

To Jacopo

Young bodies tumble quickly away.
Roman inscription

The story of the Gordon gang is a product of the author's imagination, but two historical facts mentioned are real: the removal of Flash Gordon from the pages of weekly comic magazine *L'Avventuroso*, published by Nerbini, in 1938, and the imprisonment of Benito Mussolini in Campo Imperatore from the 2nd to the 12th of September, 1943. Apart from L'Aquila and Gran Sasso, all other settings where the story takes place are invented. Any reference to actual persons, apart from those already mentioned, is purely coincidental.

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Yesterday, by the time I reached the thirtieth kilometre my vision was blurry, my head emptied of thoughts, my blood pressure had dropped and my heart was pounding at 150 bpm. It was two in the afternoon. I had been running through the pine forest of Ostia for three hours. The sky was milky white, there wasn't so much as a breath of cool air, and it was thirty-four degrees. From their hiding places among the pine trees, wild boars watched me pityingly. What they saw was a small man running on fragile ankles, with no predator at his heels and no prey to chase and catch. They had every reason to disapprove. With my dejected, lopsided gait I wouldn't have outrun a chicken. I had to sit down under a pine tree, otherwise I would have passed out.

Today, I'm resting. It's ten in the morning and the thermometer on my balcony already shows thirty-two degrees with ninety percent humidity. For the last hour the siren of an alarm has been making its intermittent lament, to which no one responds. As I sip a South African rooibos herbal tea with two ice cubes I experience a slight sense of guilt, because I haven't been following Galloway's instructions: the alternation of long sessions, short bursts, sessions dedicated to style and sessions of interval training. I like subjecting myself to a discipline. The rigour of training generates fatigue and awareness, like Zen meditation where you empty your mind and resolve koans like "does a dog possess the nature of Buddha?", or even classical Arabic lessons, activities which I practice regularly.

*But Galloway is Californian, and he doesn't know how muggy the weather of the Lazio coast is in July. I put an old copy of Dylan Dog on top of the book on running and stare up at the bedroom ceiling. There's a suspicious bit of peeling plaster on the north east side. I need to check for leaks from upstairs. Tomorrow, though. This morning I'm planning on staying at home and watching three or four episodes of *Breaking Bad*.*

But instead the convocation from the old man arrives. "It's Sunday, I know you're in Rome and

you've got nothing to do, come over here." I haven't seen him for a few months - since April, to be precise. The earthquake in L'Aquila had just happened and we'd looked together for news of the few of his friends and acquaintances still living in those parts. Who knows what he wants to tell me. I don't like to keep him waiting, though. I immediately reply "Yes sir," our code from the old days, then put on a pair of trousers, a shirt and a linen jacket - never show up at Piero Vinci's wearing Bermuda shorts and a t-shirt, even if it is forty-five degrees outside: he's perfectly capable of giving you a bawling out and sending you home to get yourself smartened up – then set off on my motorbike towards Via dei Quattro Venti. He lives at the top of the hill, near Porta San Pancrazio, in a small building where he told me that Mazzini, Saffi and Armellini met in 1849, at the time of the Roman Republic.

I've been told that he's starting to lose it a bit. Given his age it might well be true, but I don't trust the rumours about him much. I didn't even trust them when they assigned him to me. I know him well.

"Yes, we put a diaper on him for the night because he's wet himself a couple of times," his carer Irene tells me. She speaks in a quiet voice so as not to be heard from the other room, and gesticulates to emphasise the words she whispers. It's a waste of time, though. The general has better hearing than an orchestra conductor. "It's not just that, though." I ask for some examples. Irene takes me by the arm and drags me into the kitchen. "It might be nothing but the other day he asked me what the ATM card was for. Yesterday he didn't recognize the nurse who comes to give him his injections. And he asked me why we have to pay condominium fees for the months when he's on holiday."

