

Giulia's Limit

Zurich, January 1931

“I do not need a taxi”.

A veil of ice covered the streets of Zurich for one week and the city was imprisoned by the frost: but Giulia Bassani, at the revolving doors of Hotel Duxt, ignores the porter's advice. She will walk to the meeting. She likes the cold and she is used to the snow.

She narrows her eyes so she would not be dazzled by the brightness of the day and sets out, fast and certain despite her state. When she arrives at the great crossroad just before her destination however, she is distracted: and instead she leaves the avenue and continues onto a long and anonymous road. The strong wind cuts her face and she lowers her head. Only the passing of a tram averts her from making a mistake. She turns back and she increases her pace not wanting to be late. She crosses a street of low houses and reaches the square which opens onto her doctor's office. She checks the time; she is early by six minutes. She sits on a bench in the little garden and attentively observes a villa on the other side of the square.

If someone were watching her they would be enchanted: by the black stain on her coat and her hat which reveals a young, even and clear face illuminated with a slight excitement. The man responsible for her apprehension is a patient of Jung. She likes to secretly watch him when, after she has finished sitting, she goes out into the street and follows him with her eyes whilst he walks away.

There is my wish, she says. I want to see the face of that unknown man again. It is an extravagant wish but it is clear and enthralling, not feeble and confusing like so many of my others. Who, or what, do I truly love?

The stranger is over thirty years old, thin, has light hair, black and deep eyes. He seems to bring a mystery in his heart. Perhaps he is an Italian; he could be an artist. Certainly there is a fatal combination in his destiny. Psychoanalyst's patients should never meet each other: but she does everything she can to arrive early and to force the case. This time again, thanks to her stubborn determination, the scene is repeated. The man leaves the office as if he were pushed by a spring and rudely closes the heavy gate. He is not wearing a jacket but only a grey suit; trying to warm himself by hugging his jacket which seems to be made of cardboard. He energetically stamps his feet on the ground. Before setting off he gives a displeased look to the psychoanalyst's neo-baroque villa, then, keeping his eyes low, he runs towards the old city centre.

One Sunday morning, at Platzspitz, they meet each other. Frozen iron particles are suspended in the air but Giulia did not give up strolling through the park. Walking along the bank of the Limmat she sees him: he is sat on a bench next to a massive plane tree throwing its low branches into the water; and he observes, whilst hunched in his cardboard jacket, and with his usual concentration, the river's grey current. Giulia returns to the path, she walks opposite him, slowing down. She stops, allowing him to rise and reach her but she immediately realises he is not going to do that. Perhaps he is shy. Frightened. So she turns back and

decides to take initiative. Can I sit next to you? The man rises and holds out an arm to help her.

I cannot hide my condition anymore, thinks Giulia. Not even this awkward overcoat helps me. Three years before, her tailor in Milan had made her a heavy, black, woollen coat. "To face Berlin's temperature. You are so young, in a city so cold!" she said, as though by nature youth was defenceless against the rigors of the Nordic winters. "Studying in Berlin? But why not in Milan?". Having finished university, Giulia chose to teach in elementary schools – you are a prisoner of your missionary and Christian spirit, her course mates used to mock. Her father, after a year, convinced her to continue her studies and she asked to apply to the prestigious Humboldt University in Berlin to continue with her research on Nietzsche's influence on Thomas Mann's works.

