

June 2001

It's June. The month of summer.

I'm moving through the city with broad strides as a light drizzle dampens my face. For years, I've made a habit of running every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It relaxes me.

The little red man at the traffic light forces me to a stop.

As I catch my breath, Achille's face appears in the empty air before me, his hair outlined in light and sky, as he tells me: "If all that a human being has lived can be described in words, then they haven't lived at all."

I'm thirty-three, I make my living by writing stories, and I suddenly feel as if I've lost the thread of mine, as if I'd landed square in the middle of that prediction. The realization drops onto me like a bucket of ice water.

When the little green man appears, it takes a few seconds before I rejoin the herd. I'm no longer running anymore, now I walk. And it's with my heart thumping like a hammer on a piece of cloth that I resist the impulse to crash into a dark-haired young girl crossing from the opposite side, as if by doing that, I could shatter the shell that separates me from her.

I've just reached the far sidewalk when a poster advertising an exhibit of photos by someone named Maria Dharana catches my eye. At the bottom left, I read that the inauguration will be held tonight at the Museum of Contemporary Art. But it's the poster's background that's literally grabbed me by the guts: a black and white photo of a naked woman floating in a glowing liquid, her hair unfurled in the sea's swell, her arms stretched out to her left and down the side of her body, tilting ever so slightly forward in a sort of blood-red, sensuous embrace, with the following words, hand-painted: *I'll see in your eyes the beginning and end of time. The sea will be there, fire will be there, and we will be there.*

The faint gleam of sunlight, which has just come out from behind the clouds, casting light on the poster and the soft feminine curves, makes it a minor triumph to read each word.

Sparks from a past that burns on the skin.

As I reach the end and a streetcar rolls down over the tracks behind me, I feel my whole body, warned in advance by my nerves, shake along with the Earth itself. There's a surge of blood in my veins, a slap in the face of the present. The time span separating one date from another is nothing but a dream, because inside me, at that very moment, I can feel that same flame rekindling, that same innocent amazement, that same irresistible lust for life and new discoveries that was such a daily part of my earliest youth. Back when I first met that old man. Long are the days but in time the truth unfolds. My respiration hooks back up with the invisible web and as my blood, suddenly hot again, pushes into the muscle, my foot already gathers thrust.

That's me in that woman's body. And for me, it's a clarion call. And for me, it's as if time had never passed. The lost time of youth, the only time when all ambition dwells in the realm of possibility.

Again.

Now.

No longer in memory.

In the muscle that keeps us alive.

August 1982

We were climbing the seaside cliff when I heard Rosanna call my name. I turned and saw she'd come to a halt. She was breathing hard and her eyes shone like a newly waxed floor.

Crabwise, I took three steps back to the rock where she crouched. "What's wrong? Why'd you stop?"

Rossana sniffled. "What's wrong is I'm a fool. If anything happens to her, my mom'll kill me."

She clutched Ketty close. Ketty was a fine specimen of a Pekinese pup, and she gazed up at me with the eyes of a bewildered fawn.

Eyes just like her mistress's.

I did my best to allay her fears. "Wait and see, nothing's going to happen to her. Males never attack females."

"What makes you so sure?"

"They said so in a documentary I saw on TV."

She seemed to want to believe it. "You aren't just saying that so I'll come with you?"

"You know I'd never do that."

"Then give me your word of honor. Better yet, swear to me."

The sky beyond the ridge had turned slate grey.

I could see Teresa, Mirko, and Ciro's bodies growing smaller and darker in the distance. We were nearly there. I could glimpse it. It was just overhead. I'd have given anything to sit on that rocky outcrop and from that perch try to sense the movement of the earth. It was an obsession of mine. I'd read in a school textbook that the Earth, revolving on its axis, takes a year to orbit once around the Sun, and since that day, from time to time, I'd stand still and try to capture it, that imperceptible movement. And what better place than the cliff to succeed. It was gorgeous, the ideal location. Sometimes, I'd gaze up at it in rapture from the beach. Viewed from below, looming over the sea, it looked like an enormous tongue that the land was sticking out mockingly at the sailors on the sea, nature making a face at anyone who dared challenge it.

Now what?

A small voice warned me to sidestep that responsibility, another voice urged me not to give a damn. I knew it was wrong to swear to a falsehood. And there was Ketty, gazing at me like a vanquished gladiator awaiting his emperor's thumb's down.

If I get home late, I might catch hell from my dad, too.

Finally, I took a deep breath and said: "I swear it."

The instant I said it, my eyes went straight up to the cliff again.