"Okay, but he's eighty-four and he's not well," I say. "It's only to be expected that he has the odd moment of mental fatigue." Playing things down makes me feel calmer - it's my natural Lexotan. And above all, I don't believe it.

"Maybe you're right. Anyway, he's got it into his head that he wants to talk to you. Poor you, you've no idea, he's got so logo..."

"Logorrheic?"

"Yes - he never shuts up. If it looks like he's going to go on, make some excuse to call me in and I'll get you out of it. Hurry up, he's waiting for you," she says, pushing me towards the study door. "He'll get snappy if you don't go."

I find him sitting in his dark red leather armchair, holding a folder full of papers. In the room there is a half-tail grand piano which his wife used to play, a desk of pale wood and a bookcase full of books. He looks practically the same: thin, short, very white hair, pale skin. His blue eyes still

flash. Before greeting me, he peers at me suspiciously for a few moments. "Did Irene tell you I have Alzheimer's?" His voice is still fast and deep, nothing like the hoarse, faltering voices of his peers. I give a slightly embarrassed laugh: "Of course not. She's just worried about your health."

"Let's make her think it's true. You've no idea how amusing I find it... I want to see whether she'll try and talk me into marrying her if she thinks I've gone senile." That cynical humour isn't like him, but I don't think senile dementia has anything to do with it. It's just that he's become a bit bitter since his second wife died. Irene's a good person and I doubt she's the type to try and swindle him. But I don't say anything. "News from L'Aquila? Is your house still standing?" I ask him. He makes an annoyed gesture with his hand - he doesn't want to talk about it.

"I have to tell you a story," he says, clutching the documents in his lap. "A story that I have never told anyone, not even my children. You can choose to believe it or not believe it... I've reconstructed it slowly, and... ah, what can I tell you? Pshh - after almost seventy years, I don't know how much I believe it myself." He thinks for a moment then continues. "You know, the reality we remember is like a mountain: with the passage of time, it changes. The mountains haven't always looked the way they look to you now. It's the same with our memories. They are subject to erosion, they crack open into crevasses and clefts, the occasional boulder falls off. Until there is only a desert of sand, like in the Sahara. Did you know that there were mountains thousands of meters high in the Sahara? Except that what happens to a stone giant over ninety million years happens to a man in ninety."

The story, says the general, takes place many years ago in the Abruzzo mountains. The mountains where he was born. In a fold of the mountains from which the Aterno river originates, he explains, there is one of the steepest walls of rock in the entire Apennines, but except for him and a few others, nobody knows it. A wall more than two hundred meters high, which rises sheer up to the sky like the facade of a cathedral in a square. To get an idea of it, he says, you must imagine what it must have been like to see St. Peter's Basilica back before Via della Conciliazione had been built. You wandered through the alleys of the Borgo without ever seeing it, then turned a corner and the huge bulk of the Catholic church's temple appeared. In the same way, to get to see that wall you have to take a long trek through a wild valley where wolves still hunt hares, chamois and wild goats, and birds of prey circle in the air, peering down in search of their quarry. You walk through the woods seeing nothing but plants, leaves, bushes and a few stones on the ground, then you emerge into a clearing and that marvel suddenly appears before you.

There have never been many people in that valley, apart from a few hermits over the centuries. At most there might be some hunters, a few lumberjacks, the odd person looking for mushrooms and roots.

After the last war the entire area was requisitioned by the military authorities and the order was given to fence it off and block access to civilians. The large cave that opened at the base of the wall was enlarged. It was dug deeper, and then everything was sealed up with concrete and steel. For a whole year the few inhabitants of the villages scattered over those mountains watched a great coming and going of helicopters, trucks, diggers and cement mixers. Powerful chainsaws cut down the beech forest to make way for an access road, bulldozers cleared the ground, dynamite opened a gap in the cavities of the mountain. All this grand construction work was because a huge fallout shelter was to be built inside the mountain. A bunker to house the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic, the most important ministers and the leaders of the armed forces in the event of a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. The general, who watched it being built, says it was an impressive place. From the bowels of the mountain, the Prime Minister could speak with the President of the United States of America and with the secretary of the Soviet Communist Party thanks to a telephone line that put Italy in direct contact with the two superpowers; he could address the nation via radio and television, he could communicate with the various branches of the military, wherever they were. There were twenty double bedrooms for the men of the government and their families. The kitchens, equipped with enough supplies for a year, were ready to serve the shelter's guests with simple but by no means unappetising meals. There was an infirmary with medicines and medical equipment. In one corner a small chapel had been created, which was ready to welcome believers for the Sunday mass.

