



IT WAS BETTER  
TO PLAY  
DEAD

PATRIZIO PINNA



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## 1

At last, the big day has arrived.

Not that it's really all that big, but still it's a beginning. I don't want to overdress today. Sure, there'll be people I haven't seen in ages: cousins, relatives, maybe even an old friend or two. I used to spend half my childhood at my aunt's place. But no, I'd better not overplay it.

After all, it's a minor event. Nothing earthshaking.

Just the start of the season.

A pair of Levi's will do nicely. I'll add a dark blue light-denim shirt and the jacket from a summer suit, also blue, for a good mix, half casual, half formal. A pair of Church's shoes, of course. Socks? Who cares, as long as they're long and dark. What annoys me is the season, if it were cooler, I'd top it off with the vintage double-breasted Burberry I practically stole online. But unless a sudden summer storm hits, or better yet, one of those fashionable little burnouts, wearing a raincoat would just look absurd. The Borsalino, though, is non-negotiable. I've got one for every season; I just need to remember to tip it politely, like I've worn hats all my life. Mustn't forget that. Yesterday I practiced in front of the mirror for two hours. Muscle memory should be in place by now.

Three hours to go, and I'm already dressed. Of course, I can't be the first to arrive. No, better to keep them waiting, arrive fashionably late. Not rude-late, but not too punctual either. Truth is, they don't really know who I am anymore, or rather, they only know who I was twenty years ago, when we still saw each other from time to time. By now, I'm a stranger to them. Not that anything about me has changed, but I'm not going to tell them that. Still, I dress much better these days,

I've grown a fine white beard, like Gandalf, though not quite as long, and a proud set of mustaches. With the wide-brimmed Borsalino, I cut a pretty good figure. Shame I'll have to carry it in my hands most of the evening. That's the curse of indoor events. I could keep it on, but no one would get the artistic nuance; they'd just think I was ill-mannered. And yes, I care what people think of me. Damn right I do. That's my life, my hobby: embroidering myself onto their opinions.

My profession.

Timing is everything, I need to show up just before everyone goes inside. They'll linger in the courtyard, smoking, catching up, and I want them to notice the 911 I rented for the occasion. Cost me a fortune, and I've got it for only two days, one more than I need, in case I manage to pick someone up.

I collapse onto the couch without even taking off my jacket. That way it'll crease just enough to underline my bohemian flair. I'm an artist, or I used to be. Played a bit of guitar as a kid, learned the C chord progression. Almost.

Serious stuff.

Honestly, if I'd spent half the time I wasted rolling joints and binge-watching shows actually practicing guitar, by now my name might be mentioned in the same breath as Paco de Lucía's.

He's a guitarist, right?

Speaking of joints, I reach for the cedar box from Iran where I keep the stash and papers. Glassy eyes will only heighten my would-be artist aura. I just have to be careful not to overdo it. Better set an alarm on my phone, I already had to take a day off work, the last thing I need is to miss the event I've been waiting for all week.

The last few years have been deadly dull. I've been divorced for ages, thankfully no kids, and the people I once called friends have long since forgotten me. Fine, maybe I should've tried harder, been more involved, or simply not written them off as idiots. But what can I say? People rarely improve with age. Finally, though, things are shifting. I've been waiting for this day practically all my life, and now, at fifty-five, I'm convinced this is only the beginning.

A new chapter opens before me.

From boredom to action.

God, I'm electrified.

After a couple of long drags I realize I've overdone it. Must've tossed in at least half a gram of weed. I'm already starving, craving *panettone*, too bad it's July. I need to get a grip, so I let the joint fizzle out in the ashtray, reluctantly.

## 2

I'm perfectly on time. When I pull up to the courtyard, everyone's still outside. I spot my uncle and a handful of other familiar faces. Not surprising, I haven't seen most of them in twenty years, and those who used to be little more than kids are now, from what I can tell, women I'd happily sleep with.

There's nothing more divine than...

No?!

I rev the engine a little, just to make it sing and grab their attention, and stop right in front of the barrier, out of which leaps a guy in a neon-yellow jacket. At first glance I'd have pegged him for a junkie, but no: he yanks my door open and hands me a ticket. Wow, valet service, I think, tossing him the keys to the Beast. These people spared no expense today.

As everyone turns to look, faces ranging from mildly surprised to openly gawking, I hear the Beast roaring away down the street. Before I can process anything, stoned as I am, I'm engulfed in a swirl of relatives, old friends, and total strangers. I tip an imaginary hat in greeting, only to realize the Borsalino is still sitting on the passenger seat. My aunt, mid-embrace, doesn't understand what the hell I'm doing. I make it worse by fumbling at my forehead for the brim. When you're used to wearing a hat, you feel it even when it's not there, and the weed, needless to say, isn't helping. Nor is the Negroni I downed back on Corso Europa, parking the Beast in double row outside a café just so the busty barmaid, who's ignored me all her life, might notice it. That little stunt earned me not only a buzz but also a ticket that appeared on my windshield in record time.

Bastards.

In the end, my aunt clamps onto me, squeezing me tight against the implants she gifted herself for her fortieth, implants which, forty years later, unlike the rest of her, are still hard as marble. Back then it was plastic, not silicone.

«I'm so glad you made it» she says.

*Wouldn't have missed it for the world*, I think. But I don't say it. My mouth's still desert-dry from the joint I couldn't resist finishing and the drink that left me thirsty as hell and convinced I'm Superman. I haven't even checked the ticket yet, the rental company will tack on fees anyway, but I just nod, feeling naked without my hat.

I turn toward the street while my uncle and a crowd swarm me, shaking my hand, thanking me, introducing themselves.

«So where's the parking lot?» I ask.

For a moment, they all stare at me, then go right back to their greetings. A blur of faces, strange sensations. Some people I thought I recognized have aged into octogenarian caricatures desperate only for a bathroom; meanwhile, the bratty kids I never cared about now sport beards or pornstar breasts.

«How's Fulvio, Auntie?»

Fulvio's one of her sons, there are more, I think, but I'm not sure. He's the only one I remember, mostly because he used to bounce in and out of rehab and prison like other people go in and out of a shopping mall. He always loved his fixes, and I always loved his consistency. Rehab was court-ordered, jail too, but the idea of quitting never crossed his mind. He should be around forty now, though I'd bet he looks closer to a hundred.

«How do you think? Same old ups and downs. He should be around here somewhere» she says, glancing about. «I just hope he isn't shooting up in the bathroom right now.»

I can't help smiling. Honestly, a little action wouldn't hurt.

After greeting my uncle and a few other distant relatives, I drift toward the edge of the crowd, light a cigarette, and try to look casual while scanning for whichever lucky soul might be persuaded to ride shotgun in the Beast tonight. I'll have to be careful, though. I haven't had sex in over a year, and women can sniff that out instantly. That's why I didn't let the joint burn out, better a harmless fool than a desperate creep.

By the third Gitanes, unfiltered, of course, part of the whole stage set, though I loathe dark tobacco, I start getting the feeling I'm being deliberately avoided. Every time I meet a new face, someone I'm supposed to greet, my hand shoots to my forehead, then hovers there stupidly searching for a brim. Like some bashful Arab. But I can't leave now to fetch my hat. I'd have to track down the valet, and there's no time, everyone's heading inside.

I sidle up to my aunt, trying to remember a name that escapes me, the reason we're all gathered here today. Someone I always thought of as just another aunt, never realizing, never caring, that she was her sister. Not that family trees ever interested me. I've only ever cared about branches heavy with fruit, fruit that might fall into my yard. And apparently, my family never owned a yard to begin with.

I take my aunt by the arm and she returns the gesture, stroking my hand. She scans the room for her most problematic son, without luck, and in a moment we're inside.

Suddenly, through the haze of weed and Negroni, I have a revelation: my late mother was their sister too. I don't know why it took me until now, fifty-five years old, to connect the dots. OK, we were never a close family, and when you're twenty you don't give a damn about relatives. Then they get

old and so do you, and, according to the script, you still don't give a single fuck.

At least until...

My aunt suddenly releases my arm, abandons me in the corridor and steps in first. My uncle comes past, pats my shoulder, and my cousins stare at me for a beat, while I keep gesturing, hunting for the hat.

I shouldn't have practiced that much.

Standing beside me is the one who, by my reckoning, should be Carla, the midwife of my cousins. The last time we met she was about ten; now, at first glance, she's pushing thirty and then some. If it were up to me she'd already have dibs on a spin in the Beast.

«Poor auntie» she says, hiccuping. «So sudden. We really didn't expect it.»

For Christ's sake, I think, nodding like one of those little dogs from seventies Alfes, she must have been almost ninety.

«Yes, well... you're never ready for these things» I say.

«Of course she'd been ill for years.»

Right, I think, keeping up the nod.

«Four years ago they gave her six months.»

«Yes, but you're never ready» I repeat automatically, as if those damn little dogs could talk.

«You're never ready» she agrees.

«I'd be ready» slips out of me, and I find myself looking at her generous chest.

«Pardon?!»

«No, what I mean is I try to remember the idea, you know?» I scramble for cover. «That life is birth, sure, but it's also death. Right?! I mean, you should always keep that in mind so you can live as much as possible when you can. Even in the small things... That's why I drive a Porsche» I toss it out. Class is fine, but sometimes plain speaking works.

«Ah, right» she says. «I saw the car, it's nice.» Then, leaning toward my ear, «I'd love to take a spin in it, maybe you could drive me to the cemetery after the mass.»

«Gladly, but from here to Staglieno, at a time like this, you wouldn't appreciate its virtues. If you want to distract yourself tonight we could take a ride. Relax a little, you deserve it» I throw that in, «with all you've been through lately. For me, in a way, it's easier, we haven't seen each other in ages, we lost touch» what contact? I can't even remember her name, damn it; the things you do for pussy, «whereas you've been close by, always in touch, right?»

«Well, auntie lived with us. She couldn't live alone anymore.»

«Right, at her age. Didn't she used to live in Camogli? That lovely house on the promenade, I remember.»

«Yes, but it was four flights with no lift, you know? We had to sell it.»

I nod, six, seven hundred grand at least, minimum. And she still has the nerve to cry about it. Christ, with that cash Fulvio could score until retirement.

Assuming he hasn't already.

«And tell me, how's Fulvio?»

«How do you think he is? The same as always. Still getting into trouble and using like he always did. He shoots his pension into his veins and, from the fifteenth onward, he starts stealing and inevitably lands in trouble.»

See? I'd called it, damn it! What the hell kind of pension do junkies get?

«He has a pension? He isn't that old, is he?»

«No, but between addiction, a suicide attempt and everything else... he's on disability. I don't know the mechanics. You know, he's always got social workers on his back.»

So the guy used to, as a kid, shoot hundreds of thousands of euros into his arm and now he has a pension. I'd mistaken the whole thing, holy shit!

Suddenly the general murmur and my aunt's sobs die down, the friar has arrived for the rosary, the most tedious part of the funeral: forty-plus minutes of battering our balls, but I'm in the game and I have to dance.

Once again, reflexively, my hand goes to my forehead. Carla notices, of course.

«Is that a tic?» she asks.

«No» I smile. «No tic. It's just that I'm used to wearing a hat, but today I left it in the car and I keep wanting to touch my head whenever I greet someone.»

Carla smiles and covers her mouth with her hand so she won't be caught in such a moment. Someone like her would never have imagined it.

To be honest, neither would I.

I fall into a trance, rocked by the friar's melodious rosary, some little brother with a ridiculous haircut that reminds me of a character from an old videogame I must have wasted years on, and while I look around I enjoy the moment. I love funerals; there's nothing better for feeling alive, especially when on the marble slab lies someone you knew well, some friend of yours, some old flame. Christ, when my exes start to pass by, at least the ones who gave me the boot, that'll be a party. Relatives are like appetizers, opening acts; you take what you get these days. Keeping on isn't easy anymore, they keep you alive until you're spent, but faced with illness and death, especially when they come earlier than someone's plans, other people's plans, obviously, well, then I can finally feel a thrill. The pleasure of being here, of still being around despite everything, having scraped by while the poor bastard had it worse. And the closer that poor bastard was to me,

wow, I can barely contain myself, the stronger the thrill. With relatives it's less a thrill and more a tickle, but it has advantages friends don't allow. With relatives you can perform. With relatives I can invent a whole new past, make them believe I've arrived, that I've lived a life they can only imagine, and I can do it with nonchalance. A Borsalino on my head, when I don't forget it in the car, a nice suit, this splendid fake GMT on my wrist that almost cost me as much as the real thing, a fine car, and off you go. Fuck, you'd want one of these events every day. Okay, maybe one a day would be a bit steep for my pockets, the pay as a librarian isn't bad relative to the actual work; they pay me to do almost nothing, but not a whole lot. I get that some people would sign up for that, but dealing with all the EUs who harass me daily with their absurd requests isn't easy. Ah, excuse me, for those who don't work in the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition, EU are Exhausting Users or, as we librarians call them, the Umberto Eco. People who come and want you to fetch dusty tomes that may live in the bowels of Palazzo Ducale and force you into long games of hide-and-seek, lurking while they wait for your return. We librarians basically live six hours a day underground like moles and only come up to stamp cards, trying to avoid those who at the start of the day buried us alive with their philological obsessions, big fancy words, and then stamp and start another day that's exactly the same. Underground or not, in the end it's what happens at every pay grade. That's why everyone loves funerals, even if they don't say it: they're the only places you can finally feel alive. As much as the guests may cry and despair or hurl themselves into the grave with the coffin, they're all thrilled not to be inside it. There are exceptions, of course, parents who lose children at any age are different, but those aren't the events I'm desperate to attend. And now, at fifty-

five, by my calculations the invites should start multiplying exponentially and my life, finally, should begin.

## 3

Once the rosary is over, everyone spills outside, some tears, a heap of stock phrases: the usual script. Luckily, when the deceased has long since passed eighty, nobody sheds rivers of tears; it wouldn't be convincing. After eighty, sure, it's sad, no one denies that, but come on, you can't expect more. That would be therapeutic obstinacy.

Slowly, thankfully, the crowd thins out. I fire a couple more blank salutes with my phantom hat, trying to stick close to my cousin, I don't want her changing her mind about the lift to Staglieno. But when it's time to go, I realize, shuddering, just how naïve I've been.

Carla gives me a strange look when I ask about the car  
«Valet?! At the morgue?» she nearly bursts out laughing.

«But I've got the ticket.» I hand her the stub.

«Sixteen people ahead of you?» she grins.

«Gimme that...» I snatch the stub back. «You mean they ripped off the Beast?»

«The Beast?!»

«The Porsche. They stole my Porsche!»

«Seriously?!» she says, astonished. «You think it was Fulvio?!»

«How should I know? I haven't seen him in twenty years.»

«He was here. Wearing a green bomber, in this heat. But you know how they are... They're always cold.»

«They?!»

«Come on... junkies.»

Unbelievable. I *should* be deeply upset, and I am, sure, thinking of all the crap I'll have to deal with because of him,

but I can't help admiring his craft. Junkie or not, he didn't think twice. The moment he saw a car like that, he must've flipped his bomber inside out, slipped a random receipt into my hand, and off he went.

By now he'll have already shot my car into his veins.

While my night of sex fades like watercolor in the rain, I tell my aunt I won't be able to follow the coffin to mass and then to Staglieno.

«I need to file a report for the insurance. Don't worry, I won't say I think I know who did it.»

«What are you talking about?» she says. «Of course tell them, it'll save you tons of time, they'll have a form ready for you to sign. And really, what do you think they'll do to him for stealing a car? Still, you living the good life and all, but a valet at the morgue...» She starts laughing, first timidly, then louder, until it's downright rowdy. «A valet at the morgue...» She strokes my cheek gently, then retreats toward the funeral procession.

I get the distinct feeling she admires him too.

Then I remember the Borsalino left on the passenger seat.

And I start crying as well.

It's chaos.

Filing a police report turns out to be almost harder than getting a fellow librarian to help you, trust me, that's saying something. The marshal filling out the report on his battered Olivetti Lettera 22, apparently in service since the force was born, keeps tossing me little barbs meant to let me know he's onto me. He's convinced I staged the theft myself, that I cut a deal with the thief to scam the rental company. Sure, handing him the keys doesn't exactly help my case, but my years of flirtatious, slightly lascivious smiles behind the library desk toward every Umberto Eco who expects me to fetch books for them without even offering, at least, a bit of warmth in return, let me hold my ground and avoid looking guilty. I grin serenely at every thinly veiled jab, Oscar-worthy grimaces, and the marshal, seeing his digs bounce off me and produce nothing but calm amusement, practically risks a heart attack. He wants to be taken seriously, he just can't manage it.

He even suggests escorting me home, maybe to check I'm not hiding the Porsche in the pantry. When I feign enthusiasm and offer instead that we grab a coffee together, I finally get the coveted report I need to explain the situation to the rental company.

I don't finger my cousin, I file an anonymous complaint. No point kicking him when he's down; he'll have enough trouble already, and, to be honest, I respect the guy. Not everyone would have had his nerve, even loaded on heroin.

The rental desk clerk isn't surprised: the onboard GPS has stopped working and, she explains, when the GPS dies it means the car's in the hands of pros.

«If you'd told us right away, maybe...»

«Yes, but I told you the whole story, I didn't even realize it was stolen until the rosary was over.»

I can't believe my eyes: the little bitch is actually laughing under her breath.

Bitch.

«So, if you'd like to have an aperitif with me tonight» I throw out without shame, «I could explain everything to you proper and give you a good laugh.»

«Thank you» she says, «but I'm married.» She lifts her ring finger toward me. «Also...» she continues, «I have a funeral tonight, unfortunately.»

Christ, I'd gladly accompany her, even if it meant renting another Porsche, but I don't say it. Could sound strange.

But nothing is as strange as what happens a couple of nights later, when the intercom starts buzzing, repeatedly, at an hour barred both to Jehovah's Witnesses and to the volunteers of Lotta Comunista.

I'm wrecked on the couch, smoking yet another joint and trying, half-asleep, to follow an action film I keep drifting in and out of, every two minutes I fall into a trance, wake, take a hit, and nod out again, when the buzzer demands my attention. It's past eleven and nobody ever rings me in the daytime, let alone at night.

Curiosity gets the better of me and I lift the handset to discover, well, well, my cousin Fulvio, the junkie cousin, is climbing up to visit.

«You're a gentleman, you didn't say my name» he drones on the threshold, before hello even lands, with that classic heroin drawl.

«Hi Fulvio» I say. «What brings you around?»

«In my defense, I didn't know it was you, cuz... It's been ages.» He makes his own way to the couch. «I saw a car like that and followed my instinct.»

«Would you have tried it anyway if you'd known it was me?»

«Who can say? I had the monkey on my back, but...» he thinks for a second, «no, we'll never know» he laughs, and then hands me the Borsalino he's been carrying in a Lidl bag.

«Fuck, my hat» I blurt, incredulous.

«You'll be glad I didn't shoot it up, with a Borsalino like that you could make a nice little hit, fast as a pusher chased by cops.»

I smile.

«With a Porsche didn't you at least set yourself up through Easter?» I ask.

«Eh, maybe... I won't make it to Christmas with what I spend. You know how it is, when the monkey's on you you're not picky.»

«Ever thought of quitting?» I ask, rolling a joint.

«Quit?! Why should I quit – hey, got anything to drink? – only to face the absurdity of an existence with no purpose? No thanks, I pick life.»

«That's not exactly how it goes...»

«What?»

«The movie.»

«Which movie?»

«Trainspotting.»

«Never seen it.»

«Why ever not?»

«Tell me, cousin, does a junkie spend his days watching films about junkies?»

«No, well...»

«Of course not. A junkie's days are cut into strict beats: find the cash, find the dope, find a pharmacy, open, hopefully, buy the gear, and off you go...»

«There's something comforting in that, isn't there?» I ask, handing him a beer and the freshly lit joint.

«You can say that again. Don't you have a Tennent's?»

«Christ, I'll never get why you junkies, no offense, drink that crap.»

«Because it's ten percent. With this rinse water I could wash my feet» he laughs. «But your weed's not half bad» he goes on, sucking down two long drags without a breath. «So how've you been? Still renting cars like that to drive to funerals down the street?»

Truth is, I don't live that far from the morgue, couple of kilometers at most. I could spin him a lie to explain myself, but I don't. I'm not sure why, maybe because we grew up together, maybe because even as a junkie he's too sharp to swallow bullshit, or maybe just out of laziness.

«Yeah, right... This car rental thing, let's keep it between us, okay?»

«Sure, cuz. You didn't rat me out, why would I? What, wanted to give yourself a bit of shine?»

«You know how it is, nothing ever happens, but at funerals... you know? I thought I might finally get somewhere, I mean, if you hadn't swiped the car by now Carla maybe...» Then I remember I'm talking about our cousin.

«Carla's a nympho, man, you didn't need a Porsche to get her legs open.»

Holy Christ, I could headbutt the wall.

«Come on, don't say that...»

«Look, I banged her too.»

«Oh, fuck off...»

«Yeah, when we were kids, when she wanted some, I gave it to her. Nothing more divine, you know what I mean?»

«Sure...» I pause, trying to sort memories. «Carla's Teresa's daughter, right?»

«No, Maria's, the aunt whose funeral I jacked your car at. At the next one I'll sketch you a family tree if you want. And I'm supposed to be the junkie, huh?»

«I know, it's just, I never managed to care about family ties, friendships, things like that, you know?»

«Don't tell me. Anyway, I've got a feeling we'll see each other again soon, unfortunately.»

«What do you mean?» I ask, a shiver of anticipation running through me.

«Dad's not well. They diagnosed him with some *I-don't-remember-what*, but it's not good, especially at his age.»

«Christ, Uncle... sorry to hear that. He's not that old, is he?» I ask, buying myself a couple of bonus years of life in the excitement.

It's not that I'm glad my uncle's about to kick the bucket, let's be clear, I don't rejoice in others' bad luck. Well, not everyone's. Relatives are out of bounds where my envy usually trains. But now that I know I've got a nympho cousin, hell, I can't wait to get back in the game.

Obviously, I'll have to rent another car.

«Well, he is up there in years... Can I roll one?» he asks, pointing to the cedarwood box, as if he knows perfectly well that the weed and the papers are stashed inside, even though it's neatly closed, perched on the coffee table.

«Mi casa es tu casa» I reply, quoting *Pulp Fiction*, hoping I don't end the night stabbing him in the heart with an adrenaline syringe.

Seeing the amount of stuff he manages to stuff into a single long paper, I feel a mild panic attack.

«You're not trying to make me collapse and steal my Rolex, are you?» I toss it out half-joking, maybe not so much, but I don't care. Better to be clear in life.

«With that knockoff you could scam a crackhead at best.»

«?!»

«A crackhead, come on, it's obvious it's fake. What, you think just because someone shoots up he's automatically an idiot?»

«No, but... This replica cost me good money, it's practically identical to the real thing. The only way to be sure it's fake, so the expert swore, is to open it and check the screw threading. Rolex has patented screws, otherwise impossible to tell.»

Fulvio bursts out laughing, then lights the joint with a drag that turns the living room into a branch plant of the Cornigliano steelworks.

«Maybe, but guys like me, trust me, we spot that crap in a second, no dismantling needed. Line up thirty Rolexes and I'll tell you straight off, no mistakes, which are real and which aren't.»

«Come on, how the hell do you do that? You know some trick I don't?»

«No trick, it's instinct. Like those people who sex chicks, male from female.»

«Wait, what? They do what?»

«Never mind, let it go. Let's finish this bomb and crash. Can I use your bathroom?»

«You need to shoot up?»

«If I did, you wouldn't let me use the bathroom?»

«No, come on, I didn't mean...»

«Relax, I'm kidding» he laughs. «I'm about to piss myself. I'll shoot at home, then crash, and we'll talk tomorrow.»

«End of the hall, right.»

«Figured.»

## 5

Early in winter my uncle dies, run over by his own car in the San Paolo lot where he'd gone to invest a slice of his capital.

The radio was doing a piece about the investiture of Pope John and my aunt, by a cruel twist of fate, suddenly found both her husband and his capital invested, though not, alas, both in six-year government bonds.

But the kicker, I learn at the funeral where I show up dressed like Oscar Wilde behind the wheel of a brand-new 911, is that she wouldn't even have needed the money, turns out the production of the new Passat, which the dealership shamelessly registered to an eighty-five-year-old who had to renew her licence at every new moon, was halted by a brake defect. There'd just been a recall and, to minimise bad publicity, precisely the sort of publicity Oscar Wilde thought impossible, Volkswagen planned to stuff widow and son with cash in exchange for a couple of strategically placed signatures on a non-disclosure agreement.

«Nice car» Fulvio says as he arrives in the morgue lot. «Want me to park it for you?» he laughs.

«With all the money the Germans want to give you, you gonna buy me another Porsche?»

«You heard already» he smiles. «It's romantic, isn't it?»

«Millions, mate... more pornographic than romantic.»

«With the right lawyer, and I know all of them, lawyers, it's tens of millions. But it almost seems like Dad wanted to take care of us to the last, no? With this little injection...»

«Injection?!»

«Of cash, I mean» he laughs. «With this injection me and Mum won't need to do anything anymore. We can retire.»

«Good Christ, you and Auntie are already retired!»

«Yes, yeah, but you gotta understand, there's normal pension, and then there's People's pension, you know what I mean?»

«I know, I know...» I admit, green with envy. Some people land on their feet in life, no doubt about it. But never mind.

«So, what will you do with all that money?» I ask rhetorically.

«What will I do with all that money!» he laughs. «Good stuff, I hope, good stuff. You though» he drops his voice, «you dressed up for our cousin?»

«Well. You know, you told me she likes the article, so...»

«Too bad Carla won't come, she had an appointment she couldn't miss or something. You know how it is when you give it away left and right, you don't keep so well: condylo-ma, herpes, I don't know, every week it's something.»

Perfect, another six hundred euros of rental down the drain.

Then my aunt arrives, wraps me in a heartfelt hug and thanks me for coming, for not turning Fulvio in, same old consolations. Even she, despite him being her husband, can't quite be as sad as she ought to be, those millions float above her head, distracting her.

«So in the end» I try to fill the awkward silence, «uncle did take care of you, in a way.»

«Oh yes... and to think I didn't want him to buy a car» she lets slip, as if now she's pleased, «but he was always right... always. And look at you» she points at the Porsche parked beyond the lot barrier, «you're not doing badly either...»

«No, well...» Christ, now that I could try to scrounge two euros they already think I'm rolling in it. I feel like cursing, and Carla, damn, Carla didn't even show up... A loss-making day, I mutter aloud.

«It was a loss, true» she tries to squeeze out a couple of tears, mine flow with no effort, «but come on, don't be like that.» She hugs me. «I never thought you were that close to us.»

Close? Please, can't even remember the woman's name, as usual. But all that money, now that I remember. What a shitty funeral this turned out to be; it should've been a great day, and instead...

Luckily a few people do show up; I tip my hat a bit left and right – this time the Borsalino is in its place – shake some hands, hug a cousin, but I immediately see the mood's wrong. The millionaire windfall and the absurd luck of a poor sod getting run over by his own car are the undisputed protagonists. Nobody seems to care much about the departed, everyone wants to know one thing only: how big the cheque Volkswagen will write to Fulvio and his mother is. No point even wasting petrol to drive to church. When the priest arrives for the rosary, proof enough that the family has upgraded in rank, I slip away English-style without saying goodbye and return the car to the dealership a day early, hoping for a discount.

## 6

At home, in my underwear on the couch, I realize I'm dangerously close to depression. I'd invested so much in Uncle's funeral and I really hadn't expected a hit like that, the poor bastard lived his whole life under the radar, never making a fuss one way or the other. In the end nobody really knew anything about him, beyond the noun we used to refer to him, without even knowing exactly which aunt he was linked to, but in spite of a completely useless life, apart from a pension that in his day came well before old age, he managed to go out with a bang, like a fucking rock star.

And me?!

And me, nothing... I'm wedged into the sofa with a depression so bad I don't even have the strength to reach for my wooden box to roll a joint. Six hundred euros in rental for a whole 17 kilometres: thirty-five euros a kilometre. They didn't even give me a discount, not even fifty cents, nothing at all.

The more I think about it the more I wish it had been me in that damn coffin.

## 7

Since Aunt's funeral, Fulvio has taken to dropping by my place in the evenings; at first it struck me as odd, now I'm almost used to it. I saw Fulvio being born and, sometimes when we were kids, I even babysat him, or at least I think I did. For one thing, he doesn't turn up when he's sick, maybe with all the money that rained down on him he's forgotten what withdrawal feels like.

I don't know.

At first it annoyed me, pissing me off that he came to smoke my weed, and besides junkies don't dose like ordinary people, they need to feel the hit, the real one; that's why they always drink that ten-degree swill that has nothing to do with beer. But bit by bit I'm getting used to his presence, because with him I can be myself. Fulvio doesn't give a shit, he doesn't judge me, and smoking together is, in the end, better than the usual drool-fest on the couch eating snack cakes and a bar of dark chocolate. To hell with the glycemia, which at my age maybe I should start watching.

Fulvio still hasn't confessed the sum his lawyers negotiated with the car company, but at least he gifted me a hundred grams of some mind-blowing weed, the kind that really makes you see dragons and that only he could find. For that reason his being here is almost welcome now.

Evenings we usually spend smoking, sometimes barely speaking, sometimes arguing about anything and everything like two amphetamine philosophers. Then we inevitably collapse and, when I drag myself from the couch to bed late at night, all stiff, he's already gone.

In the morning I can't help looking around to check nothing's missing, old habits die hard and I'm distrustful, of course. But Fulvio doesn't seem to have trouble getting money for dope anymore. The only thing different I always notice in the morning is the number of smoked-out roaches in the ashtray. He must always roll at least a couple by himself while I'm asleep or comatose on the couch, before he leaves.

Strange character, my cousin.

## 8

I drag myself out of bed with the sun already high, it must be past eleven at least, and I'm enjoying the two weeks of sick leave I periodically grant myself whenever the various Umberto Eco blow my fuse with their whims. Usually, to make the leave more appetizing, I take it when the Eco of the moment is at the end of their doctorate and writing their dissertation: that's when their need for heavy, dusty, hard-to-find tomes is at its peak, to use one of those terms with which these idiots believe they elevate themselves above us mere mortals. At least this way, I'm giving them a big life lesson. There's no way my colleagues will cover for me and nullify my intent. We're all on the same wavelength at the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition, and if some scab wanted to ingratiate himself with the director, he'd have to decrypt our holistic filing system, better defined as: half-assed.

Fuck you and your dissertation, I think while loading the moka, life's tough, deal with it, and switch libraries. Or pay for an internet connection. It's the third millennium, and you still want to consult paper?

With how much it weighs?!

Fuck off.

I shuffle around a bit in my underwear with a cup of coffee in hand, expecting at any moment a medical inspector's visit. By now the director requests it by default, hoping to catch me out, but I couldn't care less about going out, so long as I don't have to get my clothes dusty in the basement. And besides, I enjoy being checked on like this, because every inspection gets billed and the accounting office has to cover it.

Basically I win twice.

Three times, if I think about the pleasure of receiving the INPS officer in my underwear, maybe with a beer in hand and my best “I’m in my own house and I do whatever the fuck I want” face, telling him that yes, I’m not feeling too well and the doctor prescribed absolute rest.

To tell the truth, I wouldn’t even recognize my doctor’s face, they assigned him to me when mine retired, then Covid hit and everyone dealing with the public took advantage. Now it’s enough for me to call, tell him I need a certain number of days’ leave and he emails me the certificate.

Well, once, truth be told, he did try to point out that two weeks was a bit much for the flu I was faking, but when I threatened to demand a house call, adding on the fly a phlebitis to the anamnesis, he fell back in line and never again dared contradict my requests.

They’re obliged to visit you at home if you have trouble moving, but they’d rather feed their own mother to the Huns than do it, they’re all like that, it must be some fine print at the bottom of the Hippocratic oath.

I thrive on it, obviously. After all, if you don’t use the National Health Service this way, what the fuck is it even for?

Certainly not to cure you.

The only problem today is that I got a notification on my phone, I check and it’s a Facebook message, a schoolmate of mine died.

Now, we hadn’t seen each other since graduation, and even back then we weren’t particularly close, but the poor guy, probably out of boredom, had tracked us all down a few years ago, all of us from the class, I mean, and sent us friend requests.

I remember I spent a fine evening contemplating the photos of what the poor bastard had become. I mean, when

someone ages that badly you can't help but be thrilled, and that night I downed three vodka tonics from the excitement, bouncing between his photos, the hallway mirror, and from the mirror back to my glass.

One of the best evenings of recent times, poor Paolo, at least until the real funerals started.

And now, finally, it's like I'm playing in the big leagues.

In fact, I need to get moving, write something on Facebook right away, like those idiots who, even knowing you're absolutely and irreversibly dead, keep writing on your wall as if you could really read their messages.

I'm a bit ashamed, sure, I have more class than that, I admit it, but class doesn't pay.

Ever.

I need a good phrase, something his kids and relatives can read, not with pleasure of course, but maybe with feeling. Something that especially shows, after all these years, how Paolo and I might still have been connected and, above all, something to justify my presence at the funeral.

The problem is the funeral's tomorrow, and since I'm not a relative, it all starts at the church and the ritual's very different. I certainly can't show up at the morgue to watch the casket being closed, I don't know anyone, I wouldn't be credible, so I can skip the Porsche this time.

Small consolation.

But the church is torture, fuck. An hour flushed down the toilet where you can't even look around for a bit of pussy without making a bad impression. And if at mass you're the guy scanning the room instead of the contrite one on the verge of tears, no one gives you the time of day. People who hang around churches always have a train of fucking Catholics in tow, so you have to perform. Of course, it can be done... Especially for Catholic girls who, thanks to confes-

sion, are the ones who don't make too much fuss in bed, and even if at first they won't give you their ass, after a couple of beers they'll beg you to take them there.

I just hope the funeral time doesn't clash with the medical inspector who's supposed to ambush me. For now, nothing's been communicated.

«Hi Paolo, thank you for your friendship and for all the good times we shared. May the earth rest lightly on you» is pure bullshit, but normal people really do write that crap.

Enter.

And in just a few minutes the first likes arrive. The first must be from his son, I need to memorize his name and study his social profiles, so I can pass myself off as having heard a lot about him. It'd be perfect if he also had a daughter, but I still have to investigate that. Though doing a quick calculation, she'd be maybe thirty at most, and at that age to find one willing to give it up to an old guy nearly twice her age, well... That would really be one hell of a bonus.

No point getting ideas, things like that don't happen. For something like that you'd need to find one of those neurotic types with hollow cheeks, haunted eyes and unresolved father issues.

Psychiatric stuff.

And usually when those show up at funerals, it's only because it's their own.

## 9

«Hey cousin» Fulvio greets me in the doorway with his usual drawl and pinprick pupils, «what's with that grim face, don't you have a funeral tomorrow?»

«Yes, an old classmate of mine.» Fulvio settles onto the couch and immediately reaches for the cedar box, «but today's the third day of my sick leave and the medical inspector still hasn't shown up. That gnaws at me, thinking the director this time doesn't want to stir things up really drives me mad.»

Fulvio laughs, but doesn't comment. Instead he hands me a Penny Market bag with a ten-pack of 33cl Tennent's.

«Put them in the fridge, please.»

«You're the one drinking that crap, though!»

«What, you some kind of sommelier now?»

«No, it's just that there are different schools of thought about what you can call beer and what you can't.»

«Okay... okay, we already covered that.» He throws his hands up in surrender. «So, tomorrow? You ready for the show?»

«No way, I prepared, did my homework, but I can't get excited about the event» Fulvio nods, «too much time gone by, no real contact, perfect strangers meeting right on the church steps. You see what I mean...»

«You can't show up in a Porsche.»

«Exactly, and besides I'm on a tight schedule. Funeral's at four and I've got to be home by five because of the sick leave. Even if I snagged a target there'd be no wiggle room. A shitty funeral, in short.»

«Relax, there'll be others, right?»

«Sure, but it's the waiting that wears me out, you know what I mean?»

«Yeah, well...» he lights the joint, «you're kind of like a Mac on standby, no?»

«Jesus, you nailed it. That's exactly the feeling.»

«It's like that for a lot of people.»

«Really?!»

«Kids live inside their social profiles, waiting to go viral, which statistically happens to very few. So they don't really live. Girls too, only they can throw sex on the scales and often act like porn stars even before they get their period...»

«Get outta here?!»

«It's a joke, come on... but maybe not that far off.»

«I thought kids these days barely have sex.»

«Also true, but with all the porn available, you know...» he takes a long pull and passes me the joint, «they rush through the stages... like someone who starts smoking joints at twelve, by sixteen they're on heroin and by twenty they've already detoxed...»

«No, wait, what the fuck! That's not a transitional drug.» I lift the joint, «personally, shooting up has never even crossed my mind.»

Fulvio laughs.

«Okay, you smoke and I'll shock you. I'm just summarizing what I roughly think, not claiming to be a sociologist. Everything's different now. Maybe because we're simply...»

«Old?!»

«Perfectly put.»

We laugh.

«I don't know, I don't think it's just that...»

«It's the second law of thermodynamics.»

«What?»

«Look, I can't recall the exact definition, but any ordered system inevitably tends toward entropy, or something like that.»

«Didn't think you were that brainy.»

«Well, I used to get laid and take exams, took exams and got laid. I did get my degree, not that it helped or that I remember much, but I'm a damn mathematician.»

«Well, you're good at calculations, right?»

«If we're talking micrograms» he laughs, «I'm really good.»

«Can I ask you a personal question?»

«You wanna know why someone starts shooting up?»

«Yes, that too... but actually I was thinking about that attempted suicide thing, if it doesn't bother you of course, I get it...» I hand him the joint, «it's personal.»

Fulvio bursts out laughing like a madman, and it leaves me a little puzzled. He takes two or three long hit after hit that burn up the rest of the joint, then stubs the roach out in the ashtray.

«Okay, I'll tell you, but please, this stays between us, alright?»

I nod.

«That attempted suicide thing was a godsend...»

«What?!»

«Grab a couple of beers, come on, I'll make you laugh.»

I obey and, reluctantly, crack open one of those ten-degree swill cans.

«At the time I was into this chick who was obsessed with Bret Easton Ellis and Elvis Costello, you know?»

«Erm... actually, no!»

«Come on, where the hell do you live?! Bret Easton Ellis is a writer, well, more like a fucking rock star, even if most of

his books are utterly useless, except American Psycho and Lunar Park...»

«Ah, I saw the movie... American Psycho, I mean.»

«Exactly. All his other books, which personally don't say much to me, are bestsellers and their titles are taken from Elvis Costello songs...»

