

Excerpt from

ALMARINA

by

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I'll never know if it's Naples or if it's me. If it all weighs so heavily on me because the past days have been oppressive, full of fear and doubt and misgivings. Or if it's really the sight of the ugly building beyond the gate, the swelling yellow wave, the cupolas beneath the clouds, architraves too heavy to be supported by a single woman. If reality is made of unattainable rungs, unattainable powers as they say; or if it's just us on one of those rare days when, well-dressed, we face the steps that will change our lives.

The last time was just three years ago: then it was because they were the steps leading to a hospital morgue. It wasn't just any hospital, it never was again after I'd found my husband, lying dead and cold on a metal table, his lips purple, his face looking as if it had been dusted with talcum powder.

Only afterwards did I really begin to remember the form that memories take: images, reconstruction of what we said to each other, and the sequence of those things. Afterwards I put them in order, but in the first few days all I had was a metallic taste on my lips, as if I had kissed the mortuary table and not Antonio's mouth, now without breath. I had arrived late, after all the others, those who stood in front of me: his sisters especially, determined to hold the primacy of grief from there on out, just as they had held a monopoly in the past, over more trivial things. They had come at once because they had the same surname and so they had

tracked them down first; then they called and called and called me, and I didn't answer, just as I won't answer most of the calls fundamental to existence.

Because I teach at the juvenile prison of Nisida, and my cell phone rings in the safe box at the entrance, where regulations require it to stay. Each of us stayed where we were supposed to stay, and meanwhile my husband's body, his heart burst in his chest, had been carried from the sidewalk to the ambulance, from the ambulance to the emergency room. Naples is a city that knows how to deal with death, according to its due weight, which is that of life: namely, taken on its own, little more than nothing. So, half an hour after the demise (they talked that way, the doctors did, but whose demise?), Antonio was in the morgue and I was going down the steps that, ready or not, would change the course of my life.

Now, for the third time, it is April without him again, and I am walking briskly towards juvenile court, under the pines of Colli Aminei: something in the air suggests hope, and I even miss those shitty sisters-in-law of mine.

For the past few days, to fall asleep at night, I have mentally sorted through my closet, picking and choosing. Lying motionless in bed in the dark as the house around me gradually chilled, I tried on jackets and jeans, chose a blouse, then paired the same jacket with a velvet pants-skirt, before finally falling asleep changing my shoes. (Later, during the night, I must have dreamed again of piercing my ears.) I tried to assign value to the day that awaited me with what I had: women dress to celebrate.

A court is little more than a malfunctioning clinic, and a lot worse than a well-run post office: beyond the metal detector and the guards to whom to present the summons, there are dimly lit corridors, groups of people crowded around the windows, all talking on the phone at once, the reek of smoke, plastic chairs under neon lights, all of them occupied, and changing numbers on a display board. And there is an oppressive air of uncertainty, a fatigue that debases you, time that drains away. The same time that outside means something, in a waiting room is nothing anymore: it is only a step suspended in the air. It stands still: it will last eternally. In this eternity I have my hair done and my nails polished, and with my shoe I scrape a wad of chewing gum off the floor. The guards standing in front of me have their guns covered by their jackets, but I am well aware of them; my eye is trained on the case lists, and a detainee is sitting there looking every bit like a prisoner. Defiant, bored, arrogant, submissive, unmoving, about to bolt. I can read the proxemics of detainees the way students can spot a teacher in a middle-aged person sitting in a streetcar: society is divided by environments and they are personified, their members emulate and resemble one another, and they bow to the laws of large numbers. But then the individual emerges from that class, rises up from his condition and for a moment becomes distinct again: "I have to go to the bathroom," the detainee says. The bathroom is a door to my left; the officer who stays on guard opens it in front of me and the other one takes care of the door to the stall. The agent is a woman, and she knows how to do her job; she is sure of herself, so she doesn't look: she just keeps her hand on the handle so that the stall door can't close. But if she wanted to, she could watch the detainee squatting on the toilet. And while we all sit here, waiting for our red number to light up on the display, *morbus humanus* grips us and forces us to come to terms with that scene.

We imagine the slave trade, and shiploads of migrants, Roman galleys, the latrines of prison cells, and prisons with cells without latrines, and Dr. Zhivago's moving train when they have to empty the slop pail from the compartment, and then the lawyer who is handling my case calls me, and tells me: "Come on, it's our turn," so I straighten up and go.

