

You Shall Not Read

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Partial English translation by Lucy Rand

1 The Arrival of Farenait

The Tourism Technology and General Culture class was drawing to a close in the sun-drenched Neapolitan classroom. A crowd of clouds white as the petticoats of a cheery corps de ballet floated across the sky over Sanità.

The class was hot and bored having been watching the notes for the video on the electronic whiteboard on their cell phones for the last hour. A slideshow of Greek temples, actors in tights, Japanese *anime*, shots from drones, cathedrals and beaches covered the peeling wall of the old Pino Daniele Comprehensive, one of the five Summary Schools that managed the endless audience of Neapolitan students.

The Summary Schools were usually located on the outskirts of towns or in working-class neighborhoods, taking advantage of abandoned buildings. Pino Daniele was in a dilapidated former women's prison that had also been a hospital at one point.

The classrooms were enveloped by chipped walls and a courtyard full of scrub and decapitated statues that the students nicknamed the Courtyard of Lost Footprints. The classrooms were gloomy cells with broken aluminum window fixtures where even the electronic equipment of the Western Worlds looked outdated.

"... And now a brief nod to a dead subject: literature. As you know, after long millennia of orality, man moved onto books. As it turned out to be very dangerous, this era also came to an end and now we are in the video age..." An old-fashioned comic started to explain the eternal youth of the tragics using videos that popped up over the floor plan of an ancient theater.

"Who even are the tragics?" yawned a girl with straightened brown hair, touching up the polish on her fingernails. The girl sitting next to her snapped. She was chewing gum, rocking on the two back legs of her chair dangling long and thin masculine legs beneath ripped Bermuda shorts. She shook her arms that were tattooed with rose branches and grabbed at her short blond hair in desperation: "Ugh, *you're* tragic," she replied and pulled her phone's plug out of the desk. An alarm sounded.

“Who’s not following?” Miss Cernecchia, who was in total catalepsy behind her desk a moment before, leapt out of her seat.

“Who’s unplugged their cell phone? Licciardo, is it you? It’s always you!”

And she pointed randomly, scolding an unclear point somewhere between Naomi Licciardo, the brunette with the nail polish (which was now spilt over the desk in large cyclamen colored puddles), and her saboteur desk mate.

“Miss, I never! It was Sommella!”

Help Sommella raised her hands and the long rose tattoos crept up towards the classroom ceiling like vines: “I confess, Miss, I turn myself in.”

“Sommé, either you cut it out or I’ll cut you out, do you understand?” You’ve already got twenty flags on the register and school only started six days ago.”

Help jokingly hid her face in her hands: “I repent, I repent!” she wailed.

Elvira Cernecchia looked around the room with her fists on her hips. Neither the boys nor the girls showed any sign of life, they were all immersed in their respective devices.

“Ok, ok, now you’ve lost focus...” she mumbled, pretending to admonish the class while waiting for the bell. “Noo, Miss, I never...” whined Oraetlabora, the principal’s son, aka Giuliano Curcio, the teacher’s favorite. Behind him Thumbbo, who was known for putting a thumbs down on every video and taking photos of everything and everyone, lifted his phone in the air to take a selfie with the blue crucifix, the pink hand of Fatima and the orange Buddha that a graffiti artists had drawn on the wall behind the desk.

“Thumbbo, do you really have to do that every day?” Help moaned.

“He likes doing it,” grumbled Naomi, who was still cleaning the nail varnish off the table.

Oraetlabora stifled a yawn. The whole classroom, without looking up from their phones, yawned dramatically too. Elvira Cernecchia sighed and yawned with them. The classroom door swung open suddenly. Coppola, the corridor attendant for that floor, let the door slam against the wall and, shuffling forwards in his slippers with a cigarette in his mouth, announced: “Miss, ‘scuse me, we’ve got a new one...”

A short and round girl wrapped up in an absurdly large black scarf (it was still thirty degrees in September), stood behind him. Help rocked the front two legs of the chair back onto the ground. She had a black floor length dress, a baseball cap that was also black on the back of her head, long curly black hair and – Help noticed – black paint on her finger nails. The new girl was carrying her laptop and cell phone in her arms, just like a new inmate with her personal belongings in full view.

“New girl, eh?” Elvira Cernecchia skimmed the electronic register pushing up her distance glasses with her index finger; she didn't find what she was looking for and emptied her bag onto the desk looking for her reading glasses.

“Ehh...” she grumbled and the class, who had witnessed this scene millions of times, anticipated the refrain in a low voice: “...Ehh, once upon a time I could read without glasses...”

“Ehhh... once... what did you say?” the teacher stiffened up and dropped her keys, vanity case, the sachets of pain killers, the paper tissues and who knows what else. The class sniggered. Help looked at the new girl perspiring with a straight face under the big scarf. Capasso closed the door with a bang.

“What is your name?” asked the teacher while the electronic register slid between her hands and an alarm sounded that was similar to the one the cell phones made when they were unplugged from the desks but with a hysteric duck sound.

“Miss, it's running out of battery,” suggested Oraetlabora pitying her.

“Yes, yes,” Elvira Cernecchia became more confused. The new girl said with a clear voice that Help hadn't expected because of the scarf: “Lopez. Farenàit Lopez. Elvira Cernecchia imperceptibly raised her eyes to the ceiling: she had classes full of Samanthas, Jessicas, Rihannas, Jennifers and Naomis. What happened to the Elviras like her, the Danielas, Susannas, Antonellas and Valerias, Valentinas, not to mention the Marias? Even Sommella, who was registered as Isabella, had always been called Help: her parents, grandparents, friends, all called her Help and woe betide if you made a mistake. Even the electronic register recited ‘Help Sommella’.

And now another one. “Farenàit, eh? And your registered name?”

“That’s it. My mother loves Ray Bradbury.”

“Your father is English...” the teacher thought she had sussed it out.

“No, it’s the name of an author,” Farenàit explained and on her own initiative looked for a free desk. Help gestured to the one on her right. Elvira Cernecchia dropped into her chair thinking: Just what we need, a revolutionary.

“Young lady, you do know that authors and books are banned, don’t you?”

“Miss, it’s fine if you call me just Lopez, I won’t be offended,” Farenàit said quietly organizing her laptop on the desk and connecting her cell phone.

“Ooh, a smarty-pants,” added Cernecchia and opened one of the sachets of painkiller granules that were strewn on the desk, about to toss it into her mouth.

“Alright then Lopez, off you go with your presentation trailer.” Help watched Farenàit’s chubby fingers carefully handling her cell phone: she had silver rings on every finger over her jet-black nails. The overhead projector vibrated. The class, which was already in countdown mode (five minutes until the bell), was a rabble of rummaging hands in pencil cases, rucksacks, wound up cables, disconnected plugs, lipsticks rolling on the floor, private messages popping up (“Go home”, “I’ll come and get you on my moped”, “In 2 mins I’m gonna kiss you”, “Omg it’s almost over, I just can’t +++”), and pretended to watch the new girl’s trailer. “Good afternoon, I’m Farenàit Lopez,” it began with a well-groomed Farenàit, her scarf open, the same long dress but in blue, speaking directly to the camera. “I’m sixteen and I like funerals. I always go to them. I am interested in the faces of the relatives, the ceremony and the coffins.”

Straight away a series of short video clips played: the city cathedral and a family of little old people crying around a coffin; a baroque church with two white coffins in the center, children, and a devastated family; a group of friends recalling their youth outside a modern blue concrete church; a close-up of a priest; a close-up of a man in dark glasses.

“As you all know we never get to see dead people: none of our relatives ever die at home. When you die in hospital it is forbidden for children and young people to see the body.

Often, we see our relatives when they are still alive, sick but smiling, then they go into hospital and come out in the form of a coffin. What actually happens when somebody dies? What are they like inside the coffin?"

