

CHAPTER 10
ELISA E STELLA

September of 1968, we entered high school. The Liceo Classico (best translated as Classical or Liberal Arts High School) *Giovanni Amendola*, located on the outskirts of town, was a noticeable upgrade from *Bacelli*. The classrooms were larger with single person desks, and the newer building showed none of the traumas of the war. High school life was meant to last five years with a heart stopping battery of tests administered at the end of the school year both in written and oral formats. The three possible outcomes included: *Promosso* (graduated to the next grade), *Bocciato* (left back-repeat the year), and *Rimandato a Settembre* (the equivalent of summer school with a retake of the tests in September). An aura of serious academics infected every inch of the *liceo* as we endured informal orientations from our *professori* and upper year students. The constant chatter in classrooms and throughout the hallways, of classwork, testing, chapter readings, and projects, demanded that we abandon the more frivolous nature of middle school. In an odd way, the transition into my Italian high school added a noticeable layer of maturity to our characters. I was never sure at the time if the place imposed the standard or did something happen to us at the end of that summer. I understood the imposition to be or act older, so I followed and adapted in the wake of those who were better at it.

For the boys, that summer had burned itself out in late August on the beaches along the Amalfi Coast, while the girls in Sarno had spent much of their time taking care of younger siblings in the place of working parents. We did get to spend some time with them in the evening hours along the *rettifilo* mostly on the weekends and during the *Ferragosto* week. Amazingly, by the end of the month their giddy, girlish interactions had been replaced with attempts at sophistication. The difference was noticeable in the cosmetics that colored their faces, and the long-delayed conversion to the tight American blue jeans. The look had a deliberate sexiness that made it impossible for the still awkward boys to blend comfortably with the budding females. The girls had morphed into young women, while we naively held on to our quirky eight grade habits. The girl-shock had us rushing to condition ourselves into some form of matching male adulthood. We had no artificial ingredients to apply to our faces to add maturity, and no one item of clothing to elevate our manhood except to loosen a button or two on our shirts. The efforts had some desired effects, but no quick hormonal enhancements. Our take on girls maturing quicker than boys was that it had more to do with appearance, and little to do with character ... with the girls proving many times over that we were right. Their deceit, however, worked, and it would forever be known that boys matured much slower than girls.

Elisa had spent the summer once again in London. She returned in late August with a longing to rekindle our friendship. We spoke and sent signals beyond the wall, but I no longer needed to hurdle over it to meet up. I was invited to enter the grounds through the front portico, having won over her parents as a safe friend.

Carminuccio and Stella were eventually introduced, having survived the complicity in producing Eli's sneaky night out on the town. The four of us began spending more time together as the days pushed us deeper into our peak teen years.

