Old Lady suddenly stopped, frozen in place, in front of the local newspaper’s headline:

**Dr. Novelli Arrested for Marijuana Possession
The Mystery of the Nursing Home Deepens.**

How could the commissioner have made such a grave mistake? Dr. Novelli not only had never used drugs, but he was also one of the most serious and competent doctors in the entire city. The deaths and everything else were clearly just a pretext to remove him from his position as head of the clinic. Someone wanted him out of the way.

Zazà became her top priority, so she turned around.

“Oh dear God, you scared me!” she blurted out, finding herself face to face with her guardian angel. “What are you doing without pants? You’re not some kind of pervert, are you?”

“What pervert?! You’re in danger, I told you – that’s why I’m watching over you.”

“And you want to do it dressed like that? Give me a break,” she scoffed, delivering a solid knee to his groin. “Go home and get dressed.”

Marione didn’t argue. He remained on the ground, curled up in a fetal position, writhing in pain.

...

When Sergio spotted the Old Lady – whom we thought was safely hidden – we all rushed to the window, smoking like chimneys out of sheer anxiety. The air in the room turned into a branch of the Cornigliano steel-works, so we headed outside. Not so much because of the smoke, but because we couldn’t leave her alone to confront a psychopath. At least, that’s

what we believed, caught in a paranoia – induced haze from the Hash Plant.

Unfortunately, it was hard not to draw attention – our so – called tailing operation looked more like a parade of drunks. Hiding every time the Old Lady turned around – alerted by the thud of our boots, which no doubt triggered war memories – was a task that required serious technical skill.

Through sheer determination, we managed to follow her up to the police station. Hidden behind various urban furnishings, we watched as she went inside. We figured that inside the police offices, she would be safe.

That is, until she found the commissioner and immediately launched into a tirade of insults, using language that a cop might forgive only from someone her age.

From behind his desk, Zazà sat motionless, enduring her rant. Growing impatient with her long – windedness, he even considered reaching for his gun.

It took him a while to understand what the Old Lady was going on about, as she had yet to actually mention the topic, keeping him on edge and guaranteeing her own survival. Like in *The Arabian Nights*.

When he finally realized she was talking about Dr. Novelli, the commissioner tried to explain the situation, but to no avail. The Old Lady not only refused to listen, but she even echoed his words in a strange way.

Down in the street, we were tired of hiding, so we stepped out into the open and gathered in front of the police station, waiting for Mrs. Spezzano.

Unfortunately, she spotted us from the window and interpreted our presence as a protest in support of her cause, immediately incorporating us into her speech.

“Don’t think I’m the only one demanding the doctor’s release. Six grams of marijuana is nothing, especially when found in the possession of a scientist of his caliber. The doctor, as a medical professional, is perfectly qualified to handle any kind of substance. Your accusations are ridiculous – you have no right to hold him.”

“Listen, Mrs. Spezzano, don’t try my patience. The doctor may have the right to pump his patients full of Valium, but that doesn’t mean he can come to the station and light up a joint. Take my advice – go home while you still can. The judge will handle the doctor.”

“But the judge can’t be objective. His son has been trying to graduate in medicine for nearly thirty years.”

“That has nothing to do with it, ma’am. I’ll tell you one last time – go home.”

“Don’t raise your voice at me! First of all, I’m not deaf. And anyway, my protest group and I won’t leave until the doctor is released.”

“Your protest group?” the commissioner scoffed, looking out the window. “Ah, there they are...” he muttered, rubbing his hands together, a strand of drool hanging from his mouth in excitement.

We realized we had messed up.

We had left the center of town and marched straight to the police station without even bothering to hide the party horns still smoking between our lips.

Within minutes, we found ourselves at the center of attention.

A few minutes later, we were in a jail cell.

Together, of course, with Dr. Novelli.

The Old Lady, on the other hand, wasn’t charged and was sent on her way.

Chapter twenty – five

Rummy in the afternoon

At the clinic, Mirella, Marione, and Dirk were killing time playing cards in the main hall. They had to wait until night to act and were trying not to attract attention. In hushed voices, in the middle of the game, they exchanged improbable conjectures and fantastical motives. This helped them endure the endless rounds of rummy.

“I’ll take the three of hearts, I’m going down, and I’ll snap a picture,” said Marione, marking his points. Then, whispering, he added, “Could it be a gambling debt behind the deaths of those four people?”

“If they were poker players, it should have all ended...”

“What do you mean?” asked Dirk as he shuffled the deck.

“In poker, you usually play with five people... The fifth one must be the killer.”

“Interesting, but I don’t think Mr. Suzuki played poker... Maybe Shanghai...”

“And what if someone got dragged into it? It could be a revenge for a rigged game. The game itself might not even be important.”

“Maybe we should take a look in the recreation room. I don’t trust the cops,” said Mirella.

“Recreation room?!” Dirk and Marione blurted out in unison.

“Yes... a game room, or whatever you want to call it...”

“Oh,” said Marione.

“A game room!” Dirk exclaimed. “The clinic has a game room?”

“For at least a couple of years now.”

“Then why the hell are we sitting here playing cards?”

Mirella had an answer but held back. To her, it was obvious that an old man wouldn’t want to play foosball, Ping – Pong, or billiards, while Dirk, despite not showing it, had the energy to compete in a full – fledged gaming triathlon. Sure, given their cannabinoid levels, neither of them was eager to take on such physically demanding activities, but they were certainly

fed up with rummy. Not to mention the rococo chairs in the clinic, which seemed to require orthopedic support. So, they put away the cards and headed for the basement.

Dirk, expecting the usual cheap bar billiard table – the kind with coin slots that only returns the white cue ball when pocketed and mercilessly swallows all others – was taken aback when Mirella swung open the door, revealing a magnificent cherrywood billiard table surrounded by top – quality cues.

“What the hell is a table like this doing here? It’s a masterpiece!” he exclaimed, admiring the straightness of the cues before his eyes.

“Well, they certainly don’t cut costs...” Marione added, thrilled at the sight of an Olympic – grade Ping – Pong table. “These paddles... they cost a fortune. Isn’t that odd?”

“No, honey,” Mirella replied. “Big companies or businesses with high revenues need such purchases to deduct from their taxes.”

“Damn... Sure, they need to get tax deductions, but check out this foosball table...”

The three stood frozen in awe at the sheer abundance. More than a game room, it looked like a museum. Playing foosball on such a luxurious table would have only made them uncomfortable, as would chasing after a bouncing Ping – Pong ball with a high – end paddle. But billiards was different. Sure, it was likely the most expensive piece, but in such cases, the anxiety of damaging the cloth was far outweighed by the pleasure of a good match.

Dirk and Marione grabbed their cues. To make the game more exciting, they raided the Monopoly box and split the fake money. Dirk arranged the triangle and placed the stakes on the edge of the table.

Marione struck the balls smoothly, sinking the eight. His opponent muttered something resembling a curse and gulped loudly. He attempted a tricky shot and pocketed the one. The two, the three, and so on followed until the nine, sealing his victory. Marione played like a pro, and Dirk, motionless, his bile rising, could do nothing but wait for his turn – if there was ever going to be one.

Marione had a secret he wanted to keep: he was a pool and Ping – Pong prodigy, a skill honed in the recreational hall of Don Lino’s parish. That’s

right... up until he was thirteen, Marione had served as an altar boy. Not out of vocation, but to gain access to the parish game room, which otherwise wouldn't have welcomed non – religious kids who just wanted to play.

He won three games in a row. Then, missing the break shot, he gave up his turn. Dirk regained some color and, with a precise stroke, sank the one. He moistened his fingers, adjusted his mustache, and continued his performance until the last ball, tying the game.

But then, a strange noise. Something was blocking the pocket.

Under the nine, inside the hole, a crumpled handkerchief seemed to be hiding something valuable. A bit disgusted by what he might find, Marione grabbed a corner and unfolded it to examine the contents.

What looked like a simple antique miniature emerged from the nasal shroud. It was a lead soldier, vividly colored. The intricate details ruled out an ancient craft, betraying the use of a modern printing machine.

"It looks like a bandit – look, he's holding a gun."

"Maybe it's from a video game."

"Probably left behind by some patient's grandkid," Dirk concluded, eager to continue playing – unlike his opponent.

Marione's mind wandered freely toward new theories. Secretly, while chalking his cue, he asked Mirella to come up with an excuse to spend the afternoon outside the clinic. Then, with professional composure, he waited for his turn. He played absentmindedly, relying more on luck than skill, until the score reached six – six.

Marione took a deep breath, placed the cue in the groove of his left hand, and discreetly checked his watch: 4:45 PM. Impatient to continue his investigation, he lost focus, barely aimed, and botched the shot, gifting the victory to the ex – cop.

Dirk won the match, but he wasn't satisfied. He had underestimated his opponent – a rookie mistake.

Fortunately, Mirella stepped in just in time, saying she had remembered an important appointment. The two, feigning urgency, excused themselves before Dirk could offer a rematch.

Dirk continued playing alone.

Chapter twenty – six

Baciccia, three million

“It's been ages!” exclaimed the clerk at the model shop as Marione appeared in the doorway. “I'm so happy to see you! Have you finished the galleon?”

“You've got the wrong guy, Amilcare...” Junior replied, hugging him. “I've never built anything that couldn't be smoked.”

“Oh right, my old friend,” Amilcare said, slapping him hard on the shoulder. “But what brings you here? It's been years since your last visit – I'm a bit offended.”

“And what about you? You could've dropped by too...”

“That's true,” Amilcare admitted, glancing at Mirella. “We live just one floor apart, and we haven't seen each other in at least five years...”

Mirella laughed.

They stood in silence for a few moments, adjusting to the shop's chaotic environment – shelves packed with boxes, figurines, and absurd decks of cards, as if a bomb had exploded inside.

Amilcare was waiting to hear the reason for their visit when he suddenly recognized his friend's girlfriend. She was the greatest model maker in history – the only one ever featured on the front pages of major industry magazines, not to mention *The Times*, *The New York Post*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Donna Moderna*.

“Holy shit!” he blurted out. “You're the girl every model maker dreams of meeting... Damn, you're Mirella, right?! The one... the only... the genius who recreated Lady Liberty with just a few rolling papers!”

“Well, actually, it took about seven hundred... and the long ones.”

“What an honor!” he said, kissing her hand. “I never would've imagined that an authority of your caliber would ever step into my humble little shop...”

“Amilcare, you're going overboard. I'm just a punk chick, not a model maker.”

“Are you kidding? You’re the benchmark for anyone starting out in this craft! You’ve had full – page features in magazines, kids worship you... you’re a freaking celebrity!”

“Hey, hey, slow down... I don’t want kids looking up to me. I’m just a punk girl with no pretensions. And besides, my creations are nothing more than giant joints that inevitably go up in smoke...”

“In an ultimate act of catharsis...” he interrupted.

“Look, I don’t even know how we got to this topic, but seriously, I don’t want admiration – there’s nothing to admire. Legally speaking, I’m just a druggie...”

“Listen,” Amilcare said, recalling something he had seen, “whether you like it or not, people will always be excited about you... But tell me, what brings you here?” he asked, handing her a magazine with her picture on it, requesting an autograph.

“See, my friend,” Marione said, moved by the discovery of his girlfriend’s fame, “we found this little figurine and we’d like to know what it is.”

Marione placed a handkerchief on the counter and unfolded it. Amilcare seemed startled. He rudely dismissed a young customer who had been debating for over half an hour between an F – 14 and a Tomcat, pulled down the shop’s shutter, and stuck a sign on the glass:

Back Soon... Maybe.

Marione realized they had stumbled onto something big. He had never seen Amilcare act like this – he looked like a black – market dealer.

From the outside, the shop appeared to be a tiny, cluttered hole packed with model kits. But in the back, it concealed a surprisingly large room filled with tables covered in elaborate dioramas and medieval miniatures. Amilcare was a hardcore role – playing game fanatic, and this was where he and his friends battled each other with spells and axes.

Marione had never been interested in his friend’s passion, nor had he ever understood the rules of those strange games, even though Amilcare had explained them hundreds of times. Playing pool was one thing, he thought – rolling oddly – shaped dice in some kind of twisted board game was another.

They settled into the office. Amilcare scrutinized the figurine under a magnifying glass and flipped through various dusty tomes in total silence.

Meanwhile, the two wandered around the back room, where each table was set up for a different game, with miniatures scattered all over.

Marione asked if he could smoke. Amilcare nodded but warned them not to touch the tables – some of those games lasted for months, even years. Moving a single elf could spell disaster. Then he buried himself in his books again, paying them no further attention. Not even when Mirella casually flipped over a Spider – Man figurine.

They stayed past closing time, and the more Marione smoked, the more tempted he was to play with the Hobbits. Thankfully, Mirella, who could maintain her style in any situation, kept him in check.

It was past eight when Amilcare finally emerged from his mountain of books. His eyes were glassy, and his voice trembled – just like in fifth grade when he got suspended for mocking an arteriosclerotic teacher.

“I can’t believe it...” he whispered.

Marione quickly said goodbye to the miniature elephants and motioned for Amilcare to sit down. Normally tanned, Amilcare now looked as pale as a sheet and was mumbling nonsense. He seemed as if he’d been smoking too.

Mirella found a small electric stove and brewed some coffee. It took two full pots before they could make sense of things.

“The figurine you brought me is Baciccia – the protagonist of an incredibly rare role – playing game called: *See Via Prè and Die...*”

“Excuse me?”

“You more or less understand how role – playing games work, right?”

“More or less...”

“Perfect. Do you remember how, when we were kids, our mothers would take turns walking us all the way to school, even though it was just a couple of blocks away?”

“Of course, I still haven’t gotten over the embarrassment. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with it. Back then, our moms were worried about our safety. That was the period when a wave of gritty novels set in our city’s alleys became popular...”

“Come on, don’t mess with me – nothing ever happens here...” *At least, not until now*, he thought.

“Exactly. Nothing happened back then either. But those new authors, desperate to get published – even at their own expense – wrote horrifying stories where brutal killers slaughtered prostitutes, office workers, pre-schoolers... you name it.”

“You’re telling me we were escorted around because of a couple of delusional hacks?” he asked, outraged.

“A couple?! No, my friend – there were thousands. Bookstore shelves were flooded with local crime novels whose gory, explicit titles – especially about the areas where the murders took place – worked their way into the public imagination, not just readers’ minds.”

“I can’t believe we suffered for this crap. We should make them pay!”

“Well, you don’t need to worry about that anymore. The trend lasted a few years and then faded away without leaving a mark on history. Even the authors now deny they were ever part of it.”

“Like former fascists...”

“That’s a bit harsh, but yeah...”

“Go on – there’s more to this, isn’t there?”

“Oh, absolutely! That period gave birth to a character who became more iconic than all the others. A detective – our fellow townsman, of course – who lived with a prostitute...”

“Baciccia?!”

“Exactly.”

“And what made this detective different from all the rest?” Mirella asked.

“He didn’t wear underwear.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I swear.”

“Damn, that’s some serious trash...”

“You said it. Anyway, the author of this character sold the rights for a role – playing game. The Americans invested heavily in his novel, thinking it would conquer first the city, then the ocean. But that didn’t happen, and only about a hundred copies of *See Via Prè and Die* were ever produced – for industry insiders only.

“Now here’s the kicker: it seems that only one copy has survived, owned by an anonymous collector... and missing its most important piece.”

“This filthy cop without underwear...”

“Exactly. And that filthy cop, as you call him, is worth three million bucks.”

“What?!” Marione yelled.

Mirella nearly dropped her joint.

“You heard me right. Why do you think I locked the shop? I don’t know where you found such an item, and I don’t even want to know, but this is insane.”

“Insane is an understatement...”

“Yeah. In any case, take this book and have a look at it. If you ever need help, feel free to come back to me, but make sure you don’t bring Baccicia... Lock that miniature in a safe and don’t tell anyone about it. I assure you, plenty of my colleagues would do anything to have a piece like this in their collection. And honestly, I’m drooling with envy just thinking that such an item ended up in your hands.”

“Message received. Thanks for everything, Amilcare. We’ll return the book as soon as possible.”

Mirella, who had been listening in silence, gave Amilcare a strong hug to thank him, especially for his honesty. Unfortunately, in doing so, she failed to notice Junior, who had been joking around with his friend for over twenty years, as he walked out the back without realizing that Gandalf was battling Darth Vader instead of Obi – Wan Kenobi.

Chapter twenty – seven

Back in action, reprise

The Old Lady, after wandering around thinking about the doctor, returned to the clinic just in time for dinner. Dr. Carnevale, unaware of the danger Mrs. Spezzano was in, scolded her for going out without informing anyone. Then, he sent her off to get ready for supper.

Dirk ran into her shortly after and asked about her granddaughter. Still shaken by the doctor's arrest, the Old Lady mumbled something unintelligible – luckily, Scarcella couldn't make sense of it – before heading to her room to get comfortable.

Mirella and Marione would have loved to return to the center to relax and dive into one of the two thousand pages meant to educate them on the mysterious world of role – playing games. But the investigation had to continue.

Agreeing to keep the incident to themselves, they returned to the clinic. When Mirella saw her grandmother getting ready to join the other residents, she froze. Once again, her instructions had been ignored. Dragging her relative into the hallway, Mirella found out not only that her grandmother had left poor Senior standing dumbfounded under the clothesline, but also that all their friends, who had mobilized to follow and protect her, had been arrested.

“Do you have any idea how long Zazà has been waiting for a chance to get his hands on the kids from the center? Do you?! And what do you do? You decide to walk around as if nothing's wrong when you were supposed to stay hidden!”

“But sweetheart, I didn't tell them to follow me...”

“Can't you see?! They knew you had to stay out of sight. They must have spotted you walking around and decided to follow you to make sure you were safe if anything happened.”

“You think so?”

“Of course!”

“That’s why they kept hiding whenever I turned around... They didn’t want to be seen!”

“Exactly! And you basically served them up to the cops on a silver platter – great job!”

“How was I supposed to know...? When I saw them all outside the police station, I thought they were protesting for the doctor’s release. They even had torches in their hands.”

“Grandma?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Go stick your head in the gas pipe!”

Chapter twenty – eight

Hard drugs

Mirella and Marione found Sergio hiding inside the steel cabinet that housed the gas valve. His hair was standing on end like spikes, and he was stammering uncontrollably. Partly from exhaustion, partly from fear, but mostly because of the imminent payday. It took him three quick joints – Mirella, in her rush, had forgotten to buy rolling papers – before he could tell them what they already knew deep down... They had all ended up in the slammer, locked up with Dr. Novelli.

The deserted center gave off an unsettling feeling, not to mention the eerie echo. Sergio, too exhausted, fell asleep before they could fill him in on the whole story. That was probably for the best. Advertising all that money wasn't a good idea. Not yet, at least.

Mirella and Marione absentmindedly flipped through Amilcare's book, not particularly interested at first, just trying to distract themselves from the discomfort of the silence. But in the end, they were hooked. It was packed with information about the origins of role – playing games, and it was all hilarious.

The early enthusiasts of this discipline, hundreds of years ago, belonged to a small circle of eclectic bourgeois with virtually unlimited capital and time to waste. They gathered in secret like Freemasons, disguising themselves as their characters to conceal their identities. Miniatures came later, as did privacy laws.

Lord Spaten, one of the first devotees of the craft, suffered from significant psychological imbalances. By his fifties, he could no longer distinguish where the game ended and reality began. In those days, before being found lifeless in the forest near his manor, he would attend aristocratic gatherings at Countess Bardi's house dressed as a medieval knight. Even the noblewomen he had lain with claimed more than once that, before intercourse, the eccentric Lord would roll dice and mutter rhymes like:

“Five plus six, eleven, I gain ground and take off my underwear, she responds with a measly double three, and I claim her with the horse’s enchantment. Only a double six could extinguish such passion...”

Marione, amused, vividly imagined these scenes with cannabinoid clarity.

The disappearance of poor Lord coincided, much like later happened with the first Tamagotchi owners, with the death of his character. Astolfo, Lord Spaten’s knight, was killed by a double five while preparing to defend his master’s castle from the dark forces of a Gothic warrior whose name was quickly forgotten. Lord Spaten was found dead the next morning in his own woods, struck down by ten stab wounds. No one ever identified his killers, either real or in – game. The only detail that leaked was the noble colors of his antagonist, which, coincidentally, were the same as Baccicia’s outfit: green, gray, and blue.

This dark prototype became the first urban legend on the subject. Back then, no one truly believed a character could permanently end a player’s career. When someone faced an opponent with the aforementioned traits, they paid little attention – at least until they were found lifeless in some thicket. But by then, it was too late.

The legend continued until page three hundred, where it faded due to the game’s massive expansion. A few decades before the third millennium, role – playing games became public knowledge, and the sheer number of players made any statistical calculations impossible.

Mirella quickly grew bored of this story. Even if there really was a mysterious assassin who had survived generations or a cult of psychotic model – makers emulating his deeds, it was still out of the question that the victims had played something like this before meeting their maker. Bored, she went out to buy rolling papers.