That August had made us yearn for it a little less than usual. In June and July, we'd had the World Cup, making the wait more bearable. At last, summer vacation arrived, and with it, our longed-for freedom. That's the great thing about Calo Bay,

you can feel the yearning in the air, it gets into your blood, deep in the marrow of your bones, like a virus impervious to all treatment. During the daytime, the grownups stayed on the beach baking in the sun or chatting idly at the seaside café, while we roamed around discovering new places. In the summer, we were pretty much free to do as we pleased, compared to winter months, but there were still a few rules we had to abide by. Three were fundamental: show up for lunch and dinner (no later than 9 for dinner), get home by 1 AM, and last of all, the one rule not to break under any circumstances: no climbing the cliff. The path up to the cliff was steep and, if you fell, you'd be smashed to pieces. A few weeks before we got there, a boy from the town had fallen off the cliff. Some thought he'd killed himself, others thought it was an accident. There was just one road to the top, but you needed a car or a moped to take it, and we had neither.

But that evening, Ketty and I weren't there for the cliff. We were there for Calo Bay's other forbidden attraction: a retired prostitute that everyone in town called *the Frenchwoman*. People said she was so beautiful it took your breath away. Even though no one, except for the lawyer Todini, who'd sold her the house but who died after the transaction had gone through, had ever seen her face. She spent the entire day holed up in her house like a mole in its molehill. This made her flutter like a ghost in the town's collective imagination, kindling fantasies and backbiting. A few days earlier, Giulio, the beach lifeguard, said this about her: "She has a pair of lips that can suck the soul out of your body and send it back to God."

The previous summer, Mirko had tried to talk us into going to see her more than once, but because of the prohibition, we'd always made excuses not to go. Invariably, except for that evening. And to think that just a few hours earlier, as I was leaving, mom had warned me not to dare set foot on the cliff. That was her greatest fear, that I would get hurt up there.

I was so eager to join the others, I hadn't even bothered to reply. What's more, it never would have occurred to me that that's exactly where we were going to go.

As we often did after lunch, that afternoon we met up at "Windy Beach." It was right next to the developed beach, with the restaurant and café where our parents had a reserved spot, complete with rented beach umbrella. Windy Beach was our base of operations. We set out from there on our raids and sorties. I was the first to arrive. Back then, I had a muscle or two, dark blue eyes, and a bunch of weird questions buzzing around in my head. Like: why don't animals laugh? I was asking myself that very question, when I heard the shuffling sound of someone coming up behind me in their sandals.

I turned around and saw Teresa approaching.

Teresa Cirillo was thirteen, spoke with a muddy French r, and was slightly cross-eyed, which gave Mirko an excuse to mock her relentlessly, to his delight. He'd point at something in the distance, and when she tried to focus on it, make her turn her head elsewhere: "No! Not there! Look over *there!*" He tormented her pitilessly, the poor thing.

Before I could say a word to her, Mirko showed up out of nowhere, trotting along like a rhinoceros, carrying two plastic bags bulging full of water.

Mirko Zangardi was fourteen, had bottle-green eyes, and was incredibly strong. One time, he'd bent an iron bar in two, after *Ciro* and I, even working together, hadn't been able to budge by so much as a fraction of an inch. He was chubby and red-haired, and he constantly spat on the ground. He was the only one of us who'd had sex with a girl. Or so he claimed. Now the little rat had crouched behind a rock in ambush, just waiting for his chance to leap into action. Our outstretched arms, our pitiful looks, and our pleas for mercy had been in vain. There was no way to escape that smack of freezing water and plastic.

Soaked from head to toe, *Teresa* and I exchanged a glance, unsure whether to be enraged or start laughing, when *Rossana* appeared.

Rossana *Pinto* was the smallest of the group. She was eleven, had raven-black hair and a pair of big blue eyes like *Candy Candy's* friend *Annie's*. Late the previous summer, she'd gotten a crush on *Mirko*, though she kept it to herself for fear of becoming a laughingstock. We all started gathering seashells together to make necklaces and bracelets. We'd collected a huge stock of shells when *Ciro* finally showed up, licking a *Lemonissimo*.

Ciro was my age. Both his hair and his eyes were light brown and every so often he'd start punching his fists into the air, making strange sounds like *haeaaaaah!* *Bruce Lee* was his idol. His worst defect was his breath. *Mirko* maintained *Ciro* was constipated, which is why his breath was so foul. Whatever the reason, if you had a conversation with him a foot apart, you'd have to hold your breath: otherwise you'd faint.

