

Gli anni al contrario, by Nadia Terranova

Working Title: The Contrary years

Translation sample by Clarissa Botsford

Full translation available funded by The Bridge Anglo-Italian Prize 2017

Prologue

The Two Seas

On the toilet, Aurora Silini plugged her ears so that she could concentrate on the Geography book open on her lap. She could hear her brothers fighting outside in the corridor, and soon one of them would knock on the door. The only way to get any privacy was to pretend she had a bad case of constipation. She was aiming to get high scores again in her end of semester test, even though her parents would only glance distractedly at her report card. There was no way her success would buy her permission to go out either; her father insisted she stay at home every afternoon. If only someone would ask her something about what she was studying, or just show a little interest. No hope of that, alas.

She was the second child in a family of four boys and two girls. By the time she was thirteen, any desire to reproduce had been stamped out by all the screaming and hysteria that surrounded her on a daily basis. She had always had real babies to play with, rather than dolls, but as soon as she went to elementary school she realized that being good at school was a way to keep adults at bay and garner respect - at least not related to her. In the Catholic school where her father - a prison warden who was well known in town and always referred to as 'Il Fascistissimo' - sent his daughters to get their education, the nuns urged bad and rebel girls to follow the model student's example. Tainted by this unsolicited praise, Aurora was excluded from all the in-groups and girly cliques. She was not happy with the barrier the nuns had built around her, but nevertheless felt less lonely at school than she did at home.

Giovanni Santatorre, the third child of Communist attorney, was conceived on one of those frisky nights that middle-aged couples occasionally succumb to. On discovering she was pregnant again, the attorney's wife had been upset. "How are we going to manage now?" she had complained to her husband. L'Avvocato had lit a cigarette and answered that just as they had managed to feed

four mouths they would now feed five, and she hadn't had the heart to object that at their age money was not the problem - it was sheer physical energy.

With his auburn curls, bright blue eyes, and dark, aristocratic countenance, the last born Santatorre grew up lagging behind his brothers. His teachers complained he was difficult, but they seemed more perplexed by their inability to understand his ways than by his quiet ways. Giovanni spent most of his afternoons until after sunset playing soccer with other kids in the courtyard of the building where he lived, until his mother called him in from the window. He hated having to abandon the match, even though he rarely scored a goal. He always chose the worst players for his team, the ones nobody else wanted. Fairness and justice were already his thing.

When he was eleven he stole his first cigarette from his father's jacket pocket and became an avid smoker, winning the admiration and respect of his peers. He gave up on soccer when he got to Junior High. He had never been any good at it. He borrowed slogans from the television, picked up Marxist phrases from books at home, and decided politics was his thing. He decided he would try and look more closely at what his father was doing. He skipped classes at school to attend the local Communist Party section, where l'Avvocato was enrolled with full honors, but was disappointed to find a clutch of older men engaged in nothing resembling preparations for a Revolution. He took part in a meeting where, under the gaze of a portrait of Lenin, the division of seats in the upcoming local elections was under debate. These were definitely not the kind of comrades he was seeking. Whenever he turned up, the old men would load him with gifts for the Avvocato: bottles of wine, *provola* cheese, trays of *cannoli*. Giovanni would thank them, but leave everything behind when he left. It was clear to them all that initiating him into the complex dynamics of the Party would be no easy task, some even remarking that the youngest Santatorre didn't live up his surname, engraved on the brass name plate at the door of his father's legal practice.

The Silini home was a detached villa just outside the city on the sea front, a choice ostensibly for the family's peace of mind, but actually to shore up Il Fascistissimo's desire for isolation. He could never have tolerated living in a condominium, where he would have had to discuss noisy neighbours, shared expenses, or building maintenance with people with whom he had nothing in common. He did not want anyone to have a say in his decisions. He wanted absolute freedom to take care of, or neglect, the garden or the roof, and, likewise, nobody questioned his absolute power over decisions regarding his offspring's education.

From their window you could see Calabria and the Strait of Messina as it flows into the open sea, creating that vortex of currents where the Ionian meets the Tyrrhenian, giving Messina its

proud name: city of the two seas. The names of the residential quarters along the coastline mock reality: Peace, Paradise, Contemplation. The adolescent Aurora was by no means at peace, but she did do a great deal of contemplation. Through the slats of the green wooden shutters, closed for thirty days every other month - there was always some relative who had just died, requiring the family to create an appropriate penumbra of grief - Aurora spied on the silent fishermen, following their nocturnal adventures when they took out their lanterns to bring the fish to the surface.

At the Santatorre residence, the elder boys' bedrooms were spacious with big windows, while Giovanni had been relegated to a hastily transformed attic. Under this roof, which felt as though it was raining down on him, Giovanni would lie awake consumed by claustrophobia, and by the time he managed to get to sleep it was already morning. Exhausted, but too scared to say why, Giovanni would doze off fitfully at his desk at school.

In the Silini sitting room, the book cases were filled with non-fiction and literature, carefully selected by Il Fascistissimo. There were essays on Italian colonial history, and collections of D'Annunzio's poetry, alongside the works of other philosophers such as Croce, Gentile and Prezzolini. Aurora had asked her father to buy some novels for her to read, but he replied that if she couldn't do without she could always borrow some from the school library. She started to bring home the kind of cruelly sentimental novel the church school had made available to their charges, and she fell in love with the genre. In her favourite, the heroine was a wealthy young woman whose mother had died giving birth to her. In every chapter the girl tried desperately to win her father's affection, but he stubbornly kept the flame of his wife's memory alive, and never forgave her for coming into the world. In the final pages, the father married the girl's governess. She had been in love with him from the start, and at the wedding, father and daughter embrace for the first time. In the Silini household, the book cases were never opened. They were lifeless objects, lined up against the wall.

Giovanni soon left the Party, steering clear of people's expectations rather than of the rules, which he anyway considered a straight-jacket. He had no desire to stand for some provincial election, and even less to behave as the Avvocato's son. He decided to explore other options, approaching older students, some of whom were already at college, others who had already joined some of the extra-parliamentary left wing groups. He tried out one group another, but didn't feel any of them were up to his standards. Both at home and outside, he never missed the opportunity to lash out against the complacent, bourgeois attitude of the Communist Party, and by the time he

turned eighteen, he was seen by others as being one of those ‘lost comrades’ who were setting off down the wrong path. Discussions with his father got noisier as they competed over which of them was further left on the political spectrum. Giovanni liked to win by leaving the room and slamming the door behind him, or just shrugging his shoulders.

He was no longer dragging himself to school, as he had done when he was at Junior High. Now he loved History and Philosophy, and used his oral tests as training for debate. One morning he had a run-in with a group of Fascists. He was terrified of blood, but had been so proud and dazed by the punches that he didn’t even realize he was covered in it. His peers had been impressed by his disregard, seeing it as recklessness, until he had noticed with terror that his clothes were covered in blood. He fainted on the spot, but it had made no difference to his reputation: his status as a hero had been established and would stay with him for years.

When she was fifteen, Aurora tried to act cool when she sneaked out into the garden to smoke her first ever cigarette. The tobacco was flaky, and the cigarette paper - which had been in her pocket all morning, and which she had received in exchange for passing an almost perfect score on a Greek test to a class mate - was shredded. Her school friends’ natural hostility towards her had been mitigated by her sharing her knowledge. She had been able to show her peers that she was more than just a student who knew all the answers, more than just a terrible bore who was also untouchable because her father had sent two daughters to the school, had paid fees from kindergarten to senior year for both, and was treated as a benefactor by the nuns. She had wisely decided not to accept the invitation to go and smoke in the bathroom. She knew that she would cough and betray the fact that she had never smoked before. She needed to practice. In private.

She leaned against the wall and plucked up her courage. She coughed, but the flavor wasn’t bad. She glanced over at the weeds growing between the terracotta tiles. This place is so neglected, she thought to herself resentfully. What a waste! That was when she felt the slap on her cheek and a sharp pain at the back of her head. Il Fascistissimo was dragging her by her hair back into the house.

“You’re a cretin, that’s what you are,” he yelled. “Can you believe my luck? I have a daughter who is a cretin. She can’t do anything properly, not even in secret. I fought in the African War! Do you really think you can pull wool over my eyes?”

Aurora wept as her father railed against her, and the boys were relieved that for once they were not the ones in the eye of the storm.

The Avvocato's elder sons both went to law school, following the natural course dictated by their surname.

"What will Giovanni do next year?" Giuseppe's mother asked herself in the months running up to her youngest son's High School graduation. The more her son avoided the issue, the more anxious she became.

"He'll be the one to decide," her husband reassured her one evening in bed before going to sleep. His son had no desire to follow in his footsteps, and, anyway, he had already busted a gut getting the first two boys through law school. It would be hard to keep his youngest on the straight and narrow, even harder to keep up with him intellectually. The boy was not easy. There were far too many discussions in the house as it was. At least in the office he deserved a bit of peace and quiet.

"The entire Santatorre family doesn't have to study law, after all," l'Avvocato concluded. "Let's let him decide what he wants to do."

When he was a child, Giovanni had wanted to study medicine; he liked the idea of helping others. But he couldn't stand the sight of blood, and he was too ashamed of this weakness to own up to it in public. The students in the extra-parliamentary left he had been attracted to all studied Philosophy. Since he was interested in becoming a revolutionary, he decided that was what he would do.

A few years later, Aurora graduated from High School and was finally free of the nuns. Her hard work had stood her in good stead. Thanks to her high grades and special commendations her parents decided she would be spared the job at the post office the less talented Silini offspring were usually assigned to. They decided she would be an elementary school teacher, the only job Il Fascistissimo considered suitable for a woman. While the family waited for the national competition that assigned teaching positions to be announced, Aurora was given permission to enroll in a Liberal Arts college. Her father thought parking her there for a while would at least get her out of the house. Perhaps, he dared hope, his daughter, who was so devoted to her studies that she seemed devoid of any other talents, would learn a bit about the world and wake up to its promises. Aurora was thrilled, but kept her excitement to herself.

Giovanni's idyll with Philosophy did not last long. His rhetoric, honed by debates with his comrades and arguments with his girlfriends, fell apart when challenged by a college professor. However much he studied and applied himself, as soon as he was put to the test all he could come up with was a confused medley of insurrectionist slogans, which were ultimately rendered innocuous by his innate good manners. He interrupted lectures to give his opinion whenever he

didn't agree with his professors, cited Marxist critics excluded from the 'canonical' reading list, and was even appreciated by his tutors, who treated him as an equal. He couldn't bring himself, however, to actually berate his professors, as many of the other students had taken to doing in the corridors or during exams. He was equally restless in his political affiliations, moving from one group of activists to another with renewed energy every time. He was always the first to occupy a lecture theater, offer to roll off mimeographed pamphlets, or improvise speeches. He never backed down, and never exhausted his infinite reserves of time and anger. In the end he settled for the Marxist-Leninist Party.

Gipo, a militant in the group who lived in Bologna but often came back to his home town, was quick to realize that Santatorre was the type of comrade you could rely on whatever the circumstances. Gipo was the son of friends of Giovanni's parents. He was a few years older than Giovanni, and they had crossed paths occasionally when they were kids, without ever becoming friends. Giovanni was immediately impressed. Gipi had never been good looking, nor dressed well, but now he had contrived to make himself look interesting. His untamed beard and round glasses gave him an air of intelligent authority. Back in Bologna he had a wife and two kids, but he came back to Messina often to visit his widowed mother. Giovanni saw Gipi as being totally free, the freest person in the world. They started to write to each other and occasionally speak on the phone. Giovanni had the sensation that he had become important in some way, that in this small, sleepy seaside town he was some sort of outpost of a vast movement taking place elsewhere.

The day Aurora signed up for her college courses she couldn't believe her eyes. Never in her life, not even when she was spying on people strolling in the piazzas and on the seafront, had she seen such an array of students all in one place: long-haired hippy types, feminists, political contesters with an intellectual air, or just plain philistines who had fallen victim to the fashion of the day. Trying to elude her brother's attempts at chaperoning her, she attempted to decipher some of the graffiti on the Faculty walls.

"This place is hell," her brother complained. "What made you want to enroll here with all these dorks?"

Aurora didn't answer. She ran her finger down the course options on her registration form: Literature, Languages, and ... without thinking twice she ticked the box for Philosophy. Il Fascistissimo had chosen Liberal Arts for her, but he had not specified which course she should attend. When she got home she steeled herself for his reaction, calculating that if she showed him the registration form which had already been accepted, together with the receipt proving that enrolment fees had already been paid, he would not be able to do much about it. He peered over the

top of his newspaper, took one look at the form, and went right back to reading without saying a word.

Anything that took place outside Messina caught Giovanni's attention. He was quick to offer hospitality to comrades from Rome, Bologna or Milan who were on their way to important meetings in Palermo or Catania. Anyone who needed a place to sleep ended up staying over at the Santatorre family house, sleeping either on the divan in the sitting room, or in Giovanni's attic room, which he gladly gave up in favor of spending the night in the kitchen smoking and reading. Giovanni's mother didn't like all this coming and going of perfect strangers in her house, but his father was happy to sit down with them after dinner and enjoy a *grappa* and a cigarette in their company, debating Marxism in all its previous and current forms. Giovanni never took part in these discussions. He watched, burning with shame: for the bourgeois coffee set his mother served his companions with, and for his father's quips, which, it seemed to Giovanni, were met with polite laughter, if that. Most of all, though, he was embarrassed by his father's old-style communism that reeked of defeat.