Marione, dazed by the *Fruity Juice*, got stuck bouncing between two lines until they started shifting, transforming into the usual herd of blue elephants coming to drink at the center.

“Found anything?” Mirella asked upon her return, shooing the elephants away.

Marione bounced a few more seconds.

“Nah,” he said. “I was zoning out.”

“I figured. You know, this whole thing is really getting on my nerves,” she admitted with frustration. “With everything we’ve uncovered so far – and we’ve uncovered some weird stuff – we still don’t have a single lead, damn it.”

“I’ve got one...”

Sergio had woken up.

“You have a lead?!”

“Of course,” he said, pulling a small transparent bag from his pajama pocket. “A line is still a lead, isn’t it?”

“Line... Line...!” Marione echoed. “Make way!!!”

Junior had never done hard drugs, but he felt like the time had come. Mirella – usually against it – agreed that postponing hibernation wouldn’t be a bad idea. This situation had to be broken through, one way or another. So, she pulled the mirror off the wall and lined up three strips.

Sergio got ready to snort as he opened the bathroom door.

Marione watched him questioningly, unaware of the cutting procedures that had decimated the Yuppies with a diarrhea epidemic. When the mirror reached him, partly out of fear and partly out of chivalry, he passed it to his girlfriend.

Mirella moved like a sprite. Not only did she snort like a pro, but she even managed to reach the bathroom before Sergio.

Marione remained motionless while the mirror in his hands reflected a fragment of his face. He cautiously brought his nose closer to his own reflection, trying to familiarize himself with the substance before offering it his body. Then, with studied calm, he rolled up a banknote – unaware that one corner had folded over, blocking the passage.

He inhaled deeply.

As Mirella exited the bathroom, she couldn’t figure out what was hanging from her boyfriend’s nose. But as she stepped closer, she recognized Abraham’s forehead. Suddenly, any bizarre theory became acceptable.

“The victims might really have been playing role – playing games,” Mario began. “Maybe even erotic ones, with a dark knight who has outlived the children of his own grandchildren.”

“Which would drastically narrow down the list of suspects,” Mirella continued.

“Because only a superhero could live that long. A superhero or a Zen monk.”

“And which superhero best fits the description of a dark knight?”

Mirella shot forward as if she had the answer in her grasp, but then stopped, mouth open, realizing she didn’t actually know. Marione followed suit, only to freeze with his jaws wide and the answer stuck on the tip of his tongue.

Sergio, who had just woken up and skipped the entire role – playing game discussion, decided never to offer his friends anything like that again. Then, seeing that the two were still paralyzed in their impasse, he suggested:

“Batman.”

“Batman!” they blurted out in unison, both convinced they had figured it out themselves.

“And what color is his suit?”

Sergio ran his hands through his hair.

“Black, obviously. Like Mr. Suzuki’s.”

“That’s exactly where I was going, love! And where is Mr. Suzuki from?”

“Japan...”

“Where Zen monks thrive.”

“He’s our man! Zen Batman: the Dark Knight...”

“Who, across time and without fear...”

“Is carrying out a massacre at the nursing home.”

Sergio rolled another joint, hoping to quell such madness. Assuming it wasn’t contagious.

“To the station!” Marione shouted, peaking. “Right now! We have to inform the cops. There’s probably a serious sex ring behind the clinic.”

Sergio couldn’t understand how, no matter how high they were, they could mistake a victim for the perpetrator:

“You two have mush for brains,” he started strong. “There’s nothing behind the clinic except the terminal stop of the local bus...” he trailed off, losing himself.

He lit the fuse, hoping he wasn’t too late – he was already showing the first symptoms.

Chapter twenty – nine, twenty – ninths

From the frying pan into the Police Station

The saloon – style door of the police station burst open. Mirella and Marione didn't seem inclined to stop running.

The officers dove to the ground, drawing their nine – millimeters from their holsters. The punk kids, caught in their momentum, appeared at the entrance of the police station, which now seemed deserted due to the speed of the law enforcers' reaction. They slowed down, trying to figure out whether humanity had gone extinct or if the cops were just taking a break at the coffee machine. This hesitation saved their lives.

The officer who had assisted Commissioner Zazà in the clinic investigation recognized the punk girl with green hair, preventing a massacre.

The commissioner, locked in his office, heard the commotion and came downstairs, rubbing his hands together. Zazà found the two engaged in a frantic conversation with the officers. From what he could make out, Mirella and Marione were breathlessly telling an unbelievable story involving bizarre games and Batman's sexual preferences. Their dilated, watery pupils revealed to the cops their less – than – sober state of mind – let alone the telltale halos around their noses.

Zazà would have let it slide, given how pleased he was about having arrested us all, if not for Mirella's verbosity. She couldn't resist launching into a monologue about the rights and duties of law enforcement, which unfortunately ended with a resounding *fuck you*.

Thus, the two were taken to the room – because it was still just a room – where we were being held along with Dr. Novelli.

"Dr. Novelli!" Mirella exclaimed. "How are you?"

"Well, dear, and you? What brings you here?"

"I was just passing by and thought I'd drop in to say hi..."

The doctor didn't seem in bad shape – not sick, mind you – just a little too cheerful for someone in jail. He had the classic look of a man counting elephants.

“Are they blue, doctor?” Mirella suddenly asked, as Novelli seemed to be observing life on another planet.

“Blue and made of tin... You see them too?”

“What the hell, doctor...” she shouted, out of control. “You guys smoked in here?!”

Our group huddled around her to stop her from screaming our secret to the world. When we were arrested, we had handed over, as evidence against us, only the little bowler hat we held like a torch of solidarity. But we had never even considered revealing our hiding spots to the incompetent cops who had searched us.

Drugo, for example, had managed to smoke joints even in a canine training center for drug – sniffing dogs. Sure, it was an idiotic stunt driven by a stupid bet, but the fact remained: not only did he manage not to set off any of the thirty – four German Shepherds going through withdrawal, but he even made some friends – one of whom, Floc, later saved him from a three – year sentence at the airport.

Night was falling. Locked up in the police station, under detention, there wasn’t much we could do. We started smoking around nine – thirty and kept going for quite a while. The mystery of the clinic faded joint by joint – but not completely.

Novelli tried not to be annoying, but his condition was obvious. He was way out there.

“They can imprison my body, but not my mind. My mind roams free, beyond these walls...” he declaimed, quoting Jack London.

“Then buy me three sandwiches,” Drugo urged him.

“Tomato, mozzarella?”

“And a drop of mayonnaise, if you don’t mind.”

Mirella didn’t approve of the doctor’s state. She didn’t think this was the time to be getting high.

Luckily, Marione had a great idea... We all, he explained, had the right to one phone call. All we had to do was claim our right and each hire a different lawyer. By flooding the station with esteemed professionals, the newspapers would have to take notice, and the cops wouldn’t be able to keep us detained without a formal charge. Everyone knows cops act one

way when no one's watching and another, much more by – the – book, when public scrutiny is breathing down their necks.

Right now, we needed that breath.

Since there were nearly twenty of us, we figured that, together, our collective breathing might just give the commissioner a nice gust of fresh air.

The plan was simple. Marione assigned each of us a number. When our turn came to call, we would open the phone book to “Law Firm” and choose the number that matched ours. In no time, we’d have a swarm of esteemed professionals at the station – probably all related to each other.

We waited a few minutes before executing the plan, just long enough to clear out the elephants and change the air. Then we started making ourselves heard.

Mirella went first, escorted by an officer. Then Marione, Dr. Novelli, Drugo, Spino, Siringa, and so on...

By the time we finished, it was past ten, and the officer was dead on his feet.

We made ourselves comfortable on the sofas lining our cell and patiently awaited the arrival of our lawyers.

At eleven – thirty, a car stopped in front of the police station, breaking the street’s virginal silence. We sat up, ears perked, waiting for the first lawyer to enter: Mr. Abaco Abele.

A door creaked open downstairs. We thought it was finally happening.

Heavy footsteps approached our door. Never would we have imagined that instead of the first defense attorney listed in the city directory, the doorway would be filled with nineteen mushroom pizzas – delivered by a guy dressed as Pulcinella. The delivery boy from the local pizzeria.

Logic was drowned by hunger, and we didn’t stop to think that one of us had probably strayed from the plan.

The fresh porcini were the classy touch missing from a margherita, I thought – until I contradicted myself, remembering the red gorgonzola...

After eating, I feared I had developed psychic powers because, moments later, another delivery boy appeared in the doorway, dressed as a cheese focaccia.

He was carrying nineteen red cheese slabs.

That's when we started smelling something fishy, and it wasn't the pizza.

Someone must have thought that one missing lawyer was statistically acceptable and had rerouted their mental waves from the law firm to the neighborhood pizzeria.

Mirella slumped onto the couch, stuffed and disheartened, wondering how we had managed to screw up such a well – thought – out plan.

She knew this was just the beginning.

Indeed, at midnight, when a delivery guy dressed as a kangaroo pulled nineteen stracchino pizzas from his pouch, her suspicions were confirmed.

Two pizzas past eleven would wreck even the most passionate smoker, so we had no choice but to invite the officers on duty to share a bite with us.

Better to give it to a cop than waste it.

Every half hour, the squeal of car brakes broke the neighborhood's silence, and a new delivery guy showed up at the door.

Everyone had the same idea.

Not one of us had thought to order a beer.

I can't even describe the thirst we felt by six in the morning, when yet another car stopped outside the station.

We all exchanged exhausted, bloated glances.

We never wanted to hear the word *pizza* again.

We couldn't figure out how so many late – night pizzerias even existed.

Then we heard the familiar heavy footsteps in the corridor outside our room.

The door creaked open, and a collective groan filled the air.

A timid figure appeared in the doorway – a man in his fifties, wearing a suit and glasses with a blue frame.

He didn't look like a delivery guy, but the large bag he carried didn't inspire confidence.

It could be more food.

Our groans of protest didn't subside as he placed the bag on the table in the center of the room, looking around, slightly puzzled.

"You called me," he said, trying to calm the murmuring.

"Are you the lawyer?" Mirella stepped forward.

“Of course. Abaco Antonio, at your service.”

“Damn, I’d almost lost hope...”

“I got here as soon as I could, my dear. I’ve been outside in my car since two...” he yawned, “but the street was blocked by all the delivery guys.”

All together, we cleared our throats, and luckily, no one explained the pizza express story to the lawyer.

Instead, we told him *our* story and signed a couple of papers. He assured us that he would do his best.

So, we relaxed, and once the lawyer had left, we took turns throwing up.

Chapter thirty trentino

The show must go on

At the clinic, the detectives were getting nowhere; in fact, things were quickly slipping out of their control. The Old Lady and the others resumed searching the rooms of the victims, which had been sealed off by investigators, thus defying the commissioner's orders. Senior, though trying to hide his excitement, couldn't keep calm, and both Dirk and the Old Lady barred him from entering Mrs. Stanziani's bathroom.

Marione was furious – he had spent the night among the milk cartons of Cavalier Bricconi and the remains of Dolcetto – shouting that if he couldn't take a sip from the Chanel bottle, then neither could Dirk, who, like him, had shown a certain inclination toward the bottle.

Without the doctor, discipline soon became a thing of the past. If nothing else, the Old Lady, who was pushing the investigation forward to speed up her beloved's release, put her sexuality on hold. A great step forward for Marione's testicles.

Trying to instill fear to prevent a mutiny was no easy feat, especially without resorting to low blows. Marione had become immune to the Old Lady's authority after being dumped first under the laundry line and then left agonizing in the street. Meanwhile, Dirk, who was silently watching the two exchange remarks, thought that even drunk, he would never behave that way toward a lady. He just didn't know her well enough yet.

Of course, the investigation was anything but discreet, and Dr. Carnevale, hearing strange noises coming from the first victim's room, wasted no time calling the police. When Zazà and his team burst into Mrs. Stanziani's suite, they found the Old Lady tied to the bed and gagged with strips of cloth torn from the sheets. Dirk and Marione, in the bathroom, were toasting with a large bottle of Chanel and one of Eau de Rochas. It hadn't taken the former brigadier long to change his mind about Mrs. Spezzano.

Zazà had no trouble putting two and two together. The Old Lady, tied up like that, was surely meant to be the next victim, making those two the

culprits. There was no way to convince the commissioner of his mistake, not even after ungagging Mrs. Spezzano, who, despite her ordeal, immediately stood up in defense of her subordinates.

Dirk, guilty of once again giving in to alcohol, and Marione, guilty of having to coexist with an Emilian spirit, were taken to the station in handcuffs, while Mrs. Spezzano, tied to the bed like a human sacrifice in a cult of gerontophiles, made headlines nationwide and beyond.

"The mystery of the nursing home is finally solved," read the newspapers.

You can imagine our astonishment when, around eleven in the morning, instead of the lawyer, Marione's and Dirk's fathers walked into our room. Both visibly drunk.

"Dad! What happened to you? What are you doing in here?" the sons asked.

"Dunno!" their father blurted out, his breath quite something to behold.

"Damn, you're drunk!"

"Oh, don't start..." Senior retorted, unbuttoning his fly.

"You're not seriously going to pee in here?!" his son yelled too late.

Senior was already watering the anorexic ficus resting under the window, which the cops seemed to have neglected for years.

Marione, red with embarrassment, looked to Dirk for an explanation.

The brigadier, between burps, recounted the story in his usual slurred voice. Mirella shuddered when he got to the part where they had cut up the sheets and tied the Old Lady to the bed, but the brigadier quickly reassured her:

"Don't worry... hic... Miss... We didn't tie her up too tight... hic..."

"Do you even realize what you've done? Tying an old lady to a bed..."

"Oh, come on," Senior exploded, completely wasted. "You think this was the first time... hic... she's been in that situation... hic..."

"Mr. Mario," Mirella snapped, "I'm shocked at you... Just how much did you drink last night?"

"A lot... hic... So what?" he said. "Want to dance with me, miss?"

Marione wandered around the room looking for a manhole, while we were amused by his father's outbursts – he must have really gone overboard that night. Even Mirella, deep down, couldn't be mad at him. She

herself would have tied up her grandmother more than once. They had simply had the guts to do it.

The problem now wasn't Marione's father – his drunkenness would pass – but the fact that we were all under arrest, while outside, the Old Lady was in greater danger than ever. No one was left to watch over her, except for Sergio, of course, but he wouldn't even go out to buy rolling papers on his own, let alone protect her.

Zazà entered the room and handed us papers listing our charges. So, getting out was out of the question. My companions and I were accused of drug possession and unlawful occupation of state property. Dr. Novelli was accused of possession. Mirella and Marione were charged with insulting a public official, and Dirk and Senior were even charged with attempted murder and multiple involuntary manslaughters of the former nursing home residents.

Suddenly, reality became scarier than a nightmare. Continuous involuntary manslaughter – were the cops serious, or were they just messing with us? It was impossible for them to misunderstand an event like this. Catching two drunks in the act was one thing, but arresting a real killer was another, especially since the Old Lady wouldn't even press charges for what had happened to her.

Our complaints, however, were useless, and Zazà had us all transferred to a real jail cell, complete with bars, where a small, furry inmate was already residing. At least now, we had a bathroom.

*"Minchia... tutti a cà dentro lì dovevate mittere?"*¹ the little guy, who had been locked up before us, shouted.

"They ran out of suites..." Drugo replied, extending his hand.

*"Eh... minchia io la pazienza finii... sono tciè ore che m'hanna a renchiuso accà ecchecazzo..."*²

"We've been here for almost two days," Mirella replied, introducing herself.

¹ "Damn... they had to put everyone in here?"

² Damn, I'm out of patience... I've been locked up here for three hours already, what the hell...

“Minchia due ggiori... io devo lavorare minchia... mica posso femmare le muntagnne rússe... eccheccazzo...”³

“Roller coasters?”

“Not roller coasters, *montagne russes*...”

There was no way to get him to lower his voice.

“Are you Calogero Gennaro?”

“Minchia... e tu cumme lo sapesti?”⁴

“You’re the guy who killed Engineer Franzoni?” Mirella blurted out.

“Minchia... ora peddo la pazienza... anche tu con chista storia... i non aggiè ammazato nisciuno ancora... l’ho già detto a tutti sti’ fetentoni, minchia... Chill’ingegnere era nù curnuto... io gli feci n’à proposta e lui non volle accettà... tutto lì... io non vado in giro ad ammazà i scurnacchiati... se nun lo facevano fora gli avrei fatto un’altcià proposta che non avribbe potuto rifiutà...”⁵

“Then why were you on the run? Didn’t you know the police were looking for you?”

“Minchia... ma siete sbirri pure a voi altrci? Che cazzo volite da miia... io sono uno bravo guagliò... io volivo solo raddoppià er giro d’à morte... Chillo strunzo non voleva vendermi un pezzo di terra e io a informarmi andai...”⁶

“Get information?”

“Certo michia... chillo scurnacchiato era zeppo di debbiti... peddeva sempre al casinò e io da certi ammicci andai per sapere di quanto ‘sto guagliò stesse sotto.”

³ Two days... damn... I have to work, damn it... I can’t just stop the roller coasters... what the hell...

⁴ Damn... how did you know that?

⁵ Damn... now I’m losing my patience... you too with this story... I didn’t kill nobody yet... I already told all these bastards... that engineer was a cuckold... I made him an offer and he didn’t want to accept... that’s all... I don’t go around killing bastards... if someone hadn’t offed him, I’d have made him another offer he couldn’t refuse...

⁶ Damn... so you’re cops too? What the hell do you want from me... I’m a good guy, man... I just wanted to double the death ride... That bastard wouldn’t sell me a piece of land, so I went to get some information...

“You wanted to have his debt erased in exchange for the factory wing you needed to extend the death ride?”

*“Minchia... proprio cussia... solo che quando tornai il fetentone aveva smesso di giocare.”*⁷

“So he could have been killed by your friends?” Mirella continued, unwilling to let it go, even in front of such a character.

*“Ma per carità... chilli mica sono scurnacchiati... Nun s'accoppa mica chi ha dà pagà tre milioni... non subito almeno...”*⁸

Things weren't exactly getting any clearer, but at least we were gathering clues we had previously overlooked. The roller coaster owner didn't seem like a peaceful guy, but he didn't come across as a killer either, at least at first glance. He explained that Engineer Franzoni was drowning in debt, but he was sure his creditors hadn't taken him out.

Between the lines, we understood that the mafia was just as interested as we were in finding the engineer's killer, who was probably also the one responsible for the murders at the nursing home. This meant that Mrs. Spezzano wasn't in any real danger. She was being watched day and night as a potential target by an organization that, while highly dangerous, was certainly more professional than we were.

Of course, none of these words came directly from Caloggero's mouth – we were the ones interpreting his dialect. The only certain thing at the moment was that we were all under arrest, while a serial killer roamed free outside.

Luckily, the lawyer didn't take too long to arrive, and after posting bail, Mirella and Marione were able to walk free. For us, however, there was nothing to do – our charges were more serious, especially those against Senior and Dirk.

The two of them, after saying goodbye and promising Caloggero they would reassure his family about his condition, left for the nursing home.

⁷ *Damn... exactly... only when I came back, the bastard had stopped gambling.*

⁸ *Oh, come on... they ain't that stupid... You don't kill someone who owes you three million... not right away, at least...*

“Can you believe Franzoni?” Mirella said. “Gambling, mafia... this case is getting even more serious.”

“Come on, let’s not jump to conclusions. Franzoni could’ve lost all that money in a thousand different ways without the mafia being involved. You know how it is, you start playing poker with a bottle of whiskey next to you, and when you wake up the next day, you barely remember putting your wife on the table along with the chips.”

“Okay, let’s say Caloggero wasn’t lying. That he went to his friends to find out how much the engineer’s gambling debt was, to then make him an offer he couldn’t refuse. So far, nothing illegal, I think. This way, Caloggero could’ve expanded the death ride, and Franzoni could’ve saved himself from the grip of organized crime. So why the hell was he killed?”

“Ah... I don’t know,” he said, handing her the rolling papers.

“You’re always the same,” she replied, rolling one in the shape of Marlon Brando.

“Damn...” he blurted out, “The Godfather!!!”

Chapter: thirty – one trentino people

Roller coaster

Caloggero's wife was at the roller coaster ticket booth. The couple couldn't afford to shut down the ride – not so much for financial reasons, but for the neighborhood kids, who would otherwise lose their only source of fun.

Anita, as she was called, wasn't very skilled at operating the ride, and she spent more time running around collecting personal belongings that flew out of customers' pockets – or even their mouths – than she did sitting at the booth to tear tickets.

"Wouldn't it be better to slow it down a little?" Marione asked, noticing how busy she was.

"Sure, but then I'd risk a kid falling out instead of just a denture." She replied.

"Wait, they're not strapped in?"

"Of course not... where's the fun in that?"

Marione was speechless, thinking about those poor kids who could end up splattered on the asphalt.

At least Anita didn't speak in dialect.

"Excuse me," Mirella said, introducing herself. "We're here on behalf of your husband..."

"So, you've seen that scoundrel? Where the hell did he run off to?" She asked angrily.

"Wait... you don't know anything, ma'am?"