Carminuccio began writing his own music and performing it acoustically in the giardino. He had taken to the Italian singers Gianni Morandi and Bobby Solo. His rendition of Morandi's song *In Ginocchio Da Te*, and Solo's *Se Piangi, Se Ridi* had been practiced and performed to perfection. With guitar in tow, he played whenever the mood demanded a needed escape from the usual. No venue in town was off limits, becoming a regular at the café on the *rettifilo* to an enchanted audience. The *lire* patrons dropped in a cup was a bonus, enough to buy us a slice of pizza, but never became the motivator. Our hair length started dipping onto our collars and halfway down our ears, and the bell bottom jeans made sure we never wore our shorts again. The summer months between middle school and high school made it seem like a whole year had passed and we welcomed the forced maturity. We had become a foursome with no pretense of anything more than canonized friendshipssomewhere between idolized companions and lovers. Ignoring the fragility that defined who we were to each other could have easily reinstated the formalities we so despised, so Eli insisted on selfishly protecting our liberated group existence by having us pledge to secrecy. The pledge unshackled us further, allowing for deeper discussions with few boundaries. It led us on a quest of self-discovery guided by a desire to peel away our adolescence and the protective mantels our parents had wrapped us in, to satisfy curiosities about ourselves. Our sessions would become frequent and impassioned, with few interruptions once we found a way around intrusions. We made this happen by seeking refuge in the giardino or in a remote corner on the grounds of Marabbecca. In the propitious absence of other meaningful entertainment, we became jesters, movie stars, poets, and confessors. Eli likened our excursion away from the mainstream to the experiences in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I knew nothing of either the author or the book, but her lecture would preface my introduction later that year in my Italian Literature class (*Letteratura Italiana*). Her narration of ten friends hiding out in the Tuscan countryside, telling decadent stories to escape the horrors of the plague, had me captivated. The thought of so much fragility and uncertainty among the young, so long ago, floated my heart across the centuries wishing for a way to have been their eleventh member. She had a romantic attachment to the classics, nourished with summer classes in London and stacks of books on European literature at home. She would often refer to passages to enhance her take on youth, dreams, the future, and love. It was never annoying or self-centered, and I found it as pleasant to learn from her as my *professori*. She had reached that pivot when life could not wait, when living her interpretations took on a sober urgency, as if our days were as numbered and unpredictable as in the lives of Boccaccio's characters. The suspicion that her grasp on her destiny was precarious at best, kept her indulging more completely in her gutsy passions. She appeared gripped by a debilitating fear that time would cast its selfish shadow and deny her the complete set of life's seasons. I wondered if she would continue to advocate for her bohemian tendencies, or would I return to Sarno one day to find she had abandoned her

aspirations for the safety of her aristocratic privileges. Judging from the content of her short lectures, she had enough antipathy for the world of her parents to detour her onto paths where she could recreate herself. I could imagine no other prospect for Elisa Tuttavilla.

In those last days of summer, she and Stella became increasingly inseparable. They had struck a chord which neutralized any barrier that would have otherwise kept them from associating. The girls became consumed with each other's lives. The proverbial tracks meant to keep them apart were no match for the powers that galvanized their budding attachment. There was hardly a time when meeting up with one did not include the other. Eli had been given more freedom outside the grounds of her palazzo, and she spent most of that time with Stella, even visiting her neighborhood. Eli never passed judgment on her friend's less than proletarian life, and she never revealed her dislike for her father's Communist attachments. On chance meetings in town, she endured his coldness and unkind receptions. Eli was not conditioned to fear men, so ignoring him came easily. When she stayed focused on Stella, she came to worship her friendship for the exposure it offered to the local life. Stella was the portal through which she invited herself into the everyday practices she found so compelling.

Our first group gathering came to order in the shade of laurels where Eli and I had first met. It took a few weeks to organize, bringing us to edge of September. Stella lost no time in disclosing her anxieties about high school into a mixed bundle of questions and observations. She fumed about being only a few days away from a new experience, with no information to ease her through the process ... a transition with no reassuring orientation. We all had apprehensions about fitting in while feeling a certain pride for having made it that far. For Stella it was more of an accomplishment considering that many girls from low income and farming families would be forced to end their education after middle school to take on household obligations prior to becoming young wives. Survival for many families had much to do with each playing their parts. *"Io sono piena di ansia per quello che deve avvenire fra pochi giorni. Stiamo per entrare al liceo senza nemmeno n'idea di quello che ci aspetta! Ho un nodo nella gola, e non so se sentirmi completamente ignorante, oppure coraggiosa per esserci arrivata."* Elisa wasted little time in setting her at ease with a fiery monologue that lit up her eyes and exposed her naked passion for things that turned her on. *"Stella, cara, ma perché' dai così poco valore al tuo carattere? Sei una donna scaltra e capace di tutto. Sei la mia Sofia Loren, la mia Anna Magnani; ma capisci che sei il risultato di una cultura antica e brillante? Si può dire figlia di antenati che hanno costruito la storia mediterranea. Ti invidio con tutto il cuore! Bisognerebbe nascere di nuovo per essere più come te. Sai confrontare qualsiasi situazione, non hai paura di nessuno, sei al tuo agio in tutti gli angoli di questa città, e quando metterai piedi in quell'aula liceale, sarà un altro passo naturale per te, senza timori, e dove ti aspettano tanti successi."* Carminuccio and I remained stunned by the beautiful words Eli granted her friend. She praised Stella's powerful character, the quintessential tough Southern Italian female, the product of an ancient and brilliant culture, a daughter of the Mediterranean world. She turned Stella into her Sofia Loren and Anna Magnani,

