

Excerpt from

EXPATS

by

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(*Spatriati*, Einaudi, 2021)

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## EXPATS

... never content, never centered...  
GIACOMO LEOPARDI<sup>1</sup>

## Part One

### *Crestiene*

(n. Any individual, a man. As in other dialects of the South. “‘We're not Christians,’ they say. ‘Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli.’ ‘Christian,’ in their way of speaking, means ‘human being,’...” (Carlo Levi). Also a person who professes the Christian religion).<sup>2</sup>

When a cold air front encounters a hot air mass on the ground, the heat rises. Thunderstorms result. Rain and lightning, water and fire. I have never figured out which of the two of us was the heat and which the cold, but I consider myself fortunate to have met my opposite front in Claudia Fanelli, the expat, as the dubious, the irregular, the unclassifiable are called here, and sometimes the crackpots or orphans, or single, unmarried people, drifters and vagabonds, or maybe, in our case, the liberated.

I first noticed her in the school lobby and desired her red hair, ethereal skin, pronounced nose. She looked like she had rained down here from another world, more evolved and enlightened than ours.

My name is Francesco Veleno. I am the only son of Elisa Fortuna and Vincenzo Veleno, two former amateur athletes, who fell in love during an episode of the TV show “Games without Borders,” and throughout my childhood raised me with the idea that I would make up for the inexplicable accident of their having brought me into the world. I was still far from realizing that many relationships continue on, as Claudia would have said, for “raison d'état.” And again thanks to her I would come to understand that there is no *raison d'état* so stringent as to force three very different individuals to live together unless they are serving a prison term. The court that had sentenced Elisa and Vincenzo to stay together despite the patent estrangement rules in response to the cruel law of keeping the peace, the harsh human code that demands rigor and absolute strictness in the most nominal instances.

Before Claudia, the reality was what they told me and not what I saw. I was the type who lets himself be driven by other people, by events, by rulebooks and preconceptions. The Veleno twosome were pushing me towards a life without tremors, a quiet life, just enough living not to suffer. It had served them well enough after all.

He was a professor of physical education and had also briefly practiced fencing together with my mother. Vigorous and unconventional, he went around with a Beretta M9, regularly reported, which he wouldn't dream of parting with. I did not yet perceive lost sexual prowess in middle-aged white males armed with a pistol.

My mother was a nurse at the Martina Franca hospital. For a brief time in my childhood she had called me *Uva nera*, Black Grape, because in Martina everyone grew the tart Verdeca grape, from which they make a dry white wine that makes you tipsy after two sips. She instead had produced a son with an olive complexion, dark like the skin of peasants at the end of summer or the Saracens of the ancient chronicles. With black grapes you make Primitivo or Negramaro. Wines that muddy reason. Keeping that in mind when I made impulsive decisions in my life would have been useful.

No one in the family had my features. No one as dark as me, no one with such a high hairline and exposed forehead, plus the burden of indolence that kept me glued to the couch reading inane comic books. During the afternoon I was often alone, since my mother practically lived at the hospital, sometimes disappearing for two or three days in a row. My father, after his hours spent at the school, passed his time in the local bars, boasting about his adventures and recalling his past as an athlete, before returning home with rumpled clothes and a suggestive smirk, like someone who has accomplished a feat and can't wait to tell about it. But he never told about it. Maybe because I was afraid to ask, or maybe because he thought I wouldn't be able to understand.

They were different, my mother and father, and they were even different in their verb tenses when they spoke to me. Elisa was a woman of the present tense, often in the first person plural: "We're leaving." My father knew only the past tense and occasionally the future tense when he talked about me. Clinging to his memories, to a list of anecdotes that were glorious to him, boring to everyone else.

On one thing Vincenzo Veleno and Elisa Fortuna found themselves in miraculous concurrence: neither had ever attended a single day at a classical high school, but they had the respect for a humanities education that one has for an unattainable entity. It had formed the minds of their superiors, chief doctors, deans, and school superintendents. All minds that came out of Martina Franca high school. They said that by studying Latin doors would open to me, and that I would meet the children of prominent families in those classrooms. They considered that the most opportune path for me. The kind of people who know what's right for others but not for them.

In the early days I didn't exist for Claudia. She was the tallest in the class, red hair flaming on her neck – the shade of the marasca cherry, the wild cherries that my grandparents would pick in the summer to turn them into jars of garnet and amaranth jams. Each of her eyes was a different color, light brown and blue-green, the kind of eyes that here are called “colors of the forest.” Her bones protruded, and her cheekbones were sharp in a thin, elongated face.

