

Excerpt from
LA PIÙ AMATA
by
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You don't understand! I shriek, clutching the little head to my chest.

I run down the stairs, stop at the fourth step, and jump. Nonna behind me: give it back to me! But I don't let it go, until my mother appears: where did I find it, I have to return it right now!

Then, fiery, bravely, I strut over to the window: what do you want with her? Feisty, headstrong: why are you so heartless? Inconsolable: without her my life is meaningless.

This is me, standing on the sill of the large window – making it clear that yes, I might even jump – skin pale as a ghost, straight teeth, one of the few who doesn't have to wear braces. Pink bathing suit with red strawberries. Bare legs, no shoes. What do you want with her, I repeat despairingly. Maybe all the toys I have aren't enough for me? Mama complains. No other little girl has what I have ... that's not a doll, it's not a toy, can't I see that it's a worthless nothing?

Hugging the worthless nothing tighter and tighter, I mumble: I'll take care of her.

Shouts that tumble over one another: the problem is you're too spoiled.

You have no heart.

Spoiled and selfish.

You hate me.

Watch out, now you're going to get it.

There's so much violence in this house.

Give the head back to Nonna right this minute!

Why did you bring me into the world if you don't love me?

Let go of that thing or you're going to boarding school.

And then I, lysergic, still standing on the windowsill, the sea behind me, I, up there like a demure little Madonna, accuse them: all you're interested in is money and jewelry, love doesn't count.

Little idiot, the voices talk over one another, get down immediately, now you're really going to get it.

Money and jewelry, I repeat calmly, by now a Madonna, mine is an ascension, I am taking off, away from you miserable humans, money, jewels, furs, I rant a moment more before a thundering voice roars.

What's going on?

A voice that seems to come from above, and instead is coming from here, from right here, from the porch to be exact.

I jump down from the windowsill, run to him, and show it to him: I show him the little polystyrene head with the brown wig. I beg him, I implore him to tell them, to tell the two women, those two inferior beings, to let me keep it: I will be mother, grandmother and sister to her, I promise. She will be my love, my only love.

Let her keep it, daddy orders.

My name is Teresa Ciabatti, I'm seven years old, and I just discovered that my grandmother wears a wig. Due to alopecia, she's completely bald. She keeps the polystyrene head with the spare wig in her closet. It's identical to the one on her head: dark brown, styled in a chignon.

All the Pileri women are bald, mama reveals to me in a chummy moment, she and I in the big bed, our legs intertwined. And Nonna Teresa is too ... Keep it to yourself, she shuts me up. My great-grandmother was bald, her sisters were bald, the daughters were bald. All bald up until mama. With her the affliction stops. Mama has luxuriant hair, I stroke it, she should let it grow, why does she keep it so short, oh, she sighs, I'm too old for long hair. Your beautiful hair, I comb it for her the year when she sleeps. Mama has thick, shiny hair, and I do too.

I who, standing on the diving board, loosen my dark blond, slightly wavy lustrous hair, this healthy hair, imagining that someone looking up from the beach can see me and wonder: who could that fantastic creature be?

It's me, I feel like shouting, just me, Teresa Ciabatti, then I raise my arms to the sky, take a run-up and dive in.

My hair billows beneath the water.

I have a happy childhood. Barbies, paper dolls, porcelain dolls. Dresses, shoes, jewelry. And a polystyrene head with hair I can comb to my heart's content.

I live in great big houses, in the summer in this one with the pool, my pool. I travel. I've been to London, New York, Paris, Vienna, Greece, Turkey, Disneyland. In the winter mama and daddy take us skiing: Cortina, Madonna di Campiglio, Switzerland. I've seen the sea and the snow, the pyramids and the desert, I've seen the Rosetta stone and Mickey Mouse in person. I've seen everything, you kids who go to school with me: I'm different, no use denying it, I am the Professor's daughter.

My father is the most important man in the Maremma, the chief surgeon. He treats the poor for free, the Professor loves the poor.

Often in the afternoon, accompanied by my nanny or my grandmother, I drop in at the hospital to say hello to him.

If he's operating, I wait for him in the staff room, where the doctors stop by to pay homage to me. Handsome, young. In the arms of one or the other, I close my eyes: don't let me see, I gasp on their muscular chests, I'm so afraid, when the doors open and a stretcher comes out, on it a sleeping patient, a tumor. Behind come doctors, nurses, and finally him. The disciples step aside to make room for him to pass, and I see him surrounded by a bluish light, a light like the purest radiance of a star, the light that blesses only the Professor, my father. I run towards him and jump on him – hey, gently! – my legs wrapped around his waist, and my arms around his neck, so, so tight – you're suffocating me – and I beg him, I implore him in a loud voice so that everyone can hear: oh, poppy, let's go and buy my tutu.

