

Translated Excerpts
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from

THE SUMMER WE FELL FROM GRACE

by

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Chi focu chi 'ndi vinni! The words were a wail uttered by Zia Nuccia, in the corridor near the doorway, hand to her head. The hand then slid down her cheek, sealing her mouth as if to keep her from moaning them again, words that for years, forevermore, would give Caterina the chills whenever she thought of them. Her aunt too maybe, she doesn't know, she never asked her. Zia Nuccia with her hand over her mouth, clamping her jaw, thumb and forefinger pressing her nose. Is she trying not to breathe? Or is she about to cry? She wouldn't be able to, it's not time yet for that lump to dissolve into tears, for now all she can do is knit her brow, as if struck by a physical ache, a stabbing pain in the back, the foot, the stomach, a sudden painful migraine, like ice on the forehead.

Zia Nuccia was in the doorway, she had just stepped in, and Caterina's father and mother were in the corridor too with Zio Ignazio, Nuccia's husband, and another uncle, Santo, the youngest of the brothers, the uncle who stuttered. He had come running like a maniac, as they sat outside the door enjoying the cool evening air, among the pots where the gardenias, Caterina's favorite flowers, were blooming. They were sitting out there, on the white enameled chairs – only down below, on the legs, had the enamel flaked off, revealing the rusty iron, but no one would have noticed. They often sat outdoors in the evening, her parents, Zia Nuccia and Zio Ignazio talking, Caterina reading. In her summer pajamas with the tiny straps and minuscule flowers embroidered around the neck, the bottoms like the shorts volleyball players wore – she was so proud of them that she didn't even feel the mosquitoes biting her – she flaunted those pajamas and read the same copy of her favorite comic book over and over again. She, unlike Margherita, was allowed to stay up a little later, while her little sister had already been sent to bed. A peace so pure, they might even have been fooled, maybe that night they had been fooled by it, even Caterina's mother had been misled, and Zia Nuccia of course, surely more than anyone.

But Zio Santo had come running, Caterina can still see him bursting in but it's all blurry and she doesn't remember what they were talking about, maybe they were even laughing. She can still hear him panting, not his stuttering, it's hard to say what words he had spoken, Zio Santo, how he broke the news to all of them. Maybe he rushed into the house and pulled only one of them inside, maybe just his brother Salvatore, Caterina's father. Her father came in with his lips already pressed tight, his forehead suddenly lined with a web of wrinkles, sensing the start of a colic attack. He left his wife Laura outside with Caterina, his older daughter, who was reading a comic book. By this time she knew it by heart, she had been copying it for days in a sketch pad. Before long the summer of her ninth year would be over, and Caterina would only have remembered this: the smack of her behind hitting the seat when she bumped down the stairs on her bicycle, the dunk shots against the wall, almost as powerful as those of the animated volleyball player Mila Azuki, the dead rats carried by the flow of water in the irrigation canal in the garden beside the house. Dry for most of the day, like the arid bed of a stone river, yet at specific times filled with rushing water. The children would rush to dip their hands in and splash each other, throw in toy cars and leaves and pebbles, whatever the current would carry away, then race off swiftly to try to recover them. And Caterina would have remembered that comic book too of course, if the summer had glided by peacefully night after night, if it had turned uneventfully into autumn, without anyone noticing, if it had not instead been stopped in its tracks, for all time, by the words Zio Santo spoke to her father that evening, words marred by an incurable stuttering, words that Caterina really can't remember.

All she remembers is standing between the rigid bodies, she remembers the sweaty palms, the disjointed words and pale faces, the churning stomachs, weak knees, furrowed brows and the wrinkles, the millions of wrinkles that suddenly aged all of them. Years later they would appear on her face too: others would consider them a normal effect of time, but she would know that they came from back then, from that day,

engraved on her skin by the anguish of that moment, visible only when the time was right.

Zio Santo was breathing heavily when Caterina went into the house, someone said, *Go outside, go back outside and read, don't come in here*, someone even nudged Nuccia, who had uttered that fateful cry before the child: a cry that held the beginning and the end of the world. Her aunt was the only one who spoke the words, the only one who sanctioned the gravity of that moment, and every future moment from that time on, she was the one who took it upon herself to say it. To say that the summer would never be the same, to say that it would abruptly be different, for everyone. All of a sudden it was no longer possible to pretend that they too were deserving of such peace, events would take a new turn, veering in a direction as yet unknown to everyone, yet inevitable. It was she, Zia Nuccia, with that single phrase uttered in dialect, it was she who voiced what had happened. That grim misfortune had come to them.

And that is why Caterina doesn't remember anything, except her aunt's hand over her mouth, the hand that she had first run through her hair in a characteristic gesture of despair, hands that had clutched at her face tugging down her eyes and the skin of her cheeks, disfiguring her looks. It was only her innocence that led Nuccia to utter those words in front of everyone, even in front of the child. She had almost moaned them, keening and drawing the vowels out like a dirge, *Chifocuchindivìnni*. What a curse, what an affliction has come down on us.

And it was only after hearing those words that the child became frightened, that she felt her face screw up. It was only after those words, that did not yet even have a meaning, that Caterina burst into tears.

