

be expected that he looked up to his grandmother with admiration; he would meet her frequently walking along the exposed river bed gathering up pieces of driftwood brought on the currents, some of which he and his companions would carve into fantastically shaped weapons for use in their encounters. Marianna was careful not to disturb the household more than was necessary: she occupied little space and used up minimal resources.

She had another habit of never wanting to sit with us at table when we ate our frugal meals, which during the week consisted in a bowl of vegetable soup at midday and in the evening one plate for all of us of radishes from the fields. On Sunday there was a small piece of mutton to make broth, which needed to be continually skimmed. My grandmother was very devout; her only expression of annoyance, in dialect, was “begone with the Devil”. She loved us very much; we in turn often drove her to distraction.⁹

In the image of the Duce created by Fascist propaganda, the family diet was always seen as a sign of their poverty; even what he ate as a child had to suggest that Mussolini was a self-made man who rose from nothing. From today’s perspective, in a time of outlandish diets, the family meals look rather different to us. Healthy vegetable soups were then – as is no longer the case today – widely prepared and eaten: it was a perfectly normal dish in rural working households, for ordinary not impoverished families – real poverty at the end of the nineteenth century was much starker. But the normality of Mussolini’s family was not very useful in the construction of his myth; the story had to be made more dramatic by picking out and highlighting certain details. Over the years Mussolini selected from his family memories whatever was most useful to him at that particular moment: when he wanted to play the revolutionary, his atheist socialist father was invoked; when he needed to negotiate with the Vatican, it was the turn of his pious mother instead, who made him get down on his knees and say his prayers every night by his bed.

Chapter 2

Three Knives

The first time he used a knife on someone, it happened out of the blue, just after he’d left the classroom. At first it seemed like the normal set-to of young lads hurling insults at each other for no real reason. Then it turned into a grimly silent scuffle – punching, kicking, scratching, all in a heap on the ground, trying to tear hair and jackets, to dig with their elbows and knees, with not a groan to be heard – they didn’t want to attract the attention of their teachers, the strict fathers of the Salesian order. One of their schoolmasters, a priest with large hard hands, would have come and broken up the fight with a few harsh-sounding blows of his fist. None of the others intervened; they looked on, watching what was for them a genuine fight or duel. Such fights didn’t often occur, but when they did you had to let them play out to the bitter end. In the fast-moving scrum of boys, led by some kind of instinct, he took the knife from his pocket and stabbed it through the hand of his schoolfellow, who started to scream, at first with pain and then at the sight of the blood squirting out everywhere.

The second time he stabbed someone with a knife was in the maths room in a fit of cold rage at a classmate who had scribbled on his exercise book. His first reaction was to hurl abuse at the boy. He was always good with words and it was effective; the other lad was nonplussed and struck out with his fist. Mussolini took hold of the blade with which he was trying to scratch away the ink from the sheet of paper and stuck it into the other’s buttock.

And the third time: this came to light in retrospect when the twenty-eight-year-old was locked up in the prison in Forlì, cell thirty-nine. He’d asked his guard for a small notebook, and in it wrote what was to be his first autobiographical account of his life: *La mia vita dal 29 luglio 1883 al 23 novembre 1911* (*My Life from 29th July 1883 to 23rd November 1911*). His thoughts took him back to his time in