«Who I don't know.»

«Yeah, well, you don't know him because you're musically ignorant, but the girl I was seeing did. She liked snorting coke, reading Bret Easton, and listening to Costello. She was an '80s freak, something like that. Anyway, her birthday was coming up and since I was really into her I didn't want to give her the usual two lines of coke, I wanted something that would stick, something that would make her think of me, you know?»

«She fucked like crazy!»

«Exactly, she was an enthusiastic cocaine addict, not yet neurotic, the best, sexually speaking.»

«So?»

«So one day I snooped through her records and saw she was missing one Costello album. She had the cassette but not the vinyl... You know, she was the type who went crazy for real records. So while she was in the bathroom I grabbed a post-it from her desk and wrote down the title of the album I wanted to buy her...»

«And then?!»

«Then I went home and I scored, only the dope I got was a little purer than what I was used to and... you know how it goes. I went too far.»

«Overdose!»

«Right... Luckily I had the presence of mind, once I realized I was about to go, to stretch out my arm and crank the

stereo up to the max... It was like four in the morning and the cops didn't take long to bust my door down, thank God.»

«So it was an accident, you didn't try to off yourself!»

«Of course not, fuck... You don't go where you weren't invited» he laughs.

«So how did it all start?»

«From that damn Elvis Costello record. They found the post-it in my wallet...»

«The one with the album title?!»

«Exactly.»

«Like...?»

«Goodbye cruel world.»

I almost choke on the Tennent's.

«I can't believe it!»

«Me neither, man, crazy stuff.»

«But you never told anyone.»

«Absolutely not, you're the only one who knows this.»

«And why didn't you say anything?»

«At first I wanted to, but then suddenly everyone – even my mother – became so nice to me, so understanding. I mean, one moment I was the black sheep, the family degenerate, the one who liked to get high and embarrass everyone, and the next I was this tormented soul, too sensitive for this world... stuff like that. From executioner to victim, with all the perks, and not only that...»

«What do you mean?»

«Well, it wasn't just the family that started seeing me differently after that misunderstanding, even the State changed its perspective.»

«I don't follow.»

«After a couple of weeks in psychiatry, some services kicked in, social assistance stuff, the kind of help you can't get just by shooting up. But having attempted, well, having

tried the final act, I'd moved up a lot of squares on the INPS board game, passing all those poor bastards who didn't have the balls to throw themselves under a train or out a window, you get it?!»

«So they gave you a pension?»

«Yeah, well... Not right away, but from that moment it kind of became possible. And in the end the State started giving me a small monthly income even though I'd never actually worked. If I'd known, I would've tried to off myself as soon as I finished high school» he laughs.

«Sure, but age must have had something to do with it, or something like that.»

«Of course. Age and all the tests they put me through, like the military exam, remember:

Do you like flowers?

Do you love your mother?

Would you like to be a hairdresser?»

«You messed them up on purpose!»

«Let's say I gave them all the answers they didn't want to hear.»

«Bravo!»

«Thanks, cousin. Mind if I?» he indicates the little wooden box.

«Go ahead, it's the same one you brought.»

«Wow, you make it last» he laughs.

The rest of the evening we spend mostly in silence, smoking that strong stuff and drinking that kind of beer. I can't help feeling a little jealous, I can't help it. I can't quite focus on his problems, addiction, the physical distress, the pain even, and above all the causes that brought Fulvio to where he is now. It's obvious he's not doing well: he often starts sweating for no reason, other times he's freezing and shaken by chills. His voice is always drawled now, even when he's

clean, and he's confessed that it's his biggest worry. I don't know why his voice changes so suddenly when the stuff kicks in. Maybe because all the muscles relax or because the vocal cords loosen. The point is, at first he said it only happened on a trip, until one morning, bam... he realized, perfectly lucid, that his voice wasn't the same anymore.

As much as I try, not very hard, to be honest, I can't see my cousin as someone with problems; I only see his opportunities. Not so much the new ones, from his father's death, but the ones he's always had: family, houses, disability checks, chronic unemployment and, in the end, even a pension. Meanwhile I, fuck... I only have my health on my side, at least for the moment, and everything else I can only dream about.

Only health, fuck.

What a shitty life.

## 10

The week of Ferragosto is looming, the library is about to close forcing me into vacation, and in these days I usually shut myself in the house with the shutters down, posting fake photos of so-called holidays at the edge of the conceivable.

Praise Photoshop, mentor of liars.

Last year I picked Patagonia, the so-called Land of Fire, and this year I wanted to aim for the other side of the planet, except that Fulvio's constant presence at my place forced me to revise my summer plans.

My cousin already knows too much about me and I don't want to get carried away with confessions.

I could simply tell him I'll be away for the holidays, but he wouldn't buy it. He knows perfectly well I'm flat broke. Okay, he wouldn't believe that either, but that's not the point.

A nice funeral could get me out of the jam and justify to my virtual friends, assuming they actually exist, my emancipation from Ferragosto vacations: the most expensive of the year and, precisely for that reason, the most chased after.

You know what I mean.

And just when Ferragosto is near, an old flame comes to free me from the predicament.

Not that we'd been lovers proper; I would have liked it, but she aimed higher. I was only a fallback when no one answered upstairs or after a few drinks, otherwise her radar didn't even pick up my position.

In the end she married some absurd guy with a fat bank account and lasted a couple of years, then she ended up alone. I didn't go to the wedding – they weren't the sort of

parties that thrilled me – but now there’s a chance to attend, sooner or later, her final farewell.

Top-tier stuff, no doubt.

A mutual friend did the informing, probably caught in a bout of universal sharing. Information is power, everyone knows, and those who have it can’t wait to spread it to feel that power coursing through their veins, even to people they haven’t been in touch with for years.

She doesn’t even give me a call, just a simple, detached WhatsApp message.

«Hi Walter, I don’t know if you know but Luisa is having some health problems, one of those she unfortunately won’t recover from. I don’t know if you’ve been seeing each other or keep in touch, however I thought I should let you know, just for your information. I don’t think she wants calls right now, but at least you’re informed. Do what you think is right. Big hug, I always think of you.

Marina.»

I do a quick calculation: we haven’t seen each other or spoken in thirty years, and yet she thinks of me. Fantastic, really fantastic. Of course I’m glad she wrote, even if her reason is strictly personal and utterly pragmatic, but what I wonder is: where the hell did she get my mobile number?!

They didn’t even exist thirty years ago!

Or at least we didn’t have them.

I tell Fulvio about it that evening and he seems stunned too, or maybe it’s just the psychopharmaceuticals they cut the stuff with.

One of the two, but I don’t investigate.

Now what the hell should I do? Call her day and night – a day that’s lasted thirty years – to tell her I send my regards and I heard about her troubles?

No. As much as I have no problem rationalizing what others hide under the rug of their existence, as much as I can feel alive in the face of someone else's misfortune, I have limits.

I may be a nasty piece of work, I don't deny it, but I still have some class. So I decide on my own, since Fulvio is strangely catatonic tonight, to stake out under her house in the coming days. I have to meet her by chance, obviously; only then can I make my presence acceptable. If she prefers to keep her condition private, well, then I can bring Marina into it and confess I heard.

The only problem is I have no clue how social someone in her condition can be, and, truth be told, I don't even really know her condition. But the illness you can't recover from I interpret in only one, sadly common way.

This promises to be a rather demanding stakeout.

Luckily there should be a nice café with outdoor tables near her place, assuming she still lives in the same spot: another unknown, not to be underestimated.

I'd like to suggest to Fulvio that we go reconnoitre and have a drink, but there's nothing to be done: he can barely keep his eyes open.

«Listen, should I be worried?» I shout in his ear when I see him stretching out on the couch.

«No, sorry» he pulls himself together for a moment, sitting up, «it's just I shot up in the elevator, I'm tripping, but I'm fine... mind if I switch off for a bit?»

«In the elevator!» I explode, wondering how the hell he managed to prep a needle across four floors. «You're not going to die on the couch, right?»

«No, don't worry» he says with that classic junkie voice, struggling, «I'm on a trip, not OD.»

I decide to trust his judgment and good night.

But just in case I leave, at least so I won't be there if he was wrong.

Thirty euros in taxi fare and I find myself sitting at the counter of this damn bar – the outdoor tables are all taken at ten p.m. – alone like an idiot, pretending to wait for someone who won't come, looking like a fool in front of the bartender who stares at me waiting for the order, hoping not to find a corpse at home when I return but most of all, and harder still, hoping to meet a near-ex of mine, very ill, at this hour just to snag an invitation to her last party.

«Martini cocktail, please» I find myself saying, without premeditation, probably guided by the fact I'm in a taxi and by all those bloody IBA diplomas on the wall that should somehow vouch for the guy behind the bar who, wearing a worn Jethro Tull tee, looks more like Aqualung himself than a bartender who's won half a dozen WCCs.

«I'm waiting for someone, but I'll get ahead» I say to seem casual, «maybe if a table outside frees up we'll move out there.» I bluff.

The guy, reflected in the obligatory mirror behind the counter that multiplies the bottles on the shelves, nods. Then he slides me the glass and wipes ten euros off me.

High-class neighbourhood, fuck me.

At least this swill seems decent. I mean, you don't need a degree to pour gin into a glass that smells of vermouth, but at least the gin seems okay.

Honestly, I don't understand gin at all, but ten euros gives the drink a certain authority. The problem is I can't sip something like this sparingly: on the first swallow I blow five euros clean, then I stall, look at my phone, send a couple of messages and in the end even fake a phone call, and almost without noticing I suck down another three euros pretending

to dial: «Hey, I'm in position, don't keep me waiting as usual, alright.

...

No, are you joking?

...

When, sorry?

...

Fuck, you could've warned me, you want me to come over?

...

No, well... you're right. Now I didn't think they let only one person in at a time at A&E.

...

Alright, here's the deal: as soon as they visit her call me, I'll try to hang around, if they keep her there I'll stop by and bring everything she needs.

...

Me too.

...

See you.»

With the bartender I should be squared, but it's better to dot the i's. I polish off the last two euros, apparently with no immediate consequence, and push the glass and another tenner across.

«My partner's mother fell in the bathroom, fuck. She's at A&E waiting to be seen. It wasn't supposed to happen.»

The barkeep nods again, but this time, handing me the glass, he even speaks: «The trouble is that these days, for a domestic fall, you risk spending the whole night at A&E.»

«Yes well...» and another five euros disappear, «I hope for someone her age they pay a bit more attention. I read that when they're that old, my mother-in-law, let's say, she's about eighty» I improvise on the fly, doing a quick mental

calculation that makes me feel like a budding Fields, «it's not that they fall and break the femur: it's the femur that gives up on its own, so they fall.»

«Yeah, I heard that too. The important thing is to never turn up at the hospital alone. Always call an ambulance, with an ambulance they're obliged to see you quickly. They might still leave you twenty hours on a stretcher to die, but at least they looked at you, you know what I mean.»

This time I nod.

Finished the cocktail in two precise sips worth two euros fifty each and the hit starts to climb inexorably. I still have a few minutes of pseudo-lucidity to decide quickly whether to get up and go home with my tail between my legs and fifty euros less, eighty counting the return, or to not give a shit as usual, start drinking, blow a fortune, and spend the next two days cursing myself for doing it again.

I already raise the glass; instinctively I always opt for the second choice, when I realize I can't burn this bar, I need it for the stakeouts. So I do the worried-about-the-mother-in-law routine, which is a bit of an oxymoron if you think about it, then I say goodbye and leave.

I still manage to walk in something like a straight line, which with hard liquor isn't a given, so I start pacing back and forth, from the bar to the small garden, from the garden back to the bar and again, thinking about how likely it is to bump into a sick person at this hour, it's past eleven now.

I'm a dreamer, so I don't give up. I pass well past midnight before throwing in the towel, realising I'll have to pay, besides the night rate, the holiday surcharge since it's now Sunday.

One hundred euros wasted for a Saturday night that wasn't worth ten. At least Fulvio isn't on the couch and, I check quickly, not collapsed in some other room either.

That alone is no small bonus.

Only when I'm finally in bed, in those two seconds of autonomy booze gives me before shutting me down, do I know what to do. I try to turn over and set an alarm on my phone, but my time is up, my energy has abandoned me – not tonight, but for years – and tonight, damn Eve, I already know I'll dream of masses, processions, investitures, hosts, incense, vespers, organs, altar boys, black smokes, white smokes, synods and various metempsychoses, fuck.

Sick people you catch on Sunday morning in church, not Saturday night at the bar.

No doubt about it.

## 11

I open my eyes and it's past ten and there's no way I can make myself presentable for the eleven o'clock mass. On the bright side I discover that churches have websites too and that the masses at that parish are held Saturdays at 6 p.m. and Sundays at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., and again at 6 p.m.

I have a week to turn myself into a proper Catholic. Hopefully Luisa won't decide to die on me before then. That would be a real bastard move, damn it.

I get up with the best intentions, naked except for the T-shirt I sleep in, and I download the Bible to my tablet. I've got a week to prepare and I want to do it properly. At a commemoration like this I'm not saying I can play the lead, but almost.

These are opportunities not to be missed.

After coffee I dive into the reading, only to discover that this thing they've built into such a pompous spectacle is a piece of crap like I've never seen. I've never found a book written worse or full of such blunders.

I get dressed, have another cup of coffee, and switch to discovery mode. I open Wikipedia and try to learn about the available editions of this bestseller, at least those published in my language, since I don't know Latin, and: nothing, I actually downloaded the version approved by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

So Abraham really did get circumcised at something like ninety-nine years old, he was a hundred when his son Isaac was born, and he died at one hundred seventy-five. Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years. His son Seth had a child at one hundred and five and lived eight hundred and seven...

And so on... the more the better.

Lost, by comparison, is a rational, well-structured TV series.

By noon I've already smoked a couple of joints; it's impossible people still kill themselves over a fantasy written so terribly. I never would have imagined something like this.

Not even if I'd lived all of Adam's years!

By page seventy I can't sit still, this week won't pass quickly enough; I'm so eager to go to mass and, if I don't run into my dying ex, to mess around with some cassock.

No, interpretation, faith and all the bullshit they use to enoble an otherwise idiotic text are one thing, but here they really went off the rails.

That the best-selling book in history is also the worst written should make you think, I guess.

I say «I guess» because at one in the afternoon, with an appetite that at Christmas would send me into the street hunting for brutal panettoni stuffed with multicolored creams, I no longer even know how to tell fiction from reality and the eyes in my head, bouncing from one line to the next, like when I'm about to fall asleep, add to the raining brimstone on Sodom the troops of Jon Snow and the dragons of that big-boobed blonde from Game of Thrones.

Maybe shooting heroin is something like that!

I think of Fulvio, out of the blue, and it wakes me up a bit. If I had a phone number I'd call him, just to make sure that elevator trip didn't send him too far down, but the only phones that pass through his hands must be the ones he dries off and promptly swaps for powder.

He has no contact number, him...

He may be dependent on the stuff, but he's freer than me.

Okay, nobody really ever uses my phone except on rare occasions, but that's not the point. It's the feeling of being

naked and lost if I leave it somewhere that makes me uneasy. That is: I'm uneasy if I forget it, I'm not uneasy when I think about the unease I shouldn't feel, but do, when I don't have it with me. Though I sense I should be uneasy in that other way instead.

So I adapt.

That is: if I were to score too, I certainly wouldn't worry this much.

I'd have already sold the phone.

## 12

I'm already kneeling half an hour before mass begins, tactical position in the middle of the nave, wrapped neatly in an Armani stitched in Secondigliano: elegant but not too much.

I don't need to impress her, I just need to find her.

And since I'm here, I might as well pray too: Fulvio hasn't shown up these past nights, I haven't heard from him since I downed two Martini cocktails at the bar across the street.

Sure, for someone with his hobby it's nothing unusual to vanish without a trace, disappear, hide, or simply end up in the slammer, but I've gotten used to his evening raids and smoking alone all week has felt weird. I could've called my aunt to ask, or the hospitals, but I didn't, obviously. I didn't dare invade his privacy like that.

He's not my boyfriend, for fuck's sake.

Of course, "praying" is just a euphemism; I'm not about to address some imaginary friend to find out what hole my junkie cousin has crawled into, but I'll gladly shell out a euro to light a candle for good luck and ease my conscience like any Catholic would. Not to mention I just noticed they even take credit cards for offerings here. Holy Christ, you can't buy bread or milk with Visa, but you can light all the candles you want. Even the collection basket the housekeeper passes around at the end of mass has a built-in card reader, and that worries me: if Luisa happens to be bid farewell right here, I'll have to rein in my acting. If I get too carried away with the role, I might risk a wild swipe. I'll need to stick a Post-it on the fridge to remind myself to leave my cards at home that day.

Here we go: the priest takes his place and, accompanied by organ music stolen from *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, starts bouncing us around like pinballs: stand, sit, stand, sit, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, stand higher, stand taller, sit, let's exchange a sign of peace and...

I can't believe it. Not on the very first day of the season, not at the very first mass... but when I turn to shake – careful not to break it – the hand of the old lady sitting behind me, I spot at the back of the nave, seated and leaning on a pair of crutches, a woman very much like the Luisa I remember. The crutches only strengthen my conviction.

And thanks to them, she sure won't escape me.

I feel like luck is finally turning.

I try not to turn around again. It all has to happen as casually as possible. I'd love to use my phone in selfie mode to keep her under surveillance, but I'm almost in front of the altar and everyone would notice: the church is the one place where people hold back from filming.

A thought troubles me: how can she look exactly like the Luisa whose image I've guarded so jealously? How could she have preserved herself so well, despite the kids and the illness her best friend spoiled for me?

Something doesn't add up.

A rhythmic sound on my right tells me Luisa, or whoever she is, is steering her pair of crutches toward the altar to take the body of Christ in her mouth. Mine too, once or twice, though she was drunk as a skunk, and afterward she didn't bless me biblically the way she should have, also because outside the car, which I had to slam to a stop, there were crowds of people walking by. Booze had forced her into communion with yours truly, no forethought involved, and after the blessing it was goodbye and into the bin.

And everyone home.

I rise as I sense her drawing near and almost bump right into her. I freeze, staring into her eyes with the best look of surprise I can pull from the Postal Market of hustlers. She hesitates a moment, doesn't recognize me right away.

«Luisa?!» I whisper.

She straightens her arms on the crutches' grips to stand fully upright. She's exactly my height, and as thin as I remember. Her face hasn't changed a bit.

Could this actually be her daughter?!

«Walter?» she murmurs after a few seconds of disbelief.

«Jesus Christ» I blurt, «did you really make a pact with the devil?»

I can't believe it's really her. It's maddening to realize she hasn't aged a bit; if it weren't for her illness, a small consolation, my instinct would be to headbutt her nose so she'd look more like a Picasso painting than a Leonardo.

A couple of mummified old bats escaped from the Egyptian Museum turn their gaze on me and fry me alive with their eyes. She laughs, I don't know if at my blunder or the compliment. She wants to kiss me on the cheek but the crutches get in the way, so I lean toward her face and brush her cheek with my lips. Her scent drags me back in time, making me understand what Proust must've felt dipping that cookie in tea. I should go home and write seven volumes myself, three thousand seven hundred and twenty-four pages, to try to figure out why she never gave it to me despite everything else.

«Yeah, sure. Look at me» she gestures toward the crutches with her head, «I can't even stand on my own anymore, some pact with the devil that is. Let's meet outside once this service is over, okay?»

Service?!

I don't understand jack about church stuff, so I nod, and to stay in character I follow her toward the altar.

«The body of Christ» the priest says when I'm in front of him. Disgusting! I feel like saying, but I'm polite and just thank him. Nevertheless, the priest makes a face and shoots the wafer into my mouth with a flick, like it's a fucking mini frisbee. Nearly chokes me.

Yeah, he sure loves his neighbor, that bastard!

## 13

«What a pleasure to see you» Luisa blurts once mass is over, «I never expected to run into you in a place like this, weren't you an atheist?» she laughs.

«I still am» I confirm, wearing what looks more like paralysis than a smile. Only I know how much it pisses me off that Luisa still looks fantastic. I'm gnawing with envy, then thank God I think of the cancer and relax. «But I've got a junkie cousin» I improvise, even if that part is true, «and my aunt forced me to light a couple of candles here to avoid doing it at the cemetery. Sure, I know it doesn't really work like that, but with old people there's not much to argue. They'll trick you out of the boldest promises, shame's not really in their vocabulary anymore.»

«You took communion!» she exclaims. I look at her surprised, again I don't get it and she notices. «The communion» she continues, «you ate the host!»

«Oh, that! Yes, well... it's all part of the performance. I could've abstained, but my aunt would've clocked me. They've got a sixth sense for that kind of bullshit. Aunts are like grandmothers, they know what's buzzing in your head and they catch you every time, at any moment. Not like parents. Parents are too involved, it's like they contemplate a huge painting that's ten centimetres wide, they only see what's right in front of them, you know?»

«I do, yes, but I never thought I'd see you kneeling before the altar.»

«Yes, well... I'd be very grateful if this stayed between us. Also, that nasty thing ruined my mouth. We should scrub

our taste buds with a little prosecco, at this point. What do you say?»

«Why not!» she agrees, after eyeing the man's Rolex on her wrist that I'm convinced is real, who will she leave it to, damn. «There's a nice bar right in front, with outdoor tables, the barman is brilliant, he's won a bunch of awards.»

A dairy shop would've done me fine, but now I'm in it and I'll have to watch at least forty euros dance out of my wallet. I at least hope they'll cover my invitation to the party she'll be throwing in her own honour.

The barman is wearing the same T-shirt as last week, I hope he washed it, but I don't pry. We sit in the middle of the small dehor surrounded by half a dozen old ladies in advanced, and perhaps unaware, stages of decomposition, who sip their coffee and Fernet Branca as if at a slow-drinking tournament.

The barman greets us with a nod from his post behind the counter, busy pouring Fernet and Corochinato like there's no tomorrow.

Remission of sins, you know, makes one very thirsty.

«What will you have?» I ask, almost rhetorically, since I don't think she has many options in her condition.

«A Campari Spritz, please. Not much ice, thanks.»

«Not much ice?»

«Yes, anyway Andy knows how I like it, I come here almost every day, just not at this hour» she smiles, «at this hour, usually, if I'm not in bed... I go to sleep» she chuckles.

I'm confused, these aren't the lines I expected, but there's time, now I have to make the first twenty euros count, which in the end turn out to be two simple bitter-whites in beer glasses.

«So» I say returning to the table after ordering the drinks at the counter, «tell me about yourself, how many years have passed?! Christ.»

«Thirty or so, right?»

I nod, thirty years have really gone by, and this bitch is still fuckable like when I met her, crutches aside. I have to force myself not to show my disgust and stay believable.

«But you really made a pact with the devil, you look amazing... you're exactly» I swallow before finishing the sentence, «the same as back then. What's your secret?»

«You're kind» she smiles, showing thirty-two teeth that look like they grew yesterday and have never seen a drill or a dentist in their lives, around here they should start using floss before Duplo bars, damn, «but I feel triple my age. All sorts of things have been happening to me lately» and she nods toward the crutches, «you can't even imagine.»

I can picture it perfectly, though I must say her spirits seem sky-high, they probably load her up with so many opioids to tolerate the pain that she's almost fine, at least as fixed up as Fulvio.

«Well, you look great to me» I smile, risking a couple of fillings popping out, «so what happened to you?»

«Here you go» the barman threads his way to our table with what look like two pints full of sparkling wine and Campari, «how's your mother?» he asks Luisa, thinking perhaps she's the woman I was expecting last week and breaking the cardinal rule of bartenders and mafiosi everywhere: omertà.

«Mother?!» she asks.

«Yeah, well... she didn't fall in the bat...» he starts, then luckily catches my double-eyed look: I'm turned slightly toward him without breaking eye contact with Luisa. From her side I'm smiling, while from his side the grimace on my face

reads exactly: «What the fuck are you doing, you stupid idiot!»

Forget drama school, they should give me an Oscar for a performance like that.

Some synapses fire in the barman's head, aligning neurons from one to ten thousand raised to some stupid power and, after grasping the situation, he saves himself by saying he got confused.

I breathe a sigh of relief, until the idiot can't help winking at me as he walks away.

Luckily Luisa is focused on the *bianco-amaro* glass she already holds up toward me, eager to drink. It isn't even noon and she already wants the hit.

Then I realize that if she really had stayed unchanged over time, after a couple of these tanks of prosecco I shouldn't have too much trouble getting her into bed.

Maybe not in the middle of the street.

«You were saying?» I ask, pointing to the crutches in hopes they'll help me get to the point, i.e., to that mass of crazy cells she still hides somewhere in her, damn I must admit, stunning shell. «What did you do to yourself?»

«Look» and she downs, as if nothing, four or five euros' worth of *bianco-amaro*, «it was madness, I was seized by fear...»

Okay, we're getting there... What sounds odd to me is that she speaks in the past tense. I mean, if she's dying, the fear won't just pass, will it?! We're humans after all and, however stupid and utterly meaningless this existence may be, it's still the only one we have. Knowing you have to pull in the oars can't leave you indifferent.

It must be the meds talking, God, how I'd like to try at least once what she's taking.

«Don't keep me hanging» I say, toasting away another three euros.

«Everything started six months ago. Suddenly I had stabbing pains in my head and the right side of my body began to fall asleep: foot, leg, shoulder, as if I were split in two... Of course my fear was a tumor, so I didn't wait around and went through every test possible...»

Because, fuck, I think, are you telling me it isn't a tumor?! «And what did they tell you?»

«Look, they turned me inside out, I saw all the best specialists, and thanks to my people, you remember they're both doctors, even if retired, I managed to do everything through the National Health Service, which is no small thing. You know what I mean, right?»

«Perfectly» I say, trying not to lose myself in thoughts too complex so I don't reveal what I really think. Namely that it's madness if those with money and connections can use public services without trouble to the detriment of everyone else. But let's drop a veil over that.

«So after dozens of visits and checks, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.»

«No... Fuck!» I blurt, making all the mummies turn our way, though not for the reason she thinks. Multiple sclerosis takes years, Christ, I could really croak before her at this rate.

«Relax» she says with a smile, «I'll spoil it right away, they were wrong, don't worry, there's nothing wrong with me...»

«Nothing wrong with you» I repeat in a strange voice that doesn't even sound like mine from the outside. How can there be nothing wrong with her, and the crutches, and Marina's message... What the fuck is going on here?! «So... you're fine?» I ask, shaken by a shiver of fear that she mistakes for deep concern.

«Never been better» and she flashes a blinding thirty-two-inch smile. «I mean, I'm fine now, but you have to understand that when they gave me that kind of news, well... You can imagine.» I nod. «At first I locked myself in the house for weeks, not going out at all, then I quit my job at the university, what was the point of wasting eight hours a day, now that I knew I didn't have all the time I thought. Not to mention that I never needed the job financially. I mean, let's not be modest, but my family, I'm open about it because you're a friend and you already know these things, financially we're doing really well...» I keep nodding, watching her now through the bottom of my glass, like one of those little Alfa Romeo dashboard dogs. «A rough patch, you can imagine. And then my best friend...»

«Marina?!»

«Exactly, you remember her? Well, as soon as Marina found out what I was going through, boom... she disappeared from the radar. Before that we spoke every day and saw each other at least two or three times a week, but after she found out, suddenly, she started hiding behind lame excuses, brushing me off, so I stopped looking for her. After all, I was the one who needed support, right?!»

«Of course!»

«And she never reached out again, it's been three months now. Completely vanished from my life. Okay, everyone handles pain in their own way, I know... But it hurt, I assure you.»

So that's why she wrote to me, I realize. Not being able to hold the role of best friend but still caring, she made sure Luisa wouldn't be left alone in her illness. Did she write only to me or to everyone from the old crew?

«But you said there's nothing wrong with you...»  
 «Exactly... Luckily I'm fine, but I didn't tell Marina. I'm still

angry with her. I mean, she bailed on me when I needed her, ran for the hills, so...»

And how the hell did she even find my number... «Let's have another» I raise my nearly empty glass, the buzz climbing steadily, relaxing every muscle in my body.

«Yes, gladly, I could drink fifteen of these things, I live right across the street anyway. By the way, what were you doing in that church around here, it's not your parish, is it?»

«No, of course not. I don't have a parish... I didn't even know they had an owner.»

«You're a clown» she laughs. «Andy, excuse me» she shouts toward the barman, «can you make us two more, please.»

«Coming right up» he replies.

«So, the doctors were wrong?»

«Yeah, all of them.»

«But you... how did you realize they were wrong?»

«Well, I rushed off to Switzerland, Lausanne to be precise, where the biggest research center and foundation for muscular dystrophy and ALS is based. They ran a bunch of tests on me there, this time privately, and found out that although all my symptoms screamed muscular dystrophy, in the end it was just a simple trigeminal inflammation, probably caused by riding a scooter with wet hair, or something like that.»

«A draft?! All that for a fucking draft?!» I'm about to explode.

«Look, don't tell me... it's insane. Public healthcare is finished.»

The barman replaces the empty glasses with full ones and even tosses in a bowl of what looks like squirrel feed.

Getting ahead of the game, I pull out my wallet, at this point the day's a loss, and as expected forty euros go straight to hell.

I should never have come to this shithole neighborhood.

«The crutches, then?» I ask, hoping for a twist: a plot twist, as the screenwriters call it.

«Well, wait. It's not over yet. Do you remember I have an older sister, right?»

«Yes, but I never had the pleasure, I lie. I mean, I don't think I ever really had the pleasure, but remembering her relatives, of all things! Until yesterday I didn't even remember her. What the hell do people think, that they leave a mark, the slime trail like snails, in other people's lives?

Poor deluded fools.

«So?»

«Well, my sister is a lawyer and works at a big law firm in Monte Carlo, where she moved right after graduating, and when she found out what happened to me she didn't let the flies eat her pussy, as we say, and she sued the doctors and the facility.»

«I don't believe it!»

«Permanent psychological damage, material damages, loss of a steady job, sleep disorders, psychosomatic hives, irritable bowel syndrome, acid reflux due to stress, and so on and so forth. Basically it was lucky I used the National Health Service, if I'd gone private, with the same mistake, I wouldn't have squeezed nearly as much out of them. In the end the hospital settled for two million euros and of course we accepted.»

«So they covered you in money?» I ask rhetorically, trying to rein in the beast stirring inside me.

«Not that I needed it, I realize that, I know what you're thinking...» No, I assure you you don't know... «the rich get richer. Okay, but what was I supposed to do?! I mean» and she downs half her glass in one, «they wouldn't have donated it to charity had I not moved, right?»

«Of course not!» My jaw starts to hurt. At this rate I'll pop a filling to have the full experience. «And the crutch, then?»

«Well, when the transfer landed in my account my sister and I rented a room at the Betatron, one of the trendiest clubs in the principality, and we drank and danced so much that in the end even my sciatica flared up badly.»

«You hurt yourself dancing?!» I'm at the limit, I need an excuse to get out of here.

«Yeah, dancing... Or maybe handling the magnums of champagne we were surrounded by, one of the two. The next day I couldn't even get out of bed. These things don't happen that often...»

«Never, I'd say.»

«Exactly» she smiles, «but I didn't tell Marina, I was too hurt, you see? Okay, maybe I'm a terrible person, I don't know...» she finishes the sip and signals the bartender, but I'm not going to hand over another twenty euros, no way. «I mean, I thought I had days counted and my best friend what does she do? She disappears from my life, does that seem possible to you? Is that adult behavior? To vanish without explanation, ditch me in the middle of what promised to be my darkest time!»

I shake my head back and forth or side to side depending on the phrasing that hits me like a freak wave. She's drunk, definitely, she keeps demanding the bartender's attention between sentences. I'm so depleted that even the prospect of taking her to bed loses massive points on my list of things I'd like to do.

I'm too worn out by envy and the universe's chronic injustice, but when the barman deigns to pay attention to us I play it cool and order a bottle of the best champagne and a dozen oysters, things I didn't even think would be on the menu, damn high-end neighborhoods, then I ask to be excused and

head for the loo, diverting before I get there and slipping away English-style without being seen.

I just hope she doesn't notice my defection before she pops the champagne. With all the time and money she's made me waste, it's the least I can do to square the accounts.

And fuck it.»

Home sweet home.

I open the wooden box and roll a joint.

After a few puffs, finally relaxed, at least more relaxed than an hour ago, I take stock to try and quantify how much that message from Marina cost me. At this point I've got to do something for her too to even the score, it's a karmic thing, I can't let her off the hook, especially when I think about what she must have gone through to dig up my mobile number. Which in itself is already a mystery. My number isn't online, I've never used it on any social, nowhere on the internet. Only a few really know my number: the Municipality, the University – my employer – the Region probably, the Revenue Agency for sure, some relatives and a tiny selection of friends who don't use it anymore, and thinking, I've almost finished the joint in a few puffs and I'm going paranoid, about how much trouble someone I hadn't seen or heard from in over thirty years must have gone through to stick it under my nose and pawn off the friend she thought was dying onto me, well... it really drives me mad.

If only I knew under what fucking rock Fulvio had gone to hide! With him I could work out a theory or just debate the absurdity of humankind, but he's still missing. At this point, if something had happened to him, my aunt would have told me, so I don't think it's a problem to give her a buzz.

A female voice with a strong Indian accent explains in halting Italian that the lady is not at home. I imagine my aunt has started spending some of the Volkswagen money by hiring herself a housekeeper, and then who knows what else, be-

sides the vacation whose destination I think I catch, albeit with difficulty.

Barbados!

In her eighties and off to the Caribbean?!

I ask again for confirmation and the destination is confirmed, at least from the little I can make out. I ask if Fulvio went with his mother, but I get the impression the housekeeper doesn't even know Fulvio.

Waste of time.

Might as well go to sleep.

I wanted to take another couple of weeks off sick but I have a feeling the doctor is starting to bounce my calls, so today I was forced to clock in. The fact that the doctor didn't pick up is driving me crazy and I'm so cheerful I'd dip the edges of the first dusty old tome someone will soon ask me for into cyanide. Something like *The Name of the Rose*, just to be clear. More than appropriate for the current Umberto Eco.

Sure enough, punctual as death, a doctoral student arrives, fat like a pig with greasy hair. He bores me with the thesis he's writing and from what I can gather he absolutely needs a specific paragraph of a relatively recent publication – last century at most – but one that's practically impossible to find, of which we, the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition, have a copy.

Lucky us.

With the enthusiasm of a condemned man about to lay his head on the executioner's block I check the location at the computer and nothing, you can tell it's Monday because the monograph on Saint Luigi di Copertino by Albano Flecchia lies in corridor D shelf 1254 position H, in other words: fuck off. Corridor D is by far the farthest and dustiest of all the stacks. The day really starts badly.

Before diving in I exchange the usual small talk with the patron who's annoying me, just to make him repeat the paragraph he needs and that I've already forgotten.

Then I go.

At first with a brisk step, at least while the patron is within sight; once I turn into the central corridor toward the spiral

staircase down to the lower floors I lose momentum. First I stop at the coffee machine, though I don't even feel like it, mash a few random buttons, check whether management, in cahoots with the technician, hasn't raised prices or lowered product quality.

Then I go down.

In corridor C, the cleanest one, I wake Massimo, my colleague, who's sleeping on the deck chair we've wedged between shelf U and shelf M. Don't ask me why the letters aren't in alphabetical order because in theory they should be, as we were always assured from preschool onwards. They used to do that here too, once, but then moving a few shelves for maintenance, pest control, air conditioning, relocating, cataloging or any other lemma ending in ...ing altered the logical sequence and shuffled the cards a bit. Or maybe it was Massimo and me over the years who consciously introduced chaos into an otherwise too-ordered world.

But that, you, are not allowed to know.

Massimo complains; he'd won the morning off and I was supposed to sleep in the afternoon, but I know he likes to be present when let's make fun the patrons so I tell him to grab the hairdryer and meet me in corridor D.

«It's been a while since we gave someone such a bollock-ing» he hands me the hairdryer when he arrives.

«You're right, I almost don't remember how.»

«Relax, it's like riding a bike.»

I open the book to the paragraph the greasy-haired guy craves.

«Is this it, paragraph 16.2?»

«That's what he said.»

«Perfect, take the punch.»

First, with the hole punch we butcher the whole paragraph leaving only a few outlines or unintelligible words here and

there. Then we drip a little hydrochloric acid, muriatic as they call it, onto the jagged edges of the hole and let it rest for an hour while we watch an episode of some series on our phones.

Luckily the industrial repeaters we've demanded with vigorous protests work well down here too.

Once the binge watching is over we dry the edges of the punched paragraph thoroughly, the acid gives the pages a worn look and a faint whiff of ammonia like rat pee.

Then, with an old grater, we pulverize into the hole some paper from a papier-mâché ball prepared years ago for cases like this.

Et voilà, the book is ready to be placed on the conveyor belt. It will arrive at its destination at least ten minutes before us and the patron, if attentive, will see it reach the pickup station behind the counter, where of course he will not be allowed access.

Before facing the patron eye to eye I jog on the spot for a few seconds, pull a corner of my shirt out from my trousers and splash a little water on my forehead at the fountain. It took me at least an hour and a half to find this publication: I have to be credible, but when I finally – finally for him – stand in front of the patron I notice this poor sod is sweaty as if he'd run a half Genoa. All the fat he carries, the frustration of being abandoned, mixed with the anger and boredom of standing around and waiting with no notice – I certainly didn't dream of telling him how long it would take – have made his endocrine system crash, poor bastard.

Here I am then, ready for the grand finale.

Massimo, from behind a column on the mezzanine, signals that he's ready to film with his phone, pretending to be in a conversation, so with measured calm I pick up the book from the conveyor tray, lift it with both hands holding it horizon-

tally and, with the same care as a mother lifting her newborn to place on the changing table, I set the volume on the counter in front of the user, but with the cover facing me.

The user is quivering, but I still have my hands on the book and he can't interfere with the ritual.

I perform a couple of magician-like moves, measuring the book and brushing the cover with the back of my hand without actually touching it, and finally, strictly counterclockwise, I turn the cover in his direction, touching the volume only with my index fingers, the other fingers closed in a fist.

A move you only master after years and years of practice.

These are the few moments – when I pull off the ritual without interference and in an apparent state of grace – when I truly feel fulfilled. Moments when, pardon my French, I really feel I could piss down the neck of that fucking Spanish bartender who's so trendy on social media.