Part One
Like a Curse

And I was innocent as a curse, *Ed ero ingenuo come una bestemmia*,
Francesco De Gregori, "Buonanotte fratello"

The bedspreads are sky-blue, maybe the washing machine shrunk them: the point is she always thought they were a little short, the edges don't reach the floor, they hang there, exposing the legs of the bed that stick out below the boxspring. Caterina is looking at them, at that woven blue, wool and acrylic in unequal percentages, the acrylic undoubtedly prevalent. She can't understand why her mother chose them, she must think the color blue is appropriate for a child's room, even though Caterina is already twelve years old and in the seventh grade. At school they spend their time making lists of the most popular kids: the best-looking boy, the prettiest girl. In a class of twenty-five she is always ranked among the last, and it must surely be because of that ponytail her mother tightens just above the nape of her neck, the black hair pulled back with a wet comb. It must be because of those skirts that come below her knee, ultramarine blue, or pale blue, which her mother continues to sew for her even now that they have come to live in Recanto. She had taken a sewing class with her friends when they were still living in Nacamarina, and had used her daughter as a guinea pig, or as her mother put it, a *model*. Or maybe it's because of the suede boots with the fur trim, no other girl at school has them except her. Or because she chews her nails, wears a boy's windbreaker, has thick eyebrows – it's not time to pluck them with a tweezer yet, she is forbidden to do so. Sometimes she hurriedly draws a thin line along her eyelid, with a black pencil stolen from the shelf: in the school's bathroom mirror she sees herself and thinks she's beautiful. She erases it just before going home, but today too she didn't win any contest. Even the heaviest girls in the class came in ahead of her, probably because of their tight, ankle-revealing jeans, studded with zippers as fashion dictates, their mannish shirts, their cross-shaped earrings or enormous rings. Maybe because during the break they joked around with everybody, definitely more personable than she.

Still, awaiting her at home are the blue bedspreads, the identical twin beds in one room: there's a reassuring sense of order, and today this is where her mother brought her when she came home from school, leaving Margherita in front of the TV in the kitchen. Caterina just had time to toss her book bag in the corner between the two armoires. Her

mother doesn't ask her to set the table, she's walked away from the stove, it's nearly two o'clock, what's going on?

"I have something to tell you" her mother cautions. "Don't shout."

That's what she tells her. Don't shout.

Caterina realizes that what she has to tell her will frighten her.

"Zio 'Ntoni died."

She doesn't shout or make a scene. She holds her breath.

"When?"

"This morning. They called us."

"How did he die?"

"A heart attack."

Her mother can't suppress a laugh. That's how she is, every time she tells a lie she just can't keep from laughing. The corners of her mouth twitch and she can't look at her daughter.

"Where's Papa?"

"Papa left, for the funeral. He'll be in Nacamarina tomorrow morning, early."

And as she says it, the urge to laugh is already past. Her mother's face is tense again the way it was when Caterina came home from school. Her little sister is in the other room watching television, every now and then she hums the theme song of some program, some advertising jingle, crooning softly to herself. Her mother is already lost in some inexpressible thought, drained by a worry that makes any further act, any further words impossible.

It is not a momentous scene. There is nothing to shout about. Maybe her mother feels like shouting, Caterina knows the anger that is eating away at her. Right now Laura isn't thinking of anything except a husband on the train, miles and miles in second class, velvet seats musty with dust, newspapers, trash and empty potato chip packets left under the seats, a black turtleneck sweater and his leather jacket with the predictable fur trim,

thinning hair that was once wavy, and those horizontal lines stamped on his forehead like a distinctive brand.

It's Salvatore they're thinking about, both mother and daughter, in the room with the blue bedspreads, at one thirty on an autumn day. They're not hungry, and they don't shout. This scene is a tracing, it is transferred with a sheet of carbon paper, its contours blurred. Even their anxiety is felt that way, muffled, muted by time and place, by the fact that today, here, in this house, in this northern city, it would be impossible to shout, no words would be utterable. Who knows what Zia Nuccia said when she heard: has her aunt, down there in Nacamarina, become less innocent? Her father will notice maybe, he'll be able to tell her, her father will. Though maybe he won't pay any attention, he must be grief-stricken and bewildered and, who knows, maybe even afraid – is it possible for her father to be afraid?

She writes a prayer, Caterina does, in her secret diary. After she finishes her homework, around five o'clock. Seven pages long. It has several stanzas and even a refrain. If she were able to write music she could sing it too. Still, she composes the melody by ear and sings it in her room. The only light is that of the desk lamp. She sings and cries, and it's not for Zio 'Ntoni, she has to admit, not because of his death. And not even for her mother's thoughtfulness, for having concocting a suitable cause of death for her, how could she ever thank her?

It's for her father, he's the only one she's crying for, him there on the train, wordless, huddled in his jacket with his hands clasped, calluses rubbing together, lips clamped tight like they were then, like on that summer evening three years ago in Nacamarina when Zia Nuccia spoke. Twenty drops of Diazepam swallowed for the unbearable spasms.

A prayer fit for a devotional missal, verse after verse written in a crooked, wobbly hand on the unlined pages of her diary: the unshareable ritual, the magic formula, will lie protected behind the tiny lock: Caterina's tacit, desperate covenant with God to protect him, protect her father, as only He can.

That August night, the night of the tragedy, Caterina did not sleep in the room she and Margherita shared. She fell asleep on the orange-striped folding chair. Now and then they had taken that deckchair to the beach. They always went loaded with stuff, insulated coolers packed with food, especially fruit, a bag full of beach towels, big ones and little ones for the children, the umbrella that her father would plant in the sand – he really didn't like being in the sun – pails and shovels and little plastic molds – a butterfly, a bee, a flower – and magazines for her mother and Zia Fatima, sun hats for the kids. Caterina with her grown-up, size 5 rubber-soled sandals: they even had a wedge heel, who knows how she had been allowed to have them. Her parents, and her aunt and uncle too, had probably let themselves be persuaded because her cousin Maddalena – or rather *Lena* – had an identical pair. The children, Caterina, Margherita, Lena and Giacomo, were always treated equally, they all had the same trucks and the same water pistols, the same dolls and the same clothes, and they passed them down from year to year, from the oldest cousin to the youngest.

