

I arrive at the hospital and stand in the parking lot, my hand limply resting on the steering wheel and my fingers drumming. Evening is falling outside, and the first lights from the street lamps come on, one flash after another in the haze.

I'll be there as soon as I can, I said.

I light a cigarette and bring it to my lips. Patches of smoke spring from my mouth a few moments later, the comfortable taste of tobacco staining my teeth, and the interior of the car reflects the haze from outside, growing thicker.

I could stay in here, I think, not even open the windows.

"please hurry."

That's what my mother's message said, but I know I'm already insanely late. Another deep breath, more clouds in my lungs.

My eyes sting.

I have to hurry.

My gaze meets the opaque windows of the hospital, a white concrete behemoth on which shine familiar red and blue lights and from which come frantic sounds of life and death.

"You have to be there," my mother had shouted into the phone. "You are his daughter".

I won't be for much longer, I think.

The smoke has become unbearable.

I open the door and put one foot out, the rubber of my boot sinking into the snow without difficulty. I cough and the cold air scrapes my throat. I didn't even get a proper coat before I got behind the wheel, and now the cold embraces me like a jealous lover would.

There is no turning back.

The sliding doors of the hospital retreat into the walls.

I want to escape.

The nurse at the entrance asks why I am there.

"My father."

"I'll need something more" a pause "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. My mother is already here. Room 117, I think."

The woman nods, but I know she hates me: I can tell by the way she looks at me. A couple of clicks on the computer as a clear, anonymous voice echoes in the hallway, and then a response.

My father's name and then, "I need your personal information and ID."

Mechanical generalities follow and then I am on an elevator, accompanied by another nurse. She is telling me about my father and does not hide a vein of compassion. Her eyes, tired, convey a motherly comfort.

The elevator continues to rise. The nurse is now silent, but she still occasionally casts furtive glances at me.

It feels like going up to hell, and when the elevator doors open I am greeted by a long white corridor facing a glass window: the horizon of dark forests sprinkled with snow stretches parallel ahead in a natural maze that manes the mountains.

The nurse places a hand on my back, but soon withdraws it, leaving my fingers suspended in the air for a few seconds: she has noticed that I am shivering, and realizing this makes me feel an unnatural rage.

An aseptic smell of chemical cleanliness and germlessness intoxicates the whole room, mixing with the all but artificial stench of a dying body. I haven't smelled it since my grandmother died.

My aunt and Mother are already here. The former is wiping the forehead of a pale, swollen body, a mannequin of purulent rags emerging from the bed, while the latter is talking on the phone, but interrupts the call as soon as she notices me.

Mom throws her arms around my neck and hugs me. For a few moments the hospital smell disappears and only her scent remains, familiar and distant in time, and I just wrap my arms around her tighter and tighter.

She cries, holds me, takes my face and smiles.

Then, her nostrils barely flare and dull again. Her eyes snap inquiringly, frantically, a look that screams betrayal now that it is accompanied by tears.

I know what she is thinking.

She has smelled the smoke. We've argued about this before, in fact, it's something we've been fighting about since I started smoking. I promised myself not to do it before I left, but I had forgotten, maybe, I had wanted to forget.

The disappointment in my mother's expression haunts the air, interrupted at times by a few awkward sobs, and for a moment it is impossible to sustain her gaze.

"There was traffic," I exhale, a phrase that resonates in my mind as forgive me, I'm a terrible daughter, I want to die, forgive me.

"Yes" Mom replies, still distant but more controlled. "I saw on Google."

"So many people who are-" for a second I can't speak. "They're leaving for the holidays."

More silence, interrupted by the alien noises of the car behind that body and the voice of my aunt, who seems to be singing something under her breath.

I take off my denim jacket and lay it on one of the brown chairs in the room. Mom closes the door.

"He's gotten much worse," she says, as she walks back toward the bed, "The doctors think it will take a couple of hours."

"He can't talk, can he?" I ask.

It is my aunt who answers. "He can barely breathe" I'm about to reply, but she doesn't give me time "If you had come earlier, perhaps, you might have heard your father's voice one last time."

My mother huffs, irritated. "Please stop."

"No" my aunt stands up, trembling. She has the eyes of a wounded animal, the look of prey trapped between a cliff and the barrel of a gun.

She seems to want to continue, but a sob breaks her voice. She falls on her brother's body and weeps, weeps in despair; my mother clutches her shoulders.

A cloud of silence, choking like smoke, fills my lungs. I stand still for moments that seem like centuries, and then I speak.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

As that bloated body becomes a corpse, as my aunt despairs, as my mother, in tears, hits the door of the bathroom I have locked myself in and screams, screams at me, at death, at divorce, I am vomiting.

When I have cleansed my body of smoke and every molecule of water, I mechanically get up and wash my face. I do not remember anything that happened after that.



The funeral is not too crowded. We will be, if I count a couple of family friends, a dozen at most.

My brother arrived the very morning of the service: he took the first flight of the morning, after the blizzard had canceled all available ones the night of the hospital, and did nothing but console Mom.