The children, in the winter, came to class like snowmen and burnt their hands by throwing them over the coal stove. *Maybe this man has a stove in his house which he presses himself up against?* Giulia asks herself. He is cold. Dressed like this! Motionless, with a bowed head. What is he thinking? He has red ears; like crystal. A thought comes to her mind; they look just as mine do on the ski slopes. She quickly regretted what she had just thought. About what she had just thought and also about his high laced boots; the man is dressed in summery leather shoes; and she is embarrassed about her suede gloves: the man tucks his bare hand into his pocket. She feels guilty about her warm fur hat, yes, first and foremost for her hat because the man must be cold. Certainly and especially his head, his head is so cold and he must be suffering a lot. "Doctor Jung is looking after you too?" she asks him after some moments of silence. I go an hour after, I always arrive early and I see you leave. She did not say anything else, she turns her look to the river and waits. You come the hour after, I know, the man responds. He has uncertainty in his voice. She tries to rise, to hold herself still. Dr Jung told me that he does not analyse Catholics or pregnant women, but I am Catholic and you are pregnant. We should ask her for her reasoning. What do you think? After a few minutes of conversation they decide to leave the cold park and head to the Grand Hotel Duxt where Giulia lives. It is not far. In the luxurious lobby they order coffees and brioches. When the waiter walks away, Giulia introduces herself. And he (here come the consequences of hunger and the cold!) becomes like an animal, even forgetting how to say his own name! Can you forgive me? His invitation cures me more than an entire circle of sessions with Jung and happiness forgets good manners. He looks Giulia in the eyes smiling and rubs his hands as if checking to see if his blood had really began to circulate. I reconverted to Christianity not long ago, he affirms with emphasis, and I had good reason: the divine providence exists and is an angel. You.

My name is Ignazio Silone.

"Reconverted?" Giulia asks. He lowered his eyes, regretting to having mentioned the conversion. He knows how much his spiritual journey is incommunicable. He loosens his necktie, coughs. Three, four dry coughs. He tries another biscuit. Giulia then, speaks about herself, she tells that she was Catholic, practising, but for some years she became distanced from the Church and from God. Now I do not believe anymore, she whispers. I would not like to talk about faith and God, not now, she stops Silone and apologises with a final feeble voice. Giulia feels uncomfortable. Silone lights a cigarette to spite his lungs and his sickness which was cured in a sanatorium in Davos; he makes himself more comfortable on the sofa.

The heat, the tea, the biscuits, the velvet of the lobby, the smoke: he smiles again now, but not at Giulia. He smiles with fear in his eyes, at the Hotel's fresh and floral ceiling.

I thought a lot to where Giulia Bassani and this man could have met. In the square near Jung's office? In a coffee shop in the old city? Yes. However, their meeting at Platszpitz Park seems to me a more convincing hypothesis. To be clear: I am not certain that things really went like this - I am not even certain about many other specifics of this story. This is because I had intertwined reality and fantasy and everything, in the end, is only a fiction that apologises for the truth – but the readers will be able to forgive me. Even History with its capitalised “S” is an approximation. Even the reconstruction that we constantly make, with memory, to our lives so that we can render them coherent and we are able in some way to sustain them is imprecise and malignant. Nevertheless, I remember well when I saw Giulia arriving at Duxt accompanied by a chilled, thin and frightened man. I was sitting on an armchair in the lobby and I was showing off by reading *The Tigers of Mompracem*. I was fourteen years old. Giulia told me, a few days later, she had met him by chance and she immediately knew how much help he needed: a warm place and sweet brioches.

My mum had accompanied me for the first time to Platszpitz a few days before. She knew how much I loved parks. Its trees, thick hedges, wrought iron newspaper stands and the cheerful and serene society that I frequented won me over. For some time I would forget the pain that I was feeling after we had left Italy. We were exiled to Switzerland because my dad did not support the black-shirt regime and had established at the Duxt his own European furniture dealership. It meant a great deal to him to keep the adjective European: he was ashamed of being Italian. Although when he was ashamed to be European, he went to America, to Boston, where I also went to live long before returning to Italy.

We remained in Zurich for a little more than a year and it was a happy period. We lived in luxury; I loved it to death. It was the same period when Giulia Bassani also lived at the Duxt. We became our friends. Giulia was twenty-seven years old, the age to be a role model and an ally; that which my mother could not be. My mother, who had me later in life and who I saw as an affectionate, older lady dominated by a genial and hyperactive husband. One day, it was November, Giulia came up to me; I was in front of the hotel's revolving door, she was crying and I was crying. We lived in Zurich for a few days and still I did not begin to appreciate the advantages of the confinement at the Duxt. Every moment I thought of my friends, school and bedroom, even of my grandparents; of everything that I had left behind. I hated my father and more than him, my mother who was not able to oppose his decision. I hated my father and mother even more than I hated Mussolini who was the cause of our miserable situation. Giulia introduced herself to me, not asking why I was crying, with a smile that seemed to me the most beautiful that I had ever seen in my life; she offered me a hot chocolate. It makes bad time pass by, she said. I did not understand that she was implying the bad time inside of me – she was a poetess. I began to understand her jokes only much later and just when I thought I knew everything about the woman, poetess and friend, I did not see her anymore.

