



**The River Captain (66<sup>th</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>) – Translation Proposal and Sample by Clarissa Botsford**

Ubah Cristina Ali Farah was born in Verona to a Somali father and Italian mother. She spent her early years in Mogadishu until the civil war forced the family to return to Italy and settle there. Her experience of a second generation, mixed race upbringing has coloured her writing, which is both deeply entrenched in the African oral tradition and extremely contemporary. Ali Farah writes for many newspapers and periodicals, and has conducted research and contributed to studies on migrant literature and the Somali diaspora. Her attractive personality and interesting life experience makes her an ideal participant in panels, media events and book presentations. The book may be eligible for English Pen translation funds.

Ali Farah’s well received first novel, *Madre Piccola* (‘Little Mother’ translated by Giovanna Bellesia Contuzzi & Victoria Offredi Poletto, Bloomington, Indiana University press, 2011) was described by David Shook as being a “tangled mass of experience and memory” ([www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2011](http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2011)).

‘The River Captain’ shifts the “tangled mass” one generation forward and grapples with questions that are terribly vital today in every developed western nation: How has it come to pass that a generation born and educated in the west does not feel the affinity, the ‘belongingness’ that is so essential for active participation in the society they were brought up in? What lies at the root of the new generation’s need to establish a new, more radicalised identity? How can young people of this generation accept the ‘blended or ‘multiple’ identity model when the dominant model is so clearly hostile to them and appears to do everything in its power to impede their assimilation? How can a society that will never be truly ‘colour blind’ expect its new citizens to be? ‘The River Captain’ encompasses Rome, London and Somalia and will resonate with readers in the UK as much as with Italian readers because of its universal themes.

The novel is a classic coming-of-age story, but at the same time it is a kind of adventure story for the new millennium. There is a quest, a frenzied search for answers to the fundamental questions of life: Where do I come from? Who was my father? Why is he not part of our lives? Do I belong here? And there is a discovery at the end. Ali Farah plays with these traditional forms, teasing her readers with their apparent predictability. Our expectations, the author seems to be saying, are called into question by the complexity of our contemporary, globalised existence. The

psychological and moral growth one expects from a novel of formation, and the easy satisfaction one expects from an adventure story, are continuously frustrated by the realisation – through the difficulties the main characters have to deal with in the novel - that life is just not that easy anymore.

An extra layer of complexity is provided by the threads of a Somali legend – from which the title is drawn – which are woven into the fabric of the quest. According to the legend, two wise men manage to bring a river to a village which is suffering from a terrible drought, but the river turns out to be infested with crocodiles. The village elders elect a commander who is charged with controlling the crocodiles – accepted as a necessary evil - so that the villagers can go and collect water, an essential, life-giving good. The River Captain is the person who is called upon to distinguish between the forces of good and evil.

The narrating voice is that of the eighteen-year-old protagonist, Yabar, born of Somali parents who moved to Italy when he was a boy. The novel is a reconstruction of the past few months of his life, and his voice is at times angry, at other times frustrated, and at yet other times bitter-sweet. The backdrop is another river, his favourite haunt: the River Tiber in Rome. Yabar has just had a serious accident, and risks losing his sight in one eye. He ends up in the hospital on the island in the middle of the Tiber where the person who comes and visits most is his mother's closest friend, 'Auntie' Rosa.

The twin frames of the hospital on the river and the Somali legend provide a stable structure for the reader, while the teenage protagonist rambles, rants, vents his angst, recounts his capers with his friends, relates his meetings with kids who have become radicalised - including one of the London

Underground bombers who was friends with one of his group - expresses admiration and jealousy for Sissi, his little 'sister' (Rosa's daughter), savours the memory, and cringes at the shame, of his recent sexual fumbings, and, most of all, tells the story of the quest for the truth about his father. Encouraged by 'Auntie' Rosa, Yabar finally confesses the terrible secret he discovered when he was sent by his mother to stay with relatives in London as punishment for failing two years in a row at school. His father was not the heroic freedom fighter in the Somali civil war he had always imagined (and been led to believe); he had actually murdered his wife's little brother in a petty fight between clans. By the end of the novel, Yabar himself takes on the role of the River Captain who is forced to distinguish between good and evil - and ultimately decide which side he is on.