"I've never heard of it," I say - not to contradict him, obviously, but because acting naive is part of the role they assigned me twenty-five years ago.

He doesn't even answer me.

The general says it was vital for the government that no news of the place leaked out. The fences weren't enough to keep the curious away - nobody must suspect that there were government buildings behind the barbed wire. A major diversionary operation was therefore organized. The rumour was circulated that there was a deposit of nuclear waste from the United States inside the valley, buried at great depths. Large trucks came in at regular intervals: they entered the valley, parked up for a few hours, then left, to give the impression that something was being unloaded. It was hoped that the Soviet spies in Italy would fall for it.

But more was done. The Ministry of Defence asked the Italian Alpine Club directly to consider the whole area as "non-existent". The general still has a copy of a letter that the minister wrote to the club's president in 1950.

He extracts it from the file he is holding and reads it out aloud.

"Dear President, as I already told you in our interview of a few days ago, I would ask you to undertake not to disclose in any way the information regarding the area of the 'Valley of the Hermitage', north of L'Aquila. In particular, this ministry is concerned that topographic maps of the aforementioned area not be made public, that no mention be made of the existence of the aforementioned valley in the volumes of the 'Mountains of Italy' guide you publish, and that no episodes of mountaineering history related to the location in question be mentioned in any publication. In short, as far as the Alpine Club is concerned, the whole area has never existed and must never exist, at least until further arrangements are agreed upon."

The Miramonti Hotel, as it was baptised by the men of the military secret services who had designed and built it, remained in operation for about forty years. And then, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, its reason for existing disappeared. The sophisticated equipment and the furnishings were removed from the valley by trusted men. There was even a valuable painting - a Renaissance Madonna that Amintore Fanfani had had moved from Palazzo Chigi to the refuge in Abruzzo because he thought that in the tragic event of his having to shelter from a nuclear attack he would find strength and comfort in the mother of God's smile.

General Vinci says that it therefore shouldn't surprise me if I've never heard of the place. But it does actually exist. He knows that the images have long been obscured on Google Maps (he might be eighty-four but he is an Air Force general and knows all about Google Maps). I could go there myself, enter the valley and force open the access door of the refuge, if I had the nerve.

The general says he has only one regret. In all these years he has never been able to track down his friend Marzia Fiume, one of the protagonists of this story. After the war she went to the Soviet Union and never returned.

Now that I didn't expect. In all these years he has never once mentioned Marzia. Who is the reason why I'm here. I have a conditioned reflex, which was drilled into me by the staff of the Fort: I must be cautious. "Did you have a friend who went to live in the Soviet Union, General?" He is a soldier, a conservative and a nationalist. He prides himself on being a great-grandson of D'Annunzio, "the aviation hero," he says every time, "who flew over Vienna in 1918 to mock the Austrians." For a while, the general says nothing more. He runs his hand over his hair two or three times with a slow, meditated gesture. I hear him breathing deeply. "Now listen." And he starts to tell the story.

1940 had passed, and few believed it would return. In town, people were asking questions. People left for the war and were heard from no more. Others came back with one less leg. The cellars had become air raid shelters, and schools and offices were evacuated. All the young men over the age of twenty had vanished from circulation: all, or almost all, were at the front, in Africa and especially in Russia, with the Alpine Brigade Julia. The inhabitants of L'Aquila are mountain folk by definition. Where else could they send you except to trample the snow on the banks of the Don?