"Don't scare me, what happened to him?"

"Nothing serious, don't worry, but your husband is in jail."

"In jail?"

"Yes, he's been accused of murdering Engineer Franzoni..."

"Who, that skinny guy who always lost at the casino and refused to sell us a piece of his land?"

"You knew about that?!"

“Why wouldn’t I? My husband went to get some information. Since that guy was always losing, he wanted to see if he could help him erase his debt. That way, we could tear down that wall and extend the death ride.”

“So, this story really does involve...” Mirella took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and whispered: “the mafia?”

“Huh?”

“The mafia...”

“Huh?”

“The mafia...”

“Ma’am, for heaven’s sake, I don’t even want to hear that word! Mafia, my foot! Who do you think we are?! My husband went to Sancremo.”

“Sancremo?!” Mirella interrupted.

“Of course! Sancremo! Where do you think that poor bastard lost three million? In an illegal gambling den? He’d be dead by now.”

“But he was killed...” Marione cut in.

“Yeah, but certainly for other reasons. The casino director is a friend of ours, and he usually doesn’t kill his customers. Especially not the ones who lose that much.”

“So basically,” Mirella continued, “you’re telling me that your husband was in Sancremo with the casino director, trying to gather information about Engineer Franzoni so he could make him an offer to clear his debt?”

“Exactly. Not the most professional approach, but in war and love, there are no rules.”

“But... we’re not at war...”

“Well, you might not be, young lady, but we’re in the trenches twelve hours a day, glued to these buttons, making sure no kids go flying off. And so far, in thirteen years of operation, we’ve managed to keep it that way. You may not be at war, but I sure am – from morning till night. Ever since we built this hunk of junk.”

Mirella didn’t feel like arguing. As promised, she reassured the woman about her husband’s condition and left with her fiancé – destination: Sancremo.

Chapter thirty – two trentini

The riviera of the stoned

“What a damn situation,” said Mirella, rolling one in the smoking car of the Genoa – Ventimiglia train. “Just because someone speaks in dialect, people immediately think of the mafia.”

“Look, I warned you. But can you tell me what we’re doing here? Couldn’t we just go home? Sergio must be freaking out...”

“Listen, love, we’re already in the game, so we have to play,” she said, eagerly inhaling from the trumpet – shaped orchid. “I want to talk to the casino director. Maybe we’ll find out something interesting.”

“Mirella, look at us,” he blurted out, suddenly made realistic by the active ingredient. “You have green hair, my mohawk is a mess, my pants are ripped, and my boots are all painted. They won’t even let us into the casino, let alone talk to the director...”

“That’s where you’re wrong. We’re going to Sancremo, not Monte Carlo. In Sancremo, there’s the festival; they’re used to artists from all over the world, dressed in all sorts of ways, just like us. You’ll see, we’ll be treated with more respect than the old ladies in evening gowns and jewelry.”

“Love?”

“Yes...”

“Have you ever actually seen the Sancremo Festival?”

“Well, to be honest... no.”

“I figured. So you have no idea what the singers look like?”

“More or less like the Rolling Stones thirty years ago?”

“More or less like the lettuce we have in the fridge in the middle.”

“The one from last year?!”

“Yeah, and it still looks better than the average singer. If you know what I mean.”

“Oops...”

Mirella wasn’t entirely wrong, though. They were already in the game, so they might as well play. Besides, they had earned a little trip, and even if

Sancremo wasn't Berlin, it was a start. After getting off at the station, they wandered around like tourists for a while, even briefly feeling like they were on vacation – until the front page of the local newspaper brought them back to reality. They allowed themselves just a couple of beers, then set off toward the casino.

By the time they reached the foot of the grand staircase, they were drenched in sweat and exhausted – both from the orchid and the beers, which had rapidly multiplied along the way. Unfortunately, Marione's prophecy came true: there was no way they would get past security. Two tall guards – dark suits, dark glasses, dark shoes, and not a drop of sweat – blocked their way at the entrance.

"Sorry, jackets are required."

"Then give me yours," Mirella shot back, shoving the bouncer.

"Look, you can't come in," the brute continued, scowling. "Don't make us angry."

"We need to see the director, and we're not interested in your little games. Call him and be done with it."

"No one sees the director without an appointment."

"Listen, we came all the way from Genoa to see the director." The bouncer chuckled.

"Sorry, but even if you came all the way from Australia, without an appointment, you're not getting in."

"Alright then," Mirella decided, seeing the guards were immovable. "Tell Pierluca that the niece of Baroness Spezzano is here, and then we'll see who won't be allowed in anymore."

Marione froze. "Baroness?! What the hell is this about?" he whispered. "Uh, well... I was going to tell you later..."

"Oh, crap... My head is spinning," he murmured, feeling his blood sugar drop.

At the mention of the alleged aristocratic niece, the bulkier guard punched a series of beeps into his phone, explained the situation, and – pressing his earpiece tightly – his expression quickly changed. The arrogance of someone who never has to ask for anything melted into a slick, servile grin.

...

Pierluca – dressed in a white tuxedo – was waiting in front of a Hemingway – in – Vacation – style liquor cabinet that dominated the office in place of a traditional desk.

“Miss Mirella!” he exclaimed, spilling a little of his gin and tonic. “What a pleasure to see you!”

“Of course it is,” she replied, hugging him. “Considering how much the Old Lady lost here...”

“Well, let’s say your dear grandmother was one of my most loyal clients.”

“Without whom you’d never have been able to buy an atoll in the Pacific,” Mirella interjected.

“Yes, well, that’s a bit of a sore spot, I’m afraid.”

“How so?”

“They forced me to sell it for only three times the purchase price. They’re going to use it for nuclear testing.”

“No way?!”

“Unfortunately, yes...”

“That’s awful,” Mirella said, thinking about the radiation.

“Exactly, my dear. If it were up to me, I never would have sold it, but you know how governments are – they’d have taken it anyway, just like in Japan.”

Marione couldn’t believe his eyes or ears. He stood there, dumbfounded by one of the most absurd characters he had ever met, while Mirella navigated the situation like a pro.

“Please, come in,” Pierluca said, gesturing toward the liquor cabinet with an exaggeratedly posh ‘R’ that would have made Guccini blush. “This is my humble office.”

“Office?! But there’s not even a desk,” Marione observed.

“Indeed, no. I do all my work right here,” he said, leaning against the liquor cabinet. “Gin and tonic?”

“But it’s not even three o’clock!”

“Exactly,” he agreed, glancing at the massive Rolex weighing down his wrist. “So we’d better make it a double unless we want to spend the afternoon playing with ice cubes. But tell me, Miss Mirella, what brings you here? If I’m not mistaken, you don’t care for gambling.”

“Indeed, we’re here for some information...”

“Meaning?” he asked, pulling a joint from a Fabergé enamel case with a two – tone gold mount.

“Well, let’s just say there have been a few murders in our city, more precisely at the nursing home where the baroness currently resides. While investigating, we found ourselves caught up in something much bigger than us, and...”

Mirella summarized the whole story to Pierluca, who kept smoking greedily from his joint without even pretending to pass it around. Marione – like a child staring at a toy store window – drooled with every puff, wondering what kind of stuff a man so rich, so incredibly rich, that he could be such a bastard as to not share a hit with his guests, might be smoking. Unfortunately, his question remained unanswered.

After listening to Mirella’s account and putting out the joint halfway through, Pierluca confirmed Anita’s version. “The lady told you the truth. The engineer was a regular client of mine; he often came to play with my machines...”

“Machines?!” Marione interrupted. “Are you saying he lost three million on slot machines?”

“He was a very loyal customer, and since he had an excellent reputation, I had instructed the token cashier to extend him credit for the quarter bucks dollar tokens he usually played with. Then I went on vacation for a week on my yacht with two stunning seventeen – well, let’s skip that part. Anyway, when I got back, the engineer had vanished, and he had lost a clean three million bucks. He must have really gone at it that week.”

“You mean... he lost all that money on quarters machines?!”

“Exactly, my dear. He wouldn’t play any other ones. Said he would feel guilty otherwise, or something like that...”

“And then,” Mirella continued, “how did things unfold?”

“Well, my dear, obviously without any publicity, as befits an organization like mine. I immediately cut off his credit and sent for him to ask for an explanation.”

“So you saw him before he was taken out?”

“Of course, my friend, absolutely. I sent two *Plastichini* to fetch him...”

“*Plastichini*?”

“You met them at the entrance. I like to call them that because they never sweat. But back to us, I imagine you don’t have much time?”

Which meant he wouldn’t waste any more of his own.

“Exactly.”

“So,” he continued, sipping his gin and tonic, “the engineer appeared before me, escorted by the *plastichini*, apologizing for the loss and promising to settle his debt as soon as possible. That wouldn’t have been a problem, except that instead of signing the usual IOUs, he wanted to offer me a highly valuable artwork as collateral. As you can see for yourselves,” he said, pointing to his own portrait, “I have always had a deep appreciation for art, so I was intrigued by his proposal. I agreed to take a look at what he had in store for me, on the condition, of course, that I wouldn’t accept anything bigger than my safe room...”

“And then what happened?”

“Franzoni handed me a suitcase, which I opened with measured calm. I didn’t want to show disappointment, but that miserable briefcase could hardly conceal a Van Gogh or a Picasso, at least not with the frame. I never would have thought that Franzoni, a longtime loyal customer, would try to screw me over, so I was at least expecting a diamond – encrusted Rolex or something of the sort. But never, ever, would I have imagined that the engineer was trying to pass off a pathetic little toy soldier...”

“A toy soldier?!”

“That was exactly my reaction... A damn toy soldier with a gun in its hand! Crazy, right?!”

“Bacicc...” Marione muttered, before Mirella’s elbow drove into his gallbladder.

“And then what happened?” she continued, as Marione turned an unhealthy shade of blue.

“It’s obvious, my dear. First, I tore into him verbally, explaining in detail where he could shove it, then, deeply offended by such an insult, I had him sign a whole stack of IOUs with my Montblanc. After that, I kindly asked *plastichini* to escort him home. The rest, my dears, you already know. My friend Caloggero paid me a visit. He wanted to know if the engineer was really drowning in debt. Of course, it wasn’t exactly professional of me to share such information, but Caloggero and I come from the

same town and emigrated around the same time. We met in Milan at diction school, and during our school years, we lived together in a tiny flat in San Babila. We became great friends – he defended me from skinhead attacks, and I gave him candlelit tutoring sessions. Not that it helped much. He flunked, and the skinheads still beat me up on a regular basis.”

“So you told him how much the engineer owed you?”

“Of course. A clean three million – not a single quarter more or less. Strange, right? And yet my groupies aren’t allowed to round up or down!”

“What happened next?”

“Caloggero left. He wanted to offer to settle the debt in exchange for the land he needed. I was quite pleased about it. Caloggero is a man of honor, and I was sure he’d pay me back much faster than the engineer ever could. If only the latter, as we all know, hadn’t gone and gotten himself killed. Who knows what kind of mess he got himself into.”

“So what do you intend to do now?”

“Well, let’s just say there aren’t many ways to squeeze money out of a corpse, so I’m somewhat resigned to the loss. Except that, among the various documents I had him sign, there was also a power of attorney to sell regarding the factory he owned.”

“You mean Global is yours now?” Mirella blurted out, as a vague scheme began to take shape in her green – haired head.

“I wish. Unfortunately, my lawyers have informed me that Global is more mortgaged than a Monopoly board. My power of attorney is as frozen as a codfish, pardon the joke.”

Marione was slowly returning to a normal color.

“One last thing, Mr. Pierluca. When speaking with Mr. Caloggero, I got the impression that you were investigating to track down the engineer’s killers. Am I wrong?”

“That’s not quite right. I won’t deny that at first, I wanted to make those bastards pay for killing one of my debtors, but conducting an actual investigation is a whole different story. I agreed with Caloggero that if the police found anything, he would immediately inform me, so I could move my pieces to make sure the IOUs ended up under a different name.”

“So if you had tracked down the murderer, you wouldn’t have even considered reporting him – you’d have just tried to recover your lost three million?!”

“Miss, I never said that... I’m sorry, but I really must get back to work now.” he concluded, staring into his empty glass.

Mirella shook his hand and thanked him for his lost time, while Mari-one, dazed, couldn’t quite figure out when Pierluca had managed to gift his girlfriend the works of Proust.

Chapter thirty – three: Thirty trentino

Poor me

Why did they leave me all alone? I can't take this damned window anymore... Where did everyone go? Hey, what the hell is that old lady doing? Look at how she limps... She limps too well, damn it... No doubt about it... Forget the old lady act – she must be a secret agent... Huh? Gotcha, you lousy 007... Damn it, I knew this would happen sooner or later. They want to take back the center... They want it back at all costs. They must have already locked up all my comrades... By now, they're probably torturing them with hot irons, damn it... And that van? Holy crap, what's up with that van? What's that huge soy hot dog on the roof... They must be Feds... Not all their vans are blacked out, you know... Look at that one – it says *Gran Ristoro* on it. The hot dog is definitely hiding radio direction – finders, no doubt about it... But how the hell did they track us down? We don't even use cell phones... Those bastards know every trick in the book... Damn cops...

Hey, what's happening now? Look at that mom arguing with the clerk. She's counting the change he gave her... Professionals, no doubt about it... And that kid? Must be a dwarf, no way he's just a kid... Cops are bastards, but not that bastardly – they wouldn't recruit children... At least, I think they wouldn't. A dwarf, for sure – a circus dwarf. Those guys are the most dangerous... If I let my guard down for even a second, I bet he'll do a double somersault and stick to the wall like Spider – Man...

Fuck you, you little dwarf!!!

Oh, now you've realized you can't move me from here, huh? Yeah, that's right... Look at him, rubbing that hot dog all over his face like a goddamn psycho... It must be a disguised walkie – talkie... Otherwise, why would the hot dog be bulging out of the bun like that? There's an antenna inside, for sure.

Why the hell did they leave me alone? They know I can't hold the fort by myself for long in this state... I need to relax... Yeah, that's it, I really need to relax... Those bastards are gearing up, I'm sure of it... Maybe I

should roll myself a nice, thick one... Just to make sure I don't make any rash decisions... Though – oh, shit – I spilled too much in there... No, wait... This must be a sign... It means I need to really relax...

Wait, what the fuck is that Old Lady doing? Look at her – she's got her cane stuck in the storm drain... Bitch... I know you're just marking your position. Forget the Sword in the Stone – you don't look anything like King Arthur, you filthy cop... And she's gotta be old as hell... Looks like Sean Connery's wife. But shouldn't they be retiring them at that age? What am I even thinking – she's probably a twenty – year – old nympho hiding her problem under a uniform... No doubt about it... These shady organizations thrive on weak – willed people...

And seriously, lady – if you wanted to go undercover, a couple of spritzes of perfume would've done the trick – not a whole uniform...

Hey... What the hell is that construction worker doing? He just lit a cigarette up there on the scaffolding... That's gotta be a signal, shit... They're getting ready to move in... He can't be too far away in line – of – sight... If only I could hit him with a water gun and put out his cigarette, I could buy myself some time... I can't leave anything to chance, damn it, this is about our center... After all the effort we put into finding a place to squat in this city, I can't just sit back and do nothing...

Bastards... You won't get me...

Three years – it took three damn years to find this loft... And now you want to kick us out? Who do you think we are, huh? Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a government – owned building in this city? With Drugo insisting the social center had to be near a tavern... Pippi wanting it close to the bus lines, and Siringa – of course – demanding it be near a nursing home...

I mean, sure, his reasons made the most sense... He wanted to grow old peacefully... Everyone has their quirks, and when he arrived, damn, did he have a lot of them... Said if he didn't, he'd end up losing his mind... Turning into the kind of guy who sings *C'era un ragazzo che come me*... all day long...

Which – seriously – I never got that one, damn it...

Hey, what's that construction worker doing? He just lit another cigarette off the last one... Shit's getting real, for fuck's sake... That's a clear sig-

nal... But where the hell is my water gun? Those bastard doctors didn't confiscate it, did they?

Fucking hell, look at this ridiculous situation... And this damn joint still isn't kicking in... Why the hell aren't my comrades back yet... Who do they think I am, Rambo? I can't take on all of them by myself...

Holy shit – see? I told you – the old hag just pried the storm drain open! What did I say?! Forget being eighty – she's got Mister Clean's strength, no doubt about it...

These people are professionals, damn it... Look at how she acts, how she moves... She really looks embarrassed... And that construction worker... How the hell does he smoke that much?

Wait... No way...

Oh, holy shit...

This is too much...

That fucking dwarf just ate the walkie – talkie.

Chapter thirty – four

The seven dwarfs

Dirk sat in a corner, cross – legged, at the mercy of his own guilt: the drunkenness was wearing off. I knew his story, so I approached him, cigarette butt in hand, to cheer him up a little. He wasn't depressed because of the wrinkles tattooed onto his forehead or the murder charge weighing on him. He was furious with Senior, who had tricked him into drinking:

“Tying up the Old Lady was fine,” he confided to me, “I did that willingly. But I absolutely didn't want to go back to drinking. It was Senior who screwed me over – he handed me a big bottle of cologne, saying it was sparkling water. I took a big gulp before realizing that sparkling water doesn't taste like *Amaro Averna*, but by then, the room was already full of blue elephants. After that, I couldn't hold back anymore.”

Mirella and Junior would have cringed with shame. Sure, Senior was a purebred Emilian, but that didn't give him the right to make a former alcoholic drink. Not even as a joke.

Senior had somewhat recovered and was wandering around, trying to piece things together. His voice was still a bit slurred as he searched for the missing link. He was convinced we had overlooked something, like those milk cartons he couldn't find in the Cavalier's room. What really bothered him was the last bottle of Talisker, greedily sucked down from a Chanel bottle, and the story of the dwarf dressed as Grumpy that he had heard.

Was it really possible for a dwarf to go unnoticed?

I found myself agreeing with him, realizing that Drugo, who had spotted this odd character from the center's windows, often saw things that – like stars – might have stopped existing millions of years ago. That's because he viewed life through the lenses of cigar – shaped telescopes stuffed with Jamaican plantations.

Suddenly, I realized how sloppy our efforts had been. Not only had we barely lifted a finger – we hadn't even understood each other.

Drugo had seen Grumpy sneak out of the nursing home, but we needed to understand what he meant by Grumpy. We applied more or less stand-

ardized concepts to what we thought we were supposed to interpret, whereas Drugo, more than once, flipped our theories on their heads with just two or three puffs.

Finally, I understood what needed to be done: me.

With a sharp movement, I popped open the heel of my boots, which – like an anarchist 007 – contained three grams of reserve Afro – Cuban that I had been saving for special occasions. I wanted to bring my comrades to that catatonic pre – coma state that dissolves into a syrupy sequence of dreamlike images, so I could get Drugo to tell me his version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

So, I rolled one up in the shape of a little house in the woods.

As master of ceremonies, I went first. Three puffs – three each was the magic number.

With the first, I felt light, as if someone had filled my skull with the gas that makes balloons float. With the second, I saw a blue elephant enter the cell. And the third made my purpose clearer than ever.

It took three little houses to satisfy everyone, and in the end, even Ca-loggero – who had never smoked – went off the deep end.

Drugo would have preferred to enjoy his own delusions, but my persistence was relentless.

In the end, waving fifty bucks in front of him, I managed to convince him.

“The Seven Dwarfs were...”

“A Walt Disney fairy tale, we already know that,” I interrupted, overly talkative thanks to the active ingredient.

“Fairy tale?! How much have you smoked? They were a gang of bank and post office robbers. They didn’t use weapons and operated with the so – called hole technique. They never hurt anyone, and you could say the entire nation was rooting for them. Especially the young girls.

They were gentleman thieves – like Arsène Lupin, if you know what I mean – which is why they were so famous. When they were caught, their story made headlines all over the world.

They called them the Seven Dwarfs because they could squeeze through tiny tunnels, but when they were finally arrested, the whole country real-

ized they weren't short at all. In fact, they were quite tall. They dressed elegantly, and their charm seduced half the women on the planet.

It's impossible that you don't remember them. The newspapers covered their story everywhere. They were only caught because an insomniac passerby heard noises coming from a manhole and called the cops.

When the seven climbed out of the sewers, they didn't resist at all. When the police, who were just as confused, asked what they were doing in the drains at that hour – as if there were an appropriate time – the first one said he had argued with his wife and went for a walk, then held out his wrists to be cuffed.

The second said he was there to keep his friend company, and so on.

The press had no trouble painting them for what they truly were – criminals from another era, gentlemen, in a sense.”

Having said this, Drugo swiftly pocketed the fifty bucks I had been holding, while my face froze in shock.

That story, which at any other time would have had me rolling on the floor, now sent a chill down my spine.

I couldn't tell if Drugo was messing with us or if he really believed it.

“Are you messing with us?”

“What the hell do you mean?” he asked, slipping the banknote into his pocket. “You asked me to tell you the story of the Seven Dwarfs, and this is it... don't you remember? It was in all the newspapers when we were kids.”