An unreal silence fell over the classroom. Oraetlabora's nose was whistling and he couldn't quiet it. Thumbo wasn't taking selfies. Instead his hand lay idle with its electronic appendage resting on the desk. Long tears ran down Naomi's face dissolving her eyeliner. Cernecchia's mouth was wide open and her painkiller granules rained down onto the desk from her hand floating in mid air. Help and the rest of the class stared at the board speechless. "The woman you will see now is Ivanka," the virtual Farenait said in the meantime. "She was my grandma's nurse until last month. I discovered that on her computer she kept the portraits of all the grandmothers she had cared for, images of their funerals and even of them just before they died, or just after. They are all of my grandma on the bed. Even at home neither my mother nor her sisters ever took care of grandma. I always wanted to go into her room but I wasn't allowed." And at this point a series of old ladies, one intubated, one connected to a drip, one wrapped in a blanket, one with her teeth in a glass next to the bed, all different in appearance, one with hair one without, one wrinkly one smooth but all equally dead, flowed through Farenait Lopez's presentation trailer. The faces of the dead were all smiling and Ivanka had placed a flower by each of them and tucked a handkerchief under their chins. She had tied the big toes of one lady together with a string so that her legs wouldn't fall open.

"Aaaaaaaaah," Miss Cernecchia finally voiced her horror.

"Aaaaaaaaah," cried many of the girls in the classroom, while the teacher, in her usual confused manner, tried to find a way to deactivate the whiteboard and interrupt the savagery.

"Uuuuuuuuh!" the boys howled too.

"This is illeeeeeegal!!" screamed the teacher.

And in a fluster of whacks, fists, a flying handbag, chirping systems going into temporary crash mode due to the teacher's unlikely intervention, the rosy blonde face of the forty year old Ivanka cracked and warped along with the faces of the dead grandmas. A final

trace of Farenàit Lopez flashed up saying something about her love of funerals. Then there was a long bzzz followed by a conclusive silence.

“You’re craaaaaazy!” Cernecchia almost choked, completely frazzled, but the bell, which the fun-loving Capasso had changed into an electric guitar riff, drowned out the voices of the teacher and students. And while the classroom emptied with a burning urgency, Help grabbed Farenàit by the arm and dragged her outside.

2 The Mouth of the Dinosaur

“Are they following us?” asked Help running, and turned around briefly to check they had lost their classmates. Thumbo and his accomplices had tried to catch up with them on the stairs, in the courtyard, in the alleys outside the school.

Farenàit, behind her, was struggling: “Uff, wah...”

Her scarf had unwound itself and was flapping around caught on her schoolbag, about to be lost, and she was dripping with sweat. Help looked out at an intersection and they turned into a street that led into an abandoned garden. They sat down on a chipped step to get their breath back.

“They won’t get here very quickly... Anyway, how did you come up with it? You’re a genius! Or are you mental?” Help exploded, “Miss will never get over it! But will you not be arrested?”

Farenàit took off her baseball cap, placed her hand on the step and immediately, disgusted, took it back again. An untamed scrub overran the flowerbeds and, between the weeds and litter there were heaps of cough mixture packaging, boxes of medicines, used blister packs, syringes, pads, cans and bottles.

The blazing sun fermented the seagull droppings and cat and dog poo. She lifted her eyes up at the grimy buildings that surrounded the garden. Thick branches of climbing

morning glory ran up the windowless walls, and on one a burnt-out barred door swung open. It looked like the mouth of a dinosaur.

“Wh-where are w-we?”

Help, still wired from the break out, shrugged her shoulders: “Oh, this is where people deal Killer Brews and Luminous Candy. Basically you come here if you want a beer or a fag... Want one?”

She showed her new friend her tobacco and rolling paper.

Farenàit shook her head: “Smoking is illegal...”

Help chuckled and started to roll herself a cigarette.

“Everything people do here is illegal: if you want a stolen phone, or to sell medicines you’ve taken from home, or a finished videotask, this is the place for you. Obviously there’s no trailers as cool as your one today though...”

Help interrupted herself. She wondered if it was a good time to tell Farenàit that, once, for the tourism topic ‘Beauties of our Earth’ she had handed in a videotask shot from the scaffolding on her building in which she filmed her crazy neighbor’s dirty dishes, a flying car slamming into the trash cans in flames and, for poetic value, the old lady from the first floor playing the harp with reindeer antlers on her head. She lit the cigarette and took a drag.

“And th-that?” asked Farenàit alluding to the hole in the wall.

“Ah, that’s where the dead souls are. They say that years ago some chicks blew themselves up as a protest...” Farenàit squinted trying to read the traces of an old sign above the barred door: “Li...r...ry” What was it? Help giggled satanically:

“It looks like loads of people died in there... Imagine how cool it would be for your video! Charred faces, rotting bodies...” and describing the hecatomb Help waved her arms enthusiastically around her head, the rose shoots flashed and the cigarette smoke made a bluish halo around her head.

Farenàit however was silent. She got up and went to look at the wall up close. Between the bricks someone had placed the traditional nativity figures that in Napoli were called *anime pezzentelle*, abandoned souls: a crowd of screaming souls, their arms raised in the flames of Purgatory. Help, smoking, stood up, kicked a couple of dented cans and asked:

“So what school did you come from?”

“Massimo Troisi.”

“The science school, the one that’s still going... Why did you change to come to this purgatory?” She winked towards the nativity figurines.

Farenàit shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t like math.”

“No?”

“My grandfather taught Greek in the old schools. He died when I was seven. He still had the books. So I wanted to go more in the direction of Cultural Tourism. And you, what are you doing here?”

“Passing time, having adventures...”

“And your parents?”

“My mother does PR, she goes out at night and sleeps in the day, so I never see her. My father was fired for informing, they caught him at home and we never heard from him again.”

“Informing?”

“Do you know that social media site where old people write stuff all day?”

“WasteTime?”

“Yeah. A colleague at the bank told the boss that my father had spoken badly of him. And so overnight...” her words trailed off. “My grandfather was upset, he had got my dad that job at the bank.”

“So your grandparents are still alive?”

“My grandma is alive and kicking! She still eats the *zeppole* straight from the oil! Without her the house would be in ruins...”

Farenàit imagined a little old lady extracting fried potato donuts from the bubbling oil with her bare hands and devouring them, and chuckled quietly.

“You’re lucky. You saw my grandma in the video, it’s the last memory I have of her.”

“And your parents?”

“Which, the Sobber or the Turd?”

Help laughed. “What do they do?”

“Penelope is a psychologist.”

“Penelope?”

“My granddad taught Greek, as I told you.”

The reference went over Help’s head, she shrugged and gestured to Farenait to continue anyway. The cigarette was almost finished; she put it out on a stone.

“When I was little he always read Homer to me.”

“Ah, one of the tragics...”

“No, the epic poet. The story of Ulysses...”

Help rolled a new cigarette.

“Ok, so: Ulysses was a hero who after ten years of besiege conquered the city of Troy through a deceit, then left with his companions to return to Ithaca, his birthplace, but got lost in the Mediterranean. His wife, Penelope, waited for him at home.”

“Right. How long did she wait?”

“Maybe twenty years or more...”

“As if! And so your mum is called Penelope after her...”

“Yep, and she married someone who doesn’t know what his job is. Sometimes he says he’s a musician, sometimes a garbage man, other times an actor...”

“I take it he’s the Turd?”

“Yep, he went away and she’s waiting for him.”

“Jeez, but it was your grandfather who chose the name... And why the Sobber?”

“My mother spends her time writing her sob story on WT...”

“She’s also on WasteTime?”

“Yep, exactly where your father was fired.”

“Good stuff. And who reads it?”