alluding to the strong, righteous female film characters afraid of no one, and capable of forcing others to accept them. She declared her envy, admitting that she would have to be born again for the chance to be more like her. She assured her that high school would offer a venue where she could exercise her nature, without fears, and where success was a foregone conclusion. Eli had confessed her love of Stella's secretly emancipated spirit-the girl who could still define herself as she saw fit despite the harshness of the social norms denying her that ability. Stella's misunderstood brashness had become an invaluable asset to someone like Eli. I had to express the same appreciation, having experienced it from my earliest days in Sarno. Our friends insisted we speak in English as often as possible to give them exposure. *"You know, I felt the same about Stella when we first met. I was very shy around her because I feared her power. She put so many people in their place especially Mimmo. I took a few shots from her as well, but it didn't keep me from liking her; a lot ... like a girlfriend. My first real kiss was with Stella at Mimmo's birthday party. I still have no clue why it happened, but I won't deny I enjoyed it. I thought about it over and over, for days. See, Stella is giving me that look like she understands."* Eli giggled and agreed that she had an idea of what I had said. *"Stella did understand. She is awfully familiar with the word-kiss-, so I fear she quite caught on to your story. Stella, hai capito quello che ha detto Gianni di te? Hai capito la parolakiss?"* Eli turned to her to ask if she had picked up on the word. Without hesitation she summarized and then let her feelings known. *"Ho capito bene. Yes, I understand what Gianni say about me. Sì, ci siamo baciati in casa di Mimmo, e ammetto anch'io che mi è piaciuto. Ho baciato altri ragazzi, ma avevo una grande curiosità di sentirmi baciata da uno straniero. Però, non offenderti Gianni, ma non è stato un bacio da farmi innamorare. Infatti, nessun ragazzo è mai riuscito a farmi innamorare."* She had a clear understanding of what I had said, and she backed up the kiss story by admitting to it. I was not offended when she underlined the fact that, like other guys she had kissed, it did not make her fall in love. Carminuccio had no intentions of letting the conversation peter out, asking how she would know if a kiss was the kind to make her fall in love? He wanted to know how much passion must be present. *"Allora, Stella, che cosa devi sentire da un bacio per concludere che ti sei innamorata? A che punto devi arrivare, cioè, quanta passione ci deve essere?"* Stella closed her eyes, took a deep sigh, and described it in spirited detail. *"Innanzi tutto, ci deve essere un'attrazione che fa sudare le mani, che ti fa girare la testa come le farfalle che battono le ali pazzescamente senza destinazione, così anche tu non sai più dove vai. Poi, quando ti avvicini a questa persona, più respiri il suo spirito, più ti senti il cuore che ti batte in ogni parte del corpo comm'a nu tamburello napoletano che te fa bollire il sangue. E quando quel brivido ti colpisce, e ti trovi a faccia a faccia, diventi debole e senti solo il dolce calore delle sue labbra. Innamorarsi significa perdere ogni senso in quel momento, e di non essere più alla guida della ragione, di crollare e arrendersi completamente. Solo così puoi assaggiare un amore vero e forte, anche se lo senti solo tu. E per una come me che possiede poco, questo sentiment di conoscere il potere di essere innamorata, mi porta tanta ricchezza."* Her sermon on love was a compelling jolt that sent us emotionally to a place we would have

normally visited years later. She spoke about love in terms of sweaty palms, of an attraction that sent your mind off aimlessly like the frantic fluttering of butterflies searching for a destination. She described the ability to inhale the person's spirit, causing your heart to beat like a Neapolitan drum, bringing your blood to a boil. And when that seizure owns you, finding yourself face to face, you are weakened by the sweet radiance of the person's lips. She was determined to take it to another level when she spoke of being in love as losing your senses, abandoning all reason ... to surrender unconditionally. In her mind, it was the only way to experience true and powerful love, even if it was one sided. In her words, for one like her who has little, being able to lock into the power of being in love endowed her with riches.