The minute we saw him, *Mirko*, *Teresa*, *Rossana*, and I all exchanged a quick glance of intent, dropped our bags, hoisted him in the air by brute force, like four mountain bandits, held him helpless and tossed him into the water, like a corpse being committed to the sea from a ship. It was a rule we enforced from time to time: the last one on the beach went straight into the saltwater. Then we swam out to the little rescue boat moored to the buoy off the beach, and started diving off the side of the boat and into the water. *Mirko*, *Ciro*, and I even took off our swimming trunks and whirled them in the air, quacking like ducks in a pond.

At last, dead tired, we sprawled out in the sunlight. That was when *Mirko*, rotating the palm of his right hand downwards, hauled out his longtime obsession and started pounding away at it. "Let's go flush out *Frenchie!* Whoever's in stack your hands!"

Ciro and *Teresa* didn't even give him time to finish before stacking their hands in agreement. Those two kiss-asses always did whatever he suggested.

Rossana, however, rightly remembered: "We can't climb the cliff. It's off limits."

"Who cares about off limits!" *Mirko* retorted, dismissively. "We're practically grownups! We can't constantly be running up against this off limits!"

As I've said before, the idea of climbing the cliff held a strange and powerful allure for me. "But what do we do about the dog. Have you all forgotten that there's a damned schnauzer guarding the house?"

Last summer *Aniello*, whose father owned the general store down in town, told us that there was a big black schnauzer guarding the house, and that it wouldn't

let a soul get near, not even a fly. He always saw it chained up when he delivered groceries and went to collect the money Frenchie left under the doormat.

"Oh, right, that damn dog!" Mirko cried. "We've got to come up with some way of putting it out of action."

"Let's lace a meatball with cyanide and poison it!" Ciro spouted. "There was a Doberman that lived upstairs from us, and it used to shit all over the apartment. So that's how the owners killed it. The dog died with foam coming out of its mouth."

As Rossana made the same expression I once saw my father make after drinking a glass of vinegar (having mistaken it for wine), Teresa leapt to her feet. "Yesss, *great* idea, let's kill that *bastard* with a cyanide meatball!" Her r's emerged muddied, sounding like v's.

Mirko, however, brought her back to earth. "Sure, but where are we supposed to get cyanide? Does anyone know where to buy it in town?"

The discussion had deteriorated as we considered other solutions, all of them equally out of the question, until Mirko got a flash of inspiration, suggesting that we kidnap Ketty and use her as a stalking horse to distract the Schnauzer.

After dumping the seashells under Teresa's beach umbrella, we raced over to Rossana's house, which was near where almost all of us lived, not far from the beach. We crawled on knees and elbows to the foot of the low wall that, along with a set of green bars, marked the limits of Rossana's family's property. The wall was just tall enough to hide behind. From there, we started spying on the house.

Sprawled out on a hammock tied between two lemon trees was Signora Rachele Pinto wearing Bermuda shorts and a tank top. A pair of sunglasses on her nose, her left hand dangled alongside the hammock, listlessly holding a Merit 100's cigarette, seemingly abandoned to its fate. Her chest rose and fell at a regular cadence. She was asleep. From the kitchen, we could hear the sound of Rossana's father working with an assortment of pots and skillets. Signor Pinto, an accountant, took care of almost everything while they were on vacation, from grocery shopping to house cleaning. As Mirko liked to say when he was trying to play the tough guy, the man was wearing his wife's panties on his head. But we couldn't see Ketty anywhere. Strange. Signora Rachele never let the dog out of her sight, as constant a presence as the wedding band on her ring finger.

We were looking around when a mop of hair suddenly emerged from the grass. Tied up to one of the lemon trees, right under Signora Pinto's ass, Ketty gave herself a shake and then laid back down on the grass, her muzzle on her forelegs. The only sound was the wind in the trees and now and again the clatter of Signor Pinto the accountant putting dishes away in the kitchen.

It was Teresa, in a whisper, who asked the crucial question. "So now what? Who do we send to get her?"

No one was ever likely to volunteer for the job. Rossana's mother was wider than she was tall and had been a championship Graeco-Roman wrestler. Most of all, she loved her Ketty more dearly than any other living creature. Anyone she caught kidnapping her darling baby was bound to be torn to pieces. We all turned to look at Ciro. He was always the one who took on the most dangerous missions. But one time, he'd been pegged as having peed into Signora Pinto's steam iron. After grilling

her daughter mercilessly, she had proceeded to give *Ciro* a pounding with her rolling pin.

"Forget it! There's no way! I told you, I'm not going over there! No, no, no!" *Ciro* yelled, forcing *Mirko* to clap his hand over *Ciro's* mouth to keep him from awakening the sleeping whale. Then he glared at me with the snarl of a wolf that has just cornered a helpless lamb.