I'm going to be a professional ballerina, I'm sure of that for various reasons, including my father's influence on the world. He can do anything: get a farmer's son hired at the Orbetello town hall, intercede with the Regional director for the head post in Massa Marittima. Even straighten out the wayward daughter of his friend the police chief. Having gone through heroin, and dozens of men, the poor girl finds herself with nothing to show for it, not even a diploma, a beautiful girl, no doubt about it, she'd like to get into television, her worried father explains, but they're pipe dreams, Renzo, just the dreams of a naive girl ...

Dreams that Renzo makes come true.

So then, given all he does for others, what won't he do for me?

Ballerina, actress, TV host. Meanwhile, I practice at home, where I insisted on a rehearsal room with a mirror and a barre. Pink tutu and toe shoes, I pause in front of my reflected image: the feeling of a grandiose future ahead. Ballerina, President of the Republic, the first female president, saint. Saint Teresa of Orbetello: there I am, ethereal evanescent, advancing solemnly along the beach to the sea, not stopping, continuing to the water, walking on the water, with everyone saying ooh, murmuring: I knew she was special. I'm special, yes. I myself repeat it, I want to tell mama, share my privileged status with her.

Where's mama?

She's sleeping. So I say it to myself – you're special, Teresa – even behind the scenes, even before going on stage.

The Supercinema in Orbetello. We little girls are waiting for the musical note on which to make our entrance. Mine is different, I have a cue that's all my own. First the others enter, as a group. Then I go on, by myself. I'm not the best or the most graceful. The other little dancers protest: why always her? They talk behind my back.

Do you know how many times I've smiled at the hateful looks they give me in the locker room? Year after year – as a child, a little girl, a teenager – I stand out on stage in the front row. The applause is for me, all for me, not for you.

Not so in 1979, the year of *Inverno*, a choreography set in the snow with a prima ballerina, the teacher explains, who is lifted by the ballerino, this year we will have a ballerino – a boy, a boy, squeals of joy in the studio – a professional dancer from Grosseto. And we, sitting cross-legged on the floor, are quivering, our little hearts are palpitating. The little heart of everyone but me, I already know, girls, let's try not to be hypocritical. Close your eyes and see me vault over the ballerino's head, gaze at me, splendid and graceful, eyeing the world from above. Oh, how I wish that doctors and nurses would come this year, those good-looking young men who adore me, I would like them all here to applaud me. The thrill of having someone at my complete disposal, the pack in white coats that follows daddy around, that troop I've always felt was also mine: to Vincenzo the blond nurse, give me a ride to the amusement park, to Paolo the cardiologist, I want a stuffed tiger, to Emilio the gynecologist, go buy me a pair of red shoes, size seven.

They do it. They do it to please the Professor, some say. And yet: can you be sure that there isn't an individual among them who is in love with this fabulous, special little girl?

Sitting on the floor, waiting for the teacher to assign roles, I think of the medical troop that adores me and applauds my leap in the arms of the ballerino. The teacher is about to say the word, she is about to pronounce my name: Teresa Ciabatti, it's you.

Instead she says Simona. The prima ballerina this year will be Simona.

My breath catches, my little heart lurches, it's not possible, I stammer, it's not possible, in the studio and in the locker room, heatedly tearing off my tutu. I toss my little shoes on the floor, no, I won't accept it, no, no, no, I'm going to tell daddy, I threaten in my panties and undershirt, pint-size, I thunder.

I'm going to tell daddy and those minions of his who do whatever he says: some rush to repair the sink, some to whitewash the fence, others to repaint the walls of the house. We don't have plumbers, electricians, house painters, we have doctors and nurses, a swarm of doctors and paramedics at our complete disposal who have even learned the workings of the pool in case something malfunctions. Can you get out of the water for a second, Amedeo, an anesthesiologist, asks me, just long enough for me to fix the skimmer. No, I answer, stretched out on the crocodile. I don't even turn around, eyes closed behind dark glasses that protect me from the sun.

I'm going to tell daddy, I repeat in the locker room, I put my duffle coat on right over my underwear, and run out. Half ballerina, half ordinary child, I reach mama's car.

What's wrong? she asks.

It's not fair, I protest, slamming the door.

Would you mind telling me what happened.

I hate them all, I scream, the people, this town.

Francesca Fabiani looks at me, bewildered: what did they do to you?

I sniffle.

She doesn't ask me anything else. She doesn't probe, she doesn't insist. What happened at the dance school could have been a tragedy, a confrontation, or nothing at all. It doesn't matter.

Now she hugs me – even though I try to squirm free, I hate physical contact – and holds me tight. Could it be that it's really she who is clinging to me? That she's the one asking me for help? Whispering that everything will be all right, everything will be all right, my little one.

It's not true: nothing will be all right. People in this town envy me. I want to run away, but I can't, I'm only eleven years old. A captive child, I think, imprisoned in my bedroom. Eleven years according to the birth records, but fifteen, sixteen in terms of intelligence. I'm different, I'm special, I assert day after day in front of my parents. They are silent. I think I'm a genius, I whisper, intimidated by the word myself. I'm a genius, I say louder, I am a genius, I affirm confidently, articulating the word clearly, ge-ni-us.