The night of the tragedy – summer still had a full month ahead of it – Caterina slept on the deckchair in the living room, not even trying to imagine that she was at the beach. She didn't try to recall her father's brown checkered bathing trunks – so out of style, according to her – as he ground out one cigarette after another in the sand, or her mother's guileless laughter that sounded like the shrieks of a bird. Her mother always seemed so happy at the shore. She didn't try to remember the swim races with her cousin Giacomo, both of them wearing life vests, or pretend she had her bathing suit on, the blue one-piece that Lena, the oldest, had worn the year before. She slept a sleep whose dreams she cannot remember, sterilized. In the morning she woke up in the living room and saw everyone awake on the couch in front of her, or maybe they had never actually slept. Only Zia Nuccia was missing, the one who the night before, with her hand over her mouth, had uttered that incisive phrase. She was probably at home, in the apartment upstairs, calming her racing heart with chamomile tea. But the others were all there and their faces were impassive: the skin drawn tightly across their cheek bones seemed

parched, their gestures too slow or too jerky, their voices subdued, clinging to a dialect that remained the only certainty they had after what had happened.

No one turned to look at her to say, *Caterina, Caterina you're awake*. The girl saw them as if through gauzy tissue, then she turned away, curled up on the deckchair, stared at the tiny flowers embroidered on the straps of her pajamas and thought about how she felt like drawing, like any other day.

She doesn't know if she really did draw, or what she had for breakfast. Whether even that morning they served her hot milk laced with coffee and some Atene Dorias, those rectangular biscuits with the holes that her father brought home from the market by the boxfuls. And almonds picked from her grandfather's garden. She thought, *no one has a breakfast like this, not even on television*, while she instead, in the summer time, could eat almonds as soon as she woke up. She had this bizarre morning meal, fit for a queen, as she decided what to do with her day. Sometimes she dressed up like Magical Emi, a pair of very short shorts, a peaked cap, a tee-shirt with a somewhat loose neck – if necessary she tugged it until it stretched– that she let slip down to reveal her shoulder. Sneakers and a plastic bracelet completed the masquerade. It was easy to become someone else, only the ruined tee-shirt irritated her mother a bit, but afterwards she was Magical Emi for the entire day and no one could tell her otherwise.

That morning, Caterina did not dress up as any animated cartoon character. She didn't ask any questions, didn't look for any explanations, and barely spoke to the adults. There was no need to, for one thing. She knew everything, though she made believe she didn't understand, as was expected of her. Nobody ever asked her to do that, yet she had learned the drill on her own. And so the way she pretended to still believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, so she pretended not to understand the tragedy that had struck them, each and every one of them. Instead she masqueraded as a younger child, interested only in ball games, comic books, colored markers and glue: this was the only form of masquerade possible.

The girl got up from the deckchair, said good morning to everyone and went toward the bathroom. Again she became a Caterina who didn't exist, though for years the others considered that pretend-Caterina to be the only Caterina. She was so convincing that everyone mistook the pretense for reality.

Salvatore tries to adjust the headrest, he slides it up and down, rests the back of his neck against it, then his right temple, his cheek, part of his forehead, the back of his neck again, the left cheek; finally he gives up on the headrest, bends forward and puts his elbows on his knees. He stays that way, gazing at the floor, his back a perfect hypotenuse on the base of his sprawled out legs.

Once more he's making this journey, going back yet again, later he'll retrace the same route back home. Then in a year or maybe even less, there will be another misfortune that will make him take this train again, repeat this same long trip, watch the sea vanish then reappear. Cities at night are all dark: if he stays awake beside the window all he sees are distant lights, winking like trapped fireflies. No matter where, that's all Italy is to him as he travels through it at night in second class, huddled in a black, double breasted leather jacket. As he sits hunched in his jacket with his arms crossed, or leaning his elbow on the folding table in front of the seat, the weight of his head pushing against his thumb. He makes believe that the strength of his sturdy thumb, with its square, tough nail, is all it takes to support the heavy thoughts that weigh on him, that the finger pressed against his brow will keep his head from falling off. The passengers would see it roll under the seats, or maybe they wouldn't even notice it, but would go on dozing or doing their crossword puzzles, his decapitated body there by the window, Italy behind him, streaking by live in real time, where at night there's really nothing to see. Italy is nothing but a series of train stations, everywhere the same sound of doors closing, whistles and shouts, newsstands on the platforms, the chill, the sleepy faces, Italy is nothing but an accumulation of night-time desolation that builds up, hour after hour, until dawn, until his village becomes the first thing he sees, the first thing that stands out from all the rest, the first that smiles and calls to him – he speaks to it and it responds. It is no longer Italy: it's home.

His head remains attached to his neck, no startling sound will wake the other passengers in the compartment unless a thief shows up tonight. It's not that improbable, unfortunately. Salvatore doesn't drop off to sleep until Naples and afterwards he is even

more wide-awake, his head still on his shoulders. He should have chopped it off three years ago, bashed it against the rocks, slammed it into the wall, drowned it in the sea and renounced all responsibility, instead of scouring every inch of his brain day and night – night and day – groping to find urgent, immediate answers that would benefit everyone, his wife, his daughters, his sister, his brother-in-law, their children, his mother and father and his brothers and his wife’s family. Even his friends at the café, it seems stupid but maybe he thought of them too during those days. He had tried to find a reason why the bridge in front of the church in Nacamarina should make him want to stay, that bridge, a place of simple laughter and unassuming chatter. He tried to forget how dangerous even a card game at the café had become, even going for coffee. It was this small world so suited to him, so at one with him, this is what they had taken from him. He who has all of Italy to choose from, who has traveled up and down the peninsula too many times by now. Tonight he will pass through Rome for the umpteenth time. Yet he will pass through it with his behind glued to the seat. He has no idea what lies outside Termini station, to him all that expanse doesn’t mean a thing. Pisa is no better than the little ball field behind the church in Nacamarina, where he was baptized. That was where they went to play when they played hooky without anyone knowing, they grew up in that neighborhood: there – that’s where they were born.