During recess the halls of Tito Livio emptied, and the students rushed out, crowding against the wall to cool off in the shade. The only one in the sun was her. If anyone could have observed the yard from above, they would have seen a deserted asphalt quad with a red dot in the center. She had some of my same antisocial gestures: she touched the side of her nose and twirled a strand of hair around her finger. The colorful cover of Rumiko Takahashi's manga stood out among her books; she arrived at school listening to music with earbuds, indifferent to everyone around her. During the rotation of classes I stood in her vicinity, sharpening my pencils and yakking with dull buddies with square-jawed faces and Philip Morris breath. One day I overheard the obnoxious questioning that a group trying to usurp her attentions was subjecting her to: “How come you're all by yourself?”, “Why don't you do what the others do?” What they meant was: “Why are you the way you are and not like us?” They kept at it in an insinuating way, pressing her, and Claudia replied: “It's hard enough being like me, let alone being like the others.”

Unrequited love is an easy refuge for lonely, insecure adolescences, those who don't yet know who they are, and I knew almost nothing about myself; I kept everything that I had been until then hidden, terrified that I might be judged unacceptable. I came from a childhood of rural youth centers and peripheral, second-rate soccer teams, with coaches who groped you and priests with wooden legs who made you rub their stump in the sacristy, while the rowdiest kids played ball in the empty church using the altar as a goal.

The Velenos didn't seem concerned about the red marks that appeared on my legs, they didn't care whether I prayed or sinned, not even when I came back from the country covered in dirt, humiliation and the stench of manure.

The school year had just ended, summer unfolded in fields of poppies and wheat. When I got home, there was no one there. I surrendered to the silence, then to the dusk which darkened the rooms and made me feel gloomy. I ate only some bread soaked in water with salt and tomatoes, the bread salad I had for supper whenever my mother was on the night shift, and my father vanished on his mysterious missions. I fell asleep on the couch. In the morning the house was still silent, none of the hubbub that usually woke

me when my mother returned from the hospital or my father filled the sink to shave, talking to himself in the mirror. Empty. With sticky eyes and a dry throat I wandered around, dazed, until I found a white envelope addressed “To my Black Grape” on the Formica-topped writing table – a school desk that my father had stolen from his technical institute to make it my desk. I had the feeling that my mother had written it more for herself than for me.

I had to leave and you weren't there. I'll tell you  
about the days to come. I'll expect you at the hospital.

There was the future tense, and that did not reassure me.

As I set foot in the hospital for the first time the smell of disinfectant rose to my nostrils; the half-empty corridors echoed the pattering on the floor, and large windows slanted downward. Inside rooms whose doors were ajar, motionless shadows watched over bodies wrapped in white. My mother, shoulders squared, appeared in her nurse's uniform, a pair of sabots and transparent stockings. Her face was glowing, her eyes clear and impassioned, her hair constrained in a blond knob on top of her head. She hugged me tighter than usual, her caress on my back was like an energetic massage, the transfer of a code between me and her, animals of the same species that recognize each other. She smelled like Sunday morning and held my hand, pushing me into the doctors' lounge where we could talk quietly. She was whistling the tune *Vacanze romane* (“Roman Holidays”) by Matia Bazar. She was happy, while I was having a hard time controlling my nerves, what was there to be happy about in that place? She said a number of things that my brain processed and immediately erased, as the smile she had welcomed me with gradually turned into an expression suited to the circumstances, grave.

“We will be apart, but only for a while, we need space.” She came to the point: she had left my father.

“Later on you will understand,” she concluded.

I went home drained, focused on the sound that rubber soles make on pavement.

“In the end she'll be back, they all come back,” proclaimed the blowhard, my direct forebear, seeing me on the doorstep brimming with unshed tears and suppressed wails.

The routine of our days changed. He brought home plates of pasta cooked by my grandmother, wrapped in a warm cloth, or heated canned soups, regularly burning them and muttering insults at the pots, the gas burners, and the soup companies. It was never his fault, always someone else's, but I still didn't know about people who look for scapegoats, and didn't know how to deal with them. I harbored a burning rage under the ashes of a placid appearance, not because my parents had separated, but because I hadn't seen it coming before.

I couldn't stand most of my contemporaries abroad; once they became expats they discovered that for twenty or thirty years they had been living among barbarians. It didn't matter what city they were in: Paris, Barcelona, New York, Beijing, Osaka, and star-crossed Berlin of course. It didn't matter what job or what deep reason lay hidden behind their new life. The homeland was littered with thieves, bureaucrats, hypocrites, people with connections and mobsters. But what had they done to improve things? They'd left.

That's what I thought at the time, but those who go and those who stay have their reasons. After all these years, I acknowledge it. The life you haven't lived is always better than the one you've lived.

It wasn't like that for Claudia. The past had to be erased, along with her mother. All she talked to me about was her new city. Berlin, Berlin, Berlin. She was liberated, she loved and lost, worked and ate, failed and started over again, never feeling like a zero. For her, distance was not just a geometric factor by now, it was existential: she spoke another language, thought in another language, lived among people who spoke other languages.

During Claudia's first months in Berlin I felt something very similar to what I'd felt when she went to London and I looked for answers to my uncertainties in her empty desk; or when I came back from Milan and sublimated my longings at the Martina train station. Nostalgia is nothing more than distilled, persistent pleasure.