It was thought provoking enough to listen to lectures in school about infatuated damsels, troubadours, and heartbroken poets, but to hear Stella, one of us, break it down so convincingly, was agonizing. I had to sullenly come to terms with the crudeness of my emotions, sadly acknowledging that I had been incapable of having thought of love in the same manner. Stella's was an adult rendition of how human emotions are born and then saturated with the essence of others. We all sat quietly, waiting for our brains to catch up and process. There would be no disagreements, no challenges-only stunned obedience.

Stella, as was her nature, was pushing the unconventional, an opening that would help coax us away from our innocence. Carminuccio joined in after pondering a side of her few had ever experienced. He welcomed her views but remained curious about the value in one-sided love. *"Stella, perdonami, ma non ho mai conosciuto questo lato del tuo carattere così profondo. Sono d'accordo con tutto ciò che dici, però non capisco che valore ha un amore a senso unico."* Eli was eager to participate in support of Stella's beliefs with references to the Renaissance greats who were forced to love women that were forbidden. One-way love affairs, as she called them, were individuals who lived with unrequited love that astonishes us even today. *"Sapete che I grandi del Rinascimento-Dante, Petrarca, Botticelli, furono innamorati di donne proibite? Tutti amori a senso unico, vissuti con passioni solitari che stupiscono ancora oggi. C'erano altri grandi amori tra due maschi oppure due donne non solo proibiti, ma anche contro legge. Figuratevi che maledizione essere innamorato o innamorata di una persona dello stesso sesso senza mai poterlo dichiarare per paura di andare in prigione o condannati a morte! Non ho mai capito, e questo mi dà un grande dispiacere, come si fa ad assegnare limiti all'amore tra due persone. Non accetto che l'amore sentito da qualsiasi persona possa essere più vero, più sincero, addirittura più legale di un altro. L'amore è la cosa più personale, più che ci appartiene. Tocca a noi definirlo, non alla società, non alla chiesa, neppure dai nostri genitori."* When she did not stop at mentioning the greats of the Renaissance, moving on to talk about other forms of prohibited love, my world took another hit. Her unapologetic introduction to homosexual love forced me to confront another of those taboos prejudicially imposed on our young minds by social forces bent on shielding us from behaviors taught to be sinful. She spoke freely about the cursed lives of those in love with others of the same sex, and of the laws prohibiting such behavior with the threat of imprisonment or even death. She found it unacceptable that one person's love could

be any greater or lesser or any more legal than another. She judged love to be the most personal of possessions, and that we have unconditional power to define it without interference from society, the church, not even our parents.