My parents do not reply, except I can then hear them mumble as soon as I leave the room: maybe she's not well, an iron deficiency, don't you see how pale she is?

Never mind iron deficiency, I'm just fine. Just fine, world! I don't understand mama and daddy's concern. Why don't they look at me, all they have to do is look at me: I can't say that I've developed – I'm one step away – but don't you see what a magnificent woman I'm starting to become? Other parents would be proud, instead of whispering in the kitchen about imbalances and disorders, other parents would hug me and shower me with kisses.

Instead I lie here unappreciated. I'm growing up in this house, in this town where nobody recognizes how exceptional I am. Snuggled up on your lap, daddy, I ask you: do you think I look like Marilyn Monroe?

Mama takes me to see Pappalettere. Take off your shoes, the doctor says, get on the scale. Weight normal. He stands me against the wall, height. The last time he measured me I was gosling height. Today I'm above giraffe, where the quarter-inches end, and there are no more animals. Now sit on the examination table, says Pappalettere. Ears good. Throat, I pull back, Pappalettere, you know the tongue depressor makes me gag, I'm afraid, don't worry, he reassures me, open wide ... good girl ...

Sitting there, my feet dangling in space, I know I'll have to lift up my tee-shirt now. Three months ago I asked mama for a bra, a trainer bra, and she told me: what do you need it for. I blushed and didn't ask again. I walk stooped over, I'm still a little girl, little as mama and daddy insist. So now, sitting on the exam table, staring at the animals painted on the wall to mark every ten quarter-inches – chick, cat, gosling, dog, giraffe – I wait for the pediatrician to tell me to pull up my tee-shirt. I wait while I hunch my back, praying that the moment won't come right away, a little while longer, a few minutes more, before you realize that I'm big.

Pappalettere places the stethoscope on my tee-shirt – I can keep it on, I don't have to undress! – maybe he too is embarrassed, I am after all the Professor's daughter. Now the pediatrician positions the stethoscope on my chest, up by my heart. It's pounding.

My name is Teresa Ciabatti, I am eleven years old and today is my first day of middle school. My parents' decision was to enroll me not in Orbetello, where for everyone I am the Professor's

daughter, but in Port'Ercole, where nobody knows who I am, and you'll see, she'll come down from the clouds, daddy says, patting mama's shoulder. After various tests and assessments – all normal, the girl is in perfect health – my parents concluded that the problem is the environment: in this town I take advantage of my father's position, I use his power as a shield. Let's send her away where no one knows her, daddy decided. Let's send her by herself. Because Gianni, instead, the good boy Gianni, the submissive Gianni, is allowed to remain in Orbetello. He has friends and tennis here... mama explains.

Without wasting time thinking about the injustice – I'm a spirited girl, what do they think – I go to face my new life.

Bye bye Orbetello, bye bye malicious small minds, goodbye and good riddance. No, I'm not scared, on the contrary. Waiting for me in Port'Ercole there's beach volleyball, speedboat rides, prizes, I imagine cups and medals. And applause, lots of applause, bravo, Teresa! Beyond the lagoon, five miles away, lies another world for me. A world of sensitive people, I tell myself on this long-anticipated first day of school, here I am guys!

I arrive in town in the early morning: fishermen returning from their boats, stillness, silence, the scent of the sea, never mind lagoon! Everything here is so picturesque. Here life is something entirely different, life and love. Because in this insignificant town I will find love, I think in the car – in mama's Fiorino – in this godforsaken place, I will be loved. I turn to look back, for just an instant: the little town that earlier had been shrouded in dawn mist is lit with a faint glow, street lamps and house lights, a strip of land in the distance. Nothing else. Orbetello.

A poignant feeling of melancholy comes over me then, or perhaps hope.

It's a gray September day, the sun peeks in and out, up above the sky is a vivid blue dotted with huge clouds, like flakes of plaster. It's a breezy day that stirs the trees and sweeps branches onto the road. Not a normal day for the season. I start walking up the stairs. Mama dropped me off on Via Caravaggio, because at the moment, only temporarily – the teachers, headmaster, and mayor assure us – the school cannot be reached by car, have patience, a few months, they guarantee, the work has already begun (work that will last six years, long enough for both me and the next generation of students to finish middle school).

The steps leading up the hill are the beginning of adulthood. My first steps without mama and daddy, I forge ahead amid conifers and pebbles. Here, on my way to adolescence, I will see a squirrel for the first time in my life, a real squirrel! He quickly scampers up the trees, so fast that I only catch a glimpse of the tail: an instant, and he disappears among the foliage, almost an illusion, if it weren't for the rustling of leaves, and plop, an acorn that drops.

Fucking rodents. A voice.

A boy under the tree. A young boy, smoking.