“Other whiners like her...”

“And she’s a psychologist?”

“Yep, she also has sessions with her patients over WT...”

“Haha, they should call it WC...”

Help rummaged in her schoolbag and pulled out a can of orange soda.”

“Wanna go halves?”

Farenait nodded. Help pulled the ring tab and it foamed out of the hole in the can.

“I bashed it around too much...” she apologized passing the can to her friend. “I wonder if those dumbasses are still following us,” and she looked around but there was nobody in sight. “If we had syrup we could’ve made a Killer Brew with those relaxants...”

Farenait knitted her eyebrows, suspicious. She looked around, searching for cameras put up by the MBA, which was the body that controlled the Moral Balance of Adolescents. A ton of doped up hackers worked for them under the table, each one either an adolescent or an ageing adolescent churned out by the Summary Schools, paid to spy on chat room conversations and censor dangerous content, or spy on meeting places in the suburbs. The official scope was to prevent suicides as a result of manipulation games (whales tattooed on wrists, suffocation challenges, anorexia races) and arrest dealers of antidepressants and psychiatric drugs that kids would dissolve in soda or alcoholic drinks. But in reality the MBA had turned into a system of spying and trying to arrest as many young people as possible. Every arrest had a cash reward.

“Sorry but do you... do you deal?” she asked, finally.

She waited for a bit for the answer: she was starting to think that Help had set a trap, that she was one of those kids who sold their peers to the MBA. Help took a sip of the drink and then looked her straight in the eye.

“What? Who do you think I am?! I’m definitely not a spy. And I’m not a low life either!”

A big fly buzzed around on the trash that surrounded them. Farenait fiddled with her jet-black nails.

“Oraetlabora is an MBA,” Help told her.

Farenait was shocked. “Who? The shy one?”

“Yeah, Curcio, the principal’s son. And the principal is a WT moderators.”

“A family of spies! I’m sorry,” Farenait mumbled. “You know, I just don’t know you yet...”

A line of flying cars rumbled through the sky above Sanità and the suction over the garden created a wind that howled through the bricked-up doorway.

“Sheesh, it sounds like the voices of the dead...”

The girls moved closer together imperceptibly. Without realizing it they had lowered their voices to a whisper. An old song rose up out of one of the buildings, somebody was hanging their washing out.

“Fa’ ... Can I call you Fa’?”

Farenait smiled and nodded.

“Fa’, what do you say to a tour tomorrow?”

Farenait was about to respond when somebody behind them shouted: “There they are!!” The girls leapt to their feet.

“They found us!” At the edge of the garden Thumbo, cell phone unsheathed ready to selfie, followed by a large number of boys from the class (Help recognized Raffaele Losurdo, snot specialist, Giorgio Ferentino, the blonde son of rich businesspeople, Fedez Palletta, the one who was obsessed with electronic music, and others who to her were hardly even names on the register) moved forward with long strides over the grimy and disorderly shrubbery while the late summer September sun went down over Sanità.

“Where do you live?” Help asked urgently.

“In Mergellina...”

“Come on, we can get out through the *Fondaco Scuro*...”

In the blink of an eye Help dragged Farenàit down the stairs into an alleyway that reeked of ammonia, they cut through a seventeenth-century gateway that led into a square full of stolen cars, disassembled mopeds and trash cans. A skinny cat cut across their path, a little girl from the doorway of a shack rolled out two talking apples that repeated, “Go! Go!” as they went hurtling towards a wall. At the next turn Farenàit raised her eyes and suffocated a shriek: “Caref...” But they weren’t going to run into the Roman pillar built centuries ago on the corner of the street, rather they burst into a kiosk whose cold neon lights flickered on, and inside an anemic lady wrapped in a grubby baby blue blanket raised her cupped hands to the sky. Help walked confidently, the voices of their pursuers were getting further and further away and at every stairway an old lady or a pregnant one would shout from the window in dialect: “What’s going oon?” “Who they chasing noooow?” Then they turned onto a large square dominated by an oblique church on a curved street where the mopeds sped past going “eeeeehhh!” each time they got close to the two runaways. It was forbidden for cars to fly here but they shot through the alleyways regardless, wedging in sideways between buildings about to crash into balconies, like in the old sci-fi movies. A flying motorbike, one of the pimped up ones, flew over them almost upside down: Farenàit lifted her head and heard a kid in a Napoli football shirt whistle at her. She only caught the glint of a gold earring and a huge expensive watch on the wrist of the boy driving.

“Where are we going?” she shouted over the racket.

“We’re gonna come out near the metro...” Help shouted.

As the pink sunset reflected off the glass windows on the hill, Farenàit noticed the shops they were running through: kebab sellers, Thai fried food and spring rolls, Sri Lankan minimarts. She saw now, running behind Help, that the roses weren’t her only tattoos but she had an exclamation mark on her left calf and a question mark on the right. The punctuation alternated as Help clambered over a pram with the exclamation mark and avoided a pair of crutches and a leg in a cast with the question mark (“You’re gonna get in trouble!” people shouted after them). At Piazza Dante they vanished into the crowd and nobody paid any attention to the fugitives and the punctuation recomposed itself.

“We did it,” Help smiled.

“Are you sure?!” Farenàit exclaimed using both punctuation marks unbeknownst to her friend.

Help pointed towards the entrance to the two metro lines, the old one that went back to Vomero and the new one that connected the center with Mergellina and Fuorigrotta. She put her hand out to Farenàit.

“Fa’, I’m really happy you’re in our class. You know, I liked you straight away...”

Farenàit gave her hand after a brief hesitation. Her hands were clammy. Help played with her fingers.

“So many rings... Hmm, Fa’, do you like girls?”

Farenàit went red and hurried to answer: “No, I like rings. Why, do you...?”

Help made a cross with her index fingers and spat on the ground: “No love, no romantic stuff, zero vomrom. Can you imagine ending up like your Sobber?” she asked.

Farenàit threw her arms in the air: “Jesus no!”

“I’ll add you online later? It was a swell day, thanks!”

She quickly ran down the escalator, swallowed up by the piazza floor. Farenàit smiled watching the roses on her arm disappear as she waved. She thought she caught a glimpse of Thumbbo and the others making their way through the crowd. She turned and disappeared into the metro towards home.

3 "You Shall Not Read"

Now enveloped in scaffolding for work on the balconies that had started around the time Help celebrated her first birthday, the building she lived in had once been Naples Yellow and stood majestically at the top of a hill at a windy junction overlooking Vesuvius, part of the Bay of Naples, Ischia, the Camaldoli Hill, and the terrible lost lands of Monteruscello and the Traiano neighborhoods.

After about thirty minutes on the metro, fifteen minutes waiting in a crowd indignant at the delay, twelve minutes at the bus stop, five hundred meters on foot and hundreds of videos to accompany every step of the way, ("Are you looking to scrap your flying car? Cicciotto Cartofer, leader for 50 years in the sector", "Poltronissima discounts made especially for you this week", "Bellerofonte Free University: fly with us towards a virtual degree") Help's apartment building, at the corner of Corso Europa Unita, came into view once again.

Uneven buildings rose up like wonky teeth in an overcrowded mouth around Help's block. They were built in the middle of the last century during the economic boom, when the frenzy of speculative investment bulldozed allotments, gardens and pine groves with no mercy. For a balcony with a sea view Naples had bequeathed to Help and her peers a jumble of ugly cement inside which only weeds, the odd spruce, stripped down araucaria and a couple of quivering lemon trees survived.

An overcrowded network of shops and minimarts occupied the junction along with numerous pizzerias blocking both road and air traffic after nine at night. It was a hive of after-workers awaiting takeaway pizza.