In any case, chocolate really changed my mood. Chocolate and Giulia's beauty. She was five months pregnant already but she was not showing – or at least I could not notice. Her smell, which my mother did not have, intoxicated me, and the elegance of her clothes intoxicated me, her perfect shape, her white skin without almost any imperfections or wrinkles, her green

eyes which accompanied each of her smiles with a hint of complicity and a little mischievous. Beautiful, like all the heroines from the novels. Although when I revisited some of her photographs, many years after her death and many years after our last meeting, I was a little disappointed. The old pictures did not correspond to the image I conserved in my memory: Giulia Bassani did not seem as attractive as I remembered. What does it matter? I was enchanted by her grace and her charm and the photographs quickly surrendered to the images in my mind. Whilst I was tasting the chocolate she told me with emphasis: it is beautiful here, it is all beautiful, and you will like it. Then with her eyes she embraced in green the leather furnishings, wallpaper, the high Corinthian columns and the velvet living room in the centre of the hotel. Perhaps she was a twenty-seven year old woman pretty, with a royal demeanour, certainly yes, well set up with a high level of education and generous. Nothing more. However, I repeat, she was beautiful at our first meeting and she remains beautiful even today, now that life has passed - for her and nowadays for me. The photographs, the *true* reality, do not count. She always had a pain living inside, this rendered her fascinating: at least for a romantic soul like mine. She held a pain that not even she was able to understand the nature of, she held a pain and hid it with a green and bright smile. Each time she gifted me one of her poems.

She had an emerald green smile even when she invited Silone to eat biscuits and brioches. They did not stay for long. After having been satisfied and warmed, the revolutionary extinguished his cigarette and said: it is curious, you live in the Duxt, my landlady is called Dust, Mrs Dust, Mrs Dust. I invite you to visit my room: now, right away. You will see how a poor Christian lives. I saw him jerkily get up and hold out a hand to Giulia to invite her to go with him. The smell of the snow entered inside the lobby with him but had dissolved immediately, overpowered by the strong smells of coffee and ladies' *eau de toilette*. I felt sorry for his evident poverty. The rich guests of the Duxt watched him in discomfort.

Silone knew many little lodgings where anti-fascist exiles could turn to for safety. It was not his first time in Zurich. During a lap of the lodgings, he knocked at an English lady's door who only housed young painters and those who were not on the *Red Aid* list. The rooms are already occupied, Mrs Dust had said three months earlier at the door, whilst instinctively raising her arm to refuse him. However, after having read "Silvestri" on a ticket which Silone violently shoved into her hand, the woman let him enter and she accompanied him to the loft. I can put together a bed for this afternoon. It is cold here, but I do not have anywhere else. Okay, Silone responded, summer will also come to Zurich. It will return this evening. She did not have any blankets. Could he get some in large quantities? He would have paid more for this. He also needed a desk to work at, and a shelf or a chest for his books.

The remark - you will see how a poor Christian lives - was a challenge against Giulia's wealth. Silone often felt little resentments: almost always he managed to keep them at bay, other times instead they were uncontrollable and his friend was objected to them many other times. I was able to build Giulia Bassani and Ignazio Silone's life in 1931 thanks to Giulia's diaries, I would say much later as they came to my possession, her poems and her traces of an autobiographical book. I faithfully report many of the pages from her diary, my direct memories and some citations from historical research and Silone's texts. For the rest of it I have used my imagination: obviously only that which could happen - but of which I am not certain.

