

February 19, 1980

Her water had broken unexpectedly as she laid in bed removing her nail polish, her husband already snoring. *Oh my God, what's happening? I'm only seven months along, the little idiot wants to be born now?* And they had rushed to the hospital in a haze of acetone and fear. He, after having snatched an issue of *Diabolik* on their way out of the house, looked for the nearest place to sit down and she threw herself onto the first available bed, ignoring all the obstetrician's reassuring words. She cursed, asked multiple times for something to drink, and got ready to pass out. Nothing, until that moment, had even hinted at the possibility of such a premature birth, a full month and a half early. Why couldn't the baby have bothered to warn her? They hadn't even decided on a name! He wasn't even born yet and already he was getting on her nerves: just like her husband, constitutionally incapable of being on time. Her mood worsened as the contractions started, and not even the constant coming and going of nurses and new mothers, busy at the beginning then ever more sporadic, managed to calm her down. Alone under a feeble light, she twirled a lock of hair around and around her fingers, like she always did when she was anxious. What had been a happy pregnancy had turned bitter over the course of an hour. She felt completely unprepared, like a student caught off guard by a surprise exam. And never mind the risks of a premature delivery!

"There's still time, you'll need to be patient," said the doctor who came to examine her, noting her maximum levels of worry and minimal dilation.

"First births, you know, they're always a bit stubborn to come out," she murmured *sotto voceto* her husband.

Ugo received that information and immediately focused his attention back on his comic book, pushing his chair into the corner. He knew quite well that anything he did or said could have been used against him: patience was to his wife as sight was to the blind. All he could do was stay as far out of the way as possible, or disappear on the spot. Of course just the background noise was enough to make him want to tear his hair out: in the typical silence of the hospital, interrupted by the occasional cries of newborns, Luciana was wailing a constant lament that exploded into a scream when a contraction came. It was like a radio set to its lowest volume being suddenly turned up to full blast when you want to play a joke and scare someone. One of those peaks attracted the attention of a chaplain wandering the halls of the hospital, a slight and sweaty little figure. He peered cautiously into the room, saw the patient suffering on her sickbed and pulled up a chair in solemn silence. He placed his hand over hers and without saying a word to her, instead started spitting out prayers to a picture of some anonymous minor saint, since the various Padre Pios and St. Francis (pulled every which way by people tugging on

their robes) have too many graces to hurry up and dispense, go figure if they'll bother themselves with a delivery.

Was it coincidence? The power of suggestion? A little two-bit miracle? Who knows. The fact is that the contraction dissipated and the scream died away in her throat. A hint of a smile crossed Luciana's face and she looked the priest in the eye for the first time: a prominent nose with a red, shiny bump, straight yellow hair scattered carelessly over his head like a handful of uncooked spaghetti. His eyes were fixed on the picture of the saint, his lips moved continuously as he chewed over his words. Ugo stared at him open-mouthed. A priest. At three in the morning. *What was he doing in the hospital at this hour?* Performing last rites? A pious rendezvous with some religious sisters? The little man didn't look like the type, but you never know, there are wolves in sheep's clothing everywhere. Luciana, unlike other girls her age, did not believe in God and had never gone to church or consulted priests and nuns; her only religion was Lucio Battisti and Mogol. *But what can you do, at this hour he's fine by me*, she thought, realizing that the holy man's presence was making her labor easier. When she was taken into the delivery room she affectionately squeezed his hand goodbye.

"What's your name?" she asked as the nurses lifted her from the bed to the gurney.

"Don Martino," mumbled the little man, nodding a vague blessing before retreating in the opposite direction and vanishing into the empty hallway. Ugo was left alone. He leaned with his elbow on the windowsill and began scrupulously chewing a fingernail. *Martino*, he thought. Like the saint who cut his cloak in two with a sword, the one from the cathedral in Lucca. Or like the sports announcer, Giorgio, who gave a bored summary of the weekend's Serie A football matches every Sunday before dinner. Now just wait, if it's a boy like all the neighborhood ladies swear it will be (she had been carrying high and she looked beautiful), is that what Luciana will want to call him? He had seen it clearly in her eyes when she said goodbye to the chaplain. The long list of ideas, *Dario*, *Francesco*, *Federico*, all selected a few days earlier, was about to vanish with so many others into the world of possibility, just like the terrifying *Aurelio* that had been his dead father-in-law's name. It was February 19, 1980, a Tuesday. In Italy, crushed and crumpled boot abandoned in a puddle, the clocks read 6:55 AM and everyone tossed and turned under the covers, shivering, deciding whether to get up or not. Then ferocious clock radio alarms, with no concern, began pouring the latest Sanremo song contest (the one Toto Cutugno had won) into bedrooms across the country. Martino was still hanging in the balance between existence and nonexistence, facing an impassable descent into life. Meanwhile, above his mother's belly the agitation grew, voices were raised. Nurses, obstetricians and doctors came and went. Outside it was cold, a light drizzle floated through the air like water vapor and the gravel on the street was submerged in mud. The hospital's façade was barely visible, as though hidden behind a pane of clouded glass. An attendant, just off his shift in the morgue, walked along bundled in his blue jacket, thinking about a hot cappuccino and the terrified eyes of the guy in number three. What had he seen just before he died? Did you see something before dying? He stopped and lit a cigarette, then glanced up and caught sight of Ugo at the window: his lively, beady eyes, his nose at its steep angle above a mouth that was quick to smile but was now frozen by anxiety over his impending fatherhood. He kept walking before his mind could launch into metaphors about life and death, separated only by that short, muddy alley, or wander off in search of some hidden alphabetical logic behind the arrangement of the buildings. *Morgue* and *Maternity* were next to each other, but it was only a coincidence: otherwise *Microbiology* would have been nearby too, and it was nowhere to be found. The concrete wall of the clouds seemed to crumble in the sky, and the exclamation-point top of the tower became just visible in the distance. Luciana, exhausted and miserable from the pain, pushed madly to the battle cry of *C-sectiooooooon*, like an Indian on horseback galloping furiously after a