My head must have looked like a windshield wiper running amok. A thousand times over, I would sooner have thrown myself out of an airplane without a parachute.

Then *Mirko* looked at *Ketty*. He sat there a while, observing her, and finally, resigned to his fate, exclaimed: "Alright, already, I'll have to go!" He got to his feet and turning to me and *Ciro*, tossed: "But the two of you are a couple of little girls!"

We both nodded in agreement, preferring humiliation over the incalculable risks of a scrap with the bulldog. Then, just as *Mirko* was about to step through the front gate, *Rossana* rose to her feet and stopped him, declaring in a faint voice: "Hold on, I'll go."

It was without a doubt the best solution. If her mother woke up, she wouldn't have said a thing to her. It was also far less likely that *Ketty* would start barking. So, in perfect silence, *Rossana* tiptoed through the front gate and began her approach.

Our heads peeped out atop the low wall like targets on a firing range. Every other step *Rossana* took, she looked back at us, and we waved her on, urgently. *Ketty* immediately rose to her feet at the sight of her and started wagging her tail. If she'd broke out barking, that would have sealed our fate. Then, wrinkling her nose, *Rossana* waved her hand to hush *Ketty* and fortunately the little dog obeyed. *Rossana* patted *Ketty* on the head, unfastened her leash, gathered her up in her arms and, with one last glance at her mother, scurried off as if being pursued by Indians. And all together, we raced off toward the cliff.

24-39

The sun was setting. If we hoped to be home for dinner and not trip any alarms, we'd have to move fast.

Walking briskly in single file, with *Mirko* leading the way, we emerged from a stand of oak trees as tall as apartment buildings and found ourselves face to face with *Frenchie's* house. It was nothing like I had imagined. There was only one floor above the ground floor. In front of the house was a yard full of potted plants and trees. The pitched roof was covered with terracotta tiles. The plaster had half flaked off. An interwoven patchwork of ivy and *bougainvillea* spread over the entire façade. It looked grim and spooky in the light of the setting sun, like a house in a scary movie, when the main character walks into the front yard and you know exactly what's about to happen, and you yell at them not to go in.

At the front gate, forefinger pressed to his lips, *Mirko* waved to us to get down. We all crouched low behind an agave. A chain-link fence enclosed the whole yard. Bats hunting insects slashed through the air on their crazed trajectories. Only the faintest glow, as if from a candle, lit up the last room on the left upstairs.

Mirko picked up a dead branch and threw it over the fence toward the house. We waited, but nobody came out. He threw a second branch that came dangerously close to hitting the front door. We crouched there waiting with bated breath, but neither Frenchie nor the schnauzer were anywhere to be seen.

In a silence that promised trouble, Mirko whispered: "I don't see any schnauzer around here. I bet that idiot Aniello made it up."

"What if it's inside the house?" objected Teresa in a whisper. "Maybe it's sleeping inside. How would we know?"

Right! Why don't we go back home? I thought to myself.

Mirko replied: "If there was a dog inside it would have woken up. Schnauzers are the best guard dogs in the world."

"Since when do you know so much about dogs?"

"Since always, sweetie. I had a husky for seven years when I was a kid. I know all about dogs. Plus I read *White Fang*."

Remembering the documentary, Rossana stared at me, awaiting my authoritative opinion.

I said: "I've always heard that schnauzers have an incredible sense of smell. They can catch a scent from three hundred feet away." That was enough to reassure them that the dog couldn't be anything but a tall tale cooked up by Aniello to scare us.

Careful to stay out of sight, Mirko went right up to the gate and waved to Ciro to come closer. Ciro joined him and asked in a knowing: "So now what do we do?"

Mirko was studying the gate. "What do you think, wuss? I'm gonna climb it!" Then he signaled for me to come over, too.

When I reached them, he told us: "Make me a stepladder."

Squatting, Ciro and I interlaced our hands, forming a sort of platform. I held my breath. Up close like that, Ciro's breath could be lethal. With one hand on my back and the other gripping the metal uprights, Mirko stepped one foot onto our hands. "On the count of three lift me up, okay?"

We lifted as hard as we could. After several attempts, Mirko managed to get a foot on the gate's center cross bar. He struggled to climb over, though. So we shoved him up from under.

Just then, we heard Rossana's voice: "Hey, there's a hole over here!"

Clinging to the gate like a tick on a pig's ass, Mirko tried to pinpoint it. "Where?"

Rossana, who was next to a hole at the bottom of the fence, pointed it out to him. "Right here! We can get through!"