*Clarissa Botsford's translation of Elvira Dones's Sworn Virgin (And Other Stories, May 2014) won the Pen/Heim translation grant and received critical acclaim, with favourable reviews in The Guardian, The Independent and The TLS, among other media outlets. Her translation of Condominium of the Flesh by the Italian poet Valerio Magrelli, was published in September 2015 for Free Verse Editions, Parlor Press and samples of Magrelli's Geology of a Father won special mention in the John Dryden Translation Prize. She has recently translated Contrary Times by Nadia Terranova for The Bridge Prize.*

## Sample 1

My best friend at the children's home was called Amilcar and his parents were from Cape Verde. They chose his name in honour of a famous independence fighter who had freed all the islands in the archipelago.

We used to love lining up our toy soldiers in mock battle fields. There were the goodies and the baddies but we never played on opposite sides. Amilcar and I were always faithful allies against evil.

One beautiful warm afternoon when we'd finished our homework, we stretched out on the lawn and got our armies into their positions. We spent hours drawing the battle lines and placing our soldiers strategically – it always used to take much longer than the actual fight. We would complete the scene with stones, moss, pine cones, leaves, branches, and anything else we could find in the garden of the home.

While I was lying on my tummy playing with my best friend, I caught sight of a man in the distance. He looked like my father, but I didn't think it could be him, I thought I must be imagining it. He was tall and thin and was wearing a smart suit. The closer he got the more he looked like my father, but I was scared of the tricks my imagination plays on me and I lay there totally still, my tummy flat on the grass, squinting into the distance like a soldier in a trench on guard duty. My father saw me and laughed. Opening his arms wide he said, "What are you doing? Aren't you going to come and say hello?"

Without saying a word to Amilcar, who was asking me "Hey, is that guy your father?", I jumped up onto my little pin legs and threw my arms around his neck. Dad picked me up and hugged me really tight.

"This really is a happy day!" He said it about three times while he kissed my forehead, and he kept calling me, "wiikayga", my boy.

After a few minutes of hugging and kissing he said he was going to take me out for a spin, we were going to go into town. I was a bit disappointed because I had hoped he was back for good and would take me away from the children's home.

He took my hand and we went to the supervisor to get permission to leave. The woman checked my father's passport, filled in a form and asked him to sign it. Then she let us go.

The car my dad had come to pick me up in was really cool, there was even a driver. As soon as we were sitting in the back seat I asked him where he had been all this time and why Mum was always talking about "omicidio". I was reciting words I had learned off by heart, without knowing what they meant. My father shuddered, but he controlled it so quickly I almost didn't notice. For a second I thought I had seen a different light in his eyes, as if they had gone yellow like a crocodile's. As soon as he started talking, he went back to normal.

He said that these things were too complicated for a child, that he had looked for me and hadn't even known I was in a home, but that luckily he had his informers who had found me. I asked him who these informers were and all he said was that my Mum had hidden me and that she didn't want us to see each other, but that I should relax because I was his son and he would fix everything. And as for the word "omicidio" it was just a nickname he'd been given because he was so brave he had fought bare handed against a crocodile.

I thought my dad was a hero and that he was right, it really was a happy day. He took me to the fun fair, to buy new clothes, and then we climbed into one of those photo booths and took a picture so we would remember how happy we were. We chose the four-pose option so we could hug each other in a different way in each photo, trying to get both our faces into the square box on the screen. Later we went to a restaurant, but it was really early and all the tables were empty. We sat facing each other and I started to feel sad because the day was nearly over, but Dad said we should put a good face on things and enjoy the dinner.

We ordered a veal cutlet and chips for me, roast chicken and spinach for him, and a bottle of Coca-Cola as a treat for me. My father chewed at the chicken leg with relish and then said he had to go to the bathroom. After a few minutes my heart started sinking, as if my father had gone off and left me alone again, and I rushed to the bathroom to look for him. It was a men's room, with lots of basins in a row under a long mirror opposite a row of urinals. I didn't see him straight away because he was in a corner, and he didn't see me either. There were just the two of us in there. Then I saw my father's back. He was holding something in his hands and washing it under the tap and the mirror reflected his forehead and his eyes. When he saw my image in the mirror he seemed surprised and

span round really quickly. That was when I saw his bare gums, and in his hand a bridge of false teeth, four front teeth. His gums were purple and his eyes yellow like a crocodile's.