L'Avvocato boasted that he had fought against the Fascist regime, but the most heroic thing he had ever done was hide his communist sympathies from his father-in-law so he could marry the woman he had fallen for. Every time he told this story, his wife chipped in that at the time she had been too naïve, and that if she had found out sooner where his sympathies lay she would never have accepted his hand in marriage as she was a good Christian. By the time she had gained a full grasp of her fiancé's political views, the date of the wedding had already been set and her dress already made. As soon as they were married, her husband had enrolled in the Party with the same sense of duty with which he had joined the Bar Association. L'Avvocato had enjoyed a moderately successful career inside the Party, but had always declined positions of responsibility because, he always said, work and family come first. There would be no second career for him. In Giovanni's view, his father sat around at Party headquarters chatting as idly as if he were in a bowling club. What was so great about having a Communist father, Giovanni wondered, when he could have had a normal Christian Democrat parent like everyone else?

Once the College gates had opened to her, Aurora was exposed to a whole new world of demonstrations and collectives. She was baffled by all this activism, but didn't let the opportunity to betray her father pass her by. In fact, she found comfort and hope in going for the opposite pole of the political spectrum to him. Until now she had had no idea it was possible to have ideas about divorce - or, worse, about abortion - that differed from the belief system she had lived and breathed

at home and at school. When she was 13, she had even sought approval from her father by drawing swastikas on her school notebooks. After enduring the dictatorship of one political view, Aurora was suddenly catapulted into a noisy marketplace of competing ideas, with Feminists, Trotskyites, and Anarchists vying for visibility. Aurora wondered what secrets each of these promises of greater freedom concealed, and decided to take her time before deciding which group to choose. There were plenty of books to read in order to find out more, some of which were not only not prohibited but were actually on her course reading lists.

Aurora was the first to take her place in the lecture theatres and the last to leave, fearing if she missed anything, or arrived late, Il Fascistissimo would revoke her rights. There was no need to worry; her absence from home had soon become as natural as it had been when she had attended High School. Except now there was a way for her not to have to miss the political debates and assemblies: she simply lied to her parents about her timetable. Aurora soon changed the way she dressed. She no longer covered herself up as she had done when she was a teenager. She took to wearing tight T-shirts and the heavy make-up preferred by the less inhibited of her course mates. She bought corduroy pants, an argyle sweater, and a pair of oversized glasses. She left her hair untied, hanging loosely over her shoulders. She made friends so easily she surprised even herself. She was still not allowed to go out in the evenings, but attending classes, as well as tutoring other students - which had finally given her some financial independence - meant she was out of the house more and more. When political meetings went on too long, her excuse for leaving was always the same: sorry comrades, I need to get up early to study. With this justification she felt less embarrassed at not having the same level of freedom as everyone else. Again her credibility hinged on her high grades, which guaranteed her both a 'free zone' at home and the respect of her peers. Everyone wanted to be in her study group for group projects. Her name and her level of preparation meant the whole group benefited when it came to the exam. The more books she read, the more she discovered herself to be a proud and practicing Feminist. As soon as she walked in the door at home, however, she was unable to express her newfound views to her mother, who had turned detachment into an art form and her own existence into mute depression. For now there was no overlap between her life outside and her life inside college.

Whenever he could, Giovanni left Messina. In March 1977, after the left wing militant, Francesco Lorusso, was shot and killed by the police during a rally, he went to join the demonstration in Rome, and from there went on to Bologna. The city looked like a war or a natural catastrophe had just swept through it. Gipo was particularly animated, and told Giovanni about the heroic and bloody clashes between militants and police. He foresaw a new age, a revolution in the

making. Apparently, there had never been such a unity of purpose among all the different splinter groups. Giovanni felt vaguely guilty for having missed all the action, but was filled with new resolve when he got back to Messina. Gipi's stories, and animated expression, had convinced him that now, more than ever before, was the time to make a change in his life. It was no longer enough for him to roll off and distribute political pamphlets. He used his savings to sub-let a studio apartment, furnished it with a couple of desks and a few chairs, two typewriters, a bookshelf, and a corner kitchen, and opened up the place for people like him, who had joined the Marxist-Leninist Party just as it was about to dissolve and who had not yet found another group to join. It worked. There were lots of people who wanted to help, fellow spirits who wanted to do something. With this support, he organized an environmentalist demonstration against a group of engineers who were working on a mega-project to build a bridge over the Messina Strait. The march was a success, attracting not only students but also government employees, factory workers, fishermen and the unemployed. That day Giovanni felt that politics had finally become everyone's business. A few weeks later, however, as the weather warmed up in early May, his euphoria dissipated. The coastline belonged to nobody in particular, and, after all, even political activists had the right to enjoy a bit of sunshine every now and then.

Giovanni moved to Taormina, where a cousin had offered him a job as a night porter in a hotel. It was low season, perfect for picking up foreign girls and enjoying the best water-ices before hordes of tourists invaded the town. When he had an evening off, he would go to the clubs and listen to live covers of Italian singer-writers and early British punk. He would drink and sing along until far into the night. Not only was he not interested in smoking marijuana; he actually resented the hippy types, who had lived through the sixties but had no idea that a new era had dawned. This was no longer an age of avoidance. It was time to wake up and prepare for the revolution.

In June the owner of the apartment called Giovanni. He needed the studio back, and could Giovanni please come and empty it immediately. Giovanni moved his stuff out with no help from him comrades, dying of heat and fatigue. He didn't think there was any need to look for another place. He had suddenly realized he was behind in his exams. All the other leaders had either already graduated, or were at least up to speed on their credits. He should not be an exception. It had been ages since he had last applied himself to studying, and what little he remembered about his last test was not exactly encouraging. He decided to join a study group, hoping a bit of competition and sense of duty would spur him on. He called an old class mate who gave him the phone number of a girl everyone said was an outstanding student. He dialed the number and they agreed on a time and place to meet.

Part One: Sicily Against the Moon

1.

June 1977, at 3 o'clock on a scorching, humid afternoon, a girl jumped off the empty bus and looked around suspiciously. The sun was beating down on the tarmac and against the closed metal shutters in the empty city. There was only one café open, with no more than two or three people in it. Men's voices only, she realized. Better to stand outside. The appointment, after all, was in front of the bus stop. She decided to wait under the shade of a tree; the only other shady spot being occupied by the one other person standing in the street. She turned the other way so as not to have to meet the man's gaze. How stupid can you get? Blindly accepting an appointment on trust? What has got into me? She blamed her father, with all his obtuse prohibitions, which had always made her say yes to anything she wasn't allowed to do without even thinking whether she wanted to do it or not.

"So you're Miss Top Score?" a jocular voice asked. The young man who had emerged from the cone of shade smiled, revealing brilliant white, not quite straight, teeth, which gave him a sensual air.

"And you are...?"

"What can I offer you?"

She followed him into the café. He was just a little taller than she was. The thin, curly hair on the back of his neck looked like a child's. His fingers were long and bony, gripping a packet of cigarettes in one hand, and a lit cigarette in the other.

"A whisky for me, and for the young lady, whatever she wants," Giovanni ordered, realizing immediately that he had overdone things, his desire to impress her making him cocky.

Aurora ordered an iced coffee, into which the barista spooned some whipped cream and *granita*.

"You're not on a diet, are you?" Giovanni mocked, seeing her eyeing the cream disapprovingly.

He was already in love with her half-moon, hazelnut eyes hiding behind a pair of over-sized spectacles. He looked longingly at her soft thighs contained by her tight, slightly flared jeans with an ironed vertical crease all the way up the leg.

"So why is everyone in love with you then?"

"What do you know? I haven't seen you around much in our courses."

It looked like being nice wasn't going to work. The girl was clearly not used to receiving compliments. Giovanni launched into a monologue, explaining how he had missed one exam

session after another. He told her about the apartment he had sub-let, about how successful the demonstration against the bridge across the Strait had been, and boasted about his friendship with Gipi. He finished his whisky before she had taken the last spoonful of her iced coffee and whipped cream. He talked and talked, and she didn't interrupt. As she listened she turned the spoon in her cup, making a rattling sound against the empty glass. Giovanni found it hard to gauge whether he was boring her or shocking her; the more silent she was, the more he exaggerated. He came up with the story of the time he had executed an armed robbery at a gas pump to finance his political group, but omitted to tell her that the owner was a member, and had agreed to hand over a small sum and not press charges. He pompously described how it had been a proletariat expropriation, and how the extorted cash had been put to good use in an after-school program for the children of factory workers. He paused for a second to see if he could discern how the girl was reacting. She was awkwardly holding on to her bag, which was on her knees, not knowing where to put her hands. Giovanni, agitated by the whisky, figured she was scared he would rob her.

"I'm not really a thief," he said. "My father is a well-known attorney, l'Avvocato Santatorre. Haven't you heard of him?"

She opened her eyes wide and burst out laughing.

"You, of all people, are using the good name of your family to exonerate you? Weren't you supposed to be the most left-wing of the class?"

And that was how Giovanni faced the first of the tests that separated him from graduation: the Aurora test.

They started preparing for the exams they would have to take in the fall. The study group had got smaller, as some members had gone off to travel around Europe by car or train, and others had decamped to their parents' summer houses by the sea. Giovanni and Aurora found themselves alone in the desolate city over the summer. At Giovanni's house, or in the Avvocato's office after everyone had left, they studied and took turns to test one another. Cigarette butts piled up in improvised ashtrays, and they would sometimes get drunk in the middle of the afternoon, petting, studying, then petting again. They would draw up plans, and impose deadlines on themselves; every now and then, exhausted and satisfied, they would allow themselves a break so that they could exchange childhood memories and stories about how lonely they had always been. They compared and contrasted their experiences in politics. Aurora had joined the Party of Proletariat Unity for Communism, a new party born from two strands, the Party of Proletariat Unity and the Manifesto, which in their turn had been formed by militants who had left the more mainstream Italian

Communist Party. Giovanni, on the other hand, was again on his own, without a party he felt represented him.

In the Avvocato's office, on his father's desk, there was a celestial globe. Giovanni spun it idly.

"Did you know Sirius is actually two stars?"

"No. Come on, shall we get back to that chapter we were working on?"

"It's a binary star system: there are two but it looks like one. I'd like to call my son Sirius."

"You want a child?"

"Well, I'd really like a daughter. A lovely little daughter from you, Aurora."

"How come your father keeps this globe on his desk? That must be who you inherited your obsession with stars from."

"No it's not. He likes maps of the skies, I like skies. There's a big difference. Did you know that to see the most beautiful sky in Sicily you need to climb up the volcano Stromboli?"

"No, I didn't."

"Your father took you to Predappio, but not to the Aeolian Islands?"

Aurora had told Giovanni about a Summer vacation when Il Fascistissimo had packed the whole family into a camper van and taken them all the way to the central Italian region of Romagna to join a rally where Mussolini's widow, Donna Rachele, had been in attendance. He wanted her to bless his children, as if it were a second christening. The widow had picked them up and kissed them, rattling away in her strange regional accent, to her father's great satisfaction and pride. The children, exhausted by the long journey, feigned devotion. No less was expected of them.

"What else do you remember?" Giovanni insisted.

"A tickly feeling, dribble, and white whiskers on her chin."

"Are you saying Mussolini's widow had a beard?"

They both fell about laughing.

"One day we'll go to Stromboli," Giovanni said. "Trust me. I'll find a way to convince my father."

At the end of August Giovanni arrived at the Silini's villa with a bunch of flowers and a suit fresh from the dry cleaners. The hot *scirocco* wind was blowing, and his shirt was sticking to his chest, but his desire to present himself in a good light was such that he would not have contemplated dressing any less formally. Aurora's mother served coffee in porcelain cups she had taken out of a glass cabinet and clearly didn't use every day. One of the cups was chipped, and Giovanni knew that if his mother had been present she would have been horrified. Il Fascistissimo, in the meantime, was subjecting him to a volley of questions. What kind of relationship did he have with his parents? What were his plans after graduation? Why did he not want to become an attorney

like the rest of his family? Giovanni answered intelligently, and even sincerely in some cases. He found amusement in going against people's expectations of him; mostly he loved seducing them. The youngest Silini, Rosa, stared at him curiously, while all the other siblings studiously ignored him.