I vaguely remembered something – the news at the time had clogged the TV schedules with special editions. What I couldn't understand was how he could remember this so well while completely forgetting a much more famous and universal fairy tale.

“Drugo, listen to me carefully, please,” I began, trying to shake him out of his coma. “When you saw one of the Seven Dwarfs sneaking out of the nursing home, did you mean one of the bank robbers or one of the Seven Dwarfs from the fairy tale?”

“What fairy tale?”

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, come on...”

“Huh?!”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me you don’t know the story of Snow White?”

“I just want to enjoy the elephants, I’m not trying to convince you of anything...”

“Nobody ever told you the story of Snow White?” I was starting to get agitated.

“Pat, I don’t know where you’re going with this, but if you quit smoking, maybe your memory would improve. You do know I’m an orphan, right?”

For a moment, I considered crawling into a manhole. I knew his situation very well – poor guy had grown up in an orphanage, and the caretakers certainly didn’t have time for bedtime stories between one whipping and the next...

“Damn, but you didn’t think this could cause a huge misunderstanding?”

“Look, you’re making the elephants disappear. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You said you saw Grumpy leaving the clinic, and while we all assumed it was one of the Seven Dwarfs, you were actually talking about a member of the famous ‘Hole Gang,’ right?”

“Exactly.”

“And it never crossed your mind that we would obviously think of the fairy tale and not a news story from fifteen years ago?”

“Fairy tale? What fairy tale?”

I let it go – he wasn’t entirely wrong. We had acted carelessly. *Murder, She Wrote* had busted our balls without teaching us a damn thing.

“One last question, my friend,” I continued, caught up in my new role as a private investigator. “The guy you saw – was he just dressed like Grumpy, or did he actually look like him?”

“He was dressed like Grumpy: black shirt, black pants, black socks, and leopard – print Creepers. But I don’t think it was the real one. He’d be over sixty by now, probably enjoying his retirement in the tropics – if they even released him. The gang got arrested, but no one ever recovered the loot.”

Having said that, Drugo, exhausted from the conversation, rolled his eyes back and collapsed noisily onto the cell floor.

I turned around, expecting applause, but everyone was in a coma. Everyone except Caloggero, who, having never been in this state before, was arranging a bizarre mixed fry on the floor of the cell.

He wanted to paint an Arcimboldo, but he didn't seem to be having much fun. He muttered incomprehensible words in his dialect and smoked one cigarette after another – he just couldn't get the shrimp to stay still...

Chapter thirty – four and a half

Applied mathematics

“I’m astonished, love! The Old Lady is a baroness, and you’ve got blue blood running through your veins... Is there anything else you’d like to tell me at a more appropriate moment?” Marione asked, resentful, as they stepped off the train that brought them home.

“Come on, don’t be upset. I would have told you everything in due time, it’s not exactly something I’m proud of. Either way, Pierluca fed us a bunch of lies, that’s for sure.”

“What do you mean? Your friend confirmed Anita’s story, didn’t he?!”

“Listen carefully,” Mirella said, rolling a cigarette shaped like a slot machine. “Pierluca’s theory doesn’t add up. First of all, he told us he was away for only a week with two young girls – the pig – while the engineer had unlimited credit at the token counter for quarter coins. Now, tell me, how long do you think it takes for a professional gambler to insert a coin, pull the lever, wait for the reels to stop, realize he lost, curse, and start over?”

“Well... I don’t know,” Marione replied, miming the action on his trumpet. “At least five seconds.”

“Exactly. Now let’s do a quick calculation: three million is equal to seven hundred and fifty thousand quartes to be played at the slot machine.”

“So far, so good...”

“Right... Now, assuming – and this is quite a stretch – that the engineer was the unluckiest man alive and never won a single round... he still would have needed three million seven hundred and fifty seconds to lose all the money. You following?”

“More or less...”

“Good. Now, considering that one hour has three thousand six hundred seconds, and a day has twenty – four hours, we get that in a week – totaling six hundred four thousand eight hundred seconds – the poor guy couldn’t have lost more than thirty thousand two hundred and forty bucks. And even

if he had inserted five coins at a time, he couldn't have lost more than one hundred and fifty – two thousand bucks at most...”

“So?”

“So something doesn't add up. Let's make an assumption. Pierluca told us that Global is drowning in mortgages, meaning the engineer wasn't doing well financially. Let's say he decided to play smart to buy himself some time with his creditors...”

“Meaning?”

“If you stop interrupting me, I'll get there. So, Franzoni knows Pierluca is about to go on vacation and takes advantage of it by going to the casino, where he has unlimited credit at the low – value coin counter. He cashes in big, accumulating three million in tokens, then at the end of the night, he goes to a different counter to exchange them back into cash and heads home with money to settle some urgent debts. Usually – and I know this for a fact – Pierluca never goes away for just a few days, but this time, something must have gone wrong on his trip. Forced to return earlier than expected, Pierluca must have found out about the engineer's financial situation ahead of schedule.”

“So he sent the *plastic guys* after him. At this point, the poor guy has to pay back his debt sooner than expected, and his plan – if he even had one – falls apart.”

“He must have had a plan; let's not forget he was in possession of the miniature... a miniature that, as we know, is worth exactly as much as his debt.”

“So Franzoni wanted to sell the Baciccia to pay off his debt?”

“Exactly. But since the director came back earlier than expected, he messed everything up for him. At this point, the engineer sulks home with his tail between his legs. But then what? Pierluca might have involved his friend, who – what a coincidence – owns the roller coaster right in front of the factory. Maybe just to keep an eye on him, and Caloggero jumped at the chance, hoping to expand his family business...”

“Huh?”

“The loop – the – loop.”

“Ah!”

“But Global is mortgaged to the hilt, so even if Franzoni wanted to, he couldn’t sell him a single matchstick.”

“And that must have been seriously misinterpreted by your friend.”

“Absolutely. But then what?”

“Well, he had him killed.”

“Not a chance. First of all, Pierluca, as eccentric as he is, isn’t the type to go around murdering people. And even if I were wrong, the massacre at the nursing home would make no sense. All the deaths are connected...”

“How can you be so sure?”

“What kind of question is that? Have you forgotten where we found the Baciccia?”

“Ah, right... But let’s try flipping the situation.”

“Meaning?”

“Franzoni needs money, so he might have sneaked into the nursing home,” Marione continued as a jackpot flashed on the wreckage of the slot machine, “to give a heart attack to one of the women carrying his pace-makers, ensuring that the others would then rush to him for an expensive check – up...”

“That sounds a bit too convoluted and long – term as a plan, don’t you think?”

“Well, let me finish... Let’s say he wanted to scare Mrs. Stanziani, but he didn’t know she was a habitual drug user. So, he hides in the wardrobe, ready to jump out in the dead of night to scare her to death. Only, Stanzi-ani, high as a kite, jumps to her feet at the first sound, ears perked up, and when Franzoni opens the closet doors... bam! He accidentally cracks her skull. At that point, he has no choice but to flee and rethink his plan. The second time, he doesn’t fail, and Widow Gadolla is found lifeless in her bed. But by then, no one believes it was just an accident anymore. Franzoni freaks out – he’s killed two patients and accomplished nothing. His mind turns to mush, and he keeps piling up bodies until an angry creditor – let’s say Pierluca – hires someone to take care of this embarrassing problem for him. In fact, there haven’t been any more murders since Franzoni’s death...”

“It’s a creative theory, I’ll give you that, but too many pieces don’t fit. If the killer really was sent by the casino director, why on earth would he

have been hiding at the nursing home? Drugo saw him leaving the day the police showed up disguised, but what reason would he have had to be there? And among the cops, no less...”

“Maybe he has a relative in the clinic.”

“Sure, and would you visit your father dressed as Superman?”

“What does that have to do with anything? Ah... I get it... Well... No!”

“Wait a second,” Mirella blurted out, her gaze lost in thought. “We found Baciccia in the clinic’s billiard room, but as far as I know, Franzoni was never a patient of Dr. Novelli, even though most of the residents knew him. The victims were probably not randomly chosen by a completely deranged Franzoni... In fact, Franzoni might not even be fully involved in this mess. He had Baciccia, and we found it in the game room. That means someone at the clinic knew its value. Franzoni had a buyer in there, and if the figurine never left the place, it means the engineer walked out with three million... three million that still haven’t turned up.”

Things were starting to make sense, and Mirella, euphoric, felt close to solving the puzzle – until, as they neared their neighborhood, she spotted the familiar scene of photographers and emergency vehicles. In front of the community center, an ambulance had already loaded its patient and was speeding toward the hospital with sirens blaring. A chill ran down her spine.

There was no sign of her grandmother’s usual shouting in the air. And if she wasn’t yelling, that meant one of two things – either she was unaware of what had happened, or she was the protagonist of the event.

Racing forward, Marione and Mirella pushed through the crowd of on-lookers and the cops cordoning off the area. Without thinking, they both lit up a cigarette to calm their nerves and instantly relaxed when the officer cuffing them informed them that the victim of the accident – thankfully not fatal – was just a poor construction worker who had slipped off a wet scaffold.

Chapter thirty – five

Bust shot of the Old Lady

Meanwhile, the Old Lady's blood pressure had reached Guinness World Record levels. The commissioner's actions had led to the arrest of all the people she cared about most, except for her granddaughter, who she didn't yet know had been detained. The clinic, without Dr. Novelli, was no longer the same. She needed time to fully process everything that had happened, but the absurdity of the situation only fueled her anger. That's why she decided to organize a press conference, which was attended by only one reporter – an intern on a training contract – along with his equipment.

The Old Lady, waiting in the lobby for the arrival of top – tier journalists, spotted a massive camera emerging from a Renault 4 and making its way toward the clinic steps, over which she presided. The tiny reporter – tiny in every sense – only managed to become visible at the top of the stairs. The Old Lady wasn't discouraged and, assuming that this camera and the others that were surely on their way would soon arrive, she quickly freshened up her makeup, accidentally sticking a false eyelash onto her forehead in the rush.

Unfortunately, in the meeting room provided by Dr. Carnevale, she found nothing but the enormous camera mounted on a highly questionable tripod and the prototype of what she still considered an infant...

"Have you lost your mommy, little one?" she asked the reporter, tugging his cheek hard.

"Madam, come on... I'm the reporter from Tele Salmone. You were the one who called the network..."

"The what?"

"The network..."

"And why didn't they send me a reporter?"

"But ma'am," he continued, slightly offended, "I am the reporter."

"But I called for a press conference... This is serious business, not some kiddie TV show."

"I'm twenty years old, for your information," the journalist retorted, a bit irritated. "Are we doing this conference or not? I don't have all day – I have to cover a train derailment at seven."

"A derailment at seven!" the Old Lady exclaimed, who hadn't taken a train in years.

"Yes, at nineteen hundred hours... Well, it was supposed to be at eighteen thirty, but the express is running thirty minutes late."

"Alright, kid, warm up the valves on that camera of yours and make sure you get a nice close – up – I have a few words to share with the people."

"What people? Our station barely reaches the neighborhood, and not even that well, to be honest."

"Damn, where are your transmitters?"

"Transmitters? Tele Salmone broadcasts using the lightning rod on top of the church bell tower. The priest let us hook up there – it's a bit risky, but cost – effective."

"That explains why there's never any signal when it rains."

"Let's get to the point, ma'am," the reporter said, switching on the lights. "Whenever you're ready, I'm rolling."

"Alright," the Old Lady said, fixing her hair. "Give me the cue."

"Four... Three... Two... One..."

"Ladies and gentlemen, good evening," the Old Lady began, convinced she was broadcasting live. "I called this press conference to shake the consciences of our viewers. Unfortunately, our city – already the stage of atrocious crimes – is rapidly turning into a circus. Instead of diligently investigating to swiftly unravel the mystery behind the tragic deaths that have shaken our beloved nursing home, our dear commissioner has seen fit to arrest its head doctor. He, along with myself and others – also absurdly imprisoned – was taking on the work that should have been handled by the authorities. But Commissioner Zazà, too busy microscopically analyzing the dust particles found on the victims' genitals, cannot afford to be directly involved in the investigation... It is outrageous, my friends, that innocent people have been arrested by a so – called police commissioner while a murderer still roams free. That's why I call upon all of you to mobilize in protest. We must stand against the established authority, which instead of

aiding the community, mocks it. The time has come to say enough is enough...”

Under the glare of the two – thousand – watt spotlight, the Old Lady was sweating profusely, and beneath her wig, the Bostik glue was melting, streaking her face. The reporter, too mesmerized by her changing features, remained speechless. When he checked the recording in slow motion afterward, he realized that the glue dripping down from the base of her hairpiece made her transformation resemble the special effects in Michael Jackson’s music videos. The Old Lady, who had started with the typical pale complexion of the elderly, had by the end of her monologue turned a soft brown – Casablanca – style.

Dr. Carnevale, lurking off – camera, couldn’t pass up such an opportunity. He and Dr. Novelli had discussed their concerns on multiple occasions, agreeing that as soon as the wig started shifting, the Bostik should be replaced with simple double – sided tape.

This was precisely why the small circle of Tele Salmone’s loyal viewers, at the end of Mrs. Spezzano’s speech, saw a figure in a white coat stealthily approaching her from behind and preparing to rip the hairpiece off her head.

The broadcast ended with the sharp rip of Velcro, and fortunately, the Old Lady’s ensuing curses were drowned out by a commercial break.

Mrs. Spezzano, outraged by the incident, found herself wandering the streets – bald and dark as an eight ball.

Chapter thirty – six

The blues of the cheetah shoes

As soon as I saw Mirella and Marione escorted into our cell, I hurried to tell them what I had discovered: the killer wasn't a dwarf but a normally sized person, dressed in black and wearing horrible shoes. Mirella hugged me, pleased with the new development, saying that now all we had to do was find a pair of such shoes to catch the murderer. She already seemed to know the motive.

"So we've got it!" she exclaimed, while the cell remained in a comatose state. "This whole story boils down to a simple theft."

We were a bit bewildered and extremely dazed from the trumpets, so we didn't fully understand where Mirella was going with this. Then she forced us to put out our joints and shared her theory. Only now did we learn all the details. Mirella told us about the drugs found in Mrs. Stanziani's room and Widow Gadolla's kleptomaniac tendencies. About Calogero's desire – his face turning red at the mention of himself – to expand the death racket. About a strange character who ran the casino in Sancremo and a toy soldier that seemed to be worth a fortune.

Engineer Franzoni's pacemaker worked too well – so well that its users began skipping expensive check – ups, sinking their benefactor's profits. At that point, to cover his debts, Franzoni devised a colorful scheme to scam the municipal casino of Sancremo. He would repay the three million he desperately needed by selling a precious miniature he owned...

"That's what I couldn't put my finger on!" Senior shouted.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense..."

"The cheetah – print shoes – that's what it was. When the Old Lady and I searched Widow Gadolla's room, I noticed those hideous shoes by the radiator without thinking much of it... I'm only realizing it now."

Mirella shuddered, her hair stood on end, and a slight dizziness made her stagger, prompting us to rush to support her. "Wait...", she said. "Are

you telling me you saw cheetah – print shoes lined up near the radiator in the widow’s room?”

“I just told you...”

“Try to reconstruct the victim’s room, please,” she asked, creating a Hitchcock – level suspense.

“What?!”

“Reconstruct the room – tell us how it was arranged and what you saw.”

“Let me think... The first time we entered to investigate, everything seemed strangely pristine. The bed was made. On the right, there was a wardrobe – the one where we later found all that stolen loot. The window opposite the door must have been closed, and there was nothing interesting on the table. But where are you going with this?”

“How can you be sure the window was closed?”

“Well, because when I entered, it was really hot in there, and when I cracked the door open, if there had been a draft, the curtain would have moved...”

“The curtain?” Mirella asked, intensifying the suspense.

“Yes, the curtain in front of the window was drawn.”

“So you couldn’t see outside?”

“Of course not. And anyway, it was dark – what could I have seen?”

“Tell me, Mario,” Mirella asked slowly, as if about to reveal a crucial secret, “is the radiator in Widow Gadolla’s room positioned like in all the other rooms?”

“Yes, of course. Under the windowsill!” he exclaimed suddenly, realizing with horror where she was going.

“So the killer was still in the room, hiding behind the curtain, when you two entered to search it! Holy hell, how could you not have noticed that? Do you realize the risk you took?!”

Marione couldn’t answer. We all tried to shake off the chill by lighting up our cigarette butts again.

“Now everything is damn clear,” Dr. Novelli continued. “If you were that close to the killer, that means he had returned to look for something...”

“Exactly,” Mirella interrupted him. “The murderer was trying to steal the miniature that Franzoni must have sold to Mrs. Stanziani. But something went wrong.”

“Because Stanziani had already been robbed by Widow Gadolla, who treated theft like an Olympic sport,” Senior added.

“Right... But now we come to sweet Mrs. Luisa, who never harmed anyone in her life and was loved by all. How could she possibly fit into such an absurd scheme?”

“That, I don’t know,” Mirella admitted, “but there’s a question I need answered immediately!” She turned a fierce gaze toward Caloggero. “It’s not true, then, that Pierluca contacted you to keep an eye on the poor engineer to make sure he didn’t run off with the loot?”

“Well...” He hesitated. “What’s so bad about that?”

“Well, well, well... And isn’t it also true that the idea of expanding the death racket only came to you at that moment?”

“Listen... girl... okay, I took advantage of the situation... I wanted that scoundrel to give me the land... I didn’t want to kill him, though... I made him an offer, but the guy said no... and I told him that if he didn’t return the three million, he’d regret it... then the guy went and got himself killed... But I swear, I didn’t kill anyone...”

“So Pierluca never got back his three million?”

“Of course not.”

“I think I’ve got it now. Put out the joints, please. I need to talk to the commissioner. In light of these new facts, he’ll have to reconsider our situation.”

Mirella was deep in thought, smoking one cigarette after another, waiting for the air in the cell to clear enough to call Zazà without risking an increased sentence. It seemed like the punk girl was facing a riddle, something she had to do – something she wished she had nothing to do with. Marione sat with the others, silent, listening to his girlfriend’s theories with a blank stare, playing with an octopus clinging to the bars, as if trying to detach himself from it all. He also knew something we didn’t yet understand. And he didn’t like it.

When the air became breathable again and the fireflies stopped dancing, Dr. Novelli called the commissioner. Unfortunately, the constable informed us that Zazà was out on duty.

A black old woman had been reported for disturbing the peace and insulting a public officer outside the nursing home. He would be back soon.

Chapter thirty – six and a half

The kidnapping of Zazà

When Zazà threw the old black woman into the cell – after she had called one of his subordinates a damn idiot – he found all the inmates waiting for him. Before he could even react, he was swiftly pulled inside and surrounded by the entire group of detainees, led, of course, by Marione and Dr. Novelli.

Mirella hesitated for a moment when she saw her grandmother, bald and black, entering the cell.

“This is kidnapping!” the commissioner shouted in protest.

Dr. Novelli, however, shoved a joint into his mouth and snapped a picture of him using the forensic Polaroid camera Zazà had been holding upon arrival.

“No, my dear,” the doctor replied, holding up the instant photo. “This is blackmail... Look how well you came out, Zazà. This would make quite a splash in the newspapers. I can already see the headlines: 'Commissioner Zazà Gets High with Inmates'...”

Zazà looked like a trapped rat. He yelled curses and called for help, but his cries never made it past the human wall that muffled him completely, as if at a concert. He even tried reaching for his holster, but alas, Drugo had already swapped his gun with a banana left over from lunch. The poor man repeatedly aimed the fruit at them, mentally shooting, while the doctor mimicked gunshot sounds in sync, snapping more instant photos.

By the time Zazà finally calmed down, Novelli had compiled a spicy photographic dossier that could have landed even a priest in an asylum. The mere thought of his daughters – since he had two, though no one had ever met his wife – seeing just one of those pictures, where he was aiming with a banana and holding a joint in his mouth, sent him into a deep depression. He collapsed onto the floor, finally agreeing to hear out his captors.

Mirella, after helping her grandmother clean the glue off her face, explained their new findings to the commissioner. Zazà, however, wasn't

very receptive – his mind was stuck on the horrifying image of his daughters being expelled from their exclusive private school because of a photo of him toking on a joint while mimicking a gun with a banana.

Luckily, Mirella had great patience and gently assured him that those pictures would never reach the press – if only he'd give her his attention. It took hours to reach an agreement.

The commissioner insisted that their deal be put in writing, and Mirella, of course, agreed. However, explaining to the cop that Polaroid photos didn't produce negatives – something he contractually demanded along with the prints – took an eternity.

By around five in the afternoon, Zazà finally signed the necessary papers to set everyone free and agreed to follow the amateur investigators – Mirella, Marione (both Junior and Senior), Dirk, the old woman, and Dr. Novelli – back to the doctor's office to be briefed on the case developments.

Caloggero was released with a strict order not to leave town, and Anita, in her excitement to reunite with him, nearly wiped out an entire family of French tourists.

Chapter thirty – seven

Home squat home

With immense joy, we ran like lunatics down the block that separated us from downtown, eager to return to our anarchic home. Sergio greeted us dressed as Rambo, clutching a water gun. His hair stood on end, and his blood pressure had reached levels that not even the Old Lady had ever recorded before.