Mirko let go and fell right down on top of us. I shut my eyes, afraid that I'd broken a few ribs. There was a horrible pain in my chest and no air in my lungs. After Mirko got back on his feet, a small crowd formed around me. Teresa started to slap my face. "*Mavco! Mavco*, can you hear me?"

Breathing with considerable effort, I gestured for silence, while Mirko rushed to see how big the hole was: "We can get in!" he exclaimed and wriggled through with all the gracefulness of a bulldozer.

"You feel up to going in?" Ciro asked me.

I thought it over, and was tempted to say no, but finally I nodded.

Mirko was already up on his feet on the far side of the fence. “Hey, quit fucking around and squeeze through that hole, okay? Hurry up, we don’t have much time!”

Taking care not to scratch ourselves, we squeezed through the hole one by one.

A strange silence reigned over the yard. The soundtrack to our cautious advance was nothing but the chirping of crickets and the sound of our footsteps crushing sun-withered leaves that littered the ground. We halted behind a hydrangea bush, sixty feet from the house. It was the last bastion separating us from the front door. The next stretch we had to cover was exposed.

“Now let’s go one at a time,” Mirko whispered from the head of the line. “Do exactly as I do.” Then he shot off like a rocket, landing with a splat against the wall by the front door like a gecko.

One at a time, we joined him. Arriving last, we closed ranks and I whispered: “Guys, this is breaking and entering, you know that, right?”

Ignoring me, Mirko held up one hand and hushed us with the other. “You hear that, too?”

“Hear what?” Ciro asked in a whisper.

“That sound. It’s like splashing water.”

We all pricked up our ears. And in fact, a sound like falling water was coming from the house.

“I think Frenchie must be taking a shower,” Mirko deduced, his eyes becoming mischievous. “It’ll be easier to get inside without being heard.”

Mirko launched away from the wall with a twitch of his hips and after a few quick steps, he turned to look back at the house. For a few seconds he stood there as if posing for a picture, then he came bounding back towards us. “The second story balcony door is open! I’ll shinny up the drainpipe and get inside!”

Still in a low voice and with one pupil pointing right and the other pointing left, Teresa spoke up. “Where is it? I don’t see any drainpipe.”

Not mocking her this time, Mirko grabbed her by the shoulders and pointed at the side of the house, drawing a vertical line in the air. “Right there, you see it?”

We all had a hard time spotting it because it was almost dark already and it was pretty much covered with leaves.

Mirko rubbed his hands. “You’ll see, getting inside is going to be a piece of cake. And then I’ll come down and let you all in.”

Put that way, it might even seem like a simple task. Maybe for Zorro, but not for someone with Mirko’s level of agility. Well aware of his limited physical coordination and harboring tender feelings for him, Rossana said: “I don’t think you can do it. Besides, that downspout looks old to me, it’ll never hold your weight.”

Mirko shook the pipe to test its sturdiness and, quite sure of himself, exclaimed: “Bullshit, it’ll hold me!”

He spat into his hands, rubbed them on his Bermuda shorts, and placed them around the drainpipe. With a leap, he jammed his feet between the bougainvillea branches. Despite some shuddering, for the first six feet of his ascent, the downspout seemed to be holding him. When he was almost up to the balcony,

around ten feet up, amidst the rustling of leaves and the chirping of crickets, a sound like the creaking of a rusty old door grew louder. Apprehensive, we all glanced up at Mirko.

A few more tugs on the downspout and we heard the creaking again, this time much louder. We were trying to figure out what it was, when the metal hoop anchoring the pipe to the wall over Mirko's head shot out like a frisbee, ricocheting through the pine needles. A second later we heard Mirko cry, "Shit!"

We all at once glanced up at him as Teresa instinctively stepped away from the wall and softly asked: "Hey, what's going on up there?"

Mirko's answer was as terse as it was unsettling. "I think the joint holding together the pipes together is coming loose."

"So what *ave* you waiting to come down *fov*? Come on, get down, this might be *dangevous*! *Mivko*, did you *heav* what I said? Get down! You'll get *huvt* up *theve*!"

In the thrill of the ascent, Mirko didn't give a damn about our pleas and just went on climbing. At that point, Rossana, Ciro, and I came out into the open as well. Worried sick, Ciro tried to reinforce Teresa's message: "Damn it Mirko, didn't you hear what Teresa told you? Come on, get down! You could easily break your neck!"

Undeterred, he nevertheless continued to climb. "Don't worry, it's all under control! I'm practically there, just a few more inch..."

He was just about to grab the balcony's railing when a dull thump, like a board karate-chopped in two, froze and silenced him. The downspout had broken free from the wall and was slowly bending, like a hundred-year-old tree sawed through at the base. It was logic, pure damn logic that it was bound to fall. How could a tube of that diameter, and old and rotten into the bargain, possibly support that weight?

