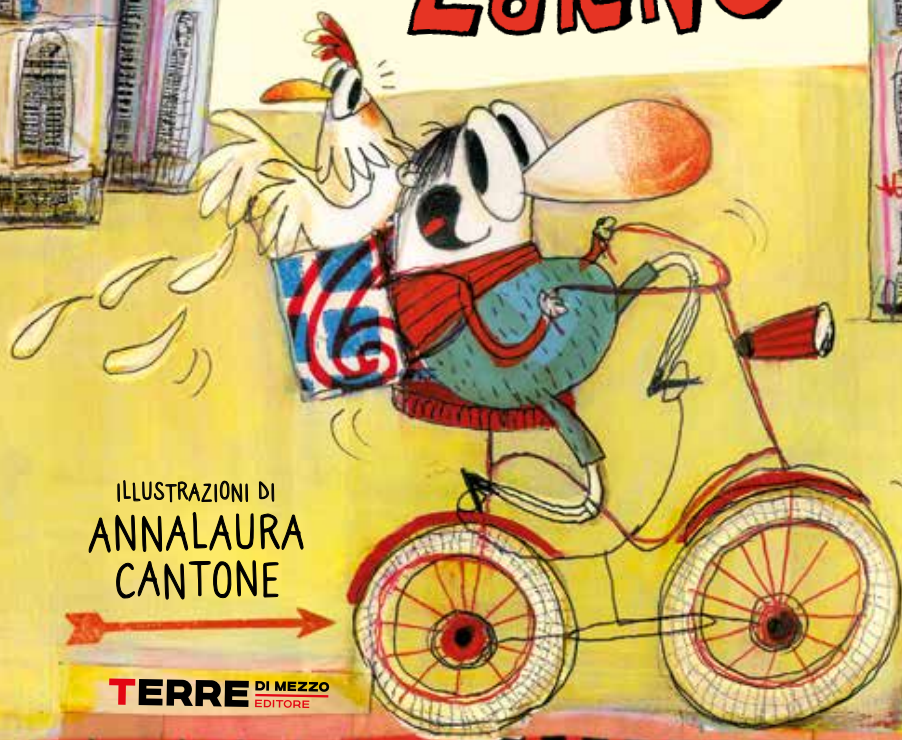


GUIDA RISARI

UNA  
**Gallina**  
nello  
**ZAINO**



ILLUSTRAZIONI DI  
**ANNA LAURA  
CANTONE**

**TERRE** DI MEZZO  
EDITORE



*"Che ci fate  
tutti attorno  
a una  
gallina?"*





GUIDA RISARI

UNA  
Gallina  
nello  
ZAINO



ILLUSTRAZIONI DI  
ANNALaura CANTONE

# ORAZIO



# A colazione PER ultimo

*[ Last One to Breakfast ]*

“Oraziooo! Oraziooo!”

The yell is so loud it shakes my bed.

“Orazio, did you hear me?”

It’s Mom. How can you not hear her? She has a voice that sounds like a fire alarm. But why the heck does she have to wake me up so early if it’s Sunday? It’s not like we have anywhere to go. Wait, that’s right: there’s THE TRIP! Darn, I’d forgotten all about it ...

“Shhh, let’s let him sleep five minutes longer,”

Dad chimes in, thinking he's whispering.

"Why does he get to and I don't?" asks Francesco in annoyance.

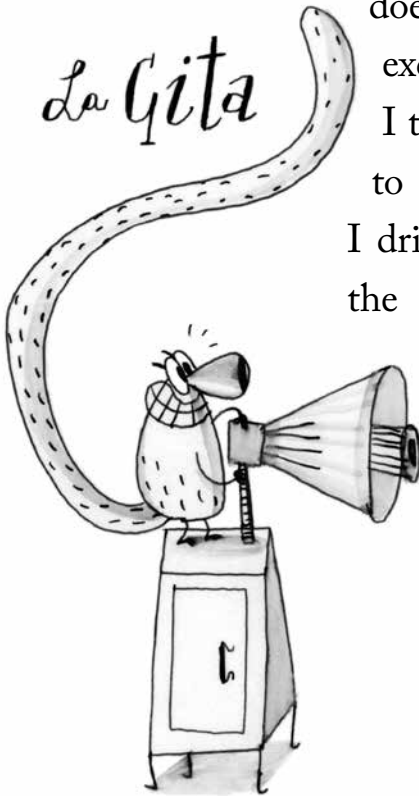
"Because you're older," Dad replies, "and you also have the right to a larger breakfast."