The symbols, however, resisted. Every sixth day of the week that God gave the earth, the Balillas, the Vanguardists, the Daughters of the Wolf and the Young Italians had to put on their uniforms and go to the sports field for the Fascist Saturday exercises. Piero couldn't stand it anymore. It was a thousand metres from his home to the new sports field, which he had to walk each time wearing a black shirt - one kilometre there and one kilometre back. He felt like an idiot. Before Italy had entered the war, and even immediately afterwards, people had smiled at him, greeted him, some fanatics even gave him the Roman salute. Now, though, almost everyone was indifferent. As he walked past them clad in his nice, freshly-laundered uniform, he was like a ghost. Some even turned away. The black beret on his head annoyed him. "This pom-pom is stupid," he said to his classmate Nico Ruggeri, who was more optimistic about it: "The girls like it, though."

Piero would have liked to spend Saturday afternoon doing something else: walking under the arcades, going to the cinema, playing football, reading a book, talking to Nico about girls, football, or war. Instead he had to believe, obey, fight, march with a Balilla dummy rifle, jump through hoops, salute Il Duce (*in absentia*, because he had never shown his face in the city), and sing *Youth* and *Little Black Face*. At least once you'd been able to start a conversation with some girl from the Young Italians. But that year, the L'Aquila branch of the G.I.L. had decided that the females' gymnastic exercises should henceforth take place elsewhere. So goodbye girls in black skirts and white stockings, attractive in their own way in that monastic uniform.

Then there was the intolerable Professor Pinto, the Vanguardist trainer. Piero loathed him. He was the high school gymnastics teacher: a tall 50-year-old with a dark complexion, thin lips, large hands and muscular arms. He had been injured in the foot during the war of 1915-18. The field hospital surgeon had reattached his tendon badly and he'd been left lame. No one had ever heard of a PE teacher with a limp before, but the Ministry of Education had made an exception for this war invalid who was one of the original fascists. He walked with the assistance of a black stick topped with a small silver skull. The skull sneered in the exact same way he did, and its message seemed to be: "Don't kid yourselves, I'll persecute you even when I'm dead."

Because of his impairment, he couldn't demonstrate the athletic exercises to the boys, so he simply explained them in words. It was wise to listen carefully to what he said: if someone didn't

grasp his description and executed the exercise erroneously, Pinto would grow as red as if the Gordon gang were tightening a noose around his neck and would bury the poor lad under an avalanche of insults that denoted, if nothing else, a certain biblical culture: "You stupid follower of Onan, stop spilling your seed into the holes of the earth and open your ears if you don't want me to throw you in the Gehenna!" The Gehenna was a small cabin containing an awful latrine which was never cleaned. Those who ended up inside had to stay there for at least thirty minutes: many emerged pale and exhausted from the trial. The nauseating smell clung to clothes and hair, and remained in the nostrils for the rest of the day and beyond.

That Saturday, though, neither Piero nor Nico would risk punishment. Both had been given permission to skip the afternoon meeting. The first had used the excuse of a cold, which he did in fact have, though only in an initial and entirely negligible form; the other instead had played the card of a non-existent aunt's funeral.

Without saying anything to their parents, they had skipped school, gone to L'Aquila railway station, hoping not to meet anyone who recognized them, and climbed aboard the nine o'clock train, which half an hour later had deposited them at the small station in Castellaccio. As soon as he got off, Piero took a deep breath, filling his lungs. The air was different up there - fresher, almost painful to breathe. It surged forcefully into your throat and was so pure that it went to your head. A dusty road led them to a stone house where Piero had been born. It stood just outside the village, and was a large two-story building with a huge wooden door framed by a white stone arch. It gave Piero a sense of stability that he didn't feel in his apartment in the city.