As we smoked secretly on the back balcony, we said nothing to each other: it must have been strange and sad for our mother to see us like that after a year of superficial contact by phone.

The truth was that I had felt calm when I realized that he didn't have anything to say either, but rather, would have to strain to find the words: something had drained both of us.

I asked him how his wife was doing. She is pregnant, he replied. I congratulated him.

"I think I'll have to name him after Dad."

"You don't have to."

"That's what everyone in the family would want."

I dropped the conversation.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

I think of the guy I've been dating for three months. "No. No one"

"You've always been independent," he replies.

I don't answer. Neither of us says anything for the next hour.

At church, my aunt couldn't stop crying. My mother was moved, my brother's eyes were glazed over, I was pale, stiff, wispy.

A friend of Mom's, a lady with flushed cheeks and a sober high-necked black dress, held my hand throughout the service. I never looked up, lost as I was in looking at my shoes: every movement of my pupil registered a stain, a detail of ruined leather, a lace beginning to wear away, and tried to substitute them for what I was listening to.

Lies from acquaintances, lies from relatives, snakes biting and squeezing me in order to make me scream. He was a good man, tenacious, strong, meek, thoughtful soul, nature lover, expert hiker, faithful husband and cooperating ex-husband, beloved brother, honorable father, little boy who always played on the old country road, devoted son, now in the arms of the Virgin Mary, amen.

I feel only bitterness. It kneads my mouth like a disgusting medicine. I should have given a eulogy, but I refused: I'm too grieved, that's what Mom keeps telling everyone to justify me; I'm an ungrateful, bitchy, shallow, cruel, cursed, spoiled child, my aunt's colorful response instead.

The truth I think lies somewhere in between, somewhere between the burning resentment that always threatens to escape my body and a slimy worm of remorse, hiding just below my heart, stunned by its constant beating, unable to get out without killing me.

I wonder if the people around me can sense what I feel.

Especially now, that we are at the refreshment party that aunt insisted on organizing, and all the guests, one by one, are lining up in a pilgrimage of condolences to shake my hand.

You've grown up, he loved you very much, how's work going?, college?, I heard about your car accident, bad story, the last few days your father was getting worse and worse, he wasn't talking anymore, you have the same eyes, you know?

The last one is a cousin on dad's side, a girl a little older than me who apparently often spent vacations with us. I didn't remember her, and she shrugs her shoulders.

"It doesn't matter, you were really small. You couldn't even reach my knees!" she bridges my silence. "Yes, you and Uncle have the same eyes. It's impressive to look at your face."

Do you want them?, I want to answer, but I hold back. "Yes, otherwise I think I take after my mother"

"I still need to talk to her" he searches the room for her with his eyes and then, as soon as he spots her, he greets me by squeezing my shoulder.

I go out back. The air is dry and cold and envelops me, creeping up my spine and then branching throughout my body.

Nothing has changed since I left. The garden has graying with winter, the grass with its head cut off, the tree Mom planted is bare. The gray sky mingles with the hazy roof tiles, which in that ashen scenery look like dark, remote galaxies without stars.

As a child, I would hide in the house, locking myself in the closet, and pretend that I was setting off on a long journey, far from the cold of the Earth. A journey with an unknown destination, but one that I had to complete.

Mother would always find me. She would patiently tire me out, reminding me that I was growing up and that soon I would no longer be able to fit in there: I would either be stuck in that huge wooden crate or I would crumple in on myself, and I would have to live like an artist's unsatisfactory sketch.

Sometimes Dad would find me. I knew he was the one who opened the closet door because Mom always knocked before she did, and asked permission to come in. Father would just open it.

Then he would stare at me, weighing me. The first memory I have of him is his pale, tense face, his eyes fixed in mine, the light of the chandelier enveloping him and the darkness of the closet brushing against his face.

His knuckles are clenched on the wood. He has dark marks on his hands. My father often had scratches everywhere. The mouth is a straight line, vaguely asymmetrical in a mild smile.

In those moments I felt we were extremely close: if Mom begged me to come out and treated the closet as a game, Dad never did.

It seemed as if looking at me in there he felt a certain envy, as if he was wondering how I had managed to find such a place, where one no longer exists in space, as if he wanted to replace me among the shelves and boxes to curl up like a pile of dust.



The next day we are all sitting around a neat desk.

My mother has her hands clasped in her lap, nervously her fingers brushing and loosening, while my brother, next to me, straightens in the dark brown chair. My aunt is to mom's left, also tense but less frightened: there is a certain stillness on her face, the torrential weeping that had furrowed her cheeks until yesterday afternoon has turned into a mask of perfectly still and expectant facial muscles; she reminds me of a snake ready to snap at its prey.

The notary re-enters the study at that instant. The sound of the door opening is only the beginning of an orchestra made up of the footsteps of old moccasins, which creak every time they touch the floor., and the sometimes irritating whistling that escapes from the lips of the man, an anonymous silhouette that smells fresh: he looks like a teacher who, fully dressed and awkward, tries to fit into the frame of the class photo, placing himself behind the rows of his beloved pupils.