By the time he had finished his cup of coffee Il Fascistissimo had made up his mind: Giovanni was brilliant, intelligent, and from a good family. Whether he was a Marxist-Leninist, or anything else for that matter, was neither here nor there. At his age it was normal to go to extremes; in fact it was a sign of determination. Better this young man than one of those weak characters he had come across. Considering the way young people were these days he could consider himself well satisfied with the specimen in front of him. With marriage he would settle down. He invited Giovanni back with his parents, followed by a third appointment on his own, and then he finally gave Giovanni permission to go on vacation with his daughter on condition they both got A's in their exams in the fall. Il Fascistissimo had added this final clause because he knew it was an easy hurdle for them. In his mind he had already married Aurora off. If she came back from the vacation pregnant, so much the better: they could get married immediately without waiting to graduate. Giovanni was well brought up; he would certainly do the right thing. Il Fascistissimo was in a bit of a hurry to get things going. After all, he did have six children to settle. He had never had high hopes for Aurora, in any case. Giovanni was a far better catch than he had ever expected his blue-stocking daughter to haul in. She was not nearly as sweet and beautiful as little Rosa. He felt a lump in his throat when he thought about the time when she would leave home. In her last year at High School he had been convinced Aurora would never marry, and that was why, when she went to college, he had pretended not to notice when she started staying out more with other students. He had not been wrong, he thought to himself smugly. He was never wrong.

Aurora was shocked. All Giovanni had needed to open the portcullis of the Silini family fortress was a bunch of flowers delivered at the right time in the right place. And yet she knew Giovanni's wit and repartee was irresistible, not just for her. Where had all her father's prohibitions gone? She had thought she would have had to fight for what she wanted, tooth and nail. She had even fantasized about eloping with her loved one. Her father's ready capitulation confused her, but she decided nevertheless to exploit it to the full, and thus threw herself into studying for her exams in September

Studying together did the trick. Aurora got an A and Giovanni an A-, the first high grade in his academic career. The following day they caught the hovercraft, leaving their books and papers behind, and landed on Stromboli already exhausted from hours of necking. They petted and

smooched; they strolled along the beaches and stopped to talk to the fishermen. They hiked up to the top of the volcano and lay down on the ash under the starry night as lava spewed from the multiple craters. At first light they descended, and caught the early hovercraft back to the mainland. They didn't want to miss the three-day Conference Against Repression. After an interminable night journey by train, they arrived in Bologna, befuddled and dazed, alongside a hundred thousand other supporters.

Gipo was waiting for them at the station, leaning against a wall, intent on reading his newspaper. As soon as Giovanni laid eyes on him he was overtaken by a sense of guilt. He was ashamed of his easy smile and inappropriate suntan. From a distance he was able to lie, and say he had been busy studying, but now he was here with Aurora the true source of his distraction was evident.

Inside the sports stadium the various political parties, collectives and splinter groups – the autonomous groups, the *via dei Volsci* collective – mingled. There were hundreds of different slogans being shouted by thousands of demonstrators. The romantic break they had just enjoyed under the shadow of the volcano felt out of place even to Aurora. In the evenings they went on debating in Gipi's kitchen, until the first rays of dawn illuminated the piled up ashtrays and empty bottles.

Two months later Aurora was locked in the bathroom, her old haunt, throwing up in the toilet bowl. She wasn't hiding books under her T-shirt anymore; she was covering up the fact that she had to keep the top button of her jeans undone. *Il Fascistissimo* knew that her frequent visits to the bathroom were nothing to do with the diarrhea Aurora professed to, just as he had known when she was a child that his daughter used the bathroom as a place to study so she could get good grades. Now all he needed to do was settle things, and get the timing right. He took Giovanni aside, glared at him with his fiercest expression, and ordered him to marry his daughter. Giovanni was delighted. The next day the young couple looked at each other with the incredulous air of two children who had expected a punishment for being naughty and had received a prize instead.

When he was in Bologna Giovanni had met a German man, married to an Italian woman, called Peter. They lived in West Berlin, and Giovanni had invited them to the Conference because he believed the moribund Italian Marxist-Leninist movement would benefit from gaining an international dimension. They had talked about the Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorist group, which had kidnapped Hans-Martin Schleyer. Gipo and Giovanni considered the Christian-Democrat

industrialist an emblem of western capitalism, but Peter called him a *Nazishwein*, a Nazi pig. Schleyer had enrolled in the National Socialist Party when he was twenty, and, in Peter's view, all his actions from then on were the logical consequence of his destiny. Kidnapping him was a necessary political action, and RAF comrades were right not to compromise, under any conditions. When Schleyer's body was found, Giovanni thought back to those conversations with Peter. At the time his indifference had troubled him, although he had tried to dismiss it as unimportant. Now he felt more indulgent towards Peter's point of view. Why should we be afraid of extreme gestures?

"We need to push forwards, especially now that we are getting nowhere," Gipi had written to him in his last letter. Giovanni felt the world was moving on without him, and that he was being held back by his married state and Aurora's pregnancy. Walter Rossi, a member of the leftist Lotta Continua party, had been shot and killed in Rome while he was handing out anti-Fascist leaflets. In retaliation the next day, during a demonstration in Turin, a café whose owner was accused of being bourgeois and fascist was stormed and a working student was killed. In Germany, three RAF leaders had been found dead in prison. By contrast, Giovanni's daily incumbencies were taking Aurora to her Ob-Gyn checkup, and sitting around while the Silini and Santatorre families discussed how to share expenses for the wedding and over the next few months until the baby was born. He felt detached from the family discussions, but even more painfully distant from world events. He had no money of his own, and whatever funds his family passed on were to maintain his wife and child.

Aurora, on the other hand, seemed to slip easily into her new life. She studied as hard as ever. She continued to attend meetings with the same political group as before and had made friends with some women from the Feminist collective. She joined a self-awareness group, and her pregnancy made her feel emancipated, even invincible. She persuaded Il Fascistissimo to let them get married with a civil ceremony rather than in the church. She was absolutely adamant about this choice - a punishingly coherent revolt against her Catholic upbringing.

"Are you really sure?" Giovanni asked her. He had always been unquestioningly atheist. Aurora was sure. She did not want to pretend to be what she was not. Giovanni would have had no difficulty pretending in church. For him the concept of marriage was increasingly losing its meaning. He was desperately in search of a model. He didn't want his new family to resemble either his own, or Aurora's. Back in Bologna, Gipo and his wife had separated. Maybe it really was true that marriage was a bourgeois grave. At other times, Giovanni felt he could only keep going because he had Aurora close by, that only together could they make it. A child would give both of

them the strength to change the world. Of this he was sure. At night he battled with his chronic insomnia, staring up at his childhood attic roof. On the radio, the Clash kept him company.

On one of his trips home, Gipo met up with Giovanni in the same bar where he and Aurora had first met. The northerly *tramontana* wind was blowing, bringing with it a cold, bright light. Gipo sat down without taking his coat off. He said what he had to say briefly, with unusual directness. They could wait no longer; they had been talking about revolution for too long and now was the time to set it in motion. Until then Gipi had only hinted at the armed struggle. Giovanni knew Gipi was involved in some way with the Armed Proletariat Nucleus, but he'd never actually asked him, because if he had he would have had to admit he knew nothing, and proved he was outside the theater of action.

"If you're wondering what the future holds for your movement, I'm telling you the student movement is over," Gipi snapped, and Giovanni reflected that everything that had happened in the last few weeks was pointing in that direction. The '77 movement was over before the year 1977 had come to a close.

"Tell me about yourself," Gipi coaxed. "You look out of sorts."

Giovanni was relieved to go back to more familiar territory: his concerns about getting married, the two families' expectations, Aurora's ease with the situation, his own inadequacy.

They walked back to Giovanni's house together and said goodbye. Just as Gipi was heading off, Giovanni turned and called out to him.

"Listen, Gipi. I was thinking, you will come to the wedding, won't you?"

Il Fascistissimo enjoyed his triumph; everything was going exactly to plan. His second born was about to get married, his boys were currently dating the kind of girls they could happily sow their oats with, and lovely little Rosa never gave him anything to worry about. In fact she was the apple of his eye, the joy of his old age. Not even becoming a grandfather gave him the same satisfaction as the smug feeling that, after a lifetime of struggling to keep everything smooth, finally things had taken on a life of their own. The idea of holding a newborn grandchild moved him. Of all the things he had always held sacred – the war, his work at the prison, marriage – fatherhood came top of the list for Il Fascistissimo, and he was about to experience fatherhood times two. His daughter was sitting basking in the pale winter sun ("Papa, I'm putting a table and chair out here in front of the door. It'll be good for me and for the baby," she had announced, and he had wondered why he'd never thought of doing it before, why he'd left the front garden in such a disgraceful state of abandon). Aurora's pregnancy suddenly felt like an opportunity. Fatherhood without the duties of

training, containing, educating. He would be able to spoil the new arrival, buy him or her an ice cream, or go out for a walk together. He could tell stories about the war, exaggerate about his heroic acts, so that his grandchild would have something to boast about at school. He could finally overdo things, and relax. In short, he could be a grandfather.

2.

“It’s a girl.”

“Boy or girl, what’s the difference?”

“It makes all the difference. Don’t you see? You’re the mother, how can you not know it’s a girl? You should be able to feel it. That’s what you women say, that you have this atavistic intuition.”

“I’m not saying it’s not a girl. I’m just saying I don’t know.”

“It’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?”

“I’m just saying it to make you angry.”

“What I think is that this belly is not yours. They’ve stuck it onto your tummy like an artificial limb.”

“Sure!”

“You don’t have any maternal instinct. Or maybe there’s no such thing.”

“You’re the one that never stops banging on about becoming a father.”

“Because I’m going to be perfect. The best father in the world.”

“You’re never on time.”

“I will be now. And I’ll be a clown.”

“Well, you’re certainly that.”

“I mean I’ll be a clown as in I’ll be funny, and have fun myself.”

“What will I do in the midst of all this perfection?”

“You’ll watch me.”

“I’ll have to get back to my books, actually.”

“There you go. You’ll graduate while our little girl and I have fun.”

“Come on, it’s getting late.”

“You said that an hour ago, and two hours ago, and three hours ago.”

“Now it’s really getting late.”

“Why? What do you have to do tomorrow?”

“Nothing, the usual. Except I have an appointment.

“Really? You too?”

“Yes, just a little errand.”

“Me too. I’ll get it over and done with quickly.”

“Might it be the same appointment, per chance?”

“Ah, I don’t know about that.”

“I’m getting married.”

“No! Really? Me too!”

“Yes, but I’m marrying the right person.”

“I think I am too.”

The next morning friends and relatives came to City Hall for the wedding. Giovanni looked exhausted, the tension and alcohol of the night before still in his system. He smoked nervously, awkward in his formal jacket.

“You might have bothered to have it taken in, it’s too big for you,” his mother complained. Giovanni nodded without comment, making it look at least as if he agreed with her. He didn’t care one bit about his jacket. All he could think about was trying to silence a voice in his head asking him why he was there. That was plenty to keep his mind busy. His father, l’Avvocato, his mother, his brothers and their wives, all filed in and took their places in the hall next to the Silini family.

Aurora arrived a little late, on her father’s arm, in a cream-coloured short dress. She had gone for a non-church wedding to keep faith with her new-found political views, and because when she was growing up she had been taught that girls who get pregnant before marriage do not deserve the holy sacraments. She never for a second thought she would wear any colour but white to her wedding, however. It was the last token of her girlhood fantasies of marriage. Giovanni, who was waiting for her on the steps outside, thought she looked beautiful. His worries vanished, giving way to an immediate and total trust in their future. He stubbed out his cigarette, pulled her into an embrace and kissed her.

“Sorry, I can’t stop myself. It’s absolute torture keeping my hands off your daughter,” he teased Il Fascistissimo, who was not displeased to let his daughter off his arm.

“Did you get any sleep?” Aurora whispered to Giovanni.

“Yes,” he lied. “Let’s go in.”

The night before his wedding, after wishing Aurora goodnight, Giovanni had gone home, put a Velvet Underground record on the player, drained the whisky carafe in his father's study, and sat there chain smoking, until he could stand it no longer and decided he had to get out of the house to seek some comfort elsewhere. He had bought himself a drink in a bar, then went on drinking with some acquaintances he had bumped into on the street, who had also offered him a toke, which for once he had accepted. On his way home he had felt more relaxed, and had stopped on the street near his front door so that he could carry on smoking and enjoy the feeling of being stoned. The local crazy, who had known Giovanni since he was a child, had sat down next to him. At one point Giovanni had clung onto him, swearing that he would not go through with the wedding the next day, that he too was free to do what he wanted and would never be tricked into something like that. At four in the morning he had stumbled into his bedroom and fallen asleep fully dressed. A few hours later, when his mother had come to wake him up, he had seen this parents were both ready and on their way out to check flower arrangements and other last minute details in City Hall. They had left him breakfast on the table, and an empty bathroom. Giovanni had struggled out of bed and gone to get married.

It was a quiet ceremony, with close relatives and intimate friends only. Giovanni was happy to see Gipi there, though he had arrived late and sat in the back row. The two fathers, Il Fascistissimo and l'Avvocato, were amused by their new role. The old Communist and the old Fascist, they laughed, were finally obliged to unite against a common enemy: the new generation who had no sense of identity and were always late for everything. After signing the register, Giovanni kissed Aurora for so long and so deeply that everyone in the room started jokingly to protest.