I was so scared I started screaming. I didn't know then that some younger men had false teeth, and my father had a startled expression as if we hadn't just been sitting at table having a meal together just a few minutes before, as if the supervisor hadn't checked his passport and said "Okay, you can go now," as if he hadn't held my hand and taken me to the fun fair.

I never saw him again.

*The River Captain is the greatest swimmer in Somalia, people say he's the only person who can swim with crocodiles. He knows all the tricks to keep them under his control, he knows how to bewitch them with medicinal herbs when they come out of the water and how to persuade them to obey his orders.*

*The crocodiles are part of the river and the Captain's role is vital. That is why men and women bring him animals, fruit and bread. If anybody refuses to pay their dues the Captain summons a crocodile and tells him to lie on top of them, and in a flash they vanish from under the beast.*

*Men and women are only allowed to live in the village if they pay their dues, and if they do they can also ask the Captain to act as a judge on their behalf. For example, if a woman owes a man something and refuses to pay up, the man can go to the Captain and explain his case. If this man has brought fruit, meat and grain with him, the Captain calls nine crocodiles and tells them to capture the woman when she goes down to the river to fetch water. They snatch the woman and one of the crocodiles carries her on his back, two crocodiles escort her on either side, two swim ahead and two behind, and they bring her to the Captain. The woman has no choice but to pay her debt. The Captain feeds the crocodiles as a reward for their help and they slide silently back into the river and wait for a new task.*

"The wise men appoint the Captain to govern the lives of the crocodiles and the lives of the people in the village, but in the legend the Captain uses the crocodiles and he uses the people. So is using and governing the same thing?"

My mother smiles and says, "Good point. The River Captain is appointed by the people, so we suppose he acts in their interest. But at the same time we can't be sure the Captain can distinguish

between crocodiles and people, between his own interests and those of the people. Would you know how?”

Some rivers when they break their banks make the land more fertile on each side. The water overflows and the silt from the river bed overflows with it. People say the River Tiber is a fantastic treasure trove: on its bed lie precious pearls, mercenary soldiers' spears, pistols from Garibaldi's Thousand, white marble statues, ancient candelabras. There are plenty of other things down there in the depths of the river too, animal carcasses, wrecks, carrion, and when they come afloat they need to be disposed of or they pile up under the bridges and block the river. Once I saw a huge dam made up of tree trunks and branches that had been brought down river by the current. The river police had to clear it away, pity because it was really nice watching that dead forest hugging the white river bastions.

When the river level rises, seagulls sit on the water pretending to be ducks, and if you watch them closely you can see how fast the river is flowing. The seagulls slide on the surface of the water, they let themselves be carried along without resisting and without sinking like the little swift I once tried to save and failed.

I wanted to be a seagull that evening. After exchanging phone numbers with Gheorghis and Libaan I decided to walk home. I needed to calm down and anyway I've always hated buses, specially night buses. I tried to remember what my father looked like, but all I could see was an oval shape with no features. Mum had got rid of every single picture in the house, but I knew there was one in my secret box, the one where I used to keep foreign coins, shells, postcards and other little cherished things when I was a child.

My secret box is a miniature chest of drawers made of flowery cardboard. In one of the drawers there was the photo we took that day my father picked me up at the children's home. In each of the four poses there were two cut off heads, a man and a child having fun moving in and out of the frame.

I had forgotten what he looked like and at that moment I saw him laughing in the shadows, as if we were playing hide and seek. Our faces were never whole, so I grabbed my scissors to separate his face from mine and then stuck all the pieces onto a sheet of cardboard. I thought I could recompose

our faces and see him again, but the pieces did not fit together properly and the end result was horrible.

I couldn't remember what he looked like and now that was the only image I had left of him.

I ask the head nurse if I can go to the cafeteria with my friend, the Sybarite. She's not happy but in the end she says yes, as long as I'm not away too long. I buy a newspaper, the same as usual, and check the Rome pages furtively to see if there are any updates. At the cafeteria we get two cans of peach flavoured iced tea and then move on towards the central cloister of the hospital. There's a marble-lined rock pool at the centre of the courtyard, with a dolphin spitting water into a shell rising out of it, and cyclamens and ferns planted all around the base. There are two pools, one inside the other, and blue steps down. The rock in the middle is teeming with little water turtles sunbathing, while others are swimming around in the algae. I go up to the pool.

"What are you doing?" my friend asks.

"I wonder if I'll recognize them after all these years."

My friend stares at me, not quite understanding.