There is no camera, but on the other hand there is my mother, who, after moments of silence in which the notary seems to have almost forgotten our presence, clears her throat.

Cheese, I think, as the man smiles shyly and his eyes narrow to two slits.

"I didn't mean to keep you waiting, forgive me," he observes us and licks his lips. "Did they bring you coffee? Don't you want it? Oh, that's all right. Yes, of course it's already late. Let's get started then."

From a drawer he pulls out a still sealed envelope. Once opened, he reveals its contents, a pale document on which the ink of the letters stands out like medical sutures around a scar, and prepares for the reading: he wears two small round glasses, a total stereotype that makes me arch an eyebrow.

The first parts of the will are a sequence of regulations and formalities.

I listen without registering any. I am here only because I have been asked to be, I will reject whatever Dad has left me and leave this town for good; maybe I will come back for Mom sometime, and maybe I will drop in when my niece (or nephew?) is born, provided my

brother brings them here to celebrate birthdays or to walk in the woods, as we did when we were kids.

I may come back for the woods, perhaps, for those long walks sometimes lost in the wilderness. We used to follow our father everywhere as children when he would start one of these hikes: he would walk ahead, his stride sure, and we would trot behind him; he would always go too fast and you had to hustle to get him to slow down. Sometimes Dad would take only me. Then we would choose another walk, a more difficult and untrodden path, and Dad would sometimes freeze, almost hypnotized, his gaze fixed on

"I'm afraid you young lady have inherited the most mysterious lot."

"I beg your pardon?"

The notary repeats what he said. Then he adds. "Your father was very insistent that I keep the secret."

No. "Whatever it is, I don't want it. I have already made up my mind."

"Don't be too hasty."

The notary gets up and opens one of the sliding cabinets on the walls. He disappears for a second among the metal of the shelves before reappearing with a box in his hand: it is made of cardboard, absolutely anonymous, a little damaged at the edges and sealed with paper tape on all sides. He lays it on the desk under our astonished gazes, some more curious than frightened. Not mine.

I feel like that box is just waiting to bite into something.

"His inheritance is enclosed in here," I am about to speak, but he interrupts me. "Even I don't know what it contains. Your father was a very private man, let me tell you."

"I remember watching as he prepared it," my aunt comments. "He wouldn't tell me what it was about."

"And he wanted to leave it with me? Not to my aunt?" I ask.

"Yes, miss. And not only that" he sits down again and resumes reading. *"To my only daughter I leave the contents of the above-mentioned box. Under no circumstances is it to be opened, destroyed, sold or exposed to danger before it can reach her hands. Only she alone will be able to open it. What she will do with my inheritance is at her total discretion. The rest of the family may know about the box, but they may not under any circumstances touch it, open it, destroy its seals..."*

"I understand," I blurt out. "I don't want it anyway. It can stay closed."

My mother sighs. "These are her last wishes. Please respect them."

"You have every right to refuse her, ma'am" replies the notary.

"Really, it would be okay if Auntie received it" I continue, and she looks at me. "She took care of Dad until the end."

"Suddenly you care about what's fair?" she asks. "When he was dying you were hours late, you smelled like smoke, you wouldn't even talk to him."

I sink into the chair. "I would have come earlier if I could have."

"He had been in the hospital for a week. You had as much time as he took to die" my mother tries to calm her down, but my aunt pushes her hand away. "Do you want to do what is right? Take this box. Respect your father and don't draw attention to yourself even at a time like this."

"Will she be free to do what she wants?" my brother asks.

"Of course, she is free to reject it and to shut her mouth. To not talk about what is right."

"I agree with your aunt," my mother's voice suddenly booms, silencing us. "Honey, you may as well hide it in the basement and never open it. Think of it as a symbolic gesture: fulfilling the last wish of those who are gone."

I look at the box. In its simplicity it fills me with dread. Part of me can't help but wonder: did my father manage to fill an entire box for me? Opening it, I think I would find nothing. It would be funny. Ironic and grotesque.

In legacy, I leave you everything I ever felt for you.

In legacy, I leave you everything I ever knew about you.

In legacy, I leave you how much I cared about you.

In legacy, our last conversation.

In legacy, our love.

Am I afraid of that? No, it would confirm what I already know. I cannot be so afraid of something I already know. Can't I? As a child I thought God was scared anyway, even though he knew everything, so paralyzed by fear that he could not stop the dark destiny that sooner or later would devour everything. Grandma had said that was a blasphemous thought, because God could not feel fear.

And even if he were afraid, she had concluded, a father would never let his children see him afraid.

Maybe inside the box are my father's fears, which will devour me once they are released. "You can take all time to think about it, miss," the notary's voice is distant and muffled, a mirage. "However, these gifts are a great way to reconcile with our loved ones. Or, at least,

to close an inauspicious paragraph of our lives. She will in any case receive her share of the inheritance, like her brother. The box will be here waiting for her."



"So when are you coming back?"

"I don't know."

"Alright" a pause follows. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"How did the interview go?"