Besides squirrels, as I come and go through the grove during the three years of middle school, I will see juveniles doing drugs, juveniles having oral sex, juveniles fucking. Juveniles, all minors. All on the path to the school. Welcome to the Michelangelo Buonarroti middle school, Port'Ercole, Grosseto.

Will someone please tell me why – in this school that’s unapproachable from the civilized world, in this insignificant town – why in this particular place, there is a high frequency of fantastic adolescent specimens? Who are these tall willowy creatures, these long-legged beings with their flowing hair?

Fedora, Iside, Dolores. In the second year there is also a Maria Teresa. A quasi-Teresa, who is not me.

Will someone tell me why these creatures are here, in 1983?

They can’t be the fruit of the grafting of the Spanish stock that also affected Orbetello, just look at the results on us Orbetellians: heavy haunches, sagging butts. Will you explain to me where they came from?

At home, in the hall mirror I see a severed head advancing. No longer the beautiful girl. I close my eyes and run away.

Why did you send me here, mama and daddy? I won’t survive. In an oasis of Valkyries, I’ll disappear. Girls who when they play volleyball – in short shorts and transparent tee-shirts – draw all the attention, leaving no room for me. Their breasts bounce up and down with every leap. At every return the boys wait anxiously, hoping that bras will come unhooked, that shorts will rise up and get wedged in the crack of those perfect behinds. Who am I among them? Who am I halfway up the climbing bars, whispering I can’t do it, I can’t do it, looking down as if from a precipice, while they overtake me with their long, long limbs? Who am I who must be rescued by two of them, as ordered by the phys-ed teacher, two ballerinas, panthers, who nimbly reach me, one of them removes my hand and places it on the nearby rung, there, that’s it, the other makes me move my foot down, slowly, you won’t fall, they reassure me, as they lead me down.

Only on the ground do I realize that one of them is Maria Teresa.

Five foot six, black hair, very bright green eyes. Olive complexion. At moments of reflection, she rests a splayed hand on the side of her nose, covering half her face. I’m better looking in profile, she explains.

White tee-shirt to show her bra. The school’s biggest tits. A lot of boys claim to have seen them. At the age of twelve, Maria Teresa has already fucked. She doesn’t have a steady boyfriend.

She’s with one boy now, then with another. She’s in danger of flunking, but she doesn’t care.

Maria Teresa is the only girl of four children, her father is a fisherman. She doesn’t want to end up like her mother, poor woman, her figure ruined by pregnancies, and to think that as a young woman she was beautiful, you should have seen those legs, but now... She struggles with the household chores, always asking her kids: Athos do this, Roberto do that, Gianfranco over there, Teresa find the brush under the bed. No, she doesn’t want to lose her figure like her mother, although in the end it’s bound to happen, at thirty men don’t want you anymore. You have kids, you iron. Fortunately, thirty is far away, there’s still time to make the most of every

second. It's all in the moment, she tells me as she applies makeup in the gym's bathroom mirror. I can put makeup on even without a mirror, she adds, even blind. Image is important to her, image is everything: perfumes, shoes, clothes, she doesn't buy her dresses at the market like many of the kids at school do, no, only boutiques for her (much later I will discover that, to get money, Maria Teresa steals at the stores, especially at the Coop – God does she love the Coop! – and then resells the stuff at half price).

In the locker room at the gym she studies me from top to bottom: for example, it's not that I dress badly, she observes, you can tell it's designer stuff, but I dress like a child, when physically, on the other hand, I have the measurements, tits, she seems to think, unless she's mistaken, let me see them.

I shrink back.

With that thing on you can't see anything, ready, set, go, take off the sweatshirt.

How inadequate I feel in front of you, Maria Teresa. How I'd like to be your friend! Walk beside you, with boys turning their heads to remark: such gorgeous chicks. Because beauty radiates. So does being grown up. With you beside me I would stop being little.

Lift up your tee-shirt, she insists.

Then, staring at the floor, I pull up my sweatshirt and tee top.

I knew they were there, she says gleefully.

Do you know my name is Teresa too? I offer.

She smiles: I make everyone call me Maria, Teresa sucks.

After getting close at the gym, the conversation (Maria, didn't you realize the connection between us?), the boobs (I got undressed for you!), after all that intimacy, nothing. As if we had never met. Sometimes she answers when I say hello, sometimes she doesn't. There's no way I'll be able to win her, she's ashamed to be seen with me, I look like I stepped out of kindergarten.

At home, I clamor: I want a miniskirt! And my father: forget it. And my mother: not above the knee. And me: I said a miniskirt!

Then one day in May I climb the stairs through the woods wearing the skirt and canvas shoes with a wedge heel, less than an inch, just enough to make me feel grown-up and send me to you, Maria, to twirl around and say: I bought it at the boutique.

You look at me, you study me, then you pass sentence in front of the other girls: below the knee, you look like my grandmother.