I pictured her getting off the plane, perfectly in tune with everything, different from all the other passengers, a duffel bag as hand luggage to store as much stuff as possible, her head raised towards the exit gate, sure of herself. In Berlin there were always bridges on which to stop and gaze at the river. There were sprawling parks with tall oaks, grass so well tended that it was impossible to discern our weeds, the ones we used to put in our hair when we were kids, or smell their scent. Such were Claudia's stories, fostered by her arrival in spring when all big cities become luminous, their colors more vivid. Long, long walks, the ding-ding of her bicycle, her voice labored as she spoke into the mouthpiece of the headset on her way between home and work, her first friends and the word "friends" sounded different, occurring more frequently in our conversations than in the past.

Later, with winter, the ding-ding of the bell disappeared, but something exotic remained in the background, like the incomprehensible announcements of the metro that Claudia spoke about almost proudly. She had never talked about Milan's metro.

Claudia's winter in Berlin was one long night from November to May. The cobblestone avenues lined with great oaks, the flower stalls inside the metro stations



overflowing with tulips and sunflowers. The cemeteries that interrupted the layout of the districts, blending in with the parks.

My life had gone in a different direction. I had quickly built up a respectable real estate agency. On the straight stretch between Massafra and Martina I approached 125 mph. I clocked the time it took me to go from one town to another: 15 miles in 11 minutes. I had to deal with clients who were asking to sell, with offers that were killing the market; meanwhile their money was running out, as the banks kept failing and taking their savings with them. My advice was always the same: sell a piece at a time. Apartments of 1300 square feet became three mini-apartments, the baroque buildings of the historic center were sold by the floor, farmlands went at bargain rates because the taxes would have been stiff and it was better to give them away, donate or abandon them, remove your name from the brick and stone inherited from your ancestors.

For long stretches the state road I drove was winding, climbing up a hill of holm oaks that hid the old radar base, then hairpin after hairpin it turned into a flat, narrow strip like the roads of boundless American expanses, with ethereal landforms, ravines and purple horizons. I would comb through the land registry in search of abandoned trulli in the countryside: I would buy them for a dime and then immediately try to resell them at a higher price. Many people were abandoning their places, it seemed like a disease that had afflicted my fellow countrymen: roots were growing among the gray stones of the cairns and cone-shaped abodes, like carnivorous plants. I took photographs, published ads, hunted down buyers and soothed the sellers. Nothing more than caves, hollows in the stone where, with a bit of luck, there was electricity and running water: Massafra was the future because it was the same as Matera but less expensive.

I dressed like an undertaker at a funeral home, dark ties, tailored jackets and imitation leather shoes. For that matter I was dealing with the homes of dead people, or those who were departing. Buyers were looking for empty houses, the furniture of former residents brought bad luck; I took care of emptying the dwellings. The companies that did this, after filling the trucks with stuff, would go around to second-hand markets reselling and earning money on what for others were memories to be forgotten. I got a percentage on the haul and sometimes, if there was a piece of furniture that interested me, I would have it put aside. Family things have a soul and the Japanese say that after fifty years a sentient spirit grows in them.

In the meantime I lost weight and was pleased when someone asked: "What's going on with you, Veleno, are you fasting?" Every day I boiled two eggs and hid them in my pocket. I would make them last until evening, peeling the shell when my head began to throb and the asphalt on the road I sped along blurred. The bridges of Massafra sutured the flesh of a city scarred by ravines. It was like looking at the center of the earth, where I was assailed by the urge to scream. In the evening I would return tired and distraught, rubbing my eyes, my throat dry.

My mother left on a Saturday, the living room flooded with light. A shoulder bag and sunglasses to hide her blue eyes that at home were always sad. "Try not to get into too much trouble," she said, kissing me on the tip of my nose. She was leaving to go to Vietnam. My father stood at the front door with a hangdog look on his face. His wife

and son were there, a few steps away, but their hearts were distant. Right afterwards I felt a lump in my throat. “Anyway, she’ll be back,” my father said in a shaky voice. *Where have I heard that before?*, I thought.

I found myself imagining how my mother’s affair with Claudia’s father had started, the first look at the hospital, the first time they had kissed, the decisive detail that made them know that it could happen. I remembered one day when my mother, angry with my father, had told me not to fall in love with someone who fences, because after he’s stabbed you, he retreats, and she was fed up with people who retreat.

I still saw the same friends from school, though as the years went by they considered me a hopeless case. I didn’t have any girlfriends and I showed no interest in family plans, I was all about home and work; we saw each other only because we hadn’t left town, gathering in the bars on the outskirts towards Taranto with its burgundy sky.

I had kissed an older woman, a teacher who was like me: when I spoke she seemed to be distracted. We found our encounters to be a break from the rest of life. Maybe we were the tender types, we breathed sighs of relief when we parted without having had coitus. She would go home to her husband and I would lie in bed recalling a scene from thirty years ago: the lullaby my mother, wearing a turban, sung.