I will never know if it was really all gray or if it was me, if indeed the door was gray laminate, the floor gray resin and the fixtures gray aluminum, with the monochromatic grisaille behind the examining board. But the courtroom was spacious and lit by a nice row of windows (even if the sky was low, and Naples was erased), and the judges up there were all women, so I said: "Good morning" in a clear voice, as I do when I enter the classroom, and when I turned to close the door, I saw her: it was Almarina.

I smiled at her, and at the same time I felt relief. Almarina looked at me from the corridor, so I knew why I was walking erect, my elbows properly close to my body, and my shoes only a shade darker than my handbag. Why I had spent so many nights dressing. I remembered an old pastime, the cardboard figures that my cousins and I used to cut out, when I was a child. Sitting on the steps of the house, while everyone was busy inside, we would color two-dimensional clothes that clung to the bodies of our models with small paper tabs.

Memories always remain where we left them: we get up, we leave, called to the table by our mothers, and the memories remain on the steps.

Almarina had no such memories and she'd been the one dressed in paper, but she held the light of the future in her eyes: and the future begins now.

My name is Elisabetta Maiorano, and it's not like anyone is asking me: it's I who repeat it in my head each time I arrive at the entry to Nisida¹ (the way I repeat my ATM password in my head while I'm still walking towards the teller machine). Every time I come, I feel guilty. At the barred checkpoint, when I stop to be recognized, I lower my eyes and show my face without really looking directly at the agent, as if I had a car full of cocaine. And I watch the crossbar rise with a huge effort, as if I myself had to raise it, as if it was my fault that Nisida is a juvenile prison, as if I myself had, with my own hands, dug the tufa roads that make the car struggle to clamber up. As if they were doing me a favor.

As soon as I come to that crossbar, I lose every civil right, any substance acquired over time, I am no longer anybody, not a college graduate, not a teacher who has won competitions, who has spent years as a substitute up north and can tell off anyone who tries to cut in line. The one who goes to report the broken mirror, the punctured tires, the car door that was keyed. (*"Why, ma'am, do you know who did it?" "Yes, I do: an unlicensed parking attendant near San Pasquale, who wanted money and I told him I would give it to a musician instead." "I'll bet the musician was unlicensed too"*).

At the corner of Nisida's guardhouse I let myself be vivisected, but it's only my impression, I tell myself: after all, a lot of people go there in the morning, educators, teachers, lab instructors, and I even have a registered plate. In fact they never ask me why I'm there. And maybe they don't even know – they who are assigned one day there and the next month who knows where – maybe they don't know that we will climb the mount of purgatory, and when we come down we won't be the same again.

[...]

Today there is a new girl in class.

"Fortunately, a judge sent her here," the literature colleague says.

We're told that she's sixteen, that she's Romanian (what's left of her, after her father raped her and beat her up).

"What's your name?"

"Almarina."

The father broke some bones, I don't know which ones: they could be important bones, part of the spine, the ribs, a patella.

There's a place in the head where the most atrocious thoughts, the ones that are not normally admitted, not only get in, but line up in single file. And as I look at her, my thoughts, lined up in a row, are saying: *I understand that you can hate a child to the point of killing her, I don't understand how you can rape her.* (Do I really understand this? In these terms?) The new pupil has a stiff hand that she grips the pen with, which makes her look like one of those old women, deformed by arthritis, smoking her cigarette. Now I have to go over to her and try to see if she knows her mathematics. That is, I have to sit in front of her and wait until that hand draws a line on the sheet, divides the factors from their result.

"Do you speak Italian?"

“Yes.”

Inside the folder is this man who rapes her and then breaks her ribs: her father. And a brother. A brother who was six years old when she took him away with her to Italy.

“Let’s try doing some multiplication. Okay? 35×68 . No, reverse them, look: always put the bigger one on top.”

The nail of my index finger, lacquered with a polish bought in cash at the OVS yesterday, is so close to the stroke of her pen, of her deformed hand, that it grazes the body of the truck on which she traveled with her little brother. She paid for the trip on the truck itself, to everyone, whenever they wanted it. Wait, $5 \times 8 = 40$, move it, put it down below or you won’t find it anymore. So somewhere there is a brother. The brother who comes with her. They find them in Fano, they separate them: him in a home with a family, she in a juvenile residence. She must have felt great when they took him to safety. She must have thought that they would adopt him, she must have thought what mothers at the Annunziata thought when they put their newborns into “the wheel” at night.²

Now we need to do some addition. Adding, more.