From what we could gather, the poor guy had spent the entire time of our arrest in a state of complete anxiety, convinced he had uncovered conspiracies everywhere. We didn't pay much attention to his ramblings; what truly concerned us was his appearance. He must have lost a few kilos in just a few hours. Noticing this, Drugo, after rolling a joint shaped like a Sacher Torte, gifted him the classic pin that read: "Want to lose weight? Ask me how."

We were all overexcited about being back, and in no time, the fog that usually blanketed downtown returned to dominate the plains of our loft, where we spent our days. Sergio updated us on the Feds' moves – he was convinced they were watching the building. He was particularly suspicious of the soy hot dog truck that had been stationed in the neighborhood every summer.

Luckily, the company of friends quickly made our paranoid comrade forget his worries. After unbuckling his harness, he went to open the door for the blue elephants that were knocking. You should have seen his face when, instead of the expected visitors, he found another type of mammal on the doorstep – a construction worker, bandaged in various places, who punched him in the face. Sergio felt like he had been hit by a train.

My companions and I immediately sprang into action, thinking a violent delegation from Forza Italia had finally mustered the courage to confront us. But at the door, instead of the usual syphilitic right – wingers, stood a group of hardened construction workers who seemed to have nothing to do with politics.

With my senses amplified by Amnesia White, I got scared. The calluses on their hands looked like cream – filled doughnuts, and the tattoos on their arms reminded me of old black – and – white televisions. Luckily, the delegation of builders accompanying the mummy – like bandaged guy didn't seem intent on drinking our blood. From what I managed to understand, they were simply there to support their friend, who had some unfinished business with the asshole who had made him fall off the scaffolding while he was working.

For Sergio, a slap of that caliber would have been enough to keep him in self – management mode for another twenty years. Fortunately, the construction worker didn't take further advantage of his now – unconscious body.

Drugo was the first to stand up, and in his blissful haze, he asked the builder if he'd like to wait with us for our friend to wake up so he could finish him off at his leisure. The construction worker, amused by this honest, cannabinoid invitation, burst into laughter and went downstairs with some friends to buy a couple of cases of beer.

When they returned, we all sat in a circle, drinking and building model kits in mild discomfort. None of us could tell whether they were staying because they liked us or because they had a job to finish.

Chapter thirty – seven and six – sixteenths

When the going gets tough...

The commissioner was not cooperating. For this reason, the detectives wrapped him in a straitjacket, laid him down on a chamber pot that the attendants had forgotten to empty, and directed his gaze to the overhead projector, where the doctor hung a chronological series of Polaroids. Mirella got to the point, switching on the projector just as a seabream shot out from the chamber pot, splashing the commissioner's pants.

Mirella laid out the facts:

“It all started with a simple theft. Someone broke into the clinic to steal the toy soldier, knowing that Mrs. Stanziani had purchased it. When the poor woman stepped out of her suite, the killer – who at the time was just a common thief – snuck in. Not finding what he was looking for, he hid in the closet, assuming the woman had taken the toy with her.

He waited for her to fall asleep, unaware that she went to the bathroom more for snorting lines than for bodily functions. Just as he was about to slip out of his hiding spot, the old woman jolted up like a jack – in – the – box, smacking herself right in the forehead with the wardrobe door.

At this point, the toy soldier must have ended up in the hands of the widow Gadolla – a sweet old lady whom no one knew was a kleptomaniac and who must have swiped the recent purchase from her friend. The thief somehow found out and repeated the same tactic, with predictable results.

Instead of getting hit in the face with a wardrobe door, the widow Gadolla had a heart attack, and once again, the thief was left empty – handed. From here, we can only hypothesize, but somehow, the lovely Mrs. Luisa and Mr. Suzuki must have also come into possession of this damn toy soldier, which kept killing all its owners like James Dean's cursed car.”

“And now, how should we proceed?” asked the doctor.

Mirella suddenly grew serious and roll a classic joint, handing it to her boyfriend. “We need to bring him here,” she said while Marione nervously fiddled with a dead lighter. “We have to do it, don't you agree?”

Marione nodded silently, finally managing to light his joint.

Zazà couldn't believe his eyes – the little punk was smoking right in front of him, even blowing the smoke in his face. This was an affront the commissioner could not tolerate, especially while sitting on the overflowing chamber pot, which rocked with every movement, dragging him into a vicious cycle of nervousness, frustration, and damp discomfort...

A cycle that only Mirella managed to break by shoving two little joints up the commissioner's nostrils.

Chapter thirty – eight

Whisky and sodium

While Zazà wrestled with the elephants he wasn't used to seeing – spraying everywhere – the five devised a plan to lure in their prime suspect and force him to confess in the presence of law enforcement. Even though the commissioner, tied up like a salami, had very little force left in him.

Mirella and Marione had the fateful toy soldier, responsible for so many lives, and they intended to use it to draw out the killer and unmask him. The plan they devised was brilliant in its simplicity. Novelli, a sharp professional as always, summed it up masterfully:

“We have no concrete evidence to make the person we suspect betray themselves.”

“Exactly, Doctor, that's why Grandma will act as bait. She will contact the suspect and arrange a meeting to negotiate the price of the miniature. He'll try to take her out, and we'll take the opportunity to slap the cuffs on him...”

“I'm not convinced, young lady. There are too many risks. What if the killer decides to stall? We can't keep the commissioner tied up forever. Sooner or later, someone at the station will start wondering where he is.”

“We need to make him talk,” said Dirk, “and there's no better place than this...”

Everyone fell silent, even the old lady.

“This is practically a hospital, isn't it?” he continued.

“Well, yes... but where are you going with this?”

“You must have some sodium thiopental lying around, right?”

“Brilliant idea!” the doctor agreed, electrified. “The truth serum! I should have thought of that myself.”

Senior wasn't entirely convinced. After forty years of reading comics, he still believed that pentothal could only be administered intravenously, which would require coercion and render the confession inadmissible. Fortunately, Novelli enlightened him on the chemical properties of sodium.

Sure, injecting it directly into a vein would have an immediate effect, but in this case, even a decent oral dose would do the trick.

So, the doctor went to the lab to get what was needed, while Senior made a quick trip home to fetch the necessary tools.

The plan was simple: the old lady would call the suspected killer to negotiate the price of the miniature, which they would securely lock in the doctor's safe. During the negotiation, she would get the suspect to drink a fair amount of pentothal and record his potential confession.

Unfortunately, no one knew the suspect's drinking preferences – or even who the suspect was yet. So, not only was the doctor's entire liquor cabinet raided, but it also had to be restocked since the chief physician, luckily, didn't seem to pay much attention to alcohol.

For the occasion, they drugged: a bottle of Dolcetto, one of Chianti, one of Barbera, and one of vintage Barbaresco – over which Senior even shed a few tears. A bottle of Greco di Tufo, one of Fiano, one of Vermentino, and one of sparkling Verduzzo. Then a bottle of champagne, one of Moscato, one of Marsala, and one of Vermouth – for those who liked variety.

And more: a bottle of VOV, one of whiskey cream, one of Amaro Averna, one of Unicum, one of Jägermeister, one of Gin, one of Bourbon, one of Rum, one of Oban, one of Talisker, one regular bottle of Johnnie Walker, and one with a black label.

And just to be sure, several non – alcoholic beverages were included: Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Diet Cola, Royal Cola, No Cola, Ginger Ale, Cedrata, Blood Orange Soda, Lemon Soda, classic lemonade, pineapple juice, apple juice, pear juice, peach juice, cherry – apple juice, carrot – lemon – kiwi juice, and other flavors that seemed more like genetic mixing experiments than drinks.

Everything was ready. Now, the old lady just had to make the call and set up a meeting with the person Mirella and Marione believed to be the killer. The decisive moment had arrived.

The doctor looked at Mirella with a questioning gaze. She, rolling one cigarette after another, stared at her boyfriend with sadness, as if apologizing for what she was about to say. The tension stretched unbearably until the doctor finally couldn't take it anymore:

“Come on, young lady... Who is it that we need to bring here?”

“You, Doctor...”

“Me?!” Novelli exclaimed, visibly shaken.

“You fell for it, huh?” Mirella replied, lowering her eyes to soften the blow. “Call the model shop.”

Marione, in one long drag, finished the joint he was smoking, concealing a pain that had never before shown on his face. The doctor, on the other hand, after all that suspense, didn’t seem interested in the matter anymore – too busy checking his blood pressure after the near heart attack Mirella had given him.

Marione was thinking about Amilcare. They had grown up together, and although they had never been on the same wavelength, he couldn’t – no, he didn’t want to – believe that his old playmate had turned into a serial killer over a stupid toy soldier. He barely held back his tears.

Mirella noticed and asked him to wait in the next room, where they would all hide as soon as Amilcare arrived at the clinic.

The old lady delivered a performance worthy of an Oscar. Amilcare, on the other end of the line, barely interrupted her monologue, in which she claimed to need his expert opinion before committing to the sale of her little friend.

Contrary to expectations, Amilcare showed no eagerness to meet. In fact, he politely tried to brush her off.

“Excuse me, madam, but the miniature you’re talking about is the same one your niece and her boyfriend already showed me. I’m quite certain of my appraisal. Look, it’s very late now, and it’s not professional to discuss these matters over the phone. Contact your niece – she’ll surely remember the value of the piece. There’s no way she could have forgotten. Unfortunately, I have no means of acquiring it, so I don’t see how I could be of help to you.”

The old lady realized that Amilcare had no interest in buying it, so she began to improvise.

“Young man, listen to me... I know very well that it’s late and that you’re probably in the back room playing with your little toy soldiers, but this is not a game. My niece did tell me the estimated value of the piece, but my buyer won’t settle for the word of a green – haired girl. Do you understand? You should come here immediately – with your best letterhead.”

“But madam,” Amilcare interrupted, “how many times do I have to tell you that – ”

“Then we don’t understand each other,” the old lady cut him off. “I only called to do my niece and her boyfriend a favor. Do you know the prestige your shop would gain by issuing a certificate of authenticity that would end up in the hands of one of the most famous collectors in the world? Not to mention your commission, of course.”

Amilcare hadn’t considered that angle.

“Alright, madam, tell me when and where.”

“Right now, dear boy, here at the nursing home, in Dr. Novelli’s office. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Even though she hadn’t stuck to the script, the old lady had done an excellent job. When the spotlight was on her, her diva spirit took over. Sure, it was hard to keep her within the rails of a structured plan, but once she grasped the concept, improvisation became her greatest art form.

We finalized the preparations, settling Dirk into a wheelchair and covering his legs with a blanket. He had to look as harmless as possible. He would watch over Mrs. Spezzano’s safety, pretending to be her husband. It was risky, we knew it – because the old lady would undoubtedly take advantage of the situation.

Chapter thirty – nine

The blues of the cheetah shoes – reprise

Amilcare told Dr. Carnevale that he had been called in to conduct an appraisal in Dr. Novelli's office. Carnevale escorted him to the office door and then returned to his duties, leaving Amilcare to announce himself. A bit awkward, Amilcare hesitated for a moment in front of the door, straightening his clothes. When he finally knocked, the Old Lady gulped loudly and stood up, full of confidence. She never could have predicted the chill that would grip her once she swung the door open...

Amilcare stood before her, stiff as a broomstick. And as the Old Lady took in his black shirt, black pants, and, alas, cheetah – patterned shoes, she mistook his rigidity for the classic coldness of a serial killer...

"Good evening," she greeted him in a faint voice.

"Good evening, madam," Amilcare replied as he stepped inside. "I'm here to appraise you... uh, I mean, to conduct the appraisal," he corrected himself.

The Old Lady flinched.

"Of course, please, have a seat," she said. "This is my husband, Mr. Dirk. Speak up because he's deaf."

"Good evening, Mr. Dirk..." Amilcare shouted, shaking his hand, while Zazà, hidden in the storage room with headphones on, widened his eyes at the excessive decibels.

The Old Lady needed to relax. The mystery had to be solved, and she was on the front lines of this battle. There was no room for mistakes. So, after a brief moment of reflection – one that Amilcare interpreted as the poised composure of someone with too much money – she got back on track, offering her guest a drink.

"Tell me, what will you have?"

"Nothing, madam, thank you."

"If you'll allow me, I insist. You can't close a deal like this without a good drink. Don't make me angry..."

"Really, madam, I don't drink. Thank you."

“Oh, for Christ...” She caught herself in time. “Well then, how about a juice? A soda? We have all kinds...”

“Alright, if you insist, I’ll have a juice,” he said, pulling some papers from his briefcase.

“What flavor?” she asked, turning her back to him as she searched the liquor cabinet. “We have pretty much everything.”

“Banana, then... Thank you.”

For a moment, Dirk seemed ready to let out an unholy curse. It wasn’t possible. After wasting all those damn bottles, this bastard had to go and ask for banana?! Even Zazà, still tied up like a sausage, would have executed him on the spot.

The Old Lady, however, didn’t lose her composure. She opened a couple of yellow bottles, mixed them to obscure the flavor, and poured the concoction into a pint glass. Then, without thinking, she filled another glass halfway with Oban. Seeing Dirk’s bewildered expression, she took it as a request and poured one for him as well.

Dirk was dumbfounded. Sitting in a wheelchair, wrapped in a wool blanket in the middle of summer, holding a glass of whiskey, the situation didn’t seem particularly promising. He broke into a heavy sweat – more from internal conflict than the plaid – then downed the drink in one gulp. The Old Lady followed suit. And Amilcare, clumsy as ever, thought he was supposed to do the same.

He chugged half a liter of juice – kiwi, apple, cherry, lemon, carrot... and sodium – thinking that this damn nursing home must have some really terrible bananas. The truth serum, in that quantity, took immediate effect, and all three of them were suddenly out of their minds, eager to spill secrets they wouldn’t normally admit even under torture.

“You know, my boy, I’m not as old as I look,” Dirk began. “In fact... I’m about your age. How old are you?”

“I’m thirty, sir. But why are you keeping that blanket on your legs in this heat?”

“Don’t shout, kid, I’m not deaf.”

“But the senile old woman, uh, I mean, the lady here said – ”

“Bah, she’s fried. Don’t listen to her. All she thinks about is jumping Dr. Novelli. She’s just a filthy old nymphomaniac.”

“Nymphomaniac?! You’re the drunken cop! If it weren’t for me and my niece, you’d still be down there drinking from morning till night.”

“At least I wouldn’t have to look at your wrinkled face, you old hag...”

“Your niece,” Amilcare interrupted the argument, “the sweet damsel with green hair, Marione’s girl?! My God, I’d jump her bones in a heartbeat... She’s better than a truckload of almond – filled croissants. Better than a skyscraper made of dark chocolate. Better than – ”

“You filthy pig... That’s my niece you’re talking about!”

“So what?! Wouldn’t you sleep with the doctor?”

“Would I?! Oh, if only I could... I’d turn him inside out like a sock. But he’s too diplomatic; he always manages to dodge me...”

“Then we’re even. I’d sleep with your niece, and you’d sleep with Dr. Novelli... And you, Dirk? Who would you sleep with? Your wife, perhaps?” he asked, pointing at the old hag.

“I’d rather stick my dick in a blender. I’ve been faking it since I was thirty, if you catch my drift... As if I’d ever screw this fossil. I need a young thing. I haven’t had sex in six years ...”

“What was your math grade, Mr. Dirk?”

“How dumb are you, my dear serial killer? I already told you, I’m not as old as I look...”

“Serial killer?”

“Well, are you surprised? Aren’t you the one who took out Mrs. Stanziani, Widow Gadolla, sweet Mrs. Luisa, Mr. Suzuki, and Engineer Franzoni?”

“Who the hell are they?”

“You mean you don’t know any of them?”

“I don’t think so, no...”

“And you have nothing to confess? Something that’s weighing on you, something you just can’t keep inside anymore?”

“Well, there is something I’m ashamed of that I’ve never told anyone...”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“You see, when I was a kid, my mother used to get her hair done at the house of my neighbor’s mom – Marione. The one who’s now dating that stunning girl I’d love to sleep with... Oops, forgive me, you wrinkly old

hag... Hey, what's happening to me? I just can't hold back... Ehehehe... Has anyone ever told you that being that bald makes you look like a bowling ball?"

"Go on, you stupid young man..."

"Well, anyway, he was a bit older than me and a bit chubbier," he laughed, "so he was already in school when my mother and I would show up at his house... I don't know what his niece sees in Marione, as fat as he is... Hey, what am I saying?! Anyway, he had this big model train set with tracks, a station, little trains, the whole thing, and I always played with it when he wasn't around. Until one day, the green roof of the station broke off in my hands."

"That's it? You lousy murderer?"

"A murderer over a model train set? It wasn't even completely broken... But wait, why am I telling you all this?! Wasn't I here for an appraisal?"

"It was a trick to make you confess."

"All this drama just to make me confess that I broke Marione's train set?!"

"No, idiot. To make you confess to the murders you committed here..."

"Oh, come on, murders?! The only thing I ever killed was a fish – before the Rise of the Cod, though."

"And have you ever killed anyone?"

"What kind of question is that, young man?" replied the Old Lady. "Of course not... You're the murderer..."

"Murderer, my ass... And you, Dirk, have you ever killed anyone?"

"Uhm... well, yes... a couple..."

"You've killed a couple of people?!" Amilcare and the Old Lady shouted in unison.

"Jeez, not the ones we're investigating! I was a cop, you know, and I was involved in dozens of shootouts..."

"Oh, well..." they both relaxed, while Marione stepped out of the storage room, tired of the charade.

"Marione..." Amilcare blurted out, "what are you doing here? You heard everything? Damn, I'm sorry for what I said about your girlfriend, but I just can't help myself... It's true, you know... I'd totally do her..."

She's too hot... Oh crap, see? I can't stop myself... Normally, I'd never say things like that, you know that, right?! We've known each other forever... And I swear, you're not that fat... Well, you're not as skinny as me... See? It happened again, I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry. I can assure you, I'm the one who feels worse." Marione admitted, hugging him. "I'm sorry for ever doubting you."

"What the hell are you saying, Fatso... Oh crap, again..."

"You can't lie because we made you drink the truth serum. That's why you can't stop saying everything you think..."

"Oh yeah? And why would you do that?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it," Marione said, pouring himself a pint of Talisker, "but we thought that the murders shaking up the neighborhood were your doing."

"Have you fried your brain, old man? Probably from all the crap you smoke... What made you think I'd kill anyone, you idiot? And why the hell would I?!"

"Never mind, it's a long story," Marione said, realizing his blunder only at the bottom of his glass. "Anyway, you clueless model – train nerd... Do you know how much I cried over that stupid train set? I even wrongly accused my little cousin, and now, only now, I find out it was you. Couldn't you have told me...?"

"Oh, how the hell was I supposed to know? I was so little that I just froze... Maybe it's because of the guilt over that train set that I got obsessed with models. And you totally got your revenge on me..."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You think I don't know that you swapped Gandalf for Obi – Wan Kenobi? I almost had a disaster in my shop."

"Of course, that was me. So?"

"I almost lost two of my best customers, but you don't care... You never think about the consequences of your actions... You never have... right?!"

"Enough already!" Mirella shouted, stepping out of the closet with the commissioner tied up behind her. "You're all acting like children. We all made mistakes tonight," she concluded, untying Zazà.

She was right. Even the commissioner was no longer convinced of the suspects' guilt, despite being furious at having been kidnapped and tied up for hours.

Everyone emerged from their hiding spots and took seats in the doctor's office, engaging in animated discussions about things they would never have talked about otherwise. Even Mirella, Zazà, and Novelli ended up having a drink, and in no time, chaos reigned supreme.

No one could resist the narcissistic urge to talk – or to hear others talk about them – with absolute honesty, and the conversations that overlapped that evening would take several chapters to recount.

The commotion even drew in the night staff and the lightest sleepers among the residents. By midnight, the roll call included: Dr. Novelli, the Old Lady, Dirk, Junior, Senior, Sir Bricconi with Miss Franca, Dr. Carnevale, Dalesio, and about ten nurses. All with a glass in hand.

The murders took a back seat, and everyone seemed comfortable baring their souls to their conversation partners in that strange yet reassuringly empathetic atmosphere.

Everyone except Mirella. Amidst the tangle of voices, chatter, and friendly triviality, she couldn't help but notice Amilcare revealing his discomfort by constantly tucking his shirt into his pants. She asked her boyfriend about it, but he looked confused. And not because of the Big Bud, the alcohol, or the truth serum – he simply didn't recall ever seeing his friend wear a shirt.

Mirella glimpsed the light at the end of the tunnel. Without drawing attention to herself, she reached Amilcare and urged him to follow her into the storage room. Amilcare thought he had just won the lottery and, making sure no one saw him, entered right after her. Without wasting any time, he took off his shirt, revealing a rather unsexy bricklayer's tan.

"Amilcare, what are you doing?" she blurted out. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Not my mind yet, but about a liter of truth serum... Forgive me, I thought you wanted to jump me..."