stagecoach. She stank like a stagecoach, like nervous sweat and other emissions that she could hardly believe had come from her body.

"It smells like a wet dog in here!" exclaimed a nurse immediately upon entering the delivery room. She wasn't wrong.

At exactly ten o'clock, like the most banal cinematic imagery, Martino's crimson head and the full round sun both appeared on the scene, uniting majestically to sweep away placenta, clouds, membranes and fog alike. Ugo watched as his firstborn son was thrust into his arms - tiny, desperate and ugly, marked by the extraordinary difficulty of his birth - and he couldn't hold back his emotions: his nervous tension dissolved into peaceful tears. A new man had arrived in the world, and it was his son. Martino Toccafondi. Toccafondi, Martino. All told, it didn't sound too bad.

1984 – 2011

1984

The town of Cuzzole still remembers that hot and humid June of 1984. How it was forced to stretch its borders and streets towards the river in search of a bit of cool air. A gust of wind, for mercy's sake! The delicate shade of the poplars! Ticco, Gabardina and Ponce had moved from the ARCI center<sup>1</sup> to the breezy riverbank a week earlier, since at Milone's place you were stuck panting like a dog indoors and out. Inside the bar, the blades of the fan turned slowly and occasionally stopped entirely, exhausted, as if they were catching their breath; outside, between the baking asphalt and the sun at its peak, the sycamores couldn't do much: even the shadows they struggled to cast were boiling hot. Blood flowed through your veins like lava. The three old men, who suffered from chronic high blood pressure but were meek characters, had taken charge of the situation and set up an unalterable routine: meeting at Milone's at three, after a light lunch and the obligatory postprandial nap; their traditional espresso with sambuca, without getting caught up in useless conversations; departure in Gabardina's Fiat 128, teasing those who stayed stuck behind at Milone's in the muggy, still air. They drove the barely two kilometers mockingly fast, with the windows rolled down and the smug faces of *someone who had figured out how to steal the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow*. Once they reached the paved lot by the little waterfall they got out of the car, opened their folding chairs, unbuttoned their shirts from top to bottom and plopped themselves down, legs spread wide and undershirts in full view.

"Ahhh...this here is the good life!" they commented immediately.

They were content with the little things, like back in that mythical Arcadia of the pre-caregiver, pre-Viagra days, when their senses were quick to find peace. They kept the car door open to listen to Mina, Claudio Villa, and Iglesias, gesticulating as they talked about various infidelities, politics and cycling, usually over an open newspaper. Their favorite topics were the affairs of the surveyor's wife, Luisa, who had recently been caught with their neighbour Neccio, and that scandalous *Giro d'Italia* that had obviously been rigged to make sure Moser won. Ticco and Gabardina, both hardcore Saronni fans, had used the heat as an excuse to avoid the triumphant final stages and the ensuing mockery from Milone and company.

"What do you call those wheels there anyway, the ones for time trials? *Aerowheels?*"

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<sup>1</sup>Translator's note: ARCI, for *Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*, Italian Recreation and Culture Association, a widespread network of community centers and cultural organizations originally associated with the Italian Communist Party and other left-wing groups.

“Yeah, because they cut through the *air*...”

“Air, my ass. They’ve got a little motor inside them, I’m telling you.” Gabardina closed the debate, rolling his impeccable beige trousers up to his knees and letting the breeze cool his hairless, freckled calves.

“The wind, huh. Like what Luisa’s got between her legs.” Ponce reopened the discussion after a full minute with a touch of class.

“And that pinhead of a husband she has is always wandering all over the place, like shit in plumbing: the office, the cadastre, city hall...I’d never leave the house if I had a piece like that on my hands!”

Toccafondi, who worked on the nearby water main, always stopped to say hello to the trio while running his inspections on the reservoir, and they never limited themselves to a simple hello.

“Ugo, careful now, don’t put too much chlorine in the water!” they called, watching him tinkering with something in the distance. “Cut it with wine instead like your father did, God rest his soul...”