"It's a deal!" Francesco approves contentedly. He's always happy when he's able to get something. He

doesn't do anything for nothing, except maybe breathing.

I turn over, hoping to fall back to sleep right away. Luckily, I drift back into my dream: I'm the captain of a ship, and I'm standing in my cabin when

I realize that a blood-thirsty monster has just come aboard. I hear the floor creaking: he's inside. The monster raises an axe above my head and ... falls





on top of me like a sack of potatoes. My bed bounces beneath his weight. Two arms jostle my shoulders like steel pincers, and a warm breath tickles my neck.

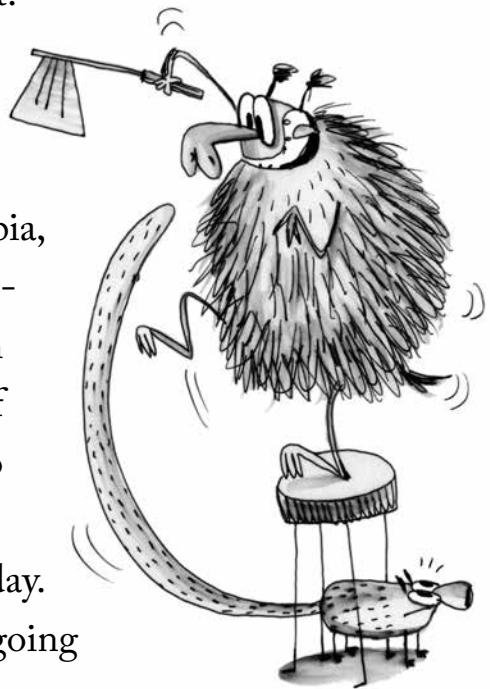
“Come on, Orazio, get out of bed, we have a great day ahead of us!”

Dad is always in a good mood; he even smiles on Sunday morning at the crack of dawn. I don't know how he does it.

“Are we going to get a dog?” I ask, my eyes still closed.

“I'll call him Tobia, he'll be really well-behaved, and I'll teach him to do all kinds of things. I mean, we do need a dog ...”

“No, no dogs today. But the farm we're going



to visit will be full of animals.”

“Such as?”

“Dogs, cats, pigs, cows, donkeys, goats, rabbits, geese. Even a dormouse.”

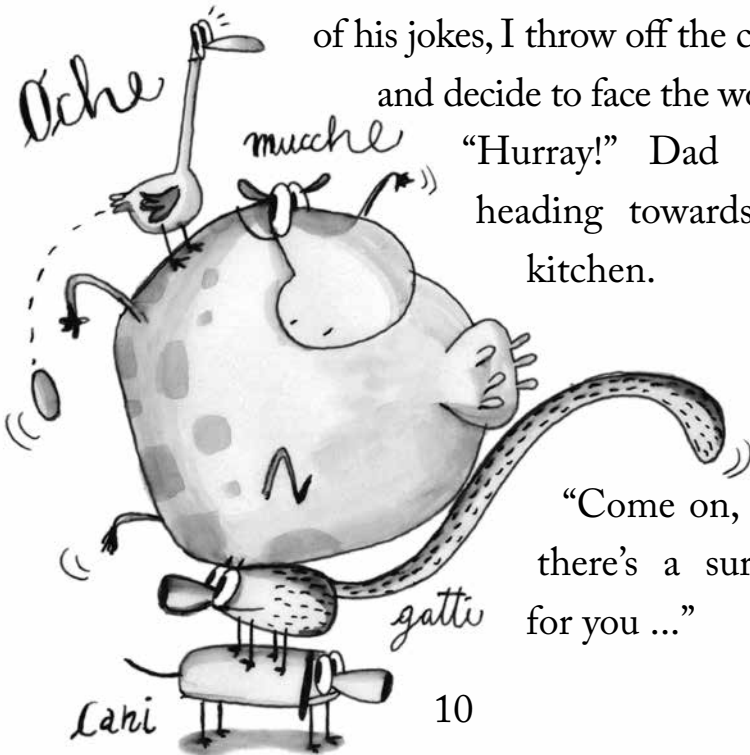
“A dormouse? What’s a dormouse doing on a farm?” I ask.