I lived long after the deaths of Giulia Bassani and Ignazio Silone. Meeting the exiles of their life and of that historical period which conditioned their choices gave me a narrative freedom which was otherwise impossible: to be partly testimony and creation of a story. My characters entered by mind, I followed them where it pleased me to be, but where I was not. I wrote a novel. It pleased me to think that *this* novel is the novel that Giulia would have written and that she only outlined, if it means the same thing. That its words are those which my friend did not have time to compose. It was not easy: sometimes it is more difficult to write a novel than a history book. Paradoxically, Henry James says, the novelist is disadvantaged in comparison to an historian: he meets, in fact, many more difficulties than him in the patient work of collecting evidence.

One of my most vivid memories is really that of their *first time* in the Duxt's lobby. After Silone's remark about Christian poverty, Giulia protested. He did not need to allow himself to say such a horrible thing! I thought that she would have set off on her two feet: instead she got up and accepted his invitation. Do not go! I wanted to scream, but they were furthering away from me together, fast, towards the big revolving door. I heard him saying: it is the grudge of a believer, excuse me. I left two churches, you cannot understand, you entered in the house of God only for good manners when you were a child and left it straight away, you became an atheist as I have understood. Agnostic, Giulia corrected. I am not an atheist, I am agnostic, neutral. We are in Switzerland. Fine, Agnostic, neutral, but anyhow, Silone impatiently ended, you did not need to ever betray and you were never betrayed.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" he asked her. "It is not far. Mrs Dust's house is in Langstrasse, near Helvetiaplatz". Giulia seemed taller than her companion, she had been educated to walk upright, looking forward with studied and proud demeanour. He, instead, was stooped over by the cold. Thin, dressed in a light suit with his body tight into his heart. They did not talk during their short walk. Silone thought about the risks he ran showing himself in the company of a strange woman; Giulia on the other hand questioned herself on the psychology of believers, disciples of the Church, or of a party. How is the soul of a true affiliated member? Strong? Arrogant? Intolerant? What do they need to renounce, and in exchange for what? The priests have ties to obedience, the novice owes it to the parish priest, the parish priest to the bishop, the bishops to the Pope. Obedience is a value in itself which overlooks the contents. It is a trick, like patriotism, the idea of Italy, of Europe. It is a trick of powers. On one hand obedience is a simple condition: the search for truth has been accomplished already and one is not alone in the face of doubt. It is a sentimental condition, not rational. It is the state of being in love: you do not see the defects of its lover and believes all of its lies. When one believes in an idea: always justifying the unjustifiable with a better reason, a desire or a mystery! How many pages have been written to explain the necessity of evil and the existence of pain? Even in sacred texts. But in the end? "Conclusion of the speech after everything has been heard: worship God and observe his commandments because this for man is everything" – here is the arrival point of the *Ecclesiast*.

When they arrived at Helvetiaplatz, Silone recommended that they did not speak to anyone: they could run into Mrs Dust or her other guests. Lower your head and only say good morning, better to say it in French. It is a good time, the painters are surely asleep, they stay up late at night looking for inspiration at the taverns and as far as Mrs Dust is concerned, she should be at the market. However, it is best to be prudent.

‘Are you worried about my reputation?’ Giulia asked laughing. ‘I could unfasten my coat, I am not very desirable’. ‘No’ Silone responded, ‘I am worried about *my* reputation. I do not want them to think that I go you pregnant. Mrs Dust would chase me out of her house, she does not want women and she does not want babies. It is better that they do not see you, if they see you do as I said and there will be no problems for yours and my reputations’.

If there so many dangers, why did he invite me here – and why did I accept his invitation?, thought Giulia. I should not trust him, her only reference is that he is a patient of Dr Jung’s and to think of it, it is not a great reference. Moreover what if he were like Moosbrugger, the criminal who Clarissa wants to save, in the last of Musil’s novel, *The Man Without Qualities*? Nevertheless Giulia did not say anything to that obscure convert. In the last month she did not go anywhere except to see Jung. She needed to speak, to listen and even someone like Silone was good enough. ‘She is a writer’ he exclaimed as he entered the loft. She saw a large amount of typewritten pages on a table. They could not be the work of a novelist, they must be relations, letters – but the idea that Silone was a writer reassured her. Novelists do not kill pregnant women. She looked for evidence, signs trying to make her wish come true.