For this American kid still wet behind the ears with Catholic holy water, Eli's serious exposure to sexuality had me confronting my crossroads: stay the course or retreat. I had yet to add my feelings to the topic, so Eli pressed me on it when she noticed my discomfort. *"My dear, dear Gianni, are you bothered by the topic? I should have been more considerate. We can let it go until another time, but I believe we must continue speaking of these things if we ever want a world that is more compassionate. Please do not abandon us."* I staggered through my response. *"No, I am fine ... I mean, I understand ... I am good with your words ... it is just that I ... I never ... you know."* Thankfully, she finished my thought for me. *"You never had to deal with homosexual love, that's it, right? I suppose you were taught that it is wrong, that it is sinful. Gianni, you must not let those opinions influence what is in your heart unless you want to honestly believe what has been told you. Could you sincerely think that any two people, no matter who they are, should reject love for each other because some rule or law prohibits it?"* Off balance, I had to question my beliefs, and I could no longer judge another's choices when it came to love. It all seemed suddenly so logical as Eli broke down the concept of pure freedom. Catholicism had taught me to recognize and respect the limitations on freedoms ... we were aware of our sinful actions which left little room to exercise choices. America was a free country-we all knew that, but there were so many things that we could not do. I had never concerned myself with the protection of freedoms. Eli was teaching that to be free one needed to live it unencumbered and to demand that others respect it. She had placed love at the very top of the list of human needs, asking society not to interfere-how could I argue with that. I began thinking in terms of mutual respect to live and let live. Stella and Carminuccio received a translation, but it seemed they had already locked into the discourse having picked out the words they understood. I tried to appear modern and responsive to the topic, but Eli again noticed the battle in my head, so she pushed the envelope. *"Gianni, I know you are struggling with this, but you must come to understand and to accept. This is bloody easier in London-in this place taboos live on forever. Let me make you understand in the best way I can."* The words had barely slipped from her mouth when she turned to Stella, gently took her face into her hands, and kissed her passionately on the lips. Stella initially thought of pulling away, she had courage, but little of the eccentricity Eli had gained from her summers in England. Unable to resist, she relaxed her body and allowed the kiss to last long enough to make sure it was not understood to be a demonstration. Eli pulled away for a second, then enhanced the message when the kiss was repeated with even greater legitimacy. When it was over, they both stared us down waiting for some reaction-anything. We delivered nothing. Stunned into silence and brain dead, our thoughts could find no direction as the confusion siphoned away any chance that we could quickly homogenize and appear cool with it. Eli insisted on reading into what little we gave away. *"Carmine, Gianni, guadatemi! Look at me! Please tell us you understand."* She had taken an irretrievable chance, gambling on the strength

of our friendships ... she needed to know there was trauma that wouldn't scare us away, and that could be dealt with. Carminuccio spoke because he had some inkling, I, instead, was completely sterile. *"Allora, se non mi sbaglio, noi dobbiamo capire che voi due siete innamorate, cioè che vi amate come Eli aveva spiegato poco fa. Questo sarebbe un amore profondo fra due donne, così come si possono amare un uomo e una donna? Volete farci capire che non c'è differenza, anche se a me sembra strano? Gianni, ma a te sembra strano lo stesso? Ti fai capace di quello che vogliono farci capire?"* Carminuccio delivered his reaction, recognizing that they were lovers, and that their love, between two women, was to be understood to be as valid as the love between a man and a woman. He was being asked to accept even if he admitted it all seemed strange. Then he dragged me into it. He wanted to know if I thought it strange as well, and if I had wrapped my head around it. My conflict was more intense. I was still struggling with a first teenage kiss, wondering what girls looked like naked, and exactly how intercourse worked. Now they wanted me to leapfrog all that coming-of-age stuff and deal with making sense of lesbian love. I tried to untangle my feelings in English. *"Eli, Stella, Carminuccio, all of you, this is the first time I ever heard of such a thing ... I mean ... I never thought that girls could or were meant to ... you know, do the same things that a man and a woman do. I never saw a girl kiss another girl on the lips. I think I am confused, but I'm not sure. Besides, it is not like I never saw Stella with guys. She even seemed to have a much older boyfriend. You even kissed me once. That would make me think that she likes boys."* The frustration mounted, and I lost confidence, finding it difficult to bring together a string of worthy thoughts. I switched to Italian to make sure the three understood my anxiety. *"Non so cosa dire. Io voglio avere tutti voi come amici per sempre e così se Eli e Stella si vogliono bene come innamorati, io capisco. Però, io non voglio amare un ragazzo, voglio amare una ragazza. Io voglio bene a Carminuccio con tutto mio cuore, ma solo come amico"* Their friendship was important to me, so Stella and Eli's declaration found support in my heart. I was, however, adamant in announcing that I had no intentions of being in love with a guy, making it clear that my wishes were to fall in love with a girl. I pounced on Carminuccio by emphatically making an example of him as a male I loved very much as a friend. Stella giggled as she mumbled a few words. *"Gianni, sei così sciocco, però proprio simpatico. Non aver paura che stiamo cercando di cambiare il tuo parere sul tema dell'amore. Si è capito dal bacio che io e te abbiamo provato quella sera da Mimmo che fai il tifo per le donne. Questo è completamente naturale, e non è che io o Eli non provassimo qualcosa per maschi. Secondo Eli dovremmo considerare naturale qualsiasi amore condiviso fra due persone. Non so se sei pronto ad accettarlo ... cosa pensi?"* She thought me silly but cute. She assured me that no one was trying to change my mind on love, and that, my need to love a woman, was perfectly natural. She did not put off her feelings toward males, those were still a consideration which only heightened my bewilderment. Then she pushed me to ponder that perhaps any love exchanged between two people should always be considered natural. She asked if I was ready to accept that, while Eli sought to add more detail. *"Gianni, Stella and I have felt this way about each other for quite some time. Neither of us had the will or the*