"Good" silence. "I think it went well"

"Good"

"Listen, you can tell me if something is wrong. With your father's death and everything would be normal. Don't answer me like that though. You don't seem to give a shit."

I don't give a shit, I think, I don't care about you. I will never care about you. Waking up next to you every forces me to cry in the bathroom, I feel dirty every time you touch me, I feel drowned when I have to hold your gaze. If I could I would erase myself from your memories and start over in another corner of the universe, as long as I didn't have to know that you will love me no matter what: no matter what I do, no matter what I say.

I have been silent for too long.

"Sorry," I exhale. "Just... You know, a strange thing happened. It scares me a little."

His voice seems to take on a tinge of relief. "Tell me, I'm here."

"Don't you have a shift at the bar?"

"It can wait. Tell me."

I tell him about the box and how it terrifies me. Around me darkness absorbs my anxieties as more words escape my mouth and it seems as if the wooden walls are imprisoning me in a chest.

More silence. "Yes, indeed, it is strange. Your father was never too much on the line though, was he?"

"On the line?"

"Wasn't he vaguely crazy?"

I don't know how to answer. "Even if he was, I don't know what to do and I keep thinking about it."

I hear him sigh. "I would take it."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'll tell you, it's strange and sadistic, but it makes me very curious. Maybe you'll find a treasure map."

I would like to rip his face off. "My father had no treasures"

"People have a lot of secrets" and on that I agree. "In my opinion it would be a good experience, cathartic"

I chuckle. "Did you learn it in drama class?"

"What? Cathartic? Fuck you, I'm not an idiot like you think."

"I don't think you're an idiot."

"Yeah, sure" he's smiling, I can hear him through the phone. "Tell me how it's going. Send me some pictures. I miss you."

I nod. I say I will. We stop talking on the phone a few seconds later. I huddle in the closet and wait for someone to find me and force me to leave it. For a moment I think about sending him pictures of me, actually, for the first time since we've been together. I could take them with flash, among the shelves and old coats, and frame just my torso.

No, just thinking about it makes me vomit. I quickly send him a couple of pictures I found on the Internet, girls who vaguely look like me and ended up online because of some keyboard monster; I don't know how right that is, morally, but at this point it doesn't matter much. He doesn't seem to notice, and if he does, he decides to pretend.

Since we've been having sex, I don't even look at myself in the mirror. I don't think he's noticed how much I find him repulsive, the way I look at him sometimes when he's on top of me: he's terrifying and looks like a big, greedy animal, his eyes narrowing with every grunt and groan, his hands grasping, desperately, and disconnected words coming out of his mouth.

In the shower I rub myself until my skin hurts, but that smell of flesh and sweat and being human never seems to want to go away. I tried it with other people while he was out of town and realized that he is not the problem, but I am: women, men, I feel suffocated every time my cells dance around another person's. To say that I feel in danger would be to minimize.

My brother said I am independent, I think I am simply disconnected.

The closet door opens. I look up and look for my mother, but I find my aunt, who is watching me from above; she smiles, embarrassed, and then asks:

"Let's you and I go out for a drink, shall we?"



My aunt did not have an easy life. She and my father were twins, heterozygous, but strikingly similar in facial features, physicality and attitudes: what differentiated them was the deep agitation that has always characterized my aunt's every expression, reaction and thought.

Looking at her, one could sense that she was a wounded animal. I don't know what happened, I know that Grandma and Grandpa were not perfect parents. My father called it old-fashioned education, my mother always described it as gratuitous and continuous violence, which, in my opinion, continues to this day to run in our family's blood.

Aunt must have thought so, too, because she had had no children. She had had a partner for many years, but she was terrified of bringing someone like her father or mother into the world; she had revealed this to me one New Year's Eve, after she had quarreled with her grandmother, who was still alive at the time.

She was in the bathroom, enclosed between the toilet and the dirty laundry basket, crying her eyes out, gasping for air. She had called me and held me close, and said, "Tell me you will be the last. Tell me she will not go on. I don't want her to live again."

I felt like we were very close. Ironical, when I think of our last conversations.

We sat at a little corner bar, run by an old school friend of hers, who bought us our drinks and offered condolences. I had a Moscow Mule, her a Gin Tonic. She turns the ice back into the glass slowly.

"I wanted to apologize for how I behaved with you," she says, after a few seconds of silence.

"Auntie, please don't-

"No, let me talk," she rests her slender arms on the coffee table. "I have never suffered so much in my life. I feel I just lost half my body. Your father was my first thought during these months: in the morning I would go to him and keep him company, hold him while he vomited, and accompany him to bed at night. In the last period he couldn't even go to the bathroom. He had to go in a bottle," he sighs. "I hated you for not being there. I would call you and you wouldn't answer, your mother was desperate. I assumed you didn't care."

"It's not your fault. I never gave you a chance to think that I didn't."

She smiles bitterly. "I think you don't care, actually."

I don't know what to say. She takes a sip of Gin Tonic and I imitate her, focusing on the Moscow Mule. I feel it flowing through me until it fills my empty stomach.