"Do you remember the water turtle I had when I was a kid?"

"..."

"When I used to go with Mum to work, just after we moved to Rome, we used to go past a pet shop every day. I was desperate to go in, but Mum always said we couldn't. Do you know what she used to call the owner? The animal torturer. 'Go on, go and say hello to the animal torturer,' she would tease me, pushing me towards the door. In the end, I went on so much that she gave in and bought me a little water turtle. She only allowed it because I said I would take care of it on my own."

"Now I remember, it was in a coloured tank with an island in the middle and a plastic palm tree, right? You gave it some weird name, what was it...?"

“Amilcar. That was his name.”

The water turtles were all different sizes but it was impossible to tell them apart in the rock pool.

“It was my best friend’s name when we were in the children’s home.”

“A home? You? You were in a children’s home?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about it?”

“I don’t know, it just never happened.”

“Have you kept in touch with Amilcar all this time?”

“No, never.”

“And what happened to the water turtle?”

“Mum was always complaining because the shit and the turtle food stank out the house, and I was always forgetting to change the water. One day we were in the hospital for a check-up I think and she saw this rock pool. It probably wasn’t allowed, but she decided to get rid of it and persuaded me Amilcar would be happier with all the other little water turtles. She even said we would come and visit every now and then.”

“Did you?”

“Of course we didn’t. You know my Mum, she’s not exactly subtle.”

“Anyway, why did she send you to a children’s home? Wasn’t there anyone to look after you?”

The Sybarite can’t quite believe there are things about my life he knows nothing about.



“I keep asking myself the same question. I think she felt she had to give to the family and didn’t have any right to get anything from them. Do you remember that day we went with her to wire money home?”

My friend throws his head back laughing.

Less than a year ago, Mum came to pick us up from Termini station after a school trip. We’d been to Calabria, and Sissi had picked a bunch of yellow daisies which she had kept in a plastic cup of water for the whole trip so they wouldn’t droop.

“These are for our Mums, ” she said as she got off the train, though Auntie Rosa was the only one who really appreciated flowers. Anyway, my Mum hugged her and thanked her and placed the plastic cup carefully between the two front seats of the car.

“I need to stop at the Money Transfer on the way. It won’t take a sec. You can get out if you want, or wait for me in the car. You decide.”

“Who are you sending money to this time?” I asked, a little sharply, while Sissi shot daggers at me. She knew we were always arguing about this. Mum got out of the car huffing, and came out with her usual phrase, “You never give up, do you?”

Requests for money came from up high. Often an older member of the family would intercede on behalf of a relative in need.

“Can’t you just refuse to send money to whoever asks you for it?” my friend asked me as soon as Mum was out of earshot.

“Forget it,” Sissi cut in, “don’t you start too.”

“I’m just trying to understand, that’s all. You don’t look like you’re exactly rolling in it.”

“I know, but she’s thrifty and saves money. She says shame comes down on your head if you refuse.”

“Even if it’s a relative you’ve never seen in your life? Even if you’ve lived far away from everyone for a thousand years?”

“Auntie explained it to us. It’s their culture.” As if ‘culture’ was as unchangeable as a fossil.

“So? Who’s ever helped us?”

“Auntie says that if you need help all you ever have to do is ask.”

“Yeah, pity the only person she has anything to do with is your mother. Is that logical?” I asked my friend.

“I don’t know. Considering you’re on your own here, no. I think my grandparents bought my parents their house, But they feel responsible at most for us kids, not for anyone else. These old guys that call you up and ask for money for the family... it sounds like the bloody Mafia.”

“I think it’s right. It’s like redistributing your wealth.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I shout at Sissi, knowing she says these things to piss me off.

“I would get it if she sent money to her parents, her closest relatives maybe. Every now and then I try and calm myself down by asking myself, ‘Hey, if I were in need, wouldn’t she help me?’ As if it doesn’t count that she brought me into this world, fed me, clothed me and brought me up, and on her own at that.”

Mum was already back in the car by that time, and as she turned the ignition she made sure the plastic cup of daisies didn’t fall over.

“If Sissi and the Sybarite were having problems,” I said to my Mum, as if she had taken part in our conversation, “I, for one would send them all the money in the world.” As I said this my two friends leaned towards me and started punching me affectionately.