Before long he reaches Naples and breathes a faint sigh of relief. The other passengers rub their eyes and try not to doze off, handbag crushed against the belly, shoulder strap wrapped tightly around the arm. He on the other hand feels the desolation begin to recede, and senses a smattering of acceptance, of solidarity. Naples is where that world which is not understood north of Naples begins, that world from which they uprooted him. He was the one who made the decision, but had he really thought of everyone? Wife, daughters, sister, brother-in-law. His brother-in-law made him decide, on his own he would never have left, and he doesn’t know if he thought about his parents as well, but how can you choose for everybody? How can you make such a radical decision in just a few hours? Salvatore couldn’t have imagined never going

back, except for a few days once or twice a year, nor did he realize that Italy was so big, so much the same everywhere. The only thing he doesn't find anywhere else is the sunlight shining on the wall of his parents' house, the smell of freshly washed laundry and the chairs set side by side in the yard, under the fig trees. In a few hours he'll be back home in a world of things that can't be explained, but can only be shared, like his mother's bony knuckles, the liver spots on his father's face, his neck, that cigarette smell like the scent of his skin.

He gets up, goes out to the corridor to smoke. He has to be rational, once again, he has to be so for everyone. He's the older brother, this is expected of him. Laura must be in the big bed with the girls by now. When he's away he knows she clings to their bodies to take her mind off the fact that he's not there. She can't say a word to him this time, his wife. She can't pressure him. Tonight on the train he can't even imagine any alternatives, and maybe there won't really be any choices. There's nothing more to be done.

His mother will embrace him as if he were still far away. She will call out his name, her son, the joy of her life: *Sabbaturi*, she'll say, *figghiu, beddu r'a me' vita*. She'll be dressed in black, Cata will, smelling of soap, her long, thin hands and broad face unchanged. Salvatore will let her hug him, tomorrow morning at the gate in front of the house, he'll hear her laugh and cry, after a while he will pull away to embrace his father. Cece will remain seated in the straw-bottomed chair, unable to stand up on his own for some time now, *Turi*, he'll say, *'rivasti, beddu*. Yes, Papa, I'm back.

The pain of this new tragedy will mingle with their joy at seeing one other again: conflicting feelings, a fire in the body. Salvatore feels it burning like an ever-smoldering ember, it reminds him who he is no matter where he may be, it reminds him where he came from.

It will be home. It will be everything he lost and the reason he went away forever. At dawn he will open his eyes to the only station that makes his heart beat a little faster as soon as he spots it. The emotional impact will hit him like a blow to the sternum, he'll

have to squeeze his eyes, swallow several times and make an effort to try and speak. Because he'll have to have answers, if they should ask them of him. And this time his brother-in-law 'Ntoni will not be there to help him.

They park along the street, before the bridge. They get out of the car. Salvatore glances quickly over at the bar, then turns around hurriedly, feeling almost guilty. He sticks his hands in his pocket and waits for his brother to lock the car doors. Then together they begin walking rapidly, in silence, toward the gray concrete wall behind which 'Ntoni's building rises like a lookout tower. Next to the metal gate, a policeman takes a bite of a salami sandwich. Another is smoking a cigarette, leaning against the wall. They're chatting. Ignazio goes over to them. "*È ma frati,*" my brother, he says, pointing to Turi. They know Ignazio by now. Who knows how many times he's been up and down to the seventh floor, in the past two days. Maybe that's why they trust him, and raise their chin as if to say, *Go on in*. Or maybe they don't want to interrupt their lunch break.

Fatima opens the door of the palatial house where she has never felt like a queen. Salvatore greets her with two kisses on the cheek, like a stranger, like people will at the cemetery, lining up confusedly. He doesn't know what else to do. "Angel," is all he says, and it's enough to make her eyes grow moist, her chin crumple, like when she would cry as a little girl, after her mother reprimanded her about how she performed the household chores. Fatima had quickly learned to be the woman of the family: a little mother to her three brothers, Turi the eldest, Ignazio the middle brother, and Santo, the youngest, the one who needed her the most. Once – his sister must have been twelve years old – Salvatore had scolded her because the shirt he wanted to wear hadn't been ironed. Cece, their father, got angry. Don't ever speak to your sister that way again. She was mortified, and her chin had crumpled that time too. Today, Salvatore, watching Fatima cry because no one had protected her, no one had been able to spare her this heartache, feels the sting of guilt like a sudden stabbing pain. Suddenly he is ashamed of that scolding long ago though it may be. Or maybe what stings is simply guilt at not having managed to shield her from yet another humiliation, his guilt at having abandoned her.

Fatima wipes her eyes on her wrists, rubs her hands on her apron, then smiles gently at her brother: “How was the trip? What would you like? Coffee? And you, Ignazio?”

Ignazio tells her that they had coffee at the station, not to go to any trouble for them, to take care of what she has to do and not worry about them. It's early, but the buzzer will undoubtedly start ringing soon enough. They've been coming to share her grief, it doesn't matter that there is no corpse, they've been filling the house since yesterday, they don't care about the policemen stationed like sentries at the gate, they show their ID indifferently, even impatiently, they speak in dialect, they don't even attempt official Italian, and no one looks the policemen in the eye, as if they don't deserve the respect of any of those people who since yesterday have been bringing sugar and coffee, cookies and biscuits, or sending up croquettes, calzones and teacakes from the bar.