The procession of Syrians seems never-ending, they say half a million, maybe more; a long, wearying line crosses the border, single file, between Hungary and Germany, bringing to mind columns of war prisoners; they march along, their homes reduced to a bundle, their children on their shoulders. As they cross the puszta, Hungarian police Jeeps stand guard over the road to make sure no one escapes from the line.

It must have been the second or third story on the TV news in the days before I said goodbye, which like all goodbyes had a small dose of farewell. The cameras were filming the refugees, the microphones held out to interview them; a cameraman tripped a graying man who was running with children in his arms, panic-stricken – he was a father but he already looked like a grandfather. For us Apulians it was *déjà-vu*: when the ship *Vlora*, over 300 feet long, had arrived with 20,000 Albanians clinging to the mast and to God, the children looked like grown men. They asked for bread, but at the pier in Bari where they docked, there were soldiers waiting for them. Some of them tore off their life jackets and pushed them into the sea, while others fed them, sharing their prosciutto sandwiches. The usual story of humanity, the conflict was not between the good and the bad, but between the weak and the strong, and the strongest are those who know they can lose everything and not be afraid.

“Look at them, you’re just like them,” my father said as I was closing the suitcase, still incredulous at the news that I was leaving. He kept tossing the keys to the car I was handing over to him, shifting them from one hand to another. Whereas my mother had blessed me with a note: “Good luck, my Black Grape”, he just couldn’t accept it. “They’re running away from their troubles, like you.”

“Their troubles are a war,” I replied angrily, because he had hit a nerve. After all, my father wasn’t an endearing clown with horns, but a bitter solitary old man.

“Your trouble is that you have no idea what war is like, and if you were there, you’d run off just like them,” he rebuked me.

“You don’t know either.” Of the two of us I had always been the weak one, but with one foot out the door I felt I had the advantage for the first time.

“Don’t close down the agency, give it to someone else to manage, listen to your father.” His advice undeniably made sense, but I dismissed it with my truth:

“I don’t want anything that would make me have to come back here again.

Unlike the millions of emigrants who were leaving their families, I was returning to my family, returning to love, where all the significant things in my life had begun. Claudia was waiting for me, I had even gone so far as to sniff the smartphone on which her messages appeared.

In the sky that welcomed me to Berlin, the violet of the Ionian Sea that I had said goodbye to reappeared. The landscape I passed between the airport and the city was a forest of wood and stone, tall houses with no balconies, large umbrella canopies on some of the windows. As I looked through the pane, the icy sounds of German was harsh in my ears. The announcements in the stations crackled, and I read the obscure meaning of my new life in those incomprehensible words.

Claudia and Andria's relationship had moved forward, resting on a mutual need to care for each other. As if they had long sought each other out not to share passion and sensuality, but tenderness.

They worked in the same place.

He had passed along an ad to her from a company that trained staff to work in nursing homes for the elderly, and Claudia realized that Andria was showing her a path. If that wasn't a form of love, it was very close to it.

The part-time job in a rest home was not a choice of welcome regression but an opportunity: she earned just enough to live on and to read all the novels she wanted. Around 1 o'clock, from Monday to Saturday, she would ask the guests at the home what they would like for dinner. Among the three alternative menu options, one was prepared personally by her. German soups, Japanese ramen and Korean udon, she had become an expert. She liked getting her hands dirty, the produce smeared on her fingertips, tasting the vegetables while the sauce was cooking.

Her favorite patient was a very lovable old man, Torsten; she would greet him with a caress on his hand, his thin skin seeming to crack at her touch, and he would blush and smile.

"I adore him because he once told me that sooner or later we all become like pavements. When we're young we're soft and warm, then later we're hard and cold," she told me, amused.

They rarely slept together, Claudia and Andria, and when they did, she lay awake because she smelled the sex of other liberated males like him on Andria's body. An acidulous smell that dazed her. It worked like hypnosis, that big nose of hers was like the sensitive tip of a dowsing rod. Yet no one had ever made her feel so secure. "You have to feel safe with those who love you," she'd written me plenty of times. One day an irritating cashier at the REWE market had made fun of her accent, and a savage expression that she'd never seen before had come over Andria's face. In Martina, when they want to know who you are, they snap their fingers and ask you, "Where do you stand?"; that "stand" includes lineage, belonging, status and goals, a way of being in space and time, our stance in life, knees bent, ready to run or jump. But Andria had never bent his knees, that was what Claudia liked about him.

"Your suitcase is too big," she said pointing at the roll-on bag I was dragging.

We didn't kiss on the lips, almost no physical contact, I bumped my luggage along following the snaking metal track to the tram stop.

"I'll show you the house, then I have to run to work.