‘Everything here knows about the novel. The books, pencils, notepads and ashtrays: he put the writing desk in the centre and all the rest was dominated by it. It does not take much experience in the circumstantial method to realise that you are a novelist, it does not take a Sherlock Holmes. Is it your first work?’

‘Is it your first work?’ Silone mimicked annoyed. The insecurity forced him to react in an unpleasant way. He left her and continued to sing: is it your first work, is it your first work... Why did he bring her to his loft? Did she want to know? *What* did she want to know? He sat on the bed, her head between her hands.

‘Who is she? The best student of Dr Jung?’ he cried. ‘Is he the doctor that taught you to understand people? Well yes, it is my first work. I want to be a writer!’ After the confession, Silone felt better. He had freed the weight of his insecurities: finally he could talk to someone about his ambitions.

‘Come and sit here, do not stay standing in your state. Come. I am happy to have met you. I beg you, tell me that you are also happy to have met me’.

He became friendlier, affectionate; even taller, upright and more open. He returned to being the charming and sure man that he was until a few months ago. He smiled and invited Giulia to see inside of himself without fear, he welcomed her into his dark and deep eyes, permitted her to see the secrets from inside of his soul. He held out an arm, a gesture which later, in moments when their intentions were complete and perfect, Giulia saw him do other times: offering his hand as if to invite her to come closer to him, to press against him, and to smile. He arranged the bed, took a blanket and a glass of water and drew the curtains. More light! If only Togliatti or Longo were here, he thought. Or both, together for another interrogation and in this loft! What suspicions could grow in them from my happiness? They, who from their suspicions made art, what would they think of this rich and pregnant woman? What would they think of Giulia who, despite her double wealth, is forced like me to see Jung three times a week? Giulia! Who has said – you are a writer!

“My work is that” he whispered pointing at a messy booklet. “It is a novel with thirty pages. *Fontamara*”.

“I want to read it. Please”.

“It is the only copy I have here”.

“I will even read it at night and in two days I will bring your creation back”.

Giulia pushed her hands forward like a child in front of a new doll; and Silone, delicately, placed his treasure in her arms. They laughed from embarrassment. Then, from joy of having met each other. Now, Silone would have laughed for anything. “It is not the final version”, he said with tears in his eyes. “I had four typewritten copies of the last revision but they were left in Davos, in a lodging. When I told the hotel manager that I needed to leave for Zurich and I did not have enough money to pay for the room, he ordered that I leave him something and he wanted the thing most important to me. *Fontamara*. The four copies in Davos are better than this and there is a very important preface that I am completely missing here. Basically, read it with indulgence, I can do better”. Silone told of his own way of writing. He said that he had constantly ran over his pages and phrases and when he had re-read his copies in Davos he would have certainly felt the need to write yet another revision.

“Re-writing is the essence of this art, it is not true that the small and progressive fine tunings are needed by the author and not the reader. They say that no reader can be aware of them and appreciate them, and that they could not even know them with the help of a text in front of them. I believe however, that a good novel disguises its real motives of its force and harmony like a cathedral’s façade, when it is beautiful we do not get tired of watching it but we cannot say how exactly the balance of detail captures our eyes”.

They spoke about books. Silone took a copy of *Karamazov Brothers* from a nearby chest, a novel which he loved very much. Opening a passport: Giulia picked it up, looked at it; looked in the chest and saw the others. “They’re all yours?” she asked amused. Naively she opened someone’s. The photograph was always of Silone but with different names: Rotemi Giuseppe, Valentini Guido, Marcelli Roberto. In some documents he was even pictured with a ridiculous fake moustache which made Giulia smile. Silone did not mind. Whoever she was, he was exhausted by illegality, secrets and double lives. Giulia will discover much later on that even *Ignazio Silone* was a pseudonym. The man she faced had used it for the first time in 1924 in one week’s article in *The Recovery*, about Italian immigrants in Paris. *That man* – which he calls himself! – when he was born in Pescina in Marsi, the province of Aquila, the first March of 1900, he was called Secondino Tranquilli. Then the politician and clandestine was forced to invent other names, battle names like Pasquini or Sereno or names of informants like Silvestri, or acronyms or word games like Silone Hippolito and Willi Tranq. The necessity, but also pleasure: how many times did his companions tease him for his overflowing creative fantasy! Did he like masks? Make-up? Disguises?