The Umberto Eco in front of me can barely contain himself. Even he, obese and sweaty as he is, makes Sparrow-like hand gestures; even he doesn't immediately touch the volume: he's about to, then pulls back, as if the cover were the pubis of a minor and he a passionate lover aware yet hesitant whether to give in to desire or not. He contemplates the beauty of that small, hairless slit – the cover – and savors its smoothness with a finger. He drools a little on it too, literally, because I can see the white flecks at the corners of his mouth, and a shiver of disgust makes me step back slightly: a calculated move to leave Massimo, behind me to the left, the perfect angle for our video collection.

Another moment of hesitation, which I relish with the pleasant bitterness in the throat like the first hit of coke, then Eco makes his move and opens the cover, which falls flat on the counter without resistance, like a contortionist's legs. He strokes the frontispiece for a second, then slowly runs the

thumb of his left hand – he must be left-handed – down the inner edge, from the top to the middle of the book.

He's about to flip through it, we're there; but at this point, after the initial rush of lust, he should start to smell the ammonia. A slight contraction of the nostrils and a millimetric tilt of his head back confirm it: he was about to climax, but just as the legs spread, when he presses with his thumb to separate the pages, out pops the dick, until now hidden between the calves.

Metaphorically speaking, of course.

«What the fuck!» he bursts out. At a volume absolutely inappropriate for a library, amid the dust rising from the pages to mess up my counter, which, of course, I'll have to clean.

I try to stifle the smile breaking onto my face, this idiot fell for it big time, thought he was fucking and just got fucked instead.

I lean in with professional manners. I wave my hands a bit more to complete the trick, rotate the book back toward me with my index fingers, weigh the hollow edge and gently open the pages.

«Rats» I whisper softly, feigning studied astonishment at the hole among the pages, «must have happened before the pest control. I'm terribly sorry» and I make to take the volume back.

«No wait» he stops my arm with his sweaty hand. «May I?»

«I don't know» I say, pulling the book away with the other hand, «we have very strict safety policies here. Rat droppings can transmit Leptospirosis, Salmonellosis or even Hantavirus, the so-called rat fever, you see what I mean. This has to go straight into the incinerator and we both need to disinfect our hands immediately...»

«No! Please wait» he starts sweating like Renton in *Train-spotting*. «I need that book, my thesis depends on it. There are only two other copies, one in the Vatican Museums, totally inaccessible...»

«Well, yes...» I agree, «they don't lend books easily there.»

«And another at the Girolamini Library in Naples.»

«A nice trip» I say.

«Exactly, so you understand that...»

And nothing, he really doesn't seem to get it. I shake my head repeatedly, as if I'm truly weighing whether to break the rules and risk my job.

«I can't, I'm sorry. Besides, we don't even know if the pages you need are intact, we certainly can't just flip through them here, there's a protocol to follow in such cases, the staff have to disinfect the counter and you and I would need to go to the infirmary...»

«The infirmary!?»

«Of course, the doctor has to brief you on the symptoms that might appear in case of infection, while for disinfecting your hands there are spray bottles everywhere.»

«Ok... ok... just a second» he looks around, heads for the nearest dispenser, soaks his hands in an embarrassing amount of gel he ends up drying on his trousers, all the while keeping eye contact to make sure I don't vanish, then comes back to the attack. «There, I sanitized. Look, I need that volume, I beg you...»

And nothing, this one really doesn't seem to get it. But me, if I could really risk my job, in the State no less, over some bullshit like this, does he think I'd do it for his pretty face? Does he think I'd martyr myself to do him a fucking favor? What does he think, that people are kind, that they turn the other cheek, that they prostitute themselves to help

him finish a damn thesis so he can slap the title “doctor” on his name and go pester the poor folks who don’t have a degree?! As if she were even a hot piece! Christ, they study their whole lives and still can’t tell when it’s time to drop the bullshit and open their wallets.

«Try to understand» I keep whispering, in an ever lower voice, «I risk getting fired if something like this gets out, do you understand? I can’t afford to lose the job, it’s not a great salary, I admit» I mean if you don’t get it that way, «but I need it... I’ve got three kids, a wife and an ex I have to pay alimony to» I almost let a tear slip if that won’t do it for him, «I really can’t afford it.»

«Okay... okay...» he admits, taking a couple of steps back, damn, I think, there’s no way he’s going to give up and leave, for a moment I fear he might cave but I’m a professional, so I pretend to be relaxed, grab a plastic bag and seal the book inside, sticking on a sticker with the chemical contamination symbol, some prop we printed back when the copier still worked. He keeps edging backward. «Excuse me» I call after him, «look, you can’t just leave, there’s an anti-contagion protocol to follow, you have to come with me to the infirmary.»

«No, look... I’ve been here two hours already» he moves back in, «I can’t waste more time, I have to go...»

«To Naples?!» I throw that out, hoping he does the math. You really want to go to Naples instead of...

«No, damn, I really can’t lose any more days, I have to hand in the thesis» he spins around a couple times, makes as if to leave, then comes back, then makes as if to leave, then returns... He even gives a name to the banknotes in his wallet he’s so attached to them. In doubt, nonchalantly, I shift slightly to block my colleague with the phone’s view. By now he has to decide whether to fold or invest.

Luckily in the end he gets up to the counter and starts whispering too: «Listen» he says, finally slipping his hand under his jacket, «couldn't we just pretend nothing happened, since you're going to incinerate that book anyway...» and he pulls out a fifty euro note, this tramp.

I shake my head, «put it away, I risk... I risk the job» I hesitate, I mustn't look too strict. He must have another fifty for sure.

«Please» another fifty comes out of the wallet, but I thought I saw another bill of the same colour in there.

«Sure, they'd be handy» I admit, «but it's a risk, you see...»

When he pulls out the last note I don't give him time to say more, I pocket the cash and hand him the book in the plastic bag. «Please don't get me in trouble. Get a biological-risk mask at the pharmacy and wear gloves. Agreed?»

«Certainly» he says, and finally he goes, looking around as if afraid of being followed and hiding the volume under his jacket.

What an idiot!

«Jesus Christ» Massimo says, «he filled my phone's memory, this one.»

«You filmed everything?»

«A textbook bollocking, how much did we pull in?»

I take the notes out of my trouser pocket, careful which to pick: «Thirty each» I say, pulling out three twenty euro bills. I recognize the notes by touch but it pisses me off that today I don't have any tens. «Got a ten in change?»

«Sure» and he hands me ten euros, thanking me.

«You're welcome» I say, «but we can't keep working like this for two measly coins.»

«What can you do, mate...» he laughs, because he always thinks I'm joking.

But I'm not joking at all, I'm as serious as death, damn it.  
Even though I pocketed four times what I gave him.

Massimo doesn't care, and goes back to sleep blissfully.

While I have to wait more than an hour before I swap with  
him on the deck chair.

You can't live like this!

## 16

I'm at home, lying on the couch, holding up to the light the three fifty-euro notes I dried out of Umberto Eco: every now and then, even at work I manage to bring home a little satisfaction, modest as this one is. Sure, I would have loved to see the poor guy's face when he discovered that the paragraph nibbled by rats was exactly the one he needed, but you can't have everything in life, that's for sure. For a thrill like that I should've made sure to pocket the cash first, then hand him the book personally later; I could've blamed the anti-theft system, the surveillance cameras or something, but that would've been too much work for so little money.

No point making an effort, that's the motto.

Nobody should ever forget it.

At least, while I'm here turning these three banknotes over in my hands like they were the first ones I stole with this trick from some patron, I hear a knock, then a key in the lock, and as if nothing happened Fulvio reappears in my life in absolute calm.

«Heilà, cousin» he says after closing the door behind him, «you still got Tennent's in the fridge?»

«You know I don't drink that crap» I answer simply, as if we'd seen each other yesterday, trying not to show the slightest worry. We're adults, damn it, not high-school sweethearts.

Although the fact that I worried about him eats me up inside like crazy.

Fulvio, as usual, kicks off his shoes, grabs a beer from the kitchen and then plops down on the couch. In the meantime

I've already slipped the notes into my pocket, you never know.

«So, cousin, what's up? Any funerals coming?»

«Maybe» I say. I'm torn between letting it go, forgiving him and telling him everything that happened to me, or making him sweat a bit when I notice that... damn... my cousin actually looks really great. I don't know how to explain it, but his complexion, the glow of his skin, the dilation of his pupils, his voice, even the outfit, tonight he doesn't look like a junkie at all.

«What's wrong with you?!» he says, seeing me staring at him, «wanna make out?»

«Fuck off, idiot! It's just that you look well. Last time I saw you I was afraid you'd die on the couch, now compared to that you look ready for a triathlon.»

«Oh, you notice?» he says with a smile, «well, I haven't shot up in about ten days.»

«Great» I blurt, forgetting the resentment I felt a moment ago, «you detoxed?»

«Okay, easy with the big words. A junkie doesn't detox, at most he swaps addictions. Otherwise he wouldn't be a junkie. I haven't shot up in ten days, period.»

«I don't follow.»

«Can I?» he says, indicating the wooden box.

«Sure, it's still your weed.»

«Fuck, you smoke like a nun, it was only a hundred grams, how long do you stretch out a hundred grams?!»

«At least a year.»

Fulvio bursts out laughing so hard he almost drops the joint.

«Explain this junkie thing to me» I ask after taking a couple of hits.

«There's not much to explain, cousin. Junkies never really detox, they wouldn't be junkies otherwise. Okay, sometimes we drop one drug, but if we do it's to embrace another substance. I could stop shooting up and start drinking heavily and continuously, I'd no longer be a junkie but an alcoholic. I could quit the stuff and throw myself into some sport, but I'd do it as a junkie, never as an athlete. A junkie must always have something obsessing him twenty-four hours a day, so there's no time to waste on stupid thoughts about the meaninglessness of being in the world and the distress that follows, to avoid thinking about the effort needed to get through a completely useless and painful existence in a world where you can only suffer injustice or impose it on others. Junkies are simply people too sensitive to live in this world.»

«Yeah, well... Those so-called sensitive people I've met never struck me that way.»

«Try to understand, sensitivity pushes you to smother the pain with stuff, and when you've got the monkey on your back and you need to score... well, things go back to a very primitive level, if you know what I mean. When you feel bad, you feel bad. And you simply become a hungry animal in the jungle. There's nothing you can do, and when you're hungry...»

«You gotta eat.»

«Absolutely. I was lucky never to reach that point, but I've seen everything, I swear...»

«But you, then? Why'd you decide on this detox, if we can call it that? And doesn't withdrawal hit you hard?»

«Fuck, it does hit. I pissed my brain out for sure.»

«And where were you?»

«At a guy's place who does it for a living.»

«What?!»

«Well, when you decide to lay off the stuff for a while, either because you met someone or because the dope doesn't do anything for you anymore, you can't just lock yourself in your room, because the moment cramps start you go and score. So you go to a professional. Like a guy who owns an isolated house in the countryside, with a room set up like a prison, kind of. Padded walls, a stainless-steel toilet like in jail, one of those mirrorless mirrors and a stainless-steel sink and shower. The room's soundproofed, so you can't even hear what's happening inside. You pay him and he locks you in for about ten days, slips food through a little hatch under the door three times a day and bam... job done.»

«Jesus Christ, you're telling me you pay to be locked up?!» I explode. «And what if he has a heart attack and dies in there?!»

«Then it becomes a Hitchcock movie. Here» he hands me the joint, «now you've freaked me out!»

«Like, why, haven't you ever thought about it?»

«Never...»

«What can I tell you, I do think about these things. Even when I was a kid watching cartoons, no?!»

«Cartoons?»

«Yeah, like imagining Heidi, isolated on the mountains, far from any medical help...»

«Holy shit» he says, then bursts out laughing like a maniac, «you're not right, cousin, seriously» and shakes his head. I follow and we let go.

A perfect, liberating laughing fit like I hadn't had in centuries. Maybe never, come to think of it.

«Look, I'm not joking. Isn't it dangerous? This friend of yours lives alone, he shoots up?»

«Yes, and yes...»

«How yes and yes?!»

«Yes, he lives alone, and yes, he shoots up... to avoid stealing or ripping someone off he set up this business.»

«And how does it work, exactly?»

«I told you, he's not piloting a 747, fuck. You just go to his house and if his slaughterhouse, that's what we call it, is free, you leave him a thousand euros and he locks you in.»

«And if it's occupied, is there a waiting list?»

Laughing, Fulvio goes to refill in the kitchen, then starts rolling another joint.

«What waiting list, you're not at the Grand Hotel! If a junkie wants to quit he has to grab the chance, jump into the slaughterhouse and hope the Executioner manages to turn the bolt in time.»

«The Executioner?!»

«Yeah, we call him that. It's a fitting stage name, I assure you. At least for the first days of confinement.»

«And if someone changes their mind?»

«There's nothing you can do, it all depends on the Executioner's professionalism. I mean, if you manage to escape before he locks you in fine... You lose a thousand euros, because there's no refund, but nothing else happens. But once you're locked in, boom... you don't get out before ten days.»

«And if you get sick?»

«Listen, you do get sick, and bad, you don't spend ten days playing Minecraft.»

«No, I meant if you get something other than withdrawal, like a heart attack?!»

«You don't get out before ten days.»

«And what if the Executioner shoots up in the meantime?»

«At least three times a day, why?»

«God, gives me chills...»

«Enough, cousin, I shouldn't have told you shit, you freaked me out. Now next time I want to get rid of the mon-

key I'll have to go to the Betty Ford Center... and there, forget a thousand euros!»

«Well, you've got the money anyway.»

«Yeah, but I'm not about to flush it down the toilet because you watched too many horror movies.»

«Okay, carry on, tell me why you felt the need for that place, what did you call it?»

«The slaughterhouse.»

«There, why did you feel the need for the slaughterhouse?»

«For the oldest reason in the world.»

There it is, you'll see he'll fall in love, damn it.

«A woman!»

«Exactly, but not just any woman, a creature to say the least sublime.»

«And excuse me for asking, but where the hell did you manage to find, I presume more than ten days ago given the time you spent in the slaughterhouse, a sublime creature like that? When we saw each other you could barely stand and if math is anything to go by you must have seduced her on the route from my couch to your folkloric friend the...»

«Executioner.»

«The Executioner, exactly.»

«Yeah well... We were on the bus and she had the latest iPhone. Only she saw I was staring so she put it away and started talking to me.»

«So, she saw you interested to her phone, to steal it I mean, and she start to flirt with you?!»

«Yeah, well... you know how it is? There are a lot of those who get turned on when they see someone in rough shape, you touch them in the maternal instinct or whatever: shrink material. But something clicked, we spent the whole night talking. The next day she had to leave for Taranto, she

works at Fincantieri and manages the permits for going on board, something like that. I walked her home, helped pack her bags and even saw her off at the station in the morning, a sappy thing, I know. I never thought it could end up like that, but what can I tell you! When I left Principe Station I seized the moment, hit a couple of ATMs and went to the Executioner.»

«Jesus Christ» I explode, not without a twinge of envy. Okay, more than a twinge, but damn, this guy shoots up morning to night and still picks up, and maybe he even picks up a good one. I sold a kidney to be seen in a Porsche, I dress like a damn dandy, I've got a fucking hat collection and to this day not even the Borsalino got me a blowjob, damn Eve! «And when are you seeing her?»

«Tomorrow night, I'll pick her up at the station, I want to surprise her.»

I nod.

«But if she liked you because you were beautiful, junky, and damned and tomorrow you show up just beautiful?» I realize I'm being nasty, but I can't hold back.

«Jesus Christ, cousin. You've got the knack for sending me into paranoia from zero to one hundred, damn» and he lights a cigarette even though we were still sharing a half joint. «No... no... no... damn. I hadn't thought of that. Do you think it's better if I score?»

My instinct is to nod right away. But I restrain myself.

«No idiot, what do you mean score?! You just spent a thousand euros to clean up and you look great. See how it goes tomorrow, everyone can fake being high; if you see she's not getting excited enough drag out the words.»

«Yeah, you're right. I can always fake it, I know how to be junky.»

«Exactly. Also, have you told her you shoot up?»

«Well, we talked about a lot that night, but no. Not explicitly, I don't think. She knows I had problems with drugs...»

«And what's the difference?»

«Yeah, well... I don't know, but I didn't talk about syringes or that stuff. It could be any drug. You know, she's so sweet and innocent – still living with her parents, though when we met they were on holiday – I wouldn't be surprised if she interpreted my problems as: he smokes weed.»

«Excuse me, how old is she?»

«Twenty-five.»

«Jesus Christ, twenty-five?! And you are... you are... How old are you?»

«Well, ten more. Come on, it's not that many.»

«You're thirty-five?!»

«Yeah, why? How old did you think I was?»

«Hmm, I don't know... Okay I knew you weren't exactly my age, but come on... the lifestyle, the Tennent's, you know what I mean, right?!»

«Yeah, Tennent's isn't good for the skin, I know» and we burst out laughing like lunatics.

«So there's twenty years between us, Christ, I never noticed.»

«Does it change anything for you, why?»

«It does! The fucking envy factor just jumped up considerably. Not to mention the real possibility that tomorrow you'll fuck a twenty-five-year-old. Something I can only dream about now, unless I pay. I can't even imagine how smooth and velvety a twenty-five-year-old's skin must be, how firm her tits and round her ass. I can't even think about how fucking exciting sticking it in her would be...»

«Jesus, cousin. Don't talk about it like that, I'm telling you there's something going on.»

«Fuck off Fulvio, until yesterday you were shooting up my paycheck every day and now you're all sorted... Fuck off» I'm vicious, but you have to toughen the bastard, he can't come acting like a high-school kid in front of me, it's not credible. «And what's that slut's name?» I push, quoting an old moovie: *Il Vizierto*.

«Ludovica.»

«Ludovica, damn... Even the name sounds aristocratic! Ludovica. Makes me want to fuck her in the ass, Ludovica!»

«Enough!» he yells, «come on, I'm asking you please.»

I raise my hands in surrender.

The evening is gone to hell. Might as well finish wiping myself out and go to bed.

Ludovica, damn.

Fuck!

Only I sure as hell won't fall asleep tonight, this hit was not welcome. A twenty-five-year-old! He wants to get her iPhone and ends up detoxing, takes her to bed, programs some little family and that's it...

And they all lived happily ever after with Volkswagen money, never having to hear an alarm ever again.

If I didn't still like him a bit I would've already put him on the list of people to get revenge on someday. If it weren't that, damn, revenge needs funds and energy. And on this planet, without funds, nothing. There's nothing you can do but watch yourself grow old in the mirror.

What a shitty life.

Okay, I could play him a little prank, it's not hard to see which trains arrive from Taranto tomorrow and give him a surprise on the platform, just out of curiosity, to see what she's like. Only twenty-five is too young. If she were twelve years older I could stage a nice scene, get in the game, compete, whip out the best Borsalino, class, try to steal her from

him first. Bastard move, I admit, but hot is hot. Fulvio wouldn't take it well, indeed that would surely end this sort of friendship of ours, but with a twenty-five-year-old the only thing I can do is make myself pathetic. You don't need War-games-level computation to see the only winning move is not to play.

That damn movie ruined our lives with its not-so-subliminal message.

Fuck you Joshua, you and whoever didn't send you!

As usual, I haven't seen Fulvio for more than a week and every time I open the fridge the clink of his shitty beer cans makes me furious. I would have at least liked to have met that damn twenty-five-year-old, but I understand the bastard has other things on his mind right now. The problem is that lately everyone seems to be in great health, I keep scrolling through the obituary lists in all the papers, I send messages to the relatives who are getting on in years, just in case someone kicks the bucket without letting me know, I mean I try to be present, albeit via WhatsApp, so as not to miss any event, but nothing. To be honest I don't even know if my aunt ended up coming back from the Caribbean. I didn't ask her, I just occasionally check on her with a message to which she replies with a smiling emoji.

And then they even have the nerve to tell you that money doesn't buy happiness. They've got the nerve, that's for sure.

I spend the evenings smoking joints and combing social media for photos of old acquaintances and former classmates, when I find someone who's aged badly, like Massa or Guaraguaglini, the evening becomes acceptable and I can even relax and enjoy a film or a couple of episodes of some series for mental slowpokes. But when I spot people like Ghio or Comparini, looking great and photographed, one in a three-hundred-plus-square-metre apartment and the other behind the wheel of a vintage Porsche dressed like Lapo Elkann, nothing helps: the urge to shoot myself takes over and then I load the Smoking heavier than Fulvio would and smoke at least half of it, before dying temporarily on the couch until late at night.

Maybe I should find myself a woman too, but women... no, I don't want to think about it. Just the thought of a female presence exhausts me. Imagine having to relate to one just to get some sex in return. It would be a second job in every respect, and I wasn't born to work, damn it!

No one should be, that's for sure.

And yet I work, unfortunately, but today I won the morning on the deck chair and Massimo is at the desk dealing with the Monday-morning Umberto Ecos, when Marina's face starts flashing frantically on my phone, that bitch who wanted to pawn off the dying friend on me and whom I had to get revenge on somehow.

And this time it's a real call, not a message.

Big stuff is looming.

I sit up, take a deep breath, while I intently think a mantra of fuck-you for that bitch I haven't heard from in something like thirty years, but who's been bugging me a bit too much recently, then, with all the calm I can put into my voice: «Hello?» I say.

«Hello Walter, hi it's Marina, you remember?»

I play confused a little, «Marina?!»

«Luisa's friend, remember. I wrote to you a few weeks ago, did you get the message?»

«Ah, yes. Long time» I say through my teeth, when I'd like to say something else, «how are you?»

«Okay, not bad. Listen, am I disturbing you? I wanted to ask if you have any more information, you know I haven't heard from Luisa and so...»

«Yes, well... Look, there's no point beating around the bush, she's ill. Very ill. From what I know she's on the final stretch, but she doesn't want to see anyone, of course. It's understandable, right?»

«Yes, of course... it's just, I've heard rumours, I don't know if they're true, I mean I hope they're not but you know, before calling I preferred to find out so I don't make a faux pas...»

«Like?»

«Sorry to spring this on you out of the blue, but I heard she inherited a nice sum, is that true? I would be so happy for her, you know... Being able to afford proper care in her situation must be a huge thing, right?»

Look at this bitch, asking me about her ex-best friend's finances with such nonchalance. This really makes me feel like a rookie, and if you say anything they accuse you of being misogynistic, but it's not misogyny if the world is full of whores, right?

«Yes, well... she really did inherit an uncle from America, you heard right. She didn't expect it at all.»

«I heard about a million euros, is that possible?»

«No... you were misinformed.»

«Ah! Okay... Well, I hoped it was true for her sake...» I keep her on edge a little, «but do you know roughly...»

«What figure are we talking about?»

«Yes...»

«Ten times that» I throw it out, I want to see her go pale, and sure enough I can tell her saliva just cut off, the bitch.

«Ten million euros?! Well, that's... fantastic» she even starts to stammer.

«Yes, it is... And she gave it all to charity, every last cent» I throw it out, I'm improvising but it seemed like a brilliant idea in the moment.

«To cha... charity?!»

«Yes, everything... she didn't keep a cent, she gave it all to the association treating her for dystrophy and to her church, but listen, why don't you call her, I know in her con-

dition it's not easy, but I think she'd like to hear from you, to reconnect a bit in this difficult moment. You know, she hardly moves anymore, a bit of company would do her good, we must be realistic and she, unfortunately, doesn't have much time left...» I'm bluffing but if I convince her the money's gone she can bugger off too and stop harassing me, as if it weren't already hard for me to know that the other one hit the jackpot while I didn't!

«Yes, well... you're right. But, all to charity?»

«Every last cent, to tell the truth she even emptied her own account, since she can't get out anymore... I do her shopping once a week now, mostly to let her know I'm near. We got closer since you messaged me. I called her, told her I'd heard and that was that... We got back in touch. Now I see her often. If you want next week we can go see her together, I think...»

«Sorry Walter» the bitch tells me, «I'm calling from the office, I have to run, can I call you during the week?»

«Sure, call me and we'll arrange it. Shall I tell Luisa you called or shall we surprise her?»

«Yes, let's surprise her, that would be nice, right?! See you soon, hugs...»

And I say fuck you, I think, ending the call.

I get comfortable again and within ten minutes, lulled by the certainty of having made her gnash her teeth like no one else, I fall asleep like a baby.

Every now and then you need a bit of satisfaction! And at least I've taken this one off my dick for eternity, that's for sure.

## 18

This morning Massimo says he's not feeling so well and asks if he can do the first shift on the deck chair in corridor C without us playing the usual game, of course I tell him there's no problem, except that if he didn't feel well at work he shouldn't even have come near. He should have promptly called his doctor and got a week off sick, no compromises. But in this respect Massimo still has a lot to learn. Or maybe he's better off in this shitty place than at home with his wife and his two teenage kids who squeeze him like a lemon, both psychologically and financially. He's got a boy and a girl, the boy is still fairly small, a teenager, sure, but still manageable, the girl instead is about twenty years old, maybe a bit older, and she's set on becoming an actress, so that gives him some extra worry. In this town, where they probably shot three films total back in the seventies, thinking of becoming an actress is a bit like wanting to be a top skier in Sicily. There are worse things, of course, now all young people want to be influencers or gamers, so wanting to be an actress, by itself, almost paints her as an intellectual. Something Massimo is proud of in the end, even if he lives in terror because he knows that one day his daughter, if she doesn't change her mind about her dreams, will have to start spreading herself around, to hell with all the MeToo loudly advertised by those who long ago already sacrificed their sex to the big screen.

Having teenage children is like walking a tightrope.

You don't need Freud to figure that out.

Massimo hopes that Carolina, with age and the first disappointments, will come to her senses and finally consider doing a normal job, while in daily life he pretends to support

her in every way to prevent her from taking her panties off too soon. Or at least he hoped so because: «The problem» he says before lying down, «is that they gave her a role in a bra commercial, you know Carolina is slim but she's got a size four, I mean.»

Fuck, now I'm curious. Until a little while ago I only wanted to meet Ludovica, now I have to add Carolina to the list.

«Wow» I say with a whistle, «so you'll have to see her half-naked on TV, but on a serious channel?»

«The bra brand is famous. She'll be on TV, on billboards, online, on buses...»

«Well, that's quite a score. They'll pay her a lot, right?!»

«No, you don't get it. You don't have kids, but it's not about the money. She's my kid, and she's not forty, you know, she's twenty-five... If she accepts that kind of job...»

«And she will for sure» I can't help myself.

«She'll be catapulted into a world we can only imagine, you know what I mean!»

«How not? Sex, cocaine, at least... then parties, alcohol, other drugs, promiscuity...»

«Jesus Christ, will you stop? My blood pressure's already at 120, you're the last thing I need poking the sore.»

«Sorry Massi, I was empathizing.»

«Yeah, but you're doing it badly.»

«But there's nothing you can do, like, to boycott her?»

«Like what? Convert to Islam and make her wear a burqa?»

«If it helps...»

«No way, you've already hit the problem.»

«The money!»

«Right, the money!»

«If the brand is famous and they take Carolina as a model they give her a ton.»

«Not as much as they'd give a famous model, but much more than you and I would earn together in a normal working life.»

«And so you're torn.»

«You can say that again.»

«Do you already know the exact figure?»

«If she signs for the first season, two million euros... If then she's renewed for next spring-summer they'll renegotiate privately through an agent, for now they give her only two.»

My irritation is starting to rise, I know the next line should be something like: I'm so happy for you... Carolina deserves it... With that money you could do a lot, stop working, enjoy life... But fuck me, how can I keep turning around and find people suddenly drenched in cash, out of the blue and for no apparent reason. I mean, these people haven't written Ulysses or made the Mona Lisa, damn. One was simply run over by his own car, then money, okay he's dead, but his family isn't. Another from human error, then money, and this one now, who, if you want, is the only one being paid for a job, even if ridiculous like having to be photographed half-naked, will also be covered in cash.

«I'm so happy for you...» I say through clenched teeth, while imagining ripping his head off with a chainsaw and then kicking it like a ball, «I'm sure your wife will be proud, with a sum like that you can start enjoying life, stop working.»

«Yeah, well... The contract will be in Carolina's name, it's not exactly our money, she's of age.»

«Well, yes, but it's two million euros, and your daughter lives under your roof. Okay, with that money she can buy more roofs, but...»

«Listen Walter, I'm going to bed to try to sleep a bit because today you're only making me anxious and I don't need it.»

«Okay, but try to understand, I'm excited too, you don't hear news like this often» I lie, because lately it keeps happening to me.

«Yeah, well... for now it's all uncertain.»

I nod and don't argue, a massive irritation is rising in me, better that he goes to bed and lets me stew in my own juice. Because around here, truth be told, only stew seems to circulate, even though everyone orbiting me, one way or another, seems to live on caviar and champagne, damn.

Morning luckily flows smoothly, no Umberto Eco on the horizon and the few people here make do with the electronic index, then go hunting for the volumes themselves. After years of catechizing they finally understood that hassling the librarians is counterproductive and little by little they're all becoming self-sufficient. The problem with free time today is that I can't help but gnaw with envy even at my colleague and I spend the morning imagining having his daughter Carolina and my cousin's Ludovica at my disposal, like the Marquis de Sade.

Young, millionaires and sodomites: the title of the book slowly forming in my head, while the bile flows powerfully through my veins. Because it's not possible that... that always the others... Always.

Fuck!

At noon, even though this morning I've done absolutely nothing except imagine bending two unruly twenty-five-year-olds to my education, I'm exhausted. I need to lie down and

take a proper nap and I don't care if Massimo hasn't recovered or whatever, the afternoon on the deck chair is mine, unless he decides to give in to sick leave crucifying me behind the oak counter where I've vegetated until a few minutes ago.

Once I go down to corridor C a cold shiver climbs my spine, like some ominous premonition to which I pay no attention. Massimo is asleep on the deck chair, hands on his sternum and fists almost closed, as if he'd fallen asleep tucking in an imaginary sheet. At first I smile at the thought of the scare I'll give him, since he seems to be in a deep sleep, while normally he always wakes up when I come near, because after all our spot is illicit and the brain, however asleep, always detects danger. But he's really pale, a sign he still hasn't recovered, indeed, I think he's come down with the flu.

«Listen, you should have stayed home, Jesus. You can't come to work and infect me with your germs. That's basic, damn it. When you even feel the slightest thing, you call the doctor and take sick leave. You're not one of those fucking VAT dodgers who sink the nation, eh!»

Massimo doesn't move a muscle, not even a blink.

«Come on, damn, don't mess with me, I'm not in the mood today» then I shake him, putting a hand on his shoulder and, damn, even through the sweatshirt I feel he's cold as a...

«Jesus, no...» I jump back, then slowly move closer, trying to tell if he's breathing at least or if he really went too far with this business of his daughter half-naked on buses, and nothing. As I keep staring at his chest I can't focus on any contraction, no sign of breathing, no sign of life.

It's true that kids kill you. Especially the ones with tits.

I stand enchanted by his bedside for a few minutes, trying to understand what I'm feeling. I don't know if I'm sorry, not yet at least, I was too pissed at him this morning over the two

million, then a colleague is a colleague, not a friend. Okay, sure I don't like it, I mean: I do like it, very much, that he's on the deck chair, cold as a cod, and not me, that much is true... that makes me feel at least a bit luckier than him, who didn't even have time to smell the perfume of money before he went straight to hell. Avoiding thinking about all those wank-off kids who would soon be jerking off to his daughter's photos.

But what really pisses me off now is that I have to somehow raise the alarm and deal with the director and all the other fucking clerks. Try explaining to the director why there's a deck chair in corridor C!

I take a moment to size up the situation, I could pretend nothing happened, finish my shift and go home, waiting for someone else to find him, but nobody ever comes down here, that's why we set up our kind of *garçonnière* hidden among the shelves. I can't just leave him here to marinate for days, until the stench reaches the part of the library open to the public. I mean, if it were the director, fine, but Massimo, come on... Maybe he wasn't exactly a friend, but along with Fulvio he was really the closest thing to one.

After all, it's been only about twenty years we've worked together. Well, worked.

So yeah, I really have to head upstairs.

On the surface, a wannabe Umberto Eco tries to tackle me behind the counter. But today I'm authorized by urgency to be rude to patrons and I nearly tell him to fuck off. Then I head for the service elevator, while he keeps trailing me, hopelessly trying to catch my attention, and I ride up to the second floor where management rests all day long without needing to hide in the catacombs of the library.

The director's office door, besides being real wood, dark, unlike the others in that diarrhea-beige laminate veneer, even

has, embedded in the frame, a sort of traffic light permanently stuck on red.

I should press the little button under the light and wait for his eminence the director to grant me the honor, but I wasn't born to be servile, especially with someone pulling in a much bigger paycheck than mine without a single quality to justify it.

I knock while I'm already pushing the door open. The director snaps his feet down from the desk and I see, in the reflection of the window behind him, that he minimizes the classic Windows solitaire.

Fucking boomer!

«What kind of manners are these?!» he barks, «Cattaneo, what the hell's gotten into you?»

«We have a problem, sir.» He always gets pissed when I call him sir instead of director, or doctor.

«Whatever problem it is, it certainly doesn't justify your behavior, Cattaneo. Do you think this is how you show up in my office...?»

«My colleague is dead, we need to...»

«What do you mean dead?! What the devil are you talking about?»

This guy runs one of the biggest libraries in Italy and doesn't understand the literal meaning of what I'm telling him.

Welcome to Italy.

«Dead, sir, means he's... dead: passed away, deceased, departed, defunct, extinct if you like...»

«For God's sake, calm down and try to be a bit clearer.»

«Look, I am perfectly calm. The problem I've already explained is absolutely easy to grasp» I mock him, but he's asking for it, «my colleague at the counter, Massimo» and I realize only now, after twenty years of service, that I don't even

know his last name, «is in corridor C stone dead. I don't know who we're supposed to call in cases like this, the police or just any old ambulance, but somebody has to be told, somebody has to haul him away before he starts to stink.»

«You're telling me your colleague is... is...»

«He's dead, Christ almighty, director» this time I grant him the title, «do you want me to draw you a picture? Please come with me, see with your own eyes, then we can notify whoever needs to know.»

Finally the director gets up and, after a brief awkward moment where he seems unsure of which way to go, starts following me down the stairs. At ground level the Umberto Eco latches onto our heels with his obsessions, emboldened by the director's presence, who in his mind surely won't ignore his requests now. But the director already seems mentally far away, probably trying to recall whether or not there's a protocol for this sort of situation.

«Director, director, please, I need a philological treatise...»

«What's he saying?» the director asks me, as we head toward the archives access. «What is this guy looking for?»

«A philological treatise on...»

«Philo... what?! How does he even talk, what's he supposed to mean?»

«Imagine me, director, this is my whole day.»

Umberto Eco freezes, dumbstruck, and finally drops it.

«What are these stairs?» asks the director.

«Well, the access to the stacks, most of our collection is down in the basement levels A, B, C, and D...»

«Really?!» he blurts out.

I don't know why, but I'm not the least bit surprised. I lead him through the maze of what should be his library and about which he knows nothing, all the way to corridor C, and

when the outline of my colleague's body stretched out on the deck chair comes into view, the director starts losing steam, slowing down bit by bit until he stops well short of the corpse.

«Come on, director» I have to call him, «get closer, see with your own eyes.»

«For a thousand bison» he blurts, betraying his passion for Tex Willer, probably his only reading, «are we sure that... that... that he's given his soul to the devil?»

«See with your own eyes» I say, «before the coyotes strip his bones clean.»

«There are wild animals down here?»

«No, doctor» Christ, you need patience here, «I was quoting Tex Willer.»

«Ah... right. Sorry, Cattaneo, it's just... I've never seen a corpse in my life.»

«You mean, never even a funeral, a relative, nothing?» The director shakes his head. Shit. I do a quick calculation. Okay, he dresses like an old man, so it's easy he's much younger than he looks, but Christ, he must be really young not to have ever seen a dead body. «Damn, director, what year were you born?»

«Ninety-four, why?»

«Well, then that explains everything» I say, trying not to let my disgust show.

Thirty years old, fuck, and I thought he was older than me. What a shit wardrobe this guy has.

«What do we do now?»

«Well, director. I'd call the police, then they'll take it from there.»

«Yes, you're right, Cattaneo, first thing the police.» He pulls out his phone, «Okay, the police... First of all the police... What number do I dial?»

At this point I really have to bite my lips.

«112 should do.»

«112, okay... 112, perfect.» He keeps tapping on the screen of his latest-generation iPhone, «I thought it had changed... 112, right...»

«Hello, emergency number, how can I help you?»

«Yes, hello, I'm the director of the Library of Philology, Linguistics, and Classical Tradition in Genoa, listen, we have a problem here... that is, down in the stacks, there's... there's...»

This guy is tilting like a pinball machine, so I snatch the phone from his hand.

«Excuse me, the director's a bit in shock, we have a body. One of our colleagues is dead and we don't know what we're supposed to do in these cases.»

«I understand, I've already dispatched your address to a patrol and paramedics. They should be there in about ten minutes. In the meantime I'll need to ask you a couple of questions.»

«Okay, but I doubt the paramedics will be of any use.»

«Someone has to officially declare death in any case. What's your name?»

«My name is Walter, Walter Cattaneo, and I work here.»

«Your colleague, can you give me his details?»

«Yes, well... His name is, I mean was, Massimo, and his last name is... Can you tell me his last name, director?»

«Yes, of course... Gallo, Massimo Gallo.»

«Gallo, Massimo Gallo.»

«Perfect. Can you tell me what happened, was it an accident, an illness?»

«An illness, I think. This morning he said he wasn't feeling well and then... then I didn't see him anymore.»

«Okay, Mr. Cattaneo. In a few minutes a patrol should be there. Do me a favor and go wait for the officers, then tell them the same things you've told me, okay?»

«Perfect, thank you.»

«I'll go wait for the patrol, director. Are you staying here?»

«Here, alone with the... with the...»

«You're not afraid, are you?»

«No... what nonsense, it's just that as the director, well, I think I should be the one to go wait for the... the...»

«The paramedics!»

«Of course, what did I say?!»

«Okay, director, go then, do you remember the way?»

«Yes, well... right, then left... Maybe it's better if we go up together.»

I check myself to see if I'm still in one piece.

When we reach the entrance, the police patrol is already waiting, the ambulance arrives a few minutes later, sirens off. I lead the paramedics and officers down while the director struggles to string together coherent sentences. I see the cops exchanging looks, more amused than shocked at the director's ramblings, while I, in the lulls, try to give them context: «He wasn't feeling well this morning, plus he was worried about his daughter's career, you know he was of Calabrian origin, and the thought of his daughter photographed in a bra for billboards, well... you can imagine...»

I hang around chatting with the officers, who are more intrigued by the daughter's story than the poor bastard himself, while the paramedics circle the body a bit, then place him on an orange plastic stretcher made of two pieces that fit perfectly together. After officially declaring death, one of them informs us off the record that it could have just been a simple

heart attack... «of course without an autopsy we can't say for sure, but for now it seems the most likely hypothesis.»