I could see a toughening in her face that I couldn't explain. She was no longer the "bony young girl" who aroused maternal concerns about her state of health; her cheekbones remained sharp, but her cheeks were fuller, her eyes busy deciphering thoughts that came from far away.

The city was baking under my feet, the pavement shook from the metro, and the crowd gave off an incessant hum.

"How are your grandparents?" she asked me.

I wasn't expecting it, it had been so many years since I introduced her to them.

"They're in a home, they couldn't manage on their own in the country anymore."

"A place like the one where I work. In the end we'll all end up there," she said with a grimace.

"Something like that. It was their decision, but they weren't happy to go there."

"What about the country house?"

"Abandoned. Someone set fire to the vineyard one day. A burned dog was found, they'd doused it with gasoline."

Claudia covered her face with her hands: "What bastards."

"Everything was destroyed."

"Even the well?"

"What well?"

"The one your grandmother showed me when we went to see her, remember?"

"No."

"Your grandmother said she wanted to show me something, and it was the well. She told me that a woman had been thrown in the well a century ago."

"She never told me that."

"There are certain things you don't tell boys because they don't understand them."

I was confused and even a little hurt that my grandmother had revealed this secret to Claudia after knowing her for only a few minutes.

"I'm afraid I know why she told me that. But I figured it out years later."

"My grandmother is a woman who would make up ominous stories to scare the shit out of us," I said to lighten the tension.

"Your grandmother was telling me that where there's a well there's always a woman who ends up thrown in it by... a man."

"Really!"

"If I had stayed back there I would have been thrown in a well."

"We're not brutes."

"And Marco Curcio, what do you call what he did with me? Isn't that throwing a person in the well?"

"I'm not following you."

"Years ago I read a writer... Alba de Céspedes. She said that women live at the bottom of a well, and only those who are in the well know compassion."

"I don't get it."

"Your grandmother was asking me for help."

“My grandmother is fine.”

“I’m glad, but I’ve been wanting to tell you for years and years.”

Getting on the tram I had the feeling that I had made a mistake in joining her. My father was right, I was like the millions of Syrians who came here and found nothing. Our lives had grown too far apart from the time we had innocently loved each other. Then Claudia grabbed two spots and, patting her hand on the empty seat, motioned me next to her. My head settled in the hollow between her neck and collarbone, and my forehead touching her skin was on fire. The foreign words of the passengers on the tram were no longer the cold sounds of a few hours earlier, but a background murmur. I sniffed the air of the new city filtered through Claudia’s skin, as she started softly singing Queen’s *Too Much Love Will Kill You*. We must have only gone three stops, but to me it seemed like an infinity since we’d clicked. Claudia was singing, not saying anything about herself but telling me all the things I wanted to know. Two guys selling newspapers came in holding sooty paper cups, behind them a woman swathed in a black burqa pushed a stroller with two kids piled on top of each other, some boys were shoving a metal bed frame into the back, and from a violin came the unmistakable strains of Beethoven’s *Fifth*.

We got off, following a crowd of blond boys on bicycles. We were in Pankow, Claudia said, and looking around I saw streets lined with plane trees, poplars and beeches. It smelled like woods and fresh air. “I live over there,” she said, pointing to a gray building standing among other gray buildings, all drab like the sky. As we crossed the street she called my attention to the shrubs, because at night they quivered with the furtive hesitation of the urban foxes. As always, there was a lot more she wanted to tell me that I couldn’t understand.

At the apartment she told me to take off my shoes, and showed me my room and then hers. I noted that it held nothing but the bed, a desk and a wardrobe. The rest of the house was filled with cartons of stuff, books, lamps, knick-knacks, postcards, glass jars, as if she were about to move. She said she would sell them at the Flohmarkt, she didn’t want anything that would create “loose ends.” She made do with little: a pale red poppy stuck out of a canning jar dripping with wet soil, dried basil leaves adorned the surface of a tin bucket hanging in the window. Objects soak up dangerous energies, stuff weighs down the soul.

She entered her room and said she had to change, but she didn’t ask me to leave. She did it naturally, as if we were brother and sister; her clothes landed on a chair, while the scent of lavender sachets drifted from the wardrobe. Our bodies had changed. Her legs were a white canvas on which the blue filigree of her capillaries could be traced. My hair thinning at the temples was flecked with white strands. But the bellies were similar, hazelnuts positioned midway up a slender stalk, the swollen belly of gaunt types.

“Do you know that reading the bans at Town Hall you learn a lot of things?” I said to her. I could hear the distant noise of the tram, the hum of a radio.

“It had become an undertakers’ job, your work, I always said so. You were right to leave it.” Having slipped into a purplish red uniform, Claudia twirled on her heels in a half pirouette, as if to say “look at me.”

“An undertaker’s work is respectable.”

“After I saw how they treated my father, allow me a superficial generalization.”

The uneasiness of what I was about to tell her was the cloud that had accompanied my journey through the clear sky.

“Anyway, in the bans at the Municipality ...” On the one hand I felt that what I was about to tell her would hurt her, on the other hand I didn’t want to keep anything hidden from her.