“Lena and Giacomo?” is all Salvatore manages to ask. Fatima tells him they've gone to their *nonna* Cata, she'd had enough, she couldn't stand seeing them around the house, Giacomo terrified by the policemen's presence at the entrance to the building – they buzz and ask for things, they appear at the door and maybe you have to offer them coffee too – and her son constantly whining, as if they wanted to take him away, him, a ten year old child, convinced more than ever that the police should have been there before, down below, to protect his father, not now, now what do they want? And Lena, who won't even greet those young men in uniform when they approach, not so much as a polite hello, stares at them challengingly, as if she wanted to incinerate them with her eyes, or maybe show that she is not ashamed. Even they are aware of it, Fatima says, they seem almost ill at ease in front of that girl whose face says she will never be able to spit up such a grief. Turi thinks about his niece and nephew: they're better off staying with their grandmother, he decides. The two brothers and their sister remain silent, standing in the kitchen. Light floods in from the balcony as if it were summer. Fatima wipes the palms of her hands on her apron over and over again. Ignazio gnaws a fingernail that has already

been bitten to the quick. Turi grabs his brother's hand: "Can't you see what you're doing to these fingers? Stop it." Ignazio examines his hands, shoves them in his pocket, makes a faint effort to smile, and says: "I'm going over to Nuccia's, you know I can't leave her alone too long." He is almost embarrassed as he says it, because though it's his sister who has lost her husband, his wife is the one having fits, with her rapid heartbeat and her terror at being left alone in the house. At night she wakes him up, thumping him on the arm. *Mi 'ffu'u mi*, she repeats, seized by apnea. It's a foible, he thinks. Those fears of hers and that conviction – *I'm choking* – are an exaggeration, a caprice. But it's a momentary thought: afterwards, when he's with her, he'll forget about it. Here, in the house of the deceased, while the deceased's body lies somewhere else, he thinks that you learn not to be afraid once the tragedy has already occurred, that you cling to life doggedly only when everything is not yet lost.

"I'm going," Ignazio says. And he leaves. His siblings don't say a word, they don't say goodbye, they stand there dazed between the table and the refrigerator, they don't sit down, they don't drink anything, they don't even speak.

When the door slams, Salvatore feels it knock against his chest. It's fatigue, he tells himself, exhaustion from the trip. He moves a chair out from the table and doesn't offer it to his sister, it's the way they were raised; he sits down himself and that's that, he waits for her to bring him a glass of water.

Then Fatima sits too, her hands lifeless in her lap.

"Did you have a good trip?" she asks again.

"Yes, Fatima. And you? How are you doing?"

He finally managed to ask her, he did it.

Fatima stares at him dully. She says there's nothing left for her, that the Lord took everything she had, and this is the cross she has to bear.

"Fatima, whatever you need, anything. I'll stay here as long as you need me, I'm not leaving."

"You can't stay here forever," she replies looking away. And she abruptly stands up. She takes the glass, washes it, leaves it to drain.

It's an accusation, Turi thinks. No, it's resignation, he tells himself, she accepted the fact that things happened the way they did, years ago. Then again he thinks that maybe it's bitterness, that his sister has felt alone, and that it's his fault. You don't betray your own blood that way.

He asks: "When is the funeral?"

"They say they'll do an autopsy today..." Fatima says, flatly.

Have they explained to her what an autopsy is?

"Today? And then they'll bring him back here?"

"Yes, tomorrow maybe. Then we'll arrange the funeral with don Nino."

"Good, I can arrange it, if you want."

"No need," she replies hastily. After a moment, as if she had just thought of it, she says: "Thank God my mother-in-law Maddalena is no longer alive, good thing she can't see any of this, that she doesn't have to see what we see, what my children have seen. She couldn't stand another one of these, if she wasn't dead she would die, the poor soul.

"Poor thing," is all Turi can say. "Poor old woman, may she rest in peace."

"And my father-in-law: he doesn't understand what's going on."

"Giommo?"

"All he cares about is his *scecca*."

"He still has that donkey? What does he use it to carry now that he doesn't go peddling his wares?"

"He doesn't use it to carry anything. He rides it, *si passa 'u tempu*, to pass the time."

"He's old too by now, her husband. Wait and see, he'll breathe his last on that donkey. Or if the donkey dies first, he'll die too," Turi tries to joke.

Fatima is still serious: "Who does he care about, *iddu*? All he's interested in is that *scecca*."

His sister's rancour seems uncalled for, or maybe she's angry at her husband's father because he did not prevent his son from becoming what he was. Fatima is angry at everybody, anyone who could and should have done something to prevent the tragedy, whereas no one lifted a finger. Turi tries to change the subject, and again offers: "If you want I'll go to see don Nino today."

"There's no need, I told you. We already talked, he's just waiting for confirmation."

"Whatever you say," he gives up. "But tell me if there's anything else you need."

"No, nothing."

"I mean, dealing with lawyers, accountants, bureaucratic matters, things like that. If you have to make any decisions, I'm here, you can talk to me."

Fatima is silent for a long time. Then, with her back to him, she says: "I have to raise them by myself."

Turi takes a deep breath, but it sticks in his esophagus.

"I have to raise them by myself, those children of mine. That's what I need. I don't know if I have the strength. The Lord has asked too much of me, this time I'll fail Him."

"Fatima, you're not alone," Turi says getting up from his chair.

"We're all here, and we want to help you. I'll stay here as long as you need me, I won't go away."

Fatima doesn't answer, she walks out of the kitchen without looking at him, as if the room were empty.

Nailed to the chair, Turi hears her say: "You'll leave, just like you left before."

He hears it clearly, and doesn't answer, he can't answer. Fatima's sobbing on the other hand is barely audible, because his sister has locked herself in the bathroom.

Laura rests the penpoint on the crossword puzzle, but doesn't write a thing. The puzzle's boxes remain empty. She stares at them until they become a confused blank that demands nothing of her, not even the elementary act of being filled in with meaningful words. Her head is searching for other words that make sense, but she has no inkling of what they are, they are all incorrect, all lacking. As always they sound cruel, unintentionally so.

Fatima's black bun, her scrawny legs, those gaunt, bony ankles under her long, mid-calf skirts, the gnarled hands, their knuckles predicting the same arthritis that her mother Cata suffers from: Fatima will have the same hands when she's old, and no man to hold her tight.

Her sister-in-law was widowed before her time, the widow-in-waiting of a husband she had not chosen and whom she loved out of a sense of duty, convention and loyalty. In the end you don't choose to obey God either, His will must be done. Yet her sister-in-law loves her husband unreservedly, she relies on him with the naivety of a child, she doesn't object, never asks him to account, doesn't oppose him, doesn't doubt him. Things happen in the world, in her life, and Fatima accepts them.