He laughed. Whenever his work allowed for it, he enjoyed a chat with them. He admired their way of aging, so lucid and calm: curiosity, the pleasure of good company, bare feet in slippers, and a thermos of iced lemonade brought from home. Those seemed like insignificant little things, but in reality were imposing walls raised to defend themselves, in body and especially in mind, from the underhanded attacks of the *Grim Reaper*. But that day, June 13, the three venerable elders were missing from their usual post, and when he saw the paved lot standing empty, Toccafondi figured they had stayed at the community center to watch TV or play cards. He returned home at 5 o’clock like always, and Martino ran into his arms; Luciana, busy shelling peas, wiped her hands on her apron and kissed him.

“I have something to tell you later,” she said, further inflaming the curiosity that had already awakened in him upon her unusually sweet welcome and strangely timid, hesitant gaze. Martino, after waiting so long for his father, demanded his full attention. Ugo followed him to play with the toy racetrack, but couldn’t hold back any longer. “Luciana, what do you have to tell me? Has something happened?”

His wife turned immediately around to face him. She could barely contain herself either. She picked up a doll and held it to her breast.

“Martino is going to have a little brother or sister,” she said. “Right, sweetheart? He already knows...”

They embraced, with Martino in the middle. Ugo kissed Luciana, who pulled away after kissing him back: to get back to shelling the peas, she said. But really it was to dry her tears on her apron and be alone. Since that morning, in fact, when she had discovered her situation, she had been battling a whirlwind of incessant thoughts. Would it be as difficult as the first time? Did they have enough money to take care of another person? Would Martino be jealous? Would she be able to divide her love into two perfectly equal parts? And most of all what was this anxiety that seemed to never leave her in peace? And her fatigue? Wouldn’t it grow to intolerable proportions with two children? She tossed the pea shells in the garbage, took an onion from the fridge and began slicing it. Now she could cry without anything seeming amiss, and let out that

mix of worry and happiness. It felt like a premonition, at once sad and tender; a reverse melancholy, a regret projected forward into the future.

A little while later Ugo and Martino went out to observe their ritual of an afternoon popsicle at the center, like they did every day during that terribly hot summer. There wasn't a living soul to be found in the broiling stretch of desert they crossed on their way, except for Brio, a stray dog who had arrived from who knows where and immediately been adopted by the whole town thanks to his funny way of wagging his whole backside along with his tail. His cheerfulness was irresistible: the townspeople had quickly made him grow obese and round. Now he struggled to run, his ass was lazy and his tail was less sleek. He leaped up from the roadside where he was lounging and ran eagerly towards them, his tongue hanging out. Martino cowered timidly behind his father.

"What are you doing? Can't you see what a good dog Brio is?" Ugo reproached him.

The boy's mother and grandmother had poured all their anxieties into him, millions upon millions of them. They saw danger even where none existed and the result was stifled growth: if he ran, he was afraid of falling. If he played football, he was afraid of getting dirty or sweaty. He didn't want to swim at the beach and he wouldn't even go down a slide. Yes, he was a good and obedient child, but he was too shy and timid, completely different from the other children his age who were all fearless. A rival in the house would force him to wake up, and it would do him good.

The bar was crowded, but strangely silent. No one was playing cards, billiards or foosball; no curses, shouts or arguments. The television was on, also silent, and everyone was watching it, their heads held high under a motionless cloud of smoke. It only took Ugo a second to understand what was on the broadcast: Berlinguer's<sup>2</sup> funeral in Rome.

"There's that many people?" he put in half-heartedly.

Seen from above, the crowd spread out like a carpet: the red of the countless flags punctuated by the white of the folded-newspaper hats. The images and the focus created a hypnotic effect, alienating and absorbing at the same time.

"It's wicked hot there too," Gabardina told him under his breath, noticing him looking dazed. "A lot of people started feeling sick...".

Ugo watched the television for a while, standing next to Milone with Martino in his arms. The boy didn't complain, aware that he needed to respect the silence, like when his grandmother took him to church. Only Ilario and Mitraglia didn't care and had sat themselves down outside to chat about cars and motorcycles. Ilario laughed in his camouflage vest with no t-shirt underneath, out of which his large belly ballooned while he picked at his toes. He was an old paratrooper from the Folgore Brigade: like Mitraglia, an illiterate street cleaner, he was of right-wing sensibilities and went to the ARCI center to find a bit of shade. What was the problem? Communists and Christian Democrats, fascists and socialists, didn't they all govern together? Then they could also go to the same bar and sit under the same sycamores. Of course they weren't even slightly curious about that funeral that everyone was so involved in. Nor did it awaken a sense of respect in them, never mind that inside even the flies were moved by emotion. When Martino and Ugo left, the boy ran towards their bench: they had sat there the

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<sup>2</sup>Translator's note: Enrico Berlinguer, highly popular leader of the Italian Communist Party from 1972 until his death in 1984.

first time, and heaven forbid they ever found it occupied. A child's stubborn force of habit admits no exceptions, not even with an ice-cream melting in his hand; it's how they impose some order on the grand chaos of the world and develop an early sense of security. Ugo stayed in the doorway, lingering over the images: he had always voted for the Christian Democrats (the party's symbol being the cross was enough to immediately earn the support of his religious and uncritical family, and he had never taken the initiative to change) but now that immense crowd had shaken him. All united to pay homage to a leader, a simple man, who a few days earlier had fallen ill during a political assembly but had insisted on finishing his speech, as if he felt guilty towards all those who had come to listen to him; as if what he was saying was too important to be left unsaid. Only when Martino's popsicle began to drip all over the bench did he turn his attention back to his son.