"But I don't have to blame you if you don't care," she meets my gaze. "You never had the relationship I had with him. He wasn't a good father. Some would say he wasn't even a good brother, but he was the brother I needed," he reaches out a hand to grasp mine. "The truth is, I wish you had been there. Not for him, but for me. He would ask for you. When he was delirious sometimes, he would just call your name. And I hated myself, because I couldn't make you magically appear before him. Your voice would have been enough and I would not have felt so useless and disgusting. I am selfish, I wanted you to be there so he would remember me as the person who loved him most. Who loved him so much that he brought his only daughter back to his deathbed."

I'm halfway through the glass.

"So I want to apologize," her eyes are glazed over. "I hated you because you would have been the only thing that would have made him happy. You didn't deserve that."

I remain silent. She lets go of my hand and sits up straight in her chair again, then runs a finger just below her eyes, from which a coat of black mascara threatens to drip. Around us, the street is bustling with passersby, families shopping and couples holding hands; Christmas lights twinkle above the street like a constellation fallen from the sky, and the snow is so white that it lightens even the cloud-black sky.

I stop drinking. "Do you want me to take the box?"

She seems surprised by my question, but then nods. "Now that you're here, I think it's okay. I think that... If you couldn't answer when he called your name, you can do it now by taking care of whatever he left you."

"You have no idea what it is?"

"No, honey. I've been trying to think about it, going over his last actions, phone calls.... I have no idea, though," she pauses. "When he could still walk, he used to go to the woods a lot, for his hikes, you know. Maybe it's something related to that."

I hesitate, but finally decide to speak. "Do you want to be there when I open it?"

I see a temptation in her gaze, a thirst and a need. A way to reconnect with that half that was ripped from her and for which she had sworn eternal hatred for me just a few days before.

She shakes her head. "No. That wouldn't be fair. He wouldn't want to."

We finish our drinks talking about lighter topics: vacations she and her partner are planning, upcoming church events, gossip from old acquaintances.

We will spend Christmas together, she promises. It will be like when I was little. I'll be able to help her cook together with Mom.

"I don't know I'll be able to be there for Christmas," I reply.

"It will still be a couple of weeks. You have time to make arrangements," she casts a glance at the glass. "Oh? But are we done yet? Do you want another one?"



The box stares at me, motionless on the floor of my room.

I locked the door and have been looking at it ever since, terrified and fascinated. I keep thinking it is a mistake. Nothing I'll find in there will bring me happiness. I take a deep breath and my chest tenses until it hurts as I think of the notary's look as he handed it to me: a mixture of compassion, respect, and curiosity. He told me I did the right thing.

After all, I think, I have not sought happiness for a long time. I have nothing to upset. Yet I spend almost an entire afternoon touching the box, assaying its texture and shape, like a blind man trying to find his way around an unfamiliar environment.

It is a simple cardboard box, sealed by heavy traces of tape, similar to any container forgotten in the depths of a garage or ready for a move. It has not changed since the first time I saw it. I breathe, inhaling as much air as I can, and release it shortly after, more hastily than I would like.

I grab the scissors and begin to get rid of one strip of tape after another as my heart explodes in my chest. Each scratchy sound of glue giving way corresponds to a maddening beat from me. I lick my lips, trembling and feeling tired, as each gesture consumes my energy to its last drop.

When I finish and the box is unsealed, naked under the light of the room, I drop the scissors on the carpet. I am sweating and the tremor by now has become so strong as to be imperceptible, a physical white noise that runs through me completely.

I open it.

Stones, moss, twigs, leaves, bark, soil, and then a letter. A forest between cardboard walls that silently offers me a yellowed envelope, with one corner dipped in black, now-dried loam; among the undergrowth, there is a dead bee around wilting gray flowers: near the bee, a dark (once perhaps moist) spot glistens with what may have been sugar.

I pick up the letter. The envelope is spotless, perfectly sealed, as if it contained nothing yet. Uncertain, I cut it open and pull out a note.

44° 21' 59.99" N

15° 25' 59.99" E

Follow me. There is something for you.

A treasure map.

I clutch the card without crumpling it. I want to destroy everything for a moment: fear melts into anger, anger that runs through my veins and makes me see only black.

I can imagine him assembling this aquarium of soil and scraps, placing the bee on the potting soil, a pond of tap water and crystals beside her, a series of rocks to throne her just to her right. I regret the emptiness that had frightened me so much: I would have understood nothingness, but this.... I can't decrypt it, not immediately.

I scan the coordinates with my phone and then google them. I walk restlessly around the room, back and forth, even though I feel my legs will soon give me the cold shoulder. Suddenly, I find myself examining the earth and the rocks, the flowers and the leaves, the smell of moss; my fingertips are stained brown, my nostrils a familiar smell, damp and nostalgic, of sneakers sinking into roots and birds singing over my head.

I am in the woods with Dad. He is ahead of me, his figure a certainty in the maze of fir trees that surrounds us. I run up to him, but he does not turn to look at me. He is looking at something else.