As usual Help avoided the front gate and the porter and went round the back of the building where there was a tire dealer. She pulled her secret armory (a sack that contained two hooks, a cord, an ice pick, a systems-forcing pen drive and a bandana with a sushi design) out from an abandoned electric dashboard and was equipped for her daily training.

Since the scaffolding was abandoned at this time of year and the building company had cut corners by never activating the alarms to signal humans and animals, there were no traps during the ascent. Apart from a few cats, the odd gecko or pigeon and, unfortunately, at the beginning of the summer a lot of cockroaches, the scaffolding was uninhabited.

The most interesting part was getting a look into the flats. She hooked on to the beams as usual and pulled herself up. With the ice knife between her teeth, which she would use if one of the holes or hooks had been blocked up, Help knew exactly how many minutes it would take her to arrive at the fifth floor without breaks: eight. But she always stopped for a little peek. On the first floor with the half-closed shutters she could make out the carpet with the burn mark under Signorina Pina's harp. Help had immortalized it for her video task on the exact day that the cigarette fell on the carpet, the firemen arrived and surprised poor Pina with her stuffed reindeer antlers on her head. Signorina Pina detested cockroaches so there was poison spread all over the boardwalk on her floor. Help would clean her shoes thoroughly because Dogdays, her beloved cat, awaited her at home and she wouldn't want to poison him. On the second floor, like every evening, the Bruchner sisters' table was already laid with steaming bowls of broth. They always waited for the news to start before eating. The shutters were closed on the third floor and she heard the voice of the widow Varriale arguing on the phone with her children. On the fourth floor she looked in at Crazy Lady's overflowing kitchen sink and smelt a terrible stink of macerated garbage. Crazy Lady was an indefinable age and often went out in an anorak with a hood, earphones in her ears and mirrored shades. The only thing Help and her family, or rather the inhabitants of the fifth and final floor, knew about her was that she detested any sound and out of spite at the most unpredictable times of the day and night she would beat the walls and ceiling with a baseball bat. That evening on the balcony, despite the scaffolding, Crazy Lady had laid out used and washed aluminum sheets to keep the pigeons away: Help maliciously pulled them up, let them flap down to the street, and climbed over the final scaffold. The smell of pasta sauce came from the fifth floor balcony and plants overflowed verdantly despite the beams and plastic netting of the scaffolding.

"Miao," Dogdays greeted her. In summer Dogdays lived on the sun-drenched terrace and in winter on the radiators or next to the oven in the kitchen.

Help stroked him and Dogdays offered her his long ears and chubby back.

"Ah, you're back, finally! What time do you call this?"

Help jumped, Dogdays hid under her hoody.

A round old lady dressed in gingham stared at her with amphora elbows and wolf-like eyes. She was the person responsible for the happy condition of the jasmines, geraniums, desert rose, basil, hibiscus, roses and strawberries, poinsettia out of season, orchids and bougainvillea: her grandmother Iolanda.

“As if that airhead your mother going out an hour ago having skipped all the day’s meals wasn’t enough, now this troublemaker is climbing up the walls and coming home from school at tea time! This house, my dear, is not a hotel. And I am not the concierge!”

Help smiled and went to give her a hug.

“What are we eating?” she asked even though she already knew. The smell announced a menu of roast turkey, pasta and sauce.

“And of course, you treat it like a restaurant! As long as there’s a plate on the table for you! You know I made a mistake with your mother and there’s no remedy for that but you have to study a little, dear girl, or who’s going to give you a job? Do you think you’re immortal?”

The images of the dead grandmas’ faces in Farenait’s trailer reappeared in Help’s mind, and she responded sarcastically: “Grandma, you’re old. These days even if you study you won’t get a job. In fact, the more you study the less likely you are to get a job. Take mum: she’s almost forty and she’s doing the work of a twenty year old.”

“Yes, yes, with the way things are going, no school, no university... Back in my day, which was no bed of roses either...” Grandma Iolanda had talked about this one topic for years: how the laws of the Western Worlds had imposed the ban on books and pressured weaker countries to recruit workers. By this point the migration rate of Italian students had reached ninety percent.

Help, however, was thinking of only one thing: the immortality of grandparents.

“...You see that shadow on the wall? Once upon a time the Tregatti encyclopedia lived there, twenty-five volumes of it! And your grandfather kept the paper newspaper for years, he made an archive of them! Then began the lament: readership was falling, publishers dying out, the need to invest in culture... And the more people who talked like that, the fewer students read, in fact it was teachers who read the least of everybody! Your grandfather, in the final days, was buried under piles of bureaucracy...”

Help sat with her legs crossed on the hallway floor and Dogdays jumped into her lap.

“... And so the Tragic Debate began: blame was thrown in all directions... The school, parents, publishing houses, the Internet, globalization, the blasted devil! But the truth was that the publishers sold dross that got more and more obscene at the same time as they were selling fewer and fewer copies. Do you study math at school?”

Help shrugged.

Does it seem normal to you that the less you sell the more you produce, the more you produce the less you plan? To tell the truth, as you plan less and less, the number of unemployed and desperate people increases! In my day, as everything was collapsing, they gave away lavish advances to writers of the lowest level who promised bombastic sales to a readership that was becoming rapidly disenchanted and disinterested.

Help had a brief flashback to a school video of the pyramids and the pharaohs accompanied by a voice that repeated the word “tomb.” She thought again of Farenait’s trailer.

“The less you read you more donkey-like you become, and donkeys govern better than doctors! You, for example, were born a donkey! From when they started saying that school had to be the gateway to work, that the hours of education had to be used to think of the future of the young people, the young people started to run away! And you will too, Help.”

Iolanda spoke with enthusiasm and fury, grabbing the wooden spoon from the sauce with her oven gloves.

“You tell me what kind of world is it where grandparents have to look after their children and grandchildren, and old people continue working with no age limit...”

Help flopped with her back against the wall of the hallway. Dogdays purred. She wondered how long this would take. Anyway, she loved her grandma and she would miss her voice, not a day went by...

Iolanda pointed the wooden spoon at the wall where the government Decalogue, obligatory in every home, loomed over Help’s head. A drop of sauce flew through the air and Dogdays stretched up the wall to lick it off.

“Look, look at what we have to have on the wall instead of the Tregatti encyclopedia!”

The video frame fizzled due to a glitch in the connection, the commandments changed color and looked as though they were melting away, then, after a very unpromising bzzz, they returned in full:

YOU SHALL NOT READ

YOU SHALL NOT SEE THE DEAD

YOU SHALL NOT LOVE WITHOUT PURPOSE

...

“I can still see that moment so clearly. I was in my office where nothing worked, apart from the photocopier...”

In all these years, Help had never asked her grandma exactly what a photocopier was.

“...The computer went at a snail’s pace and the papers...! There were papers everywhere; it was like a warzone! We had more papers than wrinkles! And the idea, in a morgue like that, spread like Bermuda grass...”

About Bermuda grass, on the other hand, Help had a more precise idea because the apartment block behind theirs was overrun with it.

“...Like a fungus in the kitchen of one of those pubs where you can get only junk food... Two simple, simple words: **READING FORBIDDEN** were written on a sheet of paper, then on another, first a decree, then a law, then a notice affixed to the class registers, on the children’s diaries... Somebody once asked your grandfather: “Sir, but what is forbidden to read?” and one of those farts who never liked reading even when they were little answered for him: “Books, idiot!” And then continued chatting with her husband on WT...”

Grandma Iolanda’s mime of the scene of the teacher who chatted on social media was a must-see in Help’s house. She repeated it every Christmas and birthday. To summarize: some years before Help, Farenait and their classmates were born, books disappeared completely.