Silone was a professional revolutionary, as they said during the years of the communist movement. His youth was difficult, hard. He lost his father when he was twelve and his mother at fifteen during the disaster of the Marsican earthquake. Despite being helped by don Orion, a priest who along with his colleagues helped young orphans, he had to look after his own brother Romolo, who was five years younger than him. At nineteen years old he decided that he would dedicate his life to political work and went on to become a militant for the

Italian Communist Party, founded in 1921. His militancy was made up of long journeys throughout Italy and Europe, economic deprivations and risks to his own personal freedom most of all when the Communist movement was outlawed.

His career in the party and the ideal hope though, always sustained him; and his sacrifices and dangers of the political activities which he was used to. However, in 1928, when his brother Romolo is arrested and unjustly accused on of the perpetrators of the Fiera massacre in Milan, he becomes a broken man. He becomes ill; with tuberculosis and suffers nervous breakdowns. He recovered in a sanatorium in Davos, recovering from lung disease and goes to Zurich to meet Gustav Jung. He asks to go on leave from the party, he does not have the strength to work like he did before. Then, during the crisis of the communist direction, which in 1930 separated into two factions, he adopts an ambiguous behaviour. He alternates between declarations of faith and withdrawals, taking clear position in contradictory letters. Togliatti confides in the other executives who can no longer understand their old friend and companion's soul.

Who could know the soul of Silone however, in the cold January of 1931! Even his love for Gabriella Seidenfeld was over. They met in 1921 in Fiume and had shared ten years of dangerous and passionate revolutionary adventures. Silone had travelled with her, studied; he organised fascist resistance with her. However, he was not in love with her anymore. Even sentimentally he was a single man; discouraged, suffering. Then the problem of Romolo remained. He was tortured in prison in Procida. Silone was no longer able to help him. He always needed money. That obstinate brother! If he were to renounce his communist ideals, he could have lessened the torture, but he did not want to. He did not want to be a traitor. Silone, nowadays, re-proposed his only hope of redemption in *Fontamara*, the novel which he wrote in Davos during his illness and convalescence.

Re-accompanying Giulia to the hotel, Silone regretted giving her the manuscript. In the attic she seemed slim, despite her belly of six months, he like her long hair and innocent eyes. Now however, whilst he clung to her to help her - and to warm himself up – Giulia had resumed her impressiveness. With her fur hat she was taller than him and it made him afraid.

Handing over the only copy of my book to a stranger, to a rich Italian bourgeois! She could be a political police agent, she could be a fascist militant! Silone remembered the days in prison in France and Spain, the risks that ran every time that he foolishly exposed himself. How stupid! He had fallen for it again! Now Togliatti would have more reason to criticise him. Allowing himself to be tricked by a woman, surely at the cost of the fascist political police! His friendship with Trotsky had really ruined him. Tresso, Leonetti and Ravazzoli. The three. This fault is also their error. Or the pocket's fault! Silone accused with reason his old companions for their own errors. He understood that he was losing lucidity but was not able to hold back his obsessions.

Two days later, though, the *rich bourgeois* was not missing from her meeting at Platzspitz and Silone's worst fears faded with her clear face until it vanished into nothingness. Giulia had read the novel twice, given up on sleep she was pale and had dark bags under her eyes. Silone reprimanded her: I do not want your child to suffer for my stupidities!

"Stupidities!" Giulia yelled. His novel is a masterpiece. Absolutely.

“It is a masterpiece! Absolutely! I should say something more adequate or deep or critical but I believe I cannot think of anything else: *Fontamara* is an absolute masterpiece”.

“A masterpiece?” Silone timidly asked. “Like the last of Musil’s works that you advised me to read?”

“Yes. Just like *The Man Without Qualities*” Giulia responded looking at him with lucid emotive eyes.