Dressed in black and standing in front of the door was *donna* Giovanna Vinci, his grandmother. The old lady had lost her husband more than ten years before, but she was still in mourning. She always would be, in fact: a widow remained a widow for life round those parts, especially in the way she dressed. She had only removed the dark handkerchief that covered her head five years after the death of her spouse. On a couple of occasions she'd worn a grey blouse, but she'd felt embarrassed and had gone back to strict observance of the widow's provisions. The only jewellery she wore was a pair of pearl earrings.

"Hurry up, Santino's waiting for you!" she shouted, waving her arms at the two. She hadn't seen her grandson for more than a month but she spoke to him as if he'd never left her house.

"I'll go and find him, grandma. This is Nico, do you remember Nico?"

"Who? Why do you only hang around with lads? When are you going to bring home some nice girl you can get a bit of practice in on?"

For some time now, *Signora* Vinci, a woman of chaste and God-fearing language, had begun to

display an irrepressible interest in the sexual sphere - an interest that had started gently enough with a few jokes and the odd innocent *double entendre*, only to later cross the line of good manners which prohibited women from revealing themselves to be experts in bodily practices, even the most common of them. Eros had become an obsession. At the beginning, the widow Vinci had developed the idea that everyone - men and women, young and old, regardless of age and wealth - thought only of fornicating, and therefore spoke of sex like some disparager of licentious customs. Lately though, the obsession had taken a different turn: the *signora* alternated condemnation of the lustful with moments in which she spoke like a brothel keeper. "Why, wouldn't you like some nice girl to do a little job on you?" she asked her grandson.

The two friends burst out laughing.

"You know grandma's not all there in the head anymore," Piero said softly, in an attempt to excuse her words.

"But she's right, though, isn't she?" replied his friend.

At that moment Santino emerged. Housekeeper, labourer, driver: after the *signora*'s husband had departed the scene, he had stayed on as odd-job man in the Vinci house in exchange for a place to sleep, food and a small salary. He was a robust man, with large arms and large hands, his round face covered with several days' growth of beard, his lower lip protruding, his hair disheveled by the wind, and the air about him of someone who knows what's what.

"Well I never, what are you doing here?" he asked widening his cow-like eyes and craning his neck forward.

Piero liked Santino's guttural voice - it put him in a good mood. "Nothing, Santino. Today the Fatherland has lost two daring future fighters. Keep it under your hat when you see my mother and father, though."

"Don't worry, I'm no telltale. But you'll be for the high jump if the *podestà* sees that you're here instead of at the meeting!"

"The *podestà*? When has he ever come round this way on a Saturday?"

"Heh - he's got himself a car now and he goes driving round all the towns so he can show it off to everyone."

Two pigeons on the roof of the house cooed.

"Why don't you take us to pick gentian so nobody sees us, Santì?" proposed Piero

Santino sighed and shook his head. "You'll get me into trouble you two will. Go and get a bottle

of water and some bread and let's go.”

As soon as they had prepared a snack and gulped down a few mouthfuls of ice water from the drinking fountain that stood in the street in front of the house, the two friends were ready. They took the bicycles from the barn and started pedalling after Santino along the dirt road that led out of the village.

"I'm taking you somewhere you've never been before today," said Santino. The two looked perplexed. "It's a fair way, but there's the best gentian there. Wait 'til you see what a place it is!"

The trio left their bicycles at a bend in the road near a small stream and walked up a track that climbed through the middle of the beech forest for a good half hour. In places the valley opened up and in others it narrowed, and when the trees began to thin out, they emerged onto a plateau where a dozen semi-wild horses grazed. "Are we nearly there yet?" asked Piero.

“What? You're only seventeen, are your legs tired already? If I was Mussolini, it'd be me who didn't want you as Vanguardists!” The sun was beginning to beat down on their necks, and Piero sneezed a couple of times. "What do you want to bet that I actually do end up getting a cold?"

After another half an hour of walking and talking, the three arrived at the point where the valley curved slightly northwards. There, the right face of the mountain - which up to that point had been a none-too-steep ridge of grass and rocks - turned into a huge grey wall of limestone. The two boys looked at its sheer face in silence.