Then the officers ask us whether we had already taken care of informing his family.

At this point the director turns pale, and it's a wonder the paramedics don't have to cart him off as well, while I'm on the verge of letting loose a stream of profanity, but I hold back:

«I mean, isn't it you who should be telling his family? We're supposed to do it?»

«Well, Mr. Cattaneo, please understand. We *can* do it, but since he was your colleague for so many years, your friend, practically, maybe for the family it would be better to hear it from you, rather than from an officer in uniform.»

I don't even waste time explaining that I never met his family, that we never saw each other outside work hours, all that, it's pointless. And by taking on this bullshit I can be home within three-quarters of an hour instead of being stuck here until six, since the cops didn't consider it necessary to close the library.

«Okay... I'll go, fine. But I'll need an address.»

«I'll fetch it from the archive» says the director, managing one of the few coherent sentences of the whole day.

«Where are you taking him?» I ask the paramedics, «San Martino or Galliera?»

«San Martino, but he doesn't go straight to the morgue, first he has to pass through the pathology ward, since he died at work they'll need to do an autopsy. Anyway, just tell them to ask at the main entrance...»

«Perfect, thanks.»

I say *perfect* but perfect my ass, fuck. Just to avoid being fried behind the counter for another three hours I've saddled myself with a hell of a burden. And damn, I have to admit,

those bastards in uniform know their stuff. Without me even realizing it they bent me over, no Vaseline, nothing. They handed the corpse off to the paramedics and the poor bastard's family off to me.

Meanwhile the three of them, by now, will already be at the Parador, sipping a white before fucking off.

I didn't even know Massimo lived in Marassi, poor guy, what a shitty neighborhood! Practically next door to that goddamn stadium that, in the year two-thousand-something, still forces these poor idiots to park their cars in their living rooms on game days. At least, by dying, he's spared himself that.

Buzzer.

The lock buzzes open without anyone asking me anything. On the first floor, a door is ajar, beyond it a woman in her forties, with a pair of tits, gotta admit, that look downright fake, looks at me questioningly.

«Hello» I say, and almost instantly my armpits feel like they've caught fire, «you're Massimo's wife, I presume. I'm Walter, his colleague at the Library of Philology, Linguistics, and Classical Tradition, he's probably mentioned me.» But she shakes her head. «I mean, you *are* Massimo's wife, right? And you have two kids, Carolina and a younger boy, forgive me, I can't remember his name right now.»

«Kevin?!» she says.

Jesus Christ, it just had to be a Calabrian to name his son Kevin. Kevin Gallo. At least this blatant idiocy, along with the fact the bastard never mentioned me to his wife, makes my job easier.

«Listen, Mrs...?»

«Carmelita.»

I struggle not to blaspheme.

«Listen, Mrs. Carmelita, I'm very sorry to have to bring you this bad news...» I don't even know if there's a set formula, like for graduations or condolences, «but something terrible has happened. Unfortunately, today Massimo felt unwell at work and...»

«No... don't tell me! I told him this morning he should have stayed home, in his condition! He's got world-record cholesterol, diastolic like a cokehead, at risk of heart attack, the doctor's been telling him for years. He fell ill, didn't he? They hospitalized him? Where?»

«Well, you see, yes, he did fall ill, I think... And in a way, he *was* hospitalized, but he... he...»

«He signed himself out, that idiot, I bet. Signed himself out and rushed straight to the bar.»

«No, he didn't sign himself out, ma'am... Massimo, unfortunately, is...»

«He's a blockhead, he should get checked every six months, that's what the doctor said, but no, no way... he always does as he pleases...»

«He *did*, Mrs. Carmelita.»

«What do you mean by that, excuse me?»

Fuck, is she for real or just pretending?

«He's dead, ma'am. He's gone.»

«Dead?!» she shrieks, a kind of cry more like a call for Jurassic birds or something. «My Massimo, dead?!»

«Forgive me, Mrs. Carmelita, but there's really no acceptable way to deliver this kind of news. It seems he had a heart attack, but it's too early to say for sure. Right now he's at San Martino.»

«So they're treating him!»

«No, ma'am, I'm sorry, but as I said, Massimo is gone. His body is at San Martino, they're waiting for you there to

give you all the necessary information. You have to be strong, but Massimo isn't with us anymore.»

«But he *is* at San Martino.»

Okay, this has to be a hidden camera prank. I mean, I get the shock, but this is bordering on dementia.

Probably drawn by her mother's scream, suddenly behind Mrs. Carmelita appears who must be Carolina, judging by her chest, which seems to disprove Einstein's theory of gravitational interaction, the next testimonial for a famous lingerie brand.

«What's going on, Mom?» the girl asks, scanning me with her eyes.

And I'm scanning her too, can't deny it. She's wearing a pink T-shirt with the Chupa Chups logo designed by Dalí, which, thanks to her boobs, doesn't even cover her belly button. Tight shorts in the same color, Yolandi Visser-style, and the same laser-cut bangs across her forehead.

It's clear Massimo's heart couldn't take it, a girl like that could give a hard-on to the dead. It can't have been easy to play the father role knowing that literally anyone, and I mean *anyone*, would want to screw your daughter.

«Daddy was sick, honey... At work, and now he's... he's...»

«I'm sorry, sweetheart, but your father passed away this morning, at work...»

«He didn't go to work?»

Jesus Christ, this one was born to be a model.

«Listen» I'm starting to lose my patience, «go to the hospital, San Martino, main entrance, and ask about your father at the information desk. Okay?»

The mother nods, tears in her eyes, maybe she got the message, maybe it's just hay fever, I don't know and don't care, one way or another she'll figure it out at the funeral. I

give them a warm goodbye, scan Carolina one last time, and bolt down the stairs before mother and daughter make me repeat the whole spiel to Kevin as well.

Even though I'm a sucker for this kind of event, Massimo's funeral doesn't give me a single thrill. Colleagues ruin the whole setting. I can't show up in a Porsche, thank God, since I'm nearly broke, nor dressed like a dandy. There'll be a ton of colleagues and you can't fool them like you fool relatives. They know where you work, and the admin folks even know your pay grade down to the cent. No, a colleague's funeral lacks seasoning; it's a bore you occasionally have to endure only because some would think it bad taste not to go.

The director, of course, pushes in that direction. After I took on the job of informing the family about our colleague's misfortune, he seems to see me in a new light. Until recently he ignored my existence, now he acts like my best friend.

To make things worse, we learn the funeral will be on Saturday morning at Santa Zita, a rip-off in every sense. If it had been during the week we could have skipped a half day of work, but on a Saturday it's a biblical-level scam. It means at least a quarter of my precious weekend goes straight to hell without passing Go...

This Saturday thing gnaws at me even after a couple of solid joints. I just can't let it go. If Fulvio were here he'd probably chalk my persistent irritation up to the shock of losing our colleague. Bullshit, of course. But he always looks for depth where there is none, and anyway he's the one doing the big hits, not me.

It also bugs me that Fulvio's been snubbing me, since he hooked that twenty-five-year-old he hasn't shown up. I mean, fair enough: if you've got pussy on the menu you don't do

much else, basics, I get it, but the fuck keeps turning in my gut.

Then, when the joint's gone, paranoia rises.

Now Massimo will surely be replaced, they won't leave me alone with all the Umberto Ecos, and what if they send some uptight workaholic with a broom shoved up his ass, someone who hates naps on the couch and giving users a good roasting?

And there goes another night down the drain, I shouldn't have let my thoughts get this far. Better to have smoked the usual shit and not my cousin's Abarth-grade stuff.

That bastard will be somewhere between the firm, featherless thighs of some twenty-five-year-old by now.

Bastard!

I get to the forecourt of Santa Zita church, way early. I stop at the bar for a nip, just to survive what promises to be the most boring, least moving funeral I'll ever attend.

I've thrown on a pair of jeans and a summer Loro Piana jacket, fake of course in imitation cashmere, anonymous shoes, no hat. I just need to be seen, say hello, then make a discreet exit before the mass starts.

«Whiskey on the rocks, please, make it a double.»

The bartender is not professional at all, what the hell is he checking the time for? Who cares it's half past nine in the morning. You opened a bar next to a damn church, remember?

Maybe it's just my lingering paranoia from yesterday.

It's almost time, I pay an outrageous price for the whiskey, this bartender must think he's in New York in the Eighties. I promise myself I'll come back tonight and torch the place. Okay, maybe not torch, but a couple of chewing gums in the locks won't be taken away from me. For sure.

I'd even buy those gums now so I don't forget, but with this extortionist's prices I promise myself to hit the discount store later. Discount gums probably harden faster anyway.

But the little revenge plan fades the moment I spot Carolina in front of the church. She's not wearing the shorts from the other time but she's hardly dressed to mourn her father, more like to make him hard. Tight pants of some indefinable fabric that, I'm nearly certain, even from this distance, though I can't focus properly, show off the cut, the perfect Brazilian shape and an ass that should be hammered, not slapped, it must be that firm. Next to her another girl, no less hot in her own way, but of a different class. Dressed properly yet with a fresh-faced look and a smile so perfect – framed by very short hair – that you'd spend an hour sucking on her teeth before knocking them out with cock. And behind her... I can't believe it, behind her, a few steps away... is that really my cousin?!

All dressed up in a damn suit?!

My first instinct is to head back to the bar and flush another twenty euros down the drain, but then I'd reek like a distillery.

And here I was thinking this morning would be boring. «Fulvio?!»

«Hi Walter» he goes, like it's nothing, «sorry about your colleague...»

«Yeah, well... but what are you doing here?»

«I just found out yesterday that Ludovica» he points at the fresh-faced beauty he's probably been banging for a week, «is really good friends with Carolina, your colleague's daughter, so...»

«Christ, you could've told me.»

«That I'd be at the funeral?»

«Yeah, well... why not?»

«Well, I knew we'd see each other here, and anyway I don't even have your phone number. I only found out last night, I was going to swing by your place but, you know how it is... Come, let me introduce you to Ludovica.»

«No, come on...» I restrain myself, «it's a funeral, introduce me some other time. I was planning to bail as soon as possible, English style. I'm just waiting to be seen by the director, then I vanish...»

«About that» he says in a low voice, «if I were you, I wouldn't let the director see you, I mean...»

«What the hell are you talking about?»

«It's just that Carolina told Ludovica that stuff turned up on her father's work phone...»

«Work phone? We have work phones?»

«Apparently he did.»

Two weights, two measures, as usual. Maybe now I'll find out the bastard had meal vouchers too, and I didn't. Okay, don't lose it, it's probably just that he negotiated better than me. Not that I ever cared about having an extra phone, but it's the principle. Don't come telling me he had a phone, next thing I know he was on a different pay grade. And at that point, if I only had proof, I'd really have to tell them all to go to hell and...»

«Mr. Cattaneo» the director cuts in, formal as before this whole mess, «this certainly isn't the place or the time, but I can't avoid it: you're fired. Stop by the office when convenient for the paperwork, but don't ever show your face in the library again.» And without waiting for an answer, he disappears inside the church.

«See, that's what I was trying to tell you, they found videos on your colleague's phone, lots of videos...»

I try to process this, the whiskey's still kicking in and everything's happening so fast. That *was* the director, right? And he really just fired me for...

«Fuck, the customers prank!» I realize. «He kept the video on the library's phone?»

«Explain.»

«Not much to explain. Sometimes we entertained ourselves by messing with the Umberto Ecos who pestered us with their requests...»

«Umberto Eco?!»

«Yeah, that's what we called the patrons, Exhausting Users, EU, hence Umberto Eco...»

«Okay...»

«Bullshit, you know, nonsense. We'd do everything to keep them from getting the books they wanted, at least until they pulled out some cash to grease us. But often it was just to kill time, to mess around a bit.» I see Fulvio breathe a sigh of relief and smile. «What did you think?»

«I don't know, they just said videos, and these days, you know...»

«You thought we were pedophiles?»

«Well, you never know.»

«Go fuck yourself...»

«Oh, and they found a deckchair in the stacks, with a coffee table, a radio.»

So the director finally must've connected the dots.

«Yeah, well... that's where we took turns napping.»

«At work?!»

«Of course, otherwise where's the fun?»

Fulvio almost cracks up, but holds it back, too many people around.

«You've officially become my idol. Tonight we're stopping by your place and you're telling me everything, okay?»

«We?»

«Me and Ludovica.»

«No way, man... your little beauty gives me a hard-on.»

«Hey, behave yourself...»

«Besides, I have to wake up early.»

«No you don't, you just got fired.»

«Christ, true.» A leftover paranoia creeps up my spine. «I'm screwed now.»

«Well, you've got two years of unemployment benefits, at least.»

«Damn, unemployment, you're right... Didn't even think of that.» Sure, in two years I'll need another damn job to get me to retirement, and at fifty-five that won't be a walk in the park. But definitely too soon to panic.

Let's wait till tonight at least.

«Listen, I've got an idea» Fulvio says before he gives up and heads home, «why don't we all eat together tonight, we never do that.»

«You eat? I've never seen you eat.»

«Well, I've been clean for almost two months, and my appetite is back» he whispers.

So there are pros and cons, I think.

«Yeah, but I don't feel like cooking, my kitchen skills are SS model.»

«Squadrons of death?»

«Standard Survival.»

«Don't worry, I'll grab something from the rotisserie, you take care of the drinks.»

I knew there was a catch.

«Yeah, but in the end your girl» I ask in a low voice, «I mean, does she know about the stuff or not... I mean, what does she know about you?»

«Well, for now she knows I've smoked a lot of joints» he whispers, «but not anymore. So tonight...»

«Shine?!»

«Shine!»

«Fuck, what a shitty evening you've set me up for, cousin» I say, then give up and head home without even waiting for everyone to go into the church.

I skipped my first funeral, and the evening really doesn't promise anything good.

Because I know exactly how it's going to end.

Ten cans of Tennent's, ten of regular beer, a couple of bottles of sparkling wine, one white and two reds, and seventy euros went straight down the drain. But I'm not going to be the guy who, if guests don't bring a bottle, has nothing to drink at home, we won't be drinking all this tonight anyway, my cousin's girl doesn't look like someone who likes alcohol. Her skin is too smooth and velvety. Damn, now I'm getting hard.

I don't know why but I'm oddly excited about the evening ahead; maybe it's been years since I met a girl so charming and above all so young, I don't have a social life, years since I've fucked, sure, and maybe, I think, this Ludovica could lead me to some of her slightly older friends.

Maybe to her mother.

The fact is I find myself vacuuming, emptying ashtrays, airing the rooms, and tidying up this mess of an apartment. Not that I live like a barbarian, no, but the lack of a female presence in everyday life shows.

No point pretending otherwise.

I even clean the bathroom without too much fuss, it doesn't bother me, what really pisses me off is not being able to smoke at home.

That, yes.

From junkie to boy scout, look at how much damage a bit of pussy can do. For God's sake, people do it, I don't deny it... But how long can such a secret last? A junkie, well, he said it himself... right? A junkie, in the end... scores... There's nothing to be done!

By seven I'm exhausted. I've cleaned and tidied half the apartment, rolled some fat-ass joints hidden in strategic spots in the bathroom – where I can smoke at the window – in the kitchen and on my bedroom balcony where Ludovica surely won't venture. I've already smoked two more on the balcony, so as not to ruin the air change that's given me a mild cold, and I've drained three cans of beer in the meantime. In short, I'm wrecked and shredded like some hippie. My eyes feel like they're about to pop out and I have an insane craving for a brioche with ice cream.

I'm deep in chemistry.

I have just enough time for a quick shower before the invited – that is, the self-invited – arrive I take the opportunity to smoke the last one in the shower, cranking the extractor fan, and when I hear the intercom – which Fulvio usually doesn't use because he has keys – I look like I stepped out of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Even without acid, I should soon start seeing bats.

On the threshold Fulvio greets me, hugging me like he never has, and gives me a severe look; I seem to hear his voice telepathically in my skull saying: «What the fuck are you in?»

I don't answer, but I shake Ludovica's hand as she comes in just behind him, and damn, how soft and velvety her skin is. We look at each other for a moment, awkward, deciding whether to kiss. So I pull her close and gently kiss her on the cheeks, first one side then the other. Christ, she smells good, it takes me back to childhood countryside trips, freshly cut grass and all that crap. Luckily I kiss her at a distance because I'm already getting hard.

Then the paranoia takes over.

«You said you were getting something, right?» I ask my cousin, terrified, since they didn't bring provisions, «I only got the drinks.»

«Relax, I ordered everything from the Merli Rotisserie, they deliver at nine.»

Merli, damn! Lucky bastard with all that money.

«Are you okay?» Ludovica asks. She must have noticed a slight hint of photophobia or something in my eyes.

«Yes, sure» I confirm as I show them in, «I cried a lot this afternoon, I'm not ashamed to admit it. You know, Massimo was like a brother to me...» damn, if Fulvio lies like a bastard I don't see why I can't too.

And at that line I see him relax and finally give me a smile.

What did he think, that I'd get found out in the first five minutes?

«Please have a seat, I'll grab the glasses, maybe we'll have an aperitif, what do you say?»

«Ludovica doesn't drink» Fulvio says, «do you have something non-alcoholic?»

I'd give her something anal, not non-alcoholic.

«Of course, we always have non-alcoholics at home» I lie again, hoping I forgot a bottle of chinotto or ginger in some fridge nook. «Do you prefer bubbles or a Tennent's?»

«Toxics' beer?» says Ludovica, and I nearly crack up laughing; I barely contain it with a coughing fit.

«My cousin's always busting my balls, he knows damn well I don't drink that crap.»

Christ, I knew he was slick, but this is a fucking professional, he reels off these lies like they're gospel, without hesitation, without a blink. This bastard could beat a polygraph, no problem.

«I know you like light beer, come on... But what do you say tonight, shall we pop some bubbles or do I get you the usual Menabrea?»

Before answering, he looks at Ludovica.

Holy shit, is he actually waiting for her permission?

«Well, it's a special occasion» she says, «and I'm driving.»

«Yeah, come on... let's make the ultimate sacrifice, let's have some bubbles.»

«Alright» I say heading to the kitchen, «two bubbles to kick things off», I can't help myself. And since I've already figured out how the night's going, I slip out onto the balcony and take a couple of drags from a joint I'd stashed.

Then I'll down a couple of glasses of prosecco and finish wrecking myself, no doubt. I've got a feeling Fulvio's going to regret inviting himself.

Luckily in the fridge I find a bottle of chinotto and plenty of tonic water too.

After the toast I stretch out on the couch and, just to make conversation, ask Ludovica how they met, and she doesn't need to be asked twice.

«I was on the bus, chatting with Carolina on WhatsApp that evening, when suddenly I feel Fulvio's eyes on me. At first I pretend not to notice, it happens all the time that people stare, but then I realize he's not drooling over me, he's staring at my iPhone 15 Pro. I mean, you get it, he wasn't interested in me, he just wanted...»

«Well, he wanted to st...» Fulvio coughs loudly and shoots me a death glare, «I mean he wanted... what did he want?»

«He wanted information about the phone, right?! I realized he wasn't one of the usual creeps harassing girls on the bus, but an Apple fan, just like me...»

«Apple?!»

«Yes, Apple products. So we started talking and the week after I had to go with him to buy his new iPhone, then the iPad, and finally the MacBook Pro.»

No wonder he quit shooting up, with what he's spent trying to woo this nun! And he didn't tell me any of this, sure we haven't seen each other, but I can read the shame all over his face.

Not to mention now he's got a phone too.

«Why the fuck did you drag yourself into this mess?» I ask him telepathically, «it's obvious this girl, as sweet as white bread in wartime, still hasn't given it up. And you're already down at least», I do a quick calculation, «five grand.»

«Make it six» he replies, still telepathically, since no way did he buy the base models, «not to mention the Merli Rotisserie, that sucked almost three hundred euros.»

«Exactly. I can understand the hope of getting laid, but why this dinner?»

«I missed you, cousin. I wanted you to meet her, even at the risk of looking ridiculous.»

I don't know if we actually talked telepathically – I'm as stoned as a tire, though I've never really understood what that means – or if it all just played out in my head, but I'm moved and tears spring back to my eyes.

«Everything okay?» Ludovica asks.

«Yes» I gulp down a long swig of wine, «it's just sometimes I can't stop thinking about Massimo and what happened.»

«You're really sensitive» she says, stroking my hand. My erection is so instant I risk a stroke. «You both are, it's clear you're related. You could be brothers, you look so alike.»

Cue the coughing fit.

Finally the buzzer cuts through the atmosphere in this goddamn sanatorium. Supplies have arrived.

Fulvio had ordered appetizers, cold cuts, olives, ravioli, minestrone, buridda, veal with tuna sauce, fried anchovies, and an indefinite amount of that stinking crap young people insist on calling sushi, complete with a collection of tiny bottles of assorted soy sauces, all in triple portions. Considering Ludovica, at best, might manage a portion of sushi on her own – not that I know how big a portion is – there should still be enough food for a week.

We might even pull it off, since we're in chemistry, but wouldn't that give us away? I mean, with Ludovica. Won't she notice something's off if we start eating like Bud Spencer and Terence Hill?

«Relax» hits me straight at the base of my hypothalamus, «she's never smoked a joint in her life, she has no idea what being in chemistry means. By the way, you've got some pre-rolled stashed somewhere, right?»

«Of course» I reply by the same channel, «in the bathroom, half a joint to finish on the windowsill outside, two or three in the medicine cabinet inside the Tachipirina 1000 box, one on the bedroom balcony behind the half-dead geranium, and two more on the kitchen balcony inside the water meter cabinet.»

«I'll just take a quick trip to the bathroom» Fulvio says.

«There are also ten half-liter Tennent's in the fridge» I shoot straight into his cerebral cortex.

«Shit, Tennent's» he says, «can you toss me one from the kitchen window?»

«Yeah, but if you don't catch it midair from the fourth floor, we might kill someone.»

«Fuck it» comes straight into my medial longitudinal fissure, «a Tennent's never killed anyone.»

And so: while Ludovica offers to plate the provisions, I actually find myself tossing a Tennent's can off the kitchen balcony toward the bathroom window, where Fulvio's ninja reflexes manage to snatch it midair. The fact that he really catches it amazes me more than our cannabinoid telepathic system of communication. I mean, maybe there isn't even communication, maybe we just think the same way, because right now, both of us, in a situation as extreme as this, in the presence of what seems to be simply and genuinely a good girl, a species we've never had much to do with, all we want is to wreck ourselves as much as possible. Because we really can't believe, or worse, accept, that we've dumbled ourselves down this far over a piece of pussy.

Five minutes later we all gather in the dining room.

Fulvio has downed half a liter of that crap in one go and torched one of the hidden joints in three or four lungfuls. I've finished the half I'd started on the balcony, and when we finally sit down at the table I feel like I'm at someone else's house. Ludovica's even set the table, where the hell did she find a tablecloth, did she bring it from home?

As I figured, Ludovica dives into the sushi and sauces, while Fulvio and I start with olives, sun-dried tomatoes, and the veal. The food, tasty and abundant, helps us steady ourselves a little, and in the end dinner turns out to be pleasant. Ludovica isn't the wooden pussy I first imagined, I should've trusted my friend more, and she's definitely not some naive virgin. She's an intelligent, educated girl. Her brain seems to work just fine; she simply has no experience whatsoever with substances of any kind, which is why our condition doesn't raise suspicion. She probably chalks up our weirdness and cognitive lapses to that half bottle of bubbles Fulvio and I are trying to sip slowly in front of her.

We talk about this and that, nothing serious, music, current events, the neighborhood. Turns out all three of us were born and raised in Sturla, and Ludovica presses a bit on the mutual acquaintances we should supposedly have. She's oblivious to the gap between us, not just in years, but socially. She grew up in Villa, the fanciest residential area of the neighborhood, while we were in the part that in the '70s was simply called the Bronx, but we don't point that out. Besides, Fulvio, heroin aside, with Volkswagen money has climbed higher than her now, class-wise. Even if he doesn't yet know the customs of his new rank.

«Fulvio told me you got fired today» she says, helping herself to another portion of raw fish, «and Carolina mentioned videos on her father's phone. But what exactly were you two up to?» she asks with a smile, clearly Fulvio has already given her a version of the story stripped of porn, or worse, child porn.

"Well, you see: Massimo and I were simply trying to survive the annihilating monotony of a wasted existence at work. Like two modern Robin Hoods we tried to take from the rich what they could spare without consequence, so we could get to the end of the day with the feeling, at least the feeling, of not having completely dumped our time and, consequently, our life, down the toilet. I don't know if I make myself clear..."

"Not really."

"Okay, we passed the time taking the piss out of the Umberto Ecos..."

"I still don't get it."

"The library patrons, we used to call them that" Fulvio cuts in.

"Yes, at first we called them Exhausting Users, then, with all due respect to the Alexandrian original, we baptized them Umberto Eco, given their cultural pretensions."

"And you made videos."

"Yes, well, we filmed the mockeries... We have a collection, or rather Massimo had them on what turned out not to even be his phone."

"Like what?! Come on, tell me more."

"Didn't your friend show them to you?"

"No, well... they had to return the phone and the computer to the library."

"The computer?!"

"Yes, the library laptop."

Christ, I've never had a library computer, you piece of shit, and you never told me, huh?! Christ, I'm not exactly happy you never got up from that damn lounge, but I'm warning you, we're very close. Very close.

"Yes, of course," I swallow, "the laptop."

"But Carolina, did anyone see it, you were selling the library books, isn't that fraud?"

"No, well... that completely undermines our work. Our mockeries were works of art, something closer to Michelangelo's Pietà than simple theft, let me go to the bathroom for a second and I'll tell you the latest one quickly."

"Pass through the kitchen and put a Tennent's in the cistern for me to chill, I don't think I still have the reflexes to catch another one midair" lights up for me like a neon sign on the parietal lobe.

"Christ, my flush is recessed into the wall, do I have to unbrick it? I'll put it in the toilet," I reply via the pineal gland.

"Okay, but at least put it in a waterproof bag or something, and flush first, please."

"Did you really need to specify that?!"

I go through the kitchen, grab a Tennent's can, but I have no bags, only ice bags. So I opt for a condom, which must be expired by years. But before pulling the flush I smoke another half-joint at the window and brush my teeth for the hundredth time today.

By now Ludovica must think I'm an old fart with a busted prostate. Old I am, obviously, but I still pee in an arc two meters away.

Masturbation has its benefits and if the prostate really benefits, well, mine is like a twenty-year-old's.

"Back to us" I say once back on planet Earth, or at least in its gravitational orbit, "just a few days ago this sweaty Umberto Eco shows up..." and I tell her, point by point, the whole procedure. Me taking the book, waking Massimo – dear departed – the hole punch, muriatic acid and the whole scene. I even show her the secret move with which I turn the book toward the user with my index fingers. Up to the one hundred and fifty euros we nicked from him. Although in the end Massimo, poor thing, only got thirty. I mean, I really shouldn't tell her this, but all the stuff I've taken tonight is having the effect of truth serum on me.

"So" she says with a naughty smile, "you even screwed over your colleague!"

"No, you shouldn't see it as screwing him over, I was teaching him everything, from one point of view. Massimo wasn't like me, he was more... more... I don't know how to say it..."

"More pure?"

"Yes, well... more pure, more dumb, that kind of thing. He filmed and I did the big talk; one day I was supposed to pass him the baton. But..." he nods. "You and your friend, Carolina, you two are very different, no?"

"We're like yin and yang, I know, but we've known each other forever, since kindergarten, and I love her to bits. She's more pragmatic, she knows what she wants and doesn't have scruples about getting it, in fact..."

"Two million."

"Yeah, two million."

"She signed then?"

"As soon as her father passed."

"Pragmatic!"

"That's what I said" she smiles.

"I, on the other hand, could never pursue my goal with her tenacity, with her courage. You know, right? It must really be a crazy environment where she'll soon take her first steps. No wonder her father didn't agree..."

"And her mother, instead?"

"Oh, well... her mother is a bit peculiar, you know. She never seemed bothered by her daughter's new career. I never understood whether it's a money thing – two million as a first contract is no small sum - or a question of social revenge. She's not an easy woman to read, her mother. In some ways she seems very superficial, sometimes a bit spacey, out of touch with reality, but I think that actually she interprets reality on a deeper level than we do, or maybe simply differently. I think she's a very capable person, emotionally speaking, less so at relating to others. Her social interface, let's say, could use an upgrade."

"Or maybe she's just an opportunistic bitch" Fulvio pipes up, and I understand they've probably already argued this one at length.

"Or maybe she's just an opportunistic bitch" confirms Ludovica.

"Okay, I'm confused, which one is it?"

"The problem" says Fulvio, "is that Ludovica is basically a good person, so..."

"She assumes everyone is like her and, when reality doesn't match that, she looks for the reasons."

"The same old story."

"We should know what your late colleague thought about his wife. Did he ever tell you anything?"

"No way, nothing at all. I mean, I knew he was married and had kids, but until a few days ago I didn't even know their names."

"That's strange, very strange" Fulvio blurts, making odd faces.

"Well, not so much, to be honest, you know at work it's not like..."

"No, not that" he continues making strange grimaces, "Christ, I can't feel my lips anymore, fuck" he blurts with a hint of marbles, "what the hell is happening to me?"

Ludovica instantly switches into nurse mode.

"Stop making faces, relax. Lie down, let me see..."

"Christ, I really can't feel anything."

"First stop cursing and let's try to reason," she lays him on the couch, "you didn't touch the sushi and you didn't eat peanuts or anything like that..."

"Eh?!" I say.

"She's a PhD in industrial chemistry, let her do her thing," Fulvio snaps, now in full paranoia.

A PhD in industrial chemistry and she doesn't even smoke a joint. It's true that those with bread don't have teeth.

What a waste of knowledge.

"Are you allergic to something?" Fulvio shakes his head left and right, increasingly worried. "Better go to the ER to get checked. Maybe a spider or a tick bit you."

"Hey, I don't have ticks in the house. At least I hope not."

"Yes, but it could be an allergic reaction, we should hurry... Sorry, Walter if..."

"Don't worry, I'd come with you but they only let one person in after Covid, let's exchange numbers so you can update me."

"Sure Walter, I'll call you later. We'll go soon, my car is downstairs..."

Fulvio wants to kill me for that classy move, but he's too paranoid – those joints I gave him were almost pure – and can't even focus on the fact that at the ER his cover might blow. His medical file, between overdoses, attempted suicide and toxicology reports after numerous arrests, must be the size of War and Peace. As for me, I'm not worried. Not because I'm really a bad person, but because I caught on pretty quickly what happened, and making it up would have only ruined this quick evacuation that gives me back the chance to drink and smoke at home and gives me leftovers to get by a week.

What I'd really like to know, once I've put the food in the fridge and finished this bottle of bubbles that was about to hit its expiry on my table and finally lit a joint without sneaking like at school, is where the hell he could have thrown the empty beer cans that I can't find anywhere in the bathroom.

When the alarm screams its disapproval from the phone at the foot of the bed I'm still high as a kite. I stagger into the bathroom cursing, trying to make myself presentable for the day, smiling now and then at the thought of the prank I'd unwittingly played on my cousin. I would never have believed that a guy capable of getting high in the course of a slow elevator ride could worry so much about a bit of numbness on his lips caused by the lidocaine from an old condom dissolved by condensation on a beer can.

Him too, damn, ok, he must've had the monkey on his back, but I would have at least rinsed the can after pulling it out of the loo. Okay, given how we were yesterday, that might be too sophisticated a line of thought, I'll admit, but hygiene basics are basics. It's also true that that condom, even if long expired, must've been one of those late '90s Durex delay ones, the kind that allowed hours of intercourse without the help of those puff-colored pharmaceutical gimmicks that are all the rage now. That white paste at the tip could turn any cock into a lifeless chunk of meat. Okay, the numbness that scared Fulvio yesterday probably wasn't limited to his lips, but more widespread, considering how much of that vile poison he must've swallowed. Will he be okay though?

And the condom, damn, the condom? He wouldn't have flushed it down the toilet, would he?!

After breakfast I send Ludovica a message, like kids do now, no voice note, mind you, just a text. Something like: «Hi Ludovica, it's Walter» I know I don't need to say it, but I can't imply it as if it were obvious, «I wanted news about

Fulvio. All good, has he recovered? What did they tell you at the ER?»

The blue ticks light up almost instantly. And a moment later a voice message arrives.

«Hi Walter» she whispers, as if afraid to wake someone, «sorry I didn't text yesterday. We ran off like jerks because Fulvio apparently had trouble swallowing and was breathing badly, but once we got to the ER he started to feel better and in the end he didn't even want to be examined» and I believe it, «you know what a stubborn idiot he is, right? You know him better than I do. So, to keep an eye on him I had to stay at his place. He's fine now though, he's asleep.»

I can't believe my ears, I listen to the message twice. He took her home last night, thanks to me. He managed to do what not even six thousand euros worth of technological crap had gotten him, unbelievable.

I light a half-joint left in an ashtray and, after the hit, try to see if my telepathic powers work at a distance.

«You bastard piece of shit, did you score with her last night, did you get laid?» I send mentally.

No answer.

«Wake up, asshole, tell me, what did you do last night, you fucked her, right? You fucked her!»

Nothing, we're too far apart.

Then, suddenly, an idea: I take the phone, tap the message recording icon and without saying a word I think intensely: «Wake up, you smug face, what the hell did you do last night? How are you?»

«You sent an empty message, Walter» Ludovica replies promptly, while in my parietal lobe my cousin's muffled voice echoes: «The best night of my life, little onion. Heroin aside, of course. Now stop harassing me, I just went to bed...»

Fuck off... The instinct is to throw the phone against the wall. He slept with her after making her sniff that for more than a week without giving it to her, then I pull a little prank – albeit entirely unintentional, which makes it even funnier – and he still manages to turn it to his advantage?

Okay, he's Fulvio. He's my cousin, all that you want. But what the hell is with some people, like they've got a horseshoe stuck up their ass?! Or does everything always go their way just because they're stuffed like Sicilian cannoli?

And not with ricotta.

«I pressed a key by mistake» I write, «tell him we'll talk tonight then, now I'm off to work. Hugs.»

«Work?!» she replies, this time in text.

Goddammit, I'd forgotten.

I'd forgotten I might be the only person in the world who got fired at a damned funeral.

The only one.

Well, at least now I have all the time to tear this damn bathroom apart to find where the hell he hid the Tennent's cans.

By now it's a matter of principle.

## 22

Nothing, I doesn't exactly live in a castle and the bathroom is a fairly normal, if not small, size, and after taking it apart with painstaking patience I have to conclude that the bastard must really have thrown two beer cans, albeit empty, out of a fourth-floor window in a pretty working-class neighborhood. OK, no one knocked on my door, so the crime must've gone unreported by now, however it still seems odd. Even coming from someone who until recently shot heroin. And who, alas, I'm sure will go back to it, because a woman, even if young, attractive, and firm like Ludovica, is never the solution, quite the opposite.

Usually she's the cause!

Christ, I feel so philosophical this morning, maybe it's the lack of steady work, no salary, the morning joint, or the mess left from last night, but I feel especially bohemian today.

I finish the joint and even the leftover of a beer can that, in a flash of genius yesterday, I put in the fridge before passing out, then I get ready to go out. This decadent arty mood I'm soaking in nudges me toward a black Armani that's been resting in the wardrobe so long I can't even remember if it's real or fake. Yes, there was a moment in my life, however brief, when I really believed in the logo's miracles.

Look at me talk big words this morning. If I'd known that smoking right after waking made you smarter I'd be the director of that damned library now, no, more: I'd be a deputy, a senator, a minister, president of the republic.

The Pope...

I even dig out a black shirt to match the Armani and a skinny wool tie, Yves Saint Laurent, a pair of black Church's

and a black Borsalino. The latter originals, because extremities don't let themselves be fooled by knockoffs like the rest of the body. As far as I know there aren't even fake English shoes and hats. Only awful shoes and ridiculous hats.

I glance at myself in the mirror a moment before leaving and damn, I must admit, I look... I look...

I really look like a fucking killer.

OK, back to the bathroom for a moment, there should be a little joint left in the box of Tachipirina 1000. I light it and inhale deeply, waiting for the hit.

I prefer to shock myself rather than change again.

Halfway through the joint I look in the mirror, I'm still far from comfortable in this outfit. So I go to the kitchen and – why not – decide to commit the ultimate gesture.

I'm decadent today, I don't have to justify it.

I open a can of that crap my cousin drinks, down it while finishing the joint, and once both are done, in the mirror appears a fucking handsome animal, splendidly dressed and a little wobbly on his feet.

Now I understand why all ex-addicts drink that crap. It's not beer, it's a beauty mask.

Once on the street, having no destination and not even the capacity to devote a single rational thought to one, I head downhill.

In San Fruttuoso I allow myself a long coffee in a big cup, for which a cute barista charges me one euro eighty. I'm so broke I pay without thinking of adding her lock to the list of locks I'll one day fill with chewing gum. Only on the doorstep do I realize such a price deserves a heated dialectical argument or at least a loud "fuck off", but I'm distracted by a funeral carriage slowing to stop in front of the church in Piazza Martinez.

I rush out, approach, and watch the crowd waiting for the coffin. Adults, an expensive private funeral service, no kids in sight and a huge number of middle-aged women.

I've never done this, but there's always a first time, right?

I just need to figure out who the protagonist is, catch their name, and the game's on.

At first I keep slightly off to the side of the piazza crowd, though technically I'm in the playing area. I study the situation and the subgroups that form as the coffin is carried toward the altar.

On the right are the work colleagues, easily recognizable by their forced sad faces, almost angry, and by the absence of tears: you don't cry for colleagues, at most, if they were bearable, you say goodbye. The closest relatives are the most grieving and surrounded by friends and by the other attendees: those who more than anyone want to be seen to underline that they were there, even though they'd gladly give a kidney to avoid such a hassle. Friends are the smallest group because they always split into two subgroups: today's friends and the friends from back in the day. It's very rare the cases in which the two groups overlap and when it happens my jealousy meter dangerously tips into the red zone. The problem is that the friend groups are made up mostly of women, and that changes things considerably. To avoid being noticed I swipe my debit card and, for more than the price of that damned coffee a few minutes ago, I light a small electric candle. Then I act like nothing's happening and leave the playing field, trying not to fix my gaze on any of the participants. I am the invisible man, I think, trying not to be seen by the main mourner.

