

MASSIMILIANO VIRGILIO

**LE CREATURE**  
**The Children**

In Italian, the first meaning of the word 'creatura' is "all things created," and in particular "every living being." But in Neapolitan dialect the word denotes, amongst all living beings, the child, regardless of its sex, geographical origin, or religion. 'A criatura, 'e criature (the child, children) in their essence, their purity.

**EXCERPTS**

**PART ONE**

**THE HOUSE**

Han woke up at dawn with an airplane roaring in his ears. He turned in between the sheets until the light of day grew more reassuring. As he got up from the cot he glimpsed the view.

The house had been built with old bricks scattered around the countryside, the main road, and Capodichino airport. It was set on an embankment on the edge of the English Cemetery, which was where a broken up trail made of concrete began that ended in soil the colour of tar. On top of it was a pile of scrap iron, garbage, puddles, and cigarette butts.

From that side a tin shack overlooked the landscape, its abject appearance like that of makeshift buildings that eventually become permanent.

The chained Dobermann slept, its paws crossed, eyes closed, and face turned toward the sun, the gentle expression of someone who is unaware. Coming from the airport were not just the take-offs and landings, but the roar of engines, sirens, alarms, trackers, the rhythm of sounds – and Han could hear them all. On the main road the cars started whizzing by.

He opened the door. The Leonessa had shown him his room, but not the toilet, so he'd held it in all night long. He crossed the hallway, counted three doors that were shut, and finally figured it had to be the one at the end.

He went back to his room and put on the same clothes he'd had on the day before. They were the only ones he owned. He checked his smartphone. Maybe his mother had sent him a message, he thought. The battery needed charging, he wandered around the room looking for a wall outlet, but there wasn't one.

He got to the kitchen. In the background a radio was reeling off live traffic reports. The Leonessa was staring at the espresso coffee maker on the flame – her black satin robe draped over a chair – and wearing a tank top so you could see the roughly made tattoo of a lion. With no make-up on and her eyes swollen, she'd lost the great look she'd had the night before.

"Planes woke you up?" She lifted the lid of the coffee maker and, as if in a trance, watched the dark liquid bubbling in the pot. "When you stop wanting to take one, you won't hear them any more."

Han shrugged.

"Don't talk much, do you." "You're right. There's not a fuckin' thing to say." Then she picked up her robe and went to the door.

On the cooktop a line of black ants carried grains of sugar toward a gap in a white tile. Han took a glass from the pile of dishes heaped up in the sink and poured himself some coffee. He was still looking around for a wall outlet. The kitchen had aluminum pots, candlestick holders, and an old telephone with a cord, but electrical energy didn't seem to be a priority. From the window Han could see the Leonessa walking against the wind toward the shack, her frizzy hair resembling a mane, trailing behind her was the Dobermann.

As he drank his coffee thirstily, his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten anything solid since the day before, his last meal being a bag of fries he'd tossed down at the Gugliano rotary before leaving.

His eyes fell on the space next to the cupboard, there was no food in it but there was an outlet at least. He hurried to the room to get his charger, after a few seconds the smartphone came to life. Maybe his mother had changed her mind and was coming to get him.

He waited.

Sometimes, he thought to himself, messages take longer to arrive.

A tall kid with his head shaved walked out of the house. "You're the new one." His forehead was baked by the sun and his accent was halfway between the dialect they spoke in the city and some foreign language. "The pump's warmed up so we can get washed now." He scratched his testicles through his pyjamas. "You're not ashamed, are you, bro?"

Han stopped patting the Dobermann and followed the boy to the back. They would have to wait, the other kid explained, by ten the sun would have heated up the water in the tank. Dimitri swatted away a swarm of gnats, then shook Han's hand.

He was sixteen and came from Ukraine, he said. (From the solemn way he pronounced the name "Ukraine," Han figured it had to be some place far away, maybe even farther away than China.) His grandfather did construction work, while his grandmother was a caregiver in Posillipo. In time she'd earned a reputation. When one patient kicked the bucket there was another one ready for her to take care of. Every Thursday afternoon they would meet in the gardens at Porta Capuana, where they split a beer and a bag of Puffs, except when he was supposed to pay the Leonessa for the month: in that case his grandmother would meet him on the main road.

He'd been living in that house for fifteen months and seventeen days. Unlike Han, he wasn't entirely irregular – Know what I mean, bro?" In Europe, us Ukrainians, they don't see us as aliens, like you Chinese and Africans..." – and if anyone came around to check on him all, he needed to say was that he'd just arrived in Italy, and no one would have laid a finger on him. Five years earlier, his parents had died during a grenade attack at the bus station in Donetsk, and the war had encouraged his grandparents to leave." The station was controlled by the rebels, but my parents weren't on the Russian side."

In Naples Dimitri had gone to live in the house of an elderly Neapolitan lady with lots of space where his grandmother was working. But one day, out of the blue, the old lady died. That was when his grandparents realized they wouldn't be able to take care of him, so they chose the Leonessa. "In the end us spooks cost less if we stay in a boarding house."