She doesn’t remember the mathematical operations: at the residence she never went to school. How can that be? I won’t look into it. (“*Elisabè, what can I tell you? The best crime she committed was when she stole a cell phone.*”

“*Really?*” “*At least that way a judge sent her here.*”)

In such cases you work your way backwards until you get to a starting point, a point you know: there has to be a moment, a house, a day, the warmth of a bed somewhere in there. Addition. She knows addition, so we’ll begin with the addends and the sum, with the commutative law.

The lessons are brief, the guards come to call the girls, and when she gets up, she’s a little taller than when she was sitting. She’s a knot, a ball of yarn, a monkey wearing a shapeless acetate jumpsuit and she leaves.

At this point we have to tell ourselves something. For example, one of the things we can tell ourselves is “we’re leaving in a little while and going back to our lives” (and for me this is not good because life outside is bitter). Or “tomorrow I’ll bring her a book on Frida Kahlo, written on an easy level, with a lot of colorful illustrations. I have to remember where I put it.”

[...]

As I was leaving I found Almarina on the bench, huddled up, her knees pressed tightly to her chest. In front of her they were playing an irregular game, the one with a dog as ball-boy and at least eight players on each side of the court. I was on my way out; the volleyball court is the last thing you pass on your left when you leave Nisida. And if you leave at game time, it’s easier to go.

Just don’t really look at them when you go; you have to go, the law says, and the law says they have to stay. This separation is inhuman. A vicious wrench for which we teachers at the penal institutions should get double pay or, as the English colleague says, at least have our cosmetic surgery paid by the ministry.

And Almarina was on the last bench before the outside world, huddled up. So I sat down next to her.

“Don’t you feel well?”

“I have my period.”

“Would you like an aspirin?”

“No, it’s not that my stomach hurts, it’s that the Madonna made my period come back.”

“You’re saying that the Madonna took your period? Oh well: were you worried about being pregnant?”

“No, not pregnant because I hadn’t had it for two years.”

“Elephants are pregnant for two years.”

“I hadn’t had it since I took the baby out of my stomach.”

“Aborted?”

“Yes, with the lady, my grandmother brought me.”

“It wasn’t a hospital? Did she hurt you?”

“No, it was like a hospital, in a lady’s house, it hurt, then it went away.”

“Did you want to keep it?”

“No, no, it was against nature, you know? It had happened after... So, no, I couldn’t keep it.”

And I understood perfectly, but maybe they don’t know how much we teachers know, to what extent.

It’s that we always try to explain the system to the children, or make them think normal, beautiful things, as you do with all the children you love. It is a non-theorized pedagogical principle, that of softening reality, making it seem less ugly. So in here we always ask the girls about their love interests, we admire the new hairstyle they’ve managed to create after shampooing with the few means they have. I, for years, always talk about denominators and nail polish, farmers selling apples at the market, and compliment them on the ceramic tiles just fired in the oven.

I know that the detainees sometimes talk to the educators, often with the agents, who have different hours than ours and pick them up as night falls. But instead that day, to my astonishment, I found myself on the last bench before the outside world with Almarina huddled up.

I would have liked to say: “Such lovely tiles”, I would have liked so much to say that, but now I couldn’t anymore: she had entrusted me with something huge and I had to thank her.

“I too had an abortion, I was eighteen, I had just started university. It’s bad, but afterward my period came back after forty days.”

I told her the truth but I would have even told her a lie. I would have told her that even if it wasn’t true. I was trying to make her understand that it will pass, that it doesn’t happen only to those who are raped, in short, that she and I were equals in many ways.

And while I was trying to make her feel, I felt it.

“And are you happy that your period came back?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that one day you will want a baby of your own?”

“I don’t know, I wanted to be a doctor or work in a perfumery when I grow up.”

“In a perfumery?”

“Making perfumes. I take these plants, see? And I put them in alcohol, the pure kind though, the one used in liqueurs, you leave the leaves in there, or the flowers, and perfumes are created. You can also do it with oil, but oil is more expensive.”