It just couldn't.

Now in a descending arc, and not knowing what else to do, Mirko began to invoke (though regrettably not using his quiet voice) the woman who'd brought him into this world: "Oh, Mama! Mommy!" At the same time, and in a vain attempt to climb up the drainpipe again, he pedaled his legs as if there were a bicycle saddle under his ass.

Ciro and Teresa were flabbergasted as they watched him, and Rossana even had her hand over her mouth, while I was already praying.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, don't let him fall!

A second later, to avoid being crushed, we got out from under there as fast as four mice caught thieving in the pantry. I went right, while Ciro, Teresa, and Rossana (who held Ketty in her arms) went left, that is, toward the front gate.

We had our backs to each other when we heard the crash. We turned and rushed to help him, but after just a few steps, once the dust kicked up by his impact had settled, we saw a silhouette, dark and menacing, beside his inert body. Like in some game of red-light-green-light, we suddenly stood paralyzed.

Frenchie's schnauzer!

It had bloodshot eyes, sharp white teeth like a shark, and it snarled like I'd never heard a dog snarl before. It was staring at each of us in turn, as if deciding which to attack.

I knew it! Aniello hadn't lied, after all!

Seeing that the dog flap built into the bottom of the front door was still swinging, though in ever diminishing arcs, I felt my balls shrink to the size of marbles. The dog's back was speckled with a whitish foam. Soapsuds. Frenchie, or whoever the hell lived in that house, was giving him a bath, and that's why it hadn't heard us.

At that point, Teresa, Rossana, Ciro, and I exchanged a hopeless glance. And it's just plain fact that in certain circumstances, if you want any hope of making it home alive, there's nothing for it but...

"Come on, let's run!" I heard myself yell. I was already heading for the cliff before I was done yelling.

After just a few steps, I turned and saw that the dog was still observing us, as Teresa, Ciro, and Rossana ran the opposite way, namely, toward the gate. I know, don't tell me, it's the act of a coward to leave a friend on the ground with no idea of whether he's dead or alive, but what else could we do? Nothing but run. Run as fast as our legs could carry us.

As I heard it bark, I turned and saw that the dog, like some guided missile, was altering its course in response to every slightest movement I made. It was moving so fast its paws didn't even seem to be touching the ground. I kicked off my flipflops and darted into a dense stand of pine trees, weaving from side to side around them. I would definitely have slammed into one, if the moonlight hadn't lit them up, if only faintly. Meanwhile, as Ketty yelped in the distance, I began to cherish the fond hope the schnauzer might notice and go after her instead. The idea must never even have crossed its mind, because when I turned to look, I saw that the schnauzer was still gaining ground. So I gritted my teeth and pumped my feet even harder, just as my middle school PE teacher had taught me. When I was verging on paralysis, I caught a glimpse of the metal fence that surrounded the yard. My only chance at survival was to reach it and climb over it.

Come on you're there...Come on you're almost there...Don't give up now...Come on, come on...

Six feet from the fence, I jumped for it and with a few clawing lunges I reached the top. I swung my legs over and was about to let myself drop to the other side when the schnauzer hurtled through the air at me. My every muscle, tendon, and nerve was motionless. A palm's breadth from my nose, so close that for an instant moment I could see myself reflected in its eyes and feel the warmth of its breath, the schnauzer snapped his jaws shut and then fell earthwards, dragged down by the force of gravity.

As the dog went on barking, my heart pounded crazily. I let myself slide down the far side and started for the cliff. After a few yards, I felt my blood run warm again, and for the first time in my life I could tell that it's the heart that pumps blood, no longer like some abstract substance, extraneous to me, but something living, part of me, flowing inside me like a sweet nectar. Then my legs began to tremble, and something in my body moved down. I couldn't say what it was, but it had substance.

It was nine o'clock. I hurried down the trail that led to the small beach of Calo Point. From there I planned to hike back up and, once I reached the spot where I'd

stopped with Rossana, I'd head home. If I could get there in about twenty minutes, I could contain the damage.

When I ran into especially sheer rocks, I'd place all my weight on my hands and feet and advance like a spider. My one concern, aside from the trouble awaiting me at home, was what had become of Mirko.

I had almost climbed all the way down when a sudden gleam of light illuminated the beach.

Was it a bonfire?

I slipped behind some bushes that grew between the rocks. I couldn't see a thing, only the flames and the smoke rising in the air.

Who could have lit it?

The sucking sound of waves going out was a sheet sliding in contact with the flesh.