Eyes lowered, I feel ridiculous, hopeless, an abused little creature, even foolish, Maria, and at that very moment an inner voice tells me you really are foolish, Teresa Ciabatti. You know why? Because you can't let yourself be humiliated by a trashy pauper, come on. I have to say it: I had never seen so many poor people all in one place. This is a school for the poor. Beautiful, but poor. And maybe the time has come to upend the plan, not to bow to their classification parameters, because life is something else, life outside of here is very different, you people don't know it, but I do, and now I'll tell you what life is, bitches, Teresa Ciabatti will tell you, I lift my head proudly, I'll teach you an early lesson about what your destiny outside of here will be like.

Someday, you have to come and take a swim at my place, I toss out that same morning in the bathroom.

Maria is putting on lipstick in the mirror.

I try again: you have to come to the pool at my house.

What do you mean? She gives a hint of reaction.

I begin to take off: in the summer I live in my two-story villa, one of the few houses in the Argentario area with a pool, it's me and Susanna Agnelli, a man, daddy says, Susanna Agnelli is a man ... anyway it's just she and I with a pool – I go on, more and more confidently – no no, I'm not lying, Maria – I laugh – the God's honest truth ... my God, no, my father is not the villa's caretaker, the house is mine, my own personal property, priceless, and that's because my father is the Professor, mystery unveiled, my dear Maria – I'm the Professor's daughter! I announce, as if shedding my bourgeois clothes to reveal a superhero outfit. You know who the Professor is, don't you? Surely he must have operated on someone in your family, he's very generous with the poor. Yes, it's true, he has this reputation of being severe, people are afraid of him and, well, I'm not saying he isn't, stern is stern ... except with me, he adores me, I sigh wearily, it's so much work to climb from the bottom of the pit back up to the stars. From up here everything is magnificent.

I'm back on top again, once again in the glittering jumpsuit with my super powers. Here I am conquering my place in this school. You don't know what a comfort – I entertain the crowds, recess after recess –, in the morning you wake up and, even before brushing your teeth, you say: you know what, I'm going to take a swim.

And that's how the friendship between me and Maria began. She teaches me to be an adult: no more blouses with little flowers, no more duffle coats, shoes with straps. Do I really not own any jeans? She's horrified: eleven years old and I don't have a pair of jeans? Not to mention makeup, why don't I wear makeup? And earrings? I don't even have pierced ears ... A little girl, I look like a child, if it weren't for the tits, come on, let's show them off, let them see the merchandise! Leave it to her now, she'll transform me, she's very good at transformation, she'd like to be a aesthetician or make-up artist when she grows up, not a hairdresser though, you ruin your hands being a hairdresser.

Maria gets her brother to drive her to my house. It isn't summertime and we're in Orbetello. A small fifteenth century palazzo, a former Spanish fort, in the historic center. Three floors, parquet floors, books, lots of books, paintings by well-known artists. Come upstairs, I take my poor friend by the hand and she lets herself be led, docile, she's never seen such wealth, and this is nothing, my dear girl, wait till summer, wait till you come to Pozzarello, my villa with the pool. Perhaps for the first time in her life Maria Teresa Costagliola wishes she were someone else, oh, if I had been born a different person, she must think, if I had been born Teresa Ciabatti...

But you aren't me, my darling friend. You are you, and I am me. Is this room really all yours? Her big eyes pop. I mean, do you sleep here by yourself? And who should I sleep with, sorry? I reply, the mistress of a world where one sleeps alone, where there are personal bathrooms and whirlpool tubs (or maybe I'm wrong, the Jacuzzi bath vogue comes years later).

We spend entire afternoons in my room, Maria and I, a microcosm where nothing else is needed. I have to get rid of the toys, she says, but then she goes over to touch them – mommy mommy, the doll cries – and she jumps, what a start! Daddy brought it for me from America, I say, in Italy it doesn't exist. And then we sprawl on the bed, and I ask: who can we call? Because I have a phone in my room. A telephone in the shape of Garfield (I may be wrong here too, that the Garfield telephone appeared in the nineties). And then Maria gets bored, looks in my closet, complains that I have nothing grown-up. So I get up from the bed and take her by the hand, come with me. Corridor, first door, second, third, last door, go on in, and hold your breath.

Mama's wardrobe room: jackets, coats, skirts. Shoes, bags. Oh my God, Maria murmurs, look at this crocodile bag! They killed a crocodile just for this! And then up top, hanging in plastic, the evening dresses. Eyes turned upward, as if we were contemplating an apparition.

Can I see them up close? Maria asks softly.

Sure you can. She points to a dress, I take it down with the pole. Can I try it on? she whispers. You can do whatever you like, I intone solemnly, as if I were her god opening the gates of paradise to her, come in, Maria.