## Sample 2

After the evening spent standing outside the Cantiere Club with Ghiorghis and Libaan because they wouldn't let us in, I decided I wasn't going out again. The phone rang and rang and I knew it was my friend the Sybarite, but I didn't want to answer. He even came round once and rang the door bell. Feeling angry with the Sybarite and Sissi helped calm me down and prepare myself mentally for leaving for London. Anyway, what did my friends know about the war, about my past?

I spent whole days on the sofa watching TV and when my mother came home I would slip out and have a beer on my own, for no more than an hour. As soon as I opened the door again, she was off on her usual "I'm so glad you're leaving! I can't stand having you around one minute longer!" But every time I asked her about London and why she was sending me there, all she said was that that was what she had decided and it was for my own good.

"I can't go on protecting you, you need to learn to get by your own."

The fact is that, apart from doing badly at school, I've always obeyed my mother, and I wouldn't dream of not doing what she says.

"Waryaa, I'm not your friend!" she says on those rare occasions I try and explain my point of view. My mother thinks our relationship should be based on an inviolable principle: me acknowledging her authority over me.

So, there I was in my usual comatose state in front of the TV when something on the news wakes me up. The newsreader was talking about a terrorist who had tried to blow up the London Underground. He had made the bomb himself using a hairdresser's spray containing hydrogen peroxide, and brown flour for making roti, those Indian pancake things. The mixture luckily didn't turn out very well and the bomb went off like a giant popcorn with a lot of noise but little else. I can just see him going off to the African hairdresser's, buying the spray and then playing Little Chemist with the wrong formula!

After the explosion the Bomber tried to get away by jumping out of the train window and going into a public toilet to get changed. Didn't he know the Underground stations are full of CCTV cameras?

The pictures on telly showed this dude in a white vest looking cool and trying to mingle in with the crowd.

After a few days searching for him through Interpol and the works, guess where they found him? In Rome of all places, hiding out with family. The Bomber had got hold of some false papers and run to his brother, poor bastard, who'd been living in Rome and holding down a proper job for years. The news said they'd captured him in the middle of the night and they showed images of this building in the suburbs that looks just like all the others. His brother had been jailed too, even though he'd done nothing, because hiding the Bomber made him an accomplice. It was because of the Bomber that I started buying the papers every day. The whole thing got to me and I wanted to find out as much as I could.

The Bomber's lawyer claimed he had never intended to kill anyone, he just wanted to call attention to his cause. He was angry about all the women and children getting killed in Iraq by the Americans and this was his way of expressing his protest. Well, we all get angry with the world every now and then but deciding to blow yourself up in the middle of a crowd is a whole different game level, at least that's what I think.

Actually, the idea of the Bomber shouting "Allahu Akbar" while the bomb fizzled out in his hand in a mass of hair styling foam makes me piss myself laughing. I wouldn't have wanted to be there, I'm not saying that. The papers all said more or less the same thing, there was the same picture of him in the white vest, and another one of the apartment building where he'd been arrested. But one day an article came out that stopped me in my tracks. The investigating journalist had found an ex-girlfriend and had interviewed her. When they were about my age, it turns out, the two of them used to hang out with the Flaminio gang. The Bomber's nickname was Bambi because he had black doe eyes and bushy eyebrows. The ex-girlfriend had had a fit when she had seen him on TV. According to her, he was not only really good looking, he was also really kind, and that's why he was such a favourite with the girls. They used to go to the disco on Saturday afternoons, she said, like all the other kids. Bambi liked hip hop, he was a really good break dancer, and he dressed like a rapper, with wide trousers slung low on his hips and basketball vests. His heroes were Afro-American ghetto rappers, but he wasn't violent. He kept away from bad company; if there were any fights, and there were quite a few, he always tried to break them up.

Hanging out in Piazzale Flaminio there were some good kids but plenty of bad ones too, pushers and petty thieves. That's why the police would swing by often enough and round them all up, I wonder how many times they checked Bambi's ID.

He was Muslim, the ex-girlfriend went on, but he didn't mind hanging with kids who weren't. Well, he didn't eat pork and such but he didn't think alcohol was taboo or anything. They didn't talk about religion much but when they did all he said was that he believed in Allah, he wasn't a fundamentalist or whatever. He had gone to London like everyone from the Horn of Africa to get political asylum. He wanted to go somewhere more lively, all he wanted to do was have fun, and have some hope of a future.