Without exposing myself to view, I moved forward, imagining myself catching red-handed a pair of lovers seeking a secluded spot for intimacy.

But what if it's actually a madman? A maniac, and he cuts me into bits and throws me into the sea...

I was just about to be overwhelmed by these horrible thoughts when, from between the branches, a woman finally appeared. No, make that a young girl.

What is a young girl doing here at the beach all alone at this time of night?

She set fire to two other woodpiles. One was circular, the second square, and the third shaped like a half moon. Arranged in a triangular array. Then the girl sat cross-legged in the middle of the three fires and started staring into one of them. I wanted to get a glimpse of her face, so I moved slightly as she, still seated, took off her denim blouse and Bermuda shorts. She laid them on the sand. Then she jumped to her feet and started to move, raising and lowering her arms and legs as if taking part in a tribal ritual or something like that. Finally, she started whirling her arms, throwing them one way, and swiveling her hips in the other, sort of like a belly dancer.

I'd never seen such a beautiful girl. Slender, slim ankles, high, pert ass, wavy hair, her body glimmered beyond the flames. I followed its sinuous movements, while the shadows cast across the sand looked like cursed souls at war with one another.

When she turned toward me for an instant, allowing me to get a quick glimpse of her face, chills ran up my spine. I was so mesmerized by her stunning beauty that I broke cover without even realizing it, but then, after just a few steps, I could no longer clearly make out the sand, rocks, and surrounding vegetation. So I stopped. The more I tried to focus on the girl, the worse my peripheral vision became, until where she had once been, I saw only a bubble of light floating in midair, emitting tiny, intermittent flashes of dim light. I couldn't breathe and more than once I was forced to squint my eyes before I could see her again.

In the meantime, twisting and turning, writhing like a snake enveloped in flames, she glided into the water, dousing herself in the darkness of the sea. Bewildered by that sight, I briefly waited for her to surface. Nothing doing. So I walked past the bonfires and headed for the water's edge, peering around for her.

The moon, a monumental pearl pocked by gnawing woodworms, was reflected on the pitch-black surface of the sea, making the dark mantle of water look as if it was overshadowed by a cloud of fireflies. With the crackling of the burning wood and the soft sound of waves sucking back out to sea in my ears, I spent several minutes studying the surface of the sea, hoping to see her emerge—but she never did.

She'd vanished. Swallowed up by the sea. Like in some magic trick.

Go, go, go!

It was really late now. If I didn't want to wind up in the newspaper's crime pages, skinned alive by my dad, I'd have to come up with a plausible excuse, and right quick.

I climbed back up to the spot where Rossana and I had halted along the way, my bare hands and feet scraped ever redder, trying to dream up some lie to tell my parents.

I could say we were in the pine grove and we got lost. Hmm, too conventional... or that some strangers kidnapped us while we were playing bocce ball...

No. Mom would immediately run down to file a report with the carabinieri. I couldn't think of a thing. Then it dawned on me that if Mirko hadn't made it back and the others hadn't already told them, I would definitely need to go inform his parents. At this point, any lie would be superfluous. This complicated everything.

When I reached the point where Rossana and I had admired the little beach of Point Calo from above, I looked down to see if by any chance, the bonfire girl had reappeared. The fires still burned, and her clothes were still there, for that matter—but she wasn't. Deciding that only a mermaid could have stayed underwater for that long, I started down the trail that Rossana and I had taken to climb up.

Back then, Calo Bay was a little fisherman's village. All told, two hundred people lived there, and in summer, with vacationers, the population might reach three hundred max. There were no hotels, trendy boutiques, boats, no blond bosomy women wrapped in colorful beach sarongs and bejeweled like Christmas trees, no clubs. Just a handful of old houses, a piazza, a small church, and a store that sold everything imaginable, the carabinieri barracks, and a cemetery. That's it.

Mirko was the only one of us who lived in town. His parents were born in Calo Bay and owned a house on a small lane that ran right onto the main square. I was about to turn down the lane that led from the square to his house, when a soccer ball grazed my face and crashed into the store's metal shutter.

With a massive sandwich in one hand, laughing like an idiot, Mirko was walking towards me. "Shit your pants, didn't you?"

I was happy to see him, but my heart was still in my mouth. "Are you insane? You practically gave me a heart attack!"

He retrieved the ball and came over. "What brings you to these parts?"

"I was going to tell your parents what happened. I thought that fall killed you."

"Oh, not at all, as you see, I'm still alive and kicking." He snickered. "The benefit of being fat."

“What about the others?”

“Everyone’s safe and sound, except for Ketty. She jumped out of Rossana’s arms and we lost her. We looked everywhere for her but came up with nothing.”