"Daddy," asked Martino, "Are they all watching Italy in there?"

"No..." said Ugo, and cracked a smile. The child had only ever seen crowds that large in front of a television when the national team was playing a football match.

"So what are they watching?"

"They're watching a funeral."

"But what's a *funeral*?"

"That's when people go to say goodbye to someone who has to go away."

Martino meditated on that complicated reply, staring at a little turtledove on a branch as it whistled its three-syllabled song.

"But where does that person have to go, daddy?"

"To heaven," said Ugo distractedly.

To heaven? Martino had occasionally heard people say that someone had gone to heaven, grandma Mirella said so all the time, and it always made him doubtful. First of all: wouldn't they fall down? Second of all: where were they? You couldn't see them even when the clouds were gone. He didn't ask questions anyway, and went back to eating his popsicle. Meanwhile Ugo turned his attention back to the community center. *If my first son was given the name of a priest, he thought, the second – if it's another boy – will have the name of a communist. Why not? Enrico Toccafondi. Toccafondi, Enrico. It sounded like music.*

1988

It was all because of the c-section. Mirella had said so over and over to the ladies in her neighborhood. They would all nod, then make a face that said *Poor you, bad luck came for you, but better you than us*. They avoided even looking at Enrico, all twisted in his stroller. They were embarrassed, and anxious to leave as if in the presence of some kind of plague victim. Only a few were courageous enough to give him a half-caress or a compliment before retreating. Many

more thought, making the sign of the cross, of all the good reasons God had to punish Luciana. She had never even set foot in a church, and before marrying Toccafondi her wild adventures would have made Casanova blush. She changed boyfriends more often than she changed her underwear – *that is, if she wore any* – and once she had even dared to bring home an African who sold cigarette lighters on the beach. What else was there to say? She even cried under the hair dryer while getting a perm, the saintly Mirella, thinking about her daughter who just couldn't *settle down*. And now? After having suffered on account of her and the untimely death of her husband, now she found herself with a spastic grandson.

“She could just come to terms with it and enjoy her grandchildren,” the women said under their breath. “It’s a real shame.” It was a simple statement, devoid of emotion, that spread through the air with a consequent shaking of heads. Then they immediately turned the page: new topics, quickly, new comedies and tragedies. About the neighbors, if possible.

It took Luciana three years to be able to go outside calmly with her son; to deal with the quickly averted gazes and the silence that fell as they passed by. She lived in a complex of houses scattered around a courtyard where the children ran and played, and the women stood to hang the laundry to dry, fed the cats and chatted among themselves. There were parked cars and motorcycles no one used, a well covered by a grate and a water fountain with a spout that looked like gold. The sounds of televisions and arguments came from the windows. At night, the bass of disco music made the windowpanes vibrate; at noon it was the theme music of *Pranzo è servito*.<sup>3</sup> Watching over everything was a Madonna in a niche half-hidden by overgrowth. Bored and faded, she seemed to be waiting for something: a train that would take her somewhere else, more to the beach than to heaven.

“I’d rather jump into a bonfire than walk across the courtyard,” Luciana shot back at her mother’s insinuations.

“I’ll take the baby out myself, don’t worry! But just leave the house for a while, alone!” she implored. “Look, you’re practically turning green...”

But she wouldn’t budge, and her husband wasn’t going to waste his energy on convincing her. At most he was able to load her into the car on Sunday, with the excuse of taking the children to get some fresh air, and they went to Viareggio or Lucca, to visit the pier or the ancient walls among crowds of strangers. It was all Luciana would accept. She did nothing halfway, that strange girl: when she was young she would disappear for days, not caring about the gossip. Now, after Enrico’s birth, she lived hidden away at home, out of shame, out of a sense of guilt. But what had she done wrong? Nothing. Didn’t she realize that? Everyone in town knew that Enrico was a tetraplegic because of his birth, and that there was a lawsuit ongoing against the hospital. When Toccafondi had decided to hire a lawyer, who else could he have turned to but Romoli? He was the only one in Cuzzole so obviously word got out! In fact, the lawyer’s wife was known for two things: for her mahogany hairdo, that resembled wood in its color, sheen and thickness, and for eavesdropping on her husband’s office, in order to be able to present the latest gossip (divorces, neighborhood fights) at Gioara’s, the hair salon, package store and news distribution center.

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<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: *Lunch is Served*, a popular news and commentary program aired on Italian TV around lunchtime.