They celebrated their marriage in a fish restaurant by the sea. The two families had agreed to go for a neutral venue which specialized in fish from the Strait. The weather was translucent, creating a mirage whereby Calabria looked like a fairy castle, so magically close that you could touch it. Legend has it that these mirages would make people lose their minds. They would dive off the rocks, convinced that the toe of the Italian boot on the other side of the Strait was an easy swim away.

Between the first course and the entrees, Giovanni slipped into the bathroom where he saw Gipi's jacket and a book, which had been placed near the washbasin. The book was *What is to be Done?* by the Russian philosopher and critic, Chernyshevsky. He had read it at High School, after

reading Lenin's book by the same name. It was the last novel he had read; since then he had only read books on his university reading list, newspapers, and non-fiction. In that novel the potential for a relationship between a man and a woman founded on the notion of equality was all there, and Giovanni felt that finding a copy on the day he had gotten married was a portent of some kind. He picked the book up and opened it. Tucked into one of the pages was an identity card bearing Gipi's photo but another name, age and profession (engineer). He closed the book and put it back where he had found it, balancing precariously on the edge of the washbasin. He heard the toilet flushing. His friend had finished and it was now his turn to go into the cubicle.

Giovanni and Aurora spent their wedding night in the apartment Il Fascistissimo had rented for them. It was far smaller than either of them had been accustomed to and they referred to it as 'the miniature apartment'. Apart from the bedroom, there was a hallway furnished as a sitting room with a sofa and two bookshelves, a small utility room with an ancient cooker and fridge that was to be their kitchen, and a bathroom that was so small that only one person could occupy it at a time. A season of romantic awakenings and lazy, amorous afternoons started. Aurora went to bed early, while Giovanni stayed awake, smoking out on the balcony, daring himself to feel contented. The city lights made it hard to see the stars, but he looked up anyway into the nightscape and promised himself, Aurora, and their child that their life would be as luminous and filled with energy as the starry sky above Stromboli.

Things were not as easy for Aurora as Giovanni had imagined. Since the first day of living together she had realized that she had no domestic experience whatsoever; cooking, cleaning, or keeping the house tidy, had never been her responsibility. Her mother had taught her nothing. The family had always employed a housekeeper who had taken charge of everything. Il Fascistissimo had a contradictory idea of women's role in the family: they were not supposed to go out and have fun, but spending too much time in the kitchen was degrading; they were supposed to get an education, because otherwise they would be vulgar, but not go too far, because they might get strange ideas; they were not supposed to mix with the other sex, but as soon as they reached an acceptable age they were required to find a husband quickly, and make him proud, otherwise they would end up as spinsters. Aurora mulled over these incongruences of her upbringing, and was relieved to be free of it all. She felt a deep, undefined gratitude for her life, for the mere existence of Giovanni and the baby. The day-to-day running of her life was another matter. Graduating was still a priority. She was desperate to get a job and gain some kind of financial independence, without which she felt tied down. Most of all she wanted to give her husband the freedom he longed for.

One evening, on the landing outside their apartment, Giovanni smelt something burning. He turned the key in the lock apprehensively, fearing the worst. Aurora was sitting reading, enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I should be the one asking you. What’s this smell?”

“I was trying to cook some chicken. Why? Does it smell?” Aurora was sincerely surprised.

“I thought something had happened to you.”

“Yes, something terrible did happen. Me and my belly here were hungry.”

“Couldn’t you have waited? Or gone out and bought something to eat?”

“That’s always your solution. Just buy something. Why should we always buy ready-made food? There was a chicken, there were some potatoes, I’m not so bad a cook that I can’t make chicken and potatoes.”

“Well, maybe you are, but I love you anyway.”

“Who said I couldn’t cook chicken and potatoes?”

Giovanni opened the window to let the smoke out.

“It’s not as if I burned the house down,” Aurora quipped.

“Well, that’s what it smells like.”

“You think I can’t do anything, don’t you?”

“The only thing I’m thinking right now is that this smoke is not good for you. Come on, let’s go out.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Let’s go and get a pizza.”

“Your mother came by this afternoon. She brought some supplies.”

“What?”

“Yes, she brought a *lasagna* and an eggplant *parmigiana*.”

“So why did you start cooking the chicken and potatoes?”

“I had a craving for chicken.”

It was a lie. When Mrs. Santatorre had swept into their apartment with her usual shopping bag full of home-made dishes, Aurora had felt a stab of jealousy. Her efforts at being a wife, companion and future mother were nullified by her mother-in-law’s presence, as was the freedom she and Giovanni had gained by getting married. The look of disapproval on her face when she walked in announcing she had brought their lunch had been the last straw. Why did they have to eat

the food she brought them rather than what they already had in the house? She had kept up her usual pretend-polite conversation, but as soon as her mother-in-law had walked out of the door she had opened the fridge and taken out the chicken. She had wrenched the wings and thighs away from the breast, hurriedly peeled and diced the potatoes, and thrown the lot into a roasting pan, dousing the bird with too much oil and too much salt, and then shoving the pan into the oven, only to forget it was in there two minutes later. The burning smell had reached her on the sofa as she was underlining important bits in the book she was studying for her next exam. She had run to check on the chicken, but it was too late.

“Well, if you really want chicken, let’s go and eat chicken,” Giovanni proposed indulgently.

“No, it was just a silly craving I had. The stuff your Mom brought is fine,” Aurora snapped, settling the matter on the spot.

After dinner, lying on their bed, they talked. Neither of them wanted to admit they felt lonely. The house was tiny, but sometimes it felt huge and empty. They had thought it would become a haven for friends, rather like Giovanni’s sub-let had been for fellow militants, but Gipi had gone back to Bologna straight after the wedding, and old friends had not got into the habit of going to see them. Aurora’s advanced pregnancy had also made it hard for them to go out and about. It felt like all the action was going on elsewhere.

“We mustn’t close ourselves off from the world,” Giovanni fretted. “Family is just part of a bigger project, right?”

The next day, Aurora moved the sofa and made space for people to come and debate the old, eternal issues. Slowly, their old comrades starting coming to the house, together with new militants, mostly students and factory workers. Unions were considered corporations, so members of trades’ unions were not welcome. The miniature house was filled with new faces, raised voices, heated discussions. Aurora organized a meeting of the Party of Proletarian Unity around her sofa. A young couple, who were both carpenters, brought a home-made toy train for the baby. Aurora was happy, but Giovanni still felt something was missing. His wife’s political companions were exiles from the Italian Communist Party, and they settled for too little, he felt. He was still mulling over the need for armed struggle, as Gipi had urged. He was angry with himself for not asking his friend for more details. He tried calling him in Bologna, but his phone had been cut off.

One morning, however, when Aurora was at a lecture, Gipi called him.

“Where are you? Giovanni asked.

“Who cares where I am. How are you? And how are Aurora and the belly doing?”

“It’s getting bigger and bigger.”

“Is she there now?”

“No, she’s at a lecture. What’s up?”

“I’m coming down tomorrow.”

“What time?”

“I’ll call you at 4 p.m., okay? Let’s meet, alone.”

“Okay, see you then,” Giovanni confirmed, but Gipi had already put the phone down.

3.

The Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, had been kidnapped, and the whole country seemed to be talking about nothing else but the Red Brigades. Giovanni prepared himself for his meeting with Gipi by provoking his father on the subject.

“You’re going to kill him,” l’Avvocato had said, embracing all the political groups to the left of the Italian Communist Party in that second person plural. Giovanni had wondered who he had meant by ‘you’; he hadn’t felt part of a group where he could feel that collective ‘we’ for ages. The generalized accusation his father had thrown into the arena galvanized him. In that ‘you’ there was room for the terrorists who were making the whole country tremble; maybe there was room for him too.

Gipi told Giovanni to come and meet him at a road junction that led up to a hill outside the city. Giovanni went by car, and found Gipi already there waiting for him. He was amazed to see how calm he was, carrying his usual newspaper.

“Let’s walk a bit,” Gipi said, taking Giovanni by the arm. “This sunshine is pretty nice, eh?”

“What have you been up to? Where have you been all this time?”

“Why? Were you looking for me?”

“I called you in Bologna a few times. Quite often, in fact.” After a moment’s hesitation he asked whether he had done the right thing by calling.

“No, but forget it,”

“Why?”

Gipi laughed. “They rented the apartment out to a group of prostitutes. If you called now the call girls would be the ones answering.”

“What about you?”

“I’ve been around and about. Genoa, Milan for a while.”

There was no need to say any more. The Red Brigade factions from Liguria had been attacking industrial plants in the region. In Milan, the industrial area of Sesto San Giovanni was known as Italy's Stalingrad, owing to the strong historical presence of the Italian Communist Party.

"I'll come and join you there."

"Where? In Milan? Of course you can't; you've got Aurora."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"What d'you mean, what's that got to do with anything? You're married, and you love her."

"It doesn't make any difference that we're married. In fact, it's because I love her that I want to do what is needed."

"Nice words."

"They're not just words."

"So why would you want to come to Milan?"

Giovanni thought Gipi was testing him, and he wanted to pass the test at his first attempt. 'You must recruit me', he wanted to shout out loud. 'I'm the perfect candidate, perfect for you, don't you get it?'

"Because the world as it is disgusts me."

"You said that when you enrolled in college."

"When I enrolled in college the world was different, and I still believed we could change it peacefully."

"And now?"

"You thought so too, back then."

No, I didn't. You don't know what I believed."

"Whatever. Now we both know. College was not the right place for me, but I had to start out somewhere. There's nothing going on here in this city."

"Don't you want to graduate? Don't you want an academic career? Your father would be happy."

It felt to Giovanni that Gipi was provoking him. He went over the last few points he had made and felt uneasy. He had been impulsive and unreliable. Maybe their paths had already diverged the day he got married, when they had both officially become someone else: Giovanni a married man, and Gipi an undercover militant. Gipi could not have been so naïve as to leave a false identity card in plain view near the washbasin at the restaurant. Maybe it had been an invitation he had not taken up.

"I've never wanted to have a career, and my father will never be happy whatever I do."

"You're having a baby."

"All the more reason to do something."

“You say that now, but when you look him or her in the eye, you won’t want to do anything.”

“You have two kids too.”

Gipi’s expression darkened, and Giovanni was sorry to have brought the kids up. He knew perfectly well that Gipi no longer saw them, and wasn’t in contact with his ex-wife.

“It’s not the same thing,” Gipi muttered.

He never gives up, Giovanni could not help but notice. He wanted to be like Gipi, and not give up, but he lacked the confidence to say so loud and clear.

Gipi was the one to break the silence.

“How is your course going? Are you studying hard?”

“Of course I am.”

They walked on in silence, pulling on their cigarettes. Giovanni had some weed with him; he had started smoking it on his own in the car by the sea. Aurora had never noticed, but it was thanks to those stolen moments that he managed to feel a little better. He thought about offering some to Gipi, but then he remembered how they had both despised the happy-clappy hippies who had done their brains in with drugs rather than play an active part in the struggle against the State.

A few weeks later, Aurora went out onto the balcony to get some fresh air. It was far too hot in the house, and her swollen belly made every movement exhausting. She felt like she was growling rather than breathing. She had been feeling overweight and unattractive over the last few weeks; her skin had lost the luminosity of her early pregnancy. She saw Giovanni coming home, stooped, his hands in his pockets. He looked diminished, somehow. Washed out. The baby and I are never going to be enough for him, she thought to herself. And yet he kept on saying that becoming a father was all he wanted in the world.

On one of those evenings when too much alcohol was consumed and too many cigarettes were smoked, an old school friend of Giovanni’s turned up at the door of the miniature apartment. The two men hugged.

“So it really is you. People had talked about going to Santatorre’s house, but I wasn’t sure it was you. I didn’t know you’d gotten married.”

Aurora waited for her husband to introduce her, but the two old friends started talking and took no notice of her, so she announced she was tired and was on her way to bed. Giovanni said goodnight and gave her a kiss.

“Off you go, don’t worry, we won’t be late,” Giovanni promised.

“Don’t worry,” Aurora answered. “I just really need to lie down.” She could hardly keep her eyes open. It happened more and more often: groups of friends gathered in their sitting room and stayed up all night talking, while she felt the need to sleep ten or eleven hours, and even then she slept badly because the baby kicking in her belly woke her up all the time.

At one point everyone else left, leaving Giovanni and his old friend on their own. They hadn’t seen much of one another at High School because Luigi had not been interested in politics back then. He had gone on to enroll at Cosenza University where he had joined a far-left armed group called the First Guerrilla Fires. Originally based in the Campania region, the group had soon found converts in Basilicata and Puglia, where it had orchestrated disruptions and attacks on the steel factory, Italsider.

Giovanni listened to his friend talking openly about the terrorist acts he had committed. It was refreshing after all his contorted discussions with Gipi, which had always been indirect, leaving Giovanni to read between the lines. He still burned with the humiliation he had suffered at their last meeting, and the silence between them that had ensued. He had been ready to take up arms, and Gipi had actually dismissed him? He still couldn’t believe it.

Luigi was in contact with Calabrian and Neapolitan units, and he was convinced that the First Guerilla Fires should extend the range of their attacks to factories in Sicily. Giovanni smiled.