“I know,” she said, interrupting any other attempt of mine to avoid coming to the point.

“What do you know?”

“That my mother is going to marry Marco.

Once again she surprised me. “Don’t you think it’s in bad taste?”

“If you love each other. Nothing is in bad taste,” she added after a few moments’ silence but in a harsh voice, its meaning patently clear.

Something didn’t add up for me.

“I don’t understand, Claudia, are you giving her your blessing?”

“I don’t bless or condemn anyone, you should know me.”

“Father Agostino is marrying them, I can find out if they have community property,” I persisted.

“Ich bin fertig, Francesco!”, I’m through with that, she said firmly, even though her voice had cracked.

“I don’t want to let them win.”

“There’s lots to do here, there’s my job, there’s music, there’s Andria.”

“There’s Andria,” I repeated. It was meant to be a mild comment, but it came out somewhat bitter.

“Yes, there’s Andria, someone who has been through a million more struggles than we have, someone who has taught me that sometimes you have to be like metal, take the form of the blows life gives you.

“Too philosophical for me.”

“It’s not philosophy, Francesco. We grew up believing that everything had to be dealt with as if we were rock, like a fucking sledgehammer.”

“With sledgehammers we built the trulli, the farms, the villages.”

“Rocks crumble and metals are shaped. I prefer to give my acceptance to people in my present rather than to those of my past.”

I remained silent for a while, stung by a hint of jealousy over the last remark.

“You we never like that,” she went on.

“Like that, how?”

“What you told me, about my mother and Marco, about their property status, in short, about their things, hasn’t changed anything in my life. It’s as if you’d told me that someone had badmouthed me. Why do that? You’re not the kind of person who carries tales about misfortunes or repeats what gossip mongers say.”

“Well, maybe I am like that, or maybe I just wanted to make you realize that even though we were apart, I always looked after your interests.”

“There are no interests to be looked after, there is being there for each other when we need each other, even though sometimes things went wrong and we weren’t there,” she said, calm again.

I should have asked her, “When weren’t we there?” but instead I felt like a nine-year-old boy knocking on her door in despair.

“My mother loved me in her own way and in her own way she will love Marco,” she said, buttoning her uniform up to her neck.

“I want to meet Andria,” I told her.

“If he doesn’t go to his gay bars tonight to pick up someone, we’ll go to the Kitty.”

“What’s that?”

“What Berliners call the KitKat Club.”

“One of those places...”

“And then some. It’s my hangout, and maybe it’ll be yours.”

“Do you want me and him to become friends?”

“I don’t plan other people’s lives, I just have a very strong feeling that you’ll like him.”

“How many times have we been fooled by your feelings?”

“They only fooled me, with you I was never wrong.”

Once alone in the house, I was not surprised to find that although it was June my hands and feet were like ice and my nose was running. I felt a mixture of tenderness and distance.

I sat on the edge of the bed in front of the large wardrobe mirror. As a child Claudia had been afraid of mirrors because she thought they recorded things from the past, and worried that the grandmother she had never known – or some other deceased person whose image had been trapped there – might suddenly appear in the glass. I sat still in front of that mirror long enough for it to capture my figure and the thoughts churning inside my head. I decided to leave the house and wander around the city until it got late, getting to know this new world; I would enroll in a German course for aspiring workers.

I spoke to two waiters, a language school clerk, a group of tourists, a couple of drifters, with the universal language of facial mimicry and smiles, pursing my lips, winking my eye, poking my finger in a cheek to confirm that a food was good; I tried to decipher the signs of a Lithuanian homeless man looking for money to return to Vilnius.

Ignoring the tall green pillars on which the yellow U2 trains rumbled past, I walked for two hours along the tram tracks with the same impervious precision as a locomotive obeying commands. And my commands were reduced to the bare minimum, to head east, to the edge of the outskirts, on the route that the guidebook recommended only to those who had already seen the entire city. In Lichtenberg there were lots of guys in tight t-shirts and shaved heads; I became small and black again, I felt their savage eyes on me like a sharp blanket, until sunset filled the sky with orange and pink. I was wrong to come to Berlin, I would never make it in that new life and Claudia would never go back to being the woman I had known.

I reached Rummelsburg, where the tram curved to enter the town of Friedrichshain. It was a congested intersection; adjacent to the yellow tram shelter an actor was performing a humorous play, ignored by commuters.

When I got back to the house Claudia opened the door to me; her eyes did not seem to be made-up yet they glittered.

As evening strove to lay claim to the day’s space, I saw a dark shadow in the living room. The shadow rose and the features became clear: sculpted cheekbones, a massive neck, pale forearms emerging from a black t-shirt that fit like a glove. Andria



was solid, powerful, with large, manicured hands, a faint stubble around his lips, and sideburns like a pair of commas framing a broad smile. He seemed affable.