She's never had the chance to choose. She was chosen. To be a faithful, submissive wife. Her genuine smiles in her children's birthday photos showed she was the right woman, as did the devoted way she bathed them, combed their hair, encouraged their success in school, and the determined way she punished them, beat them when they disobeyed, when they did something wrong, when they were lazy. She wanted them to be beyond reproach in a perfect house in a flawless life with a flawed husband. She never said so, she would never think that. He's her husband, she has no right to judge him, she would never offend him that way.

Her personal cross: to her ears that sacrifice must have seemed sweet, like a hallowed murmur, sacred as only the voice of Mary can be, spoken to a woman who bears the name of a divine secret. She wasn't chosen to guard those secrets, the ones revealed to the three young shepherds at Fatima, but rather to conceal other, all too

human secrets, to keep them stuck in her heart like thorns. That's how Fatima thought about it, perhaps, when she got into bed with Lena – her daughter would never leave her alone in that room already filled with ghosts – and each night sought the courage to reveal that unholy heart: not like the sacred heart of Jesus on the right aisle of the church, a bleeding red orb in His hand.

Laura can picture her, that Fatima who spoke little: older than her, more adept at cooking than at life, modest and dignified, her children irreproachable, mannerly, neat, spotlessly clean, punished fiercely whenever they broke the rules; *we must be perfect, nobody can speak ill of us, we won't be seen as inferior to anyone.*

For years she waited for that husband of hers to return to the apartment he had built for them. She has always been a widow, a widowhood for which no tears are shed, in a huge house on the seventh floor.

He had chosen her, so they say, in the cradle. He was just a boy. When she became a woman, he continued to want her for himself. She wasn't in love with anyone at the time, or at least she never confided it to Laura. And Laura never asked, because there has always been this reserve between them despite their affection. They have always been different. Fatima had no boyfriends, perhaps she had suitors whom she never even smiled at, out of propriety and decorum, and the day her hand was asked for in marriage she bowed to her destiny. Cece granted his approval – what else could he do? After 'Ntoni, no one else would ever dare ask for her, and she would have remained a spinster.

From that day on, Fatima began to love her husband like a duty she would do her best to perform. She has done so her entire life. Today she weeps for him uncontrollably, it is because of him that she has now lost some of her dignity for the first time. Or maybe in public she weeps without wailing, without sobbing – Laura has no way of knowing because she's not there with her, she can't embrace her, she spoke to her on the telephone but still, Laura is someplace else, protecting her little girls, while Fatima

does nothing but weep in the corner, long accustomed to being kept in the corner by 'Ntoni.

On the phone, the two women were unable to say anything. Fatima sobbed softly, Laura was silent, words wouldn't come to her. *Don't cry*, she'd tell her, sighing deeply and falling silent again; then soon afterwards, *Cry, sweetheart*, she urged her, *cry, get it out of your system*. After that came the usual well-meaning advice of those who have been spared, clichés such as *You have to think of your children*, *You have to be strong for them*, *Life goes on*, and other heartless platitudes, the banalities one resorts to in situations like these, commonplace phrases that are disrespectful and unkind, that cut more deeply, that worsen the offense that has been suffered. Yet they care so much for one another, those women. Still, faced with 'Ntoni's death that has made her sister-in-law a widow forever, Laura feels guilty, she feels accountable. She had had the effrontery to escape destiny, she had abandoned them all just to succeed. Fatima's widowhood opened a fissure between them, like a crack in the ground, clods of earth dislodged, split apart, and the two of them on opposite sides of the precipice, now it's that fracture that separates them.

Laura had been so frightened, years ago, that she had said it, she had uttered that ill-fated word: *Widow*, she blurted out, *I don't want to be left a widow. Here we'll all be widows, we have to get away*. Fatima could never have. Not without 'Ntoni. For years, her husband did not take her to the seashore, did not celebrate Christmas with his family, did not attend performances at school. 'Ntoni could not have left.

Laura had insisted, she had pleaded for them to leave. Salvatore didn't want to, above all he didn't want to desert his sister, his only sister with two dependent children, his sister who had no choice, willing to accept *his* choices like a consecrated wafer on her tongue, every evening at six. They had quarreled, Turi yelling loudly, Laura pounding her fists against the wall, she would have banged her head against it. Then they made up, Turi became more reasonable, he went to talk with 'Ntoni, his brother-in-law gave his approval, he absolved him, he granted him a life, the chance to save it. Her husband came

back more confused than ever, his forehead pressed against the thumb supporting his head; he had never chewed his nails, never wrung his hands or fingered his eyebrows, he always rested his head on his hand when he was worried, forehead leaning on his thumb, his lips tightly clamped, his eyes completely dry though they seemed to want to weep. Then he made up his mind. At first he had asked her to wait for him there, he would go away for a while, until things calmed down, then he would return. No, Laura shouted again. She would never wait there alone, she had no intention of being a widow-in-waiting.

The afternoon they left, Fatima did not go to the station, they said goodbye beforehand. They wept a lot, they embraced, but Laura had the impression that Fatima was angry, and wasn't saying so. The person who had the right to decide, however, had spoken. Her opinion didn't count this time either.

They left her. They kept digging at the crust of her solitude, deeper and deeper, but she waited silently at the edge of that fissure. Laura had taken away her older brother. She had tried to save her own daughters from what Fatima could not prevent happening to her children. Seeing their father fall into that pit, which for years had been there before everyone's eyes, seeing him lowered into that grave that had always been waiting to be filled. By him.

"You're still sad, Mama, how come?"

Laura turns around: Margherita's eyes are teary, it happens every time she sees her mother cry; on the other hand she laughs a lot as soon as she sees her sister laughing. Laura can still remember her chortling, pacifier gripped between her teeth, as Caterina ran around the table slapping herself on the behind and reciting rude verses.

"No, Margherita, of course not. You know I always get weepy when I'm watching television, but this certainly isn't crying."