“That's high. How high do you think it is?” asked Piero.

“I reckon it's at least two hundred meters. Did you know there was this thing here?” Nico asked his friend.

"I had no idea," Piero replied, his mouth hanging open in amazement.

The wall had appeared suddenly. The trees in the woods had shielded it from view until the very last moment. It was even impossible to see it from above, because the whole other side of the valley was covered by a thick forest. It was a mysterious, primordial place.

At the foot of the wall there was a cave twenty meters deep, whose floor sloped downwards and whose roof was as high as that of a palace. Not much light came in through the entrance, but it was sufficient for a bit of exploring. Hanging from the roof were large and small stalactites which looked ready to come crashing down at any moment but which had been there who knew how many thousands of years. In front of the entrance there was some straw and a terracotta jug. A semicircle

of stones against the wall had served as a hearth, to judge by the black traces of smoke going up the rock.

Meanwhile, outside the cave Santino was using his hoe to uproot the gentian seedlings that he found at the bottom of the valley, collecting them and putting them in a cloth bag that he carried over his shoulder. He darted from one spot to another, half-heartedly singing a tuneless song. Piero and Nico left the cave and went to join him.

"Did someone use to live in there?" asked Piero.

"There was a hermit until 20 years ago. He wasn't much of a hermit, to be honest - he was barking mad is the truth of it. He didn't want no one around, and if anyone came close he'd get nasty: he had these two ferocious dogs, worse than wolves they were, and if you got too near they'd go for your throat. Then one fine day he upped and went off to the convent outside Castellaccio, and he's still there. Nobody comes here anymore. They say there's still the spirits of his bloody dogs about."

The two lads' attention was focused on the rock face. On the left side it looked like a steep staircase leading to a circular opening, as round as a hole caused by a cannon shot. That was the only part that was accessible. Apart from that, the wall was steep and smooth and rose towards the sun like an American skyscraper. At its exact centre there was a perfectly s-shaped crack, perhaps fifty meters long. From that fissure to the summit there was only a slab of smooth rock without handholds.

Piero looked up at the limestone mass, while Nico was more attracted to the small circular cave a few dozen meters above the ground. "Come on, let's go up there," he said to his friend. "It looks easy enough."

"Are you mad?" said Piero, looking upwards with a grimace. "We'll break our necks."

"Don't talk rubbish! It's like when you walk on the rocks at the beach," replied Nico, who was already starting to climb. Piero tried to protest, but was unable to find any good arguments. He didn't enjoy looking like a coward. A moment later the two were clambering up the rocky slopes like mountain goats.

"Come on, Piero - think how much fun the others are having doing their exercises!" said Nico, while in a whirl of hands and feet and without the slightest hesitation he climbed over every rocky projection he encountered. Three meters below him, his friend moved carefully. All it would take would be for him to put the toe of his boot in the wrong place for him to take a tumble down to the bottom, he thought. Above him, Nico moved with agility and at every obstacle he overcame he gave

himself a whistle of appreciation. Piero tried not to think about the emptiness that was beneath his feet and to match his friend's rhythm. The two bodies began to move in unison, as though following the rhythm of a metronome.

A few minutes later, they found themselves on the small rocky terrace onto which the circular opening in the mountainside looked. From below it had appeared much smaller, but in reality, a person of medium height could enter easily simply by crouching slightly. The passage gave access to a circular space a couple of meters in diameter. Piero and Nico sat down. "Look at Santino down there," said Nico. "He doesn't know where we are."

The poor man, who for all this time had been pulling up gentian roots from the ground and putting them in the bag he carried over his shoulder, looked around him in search of the two friends. He put four fingers in his mouth and gave a powerful whistle that drowned out the birdsong. The two stood up and leaning out from the terrace shouted down to him. Santino wasn't particularly surprised: he had seen the hermit, all skin and bones, on those rocks many times. He often used to climb up there to pray and to get closer to God.