“Housewives,” she was fond of saying, “have no duty to respect their husbands’ professional secrets, they already make enough sacrifices as it is.”

Enrico had decided to be born on December 25 at noon, so it was obvious he would fall into the hands of a benchwarmer: those of Doctor Adelmo Mangiolini, a youth whose blond beard had only just grown in, who had only ever assisted in a delivery. Nevertheless he was not lacking in presumption and decided to do it himself, rather than tear the luminaries away from their Christmas celebrations, and figured that pulling a little spider out of its hole couldn’t be that difficult. He saw Luciana, examined her, didn’t understand, and took his time.

“There’s no rush ma’am, everything is within normal range,” he sang out, under the severe gaze of a nurse who bit her lip doubtfully. The young doctor was too evasive, and in the end they had to resort to stronger hands: emergency procedures, the sudden arrival of the head physician during a storm, furious and still digesting, and a Caesarean section that turned out to be too late. Mangolini had really pulled out a spider, in the end: that skinny little thing now jerking its stick-thin arms and legs around in its stroller while its head barely moved, what was it? Only his eyes, enormous and full of light, cried out that he was a child.

The change had come over Luciana when, for the good of Enrico, she was forced to attend a care center for families with disabled children. Reluctant and hostile with the staff, silent with the other mothers, she performed her assigned tasks without conviction for at least a month: massaging the child, swimming, the first delicate exercises in nonverbal communication. Then, one brilliant April morning, the water in the little swimming pool pierced by infinite bursts of light, something happened that made her ironclad defenses disintegrate: she felt Enrico’s joy as she held him, little shivers of pleasure that he managed to communicate to her through his gaze and his body, wide open in a smile that said: “Thank you, Mommy...”

It was impossible to misunderstand. Some messages are clearer than words, more direct. They come straight from the heart to the eyes, from hands to skin. Luciana felt it rush inside her all at once, setting her on fire: her inner emptiness was filled by love, finally, in a moment of surrender that was both an acknowledgement and a plea for her son’s forgiveness.

“Thank you, Mommy,” Enrico was saying to her, “For holding me afloat, for loving me, for giving birth to me...”

“Don’t thank me,” whispered Luciana, holding his twisted little body close to her. “I haven’t done anything for you.”

For the first time she felt that he was her child, alive, hers, and she smothered his face with tears and kisses. She spoke to him and lavished him with cuddles, happy, her guard let down. The sun rose slowly that morning above the windows and rooftops and the swimming pool that was still deserted, immersed in silence. Luciana sealed that first encounter with a promise, looking him straight in the eyes: “I will always take care of you.”

That same day, the mother of another tetraplegic child, to whom she had never said more than a few quick words, handed her a book: “You can borrow this, if you want. It helped me a lot...”

Luciana took the book (she would have accepted anything that day) and read the entire thing that night, next to Ugo who every now and again opened an eye halfway to look at her but didn’t have the strength to say anything.

For his part, Ugo had accepted Enrico immediately, and had not let a single day pass by without showing him love. But he was different (and would have accepted anything in life): the joy and pain he felt, he kept inside, without letting it show. So he always seemed agreeable, calm and easygoing. But he wasn't at peace. That same day that had been so important for his wife and son, he worked hard all morning before sitting down on the doorstep of a small tower around a well shaft to eat a sandwich. The grass came up to his knees and he fixed his pale eyes on the blue sky. Three days earlier in that same little tower, he had masturbated, fantasizing over a photo of Edwige French, and had sprayed his semen into the water. The same water that flowed into every house, the water that they tested every day with samples and analyses. There was nothing symbolic in the gesture, neither protest nor anger. Not even any disrespect towards the townspeople who might drink the water. The idea had simply popped into his head, out of boredom and as a consequence of a prolonged period of abstinence: Luciana was angry at the whole world, so go figure if she was giving herself to him, who was part of the world. Polluting the water with his sperm was just the cherry on top, that *something extra* that added the frisson of an adolescent prank to the pleasure of the orgasm itself. Now he was there again, in the pale light of midday, watching the sharp marble peaks of the Apuan Alps as they pierced the sky. He wasn't thinking about anything and it seemed to him like the whole universe was holding still. He couldn't have known that, in that exact moment, a writer from Emilia was focusing hard to finish a sentence in a novel that Martino would read years later and be deeply moved by; or that in the airplane that was currently passing silently over his head a woman named Giovanna was arriving in to Pisa to spend a few days with her only granddaughter, a beautiful black-haired girl who, twenty-eight years later, would explode into Enrico's life with the force of a hurricane. When he got home he was sure he would find his mother-in-law doing the chores with downcast eyes, Martino sighing noisily, ignored by his mother and jealous of his brother, and Luciana sitting in front of the TV with a flat expression and a Muratti cigarette in her mouth. So he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the gathering of people outside the front door. In order of appearance: Evelina, with her white hair streaked with yellow and her oversized housecoat; the baker's wife and the butcher's wife, fresh from getting their perms; Luisa and Mitraglia, freshly *post-flagrante*; the Santopadre twin spinsters, completely impossible to de-spinsterize on account of their smell, hairiness and talkativeness and now also their age (they were over forty, who would want them now?); Iole with a couple of cats trailing around her skirts; and even the courtyard's pain in the ass *par excellence*, Donna Delfa, who not even several accidents and the resulting stroke could have kept indoors. In short it was the whole neighborhood, and above all there was Luciana in the middle. Luciana, talking. Talking with Enrico in her arms!