"Oh, Amilcare, I don't want to disappoint you, but I'm in love with Marione... I brought you here to save you from embarrassment in front of everyone."

“I don’t follow, big – boobed beauty... Oops, sorry...”

“It’s okay, we’re all out of it by now... Anyway, those clothes aren’t yours, are they?”

“How did you catch me?”

“You don’t have the ease of someone used to wearing a shirt, and your tan doesn’t match either. And those shoes... they’re horrible. Sorry, it’s the serum...”

“No, you’re right. They’re really ugly... They came in the mail along with the clothes. A gift from an admirer, according to the note. It also said that if I wore them on a slightly unusual occasion, I’d make a great impression... I thought you sent them. Otherwise, no way I’d have put them on.”

“You’re an angel, Amilcare,” she burst out, kissing him on the cheek, while he promptly apologized but reiterated how much he would love to sleep with her...

Suddenly, everything became clear to her – everything except the motive.

Chapter forty

Until the end of the word

Mirella left the storage room, worried that the murderer might escape. She called us for a quick mobilization while trying to keep the serum from pushing her to violate her own privacy. Novelli – less determined – was holding court, confessing his past sexual exploits in the hospital ward to the nurses. La Vecchia – wildly jealous – was listing her lovers in chronological order. Marione tried to keep his mouth shut, and when he opened it, it was only to light a joint. Meanwhile, his father, Cavalier Bricconi, and Miss Franca were delicately shifting their conversation from the nurses' curves to the cavalier's adulterous lawyer.

Mirella had noticed that Amilcare's shoes were strangely worn down on the right heel. At first, she was puzzled; that level of wear was rarely caused by poor posture unless it was so pronounced as to be visibly noticeable. Usually, that unnatural wear pattern – commonly found on the opposite side of shoes worn by frequent drivers – indicated constant clutch work. However, in this particular spot, it suggested a precise and substantial use of the accelerator. None of the suspects seemed to have a particular inclination for speed, and, on the other hand, the victims weren't moving very fast anymore either.

The murderer had made a grave mistake, betraying himself with his own actions. Had he not tried to frame an innocent person in his place, no one would have ever uncovered his identity – not even her.

"Engineer Dalesio, drop the act!" she suddenly commanded, to the astonishment of those present, after stalling for a few minutes to give us time to secure the exits of the institute. "We know everything now..."

"Miss, whatever are you talking about?" he replied with an aplomb that did not suit him.

"You gave yourself away. Without your shoes, I would have never traced this back to you."

Everyone fell silent, listening to the exchange – both thrilled and frozen in place.

Novelli stood there, mouth agape, with his arm raised mid – motion, attempting to swallow yet another pill. He was as stiff as if he had just seen a ghost. Mirella was accusing a patient who had been hospitalized for years, a patient he had examined in every possible way and had always, sincerely, considered arteriosclerotic. If Mirella was right, and if there truly was a premeditated plan behind this chain of murders, then he, essentially, would look like a complete fool.

And if his colleagues found out that he had spent all these years treating Diabolik while believing him to be a poor imitation of Groucho Marx, even his career would suffer.

“Miss Mirella, I don’t see how you could have possibly linked this to me – I’ve always been here...” Dalesio responded, slipping back into character.

“Enough...” she shouted. “This charade must end, Mr. Dalesio. The shoes you sent Amilcare along with your clothes gave you away.”

“Ah, so that’s why a slipper kissed me on the way out. Where’s my thirty pieces of silver?”

La Vecchia, as dumbfounded as the doctor, was holding a pint of Talisker mid – air, sweating profusely.

“Mr. Dalesio, if that’s even your real name, your shoes are a calling card... I’m sorry for you.”

“Miss, I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never owned shoes that thin, and it wouldn’t be very classy to have my name printed on them either – I’m not exactly a Formula One car.”

Dirk had been frozen in place by the steely determination of the green – haired detective just as he reached the bottom of his pint. Now he stood there, motionless, listening to the two, his glass held up at nose level as if peering through it like a peculiar telescope to examine Mirella’s words.

“The right heel of these shoes is strangely worn down on the inside...”

“I assure you, I don’t latch onto cars – I’m left – handed, and I’m not an ‘inside,’ if anything, I’m an ‘inmate.’”

Amilcare was struck by astonishment while tucking his shirt into his pants. He stood frozen behind Mirella, his hand bulging the front of his trousers in her direction. It was as if he were silently thinking: God, what I’d do to you!

“Mr. Dalesio, there’s no point in continuing this charade. You know exactly where I’m going with this...”

“I didn’t even know you were planning to leave, let alone where!”

Junior was so blazed that even the lightsaber – shaped joint he had just lit had frozen its smoke above the ember. It looked as if he were holding a large conical sculpture ending in a piece of plywood depicting a cloud.

“Mr. Dalesio, the worn – out heel of these shoes only proves a great passion for acceleration... Would you agree?”

“Well, I don’t know if that heel is convenient... But if it’s about acceleration, we should see how far it goes on a gallon...”

The astonishment on the statues’ faces grew even more. No one could figure out where Mirella was going with this. She was accusing Dalesio based on something she believed she had discovered, but one had to consider that the poor guy, hospitalized for a long time, hadn’t driven a car since the Rise of the Cod. Not to mention his arteriosclerosis.

“Mr. Dalesio, if you have nothing to do with this, you won’t mind trying on this shoe, right?” she asked, shoving Amilcare’s foot forward.

“That’s disgusting, miss... Did you take me for Snow White?”

Dr. Carnevale was frozen with a glass in hand in an attempt to toast, while with the other, due to the serum, he had lifted his graying toupee from his head, revealing to everyone what he still believed they didn’t know.

“You’re trapped now. These shoes are a size forty – one, a curious number, isn’t it? What size do you wear?”

“I don’t wear or give any number, and besides, in ‘41, I wasn’t even born, miss...” he said, lowering his age.

Senior was zoned out by the liquor cabinet, holding a bottle of Coca – Cola in his right hand and Sambuca in his left, embodying the classic Hamletian dilemma of all alcoholics.

“These are your shoes; the DNA test will confirm it. I don’t think you were cautious enough to have someone else lick the stamps.”

“That’s true, miss, no doubt about it... If someone had licked a stamp for me, I definitely would have noticed.”

Sir Bricconi and Miss Franca were tangled up on the couch. Not because they were experimenting with some daring position, but because

when they froze in place, they had been reaching for their respective glasses, which, in the confusion, had ended up crisscrossed on the crystal side tables. Bricconi was stretched out on the sofa, arm outstretched towards his gin and tonic, while Miss Franca, to his right, mirrored his position, unintentionally blocking him. If someone had seen them and thought about numerology, they would have played just one number: sixty – nine.

“I don’t understand how you can resist the truth serum, but at this point, it’s only a matter of time. Forensics will confirm my suspicions, and you’ll have no choice but to confess to murdering Engineer Franzoni, Mrs. Stanziani, the widow Gadolla, Mr. Suzuki...”

“No! I’ve never owned a Suzuki or a Kawasaki... In fact, I’ll tell you more – I don’t even know how to ride a bicycle...”

Zazà was struck by paralysis near the window. Stuck in movement but lucid in thought, he was deeply ashamed of the finger in his nose that he hadn’t managed to remove in time.

“Mr. Dalesio...” Mirella asked in a sensual voice, caressing his neck, “Would you come to bed with me?”

“But miss,” he blushed, “I can’t come to Bend tonight, Oregon is too far away and Miami Vice is on satellite TV.”

“Mr. Dalesio, you didn’t toast, did you?! Watch this: Dr. Novelli, would you sleep with me?”

“Of course...” he blurted out after nearly choking on his pill. “But miss, what are you making me say?!”

“I’m sorry to embarrass you like this, doctor, but it’s to support my theory, look... Commissioner, would you sleep with me?”

Even the commissioner regained flexibility, popping his finger out of his nose with a “plop” and shuddering at the thought of what he could no longer hold back: “It would be a pleasure, miss... But damn,” he quickly regained his composure, “what kind of situation are you putting me in?”

“I’m sorry, commissioner,” she continued, for the sake of fairness, “but it’s to support my theory, look... Mr. Dirk, would you sleep with me?”

“It would be a blessing after all this abstinence... Uh... But Mirella, for heaven’s sake, this isn’t fair!” he blurted out, blushing like a beet after setting down the glass he had been using as a monocle...

“I’m sorry, Dirk, but it’s to support my theory. Look: Cavalier Bricconi, would you go to bed with me?”

Even the Cavalier and Miss Franca woke up, rubbing against each other a little more as they readjusted on the couch. However, the Cavalier did not blush. Given his class and upbringing, his erotic desires were not lived as taboos but as real, urgent physiological needs to be promptly satisfied for the sake of a healthy stay on the planet, as he liked to define his earthly existence.

“I am extremely honored by your offer, miss, but given my current predisposition, not to mention our evident age difference, I would much rather have the esteemed Miss Franca lie with me instead...”

Mirella had gone too far, and she was a bit ashamed of it, but she had clearly proven that either Dalesio had not drunk the serum, or he had prepared himself in advance to avoid absorbing it.

She had no doubts. He was the killer. He had sent his clothes to Amilcare, hoping to frame him, and he had worn down the right heel of his cheetah – patterned shoes while driving.

Sure, Dalesio was of a respectable age, and he hadn’t owned a car since before the Rise of the Cod, but by “driving,” Mirella didn’t mean an actual car. Even if Dalesio had had a motor vehicle, he wouldn’t have worn down his accelerator foot’s heel in such a way.

That shoe had indeed been worn down while “driving,” but inside the clinic itself.

That shoe had been worn down in the Old Woman’s room when she was out investigating.

He was the only one who had access to the video game in Mrs. Spezzano’s room, and the non – slip surface of its pedals must have been responsible for that strange wear.

“You have no way out now... Confess, how did things happen?”

“Miss, I don’t follow you, and I don’t want go out, it’s dark.

“Dr. Novelli!” she exclaimed in full investigative frenzy. “What would you say to an intravenous injection of sodium thiopental for our guest?”

“Goodness,” he replied. “Absolutely. I’m only sorry I didn’t think of it first.”

Dalesio rambled on about the convention of Swiss cities, and Zazà, in some way, agreed with him.

He was a lawman, and as such, he wanted his actions to abide by it.

The commissioner confirmed that in Geneva, one could not drug anyone against their will.

Novelli disagreed. He wasn't familiar with foreign customs, but he knew his clinic and its patients well.

He was their doctor, and as such, he had a precise duty to provide them with the most appropriate therapies.

He had taken an oath – he had to do it.

“So, would it be completely legal?” asked the commissioner.

“Legal?” Novelli replied, putting an arm around him. “It would be illegal not to do it.”

The office exploded in a festive wave, and the old woman rushed down the ward in search of a syringe, delighted by her own reflection in the hallway mirror: she had snatched Dr. Carnevale's toupee.

At this point, the situation flipped.

Dalesio's dazed look turned into a glacial stare, and, swiftly removing his lab coat, as agile as a variety show dancer, he drew the attention to himself by brandishing two pistols that he had hidden under his arms.

The nurses jumped in fright and suddenly realized why he always smelled like gunpowder.

The engineer waved the 9mm pistols, trying to gain ground toward the door while continuing to feign a fair amount of arteriosclerosis.

Mirella, terrified of firearms, froze.

Dalesio could be a cunning killer, simulating a psychotic state to protect himself in case of conviction – or worse, he could truly be arteriosclerotic, making him even more dangerous.

Everyone opted for the second possibility; otherwise, why would he have started singing *Shock The Monkey* while trying to make his escape?

Moments of panic followed.

Dalesio, nearing his escape route, panicked and began shaking his hands nervously, making the gun hammers vibrate.

Novelli tried to come up with a rational solution to handle the situation without losing any taxpayers, but the thoughts that usually ran through his head must have taken the day off.

On the other side of the room, Bricconi and Senior, as drunk as usual, watched the scene as if they were watching a movie, giving the fugitive tips on how to hold the Beretta 92s, how to walk, and how to set a truly authoritative tone of voice.

Amilcare, always behind Mirella, had finally removed his hand from his pants and was trembling – not out of fear, but because of the close – up of the green – haired maiden’s backside right in front of him.

Marione noticed and, ignoring the fugitive, threatened his friend with the tip of his lightsaber.

Zazà felt as uncomfortable as if he had woken up in his underwear in the middle of a shopping mall.

He had arrived at the clinic tied up like a salami, and in his holster, instead of his standard – issue Beretta, he still had a banana.

Luckily, Dirk didn’t lose heart like the others – he knew he was part of the solution.

The situation could spiral out of control, so he needed to act fast.

Looking around for the necessary ingredients to pull off a good action scene, he spotted, out of the corner of his eye, the chief physician’s umbrella stand.

A shiver ran down his spine, so strong that Dalesio nearly shot him.

His sawed – off shotgun was still resting in there, loaded just as it had been when Novelli had confiscated it.

He quickly devised a plan and, trying to convince Dalesio of his precarious position, attempted to move closer to the umbrella stand.

Sure, it wasn’t a great plan – even if he managed to reach the gun, to be intimidating while holding just a cane, he’d have to fire a few shots.

But doing so risked causing a memorable mess, and a shootout in a nursing home would have been at least inappropriate.

Fortunately, things didn’t escalate.

Dalesio had already reached the doorway, brandishing his pistols in mid – air, and was preparing to escape when the Old Woman, having found the

syringe, rushed back toward Dr. Novelli's office, suddenly colliding with the fugitive's backside as he stepped backward to leave.

His guns flew from his hands, while Dirk, executing a somersault, leapt to retrieve his weapon from the umbrella stand.

The chaos was at its peak, the grandstand was in an uproar, and the nurses waved colorful handkerchiefs.

To restore order, Dirk fired a shot at the frescoed ceiling, throwing away his future pension, and finally, Dalesio was arrested.

Chapter forty – one

There’s a party

When we heard a gunshot go off inside the clinic, we shuddered. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before we saw the police cars arrive, and Zazà came out escorting Engineer Dalesio, handcuffed. Mirella followed, smoking and completely ignoring the officers in the courtyard. The whole neighborhood erupted into a celebratory wave...

The Old Lady stormed out of the clinic. She was bursting with excitement, eager to tell someone about her relative’s cleverness in helping the police capture that dangerous murderer. But after a brief moment of basking in the crowd’s attention, she realized that deep down, she felt sorry. She had never really disliked Dalesio, and his arteriosclerosis – real or fake – had always, in some way, lifted her spirits. She returned to the clinic, arm in arm with the doctor, who kept swallowing pills like a teenager at a rave.

“That’s enough,” she snapped, worried. “Will you stop stuffing yourself with barbiturates?!”

“Barbiturates?!”

“For heaven’s sake, you’ve been popping one pill after another for days! Do you really think they’re good for you?”

“Oh, come on, Mrs. Spezzano,” he replied, wrapping her in an affectionate hug, “you don’t need to worry about my health. They’re not barbiturates. They’re Falqui laxative pills.”

“Falqui laxative pills?!”

“Falqui laxative pills,” the doctor confirmed. “I’ve been constipated ever since this whole mess started.”

...

Mirella, Marione, Amilcare, and Dirk, after saying goodbye to the Old Lady and Senior – who were heading back to the clinic with Dr. Novelli and Sir Bricconi, respectively – joined us and our new construction worker friends. Together, we moved downtown to celebrate the end of the terror that had plagued our streets. Well, it wasn’t exactly terror, but it was the

end of an unnatural tension that certainly hadn't done any favors to our anarchic and idle afternoons of contemplation. Not to mention our arrest.

Our new friends brought more beer, and some of our comrades found the strength to get up and cook fritters. We partied all night – smoking, singing, and trying in every way to balance out the chemistry. Amid the whirlwind delirium of both imaginary and real dances with trombones shaped like bagpipes, we even managed to get the bricklayers to smoke. These men, usually more inclined toward alcohol, quickly built us a wood – fired oven on the spot.

Mirella kept to herself, smoking but not overdoing it. No matter what we thought, the case wasn't truly closed. Sure, they had caught the murderer, but the next day, they would have to face the rest of the story. Mirella didn't feel like celebrating – what was there to celebrate, anyway? Five dead and a psychotic serial killer? No, it would have been better to just lie down quietly, each lost in their own delirium, as was our habit. But at the same time, although Sergio had yet to wake up from his folder – induced slumber, we also had to raise our glasses to our new, hefty friends. And in that, Mirella was the first to step forward, rolling one in the shape of a Caterpillar tractor. It was the crane operator who, after confirming the perfection of the model, set it on fire.

I had never imagined that construction workers had never seen a blue elephant before. And when they finally appeared in their field of vision, the night truly took off. After that, a total blank.

...

We had all been in a state of catatonia for a while, with only the most hardened smokers waking up at regular intervals for a top – up. Then, suddenly, a strange noise woke me up – something was scratching at the front door. It sounded like a feline knocking, or, in the worst – case scenario, like one of those classic crawling dying men who, unable to reach the doorbell, wore down their fingertips against the baseboard.

A little scared, I went to open it, and what I saw would haunt me for years to come.

The staircase, from the ground floor to the door, was covered in a multitude of scampi, prawns, jumbo shrimp, and lobsters that, for the first time

in the history of self – management, were spontaneously making their way into a social center.

My efforts, which now seemed light – years away, had actually led to something. And even if many had mistaken them for mere cabaret, they had borne fruit – seafood, to be precise.

I was over the moon. So satisfied and relaxed that I almost didn't feel the need to light a welcome joint...

Chapter forty – one and seven

Until the end of the sword

When the five arrived at the police station, they found Zazà visibly exhausted from the sleepless night. However, the commissioner welcomed them warmly – his attitude had changed considerably in light of his upcoming promotion and he didn't even seem like a damn cop.

"You see, Miss Mirella," he began, after handing out coffee and croissants to everyone, "unfortunately, I haven't been able to uncover anything – no motive."

"So, how do you plan to proceed?"

"Well, we just have to hope that Dalesio takes us seriously. If he confesses, he'll certainly get a reduced sentence and save us an unnecessary waste of time and money. But if he doesn't, the evidence will convict him."

"But what if the evidence we have isn't enough?"

"We could always produce new ones."

"Inspector, what are you saying?" Mirella asked, scandalized. "You're not telling me that the police are used to this sort of thing, are you?"

"Of course not, Miss, but by putting pressure on him and scaring him a little, we might get him to slip up. The end justifies the means."

"Commissioner, please, rhetoric is used to mask the most atrocious crimes..."

"I have my doubts about that, but this isn't the time to discuss philosophy. Dalesio is ready in the interrogation room. You have a special permit from the judge to be present along with Dr. Novelli. Your grandmother, your boyfriend, and Sergeant Scarcella will watch from behind the glass."

"Okay, but first, I'd like to see Mr. Dalesio alone."

"I'm sorry, but that's not possible – it's not standard procedure."

"Commissioner, I can convince him. Besides, I was the one who turned him in. You owe me this."

"I'm sorry, Miss, but my hands are tied. There's absolutely no way to allow a private meeting with a detainee – especially one accused of murder

– without a qualified officer present. The evidence could be tampered with.”

“Commissioner,” the Old Lady suddenly shouted, shaking off a night filled with conjectures and disbelief, “she’s already told you what she wants to do – don’t make her repeat it! Are you a man or a savoyard?”

“Corporal...”

“Excuse me?!”

“It’s ‘Are we men or corporals?’”

“Let’s not get caught up in semantics. What I’m saying is, it’s absurd that you won’t grant her this opportunity – not so much for Mirella, but for Engineer Dalesio himself. We’d save a lot of time, and you’d still get your promotion...”

“Madam, how many times do I have to say it? The law is clear – an officer must always be present. Your granddaughter isn’t part of the police force.”

“And thank God for that,” Marione grumbled.

“Listen,” Mirella continued, “I’m asking you, please – let me try. You’d still be watching from behind the glass, making sure everything is in order.”

“Well, in those terms... It could be seen as a mere technicality, but I suppose...”

“Oh, thank you!” Mirella exclaimed, hugging him. “You won’t regret it.”

As soon as Mirella stepped into the room where Dalesio was waiting behind a fake mirror, she realized he could never be a cold – blooded serial killer disguising himself as a senile old man. At best, he was just an ordinary eighty – year – old murderer. The defendant sat in front of the mirror, believing himself alone, scrutinizing the progress of his gum disease. Dr. Novelli, rather than analyzing the man’s personality, ended up examining his tonsils and even spotted an early – stage cavity on his second molar.

Mirella carefully opened the door and entered hesitantly. The creaking hinges distracted Dalesio from his performance, and he bit his tongue as he swiftly turned to see her standing at the threshold.

“Miss! What a surprise! Come in, come in... How is your grandmother?”

“She’s fine. And you?”

“Excellent. I hope you’re not worrying about me – I’m a doctor.”

Mirella didn’t feel like contradicting him, so she played along.

“Of course. So, how are you finding things in here?”

“Fine. This hotel isn’t bad. Sure, my room doesn’t have much of a view, but I assure you, you don’t hear a single car pass by.”