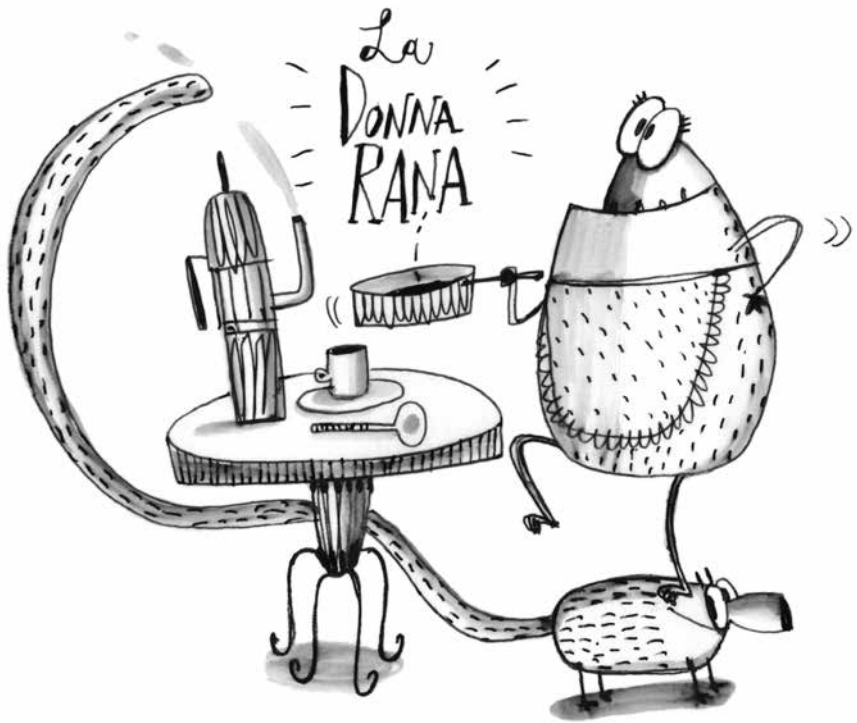
“Well, he keeps sleepyheads like you company ...” Dad laughs.

Rather than being forced to hear more of his jokes, I throw off the covers and decide to face the world.

“Hurray!” Dad yells, heading towards the kitchen.

“Come on, there’s a surprise for you ...”





I slide my feet into my slippers and walk out into the hallway.

A greenish-faced creature steps in front of me.

“Ahhhh!” I yell.

“The frog womaaaaan!”

“Yeah,” Mom replies, “the frog woman with her beauty mask has made breakfast for you.”

I start running, because when Francesco gets up before me, what usually ends up happening is

that he devours everything, taking no prisoners. All he leaves me are the crumbs.

This time I get there in time to save half a pancake.

“This is mine!” I yell, smearing it with my saliva-covered hands. “No one doubts that, especially

after that wonderful condiment

you just put on it. Brat’s drool,” he says, disgusted.