No TV news had ever said the Bomber had grown up in Rome, so you can imagine how I felt when I found out he used to spend time with the Flaminio gang. I called Ghiorghis straight away to see if he knew him. He didn't seem at all surprised to hear from me. "Hey, where've you been little bro?"

"Nowhere much" I answered, stretched out on the sofa in my usual position, "I just had things to do, I'm going away, remember?"

I told him I was totally confused about the Bomber story. When I asked him if he had ever met him, because it seemed likely given they were more or less the same age, Ghiorghis said he wanted to talk to me but that we had to meet up in person because it was dangerous to speak on the phone and that he and some others in the group they used to hang out with had quite a bit to say about the whole thing. His tone of voice and his reservations felt a bit over the top but however little I knew him I did know he was one of those conspiracy theory types, one of those people who see a film and get into it so much they think the same thing is going to happen in the real world.

We arranged to meet at Termini Station. He would come and pick me up on his moped and then we would go to the old Snia factory that's been occupied by a group of social activists, where he sometimes meets his old gang.

Ghiorghis drove with his helmet unlatched, and since he kept turning his head round to the right to speak to me, I thought we'd hit the pavement and crash headlong into a wall, but in the end, I don't know how, he managed to keep his balance and drive on in the right direction.

He too was pretty shocked that no other newspaper had published the news. “Bambi didn’t grow up in Africa or in London, but in Rome, just like us.”

“What difference does it make? Why aren’t they saying it?” I shouted from behind while we were going past Piazza Vittorio.

“So they don’t have to take any responsibility, they don’t want to know anything about us in general, so just imagine when they think we are criminals.”

“What do you mean ‘us’? ‘Us’ in what sense?”

“Us who grew up here, kids whose parents are Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali, all the ex-colonies, you know. Most people here don’t even know we exist. Do you know how my Mum ended up in Rome?”

“No.”

“She used to work as a governess for an executive at Marelli Magnets in Ethiopia. This guy had lived there with his family for generations, I think. When Mengistu came to power, he kicked out all the Italians and so my mother accepted her boss’s invitation to come to Rome with him.”

“Were you already born?”

“No, I was born here in Rome. To start with she sent me back to Africa to be brought up by my Gran, but when I was old enough she had me shipped back and packed me off to a children’s home.”

Ghiorghis’s phone started ringing. I hoped we wouldn’t answer since he was driving pretty recklessly but he turned it on and stuck it into his helmet over his ear.

“Yo, yeah, I’m on my way now.”

“Watch out! We’re going to crash!” I shouted.

“I’d better get off, or little bro here’s gonna shit himself.”

I was so impatient to find out I couldn’t stop myself asking, “So did you know Bambi, or didn’t you, then?”

“Of course I knew him! He was at the same children’s home as me.”

“And why do you think he did it? The bomb I mean.”

“I dunno, religion or something. What can I say? You’re Muslim, right?”

“Well I’m circumcised and all, and I tried to be religious, but I didn’t manage.”

“Manage?” Gheorghis was laughing, his unlatched helmet tipping to one side. “So religion is something you have to manage to do, is it?”

“Yeah, kind of. In the sense that of course I’d like to have a religion, a faith, something to believe in. The thing is I can’t manage to do it, even if I really try hard. Anyway, if managing means turning into the Bomber then maybe it’s better not to manage.”

“You know what? Bambi was a real cry baby. When he was a kid he always used to say he missed his Mum so the staff would treat him nicer. He got more attention, better presents, a newer stereo, faster skates, a cooler hoodie. It was also because he was really cute, the little shit.”

I could see how Ghiorghis could be pissed off that the Bomber used to get better presents than him, and I really wanted to take the mickey about his jealousy but I couldn’t think of anything to say that would be right.

“Do you think he wanted to blow himself up and kill tons of people, or did he just want to muck around a bit?”

“Both. If you think about it it’s the same thing: getting attention.”

“Okay, but if the attack goes off as planned, you die and you kill a whole load of people as well. How can anyone even remotely think that it’s the right thing to do?”

In the meantime we had gone quite a way along the Prenestina and, since our destination was on the left, he did a quick U-turn I wasn’t expecting and I nearly fell off the bike.

The Snia factory used to produce viscose. Squatters came in and took it over about ten years ago.

“They used to make parachutes here,” Ghiorghis says.

“Parachutes?”

“Yes Sir, and tents and uniforms and rucksacks for soldiers during the war.”