“Francesco,” I said

“A pleasure, Andria.”

“You speak Italian.”

“Pochino,” he said to me holding his forefinger and thumb about a quarter-inch apart.

“He’s learned to talk with his hands like us,” Claudia said, and he looked at her as if asking for confirmation of what he had said.

Claudia translated patiently, Andria spoke to Claudia in German, and she replied without making me feel excluded: he was sorry he couldn’t speak to me in Italian.

I was thinking that my future months in Berlin would all be like this. The aphasia that I had escaped during the day by speaking a few words in English would be a misery. I would not be able to communicate nostalgia, anxieties, or other complex emotions, every nuance would be reduced to an essential message: “I’m hungry,” “I’m thirsty.”

Claudia led us to the bedroom, and laid out on the sheets was my cassock, the long sleeves folded at the chest.

“You unpacked my suitcase?” I asked, surprised.

“Will it fit you?” Claudia asked, as if my question were superfluous.

“I haven’t grown since I last put it on 20 years ago,” I said.

Claudia looked at it, her expression crinkled with laughter, as if she didn’t believe she had convinced me to go with them that night.

“The cassock is close-fitting at the waist, it’s from from the French *casaque*, long coat, because it comes down to the heels,” I clarified with a doctoral air that I myself found insufferable.

“This one comes to your knees,” she quipped, and burst out laughing.

Andria watched us silently from the doorway; he had the look of someone who precisely sizes up the things around him.

“Can I make you up tonight?” Claudia asked. She said my dark skin wouldn’t need blusher. “It needs a highlighter,” she said, already rummaging through her makeup kit. “We’ll apply a bronzer, with the fingertips.”

It was a declaration of love, we looked at each other in the mirror as if those reflections were not us. Claudia spoke in German and I understood that she would make up Andria as well. For a second I had believed I enjoyed primacy, as elated as an explorer discovering an unknown place.

Andria sat down in a chair next to me. Now all three of us were displayed in the mirror. I would have liked to have this moment recorded, I would miss it the day I were to return to Martina. Only much later would I learn the right word to describe what I was experiencing: *Sehnsucht*. That feeling composed of desire and longing, between a thrill and craving something out of reach.

Claudia’s fingertips pinched my face as my color was transformed in the mirror. She picked up an eyeliner, ordered me to close my eyes. The pressure of the pencil tip made them tear; when I reopened them, I saw her already busy lining Andria’s eyelids. Using a brush she applied a different color on his cheeks than the one she had patted on me. The mirror recorded our chromatic harmony, we were one person.

We walked along talking over each other without ever fully understanding one another, stopping in cramped smoke-filled bars that tinkled with empty beer glasses, where Claudia and Andria sat on each other's laps leaving me to enjoy the spectacle. We were fifteen again, at most sixteen years old. Before getting on the last metro that would take us to the KitKat, Andria glanced at me sharply, his eyes wolfish. As a child, wolves were my favorite animals, because they were always on the dark side and in the end they died in all the fairy tales, like flesh-and-blood humans.

At our stop, dark figures with backpacks and roller bags got out and headed to the same place we were going. It seemed like mid-afternoon, but it was already two in the morning. There were colorful crests, a beautiful woman in a sheer tunic and fur piece covering only her shoulders, leaving her figure exposed, a boy dressed in red rubber. A family with children on their way down the stairs looked at us and smiled.

The line in front of the club was a black snake, overcoats and long dark jackets hid the most audacious outfits, some instead were already half-naked, with transparent shirts, stilts on their feet, pants with the zipper on the ass, a girl with two seams tattooed on the back of her legs like old nylon stockings.

Claudia and Andria held hands, my blood was boiling with confused thoughts: I had only rarely held her hand, walking, its soft dorsal side and rough palm never perspired. A summer vision suddenly appeared to me from a time when we were teenagers: the fireworks of San Rocco in Locorotondo, cars pulled over alongside the dry stone walls of the provincial road, people eager to be showered by gunpowder, eyes ready to take in the colorful pinwheels, soft murmuring in the darkness, and the two of us illuminated only by the stars and the moon, waiting for the first fiery burst in the sky. Everyone holding the same suspended breath.

We passed through an entrance hall with a silver-plated disco ball and a brightly-lit sign proclaiming "Life is a Circus." The expressionless face of a bouncer looked me over and said something I didn't understand; Claudia spoke to him and told me to open my backpack. I pulled out my cassock, and the men around me laughed. The theme of the evening was "CarneBall Bizarre," calling for a fetishistic or sexual outfit. I found myself in a small hallway where people were frantically undressing, pulling wooden hangers out of a metal container and handing over bags and clothing to the cloakroom attendants. Once again Claudia was right, the priest's tunic that I hadn't worn in years didn't fit. I tried two, three times, but the buttons wouldn't reach the buttonholes.

The mistress at the entrance looked at me pathetically. "Priest or naked," she pronounced in English.