There is a knock and I jerk. A scream escapes me, which fortunately gets trapped between my teeth and the outside, and I kick the box, sending it under the desk.

My mother peeps through the door. "May I?"

"Yes, Mom," I wipe my hands on my pants. "God, you gave me an heart attack."

"Don't exaggerate," she murmurs. "I even knocked."

"What's going on?"

She examines my face, one eyebrow arched. "You're as pale as a sheet. Is everything all right?"

"No" I leave the room, forcing her to move, and then close the door. "I was just coming downstairs to have some sugar and water. My head is spinning."

"I believe that. You haven't eaten today" she grabs my arm, and then, "You're already so thin, I don't understand why you skip meals."

"I forget" I let her lead me downstairs. "I'll eat something with you now."

In the kitchen there is only my brother, busy talking on the phone. He sees me and nods a greeting, then goes out to the backyard; I sit in his place and let Mom prepare something for me, my gaze fixed on the clock: I forgot my phone upstairs and didn't check the coordinates, even though a corner of my brain is convinced I already know what it is.

I must follow my father into the woods one last time and see what he has to give me. Whatever area is the one indicated by the note, it is certainly a place we used to go often together. Do I want to go there? At this point I must, I have unraveled one secret only to unearth another, a matryoshka of unnecessary riddles that is making me feel more and more distant from my father.

It would have been enough to tell me what to look for, where to find it, why it had been left there. I would have my heart at peace, Dad would get what he wanted, we would all be quiet, some in the ground and some in the world of the living, but no, impossible, he had to arrange a torment, a punishment tailor-made for me, a sadistic counterpunch of nostalgia and memories.

I'm sure all this is just an articulate way of shouting at me, "Repent, repent, I didn't see you before I died, you never called, suffer and repent, feel guilty and suffer as much as I do."

"Do you think you'll be there?" my mother asks, laying a plate in front of me.

She has prepared me a quick piece of toast, slightly charred on the sides and with stringy cheese. I bite it too hard and bite my tongue, impregnating the bread with discrete drops of blood.

"Yes, I think so. When?"

She sighs. "I just told you. Tomorrow. By seven o'clock."

"Oh, yes, of course. I'll be there" I cast a glance at the backyard. "I was thinking of taking a hike tomorrow, though."

"Oh? A hike?" he sits across from me. "Great idea, do you want me to come?"

"No," I shake my head. "No, I mean, I'd like to do it by myself. I think it would... It would help me. To think about Dad without hating him."

She smiles. "Honey, that's beautiful. I'm glad you're trying, I know it's not easy"

"I just hope it's helpful" I prop the bitten toast on the plate. "I have all this stuff inside me and I don't know where to put it"

"Maybe it won't be useful to you now" Mom comments. "But in a week, three months, a year, ten years or maybe more you'll realize how important it was. That was your place, I think even the forest was lonely without you at some point."

I chuckle. "Impossible, but very nice."

"No, I wouldn't say impossible. Nature is very sensitive, it feels when something in its ecosystem has changed. I'm sure the trees recognized your father, and I think they will welcome you tomorrow, too."

For a few moments I smile, but soon my expression softens. I finish eating and help Mom tidy up. I consider for a few moments asking my brother to come with me as well, but in the end I let it go. We chat some more before Mom decides to go to sleep. I stay sitting in the kitchen looking at the clock and then go up to my room again.

There, my phone is waiting for me, grim in the aseptic light of the display and in the darkness.

The coordinates refer to a densely forested area to the north, at least a 3-hour drive from our house: looking at the map, I recognize a clearing with a pond. I start packing my backpack and clothes for tomorrow, mechanical gestures that take me back to childhood, the nights before vacation, and the excitement of setting off on a long journey.

Boots, heavy jacket, thermal pants, gloves, a water bottle, a map, a compass, a tarp, first-aid kit, Swiss Army knife, rope, a camping shovel, a portable phone charger, a hat, heavy socks, a lighter, cigarettes, a flashlight, tissues, gloves, and some energy bars.

I fall asleep with my eyes fixed on the box.



My dreams teem with crawling insects and dense lagoons of algae. First I am trapped in an anthill, then my head is submerged in a deep, narrow pit: the more I try to free myself, the more I drown or am slowly consumed by small, tenacious pincers. Fear no longer allows me to distinguish between ants and water, for both fill my mouth equally and corrode my teeth, crawling down my throat like bitter medicine: at the end of the dream I am no longer a human being, but rather a new home for the parasites I now harbor.

My bones are ladders, my muscles soft beds and couches, my organs walls to be consumed, to create windows, doors, corridors; hanging gardens and tree houses flourish in me, civilizations fall and are reborn, while my eyes, now a memory, are what brings my new creatures closest to the distant outside world, what drives them to create the first telescopes and spaceships, the beginning of their destiny as rulers of worlds.

I wake up and manage to run to the bathroom to throw up. Looking at the bottom of the toilet, I see a puddle of water and what must have been last night's toast. The clock reveals to me that it is 5:30 a.m., and I could already get behind the wheel.