Dimitri was a real talker, Han thought. But what was that about socks? As always, when he didn't know what a word meant he pretended he did. It felt like people were trying to mess around with him when they explained one word by using other words. And that word – "spooks" – sounded as scary and as ridiculous as the name of some disease.

"You need some gear?" the Ukrainian asked.

Another kid came out of the house and walked up to them. He was black. His face was as smooth as a child's and he had a mangy moustache.

"What?"

"Gear, clothes," he continued. "Yours look like shit." He pointed to the kid. "Ismail will find you some, if you want."

"They're not so shitty."

"You stink."

Han peered down at his T-shirt, it was covered in dried tomato stains. "Where's Ukraine?"

Dimitri grabbed the pump and pointed it at him. "Near Russia," he answered. "Now take your clothes off, I wash you. Then you wash me."

Han took his clothes off, the Dobermann ran over, dragging the chain and sniffing at the pile on the ground.

"Underwear too," Dimitri said. Han glanced over at the house. "What? You ashamed or something?" A second later the water jet pushed him up against the wall.

Dimitri washed him first, then Ismail, the other boarder. "Look how long his dick is," the Ukrainian burst into laughter. "Did you know every nigger's is like that?"

"Stop calling me nigger," Ismail said.

"But you're black," Dimitri added. He spit on the ground. "He's yellow. An' I'm white."

Ismail wriggled free from the water jet and jumped him. They came to blows between the asphalt and the dirt ground. When Han got bored watching them, he picked up his clothes and went back to his room.

A half hour later they knocked on his door. "Ready?" Dimitri asked him. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To get some gear."

Hans said nothing. He headed to the kitchen, unplugged his phone, and went out.

On the main road, while they were walking toward the bus stop, Dimitri talked to him about Ismail as if he weren't there with them. It was Ismail's first summer at the house, his father earned a living

selling bracelets and necklaces to the tourists on the Cilento beaches. He was going to come back for him in the fall so they could go pick kiwis in the fields of Calabria. Of all the spooks, Dimitri explained to him, the Senegalese was the most invisible of them all, because he had actually been born in Italy, but no one had ever registered his birth with the authorities.

"You got a birth certificate?" the Ukrainian asked him. "Yes," Han replied, "I do."

"Good for you, bro. This nigger here, he ain't even registered. But he's got a pair of Nikes. All you got is a pair of shoes with holes in 'em..."

"And anyway, in September I'm going to my cousin's, in Frankfurt," Ismail butt in. "The flight leaves at seven every night. I see it all the time when it takes off from Capodichino..." He turned to Han. "What about you? Where you going?"

Han stopped short and looked at the main road, the cars whizzing past looked like balls of fire gone mad. Yellowish shrubs that looked sickly climbed up rusty utility poles. "Mid-August," he murmured. "Mid-August they're coming back to get me."

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"You alive? Hey, are you alive?"

He was awakened by a voice. The air was cool now, the breeze coming in through the window caressed his bruises. The girl with red hair was staring at him from a couple of feet away, maybe less, as if she were looking at some gigantic turtle behind a glass case. Her face was a ripe peach with freckles. She was more or less his age.

"So you *are* Chinese."

Han parted his lips. the taste of blood filled his mouth, "Who are you?"

The girl got down off the bed slowly and stiffly. "Sorry but I've never seen a Chinese guy from this close up." She held out her hand. "I'm Nina."

He tried to answer back but was sore everywhere. "I'm Han," he mumbled, his arm falling back on the bed.

The afternoon light filtered in through the curtains. It created a shadowy area around the girl that she slipped in and out of. The way she moved was weird, he thought, as if something in the middle of her body held her back. In spite of the heat, she was wearing sweat pants and a sweatshirt with the words

OUT OF ORDER written on it. He remembered the morning he had seen her wavering on the patio railing, and then running off.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"What does *what* mean?"

"Han. Chinese names always mean something, like "Horse that smells like the devil" or "The chosen from the world of the living dead."

"I think those are Indian names."

"You don't know what your Chinese name means?"

"No."

Nina shook her head in disappointment. "Wait a sec," she sighed. "Are you telling me you speak better Italian than anyone in this house, but you don't speak Chinese?"

"Just a few words."

"Like what?"

"Like *ni hao*. Which means 'ciao.'"

"Whatever. That's no big deal. Even I know that. Can you at least write it?"

Han felt a buzz piercing his head from one ear to the other. "I just look Chinese," he said. "I've never even been to China."

"Then you're a rag rug!" she exclaimed.

"A what?"

"Forget it."

Han gave a start, he touched his sore rib cage. "Listen, can you give me a hand? I have to go to the toilet."

"Maybe we should call my aunt." The girl approached the bed. "Does it hurt a lot?" She stroked his nose, then his forehead. "You know, she got really annoyed with those two queers, she even

threatened to throw them out. But she won't, she needs their money. And yours. Did you notice how gross that tattoo on her shoulder is? Looks more like a cheetah to me, not a lion!" She moved along the side of the bed, helping herself with the tips of his fingers. "Anyway, don't worry," she continued. "I'll look your Chinese name up on the Internet and tell you what it says."