"It was all because of the C-section," Ugo heard her say, getting off his bicycle and rubbing his eyes with his fingers like a child. He couldn't move closer anyway: Martino rolled a ball to his feet and a moment later he found himself playing, happy, at the center of the courtyard.

1989

"So after pulling Geppetto out of the shark's mouth, Pinocchio swims and swims...see, Enrico? He swims so far he can't go on anymore. We have to learn to swim too. I promise, this year at the beach I'll teach you to tread water! Like me, without a floaty ring. It's su-per im-por-tant: maybe one day we'll have to save Daddy...Look at the picture! At Pinocchio Park it wasn't a shark, though, it was a whale: that giant animal with its mouth wide open, we went inside and Mom almost fell in the water. Remember? But the book says *shark* and Daddy says the book is right. Books are always right, Daddy says: it wasn't a whale, it was a shark, and when Pinocchio can't swim anymore you know what happens? Do you remember who comes for him? His friend the tuna! Tu-na! Try to say it, come on... Tu-na! So Pinocchio and Geppetto first grab onto its

tail, then they climb up on its back. The tuna carries them to safety on the riverbank, and you know what Pinocchio does to thank him? He gives him a kiss on the lips!”

Enrico let out a sort of grunt and tried to move under the covers. Martino put down the book and stood up to help him: his brother wanted to roll over onto his side but couldn’t do it by himself.

“There’s my little wooden puppet-brother...” he said, and gave him a little kiss on his forehead.

“Should I turn off the light? Do you want to sleep? Or should I tell you a little more of the story? We’re almost at the end.”

Enrico’s eyes widened and he made a face whose meaning was clear: *keep going!* Martino got back on his bed and picked up the book that he already knew by memory.

“Look Enrico, here’s a picture of the tuna! See how huge it is? And I always thought that tunas were little like the cans!”

He read on for another minute or two, then he realized his little brother had fallen asleep, right as their mother came into the room.

“Shh, Mamma...he’s asleep...”

Luciana smiled and caressed Martino, then pulled Enrico’s covers up and tucked him in carefully. He ran the risk of suffocating at night: every three hours, someone needed to change his position. That responsibility fell to Ugo, who set an alarm for it. She closed the shutters, put the book back on the shelf and turned off the table lamp. Then she laid down on Martino’s bed, above the covers, next to him. She snuggled up to her older son like a cat, silently, breathing in his smell, then fixed her gaze on the ceiling that was turning bright from the light that came from the stairwell.

“I love you boys,” she said as if to herself, and stayed stretched out at his side, her hand in his, until Martino fell asleep too.

1990

At Milone’s, by September 21 there was nothing left of the famous *magical nights* except Ticco’s slippers with the worst mascot in the history of the World Cup – that thing that looked like a folding clothes-hanger – and a photo of a possessed Totò Schillaci pinned to the community bulletin board between a picture of Che Guevara with a furrowed brow and one of Sabrina Salerno topless. And yet, every time you got in the car and turned on the radio, you immediately ran into that unbearable song, *notte magici, inseguendo un gol*,<sup>4</sup> even if it was eight in the morning and there was nothing magical about anything. It was raining like the wrath of God and Toccafondi was just thinking *This rain is all we needed this morning*.

He parked in the square and ran into the community center covering his head with his hand.

“Milone, throat drops! For Luciana...” he said once he arrived inside, then turned towards the tables and nodded hello to those present: the inevitable Ticco with his *Gazzetta dello Sport*, and

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<sup>4</sup> “Magical nights, chasing a goal” – the official anthem of the 1990 World Cup, held in Italy.

Mitraglia with a China Martini aperitif: because if you don't fill up the tank first thing in the morning you run the risk that the engine won't start. Milone handed Ugo the Muratti cigarettes, then went back to paging through the instruction manual for his new video recorder, without either saying a word: it was well known that he was always in *very pissed off* mode until ten or eleven o'clock, his moustache immobile and eyebrows slanted, then switched to simply *pissed off* mode until closing, of the bar and of the day. Ugo, who knew him well, didn't push the issue. He turned quickly back to his car and soon was back home again.

"It's pouring!" he said, flinging open the door. The children were ready, but Luciana wasn't: he heard her swearing at the mirror and her wrinkles, and understood that she was putting on her makeup. He slipped the cigarettes into her bag, then stroked Enrico's cheek. "Are you excited, little one?"

Enrico looked at him and nodded, closing his eyes. They got to school just as the bell rang. Martino whispered something into his brother's ear, kissed him and ran off to class, fifth grade, on the other side of the hall.