I close my backpack and change, choosing comfortable but heavier clothes, because I know the dry chill of winter and a promise of snow awaits me. My mirror image returns my gaze: I don't know how Mom would call me thin. I study my figure and then squeeze into my jacket.

I go out a little later.

Outside, the neighborhood is waking up: some cars are leaving garages, the first lights are coming on in kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms, and the streetlights on the street are beginning to go out one by one. When I'm behind the wheel, I don't leave right away, but stay a few seconds to watch all those changes, sudden and obvious, that make me think of a semblance of normalcy. Although I cannot actually judge the neighborhood by its routine: my father, too, went to work, drank his morning coffee in the kitchen and listlessly flipped through a newspaper, perhaps listening to the radio, which he always preferred to television, and still managed to bequeath me a puzzle that I can (maybe) solve after a three-hour car ride and a walk of at least two more.

I send a quick message to Mom and ignore the ones I received last night.

I start the car.

I spend the first hour drumming on the steering wheel and driving past the hospital past the city limits: listening to traffic updates, then the news of the day, then a playlist of eighties songs that manages to partially distract me from what lies ahead. Fortunately, there are not many people on the road. I also manage to enjoy the flow of the highway, a gray thunderbolt mingling with the green of the trees and the colors of hovels, rest stops, and department stores.

The second hour begins to become unbearable. The closer I get, the more I realize that I am really going into those woods, that I am following my father's last wishes: for what, then? Certainly not out of respect or love or some form of devotion, no. Maybe I am doing it so I can complain about it later, to add to the list of paternal injustices this outing, this mysterious "treasure hunt," as well.

I decide to stop at a gas station, because I calculate that at most, a break will take about ten minutes off my time. Once inside, I force myself to buy something for breakfast. The man behind the counter, a broad-necked elderly man, shows me where the restroom is and then serves another customer, a guy who looks every bit like a truck driver.

The bathroom is clean, very carefully kept. I pee and wash my face: I am pale, but my cheeks are flushed, as if I have just run; I need only meet my gaze to realize that at this pace, the journey will never end. I will not make it into the woods. I fidget and the bathroom spins on itself.

I go out, buy a bottle of vodka and then stop the truck driver and smoke a cigarette with him. I ask him if he has weed and he gives me a good price. In the car, I lie down and then drink some water.

I start off again more serene.

The third hour is sedate: the weed falls on me like an avalanche and I can barely register the sound of the engine or the movement of the car.

Thinking back on it now, it was really irresponsible, I really risk having my license taken

away this time, but I try not to think about it and when I see a huge national park sign, a new determination envelops me.

I was stoned when I met my “boyfriend”, at a college party where he had been the organizer and only while stoned had I been able to have sex with him. I don't remember anything, I just know that I was very hungry when I woke up; he paid for a take-out pizza and a kebab, and that was our first date.

Me, him, a pizza box, tin foil stained with yogurt sauce, and his apartment, a shitty circle of pretentious furniture and movie posters about which he had many opinions. I laugh to myself.

When I finally arrive at my destination, the high has ended and I feel drained, but more alert. I park in a dirt clearing, where there are already a few vans and some families, busy preparing . It's 9:15, I'm a little late, but it doesn't matter.

On the map I've marked the area where I think Dad has hidden what he wants to show me. I've based it on the coordinates and the contents of the box, so I'll head to an area less covered by forest, to the north, where there's a small pond and where the mountain slopes sink in; it's an off-the-beaten-path destination with no signs, so I'll have to follow one of the main roads for about an hour and then have to go deep into the thick forest and rely on the map and compass.

I drink some vodka and then leave it in the car, tucked between the two seats.

My journey begins behind a family: three children, two girls and a boy, the father slightly shorter than the mother, who seems to be the expert hiker in the situation; the boy, who is the youngest, follows her with extreme devotion, stopping only to pick a few flowers, point out a passing insect or drink some water.

The two little girls are more easily bored and soon begin to complain, at least until the father starts telling a story.

It was a fairy tale that I could not recognize, because it was so similar to all the others as to be monotonous. The little girls were to hear it for the first time, however, and rapt followed the narrator's words: a little boy could not find a job and made his father very worried, because he was even afraid of his shadow. Determined to find his place in the world, he left then to learn what fear was and become an artist of it.

It sounded interesting, but our paths diverged and soon I found myself alone in the woods.

Looking upward, the sky disappeared, concealed by tree foliage and dark clouds, blending with the foliage so much that they became indistinguishable. Below me pine needles and loose earth alternate, creating a melody of broken twigs. In my ears I hear only the song of birds, the rustle of the light wind in that maze of wood, and my breath, barely condensed from the cold.

I feel a sense of absolute peace for the first time in a very long time. Perhaps Mother was right and the trees have indeed recognized me: what they are thinking, however, it is impossible to know. Will they have missed me, too? They must have wondered where I had ended up, what I was doing, why I had abandoned them? It seems that people, when they think of me, can only ask themselves these questions.