And while she undresses, remaining in her bra and panties, God how beautiful she is, while she puts on the dress, looks at herself in the mirror, and walks up and down the room, feeling important, an elegant lady, I stretch out on the floor, legs up the wall, looking at her from below, and I seem to see my mother, actually mama with the green dress, and above her all the clothes that hang there like so many mamas, all the mamas I've heard about and haven't seen, because I've never seen mama wearing one of those dresses. I regret the time before the long sleep, the time when I did not exist, how I would like to go back there, know you when you were young, the day you arrive in Orbetello and mistake daddy for a stretcher-bearer, the day of your wedding, or the day you are about to give birth and they photograph you, a radiant you, with an enormous belly, and daddy saying: it's one. Then instead we are two. We pop out, and there are two of us. The Professor had twins, hurray, hurray. How I wish I had known you then, mama, before us two, when everything was full of hope. They tell me that you wore very short skirts, that you put vinegar wraps on your hair, they say that to get back in shape after the pregnancy you scissored your legs nonstop for as long as an hour, maybe lying on the carpet, when we were sleeping, and nonna would tell you get up, Francesca, and you'd say, I want to finish.

A sense of melancholy comes over me inside, like an absence, the absence of that mother I never knew, where are you? I sigh. Where are you, young, beautiful mama?

I yearn, I look back nostalgically, while the real mama appears in the doorway, what are you doing in here? she asks, and Maria crosses her arms over her chest as if she were naked, and instead she has on an evening dress, the pea-green dress. I'm sorry, she says. Mama, staring at the dress, doesn't say a word. I didn't mean to..., my friend tries again, it was just for fun, she hesitates, I'll take it off right away, ma'am, and she struggles to lower the zipper on the side, help me Teresa, she says to me, and I get up, there, she'll take it off, I too reassure my mother, disoriented by her silence and by her eyes, staring, what are you looking at, mama, what do you see?

A few hours later, soaking in a frothy bathtub, blowing bubbles with my mouth, when my mother bursts in, complaining that at least I could have put my panties in the hamper, how many times does she have to tell me, instead of reacting and starting an argument, I ask: will you keep me company?

You have to be neat, she goes on.

I slide down some more, bath foam up to my chin. That was a beautiful dress, I say.

She scrunches up my underwear.

When did you wear it?

My mother takes the sponge and sits on the rim of the tub, come here, I'll wash your back.

Okay, she doesn't want to talk about it. I sit up, turn my back to her. Will you make letters on me? I ask. She snorts impatiently, you have to be washed.

Will you do them? I insist.

Mama dips her finger in the water, runs it swiftly over my skin, too swift. Slower, I say. Now she goes very slow. I, T ... she skims over me lightly, almost a caress, double T ... mama's hand, she must have touched me like that when I was little, I don't remember, Y.

Kitty! I say. You wrote kitty.

The three years of middle school are a crescendo of prohibitions: no going out with girlfriends, no birthday parties. In Port'Ercole I go to school, and that's it. That's because mama and daddy realized, or someone told them, that the kids at the seaside school are on the ball: sex, drugs, they even do drugs, Renzo! I hear them arguing: we were wrong to send her there, we have to rescue her.

Only I don't want to be rescued, I want to stay in that school on the hill, with friends who love me, and the sea, and the squirrels. I'm happy, mama, daddy, for the first time in my life, I cry tragically, I'm a happy woman.

Woman, my father shakes his head.

They try to take me away, I rebel, to the point of attempting suicide.

I swallow thirteen aspirins, lie down on the bed and wait for death. I fall asleep, I wake up, I fall asleep. Mama comes into the room, she doesn't understand that I'm dying. I have to shout it with my last bit of strength: I committed suicide. And I show her the empty blister.

I don't die. But I don't give up. Extortionary, rebellious, reckless, it's the age, mama tries to tell daddy, let's not dramatize it. But then I appear every week, in my nightgown, a ghost, barefoot, disheveled, announcing: I attempted suicide. One evening, in the kitchen, around the tenth attempt, they raise their eyes from their plates and look at me, my family looks at me with pity, not with concern. I'm dying – I raise the bar – and you'll be sorry.

The child neuropsychiatrist my father consults is a luminary who comes from Rome purposely to see me. Doctor, let me say first of all that I am just fine, I begin, sitting in front of him. I have many friends who love me, you have no idea how much they love me, people in general love me, my life is incredible, doctor, I have everything I want, and besides that I'm beautiful, a beautiful girl, not that I'm thinking about love, it's a little soon for that, more than anything else it's the overall picture, a magnificent picture of happiness.

He stares at me: did you want to die?

The luminary thinks he can intimidate me. I take a deep breath, I settle more comfortably in the chair, which is after all the one in daddy's study, the visit takes place there, and I explain: you see doctor, I'm not allowed to live my life. These people who are my parents hold me prisoner, they don't trust me, but on what basis, may I ask, have I ever killed anyone? If these people didn't want me, they could have simply not brought me into the world, I'm sorry, children are individuals in their own right with their own personality and their own desire to live, it's not right to clip their wings, and I, sooner than let them clip my wings – I get carried away, pompously, my voice shaking – sooner than have my wings clipped, I ... I'll clip them myself.