He shrugged and went back to sifting the ground in search of other seedlings.

The sun was high, it must have been two o'clock. Piero had picked a sprig of winter savory and was sniffing at it while Nico, who was lying down inside the grotto, was looking out at the clouds that ambled across the sky.

"Wouldn't you like to go and fight in Africa?" Piero asked his friend.

"What?" Nico replied.

"Fight to take Roman civilization to those lands and show the British and the Americans what we're made of."

"What's the matter with you? I've got a brother who's already left for Russia. You're not serious, are you?"

Piero smiled and put his hands behind his head. "Of course not, I'm kidding. You know I hate war. But I've been thinking for a while now that those who leave for the front at least take part in a grand event, right or wrong. What do we want to do, us who skip fascist Saturday to sit here counting clouds?"

"I want to do big things, but not because the Duce tells me to," replied Nico.

Piero was silent for a few moments while he chewed on the sprig of savory. He liked its wild aroma that filled his nose and tickled his tongue. "Yes, but what things? All anyone thinks about is

war. What else is big?"

"This mountain's big"

"This isn't even a mountain," said Piero. "It's a wall that ended up here somehow."

"Enough talking. Why don't we jerk off? Last one to come pays for the other's train ticket back to L'Aquila."

In 1942, jerking off was the only sexual experience possible for a teenager. High school girls were few and far between, and generally stuck up and unfriendly. All the older ones were engaged to university students who had ended up at the front, and were therefore devoted to their men who were risking their lives in every moment. The younger ones did a good job of hiding whatever sexual urges they might have had, and in any case, they were all unapproachable outside of school, watched over as they were by fathers, mothers, older brothers, grandparents and grandmothers, aunts and uncles and maybe even dogs. Since the Young Italians had been moved away from the Vanguardists, even that remote possibility of close contact had faded. In a nutshell, there was no chance of it happening, so the only remaining option was to devote body and soul to that practice Professor Pinto so harshly condemned, even though he knew very well that it was practiced by one hundred percent of the school's male population.

In an instant the two boys had pulled down their pants and underpants and begun fiddling with their genitals. Piero started at speed and immediately saw his penis swell promisingly, while Nico had a different, more cerebral, technique: he was less interested in manual movement than in images with a highly erotic coefficient. Then, at the right moment, the power and rapidity of execution of the gesture would arrive, like some burst of speed in the *Giro d'Italia*. Nico imagined being alone in the classroom with the literature teacher, *Signora* Linda Brunetti, as she unfastened her jacket and invited him to remove her bra, and then offering her swollen breasts to the caresses of her young but ardent pupil. The image was a bit trite and overused, because Nico had been repeating it in his mind since the beginning of the school year, alternating it with that of his cousin from Chieti who in his imagination he surprised lying naked on an armchair, gently caressing her pubis. But this time, *Signora* Brunetti, who on other occasions had always guaranteed a very rapid erection, failed to function. Nico closed his eyes and turned his thoughts to his cousin, but he was forced to take off and put back on her stockings several times before he obtained any appreciable result. Piero's purely mechanical technique was prevailing over his friend's imagination. A kind of suffocated cry accompanied the spillage of his seminal fluid, which went to water the seedlings that grew on that small balcony suspended in space. Nico sought to recover ground by accelerating his pace, but the cousin seemed listless and on the verge of vanishing from the stage of his imagination.

She seemed about to get up, get dressed, leave the room and go into the kitchen to rinse the spinach.

"Go on, take your time, don't hurry," Piero teased him as he wiped his hands on the rear of his trousers. A whistle from Santino called them to order. "Come back down here, it's time to go!"

Along with that invitation, shouted in an imperious voice, came the ejaculation of Nico, who almost lost his balance and risked falling to the ground below. Piero grabbed his shirt in a strong, secure grip which held him upright and prevented him from falling.

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