“Which factories?”

His friend talked about the targets as if he had nothing to do with the island where he had grown up. In Luigi’s naïve excitement Giovanni felt a chink of hope opening up, an opportunity for redemption.

The bodies of Aldo Moro and of Peppino Impastato were found on the same day in May, in Rome and in Cinisi, respectively. Giovanni had met Peppino once in Palermo, during a protest against the expropriation of land from local farmers to build the third runway at Palermo airport. He had followed the “Music and Culture” group, and celebrated the inauguration of the new radio station, Radio Aut. The news of Impastato’s violent death, blown up on a railway track with TNT, devastated him - as did the Mafia’s attempt to pass it off as a suicide. Giovanni went to the funeral in Cinisi with a small group of friends, including Luigi. He was supposed to go back the following day, but he called Aurora and told her he had to stay. There were serious reasons that he would explain when he got back. He was nervous on the phone and in a hurry to get off the line. Aurora didn’t have the chance to say that she missed him and was scared she would end up giving birth on her own.

When the time came she didn't even have a number to call her husband. She ended up calling her father, who rushed to her apartment and took her into hospital. Within a few hours, the Santatorre and Silini family had all reported for duty at her bedside.

"Where on earth is my son?" Giovanni's mother wailed. "Why did he have to leave town now?"

"We didn't know exactly when it would be, and anyway I've got everything I need, thanks to all of you, of course," Aurora reassured all those present. She had already been the object of disapproval because she had insisted on going to lectures and doing exams despite her pregnancy. On the day Moro had been kidnapped she had even taken to the streets to demonstrate. Her family criticized her for not worrying about the baby boy growing inside her. She deflected their concern by citing Giovanni: "It's not a boy, it's a girl."

Now she was lying there, immobile, all eyes on her. She needed to be strong.

Aurora and Giovanni had decided the baby would be called Mara, like the protagonist of the novel, *Bébo's Girl*, Aurora had said. Like Mara Cagol, wife of the Red Brigade leader Renato Curcio, who had been killed in action a few years before, Giovanni had added.

The baby girl was born with her dark eyes wide open, staring at everyone with a quizzical expression. The two grandfathers, *l'Avvocato* and *Il Fascistissimo*, agreed on one point: they had dealt with Mafia bosses and terrorists, one in court and the other in prison, but none of their charges had terrified them as much as this little creature.

"This little girl's gaze is more disturbing than the looks I get from hardened criminals. At least they talk! Though she's probably less intimidating than my Math teacher when he interrogated me," *l'Avvocato* added, making everyone laugh.

Giovanni got to the hospital several hours later. *Il Fascistissimo* greeted him with tears in his eyes and a bottle of champagne.

4.

The day Mara turned one month Giovanni informed his wife that a friend he had met in Cinisi would be sleeping over at their house. His name was Daniele, and he would only be staying one night.

"Tell me more about him," Aurora insisted.

Since the baby had been born everything had been going wrong. Giovanni had not expressed any regret for missing the birth. His moods had swung from elation, when he clung to his daughter

manically, to worrying that he was unwilling to share the burden of her upbringing, which made him indifferent to everything else.

“He’s a friend of Luigi’s,” Giovanni answered defensively, clearly annoyed at Aurora’s tone.

“I don’t like Luigi.”

“You’ve already said that.”

“You wouldn’t have liked him either, until quite recently.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do you remember what you used to say about fanatics?”

“I remember we called our daughter Mara because we believed..

“That’s enough of that! We called her Mara because we liked the name. Have you forgotten what you used to be like, the things you used to criticize, the things that you used to despise?”

“What things did I despise? Had Moro been kidnapped and killed when we met?”

“That’s exactly my point. So what do we do now? Do we kill everyone we don’t agree with?”

Giovanni remembered perfectly well the way he used to be, the Giovanni Aurora had been referring to. But he also thought the world was changing, and that Italy was going to the dogs. Every month had been worse than the month before. He suddenly didn’t want to have to justify himself any longer. He was no longer ashamed of having changed: the old Giovanni had been a coward and a simpleton. All is fair in love and war, he thought to himself.

“I never said that the armed struggle was absolutely wrong,” Giovanni said.

“Yes you did. You used to say that ...”

“You’re talking about a lifetime ago.”

“I don’t want anyone in the house. Not tonight. Not ever again, okay?”

“Are you closing the door on a comrade in arms?”

Aurora didn’t answer. Being accused of behaving like a bourgeois bothered her terribly. She was still terrified of being labeled as her Fascist father’s daughter. If there was one thing above all others that Giovanni and Aurora had in common, it was the desire to forget their origins, to leave behind their family names.

Giovanni brought his friend back to the house. Daniele avoided Aurora’s eyes, and Aurora avoided Giovanni’s, which was easy because as usual his head was in the clouds.

There was a ring at the door. Mrs. Santatorre used the excuse to see her granddaughter to come to the house more and more often. Giovanni and Daniele slipped out, and Aurora’s mother in law lost no time in laying into Aurora.

“Where on earth does *he* come from?”

Aurora shook her head. She was irritated enough as it was, and did not want to rise to the provocation.

“He vanishes just as you are about to give birth, then he brings a complete stranger home. I just don’t recognize my own son anymore. Can’t you say something? Can’t you control him?”

Mara was getting unsettled, and Mara tried to calm both her daughter and her mother-in-law down, bundling them together in her mind.

“Shush...it’s fine. It’s nothing.”

“Well, neither of you have a job, and Giovanni has quit studying. A woman should take care of her husband.”

Giovanni and Daniele came home late. When Giovanni came to bed, his wife was still awake.

“Our daughter has a right to know who is sleeping in this house.”

“She doesn’t seem to be complaining. Maybe it’s her mother who has an issue with trust? I thought we both believed in our project.”

“I just want to know who this person you have brought into the house is. Anyway, you wanted to have a family as much as I did.”

Mara woke up, and she went to settle her. Aurora would be 22 the following day. A birthday. Was it worth celebrating? What a stupid thought. Well, Mara Santatorre, you really need to learn to talk so that you can wish me a happy birthday.

As soon as the two men woke up they went out. Daniele was due to leave town later that day. Giovanni had given his wife a kiss on the cheek and promised he would buy her a cake and a present.

“We’ll celebrate when I get back,” he had promised, waving goodbye.

Left on her own with Mara in her arms, Aurora went and opened Giovanni’s friend’s suitcase. When she saw the gun she had been sure would be there, she clung to her daughter and called her father.

Less than an hour later, Il Fascistissimo had picked her and the baby up and taken them back to Aurora’s childhood home.

5.

She wouldn’t have called it a strange or even absurd birthday. It was simply on a different plane. The Silini household once again became the container of her discontent. It was not home. It was invaded by the voices of her brothers, ruled over by her father’s sovereignty and her mother’s

apathy. Aurora's anger was unbearably similar to her adolescent rage. Pinned up on the wall above her bed there was a photo of her and Giovanni in Bologna. Her smile was trusting, and Giovanni's hair was long and disheveled. Aurora looked out of the window and saw the table and chair she had sat at in the sun when she had been pregnant. They were rusty and unused. She took the photo off the wall.

There were clothes strewn everywhere, and saucepans and dishes piled up in the sink. Aurora had only left a few days ago and the miniature apartment was already a total mess. It's a pigsty, Giovanni said out loud, stubbing his cigarette out in an ashtray on the bedside table. His friend had gone. At least he had done his duty as a revolutionary. Smoking in bed was one of those pleasures he could only indulge in when his wife – and, he had to admit, his daughter – was not there. He didn't have to hide the pleasure of smoking joints or drinking; he could finally enjoy lying around on his crumpled sheets doing absolutely nothing. He could talk out loud, and rage against the world without anyone in his way making him feel he had to live up to their expectations. What do they want at this hour, Giovanni moaned as the phone rang. He pulled a sheet over his eyes, turned away from the phone, and surrendered unconditionally to the morning sleep of insomniacs.

"He's not answering. They can't just do whatever they want," Il Fascistissimo shouted into the receiver. L'Avvocato on the other end of the phone agreed, saying they would have to knock some sense into the couple somehow, and give them a lesson on the obligations of marriage.

Aurora heard her father's phone call. She had left the bathroom door open, and pretended to be busy washing Mara. Her little sister Rosa came in to help, and for a few minutes they said nothing until Aurora burst into tears.

"Sorry," she sobbed.

Rosa hugged her, trying to calm her down.

"Come now, I'm sure things will work themselves out."

The phrase was meaningless, but Aurora felt better. Nobody had actually asked her why she had left Giovanni. Her father wouldn't have taken her seriously if she hadn't said she was scared for Mara. When he had come to pick her up he had been very clear.

"I don't want to know why you want to leave, and I don't want to get mixed up in your business," he had said.

Il Fascistissimo did not consider Giovanni's impulses worth discussing. The main thing was to let things pass. Everything passes in the end, especially youth. He promised his daughter he would make sure she returned home somehow or other. The little girl needed a father and she

needed a husband. Aurora clung to that promise. Giovanni was her husband, after all, and even though she hated him for lying to her, for making her feel like an intruder in her own home, and for not having cared enough about Mara, she knew it would not take much for her to forgive him. She was confident that Il Fascistissimo would somehow force the issue: where she had failed, her father's authority would succeed. She was ashamed by this thought, knowing that Giovanni would despise her for it, but she drew comfort from it, while Rosa played with the baby.

Il Fascistissimo was open to any compromise. What choice did he have? Was he supposed to keep his daughter with him when the Santatorre family had provided a husband for her, a husband that he had been the first to be enthusiastic about? Giovanni was not the only one who should shoulder the blame; his parents had played a role too. The Santatorres were a good family, no doubt about that, but perhaps l'Avvocato had not used the stick on his kids enough, and he had been far too indulgent with his last born, who had always been impulsive and allowed to do whatever he wanted. Well, if Giovanni didn't know how to behave properly, he would teach him a lesson he would remember.

In the end there was no need. That afternoon Il Fascistissimo and l'Avvocato came to an agreement. They discussed in detail how they would give Giovanni the dressing down of his life, and then they concurred that Aurora should stop playing the victim and consider the idea of giving up her studies so that she could take better care of her husband. They concluded that when a man is distracted it means something is wrong with the marriage. The most likely explanation, they agreed, was the new baby. They knew perfectly well what happened to women when they had children: they detached themselves from everything around them, especially the first time. Everybody knew that women went crazy with their first baby. They said goodbye, feeling like co-conspirators, convinced they had gone straight to the heart of the problem and tackled it successfully. When Il Fascistissimo got home, however, Aurora and Mara were no longer there. Rosa told him that Giovanni had come round to pick them up and take them home, and everyone agreed this was for the best.

Giovanni had made up his mind after a long discussion with Gipi sitting in his car. Giovanni couldn't wait to tell Gipi to his face that he had been behind Daniele's actions. Bursting with self-righteousness, he wanted to say that he had been keeping busy, working for the cause, even though Gipi had rejected him.

"We got away immediately afterwards and the next day there was nothing in the papers," Giovanni boasted.

“Nobody saw you?”

“No.”

“And how did you get back?”

“We took the ferry.”

“Without buying tickets?”

“No, we had tickets. Why?”

“I just wanted to know.”

Giovanni didn't answer. He stretched out his legs and tilted his car seat back so that he could recline more comfortably. He opened the glove compartment and, without thinking, took out his weed, cigarette papers and lighter.

“What are you doing?” Gipi asked apprehensively.

“Don't you want any?”

“No, I don't. Here? Now? Are you out of your mind?”

“What can happen?”

Giovanni's Renault 4 was parked facing the sea on a dark, narrow street.

“You really don't get it, do you? It's not like in the old days. Do you think I can afford to let my guard down and risk ...?”

Gipi paused, but Giovanni understood perfectly what he was getting at.

“They won't catch us. They never have, trust me.”

Giovanni felt a pleasant rush of arrogance.

“I'm getting some air.” Gipi announced, and got out of the car. Giovanni followed him. They said what they had to say standing next to the car.

“Did you really think I could do something for you?”

“Yes, we were thinking about it.”

Neither of them mentioned the Red Brigades.

“I've already done something. Isn't that a good sign?”

“No, you've seriously messed up. You and that other guy. The First Guerilla Fires. How did you come up with that one?”

“What else is there here?”

“That lot have never had a scrap of good sense. You could have waited.”

“I've been waiting since the day I was born.”

“If the police put you on file now it's a mess.”

“You didn't believe in me even before I did this.”

“What do you know about anything?”

“Maybe I was too much in a hurry,” Giovanni admitted finally. “Can’t you give me a second chance?”

“I wanted to give you your first chance.”

“I haven’t done anything that can’t be undone.”

Gipi didn’t answer. He asked Giovanni to take him to the station, and gave him an affectionate hug.

“So how’s the kid?”

“Wait.” Giovanni took a photo of Aurora and Mara out of his wallet.