When all's said and done, that had always been the dilemma of my life, and I had always remained in the useless middle ground.

"Undress," said Claudia, pulling me close and looking me in the eye.

"Naked?!"

"However you want, but undress. She had never seemed so adult. She was ordering me to undress. My dream, in what seemed like a nightmare.

The liberation began with my clothes tossed into a dark sack, and me left in black boxers and shoes. Claudia hugged me and gave me a kiss on the lips.

I got to a dark cavern where music shook the floor, and a disguised humanity danced non-stop in the colorful smoke – police uniforms, white lab coats, synthetic furs with fox tails, horse- or dog-face masks, bodies stuffed into tight rope jackets. In the pool naked men were shouting, swimming among huge inflatable dragons. On the cushions around the tub was a tangle of bodies: a woman, naked and lame, limped along beside two guys with studded suspenders, performing fellatio on one of them. At any moment someone could have taken flight with long feathered wings. That might well have happened, but from some point on my memories are vague. In the bathrooms, Italians and Spaniards promised joy in the form of crystals to be dissolved in water or cooked with a lighter, until bouncers in disguise chased them out. My heart was pounding, I felt hot, the water I drank from the taps didn't quench my thirst.

I climbed the stairs to a mysterious mezzanine with the childlike frenzy of when I used to play without a care in the world. My hand was entwined with Claudia's, hers with Andria's. There was a pink room, with a heavy floral essence, in the middle of which a man lay spread-eagle on a gynecologist's table, being sodomized by a black man with a shaved head, wearing red shorts with a white border and terrycloth socks that gleamed under the lights. In a corner was a cage with a Viking, a black man and an Indian in it, coupling and groaning with pleasure. We approached the sculpture of sweaty flesh behind the bars, and I felt tempted, as you do in museums, to caress the marble, the skin taut and slick. Then a petite girl in a black tank top appeared and began whipping the three men with a crop: a game I had a hard time understanding, but that conveyed a sense of perdition and joy. She looked at us, laughed, and offered us the whip: "Want to try it?"

Claudia led us to an out-of-the-way corner that soon became a mecca for about a dozen curious onlookers: we were the spectacle. I wasn't afraid, I was yearning for a kiss from Claudia; I had yearned for one beneath the chestnut blossoms and among the shrubby broom in Martina, but it would be even better here, with the pounding music, the eyes of the men and women inciting us rather than judging us. Andria undid his pants, pulled out his penis, stiff, but still far from an acceptable erection, stretched out on his back, and Claudia bent down, took it in her mouth, all the while looking into my eyes. I was incredulous, shaken, I wanted to cry and scream, I could feel the dams bursting inside me and the dikes collapsing. All my life I had silently accepted the same questions: "Do you have a girlfriend?", "Do you have a job?", "Do you have a home?", "Do you have a future?", "Do you have a plan?", "Who are you?", "Where do you stand?"

"Get down here, Black Grape," Claudia said suddenly. The most important person of my life with her eyes wide-open and a cock in her mouth, the cock of a guy I'd met a few hours ago, pulsating and slimy with Claudia's saliva. For twenty years I'd wanted her, every night imagining what it would be like to enter her there in our fields beneath the sky, how her saliva would taste, between the bitter tannin of walnuts and the sweetness of almonds. I kissed Claudia only after her Georgian boyfriend had been pleased. Was this happiness? What would the world that I had left behind say? We were there, on a planet that looked upon the land of wagging tongues with pity.

An intense kiss, the nerves detonated, I dissolved, bliss was the absence of urges, the joy of sleep that anaesthetizes a weary body. Yes, that was happiness. Until an

unfamiliar tongue, rigid and adamant, intruded: Andria was kissing us, and I felt the sea, the pleasure that you get from walking with cold, salt-wet feet on the roasting sand.

An elderly man, his beard long, smiled as he tried to put his penis in Claudia's mouth; she smiled back, gave him a caress and kissed the tip of his turgid organ, but then shook her head no. When he got up there was no one left, the curious crowd had had enough and was now gathered elsewhere. We went back to dancing and kept kissing: Andria and Claudia, Claudia and me, me and Andria, our scents mixed.

We kissed on the metro and then on the tram, as day invaded the sky. On the last bridge that led us back home, as we walked single file with an arm trailing along the balustrade, I felt Andria's breath on the back of my neck. I was lost once more in Claudia's walk, it had been a long time since I'd watched her walking from behind, she looked like a pale flamingo. Only a few days later I would learn that flamingos have pale feathers when they are unhealthy or malnourished, they eat balancing on just one leg, but they can't limp.

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<sup>1</sup> "...I saw that I was never content, I never felt centered, I never settled into any place, however excellent it was, until I had memories that I could attach to that certain place..." --Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), p. 1911.

<sup>2</sup> From the Front Matter of Carlo Levi, *Christ stopped at Eboli* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006, paperback edition), Frances Frenaye, tr. The reference is to the peasants of Lucania.