The truth is that I don't know why I disappeared. I had a quiet childhood, which I don't feel I can call happy, but quiet, with ups and downs, and I had my group of friends here, people I haven't seen for about three years and whom I never called, let alone wrote to. I loved them, like you love an old sweater: they gave me comfort, they calmed that fear I always felt inside, but I don't think they knew me; I never let them know me.

One day I simply woke up and realized that for many people perhaps I no longer existed. A nameless ghost, remembered perhaps only by one's mother, wandering and hovering through the rooms of an old house and sleeping in the crawl spaces and walls, sometimes pausing in some painting.

Someone called me once, however. A friend of mine from high school. It was ten o'clock in the evening and I was in the kitchen, dressing my arm: I had cut myself while slicing carrots, but apparently the wound was serious enough for my roommate at the time to run to the nearest pharmacy. That girl had called me at that very moment, and when I had answered, she had hung up.

I never knew what she wanted from me.

The woods become a blanket of needles and shaggy bushes. A single step requires a good deal of my concentration, especially when, following the compass, I find myself over an impassable slope, which, judging by the footprints in the gray sand, is usually a rendezvous point for what must be deer or fallow deer; I essay the solidity of every rock I am forced to lean against and manage not to lose my balance, but by the time I reach the top I have knees and gloves stained with white powder.

I realize that I am taking longer than expected and that still the clearing is not in sight. The path is right, but I must hope to reach the pond before dark.

The little boy who set out to learn fear, I think, would stay in these woods all night and and look for terror at every turn. I regret not bringing vodka.

I advance for another 40 minutes. It must be just past noon and I begin to think I am lost. A corner of my brain becomes indignant at the very thought, because it is impossible that we are lost, not when I check the map and compass every five minutes, how did we get lost? I don't know, however, it can happen to be wrong, if we ton back, maybe.... No, we can't go back, also because all this would be useless, we can only leave if

I see the clearing. I emerge from a bush and the pond greets me with its dense waters. It looks like molten metal from how swollen and gray it is, and on its surface move dragonflies

and tiny insects that I cannot recognize; the grass is worn by winter, and the mountainside is so close that it seems to be the root of a centuries-old tree. I look around and drop my backpack on the ground, which by now weighed unbearably on my shoulders: I am looking for that strange rock throne, the one on which the bee rested its head.

When I find it, my heart sinks in my chest. This is it.

Whatever it is. I stand motionless for a few seconds and then advance, though I am sure I have not given my brain permission to walk. The noises around me disappear and a buzz of tension invades my ears, an interference that soon separates me completely from my surroundings.

The rock barely surpasses me in height, and at its feet the dry grass of winter sprouts from the ground with extreme tenacity. I look closer, but I see nothing, no chest, much less a letter, a map or a chest: has he buried something? I stand back and look at the grass around the rock-throne.

It looks lower than the rest of the clearing. I pick up the field shovel and start digging. The more time passes, the more I feel like I'm searching in vain: earth upon earth piles up beside me, along with a few passing worms; it's soft soil, moist from the last few days' rains, and it doesn't resist. I become agitated when I realize how much time is passing, and I dig faster and faster, with uncoordinated movements and a dread that, sensibly, begins to take control of my mind.

The shovel hits something at one point. It makes a dull noise and shakes me out of the hysterical state I was falling into. I start digging with my hands. I'm a lost traveler in the desert and I'm desperately looking for water, and when I finally feel a solid texture other than fragmented earth, a rush of adrenaline goes through me. It seems stuck, and so I pull, pull harder and harder, until I have it firmly in my hand.

A metal box, dirty, but intact. I stand up, smiling, and then notice it.

I notice the skeletal torso with cracked ribs. It emerges from the ground like a blue Picasso woman, chest ripped open between the clearing and the depths of the earth.

Everything stops. I can't stop looking. My eyes ache and I am thirsty, my heart exploding in my chest. I realize that I have dropped the chest. I want to run away, but I stay still. Those bones don't know I'm here, yet it was as if they were waiting for me.

No, it's a coincidence. It can't... No. No. No. Please don't

I dig in. I draw the rib cage to me, which throws itself at me as if it wants to get into my chest, regain its original position, and I throw myself into the pit; I'm crying and the tears get in my mouth, on my jacket, on my bones, and no, it can't be, it can't be happening to me, what the fuck does that mean, what did he do, what the fuck did he do, how did he

A skull returns my gaze. A scream dies in my mouth. I grab it, terrified that it might crumble between my fingers, and I don't know what to say. For a few seconds I embrace that

body, and shocked I caress it.

This is my legacy, I think, as I stuff what used to be a person into my backpack and cover what of her I cannot take with me with dirt; it is messy work, and I am sure I have butchered the grave that my father, I do not know how long ago, had carefully prepared.

This is my inheritance, I realize, running through the woods, falling on the path, crying, scratching myself with brambles.

This is my inheritance.

I look at myself in the car mirror. It is dark outside. My father's eyes stare at me, the skull's eyes search me from the backpack.

This is my heritage.