"Bye, sweetheart!" Luciana called after him, then aimed the wheelchair holding her younger son towards the first-grade classroom. Two teachers were conversing rapidly in the doorway: the official one of long standing, Fernanda, well known in Cuzzole; and the new young one, whom everyone called a *backup teacher* and the principal carefully referred to as the *special needs teaching assistant*. Enrico's first day of school came many days after the official start of term, because the teacher who now moved to greet him hadn't been assigned in time. How kind the government was, what solidarity: it had decided to put itself into Enrico's shoes immediately, operating on a *retarded* timetable to make him feel more at ease.

"I'm Sonia, it's nice to meet you," the teacher said, offering them a defenceless handshake. Shiny-faced and gaunt under her clothes, she was as well-preserved as a leftover aunt at a country wedding. She was put together from head to toe: brunette hairdo, peach camisole, beige blazer with a gold pin shaped like a bouquet, skirt below the knee, flesh-colored stockings and brown *décolleté*, and square heels. *Does she still have to change into her work clothes?* wondered Ugo. *Does she understand what she's going to be doing?* thought Luciana. There was only one thing they could be sure of: Enrico's saliva, always copious and shiny, would brighten up the ensemble.

"And you must be Enrico," she said, caressing the child's head. The woman was perceptive! A little stuffy and out of place, but certainly on top of things! Their meeting was formal, brief and disappointing, and placing Enrico's care in those limp hands left Toccafondi in a state that alternated between disappointment and anger.

"Huh. Well, if that's a backup teacher..." said Luciana as she got back into the car. "If Enrico tries to *back up* on her, she'll move away so that horrible camisole won't get ruined, so she won't get a spot on her little suit!"

Ugo was of the same opinion as his wife, but rather than agreeing with how she expressed it he thought it better to try to reassure her: "Well, it's also true that clothes don't make the woman," he said, but he might as well have advised indifferently that "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." All hell broke loose.

"Yes they do, yes they do! Of course clothes make the woman!" Luciana exclaimed furiously. "Don't tell me you think she's the right person for Enrico! You realize, don't you, that your son is going to be spending a *lot* of time with her? You realize that he has never – *never* – spent a single day away from us? And these are the most important years for him to learn to be around

other people, have you grasped that? Go figure...but what would you want to know about your own son!"

Then Luciana fell suddenly silent. Outside the window, Cuzzole dissolved into a rapid succession of fields with rows of grapevines and houses scattered here and there. It had stopped raining, and a short gash of intense blue reached up from the earth as if to retake the sky, completely invaded by clouds.

"Five hours a day for five years!" said Luciana, starting to twist her usual lock of hair. "Do you realize that? With the wrong person it will be an enormous waste of time!"

Ugo felt like saying that if Sonia revealed herself to be the wrong person they could change school, or demand that they send a more appropriate teacher, and that maybe (still) the bridge should be crossed when they came to it. But he preferred to say nothing: hesitantly, he put his hand on his knee without taking his eyes from the road. When they arrived at the beach the sun had made space for itself and the wind had died down. The waves scraped the shore like cats sharpening their claws on an old sofa, and there was no one there: just an elderly couple seated at one of the picnic tables. He with a copy of the weekly crosswords, she with a gossip magazine. Ugo thought he recognized the old man as one of his middle school teachers, Prof. Manrico Rontani, famous for his habit of bombarding his most distracted students with pieces of chalk, balled-up wads of paper and in extreme cases, large and sticky boogers, that he plucked from the source at the necessary moment and, before launching from on high in the hall, carefully shaped and modeled. The good Manrico was obsessed with Pirandello and the passage of time, which likes to toy with us before finishing us off, had eventually transformed him into one of his characters: hunchbacked and gray, spectacles balanced on his nose and his skin two sizes too big. Ugo still remembered the emotion shown by the little man when, after having read and explained a *novella*, he had realized to his shock that he hadn't had to deploy any ammunition: his students were all involved and paying attention!

They walked all the way to the mouth of the Serchio. Luciana was still silent, lost in her own thoughts more than angry. The current had formed an island of sand and the water was a beautiful color, between dark green and blue. It smelled of fish, wet sand, and rain, and the seagulls, who had reclaimed the beach at the end of summer, watched over it like sentinels with their chests thrust out. They stopped near the shore and sat down on a large tree trunk that had ended up in the right spot, facing the clouds and the river mouth, both perfect for chasing away their worries. *Take them, bring them far away, scatter them! In the sky or the sea it's all the same...*

In any event, Luciana did not take advantage of the opportunity the view offered. On the contrary, suddenly breaking her silence, she said: "What are we doing here? We look like two teenage sweethearts..."

"What are you talking about? Wasn't it your idea to come to the beach?" retorted Ugo. "I took the day off from work!"

"Yes, but last night I couldn't have known how nervous I would be today! Or that it would have rained. The sea without the sun makes me even more upset. Let's leave..."

"Where? You want to go home already?"

"I dunno, if you were a real man we could go threaten the educational director and force him to send us someone who knows what they're doing, not some clotheshorse like that one!"

“At least let’s wait to see how she handles it...no?”