"I thought you were doing a crossword puzzle."

"No, I got bored with it, I like watching television better."

“Aren’t we going to eat, Mama?”

The child points to the clock on the wall.

Laura smiles at her. “Are you hungry?”

“Ye-e-s,” Margherita replies, even if it’s not so. It’s just that her mother’s face and the table that has not yet been set worries her.

“Where’s your sister?”

“Writing in her secret diary, as usual.”

“Now? Go on, go call her so we can eat.”

Margherita runs to the other room. Laura hears her open the door and say:

“Mama says stop writing that silly nonsense and come on out.” Caterina pays no attention. “Go away, dopey, go set the table instead.” Margherita defies her in turn: “You’re the dope, I’m not setting the table, why should I have to do it?”

Grumbling, Caterina shuts the diary, locks it, hides the keys. “Because you have to do what I tell you. I’m bigger and I can order you,” she hisses. “What are you talking about, Caterina?” her mother yells from the kitchen. “Hurry up, come and set the table!” So the older sister tries to make a deal: “Let’s play our game,” she says to her little sister, “let’s set the table together, we’ll each do half and the one who finishes first wins.” Margherita agrees every time and each time she loses, today partly because when setting the table for three it’s hard to figure out how much is half. Caterina almost immediately crows: “Done, I win!” After lunch they play the same game, but in reverse. The one who clears the most items from the table wins. Margherita throws herself into it and clears almost the entire table by herself, quickly, counting aloud each thing she grabs. There is no prize for winning, except to feel equal to Caterina, her adored older sister.

The summer day that marked the break between their old life and the new one, erasing all traces of the earlier time, their father went shopping with the man with the mustache. Plastic plates, olive oil, salt, pasta and tomatoes. The season of having tomatoes each day had begun. A salad drizzled with olive oil: neither the girls nor their father placed a helping on their plate, they simply dipped a slice of bread directly into the salad bowl, letting the soft part of the bread soak up the oregano-seasoned oil, then, using their fingers, they would scoop out a piece of tomato and hold it over the bread, popping it in their mouth before it could drop onto the tablecloth. Their mother did not have the strength to tell the girls that it was bad manners, that you shouldn't eat out of the same plate, she let them do it.

Having returned with the provisions, the father had found his wife sitting in a chair, unable to move. He saw her get up to put things away, saw her poke through the detergents without having the strength to clean in a strange house, a house that she had not chosen, among trees and fields, without streetlights, shops or churches, how could she have ended up there? She who loved being around people. *You'd be happy even in hell*, her girlfriends always used to tease her, referring to her cheerful exuberance, her ever-ready witticism, her gregarious personality. This wasn't hell, but still she didn't want to be here.

She went on sitting there throughout the day, mostly silent, or with few words, a telegraphic brevity that irritated her husband. Every so often she burst into tears, and Salvatore would chide her: "Laura, you can't keep this up," he would say, "Laura, will you stop it? You have to force yourself." But Laura wouldn't even eat. Seeing her reminded him of her mother Màrgara's frail little figure: her tiny, bent over body, her cheekbones prominent in a ravaged face, her gaping mouth making guttural, desperate sounds, unseemly, like children when they're throwing a tantrum: she wasn't throwing a tantrum, she was just an old, old woman who was losing her younger daughter forever.

Laura didn't eat any tomatoes or bread. Salvatore made the salad, the girls ate it hungrily, the dirty dishes were thrown into the bucket. Laura did not wash the salad bowl.

She remained silent, as though lost in thought; of the two parents, she effectively assumed the role of the all-suffering one, shamelessly gloomy. All her husband could do was console her, enjoy the meal so that the girls would enjoy it too, joke around so they would laugh a little.

After lunch they went outside. The girls sat on the cement doorstep, the *bizzòlo* they called it, the stoop, and in the distance they saw a cat. It was a striped, short-haired tabby, tawny colored. It wasn't the most attractive cat, but they had never had one, and had never even been allowed to pet the animal if they ran into one along the street. But this time it was different, Caterina knew things were different. If her mother could refuse to eat, if the meal was served on plastic rather than ceramic plates, if they were living in the country, in a cottage in a Swiss village instead of in an apartment in her uncle's seven-storey building, then maybe it was also possible to pet the cat. She ran inside to get a bowl, Margherita following her, and poured some milk in it.

She carried it outside, careful not to spill it on the floor. She set it down in the doorway, beside the *bizzòlo*. She went back inside pulling Margherita by the arm, thinking that if they stayed out there the cat would be too afraid to come over. They waited. The cat did not come. They watched from the window, but he was gone.

Caterina began calling him. "Tom!" Margherita imitated her, without even wondering if that was really his name. "Tom, we put milk out for you, why don't you come?" the little one shouted.

After a few tries, to pass the time while they waited they started playing the finger counting game *gallinella zoppa zoppa*, then the card game *rubamazetto*, like on the train, until they forgot about the cat and went back in the house.

They took a nap, still tired from the trip.

Around six o'clock, their mother came to wake them up by tickling them on the lips, as she usually did. Smiling, she said:

"It's time to take a nice shower, come on," and led them into the bathroom. She helped them bathe, assured and efficient as if that were the tub in which she always

washed them. She dried their hair with the hairdryer she had brought in her suitcase, rummaged through the bags and pulled out two colorful, long-sleeved cotton sweaters: they were new sweaters that they had bought recently and had not yet had a chance to wear because it was still too hot in Nacamarina. “Mama, why long sleeves?” Margherita asked. “It's cool here, better to cover up.”

Towards evening, after a day of absence, after having sat motionless, not saying a word, their mother got up from her chair at sunset. She resumed the likeness of a mother, was herself again, found the time and means to take care of her daughters, she bathed them carefully, dressed them a bit more warmly because, although it was summer, in the hills – up north – it's chillier. She won't let them get sick, they're her children, she will protect them against any potential ill fortune.