There are huge grounds around the former factory, and a lake, but it’s mostly inaccessible.

[...]

While we were talking we started walking into the pine forest until we got to a point where you could see the lake behind a metal fence.

“Why can’t you go in?” I ask.

“The owners won’t let us. For years the neighbourhood and activists occupying the factory have been fighting to make this into a public park. Come on, let’s go back. See that low building over there? That’s where we’re going. I want you to meet a few people.”

The Flaminio gang were all there, standing outside under a line of trees. Libaan was there too, and as soon as he saw me he ran up and gave me a bear hug. They were talking about their stuff but Ghiorghis was impatient and came out with the fact that we were here because I wanted to talk about Bambi, making everyone, including me, feel really embarrassed. Since it pissed me off that he had made me look ridiculous I said, “ Can you cut it out? You’re just using me to get all the attention,” but he didn’t seem to care what I was saying, or at least he didn’t show it. My words, in fact, seemed to break the ice, and one by one they all started talking.



Libaan was the first to speak. He told us about a friend of his who had just got out of prison because he was an alcoholic and a trouble maker who every now and then ended up inside. To cut a long story short, they had met in a café but ended up buying a beer and his friend had told him that the night they arrested Bambi all the Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis in the prison had been woken up and told to stand in a line. The guards had shown them the picture of the Bomber and one by one they had been asked whether they knew him. They all said no, and so had he. He was lying of course, but Bambi had changed so much it really was difficult to recognize him.

One of the group interrupted and said he had met Bambi a few times, when he came to Rome on holiday, and he had seemed okay. Another guy said he had seen him in London a few years before and that he had changed. He had been going out with a Christian Ethiopian girl who had converted for him and he had made her wear a veil.

I had always thought religion had nothing to do with anything, and I'd been angry enough often enough but I had never started fabricating bombs in the name of Allah.

Just as an example, once I was on a bus and I wanted to get off at the next stop. I was standing near the driver, and I said, "Would you mind opening the door up front?" and the driver said, "How many times do I have to tell you guys you have to get off at the central doors." I looked around, and since there was nobody else near me, I said, "Why did you say 'you guys' when it's just me? Why did you say 'how many times do I have to tell you guys'? Tell who? Which guys?" But the driver was getting more and more pissed off and refused to open the doors. After a few seconds of faceoff, the driver got out of his seat and stood up right in front of me. I was a good head taller than him but he obviously felt good about himself, he was one of those body- building types that goes to the gym a lot.

I lost my cool and started screaming at him, "You pumped up shit head!" while he kept on shouting over me, "Go back to where you came from, go on. Home!" pointing at the central doors. Some passengers in the back of the bus started joining in, "Come on! Enough with it! Get off the fucking bus."

They were talking to me, not the driver. All I'd done was ask nicely if he would open the front doors. As I got off the bus from the central doors I thought, I really thought I would like to put a

bomb on that bus, I really wanted everyone to blow up together, the driver and the passengers telling me to get off.

The Bomber might well have thought, 'I'd like to put a bomb somewhere' and then he actually did. People often say things they don't do and would never do. I don't know whether Bambi wanted the bomb to go off and kill lots of people, maybe it's true he just wanted to attract attention to himself and mixed up the ingredients wrong on purpose.

While I was caught up in my thoughts, one of Ghiorghis's friends, a short little guy with really light skin, who could even have been an Arab, started talking. He was really angry. He didn't look any older than the others but his hair was completely grey.

Bambi had been his friend, he said, they had drunk, smoked and talked together a lot. "Who knows? We might have met up like in the old days, 'Hey, what about a beer? Shall we have a smoke?' and BOOM just like that he might have blown us all up together." The guy was really wound up tight, moving in little nervous bursts, like a marionette. "He could have blown us all up, BOOM, just because some of us are Christians."

I said, "You were friends, religion's got nothing to do with it, he would never have blown you up," but the little guy seemed to get more and more agitated. "Thanks to him everyone's even more racist than before."

Ghiorghis was looking at me a little oddly but I went on anyway, "Who's more racist than before?" It was getting hot so I unbuttoned my shirt. When they saw I was wearing a white vest underneath they all stopped talking at the same time. I stood there in silence enjoying their reaction and after a while Ghiorghis shook his head and said, "To tell the truth, little bro, Bambi looks a lot like you. You really look alike the two of you," patting me on the back while he was talking. As usual he had been the one to have the last word.