Meanwhile, who knows

how many pancakes

he’s already wolfed

down. I ask him, and

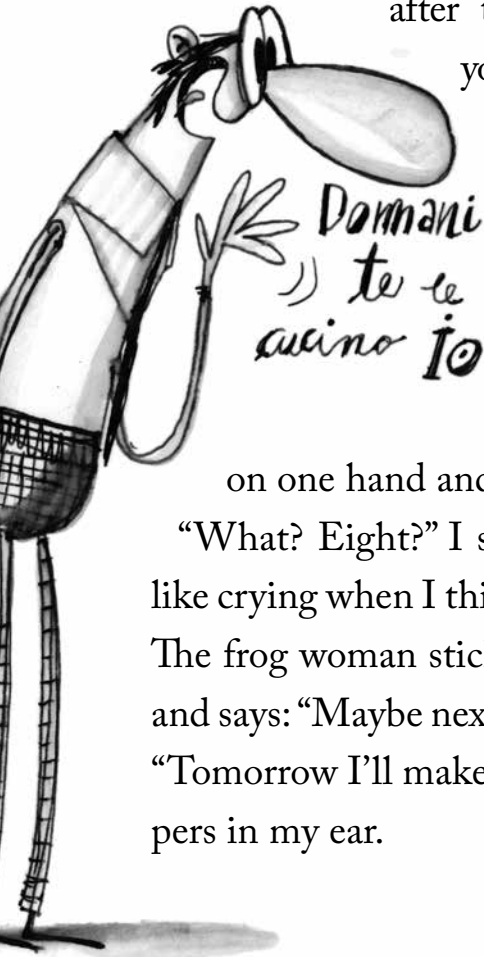
he holds up five fingers

on one hand and three on the other.

“What? Eight?” I say in astonishment. I feel like crying when I think about what I’ve missed.

The frog woman sticks her head in the kitchen and says: “Maybe next time you’ll get up earlier.”

“Tomorrow I’ll make them for you,” Dad whispers in my ear.





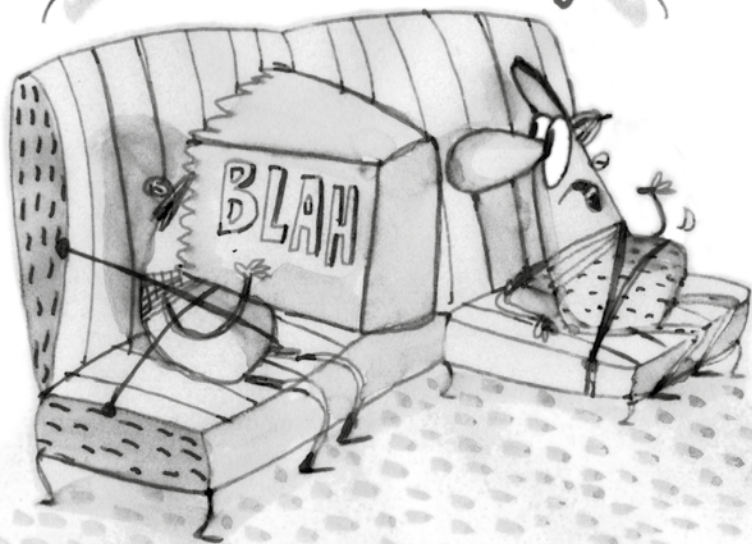
I fight back the tears and a big smile appears on my face.

Dad is always awesome: every time something makes me cry, he comes and takes care of things. He's like the sun on a cloudy day.

“Did you lose another front tooth?” my brother asks me, staring at me in disgust. I nod.

“And I'm still waiting for my gift from the tooth fairy ...”

CHE  
SCHIFO!



# Animali in fattoria

*[ Animals on the farm ]*

During the car ride there, I throw up the whole time. I make them stop the car every five minutes, then finally resign myself to sticking my head in a plastic bag.

“That’s so gross!” says Francesco with an exaggerated grimace.

“It’s your fault. If you’d left me more pancakes, I wouldn’t feel so bad,” and then I vomit again.