And so we stayed there a long time picking flowers, we planted a large organic farm on land that, as we saw it, could be Lucania or Romania. We leveled it where we needed to, then, with white coats and a cap on our hair, we went into a laboratory and among the ampoules, drop by drop, we chose the essences for our production. From the bench she occasionally pointed toward the perimeter wall, the watchtowers, and the barbed wire, because by that time, the perfumery’s sign was blinking out there: ALMARINA.

Those of you who judge are ready to believe in love at first sight, but other forms of unexpected love make you suspicious. Friendships seem cunning, love for pupils smacks of paternalism and profound admiration for the elderly seems to involve some kind of concealed lack in our past. You want love to proceed step by step, you'd like to discern a linear path, observe it all with morbid curiosity. But no, love shouldn't be observed: the heart is opalescent and examinations of conscience are for those who are unhappy.

I bound myself to Almarina like that, as we gazed at the sea, and I told her that my husband had been a magnificent swimmer. Who would disappear for hours beyond the last strip of land that I could see from the beach, and I would lie down a while, read a little, then I felt betrayed, and finally terrified. And when he came back, afterwards, and nothing had happened, and everything was as it was before, and in fact it was all very wonderful because our only concern was which tavern to choose, it seemed unreal to me that he hadn't disappeared, or been washed away, and that he wasn't even short of breath.

"I can't swim," she told me then.

"You can always learn," I said, "even when grown up."

And that answer didn't just mean what it said: it meant that I would teach her how to swim.

[...]

By the time we returned to Nisida, she could float.

At the checkpoint the agents looked inside my car, and I showed the authorization from the supervisory magistrate: I was already changing, we had already changed. I was not the teacher (I was no longer anyone after hours) and she was my daughter on Christmas leave, my daughter who was nearly safe and sound, who in February will have served her entire sentence. I was bringing her back; they raised the crossbar. At the first hairpin turn a sense of abandonment came over me. The sea was abandonment and Nisida was my heart. The wave came and went and broke and left me soaked and in the meantime night had already fallen, and huge floodlights, like those of ship moorings, illuminated the road and made the bullet-proof entry door gleam.

And since I was not the teacher, but a car that was bringing back a detainee, that huge mouth swallowed us up, car and all, and the transfer took place there, between one hatchway and the other. In the sealed room of abandonment, sitting in the car waiting, I turned to the back seat to retrieve her paltry bag and the new suitcase full of provisions and new clothes and books and things that she had liked of mine. Almarina spoke to me then.

"Can't you let me know if Arban is all right and where he is? I won't look for him when I get out, I promise. I think about the night we left. After mama died, if I had stayed at home my father would have killed me, I would really have died, so my grandmother said enough, as soon as the neighbor leaves I'll put you and your brother both in the truck. I think that he must be going to school now, right? I think so. And then we crossed the field at night and we thought that papa would kill my grandmother too, but she said don't worry, I have this, this... I

don't know, what do you call it in Italian? The thing with a handle that you use on the grass, like a moon. Yes, a scythe, and we watched my grandmother disappear behind us in the field, on foot, all dressed in black with a scythe in her hand. It's awful when you don't know if you will see a person again and everything else, still, at the beginning the trip wasn't so bad, we walked the roads by day and ate jujubes, the red dates that old women sold in baskets, and then at night we stopped at hostels, went to the bathroom and things like that. It was after Calafat that we got lost, the neighbor left us, I had to go with men and all that, but anyway I was able to bring him to Italy, Arban I mean, and we were together until the station at Fano where they took us to the police and then from there they separated us. But I ran away from the residence to look for Arban, yes, and then I also stole and I ended up here. Can you let me know how Arban is?"

And *here* the hatch door was already opening and she went with the guard and then the hatch door closed again and I drove out. Outside it was an ordinary festive night in the city and on the way back, in traffic, I had to constantly keep glancing at the people in the other cars and tell myself "they don't know anything about how I am, they see me and they think I'm normal. And so I am a little normal. I am the same as when I went there. I am the same as on any other day." And I kept telling myself that at every stoplight, all the way home.

¹ Nisida is a small island off the coast of Naples connected to the city by a stretch of land. The site of a Bourbon prison in the 1800s, it was later an Italian state penitentiary, and then a reformatory for juvenile offenders.

² The Church of the Annunziata is a basilica located in Naples' old center. Destitute mothers would come there to abandon their infants in a turntable in a convent wall, in the desperate hope of giving their child a better life.