Han followed her movements out of the corner of his eye. He'd never seen anyone move in such a funny way, it looked like every little thing she did took a huge amount of effort. But she had touched his face. "Nina?"

She turned her neck stiffly, like a robot. "What's up, my good Chinese friend?"

"Were you the one looking at me through the window the night I got here?"

The girl smiled, the freckles on her nose bunched together upwards, leaving a few inches of uncovered skin. "Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God's will," she declared, then turned her neck and opened the door, her back stiff and chin high up.

## **PART TWO**

### **THE ROAD**

"Today you're coming out with me."

Manuel's nasal voice surprised him – high-pitched in spite of his big stature and the well-defined facial features. He was drying himself off in the courtyard after showering. "Where are we goin'?" Han asked.

"You have to earn the food and the bed you're bumming off this place." The Twin headed in the direction of the main road.

Han didn't answer – he would have liked to complain: half the bed didn't have a bottom, and as for the food he hadn't seen much of that, not even when he was a paying boarder. He followed him quietly under the sun.

They walked for half an hour, and arrived at a dark cavern filled with tuff and without any oxygen. Manuel whistled, and soon after a kid with a sooty face emerged from the recess where dozens of motorcycle and motorbike bodies and parts were piled up. "They finally let you out," he sneered.

"They couldn't stand me breakin' their balls no more."

The mechanic used a rag to wipe his greasy hands. "Any longer and I would've forgotten what you looked like."

"Your face is too ugly to forget." "Fuck you." They hugged, showing off the awkward affection of two gorillas. "What's this?" the mechanic asked. He touched Manuel's bald scalp. "Where's all the hair?"

The Twin shrugged. "You know how it is. When you're inside you're not supposed to stand out. There are more queers in Poggioreale than in the land of Uncle Carmine..."

They burst out laughing. The mechanic noticed Han. "Hey, who's the Chinese kid? Your parole officer?"

He really was ugly, Han thought. His nose was flat and beneath it was a scrubby beard that was supposed to hide a shiny, pimply face as round as a watermelon. He was the same age as Manuel, but he looked younger and less important.

"This here?" The Twin turned around. "Pretend he's not here," he said. "Hey, Geppi..." He turned to look at the shop. "Is the beast ready?"

The mechanic smiled proudly. "Of course, I looked after it like it was mine." He moved over to the wooden panel hanging on the wall next to a poster of a girl in a bikini and high heels, grabbed a key, and tossed it at him "Take it, Twin. Go have some fun."

On the TMAX they raced cross the deserted city, the wind blowing in Han's face. The summer wouldn't last long. Manuel drove dangerously, with no destination, crossing the streets and the corners of the outskirts of the city at random. Han didn't ask any questions. He held on tight to the trunk so he wouldn't get thrown off. The Twin's silhouette was scary. His shoulders, skull, back, arms: it was as if Nina's words had turned those bones into steel ready to crush something. They stopped at a gas station to fill up.

"The other day," Manuel started talking, "my mother asked you if you had a place you could go, and you said no."

Han got down off the bike. "It's true," he swallowed. "I don't."

"You sure about that?"

"I don't," he repeated.

The Twin pivoted on one foot and pulled the scooter up on its stand. "But the fat guy told me your father's on Vesuvius. That he's a carpenter and seems like he ain't doin' too bad for himself. Maybe he



could afford to pay for a spook." He grabbed him by the chin with one hand and looked him straight in the eye. "You knew it, didn't ya?"

Han lied: "No, I didn't know."

"This is what they always do when they get rid of you. They leave you near someone else who can take care of you." Manuel squeezed his jaw with his strong fingers. "Must be 'cause they feel guilty."

Han thought about his mother, the days they spent together on the bypass, he thought about the decision to go back to Naples and set sail on the Diamante: had she left him a note with his father's address because she'd known she wasn't coming back? The story didn't make any sense. If she had wanted to get rid of him, she could have avoided the act, and just told him to get out. He would have done so, no problem.

"Why did you lie to us, huh?" the Twin continued. "You don't lie to us, you don't lie to me or to my mother! Get it?"

Han moved his head to get out of the hold. Manuel tried to grab him again, but he was too fast for him and in a second slipped away. Ever since his parents had split up, he'd discovered that he knew how to turn himself into a street fighter without hesitation. His life was like that, there were moments when you had to make the decision to leave without looking back. There is no person more capable of surviving adversity than the person who doesn't have baggage they need to go back and get.

"You're smart, you know..." the Twin said, opening his jaws in a sinister sneer. He pulled out his wallet, took out some money, and slid it into the machine. "Come here. I swear I'm not gonna touch you. I have an offer to make." He grabbed the pump and started filling the gas tank.

Han looked at the street, he thought about Nina again, about the fact that if he ran away he would be leaving her in the hands of this monster. He hesitated. Stopped walking.

"I won't tell my mother you're a liar, but starting today you work for me. So you won't have to pay rent to stay in the house..."

Han stood there without moving while the noon sun beat down on the asphalt showing no mercy. So, what d'ya say, Chinaman?"

The horizon fluttered in the distance, it looked surreal and impossible to reach.

And for the first time in his fourteen years of life Han decided to turn back.