And nobody missed them. “...And then people died! Help had heard her grandma repeat this phrase since the beginning of time, but she had never paid much attention to it because Iolanda often evoked the dead, especially her “bastard dead relatives,” a common curse in this part of Italy, which she often applied in reference to her daughter the PR. At this point she usually explained that books were considered subversive and dangerous due to an

incident when some people died. The government decreed that reading was useless and furthermore bad for one's back, sight, and health, that fairytales scared young children, romance novels gave girls false hope, violent books encouraged juvenile delinquency and history and philosophy books depressed and demotivated the young generations, showing them the totalized absence of a successful future.

After all, if there was something worth knowing in books, an overall idea of what people used to read would suffice: summaries, synopses, basically the essential stuff. Schools and universities were aligned and suddenly, one sunny day, a new code of behavior was declared, a sort of Ten Commandments for youth, which was closely followed by the MBA foundation.

It was forbidden to have any books in the house, with the threat of an extremely heavy fine that could bankrupt a family. It was forbidden even to name books and writers, but this ban ended up being pretty useless since by now even the professors didn't recognize titles or authors anymore. Help's parents could already only write in block capitals, and with difficulty, as for years teachers had complained about the incomprehensibility of students' handwriting and pedaled the excuse that correcting cursive was too much work. Everybody wrote directly on computers, cell phones or electronic devices; almost always brief messages with no punctuation. School homework was reduced to tele-quizzes. General Culture was made up of a few bits of information scraped together, often contradictory, almost always partial and ridiculous. Jobs were given based on the candidate's ability to remember codes, passwords and numbers. Publishers and pen and paper factories went bankrupt.

"...And the outcome is that you do these bollocks virtual lessons, hand in these video tasks... But what's the point?!" Iolanda condemned.

"Grandma, when you die I'm not taking you to hospital. We're not doing what we did with grandpa. I want to be near you." Iolanda fell silent, taken aback by the sudden change of subject. She put the wooden spoon down and repeated: "My dear, I am extremely grateful for the thought but let's hope and pray because, if I die, there won't be any food on the table... Shoo Shoo, little bat!"

Help watched her grandmother acrobatically perform some sort of exorcism and slip off her oven gloves to knock on wood.

"That's enough now, go and get yourself washed."

"I'm going, I'm going..."

On her way to the bathroom, Help passed by the bedroom that used to be her grandma and grandpa's. The bed was half made, on Iolanda's side; one table lamp was on, one bedside table laid out with pills and creams. "Kid, you're skin and bones, you look like a coat hanger," the voice of her grandfather echoed. "Eat, kid, eat 'cause you've gotta grow." She had been a difficult child to feed. "Eat up or you'll end up looking like the dead man." Help touched the old coat rack that everyone in the house called the dead man. Her grandpa used to hang his shirt, jacket, tie and pants on every night but nowadays it was bare, apart from the occasional adornment of one of Iolanda's neck scarfs. "Who moved the dead man?!" grandma shouted when a young Help, obstinately not hungry, played with the hooks on it. "The wardrobe has him hostage!" Help would respond from the shelter of the closet when she had dragged the dead man and barricaded herself in with her grandfather's underpants as a hat and a handkerchief over her mouth tied behind her neck, like a bandit from the old westerns her grandparents would download in the evenings. "Eat the chocco-blocco or you won't see the dead man again!" Her grandmother laughed and passed her two squares of chocco-blocco, an aircraft carrier made of industrial chocolate that was the only thing Help would eat: "Happy now?!" Help grabbed them and, even though she knew it would take two days to eat as they were so imposing and big to get your mouth around, restarted: "Two squares: so he'll only be half dead!" But the challenge finished there, because the dead man was too well screwed together and resisted her mischievous attempts to dismantle him with a screwdriver and hammer.

"Don't break the dead man, or grandpa will be mad," Iolanda admonished. So, the dead man returned to his place and in the meantime grandpa also returned from work. Every evening Help witnessed a mystery: the door of the bedroom closed, grandpa got undressed; the door of bedroom opened again and the dead man appeared dressed.

Every morning, on the contrary, grandpa undressed the dead man, the bedroom door closed, grandpa reappeared dressed and left the house. Help imagined that during the night there was some sort of chess match in the bedroom, while grandma slept, between the dead man and grandpa, which grandpa always won and in the morning he cashed in on his prize: the clothes.

Until one morning, some years later, grandpa won for the last time and the clothes ended up with him in a box. By then it was already forbidden for children to see the dead, so Help lit a candle by the dead man, put out a bouquet of plastic flowers and cried for grandpa. She shouted from the bathroom to be heard over the running tap: "Grandma, a new girl at school showed pictures of funerals and the faces of dead people, including her own grandma, in her presentation trailer."

Iolanda shouted in response: “That’s enough of this story…” and Help, returning to sit at the table saw her grandmother knocking on wood twice under the table.

“I would’ve liked it if we had filmed grandpa.”

Iolanda shook her head and her eyes clouded over. Help had noticed that parents never got cloudy eyes, while grandmas and grandpas often did.

“Videos of funerals are becoming popular these days…” Iolanda sounded skeptical. “Whatever will we do next? A fashion show for the Almighty Father?”

“But in funeral videos you never see the dead person. You only see him how he was when he was living…” objected Help, thinking of those video commercials where the dead person is always pictured in good health and the relatives wave joyously.

“Can we look at the album later?”

Iolanda nodded silently. They talked about other things over dinner and later on, when Crazy Lady had started to beat the walls, they leafed through the album: nobody had printed photos for decades now because photo albums looked too much like the dangerous outlawed books. They always did this with great caution, shuttering up the windows properly in case the people in the apartment blocks opposite were spying. Help found it hard to believe that people conserved so few memories back then. In the album her grandpa appeared as a newborn, at his first communion, in a class photo, then on the day of his graduation and the day of his and Iolanda’s wedding. There was no sign of vacations, ordinary days, his job in the bank or his colleagues. Then Carla, Help’s mum, was born and the photos were moved over to digital format and photo albums would never return.

“It seems such a short life with so few photos…”

“If you take photos all the time you stop living my dear, you’re only pretending to live,” responded Iolanda closing the album to put it away.

“Life is made up the memories you keep inside, they are photos that you can’t share with anyone but they never get old…”

Help shrugged her shoulders and her thumb automatically scrolled through her phone. Actually today she hadn’t taken as much as a selfie during the chase with Farenait and she had been so excited that she hadn’t even taken a photo of her ascent up the apartment building! Damn, she had nothing to post to Farenait. At that exact moment on the class chat

Thumbo's photos popped up, the ones he took in the morning and during the pursuit of Help and Farenait. What an idiot, Help thought. Then a message arrived from Farenait:

Hey, today was great! What are you doing tomorrow? Help smiled, she rubbed her nose and replied:

Surprise. No school. Dogdays came and looked at the screen, Help took a selfie with the cat and posted it to Farenait:

Dogdays, at your service, she wrote.

There was a long virtual silence. The sound of washing dishes came from the kitchen, and the sounds of TVs and computers came from the buildings opposite, then Farenait replied:

Ok. Then she posted a photo too: her face with a big smile and her black cap on backwards pulled down over her hair, and next to her a very old looking Maremma sheepdog with its tongue sticking out. She wrote:

Let me introduce you to Cimurro.

4 Penelope Lopez

The following morning, Elvira Cernecchia was drumming her fingers pensively on the desk.

The classroom was humming with messages.

- Where did u see them last?

- Going down the fondaco.

- Damn.

Elvira Cernecchia beat her fist on the table, “You know where they are, don’t lie!”

Twenty-five heads jerked up, Naomi’s nail polish tottered on the desk, but there was no reaction.

“Not even you, Curcio?”

Oraetlabora hung his head shrugging his shoulders: not even the MBA was any help.

The phones began to buzz again.