“They’re beautiful, both of them,” Gipi said, with a touch of envy, as he gave the photo back to Giovanni. Giovanni realized he had made two mistakes in one go: he had lost his only chance to be a hero by getting involved with the wrong group, and he had lost sight of the only people he loved and who loved him. He said goodbye to Gipo and drove around the city aimlessly, as he used to do when he wanted to clear his mind. He went back to the street by the sea where he had talked to Gipi, turned his headlights off, and waited for dawn. He smoked a joint on his own. The first rays of light arrived, but sleep still eluded him. On his way back home he stopped at a phone box to call Daniele, who answered in a drowsy voice. He wondered what he had to say to the man. Nothing, he concluded, and put the phone down, after which he drove home and finally fell asleep. He woke up in the afternoon, well rested, clear headed and full of good will. And that was how he came to decide to go to the Silini’s house and bring his wife and daughter back home.

It soon became clear what Giovanni and Daniele had been up to. They had crossed the Messina Strait, jumped over the gates of a furniture factory, and thrown a rudimentary incendiary device they had assembled at home. The explosion had damaged quite a bit of the factory’s inventory. The owner had pressed charges against unknown suspects with the police department. In the meantime, it transpired that Daniele had gone to jail for another action that Giovanni had had nothing to do with. Giovanni decided he should take responsibility for the attack and report himself to the police, but first he wanted to speak with Aurora. This time he wanted to tell her everything, so that he could have her on his side. He couldn’t afford to lose her again. He asked her to give him some time, sat her on the sofa, and told her what he had been doing, from the day Mara was born when he had gone to Cinisi onwards, without leaving anything out. He admitted he had been restless. Aurora didn’t say a word. By the time he got to the bomb at the furniture factory where the owner had laid off some of his workers, he was feeling triumphant. All I had to do was involve her, he thought. When he told her he was planning to go to the police Aurora went pale.

“Are you joking?”

“What else should I do?”

“Daniele won’t talk, don’t worry.”

“Who cares? I was there. I need to pay for what I did too.”

“Why did you do it? You could have thought about your daughter.”

“I told you everything so that for once you and I would be on the same page.”

“Well, you should have told me before you messed up, not after in that case.”

“Nothing I do is ever good enough for you.”

“Why should you go and incriminate yourself when nobody else is?”

“Thanks for your advice. What then? What else? Am I supposed to betray my comrades then?

You’re a Fascist like your father.”

Silence.

“Sorry.”

“Do you promise not to go to the police? Please. Think about your daughter, not about me.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Giovanni had been sincere, but his guilty conscience over the next few nights was equally genuine. He had made his wife happy, but not himself, and he continued to fantasize about reporting himself to the police and going to jail. His vision of himself was improbably heroic. In his memory the bomb against the furniture factory blew out of proportion, his remorse was exaggerated. The specter of failure loomed over him. He tormented himself with his mistakes: What a flop! Revolution, like hell! I placed my petty insecurities over and above the struggle, I isolated myself, backed down. I’m a bad father, a lousy husband, and I’m not even a political hero. I had great things in my sights and I’ve done nothing at all. Getting stoned made him feel better, and so did getting drunk. He soon gave up going out onto the balcony to smoke, and no longer even bothered to wait for Aurora and Mara to go to bed. He became paranoid that somebody from the First Fire Guerrillas was going to come and get him, and, though he felt he deserved it, he was more scared than smug. He was an aspiring terrorist who was terrified of his own shadow.

Aurora spent more and more time on her own. An adjunct at college had been flirting with her, and had promised to fix things so that she could take her last exams without doing much work, but she had taken no notice. She tried to get home as late as possible, with the excuse of taking Mara to the beach so that she could breathe some healthy sea air. She didn’t want to think about her husband or where their life was heading. After attending her lectures, and doing some reading in the library, she went to pick Mara up at the nursery and then drove along the coast until Mara fell sleep. Only then did she drag herself back home. She hated Giovanni’s house guests, who had never

actually been invited, stayed up with Giovanni until all hours, and often expected to be able to sleep over even when he was not there. They all seemed to have taken the couple's initial invitation to treat the apartment as if it was their own to the letter. She no longer enjoyed the impromptu meetings in her sitting room: beaming faces as they discussed the latest demonstrations looked ill-suited for daily life. She took no interest in their discussions, and had no sympathy for their problems. She had enough problems of her own. At night, as she lay wide awake in the half-empty bed, she longed for sleep rather than for Giovanni to come to bed as she used to. Mara woke up and cried every now and then. It was a purely physiological wail, with no real reason, but it was the only sound that kept her company.

When Aurora announced that she didn't want people in the house anymore, Giovanni simply went back to going out every night. Mother and daughter - one still a girl and the other a baby - reverted to the basic routines of childhood: early bedtimes, long nights, early mornings, long days. Surviving until the evening.

For Mara's first birthday, Giovanni suggested the three of them went out for a pizza, one of those little things they no longer did. He went out for a smoke, and promptly forgot all about it. He came home drunk without a birthday present. Aurora and Mara, dressed up for their evening out, had fallen asleep arm in arm on the sofa. When they are asleep the two of them look so alike, Giovanni thought to himself, concluding that grown-ups are simply children who have survived into adulthood.

Spring in Messina often brings the gift of a rainbow, arching miraculously above the ugly, unregulated buildings thrown up chaotically by town planners after the 1908 earthquake. One afternoon in 1979 there had been rain and clouds, then hail, and then bright sunshine, until a rainbow had come out, its ends planted behind two drab buildings right in front of the spot where Giovanni had arranged to meet his dealer. Instead of his usual supplier, however, there was a young girl. She was neither attractive nor unattractive, but shabby, wrapped in an unkempt leather coat. Giovanni eyed her suspiciously. She had everything he needed after all, and if the price was the same what was his problem?

"Don't you want to try some acid?"

"Right here?"

"Here, or at my place if you want."

Giovanni hesitated.

"Maybe next time. I have to go now."

On his way home Giovanni wondered where Gipi had got to. ‘He was supposed to save me. Ha! I’m still waiting’, he thought to himself.

“Did you see the amazing rainbow?” Aurora called out with exaggerated enthusiasm as he walked in the door

“Nice,” he muttered as he tried to find a suitable stash for his drugs. Doesn’t she need to go to the bathroom, or out maybe? Shouldn’t she be doing something? Anything? If only there were another room in this miniature apartment. When he was in this kind of mood the lack of space was like a vice clamping down mercilessly on his temples, in the same way as the sloping roof of the attic in his childhood bedroom had done.

“We were watching it from the balcony with Mara. Have you ever seen all seven colours? I don’t believe there are seven, I’ve never counted more than five. Just so you know, today there were four really clear colours.” Aurora gabbled on, in an unjustified, annoyingly good mood.

“I bet.”

“Where were you then? Didn’t you see it?”

“In the library.”

“Did you work there all day?”

“Almost. No, I didn’t see anything.”

This girl is brilliant at not being able to tell when I’m lying, Giovanni thought to himself. She has a real talent for not noticing anything.

“She’s inherited my insomnia,” Giovanni commented one evening, picking Mara up to take her to the car. The best way to get the baby to sleep was to put her on the back seat and drive her around the city – one of the few things Giovanni and Aurora still did together. Sometimes Giovanni would stick Lou Reed or Francesco Guccini into the cassette player. Other times there was complete silence, just the wheels rolling, rocking Mara to sleep almost instantly. Mara was late to learn to speak, but she would stare at people or things for what felt like an interminable period of time. Aurora found it hard to hold her gaze.

6.

The following year Aurora and Giovanni graduated. They were both painfully aware of the consequences: the Santatorre and Silini families would no longer subsidize their life. Since Aurora, in accordance with her father’s wishes, had also trained as a primary school teacher, and taken the

entrance exams, when the letter arrived in the mail saying she had been accepted she decided to take up the position immediately.

Giovanni promised he would look for a job, but Aurora told him to take his time.

“At least *you* should find a job you really like,” she said indulgently.

She tried not to let her disappointment show. She had hoped to be able to continue her research at university, but it would take too long to apply for funds.

“You could go on to teach at Junior High, and then at High School,” her younger sister Rosa suggested. Aurora was unable to explain to her naively optimistic sister that a career of incremental promotions would make her feel even more of a failure. She felt that it would be better to spend the rest of her life in an office somewhere, leaving behind her books and her ideals, and die slowly of boredom without anyone noticing.

One morning Giovanni stood in front of the mirror. Right, he said to himself. That’s enough now. I’m going to get myself together and surprise them all, like when I did my graduate presentation. They were all awed by my talk on Weimar and Rosa Luxemburg. Well, what did they expect? I suppose they thought I was going to harp on about the Italian *Mezzogiorno*. There are enough petty little provincial researchers in this world. I’m better than that. I see the bigger picture. I’ll surprise them again, and Aurora will be more surprised than any of them.

Aurora was still asleep. In that period she slept as much as she could. Giovanni had to admit she had accomplished a great deal, for herself and for him. She had not only studied hard, she had left him free to study, had never nagged at him, and had taken care of Mara almost single-handed. And what had he done in exchange? Now was not the time to torment himself. He had made it, after all. He had graduated – not with top marks like her, not on schedule like her - but the promise they had made when they first met had been kept. Will you help me finish college? he had asked, and she had accepted. Will you help me be happy? The answer to that question had been less clear. Aurora was perfect, but he wasn’t that bad. She did make him feel inadequate though. Giovanni let out a sigh and lit a cigarette. His eyes were still puffy with sleep. What had he accomplished, aside from his dark rambling thoughts in front of the mirror? He flushed the toilet. Aurora had woken up and was calling him.

“I’m coming,” he answered. He was pissed off, there’s no peace in this place, even in the bathroom. She was the one who had told him that when she was a child she had sought peace by hiding in the bathroom. Had she forgotten everything? Why did she always want to share every moment of her life? He went over to the bed and gave her a kiss.

“I need to go away for a few days. I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Yes, he really needed to get away. Spend some time alone.

“Do what you like,” Aurora answered. What difference does it make? she thought, but decided it wasn’t worth saying our loud. She got up and put the coffee on.

Baroque churches, sidewalks paved in lava, the echoes of church bells from Norman towers, the Ionian sea and Mt. Etna in the background. Giovanni felt as if he was coming back to life. He had chosen a volcano for his private getaway, but unlike Stromboli where he had gone with Aurora, there had been no need for a hovercraft to take him there. The strip of land between the sea and the volcano gave him a sense of comfort and escape, a combination of staggering beauty and certain evasion. He found a hostel for the night and grabbed a late breakfast of *scacciata* – a stuffed pizza with olives, sausage and vegetables. The mountain air, mingled with the hint of the seaside on the horizon, made him feel on cloud nine. He stopped at a café where he had seen a group of young men his age drinking coffee. They looked foreign, maybe British; in any case he couldn’t understand what they were saying so he moved a bit closer. Their pants were scruffy out and their T-shirts sweaty. They looked like foreign acid heads but he soon discovered they were local construction workers who had been renovating the façade of a building. The incomprehensible language they were speaking was in fact dialect, and they were on a coffee break from Unable to understand people or interpret situations now, even when he was totally sober?

He gazed out over the parapet at the panoramic viewing point. He hadn’t brought any drugs or alcohol. His only entertainment was the cassette player in his car, and the Dylan tapes he could sing along to without thinking about anything for once: neither politics, nor his marriage or his daughter. He went back to the hostel, paid, and drove down the narrow streets circling Mt. Etna until he reached the highway for Messina where home, Aurora, and his daughter awaited him. The scent of beauty and possibility was still in his nostrils.

Giovanni started looking for a job, and gave private lessons in English and German in the meantime. He had learned the basics at school, and had perfected his slang when he had worked in a hotel in the summer of 1977. His pupils looked up to him and their parents put their trust in him. He loved being the hero of the moment: feted by the families, saving children from certain failure at school. Every morning Aurora would go to work, dropping Mara off at nursery on the way, and at lunchtime Giovanni would go and pick Mara up, bring her home. and make lunch for them all. Neither wondered whether they were doing the right thing, whether their days resembled the life they had imagined for themselves when they had first fallen in love and decided to spend their life together. There was no time for idle thoughts. Devoting themselves to family life absorbed all the

energy they had and what little money they earned. Giovanni re-considered his complaints against his father for his absences, his distraction, his putting work before everything else. He remembered accusing his father of being dead inside. He now felt he understood him better. He even thought that one day he would apologize to his father, but then he castigated himself for being over sentimental.

One afternoon at the supermarket he stopped in front of the breakfast shelf. Aurora was crazy for a make of cookies with hazelnut and chocolate, while he still preferred a croissant at his local café in the morning. Standing in front of the shelf his mind went completely blank. He couldn't for the life of him remember the make. He closed his eyes and tried to picture Aurora opening the cupboard and reaching out for ... He couldn't do it. Maybe they don't sell them here, he thought. If I saw them I'd remember. He left the supermarket empty-handed and caught sight of a figure he knew well. It was Gipo's mother.

"How are you? And how's Gipo doing?"

Her stare was hostile, as if Giovanni had been mocking her.

"How do you think he is?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's in jail, that's how he is."

The woman gripped her shopping bag tight and said she had to get on.

So Gipi was inside. He's inside and I'm still out here, Giovanni thought. Everyone just ignore me; even the law ignores me. Not doing time means not having done anything worthwhile. I'm invisible, he concluded. That's what I am.