When the coffin holds a woman, like in this case, sneaking into the funeral requires meticulous preparation. The danger of being taken for the deceased's little lover by the husband

and getting clubbed is very real, even after a life of infidelities and lies. Because after giving a miserable, unhappy life to his spouse, the philanderer finally has the chance to redeem himself in front of all her friends and relatives. Which is the same idea for which pedophiles and those who use violence against women are persecuted even in prison by other inmates. Aware of not having been good fathers nor great partners, once locked up, they cannot miss the chance to redeem themselves by the means available. Not that anyone minds a pedophile falling out a window or expertly suiciding, to be clear, but there is always the risk of finding yourself truly in the wrong place and then...

OK, I really shouldn't have drunk half a liter of that filth, too much philosophy this morning.

The problem is that the funeral was giving me a purpose and now I don't even know what to do in the morning in San Fruttuoso, without a job, and already out almost four euros for no reason.

I could take a walk in the park to watch those poor dopes bent over picking up their dogs' droppings, or stroll through the Terralba market to slowly contemplate the fruit and vegetable stalls and drive the greengrocers mad by ignoring them as they try to hook me, but I'm not in the mood to tell anyone to fuck off today.

I'm as depressed as they are.

I want to remember why, with all the weed I have at home, this morning I decided to get dressed up and go out. What pushed me out of the house today: habit?

Where did I think I could go, dressed like this, in the morning? If it were at least late afternoon, aperitif time, then yes, I could stop in some bar, have a few drinks, go out for the evening.

But now, where could I go now?

I look around and the only option, though I just escaped from it, is really the Mass.

The Mass or...

Sure, the thought that just passed through my head really seems like a great idea, besides no one can stop me, and revenge is a dish best eaten at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

I'm excited, I'd never have thought I'd find a purpose so quickly. Of course I can't move straight away, though I'm itching there will be technical times, I will have to wait, be wise, let's say, like that idiot on the riverbank. Well, not that much, but at least wait for things to reorganize a bit, a matter of a few days, I think. Just enough time to enjoy a sabbatical week with my cousin's weed. Then I can really go back to my old workplace, but as a patron, to stir the stagnant waters of the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition a bit.

Sure, a bit of sex wouldn't be bad either, but at my age flirting is dangerous. It does not work like when we were young and maybe a girl who liked the article without many problems could be found, at over fifty having sex is easy, yes, but those who deign to give it to you then, if they see you're not a total moron or a dangerous creep, they stick to you like limpets on a rock. They've had so many shitty experiences by now that a reasonably normal man – If that means anything – they won't let him go.

No, at my age it's better to pay professionals. But here they'll dance another two euros for the bus ticket and without a steady salary I must start making cuts.

Austerity Mode On.

Fuck.

I don't know exactly how much time has passed, maybe a few days, maybe a month. With almost an ounce of weed at home it's hard to keep track of time. What I do know for sure is that Fulvio hasn't shown up anymore. More than once I was this close to sending a message to Ludovica, the only one whose number I have, but class stopped me even with the active ingredient helping. Instead I've started seeing Carolina online, half-naked, in dozens of ads. Massimo's ashes probably haven't even been scattered yet, but his daughter's half-naked photos sure have.

Better that way, colleague. A guy from Lombardy would probably have rejoiced at such success, but a Calabrian?! Come on, you'd have been dead anyway and maybe Carolina would feel guilty. Not that she wouldn't, mind you, but by going to hell first you gave her a pretty convenient benefit of the doubt.

I just hope those Catholic bullshit things like soul and paradise don't exist because, my old man, I'm horny and tonight I plan to dedicate a glorious jerk to your daughter.

No youporn or sites like that. Tonight I feel the need to go back to basics. A proper handjob, Postal Market style, nothing beats it to take me back in time a little. And I'd like a bit of privacy, so if you're really up there getting on with my business, well... turn your head the other way for a moment.

I won't take long.

Ruing the idyll with my ex-colleague's daughter is the doorbell. A voice tells me it's the postman, I think, because he only announces: «Mail in the box, thanks» without specifying whether I'm the addressee or not. He probably rang a

bunch of apartments to get people to open quickly, but since I've already lost concentration I go down to the ground floor. Heaven forbid a lightning-fast severance cheque – after twenty years of honorable service, that is after twenty tiring years spent dodging work and the Umberto Ecos – might give me a breath of oxygen.

Even if taxed twenty-six percent.

I can't believe my eyes: in my mailbox rests a white envelope with mourning stripes. I'm so excited I can barely aim the keyhole and the keys drop from my hands a couple of times.

I study the envelope as I run up the stairs two at a time to get home and enjoy its contents as soon as possible. I've never received anything like this, they've always informed me of passings and services with simple phone calls, never with something so formal.

Sitting on the couch I get a slight panic attack: do I need to rent a Porsche? Damn, if so I'm really in trouble.

The flap isn't glued, it's just tucked in, the card inside looks like a stock of at least three hundred grams, watermark, and a particular shade of white: sepia, I guess it's called, or bone white, or something like that. I allow myself a touch of suspense, rolling a joint in a hurry, then after a couple of long drags I start pulling the card out slowly with the classic moves of a poker player: «With this we regret to inform you that Fulvio and Ludovica...»

Fulvio and Ludovica, what the hell is going on?

I drop the pretense of class and pull out the whole card.

«With this we regret to inform you that Fulvio and Ludovica will be married on date... at the offices of the Municipality of Genoa in via... afterwards they will greet relatives and close friends at the restaurant...» Then below, handwritten: «I got you, huh, you slut! I should've told you in person

but I know how you'd have taken it so I preferred to piss you off a bit. Please, no excuses... Also because you should be my witness...»

Eh no, fuck, what the hell is he saying?!

Then, as if he'd heard me snap: «... the alternative was asking the Executioner, so don't you dare mess with me.»

Christ almighty, I don't think I can handle something like this, I was almost convinced I was about to be part of something important and instead it's just some pathetic wedding. At City Hall, thank god at least that, but a wedding? That's not the kind of event that tickles me, Fulvio's of all people?!

I mean, you quit shooting up five minutes ago and now what, you want to start a family?! Ok, you must have knocked her up, no doubt about it, it happens when you haven't fucked in years – because you can't even get it up with all that shit in your veins – then you find a girl who spreads for you when you're tipsy and of course you can't pull out when it counts, not to mention that the right time would've been exactly the instant after you shoved it in, and so what do you do: since you didn't pull out, now you want to pull me and a couple other losers into your fucking party? Ok, sure, free food and usually you drink like a sponge, but I can just drink at home, alone, without having to sit through the pantomime of two assholes swearing eternal love only to find out eternity is really fucking short.

Trust me, I've been there, fuck.

Ok, with Fulvio there might be some entertainment value, who knows, maybe he'll shoot up before exchanging the rings or pawn them off to score... Well, no... with the Volkswagen money it's unlikely he'd pawn the rings, but a hit to take the edge off the wedding, now that would make sense...

But that doesn't mean I'll be the one holding his arm.

If they want to get married, no problem, but they shouldn't shove it down everyone else's throat. That should be a universal law, like the thermodynamics stuff.

Once I finish the joint I have an epiphany: I slip the invitation back into the envelope and the envelope into the mailbox along with some junk flyers I grabbed in the lobby, making sure it disappears under the pile of crap.

I've already forgotten the wedding date anyway, tomorrow I'll forget the wedding altogether and that's that. Unless Fulvio, in the end, comes to talk to me about it in person.

In that case I'll have to say something.

I don't know how, but the message should be clear enough: fuck off!

And then, being best man, no less. Ok, so he's got no friends, but fuck, the best man has to bleed for the gift. He better not even try. If he thinks I'll get off this couch to go crawling into some shitty store for his pretty face, well... he's dead wrong. With all the money that fell into his lap he's still not satisfied?

Does he want to trick me?

He really wants to bend me over, with two clamps on my nipples, clothespins on my balls, a plastic ball in my mouth, and a twenty-centimeter dildo up my ass?

Well, now I'm turned on.

Where the fuck is Carolina's picture?

I vegetated at home for a week, smoking and posting fake pics of myself in Amsterdam and Prague. To avoid getting busted right away by my cousin, I Photoshopped myself into places you can reach in under a two-hour flight, sealed all the shutters tight, stocked up on groceries for at least a month – though the munchies stash ran out way sooner than planned – and made a strict rule: ignore the door buzzer no matter what. Until, in a moment of clarity, I realized Fulvio has the keys to my apartment.

Christ almighty, of all things, did I really have to give him the keys?

That's it, cover's blown, and I have no clue if the wedding date has already passed. Doubt it, though people don't usually tie the knot a week after mailing out invitations. In a rush, I scatter clothes and duffel bags around the entryway, making it look like I've just come back from a trip, forcing myself to live in even more chaos. That way, if Fulvio pops in unannounced, I can pretend I just got back.

But in the end, it's just a text that forces me to roll up the blinds: Auntie was coming home from Barbados, considerably richer than when she left, but in a plastic bag, in the cargo hold of a commercial flight.

«What the hell happened?» I ask Fulvio outside the church on the day of the funeral.

«Mom was at the Hilton's slot machines, like she often did in the evenings. And, well... she hit a jackpot worth a million eight hundred thousand dollars and didn't survive the excitement. I mean, it can't have been about the money, I guess, though in the moment she probably didn't realize that a local

dollar is worth half an euro, so the sum isn't exactly massive compared to what Volkswagen paid her...» Christ, I'm about to faint with jealousy. «...but you know, at eighty-four they really shouldn't let you near slot machines. An adrenaline rush like that, just for the thrill of winning, I repeat, not for the money, blows up your heart and your arteries at that age. Nothing to be done, they just burst.

That's why her lawyers, well, now *my* lawyers, told me to sue the Hilton. They want to take them to court, a matter of principle, they said.»

«Wait, let me get this straight. Auntie won eight hundred grand and your lawyers want to sue the Hilton?»

«Yeah, it sounded weird to me at first too. But if you remove the money from the equation it makes more sense, you see? The Hilton let an elderly lady gamble at the slots without asking for, I don't know, a health certificate, a signed waiver, something... So they're responsible for a customer's death and because of that...»

«They should cough up a ton of cash.»

«Exactly. Mom would love knowing she managed to bust the bank twice.»

«Yeah, but wasn't I supposed to take the money *out* of the equation?»

«Only for part of the reasoning...»

«By the way, what a jerk I am, I still haven't offered my condolences. I'm really sorry about your mom, I mean it.»

«Thanks, Walter. I know you cared about her.»

Well, let's not go overboard. Okay, I didn't rent a Porsche or dress up too fancy, but that's only because around my cousin I'd feel uncomfortable doing it. Other than that, relatives are all the same.

Even Fulvio, come to think of it, is starting to give me hives. First the payout from his father's accident, now his

mom who, in dying, still made sure to leave him a fat severance package, just in case, hypothetically, her darling boy had already shot into his veins the countless millions Volkswagen handed him.

I'm sick of the luck some people get, while my life just keeps dodging me. I'm drifting out here like a fucking migrant clinging to the wreck of his boat, completely ignored by the yachts blasting music with topless babes onboard. Alone, like a goddamn submarine in a lake. And now this funeral even ruins my week of self-imposed house arrest, because now it'll be way harder to pretend I forgot all about that fucking wedding everyone's clearly already buzzing about.

«By the way» says Fulvio, «I saw you were in Amsterdam, did you finish the weed?»

I don't know if he's taking the piss or not, the bastard.

«Almost» even though it's not true, I say it just hoping he'll bring me some more. At least that, with all the money he has!

«Don't worry about the weed, I'll sort that...» Great, I think. «We should meet up one of these nights anyway, I haven't asked you properly yet, the other time I was a bit shaken and it seemed like a good idea to piss on you with the mourning card, but I'd really like you to be my best man at the wedding. My best friend: the one who should take care of my family, well for now only Ludovica, if something should ever happen to me...» Christ, is that what best men are? This whole thing takes on a different meaning, but why has nobody ever explained all this shit to me? «Of course it's a big ask to ask someone that, I know...» Relax, I think, I'd fuck Ludovica even if you weren't dead at all, no offence cousin. «That's why best men are usually your best friends, and I... well, I only have you.»

«Thank you Fulvio» I almost shit myself trying to moisten my eyes to fake a little emotion, «but I don't know anything about this crap... I mean, do I need a course? What does a best man have to do?»

«Don't worry, I'm not asking you to go buy the rings or get me presents, we're a bit beyond that crap, I hope» I breathe a sigh of relief, «you just need to look good, make sure I'm not late for my wedding, make sure I don't use drugs beforehand, maybe» there's the catch, «and then, once at the reception, no more rules. Think you can do that for me?»

«Sure» I let it slip, like a fucking rookie, I don't know why, but in the end I somehow have to love this bastard.

«Will Carolina be there too?»

«Of course, she's Ludovica's witness.»

Ok, this is starting to get oddly interesting.

«Don't worry about anything» I say, straightening my shoulders, while something else is involuntarily straightening as well, «I'll keep an eye on you. Just remind me the date.»

«Well, we'll see each other a lot before and we'll talk it through properly, there's almost six months to go.»

I nod, with my best poker face, six months, fuck?! But I'm horny now.

Luckily the hearse then arrives to deflate me and behind it all those fucking mourners.

I put on a sad face and join, just in case Carolina is in the crowd.

So, I enter the church and I'm horny again.

A bit, though, I feel sorry for my aunt. I don't have many memories of her, we didn't see much of each other from adolescence on, practically never, but when I was little she was the only one who stood up to my mother. I remember that one day she insisted I get braces put on despite my com-

plaints, my mother would have cheerfully skipped it not so much to save money as to avoid hearing me cry. If it hadn't been for my aunt, now I'd have the same Tetris game in my mouth that accompanied me until almost the end of middle school.

Same with blackheads, I remember one day my aunt picked me up and laid me across her knees almost violently, shouting that I had blackheads in my ears the size of apricots and that I couldn't go around like that. Then, with a hairpin, she tortured me making me a lot of pain. I burst into tears, of course, but when she showed me what was stuck to the hairpin I gritted my teeth and let her do it.

From that day on I started to pop anything that tried to thrive on my forehead, temples and nose. In my ears, luckily, nothing like that appeared again.

So I understood that my mother didn't care about my appearance, she only needed me to have reasonably clean underwear on so as not to look bad in case I had to be hospitalized after some accident.

At Montessori she pissed in the ass, my mother.

Nevertheless, and I only realize this now, it wasn't me who took refuge in heroin, despite my mother's indifference toward me, but Fulvio who, if you ask me, received instead the most loving – albeit at times violent – attentions.

Life's strange.

I almost managed to get rid of the erection with this walk along the avenue of the sunset when Carla, already seated in the nave, with a gesture signals me to sit next to her. We greet affectionately, hug, and she gives me a kiss on the cheek, with a corner of her lip, and plants her breast – hard as marble, clearly fake – into my ribs.

«Take it easy» I whisper, lowering the tone as if speaking to an old friend, I don't give a damn about class anymore, «I'm fucking horny this morning.»

«Tell me about it» she says, naturally, as if I'd spoken about the weather, «these days I'm so wet I leave a trail like snails, listen...» She takes my wrist and tries to pull my hand under her skirt.

«Come on» I say, «everyone can see us here.»

«They're all relatives, they know I like the article.»

I nod.

«How about a jump to my place after the service, we could have a drink, a joint and...»

«Christ, since we were kids I've been dying to fuck you» she whispers, because the priest is taking his place at the altar, «I would have had you, and you only come out now?!»

I don't think I've ever been this hard, her lines turn me on, I just hope I don't cum in my pants like a kid. «Well, better late than never, no?» I throw it out, even though I'd eat my balls. Is it possible I never noticed anything?

«I don't know, if right now I were to give it to you the way I've always imagined, afterward you'd probably need a nice round of antibiotics... I'm on treatment these days, I've got a little problem down there» and she points at her skirt.

«Damn» I blurt, «I hope it's nothing serious» I say, while inside I'm swearing like a Tuscan who just found his woman in bed with his best friend on his wedding day.

«Eh...» she goes, slightly rotating her palms side to side in the classic so-so gesture. «Resistant bacteria, something like that, gynecologists have a language all their own, and then mine... you know, with the fact that he and I used to fuck before every check-up, now he's kind of pissed at me. He's bleeding me dry just to make me pay.»

«You should have fucked after the check-up.»

«Yeah, well... What a discovery!»

The priest raises his arms to the sky and invites us to stand, the murmuring quickly dies down and the homily begins, while the erection between my legs doesn't seem to give in. My cousin is pissed off at the prolonged impossibility of getting a good fuck, so she keeps teasing me, rubbing against me every which way or directly grabbing my crotch. More than once, while sitting, she tries to steer my hand between her legs, since that must be the only way she can get herself an orgasm at the moment, and if it were up to me I'd gladly oblige, of course, but in church, in the middle of a funeral, I just can't get that comfortable.

Several times, as quietly as possible, I suggest going outside.

I'm not scared of super bacteria, I've got condoms at home that survived all the way from middle school, screw viruses. And we could always stop at the pharmacy, but between an Our Father and a Hail Mary I'm starting to gather that penetration is off the table because of the inflammation. If I shoved it in, basically, she'd scream louder than any man could ever want.

But from pain.

«For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord» booms the priest with rave-party amplification, «you alone are the Most High: Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit: in the glory of God the Father... Let us pray...»

Christ almighty, did you really need to hammer it in, I've been praying for half an hour like a fucking paraplegic at Lourdes...

I'm praying that my cousin puts her hand on her conscience, opens her heart to charity, surrenders to empathy...

And at least gives me a blowjob.

Forever and ever.

Amen.

Nothing, charity is no longer in fashion. I find myself at home with an ache in my testicles that truly has something Proustian about it, like when Oriana and I, my fourteen-year-old girlfriend – when I was seventeen – would wear out our tongues in the public park. But only that, because there was no question of doing anything else, at least until we broke up and she, as happens in all company, got together with a friend of mine and, of course, started giving it to him like there was no tomorrow. And she was fourteen years and five months old. Luckily, all I have to do is turn on the computer, and Carolina, half-naked, appears practically everywhere, and lately, she's more relaxing with her erotic peek-a-boo than with some anonymous slut on the usual websites. I must say that knowing her personally also helps a little. And just before I come, for a handful of seconds, I can't wait to be at Fulvio's wedding. Afterwards, post-coital depression sets in relentlessly, and the conviction that I shouldn't give in to an event like this one, to which I'm even asked to witness it, re-surfaces. It depresses me to think of being able to witness other people's displays of happiness.

Even if they're fleeting.

## 26

I spend the morning at the INPS offices to apply for unemployment: code name NASpI, and it's a metaphysical experience, on the verge of the supernatural.

To begin with I get to Piazza della Vittoria at ten, take a ticket and find I've got about seventy people ahead of me. Ok, no problem, I think. I lock myself in the bathroom for a moment and roll a generous joint, then I study the mechanics of the misery the users are victims of. I've worked with the public and I know how these modern extermination camps operate. So as soon as the display announces the reservation number without provoking any old geezer's springboard jump, I rush to the indicated counter and toss the ticket away, crumpling it without showing it to the clerk.

Seventy people ahead, waiting time: the ten minutes of the joint.

At this point, aided by the weed, I try to keep calm in front of a civil servant who – I know perfectly well – would rather be sodomised than give me, right away, the information and documents I need.

I muster a certain amount of irony, put on a brave face, then, bluntly, make him understand I have no intention of moving until the procedure is complete. I know the trade, he can't fob me off in two minutes with some bit of gobbledygook just to show his boss he served more users than all his colleagues.

I'm not moving even if he calls the police.

In fact, if he did call the cops, with all the weed in my pockets maybe I'd back off, but luckily the bastard doesn't know that.

So the fight begins: a sort of arm-wrestle where the clerk tries to rile me so he can call security, while I, with a marijuana-induced facial paralysis, keep smiling at him like an idiot, displaying politeness and steadiness.

A good twenty minutes pass before the bastard gives up. His colleagues are bouncing old people away on repeat and he's plummeting down the day's leaderboard.

Finally, when he realizes I'm not going to yield, in a neat five minutes he fills in all the paperwork necessary to give me the protocol number that will let me receive the unemployment cheque which, I discover only now, will be proportional, to a certain percentage, to the salary once received. In practice: the more you used to earn, the higher the benefit will be.

Ok, but this line of reasoning makes my hands itch with blood, shouldn't it be exactly the opposite?

The first cheque will be credited to me within a month, so once I'm out I have lunch with a couple of McDonald's burgers, two euros eighty, to try not to touch my dangerously anorexic bank account, that is: anorexic maybe isn't the right word because anorexics, when they can't stand up anymore, are hospitalised and people try to fatten them up a bit, whereas liquidity doesn't work like that, it evaporates and good-bye to the bucket.

I wanted to get a library card after INPS, but the whole proportional-amount story put me in a bad mood and I need calm to face the one who took my job and then, surely, that piece of shit who had the nerve to fire me at a funeral.

In fact, now that I think about it, I could borrow a couple of lawyers from Fulvio. If his legal eagles think they can sue a casino for having made an eighty-four-year-old woman win – and die – they shouldn't have much trouble destroying my ex-director and the State, his employer, for giving me the

boot at such an inopportune moment, while I was so vulnerable, causing me, obviously, a long series of traumas and idiosyncrasies solvable only after a psychoanalytic therapy longer and costlier than Woody Allen's. I must remember to mention it to him as soon as I see him, because now, although still upset, this seems like a really good idea. The only problem is that, as far as I know, no rich person, ever, has done anything in the interests of a poor person.

Never.

When people with economic power brag about wanting to help those who don't have it, it's only to pursue personal goals that, even if not obvious at first glance, will become crystal clear once someone find herself bent over at ninety degrees.

Ok, maybe Fulvio is different, maybe the sensitivity that once pushed him toward heroin – now that he's loaded with cash – could push him a little toward his neighbor. And his neighbor, no doubt: is me.

I've never asked anyone for favors in my life, more out of principle than anything else, because I'm just not able to, but this time I think I can make an exception.

Desperate times, desperate measures.

Fulvio takes a couple of joints to process my request. He'd come alone, probably to talk about his wedding, but I beat him to it. I have to think about how to pay the rent, not how to hand him the ring, and he seems to grasp the gravity of the problem too: either he lends me his lawyers or, sooner or later, he'll have to lend me money.

The first option might earn him something back, the second won't, so between diving into a black hole or a puddle of dirty water, I think the choice is pretty much set.

Only a millionaire junkie like him could wriggle out of the situation without committing financially.

«I've got an idea» he blurts out all of a sudden. «Your director may have seen me in passing at your colleague's funeral but he doesn't know who I am, right?»

«So what?!»

«I'll go talk to him, dressed to the nines, after downing a couple of Blues.»

«Blues?»

«Amfetamines, Abarth stuff, but chill, nothing like dope. I'll pop a couple just to loosen my tongue, then I'll show up in front of your ex-director with a leather briefcase, pretend to be your lawyer and threaten to sue him for the reasons you've just laid out. I'll bluff a million-dollar lawsuit that will directly involve the University and that will – regardless of the outcome – put the library in a bad light... the library of... where the hell did you work again?»

Oh great.

«At the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition at the University of Genoa.»

«Jesus, couldn't they pick a normal name?» he laughs.

«Listen, if you don't want to lend me one of your lawyers just say it, you don't have to jump straight into criminal fraud on my behalf, you do know that's a crime, right?!»

«Don't worry about me, cousin. I'm good at this, I stripped a Porsche in five minutes, I'll swallow your director whole without blinking. Besides, I can't lend you the lawyers, that's not how it works, they want a shitload of money, lots. I could lend them to you, but if the case didn't go well you'd have no way to pay me back. And I know it would eat you alive. Sure, I could give them to you as a gift – I've got plenty – but I know you'd never accept it because it would feel like you're stealing from my future heirs.»

What the fuck is this asshole even talking about, I think. Imagine a fucking junkie twisting me around, even if just

with words, sticking two fingers up my ass. And what a bunch of shitty concepts he's rattling off instead of just saying "forget it" straight up. Why the hell should I care about his future heirs, and wait, he's already thinking about kids? Shouldn't he still be thinking about dope, for Christ's sake? All those fucking movies about junkies I grew up with never made quitting look this easy, and the '80s, come on... they were dropping like flies, like asparagus stalks, they couldn't all have been spineless idiots. Ok, I get it's not my field, but if quitting is this simple, ten days locked in a room, how come they all dead?

«With all due respect» I say, grabbing the joint to calm down a bit, «I don't think this is a great idea. What the hell do you know about jurisprudence anyway? I mean, going to court and trying to win is one thing, bluffing is another...»

«That's where you're wrong. First of all, I know more about courts and procedures than a mid-career lawyer, and besides, most disputes get settled outside the courts, trust me. What have you got to lose? If that's what you want, I can get you your job back by tomorrow morning, consider it a gift. But then you and I need to take an evening to talk. I need some advice...»

«From me?!»

«Yeah, well... with the wedding coming up, there are a few things I'd like to talk over.»

«O...k...» I drag out, though I can't imagine what the hell he'd want to discuss with me about marriage.

The only thing I know about weddings is that they rarely last, and that – party aside, if there's an open bar – they're a massive pain in the ass.

It's the first of October and the alarm forces me to open my eyes. Fulvio pulled off a miracle and actually got me my job back at the Library of Philology, Linguistics, and Classical Tradition at the University of Genoa.

The director didn't fall for the threat of bad publicity, nor for the bluff about me leaking videos of his Umberto Eco, style rants online, hoping to monetize them somehow and throw the whole department into ridicule, but he turned out to be very sensitive to the preliminary hearing date that, coincidentally, happened to overlap with his vacation.

Luckily, the director has a degree in ancient literature and not in law, otherwise he'd have known he wasn't required to show up in person.

How Fulvio got his hands on that piece of information, unless it was pure coincidence, which, knowing him, wouldn't be strange at all, I honestly can't imagine.

But I'm certainly not losing sleep over it.

First thing, I get up and treat myself to a solid breakfast, the champion's kind – as Kurt would say – then I decide to teach the director a life lesson. I call my doctor and get myself a couple of weeks of sick leave. I roll a joint while waiting for the doctor to email me the certificate, forward it to the university office, finish the joint, and happily crawl back into bed.

Some people are like dogs, you have to show them right away who's in charge, no half measures, otherwise they'll try to steal food out of your bowl. And if until now I'd always played it shy and easygoing, for the sake of peace, since nobody interfered with the other's life, now that he has, now

that he's crossed the line, all he'll find ahead is a valley of tears. A fucking valley of tears.

Zero to the director, the game's played my way now.

The home visit – faster this time than Abebe Bikila – wakes me up at exactly eleven fifty-nine. At first it hadn't crossed my mind, but once the intercom jolts me awake, the whole routine comes flooding back into memory.

I leap out of bed with ninja agility, open the fridge, grab the first beer I see, unfortunately a can of my cousin's crap, crack it open, and then the door.

I greet the doctor on duty – an old acquaintance anyway – standing in my doorway in underwear with a half-liter can of Tennent's in hand. I have no desire, especially right after waking up, to chug this swill, but the script, somehow, demands it.

«Good morning, doctor» I say politely, raising my head, «how are you?»

«I'm fine» he replies, polite as always despite everything, «you?»

«Don't get me started, I'm really not well today» I sip, trying to mask the disgust. This stuff tastes like shit even at aperitivo time – after a couple of hits – let alone first thing in the morning. «I've got a hell of a cervical pain, you know, all the stress my library director has put me under, and we're probably going to court over it.» The doctor nods, silently. «This whole mess has caused me a load of psychological problems and, as a result, physical ones too. I have to go to the bathroom twenty times a day» I improvise, «and when it's not diarrhea, the cervical pain is killing me. I hope two weeks will be enough, but my GP isn't convinced at all. He thinks I might have something like post-traumatic stress disorder, that veteran thing, says this unfair dismissal, I don't know if you've heard, which happened in a very particular

context when I was extremely vulnerable, has seriously damaged my psychophysical balance. I really hope he's wrong, but according to my doctor I won't recover from such a trauma in less than six months to a year. For now he's advised me, when the cervical pain hits its peak, to try relaxing the muscles with exercise and with alcohol. Desperate times, desperate measures. You see what I mean...»

«This alcohol thing, Mr. Cattaneo» he says with his usual professionalism, though mixed with the kind of familiarity that comes from twenty years of check-ups, «is the biggest bullshit I've ever heard, professionally speaking, but finding you at home is all that matters to me. Beyond that, I wish you a good day.»

I raise the can in a mock toast, of course. And I make a mental note to buy some decent beer for next time. I don't want to be mistaken for one of those idiots who actually drink this crap.

I don't know how, but Fulvio behaved like a real lawyer and didn't make me reapply, he simply got the dismissal procedure annulled, which was probably already undermined by some procedural flaw. Maybe the director couldn't even act personally against a state employee, I don't know, the fact is my pay was properly credited and they'll just deduct a few days of vacation.

Now I'll dedicate myself to savage sick leave, just to restore the proper order of things; and if I discover that the director really overstepped, then the lawyers will come into play.

The real ones, though.

The problem with savage sick leave is boredom: a couple of days off are nice, a week is already demanding, and to keep going two weeks at a time, at least until the occupational doctor holds out or until you hit six months in a year (a

milestone I've always aimed for and never quite reached) , you have to be a true professional.

So far I used alcohol and light drugs to keep boredom at bay, but lately I've been thinking about something that, in one sense, I'm ashamed of, but in another intrigues me a lot because it could fill these long idle afternoons, sit extremely well with my other comforts, let me take the piss out of all kinds of people, and give free rein to my creativity.

I stall a few days, after all, Fulvio, after getting my job back, hasn't been in touch even though he wanted to talk to me about the wedding – miracles of pussy – so why not, I tell myself. I'm fifty-five, almost fifty-six, I can pull the ultimate stunt now. I can handle it, without fearing that it will deprive my life of something essential. I've read the books I had to read, more or less, at least the classics, even if it might not seem so, and Ulysses at least six or seven times when I was young and still had some ideals – Idiot that I was – I listened to all the music I could, so really, why not! Good books aren't written anymore anyway, supermarket trash and unreadable literary prizes, and music even less: only tone-deaf idiots singing in rhyme with kid microphones with batteries and auto-tuners, so at my age, what do I have to lose?

They even credited my salary I didn't expect to have anymore, so I really have no more excuses.

Fuck 'em all.

I go out and buy a PlayStation.

Like a perfect daft fifteen-year-old I lose track of time on Fortnite. At first, at my age, it's not easy to make sense of the game mechanics, I don't have the reflexes or the skills to beat the kids, but voice chat still gives me huge satisfactions. Then, little by little, confusing day with night and returning to reality only thanks to the visits from the occupational doctor, I start to beat the weaker players, and when it's time to

go back to work I can already boast a good number of wins. Kids are much more flexible than me for this kind of thing, but I have loads of free time to burn without distractions like school, family, homework... Sure, work comes back heavily into play now, but I plan to get more sick leave again tomorrow morning early.

Now I have the monkey too, just like Fulvio.

But in these last two weeks I haven't had any news from him. Not even a simple message from his fiancée. Better that way, maybe they're reconsidering this whole marriage bullshit.

No news, good news.

I, instead, waking up after a nap of less than four hours between matches, find myself reconsidering the sick-leave issue. I've been shut in at home too long and I'm curious to see how things evolved at the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition where I still, anyway, work.

Just time for a shower to make myself presentable and I'm out. The fresh air, which I'm no longer used to, slaps me and gives me a bit of color.

I dressed up, in a dark blue Brioni suit, branded Brioni, obviously fake, and a T-shirt that reads Keith Richards for President, his monochrome face, Adidas on my feet (real ones, unless the shop ripped me off), and a gray Borsalino with a dark blue band on my head. I know I'm too elegant to get my job back in the library, I realize that, but I did it just to piss off the director and his Oviessa suits.

God forbid a nice girl should take my ex-colleague's place. Someone had to be put in his spot. You can't shut the library down, how would all the Umberto Ecos survive?!

«Finally she's back with us, Cattaneo» a threatening voice behind me while I'm clocking in greets me.

«Director» I touch the brim of my hat to give myself a tone, «you've caused me a ton of problems, you know?» I try to put it back in place right away, «my lawyers, who will contact you soon, advised me to stay home until I'd fully recovered, PTSD or something like that, but me» I give myself a tone since a little crowd of staff and users has already gathered around us, attracted by tones not exactly in line with the atmosphere of a Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition, «you know... I'm too loyal to my duty and I'd never forgive myself for causing any user inconvenience. The library needs me...»

«Yeah, don't act too clever, Cattaneo. And let's not put on a scene here in the corridor, come up, I have to introduce you to your new colleague.»

New colleague?! I'm electrified, finally something's moving, let's hope it isn't some old sweaty cow who loves books.

Suddenly, beyond the counter at the far end of the main hall, I can barely make out a female presence. I can't see her features from this distance – we still have to go into the staff-only section, down the corridor that runs beside the hall to the offices, and then emerge behind the counter – but I can tell she has very short hair, an athletic build. I breathe a sigh of relief; I couldn't have stood a fat sweaty book-lover.

«Miss Serra» says the director once we reach our destination, «I regret – he even tries to be funny, the bastard – to introduce you to your colleague, Mr. Cattaneo.»

I shake her hand warmly, looking her in the eyes, but I've already noticed she has shoulders so broad they betray a history in competitive swimming or something like that, a small but not non-existent chest, very short dark hair framing a nice oval face, and a killer body, probably carved from marble. This one must sleep in the gym, I think. She must be thirty-five to forty, tops, although I'm not good at guessing ages.

The only off note, off in a good way for me, actually a plus, is a slightly aquiline nose.

I'm officially turned on.

«Cattaneo, Walter Cattaneo» I say.

She answers her name is Martina, but almost violently pulls her hand away from mine and urges me – I can't believe my ears – to get to work.

I stand there stunned for a moment, I'm not used to taking orders from anyone, man or woman, and anyway, until proven otherwise, I'm the oldest employee here. Older than the director in years of service.

«What did you say, sorry?» I reply, trying to come up with something sharper to test them both.

«Oh, I forgot» says the director, «Miss Serra has a military background, and she was hired precisely to try to keep you in line, Mr. Cattaneo. Try to understand that this library would rather have nothing to do with you anymore, but for the moment it hasn't been possible to fire» I see the bitch signal the director to shut up as she notices I was fiddling with my phone.

«She's recording the conversation» she says, addressing the director.

«For Christ's sake» I snap, «you really are a cop of shit.»

«Hey, I won't let you talk to me like that...»

«See, see...» I go, «I don't give a shit about what you permit me or not... I hate cops, if you get me. Go do your job, now...» I egg her on, «there are users waiting who, in my opinion, are dying to be served by someone like you» then, turning to the director, «congratulations director, you tried. But you should have hired an ugly bitch. This one, with all our Umberto Ecos, will last a month before they eat her alive» and without giving them time to answer I go take off my jacket and hat before lingering at the coffee machine for

an espresso I don't feel like having. The bitch is left stunned, but as a good ex-cop she can't help doing what she's been ordered, even by someone with no power like me. Then I hinted I was being kind, and so she probably got a little wet, that wooden pussy of hers between her legs.

Fuck Fortnite, this is real fighting and I've already understood that to this bitch I will, sooner or later, really have to try my luck.

I must admit I struggle to make it through the shift, the newcomer really tries to meet every request from the Umberto Ecos who, in the meantime, seem to have forgotten how to consult the electronic catalogue by themselves, and she insists I do the same. With painstaking consistency she times me out without reacting to my provocations, and even the stacks in the stacks have been repositioned according to their original order.

I feel violated to the core, this woman in very short time has really undone my entire filing system, decoded the code and unpacked the whole system, making me absolutely useless. Now anyone, even any random Umberto Eco, would be able to find a dusty tome in the depths of Palazzo Ducale. Some women know exactly how to make a man feel useless.

When I finally clock out at the end of the day, for the first time in my life I'm truly exhausted. No one should ever be required to exert such effort just to survive.

Emancipation from work, that should be the watchword, if class consciousness, of course, weren't only the aristocracy's thing.

So on the wall of my psyche I draw a new black line, another shitty day has just passed and once I cross my apartment threshold I only want to drink, even my cousin's beer will do at this point.

Anything to switch off.

That's what work is for.

## 28

«You didn't say you didn't like that crap?» my cousin says as he walks in, as if it were his own place, catching me half-asleep on the sofa with one of his cans in my hand.

«Remind me again why I gave you the keys to my apartment?» I ask.

«Because you don't answer the intercom and you don't open the door, unless you're on sick leave» sick leave, fuck. That's what had slipped my mind. I absolutely have to get another couple of weeks, minimum, I can't face another day like today at the library. «What's up, cousin, you okay? You look rough.»

«I had an insane day at work...»

«You're not used to it, are you?!»

«Used to what?»

«Working...»

«And what would you know, anyway.»

«I can imagine. After the mess you stirred up and the one I cooked up, they'll keep an eye on you. It won't be like before, forget the half-days on the lounge, right?! Mind if I?» he asks, pointing at the wooden box.

I nod.

«They even hired a babe to replace my colleague.»

«Well, that's good news, isn't it?»

«An ex-military, something like that, a wooden hot piece. Her job is to put me in my place.»

«Wow, wow, wow» he says, sparking the joint and taking a couple of quick pulls, «big stuff, then. So what are you going to do?»

«I don't know, put myself on sick leave?»

«Wrong.»

«What the hell are you saying.»

«Christ, if you go on sick leave you let them win» he hands me the joint, «you have to go to work every day and beat them at their own game, be creative, wear them out, dodge the work and play with... Fuck, did you buy a PlayStation?!»

«I spent two weeks on sick leave, I was bored.»

«Great, can I?»

«Help yourself.»

Fulvio turns on the Play and loads the only video game I own and starts killing people like it's nothing. I would never have thought a junkie would get off on videogames.

«Why the headset with a mic?»

«Well, it's the funniest thing to threaten the kids who frag you, right?»

«You're really an asshole, I'll say it.»

«Gotta get by somehow» I say. «So, are you still going ahead with this wedding nonsense?»

«Why don't you approve, Walter. You met Ludovica, you should like her, no? Why are you so skeptical?»

«Can I be honest?»

«You must» he says, putting down the joystick.

«Okay, but forgive me for what I'm about to say» I take a long pull to gather courage, «the problem, if we want to call it that, is that you were still shooting up two days ago, okay? You told me, if I'm not mistaken, that an addict remains an addict even when they're clean, they just replace their obsession with something else. Now, you quit cold turkey for this girl, a stunning girl, don't get me wrong, she certainly deserves it» I'd do her just for the name, but I don't say it, «but you did it for her, and now you even want to marry her. You don't want to enjoy your relationship for a while, you want to

slap the marriage seal on it straight away. Look, I have the feeling you replaced the dope with Ludovica, but what will happen when with her, sooner or later, inevitably, because that's life, nobody's perfect, some problem arises?