On Miss Cernecchia’s, an ancient model with a flowery cover chewed by her dog Lallo, a message from the principal, Oraetlabora’s father, popped up:

- Ms. Cernecchia, what shall we do? Today eighty out of three thousand are missing across the whole Institute. You know that the funds get stopped if more than twenty a day are off.

Messages in this tone were continuously sent to all the teachers. For a long time absence from school hadn’t been a problem in terms of behavior or efficient learning, but rather a money problem. The euro, then, was in sharp decline, it was already the weakest currency in the Western World and they had no scruples about closing schools where attendance wasn’t good and even fewer when it came to firing teachers.

Cernecchia typed using two hands with her shabby nails (Naomi gave them a compassionate glance then returned to contemplate her own, perfect and polished, today in metallized amaranth).

- Principal, what can I do? They’ve all got their lips sealed, they chased Sommella and Lopez to no avail. Real good purchase we made with this Lopez.

- The parents, Cernecchia! Call them!

Elvira Cernecchia counted to ten, then opened WasteTime, the social media site all adults were on, parents included.

In the meantime, today's lesson played out on the electronic whiteboard, ignored by everyone. "How to become a social media personality: the profession of the Influencer. Cultural Aspects," and a famous influencer appeared, a Milanese girl whose parents were big shots explaining how she had got her break by wearing European designer dresses that Americans loved. The word "Followers" repeatedly rolled off her silicone lips, swollen like old-fashioned bubble gum. She had one million three hundred thousand "Followers".

Miss Cernecchia immediately found Help's mother's profile.

'Lucrezia Sommella Pierre.'

Her status was 'sleeping.'

And indeed, that she had done, at five o'clock in the morning outside the club. She hadn't seen her daughter. I should call the grandmother. But the grandmother isn't on WT.

Then she searched for Farenait's mother: 'Penelope Lopez Psychologist and Storyteller.'

Elvira Cernecchia found various active posts and conversations. Lopez was treating more than one patient at a time in public chats, where the other patients could also participate. The active posts with patients alternated with Farenait's mom's personal storytelling posts, some of which were still summer-themed seeing as September had only just started. Things that opened with 'One of those days that remains etched on your memory because it's shrouded in doubt. The white pants: to pack or not to pack?'

The teacher found a chat that was currently active and entered: she was already friends, unfortunately, with all her students' parents, a legal obligation.

Penelope was chatting with Annachiara Alwaysinshape and Lilla, whoever they were.

Annachiara Alwaysinshape:

- The problem is that my husband ignores me. He doesn't want to make love. He doesn't want to go out with me. He doesn't want to talk.

Lilla:

- They NEVER want to talk.

Penelope Lopez:

- But he wants to beat you, from what you tell me.

Annachiara Alwaysinshape:

- Yes, twice a day even.

Penelope Lopez:

- Annachiara, you have to figure out why you accept being beaten and don't get a divorce or at least separate...

Annachiara Alwaysinshape:

- Doctor, it's because I love him. I'm waiting for him to change.

Cernecchia typed:

- Doctor, excuse me, we haven't met yet but the system considers us friends already, as stipulated by the law. I'm your daughter Farenait's new General Culture teacher.

A moment of silence.

Penelope Lopez:

- Pleased to meet you. Is it urgent?

Cernecchia:

- Your daughter didn't come to school today.

- Nothing new...

- Yes, but you see, yesterday she showed a presentation trailer full of dead people...

- She's processing grief. It's healthy.

- But illegal.

- And I imagine you reprimanded her for it and today Farenait hasn't come to school, any surprises there?

Cernecchia hated the (inevitable) times when parents made her feel guilty. Usually, soon, the topic would arise: lawyers. Pino Daniele currently had more than a thousand cases underway, if they went over one thousand five hundred a year the funds would be cut.

Elvira took a deep breath to avoid exaggerating, then wrote:

- Your daughter has befriended one of the more difficult students in the class, Help Sommella.

Another long silence. Who knows what Annachiara Alwaysinshape and Lilla were thinking in the meantime.

- Listen, I don't know anything. Socializing is a good thing. You'll see, Farenait will be back tomorrow.

- Yes, but the principal...

Cernecchia could see that she clearly wouldn't be able to post her reply in time: Doctor Lopez's patients were already typing. Indeed their conversation restarted immediately:

Lilla:

- And what about me who can't leave my husband even though he doesn't hit me?

Cernecchia quit the conversation and closed WT.

To hell, she thought.

"... you have to really take care of how you look and be sincere, above all sincere, it pays to be yourself..." the Milanese girl in the video lesson was squeaking.

Elvira looked at the classroom: Thumbos was taking a selfie while picking his nose, Oraetlabora was dozing, Naomi had moved from her nails to her eyes with her phone on mirror mode. She rummaged in her bag, found her usual painkillers and next to them a chocolate bar. She chose the chocolate and looked on her phone online at a handsome actor from the old times. Old Hollywood Glories (OHG) was the favorite site of aging women like

her, where you could look at seductive black and white photos of the stars of Cernecchia's grandma's day.

She heard a snigger: what had happened? Had the dead awoken? Oraetlabora, smiling with a gentle air of self-satisfaction, asked:

“But Miss, who's Cary Grant?”

With great horror Elvira Cernecchia looked at the black and white photo of Cary Grant in shirt, socks and suspenders floating on the electronic whiteboard: so much for a protected connection...

5 The Robbery

“So, what shall we do?”

Farenàit and Help had met at the metro station closest to Help’s house.

For this first outing together, as she was calling it, Help had worn her favorite bomber jacket with the big red and green dragon on the back.

“Nice...” Farenàit had mumbled, “you’re just about visible...” she smiled.

“Even if I was wearing a clown costume or Samurai armor the adults wouldn’t notice us...”

“Some parents they are!” Farenàit sighed.

“To tell the truth though, my grandma did notice the jacket...”

“Really? What did she say?”

“Don’t set fire to anyone...”

Farenàit smiled:

“At least she cares about you...”

“And also Dogdays!”

“The cat?”

“Look.”

She showed her a selfie where Dogdays had two clothes pegs on his ears and had climbed onto her back and was looking into the camera with possessed eyes.

“What! Pegs on his ears! Doesn’t it hurt him?”

“He asked for it, he likes getting them off himself...”

“A mog as foolish as his owner...”

Along Corso Europa Unita the total absence of road works in the summer had allowed the weeds to grow up to elbow height; in the middle there was dried up defecation, abandoned shoes, used plastic containers and cartons forcing pedestrians to hop over them.

“Ugh, it’s disgusting...”

“It’s like this everywhere, a lot... These days everyone’s always up in the air in their cars...”

“They only tidy things up a bit in the center, because tourists come and the TV cameras pass through...”

“Stuff the outskir...”

Help began to give her new friend a tour showing her the shops where she liked to steal cosmetics, the supermarkets she targeted for her jar thefts.

“I’ve never stolen anything...” Farenàit shivered despite the heat and her usual scarf wrapped around her face.

“You know you can do it no problem: the adults don’t even notice...”

They walked for a while, Help speculating on future crimes: she went all out to scare Farenàit.

“Shall we clear out the Credito bank on the corner there?”

“No way!”

“Go on, you can reinvent yourself as a criminal...”

Farenàit laughed and then became pensive.

“Have you ever stolen Candies?”

“No, no!”

“But,” she pointed at the pocket where Help kept her tobacco, “you smoke...”

“Yeah, and I also drink beer, sometimes. But no Luminous Candy. And I’m not one of those people who steal from gypsies or Africans, or harass girls at night, or break in and shoot just for the fun of it...”

“If my mother knew I was getting involved with that kind of person...”

“Ah yes, would it be of interest to the Sobber?”

“You bet!”

“One time I found Candies in my mom’s bag...”

Farenàit’s mouth must have been wide open under her scarf. Help shrugged her shoulders. “You know, it’s because of the clubs she works in... But I don’t think she takes them. Grandma would throw her into the furnace.”