The following day he returned to his usual spot. The girl was there, wearing a seedy leather jacket instead of the coat.

"What's your name?"

"Ines?"

"I'm Giovanni."

"I know."

She didn't invite him back to her place, but she was nicer to him than she had been last time. Giovanni paid and, once he had driven to his favourite place by the sea, enjoyed a solitary acid trip before falling asleep – not once thinking about whether he should go back home.

The alarm went off, intruding on an unrelenting sensation of emptiness. Giovanni had not come home. Aurora got out of bed and readied herself and Mara for the day. She knew Giovanni would not call. She went out, carrying Mara in her arms, leaving behind the silence of the night. She had been waiting for Giovanni to disappear again; it had been only a matter of time. You see, he's

leaving, she had said to herself time after time. He's about to leave again, I can feel it. Aurora dropped Mara off at the nursery and realized she would have to ask for some time off from work so that she could go and pick her up. When she was in the classroom the janitor came in and said her husband was waiting outside. She ran out to the hall where she saw Giovanni leaning on the wall, waiting for her.

"I need to go to the police."

"What for?" Aurora asked.

"You know what for."

"So you've decided to do it after all?"

"I've left it too long already."

Aurora turned around and strode back into her classroom. When the bell rang she locked herself in the bathroom and wept until there were no more tears.

Giovanni went to the police station and incriminated himself, but the story was old and no one was interested. He found out that all of the activists from the group he had been involved with had been released, and was upset that nobody had thought to let him know. At least a phone call. He decided not to think about it, and the whole thing blew away. There were no consequences for Giovanni thanks to the intervention of his attorney father, who made the right phone calls without mentioning the matter to his son. Giovanni's file was put straight into the back of the cupboard.

Aurora realized she would have to leave, not with a hastily packed bag this time, but with all her stuff in suitcases. The excuse of the summer meant she could tell friends and acquaintances she was moving back to her parents' house so that she could take Mara to the beach every day. Rosa was the only member of the family that was thrilled: she couldn't wait to have her niece around, and Mara loved her young aunt's playful attention.

The oppressive sun, combined with a torrid *Scirocco* wind, contributed to stifling any desire to change things. *Il Fascistissimo* and *L'Avvocato* decided to postpone until September their efforts to put their children back onto the right path, but concurred that, given Giovanni's unreliability, Mara should stay with Aurora. This was best for everyone, they agreed. The fact was that nobody knew what to do.

Giovanni wanted to spend a couple of days with his daughter. He decided to take her to his cousins' beach house in Taormina, where he had spent the last happy summer of his life – or at least that was how he remembered it. When they weren't at the beach, they would play with his cousins'

Labrador. They would pretend it was a horse, and Mara would ride on its back dressed in a princess's veil, clutching a little umbrella that became the roof of the carriage. Giovanni would pull the dog with the little girl sitting on it from one end of the house to the other and Mara would laugh her head off. And yet he was unable to shake off his depression. Maybe his comrades had been right not to place their trust in him given that he was a father. But was Mara really the issue? If he hadn't had her and Aurora to deal with, would things have turned out differently? Would he have been more credible? Would he have been braver? Until that moment he had always blamed his wife and daughter for his failures, but now he wasn't so sure. When he took Mara back home, Aurora had gone out to avoid meeting him. He was sad, but even sadder to leave his daughter behind.

The cousins left Giovanni the house keys since they were leaving. They gave him simple instructions: water the plants, take care of the dog. Nothing he couldn't cope with, although his nights were soon transformed into orgies of drinking, smoking and taking hallucinogenic drugs. He was totally alone – a state he had desperately hoped to achieve. And yet every evening he would go out and make friends with random people with whom he then shared everything he had. He loved offering drinks and tokes, and when he wanted to show off he would get the mushrooms out. The local seafront dealers had found their ideal client: a well-heeled young man seeking company and waiting for his next illusion.

When the summer was over, Giovanni went back to the miniature house. He was on his own again. It wasn't that he didn't want to have his wife and daughter back. He thought about it, but as soon as he tried to get his ideas into some kind of order, they would just fly about in his head, in no order at all. He was no longer waiting for a brighter future, he could simply pay for it in cash and enjoy it some stranger's car or on the street near the station. He had experimented with LSD, but his favorite was a cocktail of Rohypnol and alcohol, which helped him pass out completely. He had become an expert in mixing doses so as not to endanger himself. He would come back home first thing in the morning, throw himself onto his bed, and fall asleep instantly. He rarely answered the phone. Aurora was too ashamed to tell their landlord what was going on, and went on paying the rent. Giovanni had suspected his father had been behind his failed attempt to incriminate himself, and had challenged him by saying he had proof. *L'Avvocato* admitted having used his influence to get his son off the hook, saying it was for his own good, and Giovanni had screamed at him. "You've ruined my life," he yelled, knowing full well he was exaggerating.

To start with, Aurora tried to avoid being there when Giovanni went to pick Mara up. After a while, however, since she missed her husband, she would make sure she was home and even

looked for excuses to keep him there for a few minutes. She told him about Mara's measles, and about her teachers. On one of these days she was exceptionally happy because Mara had suddenly started talking. She had been feeling guilty, convinced her daughter's delayed development had been a protest against her mother moving them out of the house and her father's disappearance, and was now relieved. She tried to share these thoughts with Giovanni, but as usual was unable to express her feelings openly. Giovanni, in his turn, did little to help. He was always in a hurry, and every time he came to the house he acted as though he had far more interesting things to do and had to get away as quickly as possible. In the old days, these more interesting things had something to do with politics, but now Aurora could see just by looking at his dazed expression, that he had definitively lost his dreams and replaced them with hallucinations.

Her sister Rosa organized a surprise evening for her. She offered to babysit Mara, and sent Aurora off to meet her old friends from the convent school. None of them had ever had anything to do with student politics, and when they did talk about current affairs they were as boring as the TV news left on at lunchtime. Aurora invented an excuse to get away half way through the evening.

By the time the two sets of parents got round to discussing what to do with their wayward children, Giovanni and Aurora had taken to meeting in secret. They would make love and then argue. Aurora was unable to say how much she missed him, and Giovanni couldn't explain why he was so restless. He would have had to admit that they had gotten married without knowing what either of them really wanted, that the birth of their daughter had made him feel trapped. He would have had to tell her about all the nights he had spent dreaming of running away from them both, of becoming a hero, a champion, and she would have asked why, if that was what he felt, he had wanted to marry her in the first place, and why he had wanted to have a baby so badly, and he wouldn't have been able to answer her because however absurd and contradictory all these things were they were nevertheless true – all of them at the same time.

Aurora would complain about her daily problems, and tell Giovanni how hard it was to do everything on her own, but he never answered, and she would get angry at the idea that she was to all intents and purposes separated and single. "What do you care about appearances?" Giovanni would ask her, disappointed in her. Aurora would leave the apartment and drive to the seafront, where she would park and stare out at the Strait just as she had done when she was a child. Every now and then they would try and meet up with a sibling or a friend, in the vain hope that the presence of a witness would calm them both down. They would talk about what was best for Mara,

but they had very different ideas about what that meant. In Giovanni's view, now that Mara was in nursery school, it was time for her to spend more time with kids of her own age, while Mara felt it was even more important now to protect her from other kids and families who might make her realize she was an only child with separated parents. She feared it would make her feel out of place, different from the others. This would lead them back to discussing the failure of their marriage, the swamp they felt they had stepped into and didn't know how to get out of, until Giovanni would start yelling and Aurora would run away in tears, taking with her the last opportunity for constructive dialogue.

One afternoon Giovanni arrived at the Silini house holding a wrapped package from the local café. His hands were shaking and the strawberry ice had run out of its container, smudging the paper wrapping.

"I never manage to do anything properly," he wailed, bursting into tears outside the door. Aurora's resistance melted on the spot, and she ended up hugging, then kissing, and finally making love to him, after which the decision to get back together again was a natural consequence.

"There's one condition," Aurora said. "My daughter, our daughter, must never again be in danger."

Giovanni was in no doubt: he would do anything for Mara, and he would never endanger her, he reassured his wife. Aurora went back to the apartment with Mara, and she convinced herself again that she would believe her husband because it was the right thing to do, and because she had that old lingering fear that she would be stuck for the rest of her life in her childhood home – though she could not confess this even to herself.

Il Fascistissimo let his daughter and granddaughter go without hiding his satisfaction: it was a great relief that Aurora had taken her problems into her own hands. His other children were reaching the age when they may be getting engaged and he didn't want to repeat the mistake he had made, out of superficiality, with his second born, who had been the first to get married and whose marriage had turned out to have made far more problems for him than it had solved.

There had been a police round up, and it had been hard to find weed and hallucinogenic drugs on the street for a while. Giovanni used this scarcity as an excuse for a detox, hoping to keep his promise to Aurora. As soon as the drugs became available again, however, his restlessness was back with a vengeance.

Sometimes he would go to his parents' house in the morning. The house felt half empty: he would find the windows open, the maid cleaning the sitting room, and his mother cooking. "She

doesn't know how to cook," his mother would whisper to Giovanni, indicating the maid. "I have to do everything myself." Giovanni loved the complicity. He would forget all his troubles, roll up his sleeves, and help her bone the meat or peel the vegetables. When Aurora and Mara had their long days at school, he had an excuse to stay for lunch. He would ask his mother to cook grilled swordfish steaks for him, like when he was a child, seeking the intimacy and affection that Aurora, in her diffidence, gave him less and less.

7.

Aurora kept an eye on her husband, as if she were a *carabiniere* conducting surveillance, and she never let her daughter out of her sight. She rarely went out, and never saw any friends. She taught at school in the morning and looked after Mara in the afternoon. She had lost the naïve laugh with which she had conquered Giovanni. She was always anxious, and found it hard to concentrate at school.

One evening she was invited to a meeting with her old comrades from the PdUP Party, and she decided for once to go. She asked Giovanni to stay home and babysit, given that it was the first time she had wanted to go out. She combed her hair, put on some make up, and surprised herself when she realized she was still able to participate in discussions and have fun. She drank a little, cracked jokes about the bourgeois burden of responsibility of being a mother and a wife. She found her old friends in great shape, and went home in a good mood, happy to have accepted the invitation and feeling lighter.

Even though he had promised he wouldn't go out, Giovanni hadn't been able to resist. It'll only be 30 minutes, he told himself. Aurora will never even know. He put Mara on the back seat of the car, and then went to pick up one acquaintance, and then another, and then a third. To start with Mara was the star of the show; everyone enjoyed playing with a young child. However, the novelty soon wore off, and there was a pressing practical problem to resolve, given that they were all there for one reason, and one reason only. They passed the joint around in the parked car facing the sea, the little girl staring at them. Two of them then left, while Giovanni and his friend drifted off into a deep sleep. When he woke at dawn his first thought was for Mara. Luckily she had fallen asleep too. He had not kept his promise, and Aurora would never forgive him. He rushed back home and prepared himself to face his wife's wrath. When he opened the door he found her in fits of tears.

"Rosa's dead," she sobbed, without looking at him.

That afternoon the youngest Silini had gone out on an excursion. There had been a landslide and Rosa had fallen into a precipice. *Il Fascistissimo* and his wife had had the grim task of identifying their daughter at the morgue, while the other siblings had arrived one after the other at

the hospital. The telephone had rung all evening in the empty apartment until Aurora had rushed to answer as soon as she had got home, fearing something had happened to Mara. She had been unable to do anything until her husband had got home.

The Silini family plunged into gloom. *Il Fascistissimo* announced he would let himself die, and Aurora realized she knew nothing about him. All she knew were the anecdotes he used to tell his children about the war in Africa, and how he had recklessly enrolled as a volunteer before he was even eighteen. He had always boasted that he had challenged his mother, who was against the decision because he hadn't finished school yet. "You can't be a Private in the Army, it's so common," she had scolded him. She was the daughter of a *Marchese*, and spoke very rarely – another detail her father had always stressed, as if to point out that his own modern daughters, without noble or **ciarliere** titles, were badly behaved and lacked the natural elegance of their legendary grandmother. Aurora remembered how strongly she had wanted to believe in her father's glorious past, enhanced by his stories about the ideals of military companionship and his exotic tales of black women "with pendant breasts so long they wrap them around their necks". The children used to feign surprise, and continued to do so into adulthood. "Really?" They would exclaim. "You mean like scarves?"

Rosa's death reminded her of her father's stories about his first brush with death. At camp in Africa they had been in line for lunch when his superior had waved a telegram and called out his name. "Silini!" The lieutenant had barked. Silini had taken one step forward, and his superior hadn't even looked at him. "Your father is dead," he announced. Silini had taken a step back, joined the line, and eaten his lunch without a word being said. *Il Fascistissimo* had always told the story with pride, pleased with the way he had passed his first test of manhood. But he had told it too many times, as if he hadn't ever wanted to heal the wound. Rosa's death must have found its way into that wound, opening it up so wide that he couldn't bear the pain any longer. Aurora realized it was the same for all of them. She thought about her sister falling into the void, her mother, her brothers, herself and Giovanni, all on the edge of a precipice, standing there looking down into the emptiness.