I point out that you weren't even honest with her, when we had dinner here you drank and smoked secretly, you didn't show yourself as you are, so what will you do once married, what would a sensitive, defenseless person like you do, someone who, in your words: used to get high so as not to think about the effort necessary to get through a completely and utterly useless and painful existence in a world where you can only suffer wrong or inflict it on others...

Not to mention that you're loaded with cash now. Ludovica may not be a gold digger, but you have to weigh everything up, don't you agree?»

«Walter, I'm touched, you worry about me.»

«Well, let's not overdo it, but I get that you might be particularly vulnerable right now. Your father died, you quit shooting, your mother died, you inherited everything... I mean, I never want to see you go back to...»

Fulvio signals me to stop.

Then he takes the wooden box again.

«Listen cousin, now I have to confess something to you, you deserve it, and I'll tell you right away I'm sorry for what I'm about to say, you might get pissed, rightly so, but in that case promise me you'll think about it, try to make sense of what I'm about to tell you, in the right context. A context in which you and I, once, had no kind of relationship...»

«I don't get it, Fulvio, you're not coming out to me, are you?»

«No, but it would be funny to tell you I'm gay» he laughs, «and also way easier than having to confess that...»

«That?! What the hell, are you building suspense?»

«No, I light this joint that I hope stuns us properly» he takes a hit and hands it to me.

«So?!»

«I'm going to confess I never shot up in my life!»

«Never shot up, what?» I ask, taking a long drag.

«Stuff.»

I get up to fetch a beer from the fridge.

«What stuff?» I call from the kitchen, probably slowed by the weed.

«Heroin, Walter... Christ, I was never an addict, I never shot up in my life, it was all an act.»

I'm so confused that I open one of his shitty cans and swig half of it without even noticing.

«Let me see if I got this right: you're telling me that basically you never stuck yourself?»

«Never.»

«You never snorted heroin?»

«Never.»

«Smoked it?»

«Never.»

«Ate it?»

«Who the hell eats that stuff?»

«How the hell should I know! So you faked it, not just with me, but with your whole family, that you were an addict, and that's what you're telling me, am I getting this right?»

«Perfectly illustrated.»

«What, are you retarded? Who would pull off a stunt like that? ...it's Dumb and Dumber material.»

«Come on, don't exaggerate now.»

«I don't have to exaggerate? What the hell... You, if you're not taking the piss, pretend to be an addict and I'm the one who's exaggerating?! What kind of story is this?! Sorry, but this is really absurd.»

«You're pissed off.»

«I'm confused, amazed, stunned, curious, damn it!»

«A little pissed you are.»

«Explain, for God's sake» I shout.

«See, it all obviously starts with my relationship with my parents. But I won't bore you with the whole Freud literature on the case, let's say I was very smart in high school, above average, and studies didn't give me trouble. After scientific high school I enrolled in mathematics and so far, more or less, everything was regular: exams, parties, parties and exams. But Dad and Mom understood my abilities and wanted me to use them in the best way. You know, they worked hard all their lives, no one ever gave them anything. At least until Dad died. So the pressure on me started to be a bit excessive...

I know what you're thinking, I was studying, I still had to graduate, what pressure are you talking about?

Well, right now I don't even know anymore, let's say that back then the whole grown-up world, the one with permanent jobs, factory shifts, thirteenth pay and Christmas bonuses, felt very far away to me, passé if you will. I didn't want to take on all the classic responsibilities adults have to bend to, I wanted to do only what I wanted, for better or worse, without for that reason hurting my parents too much, whom I still loved...»

«So you thought of pretending to be a junkie?»

«Oh... not me, but ChatGPT...»

«Go on please, this is getting really weird.»

«At university, in the math department, we worked on ChatGPT's learning algorithms which, obviously, hadn't been released publicly yet. When the AI really started to take off I asked ChatGPT how to avoid taking on most common responsibilities while limiting harm to loved ones. At first

ChatGPT wouldn't answer, you know there are a lot of filters, I mean, you can't ask it how to kill yourself, you have to outsmart it, because it's not that smart at the end of the day, you could fool it, at least back then, so I had to make the AI believe I was a writer and needed help developing the plot of a hypothetical novel. Only then did the AI help me and, analyzing the data it had, concluded that a serious addiction, like heroin, somehow freed the afflicted person from a whole series of exacting duties and even the closest relatives, aware of the intrinsic need of the addiction, tended to be more submissive about the resulting problems.

So once I graduated I started pretending to be an addict and began to dabble in minor crime to support myself.»

«What do you mean by: dabbling in minor crime?»

«Well, somehow I had to make a living, but I certainly didn't want to mug old ladies or that sort of thing, so I started with a few small cons, then a bit of weed dealing, and eventually I began stealing nice cars, stuff nobody got hurt over, all covered by insurance. The AI enlightened me on how simple car theft can be. In certain contexts, as you've seen, gullible people who drive certain cars hand you the keys if you've got the right jacket. No offense, of course.»

«Go on.»

«And so, doing that, I could get by without clocking in. Occasionally they'd catch me, I'd go to a rehab community and that was that...»

«And blood tests? I mean, didn't anyone notice you weren't actually using?»

«They should have, of course, but I regularly pay lab techs at our two main hospitals. They know that if samples arrive in my name they have to make me test positive for heroin. For them it's a godsend, they top up their income without

problems. If they did the opposite they'd risk their jobs, but this way, no.»

«Why not?»

«Because my lawyer would have to challenge the tests requesting a recheck. And there are false positives. It doesn't fit the usual procedural imagination that someone would want to fake a positive drug test, usually it's the opposite. So proving intent would be hard. That's why my techs are relaxed.»

«Was that your idea or...»

«Hell no, all AI, like the overdose, for that matter, just a trick to give more depth to the protagonist of my so-called novel and win back his family, laying bare all his weaknesses.»

«A fake suicide attempt that in the end even got you a pension.»

«Yeah, but the mainframe hadn't predicted that, I admit. And anyway it wasn't instant, the social workers kicked in and that whole machine, you know how it works, just like with women: if you ignore them they never leave you alone, but if you actually drool after someone, good luck winning her. I didn't want the health service in my life, they just got in the way. I skipped meetings, ignored everything they told me, and in the end they gave me disability. Aunt Angela, your mom, correct me if I'm wrong, spent years stuck in bed with depression, and you busted your ass in every way, I know, because Mom used to talk about it often when I was a kid, she was her sister after all. And what did you get out of the social workers?»

«Nothing. A fucking big fat nothing.»

«See, that's exactly how it works. At least in this country. But what was I supposed to do, turn down the pension on principle? Of course not. I mean, it's peanuts anyway, if I

hadn't stolen cars it wouldn't even have covered groceries, let alone rent, but never mind...»

«And all the bullshit you fed me about heroin, being an addict, dependence?»

«Well, I wasn't using, but they threw me into rehab plenty of times, I made loads of friends, heard tons of stories, and got laid a lot, fuck.»

«Got laid?!»

«You kidding? Why else do you think I let them dump me in rehab? When some girl gets admitted and they take her off the stuff, after the initial crash she starts giving it away like there's no tomorrow. And me, since I was paying, I knew who carried diseases and who didn't, so...»

«So in rehab they knew you weren't using?»

«No, but the nurses knew I had cash to burn and didn't let me miss a thing: medical files, weed, that kind of stuff. Everything but heroin.»

«Which you didn't care about.»

«Of course not» he laughs, «but I spent a fortune on condoms.»

«So you never actually shot up in my elevator and you never nearly died on my couch?»

«Truth is, I was collapsing that night, but from a joint I'd just smoked after a couple of drinks, and I improvised.»

«But I saw you sick more than once, breaking out in sweat for no reason, that sort of thing.»

«I'm a bit ashamed to admit it, cousin, but that was diarrhea. You know, when you drink beer and smoke dirt weed, your gut's always shot to hell. Just throw a coffee or something hot on top and you're screwed. Plenty of times I nearly shit myself in front of you, and since I don't like using other people's bathrooms, I'd just sweat and look distracted, but I was really just trying not to crap my pants» he laughs, «but

the water, Walter» he keeps laughing, «I wrecked your toilet more than once, though with extreme embarrassment.»

I'm stunned, I need time to think, because right now, after the joints we've smoked, I don't even know what to make of my cousin Fulvio, the guy I always thought was hooked on heroin, and now, only now, I find out he's just a fucking lightweight who built this whole absurd circus to dodge life even worse than I did.

«Sorry I lied to you, but as long as Mom was around I couldn't risk the truth coming out, she would never have understood.»

«I don't understand either, for that matter.»

«You pissed?»

«I'm confused. And shaken, too, so I can't focus. I mean this whole thing is really absurd. But couldn't you have just, I don't know, made a living stealing cars without pretending to be a junkie?»

«Yeah, but then I wouldn't have had the mitigating circumstances of addiction, I'd have ended up in prison, not rehab, you get me? In prison you can screw, sure, but not the way I like.»

We laugh.

«Come on, but it's not like they don't send addicts to prison, if they catch you and you're a repeat offender, they'll ship you off, heroin or not.»

«Not if you've got a good lawyer. And I always had lawyers. That's basic.»

«And you don't feel guilty about making people believe, not distant relatives, who cares about them, but your own mother, that you were an addict? About giving her so much grief?»

«Well, kids always give their parents grief, for millions of reasons. From adolescence onward, any aware parent never

really lives anymore, they stop sleeping until the kid comes home, suffer endless torments, picture apocalyptic scenarios at every delay, see dangers everywhere: clubs, bikes, cars, pollution, diseases, criminals, you name it. In a way, I gave mine a kind of peace, they only had to worry about heroin, about me not overdoing it. I cut everything else out of the equation. And I'm convinced Mom, in the end – once she accepted what I was, or rather what I made her believe I was – was even proud of me, in her own way...»

«When you stole my Porsche at the morgue, I had that same feeling.»

«See... I managed her expectations. In the end, we always had a good relationship. I pretended to be a junkie, fine, but I never made her jewelry disappear or emptied her wallet, and that, I'm sure, she appreciated.»

«Maybe... so why did you decide to come clean?»

«Well, Mom and Dad are gone, and they left me a load of money. There was no point keeping it up anymore. Besides, now that everything's in my name, I'd have everything to lose if I kept breaking the law. You know, when they catch you it's not just prison you have to face, there are fines, fees, all sorts of extra costs. If you don't have the money, no problem. But if you do, they just take it, end of story. They don't even ask first. I'm a good boy now.»

«And with Ludovica, are you serious? I mean, fine, you're not a junkie, but you drink and smoke like a chimney, and that poor girl doesn't. How the hell do you think that's going to work if you keep lying to her?»

«I don't know, that's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. I've got no clue, maybe I should ask the AI to write me a new paragraph.»

«What the fuck are you talking about, cousin! You're over thirty now. You still want a fucking computer to tell you

what to do? Christ almighty, I thought you were a junkie, fine, but because of that, because you survived the stuff and the charges without flinching, I thought you were tough, had some balls» I snap, «and now you're telling me you let a computer suggest how you should live?! Jesus fucking Christ...»

«Look, it's the same for you. For everyone. You think you're independent, but the Global Village doesn't allow it. Don't think not owning a TV puts you above the rest. Your psyche is steered by technology just like everyone else's. Maybe on a desert island you could skip progress and rely only on your skills and thoughts, but in the modern world, your thoughts are... well... not really yours anymore, actually.

It's heavy stuff, I know, but I know you get me. You've read McLuhan, I've seen his books» he nods toward a shelf behind me where the books my ex never bothered to take still sit, just waiting for me to pick one up, «we're all steered in our desires, profiled in our tastes, tagged in categories, and used for commercial and political ends. I just became aware of it and tried to use it to my advantage, instead of ending up tattooing my face and waiting my whole life to go viral like the rest of my generation.»

«Sounds like over-rationalization to me. Even though I'll admit kids these days do seem brain-fucked. But I'm old enough to know the young have always pissed off people my age. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. That's an axiom. But you, damn it, with your head... you may have fooled me into thinking you were a junkie, but you never seemed like today's youth. You've got foundations, you studied, you were loved, you know full well the media lie, and that the net, though born out of a longing for freedom, has become the opposite of what it was supposed to be. You even worked

in it yourself. And what do you do? You accept giving up thinking for yourself like everyone else? Okay, I do it too, sure, every night zoning out with my comfort crap, but for different reasons. I just want peace now, to get through my days without too much pain. But you?! You really want a computer to guide you?»

«Why not?! I'm one of the many who helped teach computers – what you so reductively call them – to make decisions for people, processing a massive amount of data our brains could never handle. Why wouldn't I trust my own work? AI works great now, it's the biggest revolution of our time, comparable only to some vaccines or the discovery of America.»

«Yeah, but look at what happened after... I mean after America was discovered.»

«Whatever, that's sophistry.»

«Sophistry my ass» I've always thought young people pissed me off just for being young, but I'm starting to realize I wasn't so wrong. Not that bright, really. Always assuming you can still call someone his age young.

I drain my beer can with a long swig, and in a flash of clarity finally realize what I'm drinking. «But let's talk about something serious instead: since your character was cooked up by a computer, this shitty beer, do you actually like it, or is it all part of the act?»

«You really want to know?»

«Christ, yes» I snap, on the verge of losing it.

«Fuck no, I can't stand that crap.»

That's the last straw. With an effort I push myself up off the couch, open the front door, and motion for him to get the fuck out. Tonight I've had enough bullshit, and tomorrow I've got a hell of a day ahead, to put it mildly.

Fulvio doesn't complain, just tilts his head slightly as if asking forgiveness, but those doe eyes don't work on me. He's had me drinking this crap for months, and I've still got something like ten cans in the fridge.

It's a miracle I don't chuck them at him from the window, for fuck's sake.

When I finally get to bed, on the edge of sleep, a question I didn't even consciously form lights up my frontal lobe like a Christmas tree: *But if he really wasn't shooting it in his veins, where the fuck did all that money from stealing cars go?*

No sick leave right now. I followed my cousin's advice and these past weeks I've gritted my teeth, put on a brave face and pretended to be a model employee. If nothing else my performance, which of course the director doesn't buy, is fraying his nerves and that's enough for me to sacrifice myself morning after morning, Umberto Eco after Umberto Eco... By the way, even if I wanted to stay home and zombify myself with videogames I couldn't, because my cousin's wedding date is dangerously close and the closer it gets the more endless annoyances seem to multiply. Fulvio's now at my place one day in, one day out, an unmistakable sign that the sexual attraction toward his future wife is already fading, you don't need artificial intelligence to figure that out. But this time it's not passion cooling that's the problem, it's the ever-growing fame of Carlotta's breasts which now risks wrecking the party because paparazzi lie in wait for her everywhere. My cousin's latest bright idea is to keep the location secret until a few hours before. Not even the witnesses, in his head, should know where to go until the last minute. Which, in the end, means I'm the one who shouldn't know a damn thing, because it's unlikely Carlotta would sell her whereabouts to the journalists. Okay, I said something stupid, actually it would be the opposite. The bitch, in fact – forgive me, Massimo, you know I don't exaggerate, you left your coronary arteries for this shit – wouldn't have any problem wrecking her friend's wedding in exchange for a bit of publicity. I mean, I'm not saying it wouldn't be funny, mind you, but what I like, unfortunately, doesn't count.

I'm almost at the timeclock, precise as a Swiss watch to punch in at the very last second of the last valid minute and hammer another nail in the director's coffin for losing his mind over this crap, when the wail of an ambulance in the courtyard drowns out the corridor chatter and nearly makes me miss the crucial second to clock in.

Someone on the upper floors must have passed out.

Of course I slip away from the crowd of onlookers following the stretcher-bearers – and not only with their eyes - I don't give a shit if someone's ill, user or colleague, but once behind the desk and wearing the mandatory lab coat – the director's new gimmick to stress his staff's professionalism – I hear the gossip of my colleagues spreading like wildfire, first timid and discreet, then increasingly bold and oblivious to the public.

Apparently, if what I've managed to intercept – without having to deal with the other morons who work here - is true: that coat will be the director's last clever idea, since the poor bastard is leaving the building under a white, virginal sheet.

I'm on cloud nine: were the last weeks' clock-ins – timed like a jazz drummer, at the stroke of the last second – what sent him to the maker?

I know it sounds mean to rejoice at something like this, but I can't be held responsible for other people's behavior. Those who spend their lives annoying others can hardly complain about trifles if they go to hell without passing Go in total indifference. Which, in the end, is what we all do, regardless of conduct. Sure, some spark stronger emotions, they're remembered a few days longer, but the outcome is always the same:

Dead 0 – Survivor 1

You can't escape.

No deceased has ever won the championship.

After the director is taken away we're all more or less struck by the same doubt: can we close up and go home, or must we keep working pretending nothing happened? Who's supposed to tell us what to do now?

Rambo, I call her that for obvious reasons, even though she's a woman, is crying like a calf with all the usual sighs and hiccups from the catalogue. The thing puzzles me: sure, she's an ex-military, but I can't believe someone like her would have slept with that poor bastard.

«What's wrong, Rambo?» I ask, just to be polite.

«I've told you a thousand times not to call me that, idiot.»

«Come on, don't get upset, Rambo» I'm a professional, can't help it, «but what's up, should I worry?»

«You've the nerve to ask me what's wrong?» she shouts. «Haven't you noticed someone just died?»

«Now don't exaggerate, it was only the director, what's the big deal?» Rambo glares at me murderously. «And anyway, aren't you ex-military? Surely it won't be the first corpse you've seen, you must have dealt with a few in your time, right?» Of course when I want to be a nuisance – I pride myself on it – I really go all out.

«Are you stupid or what? I only did my military service in the Carabinieri, I wasn't at war, thank God.»

«Military service! With you women this whole gender equality thing really got out of hand.»

«You're a real idiot» she sobs, «I... I... I found him» she ends up saying, letting go despite my presence.

«I'm sorry, Rambo, really, I had no idea» I say, holding myself back from dropping more loads.

«I had gone into his office to ask for a day off, to go to my mom's funeral, she passed away over the weekend...» and there's the reason for all that sensitivity, «and I found him with his head resting on the desk. I thought he'd fallen

asleep. I tried calling him, but when I got closer and put a hand on his shoulder to shake him a little, he... he... fell off the chair.»

I picture the scene and do my best not to laugh.

«Forget the boss, Rambo. I'm sorry about your mom, though. Do you feel like talking about it?»

«My mom?»

«Of course, she's the problem, not the boss. Who cares about the boss? You knew him for what, a couple of months» I nod, «tell me about your mom instead.»

And that's the thing, try to be nice, and it always backfires. Because Rambo really does start talking to me about her mom – who passed away prematurely at the age of eighty-two – as if I were her childhood best friend. Okay, I asked, no denying it, but when I throw out that I could go with her to the funeral, to be there for her, she makes a face that doesn't suggest anything good.

Then she bursts out crying again.

Now that the boss is dead, she has no clue who could authorize her leave to attend her mother's funeral.

For me, it's too much, I don't have the patience to explain that life isn't a fucking barracks, and not even the hope of getting her into bed makes me want to show her a shred of compassion. This one wore a uniform, so she's never had an orgasm without a written order.

I make my exit with the excuse of an Umberto Eco ready to strike, without even trying, and god only knows how badly I could use a blowjob right now.

But it's all wasted time.

If she skips her own mother's funeral just to punch the clock, people like that really don't deserve anything else.

I head off to the bar.

The director's funeral isn't exactly a front-page event, but since it was Massimo I had more or less a relationship with, and to everyone else I'm just a stranger, I can turn up as the main character. Okay, Rambo might be there, but to her too I'm simply a question mark. A question mark who still has to count her cash before renting a Porsche.

As pissed off as I might be, I know perfectly well I have to come up with something, I can't throw another five hundred euros at a car that, knowing the scene where I sacrifice my life day after day, wouldn't even guarantee me a handjob, let alone a fuck.

Sure, if... instead... A filthy idea wedges its way between the folds of my brain... Sure, if Fulvio, with all his experience, felt like giving me a hand, maybe one of the admin girls, or someone from purchasing, I might actually nail one of them. But he'd have to take out one of those little cars you see in Monte Carlo, and on social media, and I seriously doubt he feels like giving that kind of present to his best man.

Still, fuck... With a Ferrari or some other supercar I'd probably be able to bed half the university.

«How many fucking joints have you smoked?» Fulvio asks as soon as I lay out my plan. «You think I could steal a Bugatti in Monte Carlo – feasible, mind you, with the right jacket – and drive it back here without problems?! Sure, if I blew it from the long-stay lot at Monaco airport, but from a restaurant parking lot, you know how fast they'd slap handcuffs on me?»

«Then take it from the airport parking» I say, more to piss him off than anything.

«Too bad you need a coded electronic key to start a car like that. One thing is when they hand you the keys thinking you're a valet, you know that» he laughs, the bastard. «Another is actually stealing it. Legally they're two completely different things and I'm getting married, cousin, I'm not going to Monte Carlo to risk my ass so you can look good at your ex-director's funeral. I can pay you a couple of escorts, if you really can't help yourself.»

«Thanks» I say through my teeth, «but I've never been into paying for sex. Rent me a Bugatti.» Now I smirk.

«Okay, the weed I brought you is definitely too strong for you. Hell no I'm renting you a Bugatti, are you stupid?» He grabs the wooden box and rolls a joint to catch up, «I'll pay for a prostitute instead, or even two. At least you're sure you'll get it in, I'm definitely not renting that kind of car just to try to get you fucked by some random slut. If it's pussy you want» he lights the spliff and takes a long drag, «I'll pay for pussy... Actually no, scratch that, I won't pay you shit. Now that I've gotten high too I see everything clearer, dick-head... Jesus, though, this shit's strong!»

«Christ, I smoked two and now I'll end up offended if you don't get me some damn show-off car, I want something that'll make all those bitchy colleagues wet, I want to arrive at that asshole's funeral in full pomp. I want to land in front of the coffin with a fucking private jet, or some goddamn flying saucer, the chicest thing you can think of. I want to make him roll in his grave, that fucking Umberto Eco of mine...»

«See, see... You want a lot of things, but I'm here for my wedding, remember.»

«You're still thinking about it?»

«Do you think?»

«Well, can I be honest?»

«Shoot.»

«You're here almost every day, so it means the urge to get laid, with all due respect, must have gone to shit a bit, or am I wrong?»

«Well, you see... The thing is... the fact that...» he even starts stammering, «the fact is that Ludovica and I, truth is... You know how it is, right?!»

What the fuck is he saying! «Actually no!» I snap. «What are you trying to tell me?»

«Well, you see... Ludovica's Catholic, so...»

I can't believe it, in the two-thousands-plus I still have to hear that crap!

«So she's only given you her ass so far, and you haven't actually fucked her yet» I explode, running my hands through my hair.

«How fucking vulgar you are» he retorts.

«Right or wrong?»

«How?»

«Was what I said right or wrong?»

«Well, you see...»

«Right or wrong?» I'm getting heated.

Fulvio nods slightly, but doesn't speak: plausible denial. Christ, he's really getting married just because he's tired of sodomizing her.

It's true what they say: those who have the bread have no teeth. Maybe he'd have been better off actually getting into heroin.

«I mean, do you realize that shit like that happened last century. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to take anything away from the ass, lots of girls are still reluctant to give it up, and because of that it's even more attractive, but you, fuck, you're in the opposite position. You can't get married on that premise, no way.»

«What the hell are you saying, of course I can! I want it more than anything.»

«You want to fuck her more than anything» I grab what I need and prepare another joint, talks like this require proper lobotomy. «But you can't marry her without first sleeping with her properly. A test drive is mandatory, would you buy a Ferrari without trying it first, come on. She could even be frigid, has she ever had an orgasm?»

«Of course she has, what are you talking about?»

«Does she let herself be touched or not? Because usually those old-school types won't even let you get close with a finger, I mean.»

«I don't want to continue this conversation» he cuts me off, I said nothing and you're making a movie...

«Yes, but a horror movie.» I light the joint and take a couple of long pulls that put me in the right mood immediately, «I'll be your best man, with this premise I wouldn't miss your wedding for the world, but remember I warned you. If I later find out your wife isn't what you expected, that sex with her isn't what you had in mind, know that there's no Amazon returns policy. Not to mention you're loaded. If I were you I'd give a lawyer a few bucks for a nice prenup, like in the movies» I chuckle.

«Yeah, a lovely way to start a relationship.»

«Because, not giving it up is a great way to start? Let's be serious... Sex is the first thing, fuck. Did you consult your artificial intelligence on this? If you ask it I think it'll answer that at twenty-five a woman can't be a virgin, not in this historical period. They're putting one over on you, trust me. And don't come cry to me that I didn't warn you.»

Nothing, Fulvio won't hear it, he drops the subject and starts boring me with planning and logistics. There's the Carlotta problem to consider since her career is taking off and

photographers chase her everywhere and she, being at the start, still gets high off all the attention. I point out the absurdity: a slut of a bridesmaid – half-naked on all the billboards, on TV and in magazines – who’s obviously fucked left and right – that’s not an environment where people hold back – and the bride, her best friend, Catholic and self-proclaimed virgin. If Tarantino went into porn that could be the opening of one of his films.

Then end up in church Kill Bill–style.

Fulvio’s convinced Carlotta has every interest in letting the journalists know where the wedding will be to snag some gossip-mag coverage, so he’s changed the venue and is keeping the wedding location secret.

He’s convinced Ludovica will keep the secret with her best friend – or feed her false info – and there’s no way to reason with him.

I’m supposed to take her to the destination – once it’s revealed to me – trying to stop her from figuring out where it might be – at least until the last minute – and to use her phone during the trip.

As if you couldn’t just share your location on WhatsApp.

The AI, of course already consulted by my cousin, suggested, for the occasion, renting an armored car, inside which phones usually lose signal. The computer also provided a precise route to follow, studied down to the smallest detail to stay as far away as possible from transmitters, in case Carlotta rolled down a window to try to get service.

The more Fulvio dwells on the Diabolik-style details of this plan, on this absurd and – to my mind – pointless waste of time, money, and energy, the more I miss the old Fulvio, the one who did heroin and didn’t bother anyone.

Look, I can even understand a guy losing his mind for pussy: when a man’s lucky enough to find one who really

likes the goods without a fuss, it's understandable he'd fall for her. But crawling like this without even having sniffed it drives me insane.

It makes the whole category ridiculous.

We men aren't like that, it doesn't work that way, accept it.

And fuck her, for God's sake.

Fuck her.

I get up well in advance, from what I can tell it really does look like a splendid day. The temperature is perfect for a Loro Piana frescolana I haven't worn in years, and for the occasion I'll even bring out a Finollo shirt some relative had made to measure for me when I was young, for some event I no longer remember.

While I distinctly remember never having worn it.

I have my own theory about shirts and I find them by far the most inelegant garment in the entire male wardrobe. I don't care that everyone claims the opposite. The problem goes way back, when aristocrats, who rarely came to terms with soap, used shirts to avoid soiling the fine fabrics they wore. Over time, fortunately, even the nobility began to wash, but being by definition conservative generation after generation, they kept on wearing this stupid garment. Even the tie: a reworking of the simple strip of cloth that held the shirt collar in place beneath their fabulous brocades.

Utter madness.

But the tie is where I draw the line, a scarf at the neck is far more elegant, or nothing at all. A pocket square, yes, but the tie is for morons.

Which is why everyone wears it.

I indulge in one of those showers that would make Greta Thunberg swear, then contribute to the hole in the ozone layer with deodorant, exfoliant and assorted creams my ex never reclaimed and which have now expired.

I can understand milk in the fridge, but what exactly can a blackhead scrub turn into once expired? It's not like I'm going to spread it on bread and eat it! After breakfast, hearty,

and the subsequent evacuation, I don a wide-brimmed Borsalino Panama, a pair of F.lli Rossetti shoes and I'm ready for the big event.

No rental car, my bank statement has categorically forbidden it.

But I have a plan.

Bus and half an hour early, which I spend drinking a shaken coffee at the bar next door, from which I then leave with nonchalance once everyone has more or less gathered.

Too bad it's morning, otherwise I could've had a more substantial drink – I'd really need it – but ten a.m. isn't the right time to reek of Scotch, especially when trying to make a good impression.

Rambo is the first one I greet, I shake her hand, then an awkward moment and finally I pull her toward me and kiss her lightly on the cheek.

«Everything okay?» she asks, she hasn't even entered the church yet and she's already crying.

«Great» I let slip, «great.»

«But aren't you ashamed to show up drunk at your boss's funeral?» she snaps, from zero to a hundred.

Okay, so I kissed her, but normal people do that.

«I had a shakerato» I say, «okay, with Baileys, but from there to being drunk...»

«But you're glowing, you look like W.C. Fields!»

Wow, the girl's done her homework, she's not a total imbecile despite her past in the Popo. I'm almost excited. But then, I admit, touching myself, my nose really does burn, as do my cheekbones.

«Christ almighty» I blurt, drawing the attention of more than one mourner, «am I that red?»

«Yes, you look like the anger from Inside Out.»

«What the hell are you talking about?» I'm losing patience, «I don't even understand you.»

«Inside Out» she says, «you know?»

«Inside what?!»

«Don't you have nieces or nephews?»

«No, but what the hell does that have to do with anything?»

«Okay, never mind» she whispers as the hearse arrives, «you're as red like a pepper, okay?»

Fuck it, I run back to the bar to check myself in a mirror and yep: my face is really as red as a baboon's ass, except where the hole should be there's my nose.

On the verge of catching fire.

I really wanted to enjoy this ceremony, that's why I didn't wear a single fake garment, I wanted to make a good impression, score some points and, why not, try to screw someone and savor the thrill of adrenaline at thinking myself alive and well while you, boss, have cheerfully fucked off to what most have already renamed the Jessica Fletcher Library, and instead I'm forced to evaporate before the opening credits, damn it. My ex must be convulsing with laughter in some damned hotel room.

I dash to the bathroom to throw cold water on my face but it brings no relief, that damned scrub seems to want to reach my bones. I yell at the bartender to call me a taxi, it's an emergency, I even use "please" and without even imagining how much the bastard's going to fleece me I let him take me to the ER.

Only once in the waiting room do I realize that with an ambulance I'd have saved thirty euros.

But when your face is burning like the tip of a match it's hard to stay focused.

I thought I'd have to sit here all morning, patiently awaiting the liquefaction of my face, but instead, in no time at all, a young nurse ushers me into a doctor's office where an equally young and equally sexy doctor, after a quick history, loads me up with antihistamines and cortisone.

Strange, because in the waiting room there are plenty of catatonic old folks on stretchers and young motorcyclists from road accidents, yet I seem to jump the queue. Either my case is extremely urgent or my outfit made an impression.

None of the patients, in fact, are wearing a Borsalino.

«Is it that serious, doctor?» I ask once the injections are done. «I thought there were people in the waiting room worse off than me.»

«Without a doubt, Mr...?»

«Cattaneo.»

«Without a doubt, Mr. Cattaneo. But six more ambulances are arriving from a pile-up on the A7 that will crash the system, as happens almost every weekend. For now, the others need special treatments and tests, whereas you can leave straight away instead of clogging up the service for a simple dermatitis.»

She doesn't exactly sugarcoat it, huh?!

«Well, but my face was burning like hell.»

«That's still no reason to jam up the ER. A simple pharmacist would've been enough, Mr. Cattaneo» she hands me a couple of sheets fresh from the printer, «usually we make people like you wait the whole day, but today, given what's coming, you've been spared. Give these to the booth for billing and then you can go.»

«Billing?»

«Of course, Mr. Cattaneo, White Code services are billed. Next time make sure to break something first.»

Jesus Christ, but this one, so young and pretty, already has a chip on her shoulder that almost excites me. I mean, sure, maybe she's an exploited resident crushed by shifts, maybe a lesbian with a total aversion to men, but fuck, she can't just mock me like I'm some useless piece of EU trash. People who come here might not be dying, but they definitely have something worrying them, something they want answers to. It's not like someone decides to spend the evening at the ER...

At the highway rest stop, maybe, but not at the ER!

«Understood. Next time I'll make sure to gush blood, and I'll ask for you specifically, your kindness has, in fact, stolen my heart...»

And I get the fuck out before telling her straight to fuck off. I mean, truth is, I'd have liked to push it a bit further, make her squirm by flirting, but she's just too young. Impossible not to come off pathetic. Because yeah, fine, okay for dermatitis – and I didn't even tell her all that crap I smeared on my face was expired, otherwise who would've heard the end of it – but for someone with a more serious problem, what kind of guarantees can a kid in a white coat give? Doctors like her might shine in porn movies, but in the hallways of places like this, they must break their backs trying to be taken seriously...

Maybe that's exactly why she's got the chip.

Anyway, my face is already burning a lot less, a sign the antihistamine is working, while the cortisone gives me such a kick of energy that I don't even freak out too much when I realize that, to get out, I have to hand over a neat eighty euros.

Eighty, plus thirty for the taxi, already makes something like a hundred and ten euros for a fucking missed funeral. The director must be cracking up in his shitty coffin, and it's

not even over, because from here to home there are still about four kilometers I'll have to walk, but God forbid that on the way, I don't know...

Jesus Christ, I didn't even have time to finish the thought, the sliding door hadn't even opened all the way to let me out when...

«Walter?!»

«Luisa...» fuck. «How are you?» I ask, trying to sound casual.

«I'm fine, but you... you vanished without even saying goodbye that night, what the hell happened, can you tell me?» She's playing the offended card, but not too much.

I mean, I hadn't run into her in thirty years, and now, suddenly...

«I know, you have to forgive me but it was really embarrassing» a flash of genius strikes me. Maybe it's the cortisone, who knows.

«In what sense?»

«Well, that day, you know... I had an attack...»

«A heart attack?!» she bursts out, her face tense.

«I wish» I say, «diarrhea» I whisper, as if it were much worse than a heart attack.

«Nooo?!»

«Fuck, look, don't make me tell you because something like that really shook me to the core. I'll just say I had to jump in a taxi and I'll leave it there because it's better that way, trust me... It's not something you can talk about. Never in my life has anything like that happened...» fuck, I'm a genius.

«Nooo?!» she keeps repeating, as if she's never had the runs in her life, oh, fuck off. «But then you disappeared...»

«Damn, I came back to the church looking for you, and even at the bar, didn't the guy with the Jethro Tull obsession

tell you?! Bluffing, «He was always in the same T-shirt, by the way, does he ever change it?» I smile.

«No, he didn't say anything, but you couldn't have...»

«Called you?»

«Exactly!»

«Yeah, but who had your number? We never exchanged them. I had no idea how to track you down, I don't even know where you live. I thought about asking Marina, but I don't have her contacts either. I mean, it's not like the old days when you could just flip through the phone book. I tried on social media, but...» and here I take a gamble because I don't know if she's actually on it or not.

«No, I don't use that stuff» I breathe a sigh of relief, «at least not under my real name.»

Bingo... She acts all high and mighty but she's just like everyone else.

«Exactly, I couldn't find you, neither you nor Marina. I felt awful but...»

«Damn, I'm sorry.»

«I'm the one who's sorry, I left you with oysters and champagne» and I hope they didn't cost me cheap, I think.

«Well, don't worry about that, Andy has a crush on me, he didn't make me pay anything.»

Motherfucker.

«So that's why he didn't say a word. He wants to cut down the competition. But anyway» I need to change the subject, «what are you doing here?»

«My partner's in orthopedics, broke his arm hang gliding. And you?»

«Don't I have a red face?»

«A little, but not that much, why?»

«Well, an hour ago I looked like a pepper, allergic dermatitis or something like that, I put on one of those creams you

women use this morning and after a while I almost caught fire.»

«It must've been expired.»

«You think?»

«Of course, expired stuff is lethal.»

«You don't say?! I didn't even think creams could expire.»

«Like all men.»

We laugh.

At least I pretend to laugh because, no matter how much I look at her and no matter how much she turns me on, I can't forget the jackpot this bitch lit up and is surely enjoying fully, from what little I can imagine.

In fact: who the fuck goes hang gliding?! Jesus Christ!

A few more pleasantries, then we go to say goodbye. I hope she doesn't remember about the phone number, but probably she's thinking the same thing, and so we both cheerfully fuck off back where we came from. A little worn from the pantomime, maybe, but glad not to have to keep up the act any longer.

Who knows if she bought the diarrhea story.

A stroke of class, anyway.

A real stroke of class.

At work these days, everything is running so smoothly that it's been weeks since I've spared my GP the trouble of issuing medical certificates, so much so that I'm almost afraid one of these days he'll call me himself, worried something might have happened to me.

The thing is, at the moment, at the Library of Philology, Linguistics and Classical Tradition, the atmosphere is particularly relaxed. Local party politics are delaying the appointment of a new despot, and the workdays flow easily. I'm not saying that waking up, clocking in, working and clocking out has suddenly become pleasant. But doing it in a state of calm, without social classes, everyone in the same boat, so to speak, is at least bearable. Rambo even managed to take a leave and attend her mother's funeral. She didn't want anyone to accompany her, but at least she didn't skip it.

The problem is that in the evenings at home, when Fulvio comes over – often, lately – I'm not all that relaxed. This whole wedding business is really eating me alive. Okay, the thought of spending some time with Carlotta always makes me hard, I won't deny it – at the moment she's my favorite masturbation material – but this wedding thing has really gotten on my nerves, and in fact:

«Yes, well... I have to admit things have changed a bit. About the wedding, I mean» as if he thought I could imagine anything else, «you know, with the whole venue situation...»

«Of which I still know nothing» I remind him.

«Exactly, but you have to be patient, we're finalizing. Only, with this change of venue, you understand it becomes a bit difficult, logistically, to get married at city hall...»

I could have guessed, Ludovica's Catholic, he said so. But not just Catholic, an ultra-Catholic, so much so she lets herself get pounded in the ass to stay a virgin for the wedding, assuming that story's true, and you thought she wouldn't bend him over?

«You know you still have to get married at city hall before you can marry in church, right?»

«Well, at city hall you do the banns, but you can do that up to six months in advance. We've already done them.»

Fuck, no surprise there.

«So you'll marry in church, with Ludovica in white, the priest and all the trimmings... and in the morning, after the wedding night, you'll hang out the bloody sheet!»

«Come on, now you're being an ass» he reaches for my wooden box.

«It's not about being an ass. It's that you're letting yourself be ruled by someone who won't even give it to you. Jesus Christ, and there's not some kind of conflict of interest here? Come on... Ludovica's Catholic, at least she says she is, she won't give it up, but she gets sodomized without a problem, and the Lord, people like her, he drowned them in sulfur and flames, right? I'm not buying this religion story. It's weird that Ludovica – I'll give you that, I've met her – might have ulterior motives, but it's still an option to consider» not to mention the levels of envy this ass thing is sending me off the charts. It drives me crazy thinking this bastard, sitting on my couch lighting a joint, when he's not here boring me with his wedding, is sticking it to a twenty-five-year-old with marble-hard cheeks and no inhibition about getting them pounded, and it drives me crazy thinking this bastard, sitting

on my couch lighting a joint, when he *is* here boring me with his wedding, isn't sticking it to a twenty-five-year-old with marble-hard cheeks and no inhibition about getting them pounded.