They were near a large church made of blue bricks.

“Look, maybe we’ll find a funeral,” Help joked, “you love them!”

The road crowded with weeds wound around the church in a broad curve along which there were some tidy little houses with gardens, a flower shop and a pub.

During the day, at that time, apart from little old ladies with shopping trolleys and the odd Philippine, Russian or Peruvian maid taking the dogs of wealthy families for a walk, there wasn’t a soul alive. The adults were at work, or pretending to be.

At the traffic lights, Help pressed the button to turn it red for the land cars, then took out her hacking pen from her pocket and short-circuited the electronic dashboard for the crossing.

“My grandpa absolutely loved these gadgets... He would use them to make the car go when he couldn’t be bothered to drive, the washing machine or dishwasher... Every so often

he would hack the heating panel of the building... I suspect he also used it in the bank,” Help smiled proudly in response to Farenàit’s outraged face.

There were hardly any cars around but now a small line had formed. The drivers were all immersed in their connections: watching a film, chatting with a lover, following a commercial.

“They’re always waiting in line and never complain. Nobody’s wondering who actually needs to cross,” Help sneered. Above their heads, on the other hand, the flying cars travelled along their routes in a controlled and orderly fashion.

“Ok, come on then, let them go now,” Farenàit smiled, embarrassed.

She started to wonder whether she’d made too dangerous a friendship.

“Wait! The Bruchners are crossing,” Help waved at the sisters from the first floor of her building who didn’t see her.

They were fighting and dragging two supermarket trolleys. When they had crossed, along with a stray cat, she unfroze the lights. The cars started up again.

“My grandma says that once upon a time they used to beep their horns as soon as it turned red, like crazy...” Help commented while rolling a cigarette.

“I’ve heard that too.”

Beyond the traffic light the curve ended in front of the steps at the entrance to the church.

Help lifted her gaze: suddenly the half rolled cigarette fell out of her hand and she stopped Farenàit with her arm.

“Look!”

A hearse, a long land-air Mercedes adapted for carrying coffins, was parked silently in front of the steps to the church. The chrome door of the trunk shone in the sun, wide open. A well-lit coffin lay inside the Bellomunno Corporation car, the oldest funeral directors in Naples. Unattended.

Help and Farenàit explored the surroundings with their eyes, curious: no undertakers, no relatives. Outside the church were a couple of wreaths.

A few seconds passed. Help looked at Farenàit, who lowered her scarf in astonishment.

“You don’t want to...”

“When will this ever happen to us again! It’s the undertaker’s car! The mortician’s car!”

Help was possessed. She grabbed her friend by the hand and lurched towards the open door of the Mercedes. They climbed over the coffin clumsily; Farenàit couldn’t believe what they were doing. Help used her screwdriver to force open the glass that separated the coffin compartment from the driver’s cabin, and they slipped silently into the seats.

It smelled new and luxurious – the leather, the electronics, the finish – mixed with the odor of rotting flowers and a mountain pine air freshener that swung festively from the rear-view mirror.

Help checked the on-board computer.

“You’re crazy! Do you even know how to drive?” Farenàit asked, her voice hoarse and terrified.

The engine started in response, and Help cheerfully showed off the hacking pen between her fingers.

“Not really, but I’ll learn today! Did you not want to see a dead person up close? Shall we fly? Nah, we best stay on land.”

She engaged the semi-automatic land-driving program: the Mercedes screeched joyfully along the windy road that descended from the church towards Mergellina.

Farenàit turned to check if anyone was following them.

Nobody came out of the church.

“We should close... the... back door...” she suggested while bouncing over the potholes that the verdant and scenic road provided plenty of.

On the roofs of the houses in Via Passo (once called Via Tasso, but it was named after a poet whose name had been censured from the list of place names) dense natural grass was growing thanks to a lack of maintenance. Farenàit peered at one man trimming the roof and a woman going over the sidewalk with a lawnmower so that she could get the stroller out, then, giving up, she activated the hovercraft mode. When the curve ended so did the view of the flying stroller and its fluttering mobile.

At the hundredth pothole Farenàit insisted,

“We’re gonna... lose the... coffin...”

Help turned to look at her quickly,

“Nah, it’s held in well, there are locks. I can see them here, on the computer.”

She turned on the radio.

The frequencies jumped around, a little Radio Vera Maria, a little New Naples Remember, the radio station of taxi drivers.

“What the hell,” protested Help.

She fiddled with it and some rap came on.

...destroyed, destroyed, with your sandals, with the triangles, with all your questions without angles...

Now the windy road came to a junction, Help took a right, and the curves turned into hairpins. Nursing homes, private clinics, elegant villas, palms.

“Look, this is where Naomi’s mom comes for makeovers,” Help pointed out, being a tour guide for the silent and terrified Farenàit. “My mother calls her Fonzie...”

“Why?” Farenàit stuttered.

“Apparently thanks to some interventions she looks like a person from old TV,” Help chuckled.

“We took a dead person from their family...” Farenàit said in a tiny voice.

“You’ll see. They don’t want to see him anyway!”

They ended up in Mergellina and were immediately plunged into the traffic: the residential area had finished.

“I live here...” Farenàit pointed with her finger.

Help looked at a liberty pink house, yellow and white, three stories high that had a sign outside saying Villa Lopez. Refined stuccos adorned the windows with closed green curtains and on the roof luxuriant fan palms grew in numerous pots.

“Wow! You’re rich!”

“Not at all... it was my grandparents’ house but the family of the caretaker has bought it all and they’re about to kick us out...”

However strange it may have been that a funeral car, rather long and flashy, was driving through town with the trunk open and two sixteen year olds in the front, nobody paid any attention.

“Where shall we open it?” Help asked.

Farenàit’s eyes opened wide.

Help bit her thumb distractedly.

At one traffic light the African window cleaners looked at them perplexed.

“Clean?”

“Yeah, bro’,” said Help and she passed him a coin. The Polish guy who was washing lights also approached them but the light had turned green by then.

Farenàit turned to look at the bewildered faces of the African and Polish guys.

“They’ll call the police...” she murmured.

“Woooah, chill,” Help responded, happily distracted.

At the next light she bought paper tissues and sent for two ice creams.

“This light is a morgue,” she said to the Maghrebi who had taken the job, “it never changes!”

“That’s lucky!” he smiled and winked showing her a hacking pen that was identical to her grandpa’s one. “The ice cream shop is mine,” he explained.

Help laughed, Farenàit ate her ice cream in a trance.

Finally it turned green, Help and the Maghrebi said goodbye like old friends.

In front of them there was a tunnel that went from Mergellina to Fuorigrotta.

Help had an idea.

Lets take the dead guy to Virgil’s Tomb.

Farenàit jumped, “What are you saying?! We should go to the outskirts!”

“Noooo, the outskirts are guarded, there are gangs. But nobody ever goes here.

And indeed the slope that led up to Virgil’s Tomb and to that of the poet Leopardi was completely abandoned.

A screen that was losing its pixels had a summary of the place, steering clear of saying too much about the literary activities of the two dead, neither of which was actually buried there.

Help pulled over. She got out to force the gate, opened it, got back in the car and entered.

“You’re gonna close it,” she said to Farenàit, who obeyed like a robot.

But the plants along the slope had blocked access in a dense tangle, terrifying even to look at: bougainvillea, ivy, nettles, wild roses, silver dust and loads of horrendous alien-like weeds, they created a shady dome that the Mercedes would never have been able to cross.

“How are we gonna get through?”

“Flight mode!”

Help touched the on-board computer panel and two short wings popped out of the hearse and the engine made it levitate upwards. For a minute the Mercedes with the open trunk oscillated uncertainly suspended above the jungle.