At the end of the session the luminary confronts my parents. There's nothing wrong with me, I'm just a teenager struggling to differentiate myself, to be an individual apart from her

parents. His advice – with all due respect to the Professor, you never know, a modest bit of advice – is that they reach a compromise: on the one hand, concede, on the other, prohibit.

Daddy refuses: I'll wall her up in the house. Mama shakes her head.

These are my parents when I'm twelve, almost thirteen. What are they afraid of? What future do they want for me? Here comes my mother, a bathrobe, her hair pinned up, she comes out of the bathroom, goes back to my father in the living room, resumes the discussion – let's try to make her rediscover Orbetello, her girlfriends from elementary school – and returns to the bathroom. Out she comes again – after all it's only a year until the end of middle school –, back in, back out, again and again, until she shows up in the living room without her robe, she must have forgotten it, and announces: a year passes quickly.

From the stairs where I'm crouched, hiding, through the transparent nightgown, I see her body as if in an x-ray. A body that is still slender, its lines perfect. How many have looked at it, desired it, dreamed about it? I think of the men who have loved my mother, I imagine them as numerous, a crowd – I hope, it's the thing I want most from up here, from the top of the stairs – that still desires it. What does it matter if my father looks at her distractedly, says that in a year anything can happen, she could even get pregnant, and turns to the TV again, while my mother's youthful body goes back to the bathroom, changing shape in the different hall lights, first very thin, then muscular, ephobic, voluptuous, ailing, that young body that I, along with millions of imaginary men, keep gazing at until it disappears into the bathroom.

Sitting around the kitchen table, mama and daddy tell me the new rules: I can go out in the afternoon, see my girlfriends from Orbetello, how long has it been since I've seen them? I can stroll along main street from 5:30 to 7 pm. I am allowed to go to the movies, sit and chat on the benches in the piazza. I can have all this freedom, but in Orbetello, not in Port'Ercole. In Port'Ercole I can only go to school.

I hesitate for only a second. Then I express joy, and promise: I'll stay right in front here, if you look out you'll see me, I swear on your life, daddy.

You were right, mama, daddy, I exult when I come home at night in the days that follow, Orbetello is my world, my life! How nice to stroll around town, sit on the benches, and you know what? I want to start going to Mass again, Mass is important, I believe in God.

I've changed, they rejoice, it didn't take much, rules, the luminary was right. They sigh, relieved: they thought they had lost me, yet here I am, their beloved girl.

Yes, mama and daddy, here I am again, returned to my senses, a good girl, I hug them, I will never disappoint you. Now I'm going to my room to study, call me for supper.

I go upstairs and flop onto the bed: I'm a genius. What did I say when I was little? Genius. I was right.

My dear Professor, your daughter is cleverer than you are. Illustrious Professor, the great man, the famous figure who controls everything in the area except your daughter, because she doesn't let herself take orders, on the afternoons when she goes out she doesn't stay in Orbetello – as she swore on your life, Professor –, oh no. Hidden behind the station hedge, she waits for the bus. She climbs in, and crouches down in the back seat. She arrives in Port'Ercole, spends an hour with her friend Maria – strutting along the seaside promenade, Via Caravaggio – letting the

boys eye her, then the bus again, Orbetello, home. I'm sorry, Professor, your daughter does what she pleases, not what you say. The only one in the world who doesn't do what you say.

At night, lying in bed, I take pride in the thought of my deceptions, I'm going to make it, I will grow up in spite of my father.

Life around me acts in my favor even at difficult moments: I am waiting behind the station hedge again when an old man leans out of his car window to ask me if I want a ride, an angel sent from heaven just when I had depleted my allowance and Gianni's as well, no sense of guilt though, he's a child, a child who doesn't need money, an innocent child who continues playing tennis, unaware of the adult world bearing down on him, if only he were to look up, he'd see that the threatening adult world is his twin sister. Bye bye Gianni, go ahead and stay a child while I grow up, and I get into the old man's car and say: Port'Ercole.

Whatever you say, the white-haired little man replies. This gramps who now turns to ask me my name, and whether I have friends waiting for me. This little grandpa who persists: do you have a date with a boy? And he smiles: ah, the boys, the boys of one time don't exist anymore ... And he continues: at your age the boys are underdeveloped, the females want other things ... This little old man who finally suggests: why don't we go to the Monte? Don't get me wrong, he clarifies, just to get to know each other, he explains, reaching a hand to my thigh.

I'm thirteen and an old man is molesting me. This man could throw me on the ground, pin my arms behind me while he pulls down my pants, rapes me.

Still, I'm not afraid. Besides, I say maturely, the Monte is quite close to my house, the summer house, you know, not to brag – and I take off, and I'm Teresa Ciabatti again – my house is the most beautiful house on the Argentario, with a pool. It's me and Susanna Agnelli, Susanna who after all is a man, a masculine type, my father who is her friend says so, he even operated on her, because daddy is a surgeon, the chief surgeon of Orbetello.