«Jesus Christ, Fulvio... It's all wrong. You need to fuck, fuck, and fuck... Don't let her peg you. Come on! This is basic, if you're straight.»

We laugh.

«I'm straight, cousin» he lights the joint, takes two hits and passes it to me, «I'm straight and in love. I want to marry her, what's wrong with that? I want her to be happy, what's wrong with that? And if she wants to wait until marriage to give herself to me completely, I can wait, what's wrong with that? She'll give herself completely to me on the wedding night, long before she even gets access to one of my bank accounts. You have nothing to worry about, cousin. Sure, it pisses you off that I'm the one in bed with her, I get it...»

«Jesus Christ, Ludovica's got an ass that, holy shit, even her father must dream of nailing her, fuck... Anyway, I liked you better when you were a junkie, I'm telling you.»

«Come on, stop being so vulgar, you know it annoys me.»

«You're the one who brought it up.»

«Yes, but you're the one thinking it.»

Constantly, fuck... Constantly.

But I don't tell him.

«So this church? Can you give me some more info? Is it at least in Italy?»

«Relax, you won't need a passport. Me and the algorithm have evaluated hundreds of options and we've obviously landed on the best one. You won't spend more than a few euros in gas, round trip, of course.»

«Yes, if you think I'm getting behind the wheel on your wedding day you're way off. I need a license, and not for dealing coke, if you know what I mean!»

«Yes, but Carlotta, she's supposed to come with you remember?»

«I can sacrifice myself on the way there, just because it's you, but on the way back forget it. Make sure you organize yourself properly, because I'm not budging on this.»

«Yeah, yeah... We'll see.»

We'll see my ass, dickhead!

I haven't had sex in years but if the trade-off is turning into this kind of idiot, I'm almost glad of my celibacy.

Almost, mind you.

When Fulvio finally hauls his ass out of here, I breathe a sigh of relief, he's really starting to get on my nerves. I have to find a way to get my house keys back from him, or make up my mind to change the lock. Envy plays a big part, no doubt about it, but this whole thing with artificial intelligence is what really drives me crazy. I get that there are people used to taking no responsibility, I'm a prime example myself, with my joints and my couch, but handing over your decisions to a machine, I find, is a practice somewhat similar, in a way, to heroin use.

Nothing to worry about in the real world, except having the stuff or the data connection.

Of course, if artificial intelligence could hand me a couple of phone numbers, maybe...

Less than a week to go till the big day – big for Fulvio, at least in theory – It’s night and I’m sleeping like a baby. Well, maybe not like a baby, sometimes my own snoring wakes me up, but not tonight. Last night I went to bed properly fueled up, my cousin didn’t show, thank God, and I managed to massacre myself with joints and TV series. I binged the whole first season of *Californication* for the umpteenth time. Not so much for the dialogue, which in the original language is worth it, but for the sheer amount of pussy the main character beds with the same nonchalance I use to drink a glass of water. Maybe I should travel, maybe the world outside Liguria really is like that, and women aren’t afraid to take it out of the cellophane and actually use it...

Pussy, I mean.

Maybe the rest of the world really does fuck like there’s no tomorrow, but not around here, that’s for sure. The female universe is hard to figure out, cryptic, to say the least. Or maybe, simply, around here we’re just not young Duchovnys. Because even he now, well... let’s just say in real life these days, if he weren’t famous, he wouldn’t be so smooth either.

Anyway, I’d brought a notepad and pen onto the couch, I wanted to keep track of the women he nailed in the first season, but I lost count by the fourth episode and gave up.

But I *was* dreaming about it just now. It was me and him at the bar, scoping out a pair of redheaded twins sitting at a table in the back, when suddenly his face morphed into Fulvio’s, who, after looking around in disbelief – it’s my dream, after all – started crying like a baby.

«Jesus Christ almighty» I snap, «you're invading my dream world...» I know I'm dreaming because in real life, everybody knows, redheads like the ones me and David were eyeing, well... they don't really exist.

«I need to talk to you, cousin, I'm in deep shit... I screwed up.»

«No doubt about that, since you're about to get married, but can't we talk tomorrow? Let David have the space, please, we've got things to do.»

«Come on, Walter, don't be an asshole, open up, I need to talk to you. I'm here, out in the hall, come on... please.»

«Fuck, fuck, fuck... Wait, don't you have the keys?»

«It's four in the morning, I didn't want to give you a heart attack.»

Against my will, I have to wake up.

I crack one eye open, then the other. Yawn a couple of times, trying to figure out if I dreamed it or if my cousin just used again our weird cannabinoid method of communication, when I hear the sound of a key turning in the lock.

«Shit» I spring upright in bed like a jack-in-the-box, «what time is it?»

«I rang the bell, but you didn't answer.»

«Can't you wait till tomorrow?» I ask. «I don't even know if I'm still dreaming or not...»

«I fucked Carlotta» he blurts, just like that. «I fucked Carlotta.»

Okay, I'm officially awake.

And the rage is starting to course hard through my veins.

«Fuck off» I say, getting up to head to the bathroom, «at least make some coffee, you filthy bastard. And make it strong.»

We drink the sludge in silence, Fulvio keeps looking around, avoiding my gaze, while I keep my eyes locked on

him, and among the flood of things I'd like to understand right now, there's even how the hell a guy his age doesn't even know how to load a damn coffeemaker.

«You're a real idiot, can't even make coffee.»

«You're the one still clinging to the moka pot like some fucking hipster...»

«Well?!»

«Well, what?»

«What do you mean, *what*?! Tell me what you did, isn't that why you're here?»

«Sure, but we were talking about coffee...»

«Fulvio?!»

«Okay, sorry, it's just that I'm a little worked up.»

«Me too, trust me. Me too...»

«Okay, fine» Fulvio sets the cup down at his feet by the couch. «Yesterday Ludovica and I went to Carlotta's for lunch, you know, she bought herself a two-hundred-square-meter villa in Albaro, a hell of a house, don't know if you've seen it!»

«No, I haven't, I live in *Sanfru*... but go on, please.»

«We were about to sit down when Ludovica's mom called: her grandma got sick, they were rushing to the hospital in an ambulance, so Ludovica had to leave...»

«Me and Carlotta were left alone, a bit awkward of course, waiting for a call from Ludovica that never came. We ate, obviously, and to relax a bit we opened a bottle of wine. Then Carlotta says she's hot, takes off her shirt and stays there in just a bra, with one of those super-tight shorts she always wears, you know the type?» I don't even answer because my stomach's already churning. «And she goes: '*You don't mind, right? You must be used to seeing me like this, no? On billboards, I mean.*' Obviously, I don't explain to her that it's one thing to see her in a picture and another to have her tits-

and-bones right in front of me, but I don't object. Then after a while, as if nothing, she asks me if I'd like a hit. I nod, thinking maybe a joint would calm down the hard-on torturing me, the one keeping me glued to my chair. But when she sets down a little silver box full of coke, that's when I realize my own stupidity. Anyway, why not, I told myself, and we snorted.

Once we did, she wet her index finger between her lips and picked up the crumbs off the glass table, then shoved the finger into my mouth, massaged my gums, and then slipped it into her own mouth...»

«What a whore» I snap, and now I'm hard as a rock myself, and I just woke up.

«Come on, don't say that...»

«Don't start, please. So?»

«I couldn't help it, Walter, you've got to understand me. The coke, the finger in my mouth, it was a moment. We kissed and started stripping. I won't get into the details, but you can imagine, we had our hands all over each other, rolled around everywhere, and made out like two stoned high-schoolers.

Once we hit the bed, Carlotta took some coke and poured it on my dick, spreading it over the tip with her tongue...»

«No, she's not a whore» I admit. «She's a goddamn training ship. And then what happened?»

«Then?»

«Then!»

«Then I fucked her for like four straight hours. I'm not kidding, it was insane. I think I flushed out my kidney stones when I finally came, four hours later, you know what I mean. And then...»

«What, there's more?»

«Then we took a bit of MDMA and just laid in bed cuddling, between fucks, obviously, and holy shit... it was the most devastating experience of my life. I mean, I've never felt anything like it, I've never had sex like that. I think I've fallen in love with Carlotta, Walter. I've never felt the things I felt today.»

Holy fuck, I knew where he was heading.

«You're seriously an undercover dumbass, because otherwise this level of idiocy is unexplainable. To look at you, you'd think you were smart, but then... It's obvious you've never felt things like that, because you've never done *shit like that*. Don't confuse sex – and drugs – with love, for fuck's sake. Not to mention it's been forever since you had normal sex, you'd have fallen under her spell even without the chemical add-ons. Sure, you'd have lasted three minutes, but the result would've been the same. Christ, Carlotta really *is* a whore. So she doesn't give a fuck about what's supposed to be her best friend.»

«No, that's not it. It's that she, like me, suddenly found herself feeling things she'd never felt before, we connected...»

«She stuck a coke-covered finger in your mouth, you imbecile, you didn't *connect*. She barged into your house and kicked the door down, end of story.»

Then she got herself kicked down.

Harsh, but fair.

«So what are you two planning now?»

«I have no fucking idea, cousin. When Ludovica finally called, I woke up and ran here. I left Carlotta in bed, still sleeping.»

«So you haven't even talked about it yet.»

«No, nothing.»

«Spectacular, really. And Ludovica? When she called, she didn't ask where you were, what you'd been doing, nothing?»

«No, nothing, she just told me about her grandma and that was it...»

«Oh right, and how's grandma?»

«I think she said she died.»

«You *think*?!»

«Yeah, well... I was a little distracted, still in bed inside Carlotta yet. But yeah, she died, now that you mention it. Dead, she said exactly that.»

«And what did you say to her?»

«Hopefully not some bullshit.»

«Jesus Christ, Fulvio... You've done plenty of stupid shit in your life, but this one, come on... this is definitely top five.»

«I was thinking pole position.»

«No, pretending to be a junkie stays at the top. Cheating on your fiancée, lots of guys do that, even on their wedding day. Pretending to be a heroin addict? That's unmatched.»

«Yeah, you're probably right.»

«Except you're getting married in a week.»

«Getting married?!»

«Oh, I don't know. If the grandma's dead, maybe the wedding should be postponed a bit, don't you think?»

«It's true, fuck... Postpone the wedding! Why didn't I think of that, it's brilliant. Postpone the wedding...» And he gets up, like he's suddenly remembered some important appointment, and heads for the door. 'It'll cost us a fortune, but luckily I've got the money... Thanks, cousin, you've been a huge help: postpone the wedding, what a stroke of genius...» And off he goes, just like that, at four-thirty in the morning, as fast as he'd arrived.

I stretch out on the couch, going back to bed would rob me of that lovely drowsiness before sleep, and try to ignore what I've just witnessed. I'd like to sleep a few more hours before I have to focus on how much brain my cousin's pickled away.

I want to go back to my two redheads.

But once back at the pub I see Duchovny banging both of them like there's no tomorrow.

From one's pussy to the other's ass, from one's ass to the other's pussy, then in one's mouth, then in the other's mouth, and so on.

Until the alarm rings.

I wake up so horny right now I'd even fuck someone my own age.

My first instinct, after coffee, is to drag Carlotta out of bed. I'm too curious, Fulvio is her best friend's fiancé, and she – who could get anyone with even a faint pulse – can't have just been carried away by the Id. There's got to be an undercurrent I'm not seeing, a motive. Otherwise the only alternative is some kind of psychotic sluttishness, and then maybe, in that case, I could get my gums massaged too.

Ah, if only that bastard cousin of mine had told me exactly where she bought her place, the slut!

I realize though, and pretty quickly, that it's probably better to pretend nothing happened. When you try to play peacemaker between two people about to tear each other apart, you always end up being the only one who gets hit, it's axiomatic. Not to mention that if it's true Carlotta got pounded for four hours, she's probably so inflamed by now that I doubt she feels like being pounded again.

Especially by someone my age.

Christ, I disgust myself, I'm not sugarcoating it: I'm really getting too wise. Okay, if I had the address I'd probably al-

ready be in a cab, ignoring the meter even, but who can say.  
For now I just think about her a little under the shower.»

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At work, luckily, we're still flying blind. Even Rambo seems to have softened up a lot since the director's funeral, now we even drift into small talk, which had never happened to me with any of my colleagues. Today she actually says she's worried about me, says I seem distracted and distant. Christ almighty, then what must I have seemed like a few days ago?

Talking is therapeutic anyway, and I can't dodge giving her a brief rundown of what's in my head at the moment, which she listens to attentively. She confirms, in fact, that girlfriends don't behave that way with each other. Males can, for the obvious reasons that mark their biological inferiority, but females don't.

«Obviously their friendship isn't really friendship, or at least it's one-sided. You have to remember, kids today, you know this better than me, are different from how we imagine them. They form and relate to, and with, a reality completely different from the one we experienced back when we had the good fortune of knowing the world before the internet and cell phones.

You said she's a model, so at the root of her behavior, beyond the inevitable bitchiness, there can only be one reason. The same reason common to all these new generations...»

«And that is?»

«Advertising!... seems obvious to me. Socially produced desire has folded back on itself so many times it's become one-directional...»

«In Italian, please.»

«Everybody's only aiming to go viral. It's plain as day. Previous generations achieved fulfillment through a path of study, specialization, a career, and a life of preserving and enjoying the fruits of their labor: economic and moral. Today's kids believe, hope, they can reach success, which in their case is always purely economic, without any path at all, thanks only to online visibility.

Your friend probably wanted to advertise herself.

In that world it's even possible her agent suggested it.»

«Maybe, but what publicity could she get out of wrecking some stranger's wedding? I mean, Fulvio's no rock star, it's not like it's newsworthy.»

If I have to let my imagination gallop, I like to think Ludovica and Carlotta are in on it together.

Two cow-friends conspiring to snag the first halfway decent sucker who crosses their path:

«Let's do it this time like this: I'll play the goody two-shoes, only take it up the ass and steer him toward marriage... then, right before the wedding, you show up and fuck him. After that we just let him be and see what happens.»

«Like, to see if he's more drawn to the hole or the slit?»

«Exactly...»

«I like it, come on. Pick one and get to work.»

Too bad a prank like that would really need way too many extras.

«So what do you think I should do, Rambo?»

«Absolutely nothing, I'm warning you. Forget any urge to get involved. Do like hamsters: play dead.»

«Sooner or later the avalanche of shit's gonna bury me anyway, one way or another?»

«You can bet on it, sure as death.»

«You really know how to cheer me up, fuck. Couldn't you have called in sick this morning?» I finish with a half-smile,

which soon enough my cousin, I'm sure, will wipe off my face.

But Fulvio's a no-show, and that evening, despite my predictions, he doesn't show up. The thought of having to call Ludovica to offer condolences puts me a little on edge.

In fact, even though I stick to the formalities, Ludovica seems embarrassed by my call, almost uneasy. Okay, calls like this are just simple formal protocols that could just as easily be skipped, only necessary to reaffirm a closeness that's not even real, if we're honest. In these cases most people ramble on with clichés like: «If there's anything I can do...» I'd love it if the bereaved – rather than the usual boilerplate thank-yous – actually got down to business and came back with a list of demands. Now that would be hilarious...

I, however, never use that formula. A «My thoughts are with you» yes, «I'm hugging you tight» yes. «You've got to be patient, the nice thing about shitty periods, they say, is sooner or later they end» yes, if I know the person well enough and don't have to worry too much about etiquette but not much more.

With Ludovica, being my cousin's girlfriend, I stay fairly casual but without overdoing it. Simple condolences and a very brief note about the privilege of going without suffering, a bonus healthy people love to mouth off about without paying too much attention, and a few other awkward phrases of circumstance. Not that I give a damn about her grandmother, but knowing certain things about the granddaughter – like the fact that for now she only takes it from behind – makes me stammer a bit, which maybe Ludovica mistakes for emotional participation in her grief. The weird thing is Ludovica seems to stammer even more than me.

Could it be she wants to fuck me too?

All of a sudden I'm afraid Fulvio might have told her more than he should, and that now Ludovica might be scared I'll try to squeeze an invitation out of her for the grandmother's funeral, if it weren't for the fact that, just before saying goodbye, she's the one who gives me the day and time of the service. I mean: if she didn't want me around, I think, she could easily have just kept quiet, couldn't she?!

I barely have time to make sense of the situation when Ludovica's name flashing on my phone, the phone I'd forgotten could even ring, gives me a half heart attack, and the joint, Christ almighty, drops to the floor.

What the hell could she have forgotten to tell me now? She's never called me before.

Does she really want to get laid?!

«Hello?!» I answer.

«Sorry, Walter, for bothering you...»

«Don't be» we've just said goodbye, «no bother...»

«Listen» she says, more and more embarrassed and stammering, and something starts to stir down in my lower belly, «I just wanted to ask if Fulvio... well, if Fulvio was with you or if maybe you know where he's ended up...»

«Fulvio?!»

«Yes, well... I haven't seen him since the other night, when Grandma got sick. We spoke briefly this morning, but then he disappeared. Don't get me wrong, it's not like we had plans or anything, but with what's happened, you know... I was expecting a bit more closeness. I even tried calling him, but he's not answering...»

«Well, he...»

«I know... he's not good with phones, I've figured that out, but surely not as much as you who's known him since he was born...» In reality I've never seen anyone born, thank

God, but I get her meaning. «Try to understand me, I'm a little ashamed to impose myself like this, you know...»

«Christ almighty, Ludovica, ashamed of what?!» sometimes you've just got to say it, for fuck's sake. «Fulvio's practically your husband and you're rightly worried, your grandmother's passed and he's nowhere to be found, is that what you're telling me?»

«I was hoping he was with you.»

«I'm sorry, Ludovica» just saying her name gives me a kind of tingle, «but I haven't seen him» (I lie, but for a good cause) «and I have no idea where he could be, but I'm sure he'll show up soon. You know, my cousin's a bit of a character, sometimes he takes these weird turns, you know what I mean?! It's possible that, in his head» I improvise like a jazz musician, «he thought, given what just happened, you might have wanted to be alone...»

«You think?»

«Yes, well... you know, he seems so sure of himself, but in the end he's a big baby, you should know that.»

«Yeah, I mean... in a way that's what I like about him, but now, you know... now I'm a little worried.»

«I can imagine, have you tried calling...» luckily the joint fell, otherwise it would've taken me less than half a second to blurt out Carlotta's name, forgetting Ludovica hadn't mentioned the lunch or the new house, «his aunt?» I save myself at the last second. Better to look like an idiot than...

«His aunt?!»

«What an idiot, sorry... I've got selective memory, I only remember the good stuff. See, I space out too, must be a family thing. Listen, don't worry, I'll let you know if I hear from him first, though I doubt it. By the way, the wedding then?! Is the date still confirmed or...»

«Well, that's something Fulvio and I need to talk about...»

«I see» I cut her off a little rudely maybe, but I'm not in the mood to sit through the spiel about the logistics of these already-doomed nuptials. That bastard must've holed up somewhere and now his pussy – or in this case I should say his ass, if it didn't sound so bad – is trying to make me take the fall for him. If only I could find an acceptable way to get Carlotta's number I could check if he's gone back to her place for round two, but then again, why should I care? She'll call her so-called friend herself. At this point I just want to pick up this damn joint off the floor and pass out on the couch. I've worked all day, for Christ's sake!

Only once I've cleaned the floor, rolled another spliff, and wedged myself into my underwear on the couch ready for another night of Californication, do I realize that the worm Ludovica passed me like a louse is already working away industriously.

«Where the hell have you got to, you idiot?» I ask myself and him.

But nothing, no answer. I light the joint and take a long drag.

«Hey, moron, can you tell me what the hell you're up to?»

Nothing. For a second I get the impression of hearing a sort of grunt, some kind of onomatopoeia straight out of a Vasco Rossi lyric, but nothing else. Probably the neighbors' stereo who, despite being barely over twenty, insist on listening to this crap. Sorry, but as much as I've always liked the guy, I've never been able to stand his onomatopoeic songs for onomatopoeically thinking people. All that junkie shtick to sell to junkies, and I take my Coca-Cola to school... oh, fuck off. What a bunch of idiots, the nation, I mean. Probably the planet.

«Ohhh...» another drawn-out onomatopoeia from the Komandante rapes my eardrum, worsening my already shaky mood and screwing up what was supposed to be a quiet evening of binge watching. By now even Californication and all the pussy I could enjoy – the only way I get to do that in this damned, drawn-out period – has started to bore me.

Play dead, Rambo, you're not wrong. At this point the evening could only get worse anyway.

I go to bed.

It's four in the morning and I've already slept more than seven hours, almost a record, that's why, when the phone starts ringing again, showing Unknown Number on the display, I'm basically already awake.

I answer, holding back a shiver. At this hour even call centers don't bother with me. The possibilities are only two: human error or disaster. And disaster, when it can't wait until morning, has to be particularly close and personal, the kind that comes with first-class invitations to funerals.

«Hello?!» loudly, like with Amazon, to be understood by the computer and transferred to the operator answering from the Antilles.

«Walter, your cousin's here...»

«Ca... Carolina?!» I stammer this time.

Well, it's obvious I'd like to screw her.

«Yes, it's me... listen, your cousin's here, he's not doing so well, he looks high... Like, druggup...»

«Sorry, what?»

«Druggup...»

«Carolina, Christ almighty, I'm over fifty, Italian please.»

«He looks like he's taken something strong.»

«Stronger than what you took the other night?» I can't help myself.

«Ah... he told you.»

«Yes, but what the hell were you thinking, you know he's about to...»

«He's sick, Walter» she cuts me off, «forget the rest, your cousin must've taken something weird, he's practically passed out on the couch, breathing but unconscious. Sorry but I don't want him in my house like this, should I call an ambulance or are you coming?»

«Christ, I'd sure like to come...» slips out of me, «but what kind of question is that? Of course you call an ambulance, for fuck's sake. If he's sick.»

«Yes, but if he goes to the ER they'll do a tox screen, and if he's taken something it'll show up and if Ludovica finds out...»

«What the fuck are you talking about, Carlotta?» Sorry Massimo, but your daughter's testing my patience. «You smeared coke on his dick, got yourself banged for four hours and now you're worried about him blowing up his wedding?! Call the fucking ambulance. I'm not a doctor. At most I'll get dressed and meet him at the hospital, but you call 911 right now.»

«But, if...»

Christ, I must be a genius because I even understand her when she's stuck on conjunctions.

«Doctors don't search your house, don't worry. And just think of the publicity! Your agent would be thrilled, I bet.»

«You think?!»

She really has the nerve to ask that, this slut.

«Sure. At worst get a neighbor to help you – someone with your tits won't have a problem with that – dump him on the landing, then call emergency services and done... You're not tied to him in any way. And anyway, I'm telling you, if it had been an overdose by now the poor bastard would've really gone to hell. No doubt about it!»

And sure enough, as soon as I get to the ER to try to make sense of the situation, I discover that Fulvio, my little cousin who for years pretended to be a drug addict, is actually on his way to meet his maker for a bad hit of heroin.

Talk about closing the circle.

Okay, I smoked a leftover joint from the ashtray before leaving and I'm more than a little confused: the doctor – the same one who mocked me for showing up at the ER with a rash – is really telling me my cousin is in a coma because he sniffed heroin?!

«But my cousin doesn't do hard drugs.»

The doctor smiles, but not rudely, like when she advised me to hurt myself before showing up again; more like a teacher dealing with a student who just can't grasp the lesson. «Mr. Cattaneo, your cousin» she rests a hand on a medical file as thick as a volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, «uses substances and has been in and out of rehab for over ten years.»

«Yes, but...» Useless to tell her the truth. Fulvio's fooled everyone for so long nobody would believe me now, that's for sure. «But can you end up in a coma from sniffing it, without even injecting it?»

«Of course, Mr. Cattaneo. It's heroin, not vitamin C. It depends on the quantity, obviously. Once the toxicology results come back we'll know more, but from what I saw when your cousin arrived, I'd think of a dose of heroin cut with strychnine.»

«Cut with poison?!»

«Strychnine, unfortunately, is often present in drugs, not so much as a cutting agent, but for the stimulant effect it has in small doses. I'm sorry, Mr. Cattaneo, at the moment your relative is in intensive care and will undergo all the necessary tests. For tonight there's nothing you can do. Go get some

rest, maybe notify his closest relatives, tomorrow the colleagues on the ward will be able to give you something more precise.»

The doctor's right, there's nothing I can do in here, but once outside I'll really have to bother to notify someone. Okay, Carla, the only relative that comes to mind, but how the hell do I tell Ludovica. I'm starting to get tired of being the messenger for this kind of news, but I can't even get as angry as I'd like when once again the phone starts demanding my attention.

«Carlotta?!» I answer, and I could answer the following questions without even letting her open her mouth. «Bad, he's in a coma... Maybe bad stuff cut wrong... No, I don't know why he started snorting heroin... Yes, I can avoid mentioning you to Ludovica... Of course, no need for her to know he came to your place... And what you two did, obviously...»

And in fact the call goes exactly according to this script.

«Just one thing, Carlotta... I'll cover your ass with your friend, but you just explain to me why the hell you had to sleep with him. That's the only thing I don't get, you could've screwed anyone, why your best friend's fiancé?!»

«I don't know, Walter, I felt like it and he was there, then...»

«It turned you on to screw your friend over too, didn't it? Because you've always wanted her and she never picked up on your advances, or maybe she just laughed them off thinking it was your way of teasing her... Because by thirty you're all bi, right? Or it turned you on to ruin something beautiful, you know what I mean! You've drunk a cocktail of libido, envy, and revenge, because maybe, with everything going so well for you, you started reading Nietzsche and, obviously, misunderstood... Something like that, am I right?»

Carlotta doesn't answer, and her silence obviously confirms everything I'm thinking. Christ, they should be calling me from Mensa by now. Only, despite this photonic IQ I've attributed to myself, I still can't figure out what I'm feeling towards my cousin. Do I really feel sorry for what happened? If I could go back, would I? Would I really trade all this action, this thrill, for the monotony of my couch? Because deep down, damn, I feel almost like Bruce Willis in his good days, obviously.

Not now, poor bastard.

A bit of a bastard myself, to be honest, I feel a bit of a bastard too, but...

«Christ almighty, Fulvio» I blurt out in the middle of the street, like a bum, «what the hell have you done?»

«Don't worry, cousin» lights up in my cerebral cortex, «I'm playing dead, like a hamster, like you taught me.»

What the hell!? «But... is that really you?»

«Yeah well, who else would it be, the Creator?! Only they're pumping me full of stuff here, I don't know how long I'll...» then a drawn-out vocal sound comes through.

«Christ, was that you last night?»

«Of course it was me, do you really think twenty-year-olds listen to Vasco?»

«I bet you like him!»

«You can say that again, he's the Komandante.»

«Go fuck yourself...» I almost forget I'm talking to someone in a coma. Assuming I really am, because... Well, because I'm shaken, in a lot of ways. «What are you thinking of doing with Ludovica now?!»

«If I'm honest, right now I couldn't give a fuck about Ludovica. You know, priorities change in here. Maybe, if we're feeling generous, don't tell her about Carlotta, for the rest do

whatever you want. We'll never know what the hell happened to me anyway.»

«What the hell do you mean, you're in a coma, you snorted heroin...»

«I snorted it?!»

«You didn't snort it?!»

«Don't trust the tests, remember that...»

«Christ, the lab techs.»

«Exactly, they'll make me come out positive for the stuff anyway.»

«But did you snort it or not?»

«If I told you I have no idea what happened to me, would you believe me?»

«Sure, I believe everything... and nothing.»

«You don't know, see.»

«Don't worry about what I believe or not... Tell me, damn it. What the hell did you do?»

«I'd like to know myself, I swear. I just know I let myself go and made a splendid mistake...»

«You banged Carlotta, high as a tire.»

«For four straight hours, if I wasn't in a coma my dick would still hurt.»

«And then?»

«Then I remember coming to your place, sitting on the landing for a bit, then you opened the door.»

«Yeah, but after?!»

«I remember leaving, I wanted to try to postpone the wedding for... you know what I mean.»

«You're ashamed, huh, bastard. You banged the big-titted one and were afraid you'd fallen in love because you'd never delivered strokes like that, dick anesthetized by coke.»

«And the MDMA after!»

«There you go... So?!»

«It was too early to go to Ludovica's place, she lives with her parents.»

«I know, I know... It's normal at twenty-five» I smirk, «and then?»

«I was hungry, wanted to eat something, maybe I went into a place but I don't remember which, then I must have blacked out. Now it's like I'm sleeping, I realized I'm in a hospital, but I can't see anything, I can't move, but my hearing works. I heard voices, talking about coma, heroin and rat poison, something like that. But me, you know...»

«Yeah, I tried to bring it up with the doctor who saw you first, but...»

«She didn't believe you, huh?!»

«She showed me your medical file, looked like Ulysses.»

«I played it well, applaud me!»

«What the hell are you saying?»

«It's a quote, damn it... Read a book every once in a while.»

«Don't get cocky, Caesar, you're more dead than alive and you still feel like joking?»

«Always, what kind of question is that... But tell me, do you think it's possible someone tried to take me out?»

«You think this thing was premeditated?»

«Who knows, all I know is I've never been inspired to snort heroin, it's not on the list of things I wanted to do before dying.»

«You have a list?!»

«Obviously.»

«And screwing Carolina was in your Top Five?»

«As crude as it may sound...»

«Human... cousin» I grant him, «human. That one could give a hard-on to the dead.»

«I sure hope so, Walter, because, to tell you the truth, things don't look too bright from here. There seem to be a couple of nurses in here, judging by the voices, and they sound worried.»

«See if you can tell what they're saying.»

«They're talking about...»

«About?!»

«Shift change, head nurse... oh okay, false alarm, they were afraid of being caught...»

«What do you mean?»

«I mean, from the noises I think I hear, they're fooling around with each other. They must've laid down on the bed next to me, I can hear moaning...»

«You're telling me that...»

«Sounds like it. Those two are going at it in intensive care. We're all unconscious anyway. Maybe that's what turns them on.»

Jesus Christ, I can't believe it! Even in a coma this guy's about to get some pussy, even if only by osmosis.

«If you woke up right now, fuck, you could probably bang them both.»

«Yeah, but they could be fatties.»

«You're being picky in your condition?! Christ almighty, take what comes...»

«I'll take who comes, rather.»

«Already?!»

«I don't know, they're trying to be quiet, but they're hot as boilers. Listen, I'm gonna give it a shot...»

«Yeah but wait a second... one more thing...»

...

«Come on, wait a second, we need to figure out what could've happened to you... With the tests, given your rec-

ord, they'll never look past the heroin, we need to figure out where you've been, what you did... Fulvio... Fulvio?!»

...

«Hello... Fulvio, are you there?! Helloooo?!»

...

Jesus Christ, I'm really standing in the middle of the street thinking I'm talking to my cousin like he's on the phone?

At this rate they're gonna hospitalize me too.

## 35

I wake up around noon, make myself a coffee, and debate whether to finish off the last joint I left burning out in the ashtray last night or try, for once in my life, to act like an adult.

Tough call.

Last night, once I was home, I felt something strange, something atypical for my usual sensory standards, more social, more about sharing, about connecting, than just the couch and... fuck, in the end I dialed Rambo's number on my cell. She picked up on the second ring – before I even realized what I was doing and hung up – and she didn't seem especially annoyed. Quite the opposite.

We started talking and – even though during the conversation, or rather my monologue, I felt a slight nausea at picturing myself almost like a normal person: standing in line at the supermarket, picking up shirts from the dry cleaner's, waiting for kids outside school – I told her everything that crossed my mind.

I don't know what came over me, but in a way it was even erotic. In fact, a couple hours later, after a long goodbye, I dedicated an epic jerk-off to her.

I'm just getting ready for the evening's encore - looks like Rambo's knocked Carlotta off the top spot for now – when, beaten to the punch, I have to pick up the phone. Caramba, I think, is the new star of my erotic dreams really trying to get in touch with me?! I'd like to be in touch with her too, glued to her like a stamp, anything for a bit of sex...

Maybe this time...

«Hi Rambo, did you miss me?!» I throw it out there, half-joking, half-serious.

«Don't be an idiot» she shoots back, killing an erection before it even starts. «Did you read the link I sent you?»

«No, but I was just thinking about you» I play it smooth. «Why?»

«I didn't want to be the one to tell you, but you need to take a look and...»

...

«I'm so sorry, Walter... We'll talk later maybe. Really, I'm sorry...» And she hangs up before I can say anything.

What the fuck is going on, I think, what's she sorry about? I mean, I've got a ton of guesses, but every idea my fried brain can generate, first among them my cousin's health, slides to the back of my drug-softened psyche, out of focus, unformed. Forming coherent thoughts right after waking up is not exactly my strong point.

Maybe this isn't the right time to start acting like an adult.

I stall, but once I click the link to the local paper Rambo sent me, I realize even half a joint won't put me back together:

«Wakes from coma, rapes two nurses, and dies.

It happened last night in the intensive care unit of San Martino Hospital in Genoa, where a patient admitted after a suspected heroin overdose regained consciousness and raped two nurses on the night shift...

Subscribe to keep reading.»

Holy shit, I don't need a subscription to know what's next, I can picture it perfectly: bullshit. The truth is, that bastard must've really come out of his coma just to slip into the nurses' bed and screw them like there was no tomorrow. Which, for him, actually turned out to be true.

The nurses' version – whether they were caught or not – must've written itself. If they'd admitted to being bisexual libertines, they'd have lost their jobs. This way they'll get exposure and cash, interviews, TV spots, and the royalties on the best seller some publisher is already dreaming up, and soon they'll tell their nursing jobs to go fuck themselves.

No point in stalling anymore, it's already aperitif time, so I grab the wooden box and roll a full, fat one, a joint to help me relax and finally focus on what, not even subconsciously, I'd rather not face.

Fulvio: my only cousin, my – probably – only friend, has he really gone and fucked off for good?!

Is Fulvio really... I mean... is he really dead?!

«Fulvio... Fulvio?» I try calling him, but nothing. No little light flickers on the control panel of my parietal lobe, no answer. The line really does seem dead.

Now, like it or not, I've got no choice but to figure out what I'm actually feeling about him, and it doesn't take me long to realize that yeah, this whole thing is messing me up. I'm feeling something new, something normal people probably call discomfort.

Maybe even regret.

Fuck, yeah... I'm sorry Fulvio's gone, I really am, but thinking about how it happened balances the scales, because an exit like his – the lucky bastard – really drives me insane.

Okay, I'll admit it, I'm probably using envy to numb the pain, no need to call Freud for that, but I'm running through a whole catalog of unknown emotions I can barely rationalize. All I know is I want to smoke, have sex, obviously, and at times, even cry.

Especially when I think about how long it's been since I got laid.

Seriously, I almost feel like crying.

But I'm not giving Fulvio that satisfaction. A guy who checks out after banging two nurses right after waking from a coma, in fact, a guy who wakes from a coma just to bang two nurses and then check out right after, I'm not crying over him.

I envy him, but I'm not crying.

That's for sure.

## 36

Marriage is no longer a problem, what worries me now is having to deal somehow with Ludovica: his fiancée who, poor thing, will cry for a long time over what, in the end, will be nothing more than a stranger to her.

She will never know, in fact, that her almost-husband pretended to be an addict his whole life to avoid the ordinary responsibilities of normal people, nor how he supported himself before inheriting his parents' money. She will never know that Fulvio drank like a bricklayer and smoked like a jazz musician, nor that her best friend, the one whose shoulder she's now shamelessly crying on, let herself get screwed as if there were no tomorrow.

She won't even know what it really means to get screwed.

At least not in the canonical way.

Ludovica will never know that Fulvio paid two lab technicians just to keep the privileges of his so-called addiction, and although she'll think she knows what caused his stay in intensive care, in fact she'll never really know.

Just like the rest of us.

But Ludovica's biggest question will be only one. Because, fine, one can come to believe that a person you thought you knew suddenly starts using heroin, something toward which, at least to her eyes, he had never shown interest or inclination, but how to explain that the same person, after waking up from a coma, threw himself at the first nurses he came across, raping them just like that, out of the blue, without even passing Go?

I could try to let her in on it, tell her something, bit by bit, cautiously, softening the edges, but by doing so, sketching

out the picture, even in the manner of the most psychedelic Picasso, I would only sharpen her astonishment and her outrage toward the male gender. It's not possible, in words, to render the nuances and folds of such a particular character. Fulvio wasn't a bad person, absolutely not, but how to explain that in words, especially to someone who thought she knew him?

I'd much rather have a dentist appointment than have to call Ludovica to offer my condolences again, I just hope she's already been informed of the situation, otherwise the phone call would turn into a bloodbath, and that, honestly, I don't think I deserve.

Give me a break, please, I just woke up.

«The phone of the person you are trying to reach may be turned off or temporarily unavailable...»

Thank God, I think, I've done my part. Ludovica will see the notification on her phone sooner or later and, if she feels like it, she'll call me, otherwise – I'd bet my hand on it – Carlotta will, in due time, give me all the details to attend my cousin's funeral.

I spend the evening smoking and rereading the article Rambo shared with me and, well, with each reread, despite myself, I feel a strange surge of admiration rising, I still can't stand him, mind you, for everything my cousin has lived through, for all the money that fell into his lap without any merit, and above all for all the pussy he got while I'm sitting on this fucking couch twiddling my thumbs, well: with my dick in my hand, to be honest, now that there's no danger of him walking in unannounced anymore, but I have to admit that the way he decided to go fuck himself off definitely deserves all my respect.

So I pour myself a generous glass from a bottle of cognac that's been gathering dust on the bookshelf since my separa-

tion, the one my ex used for flambéing Crêpe Suzette, I light yet another joint, take a couple of drags, then actually get up from the couch, raising the glass with an outstretched arm to the memory of Fulvio: that bastard who made me drink crappy beer just for show, who never missed a chance to make fun of me, but who somehow helped brighten up my stupid life... and before taking a generous sip I spill a little on the floor, like I've seen done in so many movies.

Holy Christ, it burns, I think after gulping down a generous mouthful, then I realize I've spilled the cognac on the coffee table into the ashtray where the joint was waiting.