“Mooooom!” Francesco begs. “Can we roll down the windows? The air is unbreathable back here,

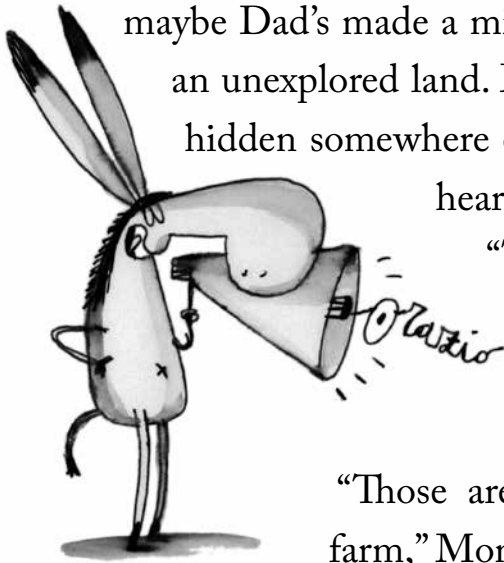
I'm suffocating.”

“Hang in there, you two: we're almost there,” Mom says, bringing an end to our bickering.

Dad is driving and whistling as though nothing strange is going on. As far as he's concerned, everything's fine and dandy.

Fortunately, he announces shortly after that we've arrived.

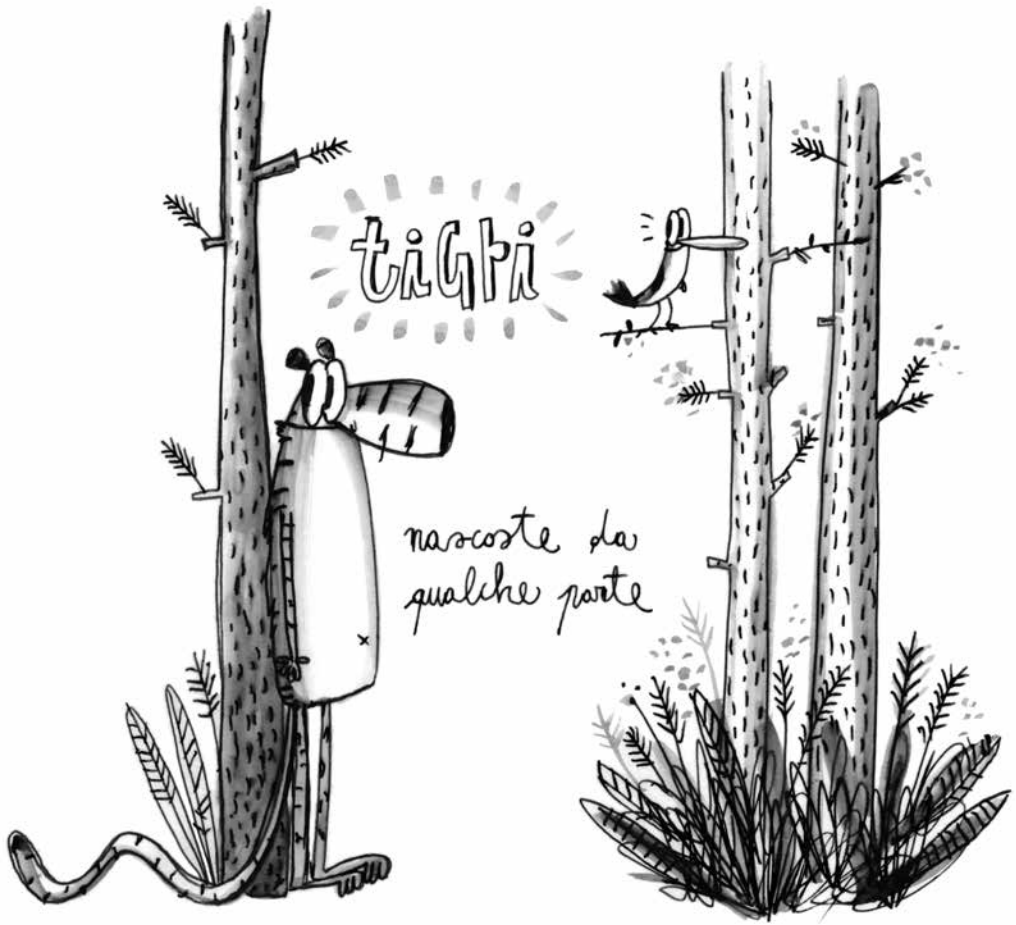
I look around and all I see are trees and bushes. There's absolutely no sign of a farm. I think that maybe Dad's made a mistake and we're lost in an unexplored land. Maybe there are tigers, hidden somewhere or other ... Just then I hear a donkey bray.