“No honest critic could deny it, you are among the best, even though you are not a bourgeois but a proletariat, even though you are not an encyclopaedist but a tormented revolutionary, even if your voice is that of epic and not a fragment. Everything was possible, Silone thought. Even that of becoming a writer, even that *Fontamara* is liked by Giulia, bourgeois Giulia. Later on he felt feelings of shame for how much he excited and swelled himself up, for how high he climbed, like a hot air balloon. He had even forgotten to ask Giulia about *her* work. She confessed to him that she was writing. Not novels: she was a *poetess*. Silone listened to Giulia’s confession whilst distracted and greeted her with a grateful and presumptuous smile forgetting all about her poems.

Giulia had shown her own verses to very few people. To her professor at university and to a companion from university. To her first love he had read a whole collection, the first, of thirty poems but he never gave a single abstruse or offensive criticism, perhaps expecting writings of love in such readings, between the lines, declarations of eternal fidelity. I have also read some of the verses. One day Giulia seeing that I was immersed in my Salgari reading, asked me if I liked her poems. I replied yes. At school, in Italy, the professor read us all the poems of our fellow countryman Guido Gozzano and I liked them very much.

“All of them?”

“Pretty much, a lot” I replied sheepishly because my exaggeration would not be overlooked in the same way my father would overlook it.

“And do you write poems?”

“Oh no” I said as my face reddened.

Naturally she had seen me whilst in the lobby scribbling verses in my note-pad. Then she told me as if she were an accomplice: “I write some. I am not as good as Gozzano, but I would like it very much if you were to read them”.

From then on she got into the habit of gifting me little lined note-pads with black covers, no bigger than ten centimetres, on which she liked to quote one or two of her poems. They were writings very different to that of Gozzano, similar to Hermeticism in style – a style which I knew very little of. However, I did not mind how Giulia used the words. Her lyrical phrases were firm, they did not move like those in songs, melodies or more musical poems. They were difficult, tough expressions; they were words lacking in frivolity. Though what is frivolous in life?

Not even in their third meeting did Silone ask Giulia to read her poems. His ego had decided to not give her the honour of the request. Who was the great writer? Then, as I said, he felt ashamed of his arrogance. It is a misery, he thought, to add to my little dishonour. He attributed this narrow mindedness to carelessness and superficiality, not to his deformed soul.

I imagine him shrugging his shoulders, in these moments, growing smaller on his seat, lowering his head: like an unhappy thief caught red-handed. He felt better some days after but he needed to insist it a lot. Giulia did not want him to read her own work anymore and he unwillingly accepted. What a tormented man, she thought. He does not care about my poems. She let herself submit to Silone's tortuous requests to the machinations of his motives and went to her room to take a little written collection some months before. When she returned, Silone took the note-pad from her hands and without opening it, slipped it into his pocket.

"I will read it at home", he said gravely. "Now in exchange, I will show you a letter from Umberto Terracini. He was in prison for five years".

He wanted to make me see this letter from the beginning, Giulia thought. A childish offer of exchange. I will read your poems, you will listen to history. Silone let a light page fall on the table like a feather. Giulia began to read the first lines but he immediately picked the precious letter from her fingers.

"Umberto" he said, "asks how it is possible that it took seven years to resolve the Bordiga question or the Tasca question, and only six months to expel three valiant revolutionary elements like Tresso, Leonetti and Ravazzoli. He accuses us of superficiality or worse! He writes that it is infantile to think that Fascism was collapsing and that a proletariat revolution can be directed from the few active forces of our party; and that it needs to be taken into account that there is a possible democratic evolution of the Italian bourgeoisie. Finally he asks: if the *three* have been expelled why has Pasquini not been expelled? Expelled! Me!"

Silone yelled: Expelled! Me! Giulia took his hand but was not able to hold it firm, to calm herself. She gave him some water, he was coughing. "I am not with them", he yelled again "Perhaps I am no longer even with Togliatti, but I am not with them! Tresso, Tresso, yes, I am fond of him, but the other two are opportunists, hypocrites! The Three! Even now Togliatti has lost his sense of reality. To believe that their union can represent a danger! In these times it is difficult to find *three* in the party who are united and do not suspect each other. This is the horror, this is the tragedy that Italian Communism is living! And I cannot even throw it out of me, tell of it or denounce it. How could I make it public? The comrades believe in us, in the direction of the party, they expect redemption from us, they risk their lives in the belief that we are united and strong. Those incarcerated only survive because they hold onto this faith. Romolo, Romolo! Him for example. He is in prison, he was tortured. He is ill. But he resists. Is it right that Romolo, or whoever else has or is suffering for the revolutionary cause, knows about our division?"