Farenàit covered her eyes, “I hate flying,” she wailed.

Then Help tapped the advance command and the car moved forwards.

“Over there!” she shouted happily.

They came down to roughly the height of a tombstone that read, “Leopardi”. The marble was cracked. Around it were the remains of a public herbarium equipped with moldy and broken signs.

“Up there, they say there’s a grotto,” said Help.

She put the Mercedes back into land mode pushing it through like a lawnmower until they reached a small square. The mountain of tuff rose up to a peak over a giant entrance archway.

Cold air came out from the darkness of the cave, who knows how deep it was.

From the rock face a giant painted Madonna stared at them.

Help turned the motor off.

“And now let’s open it.”

She tapped the dashboard of the Mercedes and the locks that had held the coffin in place until that point, in spite of the potholes, the curves and the hills, unlocked.

As unexpected as it was sudden, an automatic ramp tilted the coffin up and it slid out onto the floor of the cave in a deafening roar.

A family of swallows flew out from the cave’s ceiling.

“But it’ll break!” Farenàit protested, almost in tears.

“Good, otherwise we’ll need a real safecracker to open it.”

Farenàit gripped Help by the hand, “We’re gonna end up in prison this time.”

“Get out!” she reassures her by laughing, “they closed them all a year ago because of lack of funding, don’t you remember?”

In the deathly silence they heard the scurrying of fast and frightened lizards.

“Snakes?” whispered Farenàit.

“Rats at worst,” Help assured her practically.

In one place the coffin was effectively split. Help touched the side.

“Look, here are the commandments,” she said and bent down to operate a keyboard.

“The bump must’ve broken them...”

Long moments passed.

Farenàit couldn’t take her eyes of the broken corner of the coffin from which a kind of lace was sticking out, probably the edge of a cushion.

“Maybe he was a well composed dead man and now we’ll find him with his skull cracked open and brains leaking out...” she murmured.

“Why not,” giggled Help, “maybe all the bones have come loose and...”

But she couldn’t finish her sentence because at that moment with a metallic click the casket sprung open.

Farenàit instinctively covered her eyes with her hands. How had she ended up in this mess, how would she explain it all to the Sobber!

“Per San Limone,” whispered Help and then in a louder voice, “Look!”

Farenàit slowly opened first her fingers then her eyes.

The embroidered edge of the cushions, the shiny satin, the crucifixes and the light bulbs in the shape of eternal flames smashed by the impact formed the external frame of the box.

She squeezed her eyelids expecting to glimpse a skeletal hand, crossed fingers, a dried out face, but instead.

The casket was full, yes, but not with a dead body: with an enormous, darkened pile of books.

6 In Virgil's Tomb

“Books?!” Farenàit squealed.

“Shhhhh...” Help ordered, putting a hand over her mouth, “Shut up!!! It’s illegal!!!”

“Books?! Who still keeps books?” Farenàit continued, unable to restrain herself.

“And anyway, books may be illegal but so is the robbery of a coffin!”

“Chill out, darling,” Help insisted, “What do you want? Candy? Some gum?” She rummaged in her sack looking for something to chew on that would calm her companion down. A packet of tissues is all she found.

The space designed to hold an average sized human body was completely full of volumes of various shapes and colors. The spines of some were split, chewed up, stuck together with a really old kind of adhesive, Scotch tape; others were light and colorful, on the covers there were pictures, photos.

“I’d have preferred the dead man... What are we supposed to do now with this stuff?”

She grumbled. She was speaking in a low voice: perhaps because of the cave, perhaps because they were looking at unknown objects, both had instinctively turned the volume right down, even though it was only sparrows who were around to hear them.

Suddenly all of grandma Iolanda’s rants flooded Help’s head.

“My grandma always talks about these things, about how they disappeared, why they disappeared... But, flip, they haven’t disappeared, look how many there are...”

Farenàit had calmed down now and her eyes shone.

“Recently,” she whispered, “my grandpa also talked about them all the time: he said loads of book stoves had been sold, so that families could stoke them in the winter by liberating themselves of their illegal possessions... He also told me that in luxury hotels it was trendy to heat the rooms up using old manuscripts...”

“What’s a... manuscript?”

Farenàit assumed a professorial tone, a family inheritance. “Books written by hand, without the printing process.”

Help shrugged her shoulders, “You’re speaking Arabic.”

Farenàit started touching the closest books with two fingers.

“Ahh memories... I was so little...”

Then, leafing through them, she literally got inside the casket.

“Look! There are even some with illustrations!”

Help moved closer, a little grossed out. She looked and then pontificated, “But they’re still! How stupid!”

“The Master and Margherita... Great Expectations... Madame Bovary... Crime and Punishment... The Shadow Line... Dr Jekyll and Hyde... Carmilla... Pride and Prejudice...”

Farenàit enunciated the titles loudly and clearly.

“It sounds boring...” Help shrugged.

Farenàit stopped.

“What is it?” she asked her friend.

Farenàit raised one hand: her name was written on one of the books, but in a slightly different way. She stammered, “My... my... name... comes from here!”

Help looked with a tiny morsel of interest at the half-rotten volume that must have been a very cheap edition judging from the way it had been preserved.

She scratched her chin.

“Huh... But did the people having the funeral know this stuff was in the coffin?”

Farenàit stopped her devout examination of the paper.

“It’s true... Who was supposed to be in this box?”

“If the books are here...”

“...where’s the dead guy?”

They stared at each other, eyes wide open in the half-light of the cave.

“If somebody wanted to get rid of the books they could have done it in a much less complicated way... Is it necessary to pretend someone died...”

“Or bury the corpse somewhere... In the garden, say...”

“And the books in the coffin? Why? They could’ve buried the books in the garden...”

“Yeah.”

The gurgling of pigeons rose out of the silence.

“What do we do with them?”

“We leave them all here and go home. Somebody, sooner or later, perhaps the Bellomunno Company, will look for the car... They’ll look for the coffin... We’ll leave it to the police to find the stolen goods.”

It was Help who said these last words, who was now standing up with her arms crossed, contemplating, alternately, the Mercedes and the casket of books.

Farenàit also got up and, with her face in the shadow, added, “Don’t you want to read them?”

Of all the crimes committed that day by Help, this was the most dangerous: and it was Farenàit who had proposed it. Help, despite her tattooed arms and calves, despite her tool sack, the long history of climbing buildings, her short hair and shady reputation, in

comparison with Farenàit, who was wrapped up in her scarf, dressed in black in the darkness of the unknown and ancient cave, she felt harmless. Oh how she loved this new friend!

“There’s loads of them, how would we take them away? And where would we hide them? In our houses...”

“Let’s empty the coffin and hide them in the cave. Even if the police find the coffin they definitely won’t look for the books. And whoever hid them in the coffin definitely won’t report them missing... We’ll take them away one at a time, gradually. We’ll read, swap, and bring them back again. Without getting noticed.”

Farenàit had established the plan again.

Help looked in the trunk of the Mercedes and took out a flashlight. She also turned on the flashlights on their phones.

They found a nook in the cave, much further in than where they had parked the hearse. A little shelf. Help kept going in the dark and found a hole. Farenàit hunted out another cove. They hid the books in the groups of two or three maximum.

They spent a long time penetrating the cave. There were supports that hinted at ancient restorations that had been abandoned. A gate, that perhaps indicated an even darker and deeper path, opened with no effort.

After a rather long time – the time on their phones, that were completely out of range in the cave, told them it was already the afternoon – the box was empty.

Farenàit took *The Master and Margherita* with her. Help took the book that her intrepid friend was named after.

They gently closed up the foliage of the ancient park, closed all the gates and emerged out into the road. The Mergellina traffic was like an unknown landscape on the return from a long, long journey through time.