Nobody ever asked Giovanni where he had been when his little sister in law had met with her death, but his guilty conscience made him feel unworthy of the pain he felt he could not partake in. He tried to escape the family's mourning, and spent more and more time at his parents' house. He often stayed the night, lying in his old room under the gables, smoking. The greatest relief he felt in his state of torpor was not having to meet the gaze of his wife, or worse, of his daughter.

Aurora went back and forth between the miniature house and her childhood home, and Giovanni would call her every now and then. She was always in a hurry to bring the conversation to

an end; she wanted to hear his voice as little as possible. Aurora was suspended between two voids: the vacuum of death felt less frightening than the other, for which she had no name.

Rohypnol did not alleviate Giovanni's remorse, but it did mitigate his insomnia. He went to bed at dawn, and as soon as he hit his pillow he slept like a baby. At times he would set his alarm, with the idea that he would go and visit Rosa's grave. But when the alarm rang like a drill through his brain, he postponed the visit. I'll go tomorrow, he promised himself, so that he didn't have to admit the truth: that he would never set foot in that city of the dead.

He would occasionally meet one of his old comrades who tried to bring him to his senses, hinting that he should return to the fold, that he was needed. Most of them, however, were involved in building their political careers, and one 'enemy' less could only be good news for them. A letter arrived from Peter, asking how he was and inviting him to Berlin. That's what he needed to get out of the swamp of the provinces, he thought: a journey abroad.

Peter picked Giovanni up at the station in West Berlin and drove him through the city. The western districts flashed with blue neon signs hanging over the night clubs. Giovanni was shocked by the graffiti and the unusual architecture. He tried to sit up but felt weak. Police had inspected him on the train and Giovanni had been deeply offended, almost to the point that he had wanted to shout that they had no idea what kind of family he came from. It was not that he had wanted to make any claim – that would have been ridiculous - but simply that he had been surprised and shocked at the realization that he must look like a drug addict.

Aurora also wanted to get away. After Rosa's death, her siblings had started throwing their pain about, hating one another for still being alive. Aurora played part in the proceedings. The memory of her sister tormented her and made her regret the fact that she had not died in her place. She had never been on a plane in her life, and had never been outside Italy. Going on a trip would help her, she thought. She booked a packaged holiday to London, which included an English language course and family accommodation. It looked just right for her and Mara.

On departure, mother and daughter were in high spirits. They fastened their seat belts and waited for takeoff holding hands. They looked like very different dolls: Mara's cheeks were plump and her hair disheveled, while Aurora looked overcome with fatigue and anxiety. They chatted and played games throughout the flight, and were met at the airport by their hosts, a retired couple who looked reliable and cheerful. She and Mara were assigned the room that had previously been occupied by the Pym's youngest son, who had just left home for college. The fit between the two amputated families – the Santatorres without Giovanni and the Pym's without their youngest son -

seemed to work well. They had breakfast together every morning, then Mrs. Pym took Mara to the park while Aurora caught the tube to her language school. She sometimes used Giovanni's name to fend off the undesired attention of her course mates, but she never talked about her husband with the Pym.

On their second night in Berlin, Peter and Giovanni met up for a drink with some friends who also knew Gipo. They asked Giovanni whether he had gone to see Gipo in jail, and he told them they had lost touch. Giovanni sensed the old comrades' disapproval, as if his detachment from the movement was a sign of superficiality. Gipo was inside for a kidnapping, he had found out shortly after bumping into his mother – an action doomed to failure that would have felt like a heroic feat not so long ago. He changed the subject, clearing his throat: *Meine tochter, Mara....* He couldn't stop talking about his daughter, about what she did at school and at home, transforming her into an entity, a goddess that he had never worshipped sufficiently. The comrades listened with respect and even curiosity, and he felt strengthened by the idea of having a project and a role. He felt he was finally ready to be a father. He had been clean for a week, and when he got back to Italy he vowed to turn his life around. His daughter was the one who would help him become a better person. It was so simple – why hadn't he thought of it before? Maybe he had thought of it but hadn't managed to put it into practice. Whatever, he thought. This time things will be better. Being far away made everything seem clearer.

He decided he would go to the other side of the wall. Peter and the other comrades didn't want to go with him, but Giovanni was curious and the idea of venturing there alone attracted him. The guards' impatience at the check point dampened his enthusiasm, and all he found in East Berlin was a cocoon of normality, which stripped him of any illusions he had harbored. Everything was exactly as he had expected – cheap ale houses, Jewel cigarettes, Trabants on the road – but he was indifferent to the whole lot. What did I think I would find? he wondered. A dream that was still intact? A world tailor-made for my needs? He had no idea any more. What he did feel was a strangely oppressive sense that everything was being controlled. The whole morning he had felt under observation. He had lunch in an ale house and decided to return to the West earlier than planned. Peter asked how the trip had gone, but Giovanni didn't answer, going back to talking about Mara, about her amazing eyes, her inquisitive eyes that continued to strike anyone that met her.

On their return to Sicily, *Il Fascistissimo* had come to pick Aurora and Mara up at Catania airport. His silence in the car was unbearable. He had started out by never saying Rosa's name, and had ended up saying nothing at all. He hadn't shaved since Rosa's funeral and the grey wisps on his chin were his tokens of mourning. Without saying a word he dropped them off at the miniature

house, where in his mind they belonged. Aurora got Mara out of the car, grabbed her suitcase, and said goodbye to her father. The door was unlocked. She put Mara to bed and then looked round the house, registering that Giovanni appeared to have taken up residence there again.

The following morning she was the first to open her eyes..

“So you’re back too,” she said, waking him.

Early morning noises started to penetrate the apartment: chatter rising from the courtyard, steps across the ceiling from upstairs.

Giovanni stretched.

“I couldn’t stand being without you,” he laughed, pinching her thighs playfully.

“Don’t, they’re too fat!”

“They’re perfect!”

“Your compliments are as unreliable as you are.”

“Believe me for once.”

“I’ve always believed you,” Aurora said. “Did Peter suggest you came back?”

“No, Mara did. And you did.”

“She was so sweet in London,” Aurora exclaimed, taking pleasure in Giovanni’s words. “The Pym’s adored her.”

“Was that your host family?”

“Yes.”

A ghost of a memory of happy family life appeared for an instant and was dismissed immediately.

“You must trust me this time,” said Giovanni, sensing danger in the air.

“Do I have a choice?”

Mara woke up, calling for attention. Giovanni and Aurora got out of bed and started their day. Things went well for a while. They had made love that morning, and they made love again that evening, and the following morning too. They treasured the illusion that this time things would be different, and it might even have been true because they were both tired of packing and unpacking, of checking up on each other. It was so much easier to live together without controlling every detail of the other’s life, without making Giovanni give up his nights out. All they had to do was make sure things were less out in the open, less evident to others. All Aurora had to do was cry less often, and all Giovanni had to do was hide his addiction better. Basically, all they had to do was pretend everything was fine. They became experts in opportune silence, perfecting the art of complicity and connivance.

It happened on a day with no special significance, for no evident reason, and with no particular back story. Before his first heroin fix, Giovanni had been thinking back to 1977 when tourists would gaze longingly at him, when he and Aurora had thrown themselves into their college studies together with such energy. He took his jacket off and laid it down carefully on the sidewalk. He waved Ines away, after she had flirtatiously offered to help roll his sleeve up. He waited in vain for the euphoria to hit him. The heroin was more like a dream, like a mother consoling him. Nothing felt better, but everything felt more bearable.

He woke up in the late afternoon and made himself a cup of tea at a friend's house. Before going home he looked at himself in the mirror and was unable to grasp any purpose there. He went out to get his car and the air plucked at his lungs.

He didn't get home until much later, when Mara and Aurora were both asleep. Aurora turned in her bed, satisfied with the dreams she would never remember in the morning. Giovanni woke her up, kissing and hugging her, flooding the room with tenderness. This is what conjugal love feels like, Aurora thought to herself, and it wounded her so deeply she wished she had never experienced it,

Aurora had no idea what Giovanni was up to until money and other little valuable objects started disappearing from the house. She made a huge effort to see nothing until one afternoon, as she came out of the shower, she realized her wedding ring had gone from the shelf where she had placed it.

The winter that followed was like a journey to the center of the earth for Giovanni. Every fix, every day, was like the first time. Heroin lulled him into thinking he would have an epic day, but who cared if it never transpired that way? When he was clearheaded, on the other hand, he felt awkward and listless.

L'Avvocato took his son aside and tried giving him a pep talk.

What he would have liked to say was that he had done everything wrong with him, that all of them had. You came late, he had wanted to say, and maybe your mother was right when she was expecting you. She had wondered whether we would have the same energy with you as we had had with the others.

What he actually asked him was why he had started taking heroin. "Because it's beautiful" was the only thing Giovanni could think of to answer. Nothing else came to mind.

Aurora felt like she had the plague. She was so sure her friends were avoiding her that she ended up avoiding them. Against everything Giovanni represented, a newfound respectability took root in them both, which not only refused to lay low but which reared its head at completely random

moments. They both had their moments. Giovanni was a heroin addict because he was lonely, which was his wife's or his parents' fault. His brothers had done nothing to help. Politics had ruined him. No, actually he had been 'different' since he was a child. Aurora imagined voices around her all the time, provincial gossip mongers talking behind her back. She was less afraid of their condemnation than of their pity, their offers to help, their attempts to make conversation. She was too proud; she burned with shame at the fact that she couldn't manage to help her husband. She calculated what her chances were of getting away, how much money she would have. Then she would make up any excuse to postpone the decision because she knew this time it would be for good. She tried to see herself through Giovanni's eyes and all she saw was a girl who was no longer young, a wife her husband could tell lies to.

One evening she sat next to her husband with a syringe in her hand.

"We've never done anything together."

"Are you crazy?"

"You do it with other girls, so why can't you do it with me?"

"Go away! Stop it! You're scaring me."

It was what he had always wanted, Giovanni thought to himself.

"Isn't this what you always wanted?" Aurora asked him, as if she had read his mind.

"Maybe it is, yes."

"Doing something together? Doing this together?"

They could have done it. He had no reason to stop her. Almost no reason.

"I don't think there's enough in this dose for two people."

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Giovanni started preparing his fix and had already forgotten about her. It wasn't worth it, Aurora thought. She hurried away, and didn't realize her sleeve was still rolled up until she was back on the street, where she rolled it back down again.

In the meantime, several former terrorists had turned state's witnesses. There were no longer battles in the piazzas, and some militants had returned to the fold of the Communist Party, or had unexpectedly turned to the Church or to political factions on the other end of the political spectrum. The State changes its rules and gives prizes to those who adapt best, Giovanni thought. He kept telling himself that he had kept the faith and refused to adapt, and that he didn't care about anyone or anything. Then he would look for his next fix and stop thinking about any of it.

When heroin addicts started to find their deaths on city park benches, *L'Avvocato* decided enough was enough. There were many rumors about the drug, and few precedents, so *L'Avvocato* convinced himself the best course of action was to get Giovanni away from the city. He could no longer stand failure – Giovanni's above all, but also his own. The futility of his interventions until now, and the damage caused by them, were a constant humiliation.

L'Avvocato had a brother in Milan, and he asked him to find Giovanni a job as an Italian Philosophy teacher, any subject really, in a private school. Whatever he could find.

"Milan?" his wife wailed. "Have you lost your mind? It'll be the end of him."

Giovanni's uncle found him a job as a substitute teacher in a middle school. He was happy to have an adult excuse to get away from Messina, and a salary to spend away from everyone's controlling gaze.

The miniature house Aurora was still paying for was dismantled, and Aurora and Mara went back to the old Silini villa. Their final separation was consumed with no ritual whatsoever.

The subject of Giovanni was never brought up. His presence was felt when an envelope was dropped in the letter box once a week.

Dear Mara,

I want you to know that I miss you. Every day I wonder whether leaving you was the right thing to do and unfortunately often the answer is no, because I miss your smile and our games.

I've heard you have new friends who will be going into First Grade with you next year. Don't abandon your old friends though. Promise me. I also heard you've lost one more milk tooth in the front.

I'm dying of curiosity. Please send me some news.

Big kiss, Papa

On the back of Mara's letters there was always one for Aurora.

Dear Aurora,

It's bloody cold here and I have to get up at 5 am to get to the school in Sesto San Giovanni because my uncle's house is miles away, near Corso Buenos Aires. I can't afford to live on my own as this city is expensive and my salary is pretty low. Some mornings it's so dark that you can't see a thing. It's freezing, and my teeth are rotting, and everything is really hard for me.

My mother said she's seen you and that Mara is doing well. She says her teacher is confident this new move hasn't affected her too badly. Please do not spare me your news. Thinking

about you and Mara gives me comfort, and helps me get over my worst moments. Yesterday when you handed her over on the phone I felt that you hadn't read her my last letters. Please, don't forget to read them to her.

Try and stay well. I know you don't have enough money; as soon as I can I'll send you some.

Love, Giovanni.