A few days later, still at the Duxt, Silone told Giulia that he had read her poems and he was very impressed by them. He had come up with praises and advice.

"There are no valleys in your verses, and I believe that there is no way of stopping them at the end of the path, at the edge of a pit. It falls into the abyss: and it dies as it descends, without even the satisfaction of hitting, at the bottom of the cliff, against a rock, road or meadow. Without an aim"

They were praises and suggestions of someone who was not able to see the background messages which the verses enlightened. Silone did not understand Giulia's feelings and did not understand her tragic poems; but pretended, clumsily to understand them, to really grasp them. She went along with him and bore the comedy. She helped his embarrassing analyses

but suggesting words to him like a child at school during a difficult question. Whilst they deceived each other they became closer and were falling in love. Before leaving Giulia for the Muottas Muragl refuge, where she would give birth, they met another ten times. They kept precise account, this is the sixth, and this is the ninth time, always happy to see each other and promising another meeting. They never spoke about Jung again, they swore it during their second meeting: not even a single word about him between us. Only literature. Liberties, jokes. My son, Giulia said, he must be born with a cheerful and well-educated voice. Silone was able to be cheerful and well-educated also when he spoke of his town, Pescina, Fontamara, the earthquake, Fascism and ill-mannered people. How Giulia laughed at the ill-mannered people. Innocent Law and don Circumstance! Silone's world was grotesque like Otto Dix and Grosz's worlds, even though his rhythm was not expressionist but Homeric, and as Homer could be allowed to know of the unheard of. The unheard of forbidden to most of us, pathetic Italians: forbidden to our melodramatic feeling.

Giulia could not walk for long and Silone, worried for her state, slowed her down. She had swollen ankles and was tiring. The temperature in February had dropped again. One day Giulia told him that she wanted to buy him a coat but Silone reacted badly, he was too proud. There was no heating or coats in Pescina! I do not need them in Zurich. However, in the loft it was cold and his ridiculous and childish fear loomed over him – in Giulia's eyes – Mrs Dust. They were seen more often at the Duxt. The guys at the revolving door and the waitresses watched them in surprise when they went up to the room, but they did not question it. It was a large hotel and Giulia certainly paid a lot. The tall and decorated captains said: is he the father of the bastard or yet another lover? Are they going to make love? When will you make love to your wife if she is pregnant? Their golden shoulder pads shook during their masculine chats.

Giulia, if she had heard them, would not have let them get away with it. She would have intervened, getting closer to the captain acting a little clumsily, intimidating. Without fear however. If the father of my child were here, she would have said without aggression but dignity, yes, I am going to make love to him. But he disappeared. Due to the authorities, he disappeared, maybe he is dead. He and I belonged to a humanity where our souls were thrown away and in each direction by an explosion, by a bomb, like the limbs and organs of frontline soldiers. Who threw the grenade, and why? Though do not be alarmed. The question is not serious. Perhaps even it is good, but only for philosophers. Us poets, we smear ourselves with the blood that spills from a mutilated arm, we persist on eyes expelled from their sockets or on decapitated heads, but we examine the pain of every single piece. We do not ask them for a sense of how they were scattered far, and we do not worry about the complications that each shred will have to face during its resurrection to reunite with the rest of itself.

Giulia thought that Silone had a sensibility, precisely, of a philosopher – very far from her own, the poetess – and that he had helped her to compose her own anguish. Silone had taught her how to heal the contradictions in her life, by overcoming pain and injustice and mending strips of her memory. She could speak with him about the son in her womb, of love and of revolution; about today and about tomorrow: and despair would have been put in the corner. The miracle although did not happen: on the contrary, over the following months, Silone took on an alter ego while travelling on a different road to hers. He showed her every moment how it was impossible for her to follow him on that road. Giulia stayed on her disheartening path.