Maybe a shred of paper was still burning or maybe those stories about a cigarette going out in gasoline for lack of oxygen instead of sparking a fire are all bullshit, because before I can even process what's happened the ashtray is on fire, and before I know to run into the kitchen for water the Ikea honeycomb-cardboard-and-wood-fiber coffee table bursts into flames. My cedar box catches fire too, scenting the room like one of those stick-diffuser things they sell in overpriced home décor stores downtown, and right after – Christ almighty, no way – even the couch where just moments ago I was thinking about jerking off starts burning like the bonfire of San Fortunato.

I'm so high and shocked I can hardly move, let alone make it to the kitchen. But is it possible that everything my ex left me leads to disaster?

The couch is blazing, the air suddenly becomes unbreathable, though I can still catch a whiff of marijuana, so despite myself I have to try to get moving, let the survival instinct take control of my body numbed by the active ingredient, while a myriad of crazy thoughts overlap on my prefrontal cortex, stuff like why the hell the bitch even left me a bottle when I don't even know how to make crêpes. Why a damn

Ikea coffee table instead of some marble designer piece, for example, like the ones you see in all those architecture magazines that make you feel like a bum while you're waiting to get in at the dentist's or the hairdresser's, but most of all: why, fuck, I mean why, didn't I just stay renting instead of saddling myself with a photon-mortgage for a house I never wanted and where, in the end, I was dumped all alone?! All questions without answers, of course, because it's not like there's time here to start philosophizing, if I don't move I'll end up roasted myself, like a turkey forgotten in the oven on Thanksgiving by someone who, lucky him, is screwing in the other room.

The neighbors are already on the landing by the time I finally get out, they've already called the fire brigade and they're staring at me funny because I've got my whole Borsalino collection stacked on my head, one on top of the other. I couldn't just let them burn, and I needed my hands free to make a quick exit, but I don't waste time explaining it to them, to them I've always been the weird neighbor anyway.

I bet they're getting off on my apartment burning down.

Well, I would.

The Fire Department, thankfully, doesn't take long; they really do move fast and efficiently. They arrive – no pleasantries, they don't even bother to greet me to tell the truth, nor do they stop to waste time with a couple of female neighbors, hotter than my apartment, who even went and changed for the occasion, quick as a Formula One pit stop – they smash the living-room windows – couldn't they just open them? – and with big extinguishers on their backs and the water jet from outside they throw me an Amnesia-style foam party. Then, in less than an hour, they leave with my neighbors' phone numbers, hand things over to the Police for the paperwork and all the formalities – luckily my Iranian box burned

with all its contents – and late at night, still with my hats on my head, I realize that the fire damage, Christ almighty, is really the least of my problems.

Sure, they kept the whole building from going up in flames, but they really screwed up my apartment.

Completely.

God, how I could use a joint right now.

After a couple of days I can barely stop swearing: the apartment is gone, destroyed, and what's left of it looks like it's come straight out of one of the last shots of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – only without the signs of a heavy psychedelic binge – and me, in this state, I'm a far cry from looking like Johnny Depp.

The couch is completely charred, all the Ikea furniture looks like it's caught leprosy, the air is still unbreathable from the stench of smoke and the soot, mixed with the foam from the fire extinguishers, has formed a crust that even the most chemical degreasers can't shift. Only my Borsalino collection has survived the fury of the sprinklers, everything else is lost.

I'm unreachable, the landline depends on the power and my cell phone was on the coffee table when I had the brilliant idea of paying tribute to my cousin. I'm completely disconnected now, the outside world no longer exists and even my neighbors, once the firefighters with their calendar-worthy bodies had evaporated, promptly retreated into their respective tombs without even trying to ask if I needed anything: God forbid I might have said yes. I'll be hearing from them soon, no doubt, when those in the neighboring apartments, for one reason or another, have their lawyers contact me to try to squeeze money out of me in all the most creative ways. I'm insured, at least theoretically, because insurance policies only work for people who don't actually need them, not for normal folks. Financially speaking, anyone without some decent firepower can't expect to be taken seriously by insurance companies, no matter how regularly they pay their premiums.

Poor people take out insurance for superstition, certainly not to make use of it in any way.

I've got no electricity because the system is fried and the fridge gives off the stench of an open-air cemetery which – mixed with the burnt smell - I imagine must resemble the reek of the ghats of Varanasi when they cremate members of the lower castes, the ones you can't waste too much wood on. Even my armpits seem perfectly in tune with Asian standards, after forty-eight hours of delirium trying to give my apartment some semblance of habitability again, and the only thing I can do to keep myself remotely functional is drink warm Tennent's while trying to find my wallet in the middle of all this chaos so I can head to the discount store and finally buy something solid to eat.

The only thing that still seems to work, I realize with a shiver, is the doorbell. In fact it takes me a while to figure out where this strange sound I don't think I've ever heard is coming from and when I finally realize, I find Carlotta on the landing:

«What...» she stumbles, looking around. «What the hell happened in here?»

«Nothing» I say, stepping aside to let her in, «my apartment just caught fire.»

«Oh» she goes, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, then adds, «come on, hurry up, I'm double-parked.»

«Excuse me?!» I'm too wrecked to tell her to fuck off.

«The funeral, it's your cousin's funeral, remember?»

«Well, actually no... Nobody told me.»

«You don't answer your phone.»

«I don't even have a phone anymore, Christ almighty, are you for real?» I ask.

«Come on, move it, I'm waiting downstairs» she goes on, she doesn't seem used to listening to other people, even

though there's not much to listen to here, does she not see the mess I'm stuck in?!

«Come on, Carlotta, can't you see the state I'm in? I'm in no condition to attend a funeral, have you even looked around?»

«Okay...» she says, «I'll go find a parking spot and wait for you, you've got half an hour max, freshen up.»

«Freshen up?!» I snap, «I don't even know if I've got a dry suit left.»

«Don't worry, it's hot, you'll dry in the sun in no time, at worst I'll crank up the heater» and off she goes... As if nothing had happened, as if I'd simply told her I still had to put my pants on.

No point arguing, Carlotta is so used to the power of her own breasts she has no idea how to deal with other people, it must never have happened to her not to get what she wants, ever. I could be the first to give her this enlightening lesson, if it weren't for the fact that, almost without realizing it, I'm already under the shower, cold, no less, because even the hot water, for reasons unknown, somehow needs electricity, just like the hair dryer and almost everything else.

I slip, still half-wet, into a grey Brioni that only the last of the James Bonds would recognize as fake, not too wet since it was in a waterproof garment bag, but stinking like an ashtray where a pack of unfiltered Gitanes has been put out, and a pair of Church's monkey straps that would make quite the statement if they weren't soaked, and now, besides soaking my feet, they also make a strange noise when I walk. I wonder what the hell I'm doing, it's almost November, and okay, temperatures aren't what they used to be, but I'm really about to head out in a summer suit, wet shoes, looking worse than a drunk Tom Waits – not at the end of a concert but at the end

of a tour – and on the verge of collapse, since I haven't had anything solid in three days.

This funeral, Christ almighty, it already starts off wrong. Let's see if I can manage to turn it into a fucking happy hour.

Two for the price of one.

Fuck you, Fulvio, I hate you so much right now.

So much for a final farewell.

At least the wide-brimmed gray Borsalino I throw on makes its damn statement, taking the edge off the rest, too bad I have to keep it on my lap the whole ride because the slut is waiting for me behind the wheel of a brand-new fucking Porsche.

Didn't see that one coming.

«You bought yourself a Porsche?!»

«Yeah, well...» she says, at first a little embarrassed, or at least that's how I want to picture it, «with all the money they gave me it was the least I could do, you know? To write it off, that's what the accountant says. I don't know, they've got their own jargon, those bean counters. Truth is, I don't even like it that much, it's too low for my taste, but the VAT, or something like that, you know, to pay fewer taxes.»

I barely sit down and I already want to smash her nose in with a clean elbow. I'm so pissed off I almost don't notice the color of the dress she's wearing, which sure as hell doesn't suit the occasion.

Almost.

«What the fuck are you wearing, you think that's a dress for a funeral?»

«Why, should I have dressed like a Sardinian widow? At least I don't stink like an ashtray.»

I nod, shutting the door, realizing I'm gripping the handle so hard I might break it.

«And what the hell color is that?» I mean the dress.

«Periwinkle, it's called periwinkle. A sort of violet, as you can clearly see.» And she peels out like someone who hasn't figured out how a clutch works.

«And you bought a *yellow* Porsche?!»

«It's called Speed Yellow, the color, or that's what they told me. Not bad, huh?»

«Yeah» I nod, «it matches the dress.»

«You know, that's true» she says, taking her eyes off the road to look down at herself, smiling.

We'll definitely get noticed at the funeral. Too bad I'm not the one driving. Pulling up in the passenger seat, what a fucking shame, Christ! I'd be tempted to get out before we arrive, but I don't have the strength to walk, let alone cook up a plausible excuse.

Truth be told, it doesn't even look like the right road to the cemetery, but maybe Ludovica, or whoever, arranged some kind of farewell somewhere else. Surely not in church. Fulvio might've given in at the altar for pussy, to get married, but no way for a funeral.

If he'd been sick, sure, when you're shitting yourself you'll grab onto anything – even Catholicism – it's human. But checking out like this, from zero to one, no chance. He wouldn't have had the time to flush his reason down the toilet.

«Can you tell me where the hell we're going?»

«To Principe.»

«The train station?!»

«Palazzo del Principe, which is right behind it.»

«For a funeral?!»

«And what do you want me to say, they'll rent it out for anything as long as you pay. And according to Ludovica, there were too many people to give him a final farewell in the

cemetery atrium, you know, since he's not even passing through church.»

I start smelling smoke and it's not just my suit. How many fucking people could there be to give my cousin a final farewell? On his side there's no one left but me and Carla, maybe a couple of unknown cousins, but that's it. Then Ludovica, obviously, a few from her family, Carlotta, and then? Sure, when that kind of money comes rolling in, so do whole new squads of friends, long-lost relatives you've never seen, a horde of shameless profiteers, but that many, enough to rent out a place like that?

«So there'll be a buffet too?!»

«Count on it» she says with a half-smile.

Finally, some good news, fuck. Finally, some good news. I'm so hungry I'm starting to hallucinate, because once we arrive, while Carlotta – after a thousand maneuvers – tries to park these two hundred grand we're sitting on, I swear I see Luisa talking to the ER doctor who mocked me for showing up with dermatitis and who later gave me updates on the star of this fucking day.

And even granting that a doctor might actually want to attend the funerals of her ex-patients – which would shoot her straight into the top spots of my “women I'd like to spend time with” list: a whole different league from just wanting to fuck – still, what the hell would Luisa have to do with my cousin?

In short, I'm fucked.

Once inside, walking under frescoed ceilings and marble floors laid out in alternating black-and-white blocks, I realize something's really wrong because instead of bats I see peacocks, and the mourners who'd seemed to fill the entrance while we were parking the Porsche have completely vanished.

Only peacocks.

I panic, and if that's anything to go by there's a real chance I even misread the yellow of a taxi for a fucking Carrera 4 GTS coupe. Even Carlotta, suddenly, seems to have vanished. Did I imagine her?

I start to worry, if it weren't for the fact that – I check my trousers and jacket – I've got neither cash nor wallet on me, the suit I'm wearing smells like indoor barbecue, so there's no way I could have taken a cab without money; no taxi driver, ever, would've let me out without paying, nowhere, not even in Genoa. Not to mention that if I'd imagined Carlotta I would've dressed her completely differently and I surely wouldn't have picked such a stupid dress in a colour I don't even know the name of. I would've pictured her half-naked, not dressed as a Walt Disney character.

You get me.

I follow signs for what's listed as the Galleria Aurea, thinking that, given the name, it should be one of the main locations, and as I get closer I do pick up a background murmur. I run my hand over damask fabrics in alternating mustard and vermilion, with heraldic symbols embroidered at their centers, that cover the walls from floor to ceiling, just to make sure they're real – then I kick a peacock with my foot – hard but not hard enough to send it crashing if it weren't real, for the same reason and... Christ almighty, it actually slams into the wall and doesn't get up.

I move to get out of the way quick when: «Hey, this poor thing's sick» says Carlotta at the back of the room.

«I think it's sleeping» I say, «but where the hell did you disappear to?»

«I forgot something in the car» she says, fingering a palladium-tone ostrich Hermès Birkin that only now I realize she has with her. Another thirty grand, give or take, that her ac-

countants will somehow have written off, and which, I must admit, matches her dress perfectly, though I repeat, it has fuck-all to do with an occasion like this.

After rounding the corner and leaving the peacock on the floor, I finally start to see people moving back and forth. As we make our way on, the mourners increase in number and so does my surprise, at first, when I realize I don't know a single attendee, and exponentially more when I actually spot Luisa, seated at the far end of the nave next to the ER doctor.

«Luisa?!» I go up to her, «but... what are you doing here?»

«I'm here for Fulvio, what else?» she says with a 16:9 smile that rings strangely in a place like this.

«But... but...» I stammer, «I didn't know you and my cousin were friends, where did you meet?»

«I didn't even know you were related» she says. «Fulvio and I met at the club» she adds, without specifying, as if there could only be one club.

«Club?! Which club?»

«Well, the Golf club, what else.»

«Fulvio played golf?» I'd have imagined everything, but never that.

«No, well, I don't play either, if that's what you mean, but it's one of those places where, if you can, joining is sort of obligatory... more for the contacts, the people, than for the clubs and the holes, you know what I mean?» And as if the discomfort weren't enough, I get seriously annoyed. «Have you seen him yet?»

«Who?!»

«Fulvio, who else?!»

«No, I just arrived, and...»

«He's dressed to the nines, looks great» she says, and for a moment I don't get why she's smiling about it. Sure, the un-

dertakers may have done a good job dressing and making him up, but smiling about it? «Mind you, there's a hell of a smoke smell in here, maybe we should ask them to open a few windows, excuse me a sec» and off she goes too, looking for someone from the organisers to get some air flowing which won't do shit to fix my outfit. I look for the doctor with my eyes, she was here a minute ago, but I can't find her. In compensation, half-hidden behind a curtain, I think I see Rambo, but before I can push through the crush – there are way too many people in here – she too disappears.

My energy's draining, I really need to eat something, eat or collapse somewhere and sleep, otherwise I'll end up seeing Fulvio smilingly moving through the crowd like nothing happened.

At the far end of the hall, amid the swirl of bodies, rests the coffin on tripods draped in damask. I approach and even that, in perfect keeping with my cousin's weirdness, isn't the classic shape, it looks like a simple dark wooden cuboid, a classy coffin but absolutely minimalist. Never seen anything like it.

I edge forward slowly, on the verge of exhaustion, and the crowd of mourners seems to part like the Red Sea at my passing, like some choreography, as if everyone, though they don't know me, somehow realizes I'm the closest thing Fulvio has left, apart from Ludovica, of course, who I don't see anywhere.

They probably guess from my state: I'm gaunt, wasted, hollow-eyed, I haven't slept for almost seventy-two hours aside from a few shaky dozes, my bed's still soaked, and I still haven't remembered to take my hat off even indoors, and in front of a corpse no less.

They probably credit all that to grief, sure, what the hell would they know about my fucked-up apartment, about my whole flambé existence?!

But why, I wonder, why... Why the fuck does everyone look so relaxed, smiling, and badly dressed?!

Are they American?!

A few metres separate me from the coffin, the murmur fades as if everyone's just waiting for me to arrive. I take the Borsalino off my head and, holding it by the brim at chest height, take the last steps towards my cousin. In the near-silence my shoes squeak annoyingly and I think I hear muffled laughs – or at least I think I do – because when I finally grab the rim of the coffin with my free hand to focus on Fulvio's body, the crowd's chatter explodes again, double and triple in volume, and inside the coffin, which I find is full of ice, there's no corpse of my cousin, just a single – only one – fucking bottle of Tennent's.

What the hell is going on here? I wonder, and suddenly I notice a couple of girls wearing the same dress as Carlotta. Finally the illumination: these bastards who'd been laughing and applauding like trained monkeys are not mourners at all but simple guests.

Could Fulvio really be such an asshole?

Suddenly the crowd falls silent. I don't turn, but I realize someone's behind me, I'd heard footsteps, and now, with my senses sharpened by stupendous fatigue to which I'll inevitably surrender, I can feel their breath at my back.

I'm lucid and focused, like some monk meditating half-naked on a glacier – assuming those internet bollocks are true – but I don't move. I want confirmation first; I might smell him if it weren't for this suit. I wait for him to say something, to speak to me, I need proof it's him, and finally: «This time I got you...» he says, with his last energy, and before he can

finish the sentence I snatch the bottle from the coffin, spin round, and aim it straight at his fucking head.

Fulvio moves, the bottle slips from my hands, arcs over the guests' heads and smashes through a leaded window, for which I already imagine I will have to sign a couple of kilos' of IOUs, and then, devastatingly – God damn, I can't believe it – crashes into the Neptune statue below, cutting off its trident.

After a roar of surprise, maybe approval, certainly great amusement, everyone runs into the garden to photograph Neptune's hand on the ground, clutching the trident, with the Tennent's bottle – that devil's brew – miraculously unbroken. For the first time in my life I understand what resignation means; I mentally tell everyone to go fuck themselves and I head straight for the buffet.

I need to eat something before I get arrested.

But instead of a buffet it's Rambo who suddenly steps in front of me, probably sent ahead by the resurrected cousin.

«What are you doing here?» I ask, without even saying hello.

«Your cousin put me in on it, he wanted to pull this prank on you and...»

«You knew?!»

«Well, yes... Fulvio came to the library to see me, he sold it as some sort of family tradition, you know: the prank on the best man, that sort of thing.»

«And you didn't bat an eye, huh?!»

«It seemed a bit heavy as a joke, I won't lie, but Fulvio assured me you wouldn't take it badly, that it'd be like you'd just met. Besides, sorry, you've been a proper prick to me more than once, what was I supposed to do? Warn you?!»

«Well, why not.»

«I tried, you idiot» and she punches me on the shoulder like middle school kids do, except in my condition I almost fall to the floor. «After our chat the other day, when you proved you weren't a complete moron, I felt guilty and I called you, repeatedly. You could have answered, though!»

«Hey Walter, come on, relax... I didn't think you'd take it this way...»

I turn around, and there he is, my cousin, alive and well, dressed like a fucking penguin, with all the guests lined up behind him in perfect silence, like warriors ready to charge.

But at the buffet.

God, how I hate him. Right now I honestly wish he really had gone to hell, because now – besides wrecking my apartment, a stained-glass window, a statue, all things I'll have to take out a stack of loans to cover – this bastard has also dumped on me the responsibility of his wedding. He knows, the bastard, that I can't help but try to impress people, that I care way too much about what they think, that I have no backbone, no life, nothing at all, the bastard. He knows I can't do anything but...

«You're a piece of shit» I swallow the toad and put on a show, «you made me believe you were dead!»

«Because I know you hate weddings.»

«And you think that's a good reason?»

«I wanted you as my best man, you wanted to ditch me...»

«I would've given you hell, but I'd have come.»

«Are you sure?!»

I pause for a second, just for the theatrics, to look like I'm weighing it up, to play the guy at the window, if you know what I mean. Of course I would have gone to his wedding, no matter what I claimed for show or for the love of banter; I would never have abandoned him in a moment like that.

Grumbling, maybe, but yes, I would have gone.

«No, you're right, bastard» I grit my teeth, «you really got me.»

The crowd erupts into some sort of messy, festive wave.

Fulvio and I hug, and I really give it my all not to Tyson-bite his ear off.

«Christ, you stink» he mutters, «did you smoke all of Jamaica?»

«I wish» I confess, «there was a fire in my building. A mess. Look, I need to eat something before we start, it's been rough days...»

«Of course, let's go» he says, «shit, now I feel guilty, I didn't think you'd take my 'death' so hard, I didn't know you cared that much.»

I keep grinding my teeth, harder and harder.

«But where's Ludovica?»

«Well, it's bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony. You really don't know shit about weddings, huh?! You only know funer...»

«Drop it, please.»

«Touché.»

As the waiters start setting up an appetizer buffet behind the coffin, now filled with champagne bottles, Fulvio and I move into a private area of the venue, where, thank God, they serve us a whole range of hors d'oeuvres and a bottle of Louis Roederer Cristal 2002.

While I devour the food, Fulvio goes on explaining the reason for his little stunt.

«I wanted you as my best man, of course, and I also wanted to mess with you a bit. So I made a deal with Carlotta to make you think I'd cheated on Ludovica, to have some kind of triggering effect, you know? Something that would first make you stew and then justify my ending up in the hospital...»

«Wait» I say, sighing with relief and with my mouth full of what I think is caviar, «you never actually fucked Carlotta?!»

«No, well...» he starts stammering.

«Yes or no?!»

«Look, Carlotta and Ludovica have been together since preschool, you know... They've always done everything together, they're young, and with young people... complementary, too, like yin and yang, and it often happens that...»

«Are you telling me you all fuck together?!»

«Well... but that's not the point.»

I can't believe it, this just keeps getting worse. Is he seriously telling me he bangs both of them?

«You're marrying Ludovica, right? That's real?»

«Of course, I'm in love.»

«Okay, but you're also banging Carlotta?!»

«Okay, okay... Carlotta and I also sleep together, but it's not exactly the same thing.»

Christ, I'm the one who's going to have a meltdown here.

«Are you going on a honeymoon?»

«Of course, French Polynesia.»

«With Ludovica?»

«What kind of question is that.»

«And Carlotta?»

«That's classified information, it's not supposed to get out, you know what I mean...»

«Carlotta is coming on your honeymoon too?!»

«Well, she's joining us on another flight, we can't blow our cover with Ludovica's parents.»

«So basically you're marrying them both.»

«From a certain point of view...» he chuckles.

I'm stunned, pissed off, jealous, curious, all at once, and I feel an instant ulcer perforating every soft organ inside me.

Maybe, I think, it's all fake, and he's still just trying to screw with me.

«You have to understand» he goes on, «they've been a couple forever, I'm the newcomer. Carlotta's not Catholic, she doesn't care about marriage, while Ludovica...»

«She's a virgin?»

«Excuse me?»

«Is Ludovica really a virgin, or were you bullshitting me?»

«No, she's a virgin, and she really wants to wait until we're married to... well, you get it.»

«So you stick it up her ass and save the rest for Carlotta.»

«You're always so vulgar, let's just move on, okay... Back to us. I wanted you to think I'd ended up in the hospital and I used the cheating as the trigger...»

«But I went to the ER, I spoke with the doctor, how the hell did you convince her to play along?»

I force myself to change the subject so abruptly; I'd like to know more, everything, about this threesome, but then I'd end up pathetic.

Or criminal.

«Simple, I donated a CT scanner to her department and she lost her head. I even invited her, of course.»

«Yeah, I thought I'd seen her. And Luisa, what about Luisa?»

«Luisa?!»

«An ex of mine, let's say. She's here too. Said you met playing golf.»

«Ah, that Luisa, I get it. No, she's got nothing to do with this, I didn't even know you two knew each other. She's a nympho I met at the club bar, she hangs around to sleep with the most pedigreed men, she's completely wild, and after a couple of beers she forgets all about family crests, if you

know what I mean...» and here I'm about to have a coronary, «anyway, I invited Martina, just to mess with you a little and to make sure there was someone you knew. She's the one who told me about your weed-fueled rants, when you thought you were talking to me, imagining me in a coma but still mentally conscious, while two nurses were screwing in the bed next to mine in intensive care. Which, if you think about it, was also a sort of premonition in a way you placed me between two women, and I went straight to the altar. I couldn't let that one slide. I even hired a graphic designer to whip up a fake web page that looked like *Repubblica's* site. A master-stroke...»

«So we never actually talked, I just imagined everything?»

«Are you trying to worry me?»

«But I tossed a beer can from one window to the other and you caught it!»

«I was opening the window to get rid of the smell when I saw the can fly past and I caught it. Pure luck.»

«And the one in the toilet?!»

«Well, it was in the toilet, sealed, I figured you were pampering me.»

«And the empty cans?»

«What do you mean?»

«The ones you drank, where did they go? I never found them, did you throw them out the window?»

«What the hell, no, I tossed them in the trash. Why?»

«No, nothing.»

«Walter, are you sure you're okay?»

«Of course» I reply. The food is actually reviving me, but I've never been further from «okay.» I reek like an ashtray, my feet are soaked, my blood pressure is four digits, and my envy is off the charts, higher than Salieri's, I'd bet. At least Wolfgang Amadeus had qualities worth envying; he wasn't

just kissed but practically raped by fortune, unlike my cousin. There was real talent there to destroy your health over.

Here... here there's absolutely nothing.

And the day has barely begun.

Carlotta rushes in, insisting we have to stick to the schedule: meeting the guests, the informal aperitif, the bride's entrance, photos, the ceremony, photos, the real aperitif, photos, the lunch, photos, the first dance, photos, the cake cutting, photos, and then the big party that will carry everyone from dusk till dawn, in an atmosphere worthy – at least for me – of a Tarantino film.

If Fulvio hadn't confessed his bigamy, I'd never have understood why she was so frantic. In the end, this wedding is hers too, and tonight she'll finally get to deflower her wife.

Even if it takes a strap-on.

The only positive thing in the middle of all this madness is that Carlotta seems to mean I should go change. I ask for clarification and find out that yes, there's an outfit waiting for me, shoes included. Normally I wouldn't even have considered it, hell, I'd have been offended at such blatant mistrust in my wardrobe, but in my current state I can't exactly make it a matter of principle.

Turns out the outfit is a dark grey Armani three-piece, genuine, not a knockoff; a black Finollo shirt with a thin matching tie; and the shoes, Christ, I can't believe it, the shoes are Lobb, John Lobb's fucking Alexander: all stuff that, obviously, my cousin will never get back, even if he threw away all his class and reputation just to think, not even ask, but merely think, that I might ever return such a getup.

While getting dressed, I can't help but struggle to hide an erection I'm ashamed of, because the bastard has bent me over, pulled my trousers and underwear down and is about to sodomize me without any ceremony. A couple of dresses

were enough to make me docile as a fucking lamb. I know I'm prostituting myself, but this shoes, I don't had words to describe these shoes... they are really unbelievable.

I don't mind being such a whore anymore.

Christ, I look in the mirror and, dressed like this, I really look like another person, like I crawled out of a fucking fashion magazine, and I've got a burning desire to drink and mingle with the guests. Too bad they saw me before the transformation.

Suddenly I'm full of energy, toned like Scarface, and in a way I even resemble him in clothes and manners, because dressed like this all insecurities vanish, all fears evaporate, and I can't stop looking at myself in the mirror, I really am a different man.

In an instant I don't give a shit about my apartment burning down, I don't care about wrecking an ancient window, the Neptune statue or flattening a peacock, I don't care that my cousin pulled this stunt and all the consequences, I don't care about anything anymore because today, dressed like this, I actually have a chance to fuck someone.

That's for sure.

Fuck, this champagne is incredible.

I take a deep breath, finish what's left of the bottle and walk toward the guests one step behind the groom, shoulders back, chest out and a broom shoved up my ass. I'm a new man now, the power of booze, sugar and, above all, the suit.

Proverbs don't know shit.

After shaking a few hands, at least the ones not already clutching a glass – the guests fight over champagne and Iranian pistachios like a pack of starving monkeys – I zero in on the doctor who had such fun mocking me. Never mind trying to guilt her into doing me a favor; right now a blowjob would already be more than enough, even though healthcare people,

well, once in bed they're not easily distracted by common inhibitions.

But the doctor doesn't seem particularly erotic at the moment; she apologizes warmly for the totally unprofessional prank she pulled on me, something that, if it came out, she admits, could even cost her the job, but the pediatric CT scanner Fulvio donated to her department, a toy worth almost half a million euros, installation costing another fifty grand, will save a ton of lives, and for that reason she trusts me to keep it quiet.

Christ almighty, I think, that bastard flushed almost six hundred grand down the toilet just to piss me off, and all I've got so far are two grand's worth of shoes and maybe the same for the suit. I feel the bitch rising on my back; I'd like to tell the doctor that my confidentiality requires at least a blowjob, but she brought children's lives into it and my pragmatism doesn't go that far. I let it slide with a smile that risks popping a filling and slip away promising revenge, sooner or later.

Confidentiality my ass.

I spot Luisa near the freezer-coffin with an empty flute of champagne in her hand, proof someone drank at least one. I rush over, take the bottle from the waiter's hand and fill her glass to the brim. She thanks me by lifting it my way, but before I can grab one for myself – not appropriate to drink straight from the bottle among guests – another flute is thrust toward me. I look at the hand holding it: a guy with light, almost blond curls I swear I've seen somewhere before. I fill his too with blatant annoyance, I'm no waiter, who took me for this idiot! But then, sizing up his stupid challenger's smile to make him understand I'm the groom's best man, not catering, and that he can go happily and promptly fuck off, I no-

tice under the jacket of an unlikely Oviessa suit a fucking Jethro Tull t-shirt.

«Thanks a lot» says Luisa, «how's the bowel?»

What a bitch, she dragged her shitty bartender along and they must've even spoken. She's found out I never came back for her and now, apparently, she even takes him to bed. Maybe she'll even get him to wash himself.

I leave without replying, taking the bottle but no glass. The weight of the bastardry on my back grows enormously, to sedate it I hide behind one of the brocade drapes surrounding the hall and attach myself to the bottle, through which I see, in the bay window, a girl bent down searching for something she must've lost.

I try to focus, but the sun's rays behind her make it hard to see clearly. I get closer, tilting my head to the side to avoid being blinded. It's Carla, I realize, and she isn't looking for anything. Apparently – fuck, I can't believe it – some guest behind her, pants at his ankles, is actually pounding her for real.

«Carla?!» I can't hold it in.

«Hi Walter» she says, between moans, like it's the most natural thing in the world, «I was looking for you earlier... Now I met... what's your name again?» she asks the guy behind her, who shows no sign of stopping and doesn't even look embarrassed by my presence.

«Daniel...»

«Daniel» she confirms, panting, the pace picking up, this guy is clearly turned on by having an audience.

I take another swig, the situation is too absurd.

«Pleasure, Daniel» I say instinctively, without meaning to.

He raises a hand in greeting and keeps on banging away two steps from the guests, hidden only by a thick curtain.

«All good then?» I blurt again, just to kill the embarrassment. I should leave, but I can't stop admiring my cousin, who doesn't give a single fuck and isn't showing the slightest trace of embarrassment.

«Better than ever» she says, «as you can see yourself» and nods back at Daniel, who's going at it like there's no tomorrow. «The antibiotics worked.»

«Perfect» I say, «perfect... So, see you later, ok?!»

«Sure, I want you on my dance card before tonight» she says, «you know what I mean...» The moaning intensifies.

And while she's coming, I leave.

I slip out of the bay window carefully, trying not to disturb the curtains, and shudder at the thought of screwing my cousin right after Daniel and who knows how many others.

I'm not that sporty, after all.

Three steps from the brocade drape, behind which I've just left my cousin in the middle of her orgasm, I'm back among the crowd, both stunned and envious of the utter freedom from judgment those two just displayed.

And the bitch on my back keeps growing, because – differences aside – I could never be so relaxed in a situation like that, and also because the chance to stick it in her just went to fuck itself.

Something's happening, Carlotta enters the hall where we're gathered, walking with purpose, followed by three other girls in the same periwinkle dress: the bridesmaids. Carlotta's dress isn't the same as theirs, I realize, it's more elaborate, she's more than just the maid of honor, obviously, she's the second bride, though no one else can know that.

We're led into the next hall, same shape and size, but with six rows of chairs set up, three on each side, and in the center a white carpet where Ludovica will soon be escorted. At the end of the aisle, an arch of colorful flowers rises over a small

table draped in the same fabric, behind which some municipal official, or whoever, dressed in gray, will soon officiate the ceremony.

Carlotta points to a chair beside the table where I'll soon have to sit, then: «You remembered the rings, right?» she says with a smile.

«What, are you stupid? I came to a funeral, not this farce.» I'd like to be more diplomatic, but at this point the bitch on my back is doing the talking.

«Don't worry, Martina's got them, go get them from her, we're starting soon.»

Martina, I think, at first I draw a blank, then it clicks: Rambo.

Actually, I think, I might even give it a shot with Rambo. She herself said I've seemed a little less of an asshole lately, and surely it'd be easier with her than with a total stranger. Law of probability, after all, sooner or later I've got to find someone willing to give me some.

I scan the crowd, and when I spot her I walk over: «I think you've got something for me?» I say, testing the double meaning.

«Of course, here you go» she says, handing me a little blue velvet jewelry box.

I'm about to tell her I meant something else when: «By the way, you've never met Silvia, have you?» she says, pointing to a girl beside her.

«Absolutely not» I reply, bewitched by this out-of-this-world pussy who's about to shake my hand and give me the hardest erection I've ever had.

Silvia is almost as tall as me, at least one seventy-five, maybe more. She's wearing a dark gray, almost black, pantsuit. Designer or not doesn't matter, because she's so gorgeous and so elegant in her bearing that even H&M would

make her the star of fashion week. Broad shoulders, hair cropped short, almost shaved, an oval face so perfect it's got something diabolical about it, spectacular tits – not exaggerated, mind you, but I can see they hold up on their own – a pair of icy blue eyes slightly watered, and the look, my God, the same look Emmanuelle Seigner had while fucking Johnny Depp at the end of *The Ninth Gate*.

Only she isn't fucking anyone right now. She's just shaking my hand.

Christ almighty, if this isn't love at first sight, then it must be the start of a fucking heart attack.

«Plea... pleasure» I stammer, like a perfect idiot.

Then, while a flash in my parietal lobe lights up a few synapses, I turn to Rambo, waiting for her to give me more information without me having to beg for it.

«Silvia» says Rambo, «my plus one.» Then, seeing I still don't get it, she spells it out: «My partner, Walter. My wife.»

«Holy Christ» I blurt, and this time I don't stammer at all, I try to keep it together, «sorry, I had no idea... I thought» I try to play it cool, to lighten it up, but honestly I'd rather smash my skull against the corner of any random wall, «I thought you liked me.»

«But I do like you» she laughs, «when you're not being an asshole. It's just Silvia I like more, and in a different way.»

Then they smile at each other and take hands.

Carlotta waves me over to sit down and I... I... I mean, I don't know if it's exhaustion, the champagne suddenly hitting me, or more likely this latest blow, but I feel like I've just been shot to the moon without a fucking rocket or a spacesuit. The bitch gnawing at my back is now so huge that, if I were in America, I could really whip out an assault rifle, like half those idiots do, and Christ, I'd pull a massacre right here.

Because, holy Christ, it's no wonder they keep shooting each other over there when the cork finally blows, if you've got guns lying around, you use them.

I would now, because it just isn't possible that everyone else... that *all of them*... while me...

The music starts, or at least I think it does, because alongside the fury buzzing through my head and tripping up my thoughts, I feel some electrical jolts hitting my amygdala and catch sight of something white moving in from the edge of my vision.

I try to relax, take a couple of deep breaths, then, since I still have the bottle in my hand, I take a long swig. Nobody's paying attention to me, they're all turned to admire the bride, while her father, whom I've never seen before, glares at me, and the photographer blinds me with the flash.

Someone behind me, maybe Rambo, snatches the champagne away. The music swells, and slowly Ludovica gets closer. I have to admit she's stunning, and knowing that tonight she'll let my cousin and his girlfriend fuck her feels like a knife twisting in my gut.

Fulvio will fuck one and then the other, and back again, and when he's tired, the bastard will just let them go at each other, only to jump back in, better than Duchovny in my dream, and when they don't feel like fucking each other, they'll kill time burning through the mountain of cash they're buried under.

When the music fades, the officiant starts reading the articles of the civil code about marital duties, then goes on with the usual ritual question, and they both answer yes, fast and painless.

When it's time for the rings, not seeing them on the table, Fulvio looks at me, puzzled. What the fuck does he want now? Then it hits me, I grab the box from my pocket and toss

it to him without moving from my seat. Some guests laugh, while the bride's father looks like he'd drink my blood.

And then, just like that, it's over, they're husband and wife, or rather, husband and wives. Even the chance to oppose the marriage was denied to my bitch-on-the-back, because – something I'm only learning now – that line isn't part of the ceremony anymore.

The guests get up, crowd around the newlyweds, reclaim their glasses to toast, the photographers seem to have multiplied, and paparazzi have joined the party, tipped off by Carlotta, who'll get a scandalous paycheck for it. Everyone's smiling, drinking, hugging, kissing. The newlyweds kiss, of course, Luisa and her filthy bartender kiss, Rambo and Silvia kiss, and even Daniel – the guy who was just banging my cousin behind a curtain – kisses passionately what must be his wife, mother of his three kids.

Blinded by camera flashes, I watch the faces of the guests frozen in stroboscopic poses, like Lynch frames where every expression, stuck in an instant, morphs into a grotesque caricature of itself.

I take advantage of the distracted bartenders to snag another bottle, fuck glasses, and then I spot four out-of-place figures dressed like Jehovah's Witnesses, with name tags on their jacket pockets, pushing through the crowd, asking questions that make people point straight at me.

I duck into the crowd, crouched down to hide, when a hand pulls me through the curtains into the bay window.

«The Arts Authority is looking for you» Carla says, already lowering her panties. «They want to ram you for the bottle stunt, so you'd better move fast...»

Holy Christ, these people are all fucking insane.

«You want to screw, here?! Like with your buddy a minute ago?!»

«Christ, cousin» she was already bending over but straightens up now to look me in the eye, «I didn't take you for such a prude. Careful, if they drink you...»

«Drink me?!»

«If they arrest you – Christ, you're old but such a virgin still – if they arrest you, something like this you can forget about. You'll be the one bending over...»

Carla waits a couple of seconds, staring into my eyes, probing me, but she quickly realizes they're not oozing passion right now, only a massive exhaustion.

«You're such a fag» she concludes, before walking off, but with a smile, not malice.

Never would I have thought I'd get to the point of turning down some pussy, but doing it here, in this context, wouldn't excite me even if I were sure Daniel had used a condom.

I lie down full-length on the bay window floor, just me and my bottle of champagne, ignored by everyone, at the edge of the party the way I'm at the edge of my own existence, and start taking long swigs, thinking that when all this is over, once I've made it past the Fine Arts – maybe even Animal Protection – I'll finally get back to my smoked-out apartment, my stupefying job, my Umberto Ecos, and the loneliness I'm not even used to anymore, immolated like Giordano Bruno just so my cousin can have fun and build a family, bent over and repeatedly sodomized for pure entertainment, to the point that I'd honestly have preferred my cousin had really just gone to hell without passing Go, because there's no way to come out unscathed from situations like these. No one has the empathy required to witness, however fleetingly, someone else's happiness.

It's physiological.

A nice funeral instead would have been a whole different story.

Because nobody could have shoved it in my ass like this at a funeral, nobody.

Not even if it were mine.

