

THE
HUMAN
BODY

Paolo Giordano

*English Translation by
Anne Milano Appel*

Pamela Dorman Books

VIKING

Shots in the Night

"I'm thinking of a prank," Cederna announces to Ietri as they're shaving early in the morning.

"What prank?"

"First tell me if you'll go along, then I'll tell you about it."

They rinse their razors in the same basin of warm water resting on the ground. The shaving lather floats like cream on the surface. Cederna shaves carefully, because a few pimples have broken out and he has to pay attention. He can't explain the frenzy that seizes him on certain days like today. All he knows is that he wakes up with a wild urge to do something, to pick a fight, smash things, knock people around, wreak havoc. He's been that way since he was a kid and his memories of every one of those days are partly appalling and partly glorious. If there were someone he could beat up, it would be perfect, but the enemy doesn't show its face, so he has to improvise.

"How can I tell you I'm in if I don't know what it involves?" Ietri objects.

"Don't you trust me, *verginella?*"

Ietri thinks it over. Cederna knows very well he has him in the palm of his hand. Ietri is his disciple. If he asked him to run naked toward a group of Taliban, he'd probably do it.

"Sure, I trust you," Ietri says.

"Then tell me you'll go along."

"It's not dangerous, is it?"

"Nope. You just have to keep watch."

"Okay, then. I'm in."

Cederna moves closer. He stops Ietri's hand that's holding the razor. He slides his own blade over his buddy's cheek. Ietri's eyes widen; he stiffens.

"What are you doing?"

"Sssh . . ."

Ietri holds his breath as his eyes follow the razor's path.

"Listen," Cederna says. "Tonight, when the others are in the mess hall, we'll take the snake out of the Wreck."

"I'm not touching that thing."

"I'll do it. I told you, you're the lookout—you just have to make sure no one approaches."

"What are you going to do with the snake?"

"Put it in Mitrano's sleeping bag."

"Holy shit."

"Dead right. Wait till you see how he jumps when he finds it."

"But didn't you see how scared he was last night? He couldn't even look at it."

"Exactly."

Cederna draws the blade along his friend's jaw, carefully following the curve of the bone. Their mouths are so close that if they each pursed their lips, they'd touch. Never in a million years would Cederna ever think about kissing a man on the lips.

"What if he gets really pissed?"

"Who? Mitrano? That's just the beauty of it."

The beauty of it also has to do with getting back at Mitrano once and for all for how he made Cederna feel the night of the attack, sniveling like a woman to try to get his place back inside the bunker—but Cederna doesn't say that.

"And what if René gets mad?"

"René never gets mad. Besides, who gives a shit? If we followed his

lead, we'd all commit suicide out of boredom. It'll be fun—take my word.”

“I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea.”

“You promised you'd do it. If you back out now you're a sleazebag. Stick out your chin.”

“Okay,” Ietri mutters, barely opening his mouth. “I'm in.”

“The important thing is not to let anyone see us, otherwise the prank won't work. When they don't find the snake, they'll go nuts.”

“Torsu is always in the tent.”

“That guy's brain is fried from the computer. He won't even notice.”

Cederna now focuses on his buddy's mustache, as Ietri obediently draws in his lips to stretch the skin tighter. Cederna wipes off the residual foam with his fingers. His older brother used to do that for him when he grew his first facial hair. For *him* Cederna wouldn't hesitate to run naked toward a group of Taliban and let himself be shot—you can count on that! It was his brother who taught him how easy it is to be adored by someone younger.

“Cederna?” Ietri asks.

“Shoot.”

“Can you make my sideburns pointy like yours? I can't do it.”

Cederna smiles at him. He's a good kid, his Ietri. He moves him. “Keep your head still, *verginella*. It's a job that requires precision.”

The fact that Irene still hasn't mentioned last night's encounter is not reassuring to Lieutenant Egitto. On the contrary, it makes him more and more anxious with each passing hour. When he woke up this morning, she'd already left. He heard from the colonel that she'd gone out on patrol with the men, that she'd wanted to see the bazaar and confer with certain informants *about her own concerns*. She reappeared at lunch time, and they were sitting at the same table in the mess hall. He watched her entertain the officers with the story of a fellow soldier

who, not having appreciated the report she'd made about him to command staff, had tailed her to her house and then attacked her, cracking two ribs with his fist. Everyone was amused and shocked by the story: a military man beating a woman colleague—unheard of, imagine that! That's some kind of lily-livered coward. Egitto pretended to smile. Was the episode to be believed? And why had Irene chosen that particular one? Is she perhaps trying to send him a message, let him know that he shouldn't joke around with her? After last night's accident—that's what he's calling it now, an *accident*—he perceives a certain sense of danger. He even considers the possibility of blackmail: if he won't go along with her, Irene will blow up his career simply by snapping her fingers. That's what she's telling him: from now on he'll have to obey her, become her lover, a much more elaborate strategy than a fake pregnancy. Nauseated, Egitto has left almost everything on his tray untouched, only picking at the roasted potatoes.

Ballesio invites him back to his tent for their usual afternoon talk. Actually, he doesn't even invite him—he assumes the lieutenant will follow him—but Egitto offers some muddled excuses. He goes back to the infirmary, but Irene isn't there. The lieutenant goes around the canvas divider, contemplates the portion of the space that's been usurped from him. Irene's bag is resting on the ground, unattended, a rather small backpack, appropriate for someone who needs to travel light. He looks behind him, all clear. He squats down and opens the zipper.

He sifts through the clothes, taking care not to crumple or move them around. Nearly all black tops and pants, but also a fleece sweatshirt—so she had one, then. His hands dig deeper, and he recognizes a different fabric by its feel. He takes out a nightgown, or a slip, it's not clear—a flimsy garment in any case, maybe silk, the shoulder straps trimmed with lace.

“You should see it on me. It looks spectacular.”

Egitto stiffens. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “I was just . . .” He doesn't have the nerve to turn around.