Their first evening in Italian Switzerland, more Italian than Swiss Caterina thinks, the day following their long journey, the first journey of their life, barely two weeks after the tragedy that made Zia Nuccia utter those fearful words, violent as a curse – they remain stamped in Caterina's memory like nightmares, like the tumbles and bruises, but more so, much more so, they will be the start of every potential story, for her the beginning will always have the feel of a tragedy, it will always start with Zia Nuccia's words, *chi focu chi 'ndi vinni*, what a curse, what misfortune has struck us – that evening, which was the first evening of their new life, they forgot about the *focu* for awhile. They were four human beings, nice and clean, wearing jeans and long-sleeved sweaters, they protected themselves against the weather as the first dutiful attempt to survive.

They left the house regenerated, sweet-smelling. Never again would they feel as clean and new as that evening.

The sisters held hands, and when they left to go to Ezio's, they noticed that the milk in Tom's bowl was gone.

Riding down in the painstakingly slow elevator in the building that 'Ntoni had built, his heart skipping a beat at each floor, Salvatore pictures the scene all over again. He imagines it, he tries to reconstruct it.

His brother-in-law was on the sixth floor, surrounded by tomatoes hanging on staked vines and stacks of empty wooden crates: Fatima uses the *cascitte* to put fruit and vegetables out to dry in the sun, she saves them over the winter so she won't run out of them. What was he doing there? What was he watching? What was he thinking? Fatima told him that every day he would go down to the sixth floor for awhile, in the morning, while she did the washing or ironing; he would stand there in silence, smoking. His wife didn't ask him anything, taking refuge as usual in her domestic chores, or maybe she was afraid of getting an answer. Later she would go up to check the pots on the stove, the children would be back from school any minute. Only then did she ask him, *Are you coming up with me?* He shook his head no, she rubbed her hands on her apron as if waiting for him to change his mind, then she gave up and without a word went up the steps: the marble ones, always spotless thanks to her washrag.

It was the children who went to call him. They dropped their bookbags in their room and rushed off to find him, jubilant like all kids home from school, they called to him, making a great racket, gave him a kiss on the cheek, pulled him by the hand. *Come upstairs, come on Papa.*

Maybe that's how it was that day too. That day Lena got out of school first, there was a free hour, she returned home without Giacomo, she asked her mother, like a ritual, *Is Papa downstairs?*, and didn't even wait for a reply. She ran down the stairs, and maybe she was thinking of something funny to tell him, thinking of a way to be able to talk to him, to penetrate his silence during those days, those months, the sadness that had taken hold of her father since he had come back.

From the stairs she saw him from behind: the white shirt and tan slacks, *I'm back*, she called out before reaching him. He turned around and leaning on the railing of a balcony that was never completed, looked at her with a tenderness that made her hands

tremble a little. He was home, her father was, back home, it didn't matter if he didn't talk, that he was uncommunicative, bottled up inside himself, maybe he just had to get used to it, get used to a normal life again, she would do everything she could to make that happen.

His face was perfectly clean-shaven, not even a hint of a beard; he smiled at her. Lena stopped to pick up some folded shirts that were on the ironing board, *I'll take them upstairs*, she said, *I'll put them away*. She draped them over her arm and held them there with her other hand. *Shall we go up?* she said, her attention still on the shirts, determined not to drop them or wrinkle them, otherwise her mother would never let her hear the end of it. Her father didn't answer nor did he come over. Lena looked up distractedly and saw again, but only briefly, only for an instant, that impeccable face, while the body, her father's body, sank to the floor. *Papa!*, she ran to him, the shirts still in her arms, *Papa! Papa!*, all at once she let them drop, they fell open on the floor and maybe she stepped on one as she ran, and she knelt down beside the body, next to that man, and kept asking him, *what's wrong, don't you feel well, Papa, what's happening, tell me*, and she called her mother, screaming, like you scream when an accident happens, she didn't know yet that it was irreparable, she called to her mother then her father again, all she could say was *Papa, Mama!*, like a lost child at the zoo invoking his natural saviors; she throws herself on the ground – gray cement, nothing but cement – and shakes the body of a father who doesn't answer, the body of a father who has crumpled up, as if imploded, without her realizing it, suddenly mute, suddenly motionless, and leaden, suddenly distant, far away again, as he had been his entire life, even now that he was there before her, lying there below her, her breath on his face, her tears bathing him; she hugged him with a passion that he would never have allowed, she dug her nails into his arms, she shouted at him, beside herself, she shook him in a way that he would never have permitted, not of her or of anyone, had he still been alive. Even now while she could hold onto his body, not let go, tug at it, cling to it with her fingers, with her own body, even now her father was far away, as he had always been.

It might have really been a heart attack, Salvatore thinks, as the elevator doors open. In front of him are the electric meters and the cellar door, the smell of wine and casks lingering in the walls. 'Ntoni had slumped in silence: only much later, only when Fatima came running, did Lena notice the stain.

He had been waiting. This is what 'Ntoni was doing every morning on the sixth floor. He had resigned himself. He knew it would happen sooner or later and the waiting was unbearable. A countdown of the days you have left to live. An eternal prison term. He was waiting for death, 'Ntoni was, on the sixth floor of his extravagant, flashy building. It is this perhaps that Lena will never forgive him for, Salvatore thinks.

The outer door slams behind him. Salvatore goes down the steps, then stops. He looks around. At the building behind him and the surrounding wall in front. Like a trap. Above the top of the wall, the church campanile. That damn bell tower. A slender crucifix to redeem everybody's sins, even 'Ntoni's death. Around him, enough cement to rub you raw, an expanse of concrete at his feet, a mountain of concrete behind him, concrete that isolates him from the rest of the neighborhood, that would isolate him from the world now if he remained there, if he never went back, if he too allowed himself to be paralyzed by a flow of concrete, and stayed to stand guard over that bogus world, that futile wealth, that ridiculous power, to defend a story that went wrong, the misguided story of their lives.