“Shit! Now what?”

“I don’t know.” Like an insect of some sort, he grabbed a piece of prosciutto with his tongue and swallowed it. “How did you manage to make it out alive? That schnauzer was really glued to your ass.”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow. I’d better go now, or I’ll end up like Rossana. My dad will skin me alive.”

I headed off home at a run. Then I stopped and called out to him: “What excuse did you give your parents for getting home late?”

“That we’d lost Ketty and we were looking for her.”

On my way home, I figured it was a good excuse.

My house was an old pile, too, and it had been restored, just like Rossana’s. It just had a bigger yard. It looked like a mountain chalet more than a beach house.

As I entered the yard, I saw that all the lights were off. In summer, my parents rarely went to bed before eleven. So they must have gone out looking for me. I pushed open the French doors and entered the living room. Another nice thing about Calo Bay was that you could sleep with the doors open and no fear of burglars. I turned on the lights and went into the kitchen. It was spotless. On the table was a note. I stepped close and picked it up.

It’s 9:10 and you’re still not back. We’re having dinner at the beach with the Scognamiglios. There’s a rice salad in the fridge. If you dare go out again, summer vacation is over for you. Brush your teeth before going to bed.

Great! My parents weren’t out looking for me! I was so happy I came close to yelling out loud. The note wasn’t signed but it was written by my mom. Dad wasn’t the kind of person to make idle threats, he just used his hands directly.

I took the rice salad out of the fridge, sliced some bread, grabbed a spoon, and in five minutes I’d cleaned my plate. I put the dish in the sink and went upstairs. In the bathroom, I switched on the light and looked at my face in the mirror. I looked like I’d just emerged from a rugby scrum. I took off my clothes, tossed them in the hamper, and took a piss. I washed my hands, face, and feet, and lastly, after disinfecting the cut that I’d gotten just below my elbow, I went to my room.

There was a wardrobe against the wall near the door, and on the far wall was a window. To the right was a cherrywood desk, and to the left was my bed. Over the bed, I’d hung a *Blues Brothers* poster. I’d watched that movie twice in a row. The idea that Jake and Elwood were on a mission from God was pure genius. It had given me such an adrenaline rush that I’d smashed my piggy bank and stolen some money from mom’s purse to buy the LP. My first record.

After putting on a clean T-shirt and underwear, I lay down on my bed with my hands behind my back. Along with the exhaustion, various thoughts and images swept over me: Ketty (who we’d abandoned to her destiny), the smacks that Rossana was going to get from her mother, the guts it would take to look her in the

face the next day, and then the house, Mirko's fall, and the schnauzer that chased me. Sounds and images clumped together at such speed that I couldn't keep up.

I touched my forehead. It was warm. My heart was racing. I grabbed the *Odyssey* from my bedside table and began to read. The epic poem was the reason why I'd enrolled in classical high school, to study the deeds of the heroes who had conquered the world. In the feats of Hector, Achilles, and Agamemnon I perceived something that resonated within me. I couldn't say exactly how, but I knew it was true. My favorite hero was Ulysses, courageous and valiant like Achilles, but clever into the bargain—that move he pulled with the horse had knocked everyone out. The *crafty* Ulysses, the man of many ways. For a few minutes the distraction worked, but the same mishmash of images, sounds, and words always returned. Like a blender gone mad, a vortex had sprung up in my mind.

I put down the *Odyssey* and sat down on the stone windowsill that was still warm. A light breeze carried the smell of the sea. The moon was higher than before. The Earth had continued to move and even that day I wasn't able to discern its movement.

Who can say if I'll ever be able to do it?

To the left, through the branches of the willow tree, I could make out the lights of the town, and higher up, dark and mysterious, the cliff. It didn't seem possible that we'd climbed it. I hadn't managed to sit perched on that stone tongue, but for once I'd done something special. Like an Achaean hero, I'd ventured to the conquest of new territory. I was thirsty. I hadn't had a sip of water for hours. I hopped down from the windowsill and went to the bathroom. I turned on the tap and drank until I was fit to burst. Then I went back to my room and lay down on the bed again. The water had diluted the whirlwind of images clogging my mind. I closed my eyes and, as if she'd been waiting there beneath my eyelids, the image of the girl dancing in front of the bonfire appeared. *The fire girl*, that's what I had dubbed her. She really was beautiful. There wasn't another girl I knew who could compare. I felt my heart beat in harmony with her soft, sensual movements. I was with her in a way that was realer than real. That is how I fell asleep: listening to my heart beat and seeing the image of that body that danced past the hot and intermittent light of the fire.

In sync with that rhythm, with that cadence.