“Mr. Dalesio, forgive my bluntness, but do you realize what you’ve done?” she asked without beating around the bush.

“Of course, my dear... Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

“And you think that’s normal?”

“Well, not everyone wins a few years in a hotel like this by sending in just a couple of postcards.”

“Actually, you sent five postcards – to the afterlife,” Mirella replied, interpreting the old man’s babbling as a clever metaphor.

“What are you talking about? I only sent a couple. The only thing that doesn’t add up is...”

“What?” she interrupted, a bit nervous.

“I thought the grand prize was a Ferrari.”

“Right, Engineer,” she said, humoring him. “But back to recent events – don’t you have anything to tell me?”

“I wouldn’t know what to say about the winds, especially since the last few days have been pretty dry...”

“Engineer, please, I’m here to help you. What happened at the clinic?”

“The clinic’s bathroom? Can’t he just go here?”

“Mr. Dalesio, listen to me carefully. You may have some issues, but not all the ones you want us to believe. You murdered five people in cold blood, and you did it intentionally. These are serious accusations, and the evidence – ”

“But – ”

“Please don’t interrupt me. The evidence against you is overwhelming. Even though I can tell you that neither the police nor I have the faintest idea why you killed five innocent people, I can assure you that you will spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

“We’ll see about that, young lady.”

“You sent your clothes to Amilcare, and the package is now in the forensic lab... You do realize why they took your blood sample this morning, don’t you?”

“Hmm...”

“To compare your DNA with the saliva used to stick the stamps. I’m sorry, but you incriminated yourself...”

Dalesio sat in silence for several minutes. His empty stare didn’t reflect the soul of a ruthless killer. Mirella didn’t know what to think. This man – whom everyone had always believed to be a harmless, senile old geezer – had killed five people, and no one could figure out why. Thousands of frantic thoughts clogged the mind of the gentle punk girl as she tried to decipher any hidden truth in his vacant gaze.

The man’s round, ruddy face – like a colored – in Charlie Brown – did not match the image that five corpses painted. Sure, plenty of neurological diseases could turn a cuddly Furby into a bloodthirsty Critter, but no one had ever seen Dalesio gnawing on furniture.

What, then, lay behind the façade he had so carefully maintained over all those years in the clinic, posing as a senile patient?

“Alright, young lady, at this point, there’s no sense in lying... Do you know how old I am?”

“Around eighty, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m almost eighty – five. That’s a lot, you know?”

“I’d sign up to reach that age in your condition.”

“In prison?”

“No! I meant health – wise...”

“Ah, well, yes, I can’t complain about that...”

“Then why?”

“Why what?”

“Why kill?”

“Oh, right – pardon me, my memory isn’t what it used to be... Anyway, I never intended to kill anyone, I assure you...”

“But, Engineer, how do you expect me to believe that? You murdered five people! And to make matters worse, you’re reasoning perfectly well, which means that for all these years, you’ve been faking being the most

dazed patient in the clinic. That's premeditation... You know, I'm not sure this conversation should continue. You might want to call your lawyer."

"Miss Mirella, it is noble of you to worry about me, but as I have explained, I am eighty – five years old and have seen things you humans couldn't imagine... Battleships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, and I have watched C – beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate, and all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain... Why on earth should I care about the police? In fact, do you have a smoke?"

"Uh... Yes, sort of..." she said, pulling a stub of a cigarette from her jacket pocket. "Won't it be a bit too strong?"

"Oh, don't worry..." he replied, snatching the cigarette from her hand. "I used to breathe in Cubans when I was young."

Mirella was momentarily taken aback. Dalesio had just lit up a cigarette inside the interrogation room, and Zazà, behind the glass, would certainly have noticed the unauthorized smoking. But after some careful reasoning – which led her to light one for herself as well – she figured that the commissioner would rather arrest Dalesio for multiple homicide than for possession of narcotics.

"So why did you do it?" she asked, blowing a cloud of smoke above the engineer's head.

"You see," he recounted, inhaling greedily, "it's a long story... I am one of the owners of Global, more precisely the majority shareholder. A few months ago, I discovered that another shareholder on the board, Engineer Franzoni, was dipping into the company's funds for personal purposes..."

"In other words, stealing?"

"Beautifully put... I threatened to report him to the authorities if he didn't immediately return the money he had taken home. Needless to say, my associate shrank in fear at my threats and swore to bring me the money he had stolen as soon as possible, leaving me as collateral a valuable miniature worth roughly the same amount."

"The Baciccia."

"Exactly."

"So you were aware of the miniature's value?"

“Of course, it had been in my family for several years – at least until I sold it to Engineer Franzoni at the time of my hospitalization, just to pay for my stay.”

“I see. And then what happened?”

“Well, what happened is that the miniature, which I was supposed to return in exchange for the money, vanished from my safe. Since the only people I had shown it to were Mrs. Stanziani and the widow Gadolla, I immediately suspected one of them. I secretly went to Mrs. Stanziani’s room, but she arrived earlier than expected, so I hid in the wardrobe and fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yeah, I suffer from a mild form of narcolepsy.”

“Go on.”

“Well... when I woke up, at first, I couldn’t even remember where I was, and I panicked. When I suddenly managed to open the doors that separated me from the light – at least to figure out where I was – a dull noise caught me off guard. The poor woman’s head, standing at the side of the bed, had smashed against the wardrobe door.”

“And you ran away without calling for help?”

“And whom was I supposed to call for help, miss? The police? Obviously, I checked her pulse, but there was nothing more to be done, so I left and made plans to search the widow Gadolla’s room. But once again, luck was not on my side...”

“What do you mean?”

“I snuck into her room late at night. I knew she had a date with Dr. Sar-to, the physiotherapist. Those two were involved, so I thought I could act undisturbed. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that the doctor suffered from premature ejaculation...”

“What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying... I’m saying that the widow Gadolla, around ten – thirty, snuck back into her room quietly to avoid being heard by the other patients. Only I, with my hands in her wardrobe, didn’t hear a thing. I found myself face to face with her, all smudged lipstick and ruined makeup. For a moment, I thought she was a monster, so I pulled out pellet guns, which I always carried with me, and fired a shot...”

“They were pellet guns?” Mirella asked incredulously.

“What, did you think I walked around armed?! Have I told you how old I am?”

“Yes, you have. Go on.”

“Well... there’s not much more to add. The widow, seeing the guns, got scared to death... and she did it.”

“Mr. Dalesio, I have no words. You’ve pretended to be someone you weren’t all these years, and now you expect me to believe that the murders you committed in the nursing home weren’t premeditated?”

“I don’t follow...”

“In simple terms, you’re not the senile old man you pretended to be... On the contrary, you’re completely lucid, no nonsense...”

“Have I told you how old I am?”

“Of course you have. What does that have to do with anything?”

“No... I’m asking you, what does it have to do with anything? You’re young, you can’t understand these things yet, but for an old man like me, the only fun left is messing with people a little... Why do you care if I had fun annoying everyone in the ward? What else could I do in the halls of a nursing home, play bocce?”

“Alright, alright... Go on... What happened next?”

“Nothing... I left the widow Gadolla – who, to be honest, I never really liked – lying there. The next morning, I went back to search her room and even had to hide behind the curtain when people arrived. Her grandmother, I think? I don’t know, I avoided introducing myself. When they left, I went back to my room, once again empty – handed. The next morning, I remembered nothing at all, luckily – at least until...”

“You forgot about two people you had killed yourself?!”

“Miss, have I told you how old I am?”

Mirella had to step outside for a breath of fresh air. The spectators behind the glass were dumbfounded, not to mention Zazà, who was a little annoyed at seeing his colleague smoking inside the precinct. In fact, by now, it was well established that Dalesio was old, and some eccentricity could be excused, but believing that the poor guy had accidentally killed five people – and even forgotten about them – was quite a stretch.

The Old Lady remained silent, and even Marione refrained from offering an opinion, an opinion that, in this context, could have influenced the indictment of the engineer. No one really seemed to understand much, even though the poor fellow was telling his story with complete sincerity. At least as far as he could remember.

"Listen, Mr. Dalesio, correct me if I'm wrong: you are the majority shareholder of a major company and discover that your partner is stealing. You then threaten to report him unless he returns the stolen money. Engineer Franzoni leaves you a miniature as collateral, worth roughly the same amount. You accept, but then this toy soldier is stolen from you, and in an attempt to recover it, you enter first Mrs. Stanziani's room and then the widow Gadolla's, leaving their respective corpses behind. And now you want me to believe that you forgot about these two deaths?"

"My goodness, you're so strict. Of course, I didn't completely forget, the whole clinic was talking about it, and naturally, I suffered because of it, but in my private moments, I certainly didn't remember what had happened – I have a terrible memory... Have I told you how old I am?"

"Don't make me angry, please... Instead, tell me, what did dear Mrs. Luisa have to do with any of this?"

"Oh, Luisa! My sweet, little Luisa!" he exclaimed with a sad look. "She had nothing to do with it. Luisa was the kindest soul in that madhouse."

"Then why did you kill her?!"

"It was a terrible accident. Luisa and I had a special bond – she was the only one who knew my secret. With her, I didn't need to joke to feel good; just being by her side was enough. The night of the tragedy, she had invited me over for an aperitif in her room, as we often did, and when I arrived, I found the table set, full of delicious treats: Russian salad, olives, sundried tomatoes, pickled onions, mushrooms, and the Baciccia... Three million surrounded by pickled vegetables."

"And you killed her for that?"

"Let me finish, for heaven's sake. I would never have hurt dear Luisa."

"I don't follow..."

"Of course, you don't – you've stopped moving..."

"Are you starting again?"

“Forgive me, but it's just a habit... Anyway, I asked you for some information about it, I wanted to tell her the pure and simple truth, logically leaving out the victims, when she told me that the very two deceased had given her that ornament for her birthday, passing it off as a Capodimonte. Can you imagine? At that point, a chill gripped me... The woman I was secretly in love with had received as a gift the miniature those two bitches had stolen from me, and now that they had passed away, she had clung morbidly to my three million without even considering them as such. I spent a night in hell, torn between telling her the truth and sneaking back at night to take back what was stolen when, after the second Martini, Luisa started making strange remarks about a safety deposit box. I had little choice left; I calmly told her that the little soldier belonged to me. You can't imagine her reaction... I had never seen sweet Luisa like that before, she had truly grown attached to the gift from those two, so much so that she lunged at me while I, holding the olive forks, was about to fill my plate at the buffet. That's how my beloved ended up slitting her wrists, colliding her hands with mine. I did everything I could to prevent the worst, but it was useless. My love faded away in my arms, giving me one last incredulous look that I will never be able to forget... What were we talking about?”

“Are you trying to make me angry?”

“Of course not, but have I told you how old I am?”

Mirella had to step out again. The paralysis of her colleagues beyond the glass had not subsided in the slightest. The Old Lady, increasingly strangely, remained silent, listening to the deposition, and Marione – she saw – was trying to look as dazed as possible, but deep down he was rolling. The commissioner could hardly believe his eyes, partly because of Dalesio's story and partly because he had also caught the little punk rolling a joint. Could it be that these two were messing with him so brazenly?

As absurd as the story seemed, it actually hinted at a case of quintuple manslaughter. For the police, this would certainly be a first. If nothing else, after the Rise of the Cod, nothing would surprise them anymore. Mirella and the others, in a way, had to feel somewhat relieved. Without premeditation, the events took on a less sinister aura. Sure, the regret over the loss of five people remained, but at least they didn't have to consider the possi-

bility that they had shared a neighborhood and lives with a brutal serial killer.

“Listen, Mr. Dalesio, correct me if I’m wrong: you are the majority shareholder of a large factory and discover that a partner is stealing. At this point, you threaten to go to the police unless he returns the stolen money. Engineer Franzoni then gives you a miniature as collateral, which should be worth roughly the amount stolen. You accept it, and afterward, this little soldier is stolen from you. To retrieve it, you first break into Mrs. Stanziani’s room and then into the widow Gadolla’s, leaving their respective corpses behind. Then, as if nothing had happened, you go for an aperitif with sweet Luisa, whom you were in love with. There, you see your figurine among the pickled appetizers and tell your partner that it belongs to you and that it was stolen from you. Luisa doesn’t believe you and, hurling insults at you, lunges at you, not considering that you were holding olive forks, and in the scuffle, she slits both her wrists. Then, after laying her in the bathtub to try to help her, you realize there’s nothing more to be done.

“Doesn’t it seem absurd to you that, at my age, my love should die in my arms over such an accident? You don’t know how much I cursed myself for my gluttony...”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“My gluttony! When I see sun – dried tomatoes in oil, I lose all control, that’s why I was filling my plate with both hands.”

The commissioner suddenly realized that Dalesio was telling the truth. He had sent two of his best men to direct traffic, thinking that the traces of sunflower seed oil found by forensics on the victim’s wrists had come from their sandwiches.

“But if sweet Luisa died in your arms, why did we find her in the bathtub?”

“I didn’t know what to do, my love was bleeding out and making a mess everywhere, so I laid her in the tub and tried to stop the bleeding... Unfortunately, I quickly realized that there was nothing more to be done, and so...”

“So you filled the tub?!”

“For what purpose, excuse me? When I realized that my love had left me forever, I started crying. My grief, if anything, filled the tub.”

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Mirella continued, now in the grip of sheer disbelief, “So, you are the majority shareholder of a large factory and discover that a partner is stealing. At this point, you threaten to go to the police unless he returns the stolen money. Engineer Franzoni then gives you a miniature as collateral, which should be worth roughly the amount stolen. You accept, and then this little soldier is stolen from you. To retrieve it, you break into Mrs. Stanziani’s room and then into the widow Gadolla’s, leaving their corpses behind. Then, as if nothing had happened, you go for an aperitif with sweet Luisa, whom you were in love with. There, you see your figurine among the pickled appetizers and tell your partner that it belongs to you and was stolen from you. Luisa doesn’t believe you and, hurling insults at you, lunges at you, not considering that you were holding olive forks, and in the scuffle, she slits both her wrists. Then, after laying her in the bathtub to try to help her, you realize there’s nothing more to be done. At this point, you start crying, and your tears fill a bathtub of more than a hundred liters?! Is this what you want me to believe?”

“I loved her so much, you know?”

Mirella felt a lump in her throat. It was now easy to confirm the defendant’s story. Zazà, given his meticulousness, had surely kept among the forensic samples the hundred bottles of water he had ordered filled with the reddish contents of the tub where sweet Luisa had been found. Forensics would have no problem proving whether it was simple tap water or the tears of a heartbroken man.

“At this point, though, you came into possession of your promissory note, didn’t you?”

“Certainly. When I recovered from my grief, I grabbed the Baciccia and hid it. Unfortunately, the next day, I couldn’t remember where...”

“You forgot where you hid the Baciccia?!”

“Exactly. Have I told you how old I am?”

“Please, Mr. Dalesio, don’t make me angry... Anyway, you hid the Baciccia in a billiard pocket.”

“You have it?!”

“Of course, we found it there during a game...”

“But what the hell... Do you know what you've done?! A man died because of that damn miniature...”

“I’d say more than one, engineer. Anyway, calm down and tell me...” Mirella said, trying to remain as composed as possible. “What do you mean by ‘a man died’?”

“When Franzoni told me he had the money to return me, I practically dismantled the entire clinic trying to find the promissory note, to no avail... Have I told you how old I am?”

“Please, don’t test my patience. Go on...”

“I searched for the Baciccia desperately, and in the end, I had to go to the meeting alone. When I explained what had happened, Franzoni, of course, flew into a rage...”

“I, as a man of honor, agreed that he could keep the money – at least until I managed to recover the expensive statuette – but I was adamant about his resignation.”

“Resignation?”

“Are you deaf? Do you think I would have wanted to see him still sitting on the board of directors after what he had done? Along with the money, we had agreed that he would hand me a signed resignation letter...”

“To avoid an unpleasant scandal...”

“Exactly. But if you already know, why do I have to keep explaining?”

“I’m sorry, please continue...”

“Well... Franzoni, however, didn’t seem willing to leave the board, and after learning that I no longer had the miniature, his position seemed even stronger. At this point, he was the one threatening me and, through an audacious display of rhetoric, he began demanding not only impunity but even a promotion. At that point, miss, I must admit, I lost my composure. I showered him with insults and reiterated that I would report his crime to the authorities, then I tried to head for the door on my way to the police station...”

“And then?”

“And then nothing... Franzoni was resolute in his intentions...”

“How can you say that?”

“Well, it wasn’t me who said it – he confirmed it himself just before pointing a gun at me...”

“A gun?!”

“Exactly. What did you think, that I went to that meeting armed, after someone had already died because of my trinkets? Have I told you how old I am?”

“Of course, there's no need to repeat it... But when you were arrested, you had guns on you...”

“Yes, I had started carrying them again, with everything that was happening to me, but at that moment, I assure you, I didn't have any.”

“So the gun was Franzoni's?”

“Of course, how many times do I have to say it... He didn't want to leave and was ready for anything. I acted on instinct – after all, staring down the barrel of a gun, with a silencer no less, at my age, isn't exactly ideal. So I kneed him in the balls.”

“And then what happened?”

“Ah, hell broke loose. The engineer fell, and as he tumbled to the ground, his face turning blue, two shots went off from the gun...”

“Which, conveniently, hit him right in the heart and the forehead. What are you trying to tell me?”

“Listen, miss, I don't drool over remembering these moments. If you want to hear my story, I'll keep going, otherwise, I'm happy to head back to my cell – do you think I care at my age?”

“Apologies... And then what happened?”

“Nothing, I packed up my money and went back to the clinic – but not before straightening out my company's finances...”

“Let me get this straight: you're the majority shareholder of a major factory, and you discover that your partner is stealing from you. At this point, you threaten to report him to the police unless he returns the stolen money. Engineer Franzoni then gives you a miniature as collateral, supposedly worth roughly the stolen sum. You accept, but then the little soldier is stolen from you. To get it back, you break into Mrs. Stanziani's room and then the widow Gadolla's, leaving their respective corpses inside. After that, as if nothing had happened, you go for an aperitif with the sweet Ms. Luisa, whom you were in love with. There, you spot your figurine among the pickled appetizers and tell your companion that it's yours and was stolen from you. Ms. Luisa doesn't believe you, curses you, and lunges at you,

not realizing that you were holding tiny forks – colliding with them, she slashes both of her wrists. Then, after laying her in the bathtub to try and help her, you realize there’s nothing you can do. At that point, you start crying, and your tears fill a bathtub of over a hundred liters. Then you grab the statuette, hide it in the billiards table – where we later find it – and completely forget about it. The day you’re supposed to meet Engineer Franzoni, you show up empty – handed. The engineer gets furious and ends up blackmailing you. So you knee him in the balls, and while rolling on the floor with the gun in his hand, he shoots himself in the heart and between the eyes – at an almost perfectly equal distance... Is this what you’re telling me?”

“Why, does something seem odd to you?”

“What do you think?! And anyway, there’s still one more victim unaccounted for...”

“Oh, that one...”

“Yes, precisely! Were you hoping I’d forget about him?”

“Well, honestly, I actually did forget. Have I told you how old I am?”

“Please, Mr. Dalesio, don’t play games with me. Why did you kill Mr. Suzuki? Because you did kill him, didn’t you? Poor Mr. Suzuki was strangled... Even at your age, you must remember wrapping your hands around his neck, don’t you? You do remember, right? What did Mr. Suzuki have to do with all of this?”

“Well, nothing really... I barely even knew him...”

“Then why did you strangle him? You did strangle him, right? Don’t tell me it was a mistake. What could Mr. Suzuki have possibly done to you?”

“Hey, calm down. Do you know how old I am?”

“Please... Just tell me what Mr. Suzuki had to do with this...”

“Nothing, I already told you... We didn’t even hang out... We couldn’t understand each other, he spoke weird...”

“Of course, he was Japanese.”

“See? I’m telling you the truth...”

“Engineer Dalesio,” Mirella tried to relax, “you’re really testing my patience. Why did you get rid of Mr. Suzuki?”

“Well... umm...”

"Please, answer my question: did you strangle Mr. Suzuki?"

"Practically..."

"Argh... Now you've really worn me out!" Mirella exclaimed, standing up. "Did you put your hands around Mr. Suzuki's neck?"

"Well, yes..."

A shadow appeared behind the glass. The spectators' grandstand erupted into a festive wave before falling silent again to follow the unfolding action.

"And did you squeeze so hard that the poor man couldn't breathe?"

"Practically, yes..."

The grandstand exploded once again.

"And did you stay in that position long enough for him to lose his life?"

"Well, it happened pretty quickly."

"Answer me – did you do it?"

"Yes..."

The old woman, finding no stadium horns available, grabbed the police radio microphone and ordered all patrol cars to turn on their sirens. Zazà seemed ready to celebrate by firing a gunshot. In his direction.

"So, you killed Mr. Suzuki?"

"Yes, I admit it. It was me... but don't make it a matter of etiquette."

"Why, Mr. Dalesio," she continued calmly, "why stain your hands with such an absurd murder?"

"Eh, I'd like to see you in my place."