courage to admit it, believing it too risky. Then one day, when Stella was visiting, we were together in my room, and it finally all came out. I suppose we could no longer deny our feelings. We freely spoke of our sentiments after our first kiss. It was a first for Stella, but she would have invited it earlier had she met the right female. We discussed how we both liked girls, and how bloody afraid we were of admitting it. Stella could never be exposed, especially in a place like Sarno and with a father who would crucify her. I may have a better chance of sympathy with my family since I have an aunt, my mother's sister, who enjoys the company of men and women. No secret therein indeed, she is an eccentric who spends her days in the company of very strange people. I do hope that you and Carmine can keep this within our group. You know how devastating this could be to us both if found out. I must insist on the sanctity of our friendship to protect us." I didn't admit being unaware of the meaning of sanctity-, so I guessed it to be some sort of commitment one made

to a deep friendship. I agreed to live up to it, and I asked Carminuccio to do the same.

The day came and went, evolving into a first true anomaly- as an Italian day unlike any lived thus far. The whirlwind stayed in my head as I retreated to my room, having barely touched my dinner. Mom asked about my mood when my pasta sat undisturbed in my plate. I said all was fine, and that I had been talking to Carminuccio about what to expect in high school. Her involvement may have been superfluous to the truth, but it was still a pleasure to listen to her words laden with the soothing maternal instincts that Sarno had inseminated early in her childhood. Then nonna, who had been sitting patiently sipping her daily small dose of wine she claimed had the same power as medicine, turned to mom and gave her impression in her raspy Neapolitan. "*Maria, chist' sa 'nnamuat'. Se ved'nda l'uocchiu ca s'ha venduto o'cor.*" I had made the mistake of hinting to nonna in an earlier conversation the topic of girls, and at the dinner table that night, it came back to haunt me. She blurted out that I was obviously in love, and that it was clear in my eyes that I had sold my heart. She probably meant to say that I had sold my heart to the devil, but she backed off the more extreme view despite having earlier expressed her disdain for females who had a hold on men. She had warned me to back down in the face of teenage love and that it could wait for an older age. I knew she meant well, but I guessed her generation had little experience with "gray" areas ... all was non-negotiable black or white. I denied the love thing but admitted to liking Eli very much. Mom saw through me making sure I knew she was good with my explanation.

In bed my thoughts wanted to run wild, but I opted for an orderly and inevitable sequel where I would have to set aside my feelings for both Stella and Eli. I recalled how sweetly involved I had been with both, holding onto the hope that one would help me earn my teenage love wings. All that now seemed obliterated and buried in the past. There was little room for resentment, given the honesty. The addictive bond with the girls was something I was not willing to part with-acceptance and allegiance were the only options.