The old man gets nervous: the Professor?

I nod.

You're the Professor's daughter? He switches to the formal "you".

I break into a broad smile: that's me, so beloved, so adored.

The old man's voice starts to quaver: you must excuse me, miss, I respect your father a great deal, whenever people hear the name Ciabatti in Maremma, they bow down ... the Professor, the good he's done ... I owe him so much, and never, I mean I would never do anything to disrespect him, see, I would cut off a hand for the Professor, really, you have to believe me, he keeps repeating all the way to Port'Ercole where he drops me off.

And I slam the door in his face.

This is how all the events of my childhood and early adolescence wind up, never in tragedy.

As though protected by a cloak that makes me invisible, there are no consequences for me, always rescued. I'm about to fall, I'll fall, I lose my balance, I wave my arms, I hold my breath, now I'll fall. I don't fall.

Here I am some years earlier, 1979, the stage of Orbetello's Supercinema. Here I am caged in a wire framework covered with white foam rubber, a snowball. Never mind that in the mirror I see this mask, this ball, this ridiculous thing that is me. It doesn't matter, because I anticipate the moment when I will stand out from the others.

After assigning the roles in *Inverno*, the instructor introduced a variation to the ballet: the change of season. The sun that melts the snow carrying away winter. A snowball, one of us, must break away from the group to lift the sun into the sky. And who if not me? Teresa, she points to me, while the other girls glare at me hatefully. In the bathrooms I will explain that it was my father, he always intervenes on my behalf, I sigh, I can't stop him. It's not fair, one of them whose name I don't remember protests plaintively. That's life, I reply. Get over it, my little dance partner, that's how the world is, people who possess things, who possess you.

And now I pull away from the group and move to the center of the stage, in front of the immense audience. It's me, people, the best one, the privileged one, the little girl who will get ahead in life because she's the Professor's daughter, by the way ... where are you, daddy? The stage lights are blinding me, preventing me from seeing you, a very bright light in which I can make out a kind of secret sign for me, only for me, a promise – but of what?

Of a different future. A special future, thanks to you. So, imagining you watching me, I bend down to pick up the sun. And with slow movements, a dance, I lift it high above, onto the iron hook up there, in front of the blue papier-mâché backdrop, and then I see you, I found you, I recognized you, daddy, in the shadows, it's you, really you, and mama? Where's mama? Mama is sleeping.

There is no swimming pool, Maria accuses me. The third year of middle school has begun for me, and also for her, having flunked. There is no villa with a pool, she keeps taunting me in front of the others. Some laugh, some nod. I stammer that yes, there is, I swear. But nobody believes me now. The summer is over, and I disappeared. Try explaining to them that my parents prevented me from inviting them, no bringing home any Port'Ercole kids. Try explaining to them that they look down on them, druggies, a bunch of drunken junkies, that's what my parents think of them.

Maria criticizes me for not doing anything, I don't have a pool and I don't fuck. I don't even take it in my hand, let alone in the mouth. Gino, for example, who might even be interested, asked what I do, and Maria couldn't lie! Then he tried to negotiate: okay, no fucking, but behind? Would you take it from behind, Teresa? Maria asks me.

What do you mean?

Up the ass.

And I, who didn't even know that such a thing existed in the world, blush.

You really are a child, Teresa Ciabatti, Maria vilifies me.

Sitting at my desk, while the others gather in the halls for recess, I beat myself up: you've won, mama and daddy, I've been ostracized, happy? In my diary I write THE WORLD IS SHITTY, and I color it pink. Now I'll call the Child Abuse Hotline, I mull it over, give me the number for Child Services. I imagine the phone call: my father holds me prisoner ... It might not be enough: my father beats me. He beats me every day, twice a day ... More dramatic: Help me, Child Services, my father rapes me. He rapes me at home.

Then I think rationally: who will ever believe me? Who can believe that the Professor – a good man, a benefactor, a saint, a man who helps the poor – beats his daughter? Your daddy loves you so much, they tell me in the hospital, woe to anyone who lays a hand on his little girl.

A little girl whose best years are being squandered.

Thirteen years won't come back again. Thirteen years is the life that you're denying me, father.

Because of him, in fact, I'm once again shunned, just like the first day of school, that day when nobody knew who I was.

My season didn't last long, how long does a butterfly live?

I remember the skirt, when I wore the skirt for the first time. I went down the stairs, and the boys bent down to get a peek at my panties. And the perfume. In the bathrooms I put Maria's perfume on. A cloud of perfume, a trail of fragrance behind me, in which there are boys, so many boys, and then my mother smells it in the Fiorino – what's that scent? – and makes me go apologize to the teachers.

Sorry teachers, most esteemed teachers, it was a mistake. And the teachers, touched,
smile at this naive child, at this anomaly in a school of sluts.
How long does a butterfly live?