"What do you mean?"

"With everything that had already happened to me – first Mrs. Stanzi-ani, then the widow, then my sweet love..."

"I don't follow..."

"For heaven's sake, Miss, I was exhausted... I'd already lost three people by accident, and I was pretty shaken up. Then one evening, after saying a final goodbye to my love, taken by nostalgia, I secretly went into her room. I stayed in there for a couple of hours, and just as furtively as I had entered, I left. That's when..."

"That's when Mr. Suzuki saw you..."

"Will you let me finish, please?"

"Sorry... go ahead..."

“It wasn’t him who saw me, but the other way around...”

“That’s even worse, for God’s sake! If he didn’t see you, what reason was there to kill him?”

“Calm down, please. He didn’t see me leaving sweet Luisa’s room, but he sensed my presence behind him and suddenly turned around...”

“But you had already left the room?”

“Of course...”

“Then I ask again, what reason did you have to kill him?”

“That’s what I ask myself too. Did I tell you how old I am?”

“You’re walking on thin ice...” she said sternly.

“Pardon...”

“Why did you kill him if he hadn’t caught you red – handed? What was the reason?”

“Well, now that I think about it... none, I guess...”

“Then why, my God? Why did you strangle him?”

“Oh, come on, I’d like to see you in my place...”

“Meaning?”

“I got scared, that’s all...”

“You got scared because you ran into Mr. Suzuki in the hallway of the clinic where you were both staying?”

“How many times do I have to say it... I’d like to see you in my shoes... And anyway, I didn’t even know it was Mr. Suzuki...”

“You didn’t recognize him?”

“Look, Miss, my eyesight isn’t great. Did I tell you how old I am?”

“Yes, you’ve told me seven hundred times, thanks... So, you didn’t recognize the victim, but that didn’t stop you from strangling him...”

“I hate to say it, Miss, but at this moment you remind me of your grandmother... I didn’t want to kill anyone – I was just going back to my room behind this guy who was walking ahead of me. I had no intention of strangling anyone, I just wanted to go to bed...”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Oh, my God, I already told you... I got scared...”

“But why?”

“Because this guy, hearing me walking behind him, suddenly turned around...”

“And for that, you strangled him...”

“Oh, come on, I’d like to see you suddenly facing a ninja...”

“He was dressed as a ninja?!”

“Exactly. And he was staring at me through his mask with those slanted eyes of his.”

“I don’t believe this. What did you say he was dressed as?!”

“Oh, are you deaf?! A ninja. You know, like Zorro, but with way more weapons. And no horse...”

“Yes, yes, I got it.”

“Good, because I didn’t really understand it myself. All I know is that from behind, I hadn’t noticed anything, but when he turned around, I saw he was masked and it gave me a heart attack. I wanted to run, but then he pulled out his sword and held it straight up in front of his face...”

“That’s how swordsmen greet each other.”

“And how was I supposed to know that, excuse me? I was walking in the dark, with three bodies on my conscience – not to mention that thief of an ex – partner – when suddenly a ninja stands in front of me raising his sword... What was I supposed to do, buy him a drink?”

“But how is it possible that you didn’t recognize Mr. Suzuki?” Mirella asked, rolling herself a cigarette in the shape of a katana, which, in this context, didn’t seem out of place at all.

“How many times do I have to tell you, he was masked! And what the hell was he even doing in the hallway at that hour, dressed like a fool? How was I supposed to guess? Look, did I tell you how old I am?”

“Enough, please. I know how old you are. Go on...”

“There’s not much left to say. When the ninja raised his sword, my whole life flashed before my eyes...” He paused, waiting for a response that never came.

“Eighty – five springs, did you know that? Well, anyway, I didn’t want to give in to the Grim Reaper, so I distracted him too with the classic well – placed knee strike, and while his sword was raised, I managed to stun him and gain the upper hand by grabbing him by the neck...”

“And he didn’t try to identify himself, didn’t say anything...”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think he was in a condition to express himself at that moment, but even if he had, I wouldn’t have understood a thing – he was Japanese.”

“And when did you realize you had made a terrible mistake?”

“About five minutes ago...”

“Five minutes ago?!”

“Yes, five minutes ago... When I remembered that I hadn’t licked any stamps to send my clothes to the nice young man at the model shop. If memory serves me right, I must have used glue... But it doesn’t matter anymore, miss. In the end, it’s for the best – I’ve lifted a great weight off my stomach. Did I tell you how old I am?”

“Mr. Dalesio, for the last time, don’t make me angry. We were talking about the night you strangled Mr. Suzuki. So when did you realize that the person you had strangled was your colleague and not a shadow warrior?”

“Well, what kind of question is that? When I turned on the light...”

“Are you messing with me?!”

“Absolutely not. The hallway was dark, and after getting the better of what I thought was a ninja, I walked away happily towards the light switch...”

“Happily?”

“Damn right I was happy – taking down a ninja doesn’t happen every day, especially at my age. Did I tell you how old I am?”

Mirella just stared at him without replying.

“Alright, alright, I’ll continue... Anyway, after turning on the light, I took off his mask, put his pajamas on him, and recognized Mr. Suzuki...”

“You put his pajamas on him?”

“Of course...”

“What do you mean, ‘of course’?”

“I’d like to see you with the Japanese, they all look alike. It was obvious I’d recognize him in the ward – he was the only one with slanted eyes – but dressed as a ninja, he looked like a completely different person. So I undressed him and put his pajamas on him. At that point, I recognized Mr. Sushi without a doubt.”

“Let me get this straight: you are the majority shareholder of a large factory and discover that one of your partners is stealing. At this point, you

threaten to go to the police unless he returns what he took. Engineer Franzoni, therefore, gives you a miniature as collateral, supposedly worth about the same amount as what he stole. You accept. Then this little soldier is stolen from you, and in an attempt to recover it, you sneak first into Mrs. Stanziani's room and then into widow Gadolla's, leaving their respective corpses inside. Afterward, as if nothing had happened, you go have an aperitif with the lovely Ms. Luisa, whom you were in love with. There, you spot your figurine among the pickled goods and tell your companion that it's yours and that it was stolen from you. Ms. Luisa doesn't believe you, and, hurling insults at you, she lunges at you, not realizing she had olive forks in her hand, and by falling onto them, she severs the veins in both wrists. Then, after laying her in the bathtub in an attempt to help her, you realize there's nothing more you can do. At this point, you start crying, and your tears fill a tub of over a hundred liters. Then you grab the figurine, hide it in the billiard table – where we will later find it – and completely forget about it. The day you're supposed to meet Engineer Franzoni, you show up empty – handed. The engineer gets furious and ends up blackmailing you. At that point, you knee him in the balls, and as he rolls on the floor with his gun in hand, he shoots himself in the heart and then right between the eyes, with an almost perfectly equidistant placement... But before you even went to meet the engineer, you had a nostalgic moment that led you to spend some time in the room of the lovely Ms. Luisa. Leaving that room, you bumped into what you thought was a ninja and strangled him... But when some doubts started creeping in, you decided to see how the ninja you had just taken down looked in pajamas – at eighty – five years old, I know... Only at that point did you realize that the so – called warrior was nothing more than a poor fellow patient like yourself, perhaps with some additional kinks. Isn't that right?"

"Miss, I must admit you have an incredible memory..."

"But then what happened?"

"Well, what do you think happened next... I had accidentally killed a fellow patient and even dressed him in pajamas... So I laid him on the bed – what else was I supposed to do? Screw him?"

"But engineer..."

"When it's needed, it's needed."

“Then you put the victim’s costume away in the closet and...?”

“And, not wanting to leave him all alone with his neck all red, I placed the Pink Panther I had found in his room next to him – you know, those plastic ones with wire inside?”

“Of course, it was found wrapped around his neck...”

“Exactly, I put it there...”

“And then?”

“And then I forgot all about it...”

“You forgot?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, miss? You do know how old I am, right?”

Mirella couldn’t take it anymore and stepped to the other side of the mirror. Marione, Zazà, Dirk, the Old Lady, and Novelli were already celebrating with Lambrusco. No judge, after all, would ever be harsh with that poor old man, a victim of such an absurd series of misunderstandings. Sure, the five corpses remained corpses, and there wasn’t much to be happy about – not to mention that one of them had been romantically involved with the defendant – but it was still a great relief to know they weren’t dealing with a ruthless killer.

The trial, as we later learned, caused a great sensation, and the defendant’s testimony in court was broadcast on Neurovision, that is, in every care facility in the country.

Dalesio never spent a single day behind bars but was shuffled back and forth for a few years between various institutions, where he was studied like a Martian to see if the bad luck he carried was some kind of organic presence. Then, fortunately, he returned to the clinic, where he currently resides with the other survivors, and remembers practically nothing of his past.

Did he tell you how old he is?

Chapter forty – two

Until the end of the world – reprise

Mirella and Marione returned to the center to update us on the developments, while the Old Lady and her doctor walked arm in arm toward the clinic as the sun was rising. It looked like the ending of a western film. All's well that ends well, we thought... Of course, we wouldn't have been able to say the same to the victims' families, but on the other hand, we didn't even know them.

We gathered at the center along with the construction workers and Caloggero, who, after discovering the consistency of the blue elephants, didn't want to leave us anymore.

Returning home was a real relief for the doctor after the absurd days spent at the clinic... Since this whole story began, he had devoured about six packs of Falqui laxatives, and there was hope he wouldn't follow in Dirk's footsteps straight to the hospital.

The Old Lady, also happy to return to normal, drastically reduced her ambushes on the doctor and, through an accurate selection of essays on the subject, began to take an interest in life beyond death. She said the topic fascinated her almost more than sex... If nothing else, at her age, she had a much better chance of successfully communicating with her poor late husband than becoming the protagonist of an orgy.

A few hours later, the celebrations erupted without interruption, and we all left recent events behind us... Everyone except Sergio, who was still asleep, and Marione. For the latter, one great mystery remained unsolved. By now, his clothesline must have thawed, and beneath the crust of dried laundry, his t – shirt should have been resting. Mirella sensed his unease and crafted him a joint featuring Sigmund Freud's face, forgetting she had already given him a similar figurine before. The anarchist stands burst into a chorus of disapproval, while the construction workers and Caloggero didn't understand why. For Marione, however, Freud or Jung made no difference, and after burning the head of the figure, he went home to resolve the matter.

It was late morning when Marione, accompanied by his girlfriend, entered his parents' living room. This was the house where he had regularly lived until recently and where he could never have imagined – not even remotely – a future filled with such mystery and transformation as the one he had just experienced.

As they entered, the two saw Marione's mother sitting at the table while Senior, whistling, was serving her breakfast. She had the look of someone who had slept for over a week, and even the wrinkles Marione remembered so well seemed to have abandoned her...

"Wow, Mom, you look beautiful... What happened to you?" he blurted out, perhaps not too politely.

"My love! Come here and let me hug you," she replied, showering him with classic motherly affection. "What do you mean, what happened to me? I had an amazing sleep... It was truly rejuvenating, you know? I feel like I've been asleep for days... So this morning, your father decided to make me breakfast. Isn't that sweet?" she said, gesturing to the table overflowing with treats.

Marione was in shock. His father had never cooked a thing in his life, and now, not only were there half a dozen poached eggs on the table, but also homemade buttered white bread and a jar of cherry jam that Senior had boiled overnight after raiding the neighbor's cherry tree branches that hung over the balcony – where, by the way, the fateful clothesline still lay. He had to sit down...

Senior no longer seemed like the classic TV – addled old fool, and his wife no longer bore the typical wrinkles of someone aging behind a pasta machine.

"Marione, my love," his mother said. "If, as we suspect, you're about to move in with your girlfriend, your father and I would be grateful if you could take your stuff before the end of the month. You see, we'd like to knock down the wall of your bedroom to enlarge the living room and buy a fabulous bar cabinet to entertain our guests... Of course, you'll always have a place here if you ever need it..."

Marione wouldn't have been able to form a coherent thought, let alone a verbal response. His brain was short – circuiting... His parents had

changed, and he suddenly found himself living in a reality he had always thought was reserved for only a few, open – minded, and affluent families.

His parents – who had always been on his case about everything – were now completely understanding of his entire existence. If he had been born among Native Americans, today he would have been led up a hill, where his wise warrior father would have told him to go forth and become a man – then left him alone, surrounded by rattlesnakes.

Parents had a strange idea of parental authority, he thought. When you're a kid, they do nothing but nag you in private while bragging about your exaggerated virtues in public. Then, suddenly, they realize you're a person and leave you alone, happy they can finally remodel the house. But when the place becomes too big to clean every day, they come crawling back, trying to guilt – trip you about how, years ago you left them. Right when they bought that sad bar cabinet that every day remind it.

But amid his mental chaos, Marione also realized that kids – himself included – are never satisfied either. If they get too much love, they grow up coddled by their parents. If they get too little, they end up resenting them. And if they get just the right amount, they'll still find something to complain about – like the color of the Porsche they got for their birthday.

Suddenly, like Buddha, he realized that the truth lay somewhere in the middle.

Marione had lived all his experiences in the neighborhood, and even if his family wasn't exactly ideal, he had never lacked anything. He had managed to become a free thinker, almost indifferent to trends.

For years, he had dreamed of his anarchist role within the local community center, where he once thought he was surrounded by great activists – only to now find himself leading it, side by side with his brilliant and gorgeous girlfriend.

Much more brilliant, and much more gorgeous, than in even his wildest and most unspeakable fantasies.

In just a few days, he had taken all the major steps in a man's life... He had openly expressed his ideas to his parents, become a respected activist, left home, fallen in love with one of the coolest punk girls on the planet, and now... his parents had transformed into characters straight out of a movie.

"Of course, Mom," he finally managed to reply, straightening his shoulders for the first time in his life. "I'll take everything away by the end of the month. By the way," he continued, wrapping an arm around her, "I haven't yet had the honor of introducing you to my girlfriend: Mirella, my mom. Mom, Mirella..."

"Mirella, my dear," she said, hugging her and smothering her with kisses, "you don't know how happy I am that my son has found a wonderful girl like you... My husband has told me about your adventures, and I can't wait to have you here for dinner... Of course, your grandmother is invited too..."

"We certainly won't miss it..." Mirella replied, trying to stick as much as possible to the protocol that seemed to have taken hold of the couple – at least until Senior, who had disappeared into the cellar, burst into the room holding a bottle of grappa that seemed covered in the dust of the centuries...

"This is a great moment..." he declared, his voice thick from already having had a couple of drinks by eight – thirty in the morning. "One day, my father took me aside and said: 'My son, this is a great day... You are now a man, and I have nothing more to teach you... From this moment on, you must walk your path in the world alone. Naturally, your mother and I will always be here, and whenever you need our help, we will be honored to offer it to you. But what will change in you now is something more conceptual and profound. You are a man, and as such, you will navigate your journey through experience, choosing your paths based on your free will without, of course, any influence from us. This, let me tell you, saddens your mother and me a little, but you must choose on your own and move forward on your path... Not only do we hope that you will be happy, but we also hope that you will take all your stuff away by the end of the month. You know, we're waiting for the builders... At this point, I would like, as my father's father did with him, to gift you this precious bottle of grappa. You must keep it for an important occasion, and only then should you open it and share its contents with those around you..."

"Wow, cool the Grandpa," Marione burst out in disbelief. "What an amazing speech... You've never told me about this... But when did he say that to you...?"

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday?! Does that mean you still have your room at Grandma and Grandpa’s house?”

“Uh...” he blushed. “That’s not the point... The point is that yesterday Grandpa gave me this bottle of grappa, just as his father did before him, and so on... I never imagined that the right moment to open it would come so quickly... I would like to toast to your health, my children, and wish you all the happiness in the world,” he concluded, uncorking it.

“But if Grandpa only gave you that bottle yesterday, why does it look centuries old?”

“Because it really is, my son. In our family, the tradition of passing down a bottle of grappa from father to son goes back many generations. It is said that in a distant year, long, long before the Rise of the Cod, a grappa of unparalleled quality was distilled, which, naturally, did not linger long on the shelves of the finest wine shops. Back then, one of our ancestors decided to keep a bottle of that rare liquor to gift to his son and share in his revelation when he came of age. However, the gesture was misunderstood. Our ancestor – this, I believe, I have understood better than anyone – never intended to create a rigid tradition to be carried on indefinitely. He simply wanted his son to taste the best grappa he had ever had. Unfortunately, the son misinterpreted it, and after receiving the precious bottle, he was already thinking about doing the same for his own children. Unfortunately, when the time came for all these descendants to open the fateful bottle, they could never fulfill the original intent of the first one. Instead, they kept passing it down from father to son. Today, on this great day, I have broken this mistaken tradition. For the first time in the history of the Marioni family, I am fulfilling the original wish of our great ancestor. This,” he continued, raising the bottle to the sky as if to seek its blessing, “is the finest grappa ever distilled on the face of the earth, and although in theory, it should have been tasted by a distant cousin of yours, we accept it as a precise gift of fate. If destiny has willed that this bottle should reach us, we can do nothing but thank it and raise our glasses in its honor...”

Mirella, who had thought her boyfriend's family was just a delightful and monotonous mix of crossword puzzles and homemade pasta, had to promptly reconsider.

A delicious aroma suddenly filled the room, saturating the air instantly. None of those present had ever smelled such a sublime nectar. Some witnesses later claimed that even Pinin, down at the tavern, stood up from his stool at that very moment and, after sniffing the air from the sidewalk, returned to his seat without uttering a word. A tear streaked his face.

Marione and Mirella stood dumbfounded, glasses in hand, while Senior urged them to taste the nectar that had already waited far too many years to be appreciated. Mirella, timidly, brought the glass to her lips. As the crystal neared its destination, her nostrils absorbed an ever – greater amount of the ancient and forgotten fragrance. Suddenly, her face flushed as if the contents of the glass had an outrageous alcohol level, but her eyes, far from bulging, did not suggest an alcoholic reaction. Rather, they hinted at a gustatory orgasm.

Marione noticed and, in his eagerness to also assimilate the nectar of times past, downed his glass in one gulp – turning green. Then it was his mother's turn. Having just devoured her breakfast, she toasted to her son's future and that of his bride with a rather unflattering yellow – blue hue. The father, who raised his glass last, cycled through the entire color spectrum, lingering a bit longer on the three primary ones...

The bottle, passed down from father to son for countless generations, had traveled an incredibly long journey to reach them – only to last no more than fifteen minutes... The fifteen most beautiful minutes Marione had ever spent with his parents.

"Marione," his father resumed, still looking like a traffic light, "you must forgive me for breaking tradition by opening this bottle, but today has been a great lesson. We have learned that it is better to toast together, and immediately, rather than hope that others will do it for you... I hope you understand."

"Of course, Dad," Marione replied, embracing him. "Well said."

"Mr. Marione," Mirella burst out, hugging him too, "you are a legend."

"Oh no, my dear," he answered, pulling the two of them close while his wife watched on, smiling and smeared with jam. "I am simply a purebred Emilian... If they thought I could let a grappa like this go to waste rather than share it with the people I love, they were gravely mistaken... I'm not a Christian Democrat! But now, off you go," he encouraged them. "Your

mother and I have things to do. We're going on a little vacation before the builders arrive, and you mustn't waste time. There's surely a party in your honor at the center..."

Senior was right – at the center, the celebration would rage on for many days, and staying there any longer made no sense. His parents had finally realized they had a life of their own ahead of them – one that, unlike in most cases, wasn't just about their children.

As they were leaving, Marione suddenly remembered the reason for their visit. Stumbling slightly at the doorstep, he turned to his mother:

"Ah, Ma... I almost forgot..."

"Yes, dear?"

"The laundry under the crust must have dried by now, right?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Great. Could you do me a favor?"

"Of course..."

"Throw it all away. I feel like refreshing my wardrobe a little..."

"Alright..." she concluded, without even remembering anymore why that shirt had once tormented her so much...

They found themselves on the street, holding hands. The morning had just finished blending the colors of a new day onto its palette, drying the dew and the muddy trails left by the codfish during their nocturnal raids. They walked along the main road, the sun now high in the sky, casting their shadows in front of them as a single reassuring silhouette. All around them, the world was waking up: shops were opening, and here and there, shopkeepers were already cursing at the limpets covering their shutters. Fish drifted aimlessly across the sidewalks, and from the blossoming trees, along with the fruit, hung octopuses and squid.

Mirella and Marione walked slowly toward the social center. The cars that usually roared through the neighborhood seemed to yield to them, too timid even to make noise in the distance. Seen from behind, illuminated by such a beautiful day's sunlight, they looked like the lovers from Quino's cartoons, framed in the midst of a school of soles that accompanied their steps toward the social center, almost like a wedding procession heading to the altar.

At the center – that is, at home – the two celebrated for a long time, happily smoking away. At least until Sergio woke up, saw the bricklayer who had hit him, and, terrified, once again flung himself out the window. Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, the party took off. The fog settled in suddenly, and we all found ourselves in that velvety, empathetic universe where negative vibes had no access. To be honest, I don't remember much, but if I hadn't been so caught up in the festivities, I could almost swear I saw the White House burning...