“Oh, sure! You always want to wait, to justify everything! If it was up to you we wouldn’t have even sued the hospital!”

That said, Luciana got up and walked towards the boardwalk. Was calm truly the virtue of the strong? Seeing how Ugo behaved, it was doubtful. Wasn’t his more a case of cowardice? A goddamned lack of guts and courage? They got back in the car wrapped in silence. Luciana lit a cigarette, Ugo turned on the radio and found a news show. The UN’s war on Iraq, accused of having invaded Kuwait, seemed inevitable. Italy, *after having expressed its hope for a peaceful solution to the crisis*, had sent a couple of fighter planes to the Gulf, demonstrating the usual integrity. A few months later the first televised war would break out. Green lights silently streaking across a black sky, hypnotic and unreal. Video-game bombs that seemed incapable of creating real corpses.

Luciana changed the station.

“I’m already depressed enough on my own,” she said, and started spinning the dial convulsively in search of something that would cheer her up. She found an old Renato Zero song and leaned back humming in her seat.

“Don’t go home,” she said. “Take the highway.”

Ugo looked at her questioningly.

“We need to buy a new pair of shoes for Martino and a new apron for Enrico,” she said. “Let’s go to Montecatini. Luisa says there’s a huge supermarket there where you can find everything.”

“Does Luisa go there with Mitraglia?”

“I don’t think so. Mitraglia comes over when Corneliusson isn’t there!”

“To her house? In the courtyard?”

“Of course! The safest things are the ones done in the full light of day. It’s when you try to hide that they catch you, and when you’re seen in weird places. The people of Cuzzole are like flies, too, they’re everywhere...”

“Luisa really gets around though, huh?! Mitraglia, Neccio, the butcher...”

“That’s for sure! She’s only missing you out of the whole town, Ugo...”

“Who says she’s missing me?”

“She’s missing you...you’d just tickle her. Only you and her husband haven’t been with her, to be precise!”

Ugo started to laugh. Luciana had always made certain jokes, but they had never bothered him. Least of all in that period in which they had rediscovered their sex life and a harmony that had been missing since before Enrico was born. Because love, to function as it should, must be practiced – it must be made. As much as possible, like everything else. And however many superstructures Man can construct for himself he remains still an animal. It’s instinct, skin,

hormones, and it's where his serenity comes from. Chimpanzee DNA is only different from ours by a miniscule amount: 1.3 percent.

Luciana put out her cigarette and looked in the mirror on the sun visor. Her tears had melted her mascara, and the wind had blown away the light from her gaze. The two wrinkles at the base of her nose, on her forehead, were growing bigger day by day, tunnels that someone insisted on digging: thoughts locked up in her mind to be avoided, inmates armed with spoons stolen from the prison mess hall. She fixed her makeup in the supermarket parking lot, then let herself be overwhelmed by those enormous spaces, first disoriented then ever more at ease. They filled their cart, entertained and fascinated like two little children. Only when they set off again for Cuzzole did Luciana's worries return, the anxiety that grew in her chest with every kilometer passed, a cigarette, silence, her hand in her hair. But she still never expected to stumble upon such a terrible scene when they entered the school: Enrico sobbing desperately in the middle of the atrium, with Martino bent over him trying to console him. Behind them was Fernanda, the elderly teacher, with a cotton rag in her hand to provide first aid to a classmate of Martino's, trembling, with a bloody nose.

"Daddy!" cried Martino, pulling away from his brother. "Gabriele was making fun of Enrico, but I didn't mean to hurt him! I swear!"

The boy was upset, and burst into tears himself, clinging to his parents. Only then did Luciana see the backup teacher: she was off to the side, sitting on a little child's seat, with a group of parents gathered around her all shaking their heads in unison. Clearly she was telling them the story in search of sympathy. But why? Instead of doing her job and supporting Enrico she abandoned him to his own devices, desperate, and she was the one who needed to be comforted? Luciana looked ferociously at her and felt the impulse to throw herself at her: among the various atmospheric disturbances christened with women's names, Hurricane Luciana would certainly be famous for its strength. Fed with six years of battle, struggle, anger, barriers both physical and mental, she would have blown Sonia away with a breath, stupid little chair and sycophants included. But Enrico was crying, crying hard, who knew for how long, so she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and bent over him to comfort him.

Sonia resigned two weeks later. Enrico didn't like her either and he made her life impossible. The surrender occurred, between tears of disgust and hysteria, when after having defecated, the child managed to pick up the toilet brush with two fingers and used it on the woman like a priest's holy-water dispenser. The ensuing bloodcurdling screams made students and teachers alike rush to the bathroom, and those that managed to catch a glimpse would struggle to forget the scene: Enrico was sitting on the floor with his back against the toilet, snickering happily with his pants down. The dirty toilet brush was still in his lap. Sonia, leaning over the sink, was on the verge of passing out. Her glassy face and pink blazer were covered with spots whose color and consistency left no doubts. Enrico had placed his curse on her. *I curse you, Sonia. In the name of my father, my mother and myself.*