“They're calling to you, Orazio.” My brother Francesco, such a nice guy.

“Those are the donkeys on the farm,” Mom explains.





“They have five of them.”

“And one of them loves little boys,” Dad adds.

“It’s your moment, Orazio.”

“I’m not a little boy,” I immediately correct him.

“Oh, no? What are you then, a crocodile?”

Francesco asks, pointing at me like at some strange species.

“Cut it out, Francesco,” Mom scolds him, “Orazio is a big boy.”

“Right,” I approve with my arms crossed, “almost a man,” and I swing the bag full of vomit back and forth menacingly.

Dad puts on a pair of incredibly phosphorescent tennis shoes and sets off towards the farm.

“The last to get there is a snotty little baby!”

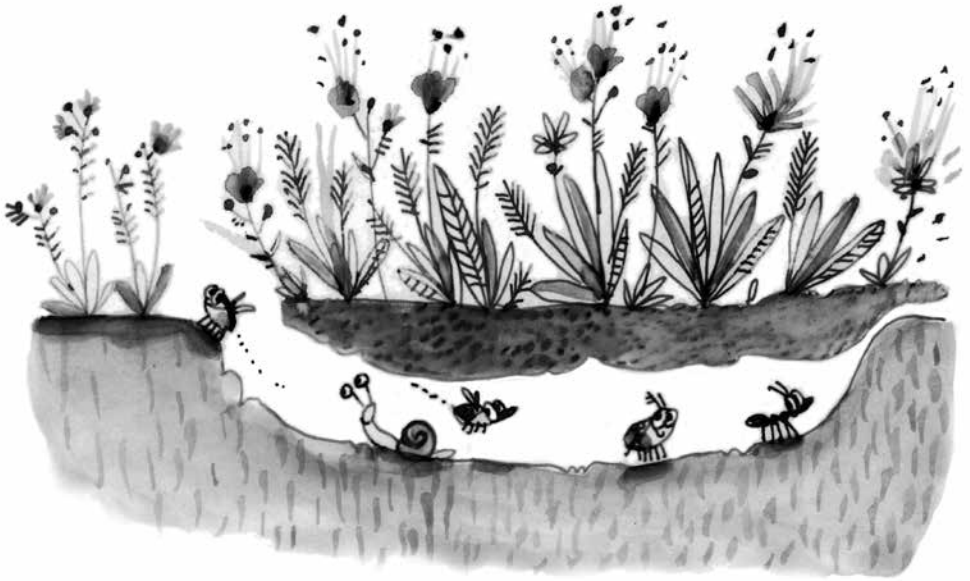
I start running; Francesco ignores me and continues walking with his slow, bouncy stride. It almost looks like he’s skipping. Mom throws a backpack full of who knows what over her shoulder.

The ground we’re walking on seems like a carpet. It isn’t hard and rough like asphalt, but soft, elastic, with holes and ditches, grass, flowers and shrubs. Inside them are ants, beetles, worms and a thousand other insects whose names I don’t know. I dig a hole and observe them one by one.

They look really pretty and I'd like to collect all of them.

“Let them be,” Mom warns me. “They're happy where they are.”

In the distance we begin to see the outline of the farm. It's a large rectangle of bricks with plants growing on the wall, with rose bushes and other



flowers all around.

“So, guys, what do you think?” Dad boasts, as if he had built it.

As we approach, we also notice a cherry tree, a long table, several wooden benches, a haystack, and a cart with its wheels painted green.

The people at the farm are all busy working, but we’re greeted by a large pig. It trots towards us,



UN  
grosso  
Maiale

grunting. Maybe that's its way of welcoming us. It's all pink and has large soft ears. When it's just a few steps away from us, I start to panic and hide behind Dad, who laughs.

"Don't worry, he looks friendly."

"Ahhhh," Francesco teases me, "the little boy is afraid of a pig," and he covers his eyes, as though he were watching some awful spectacle.

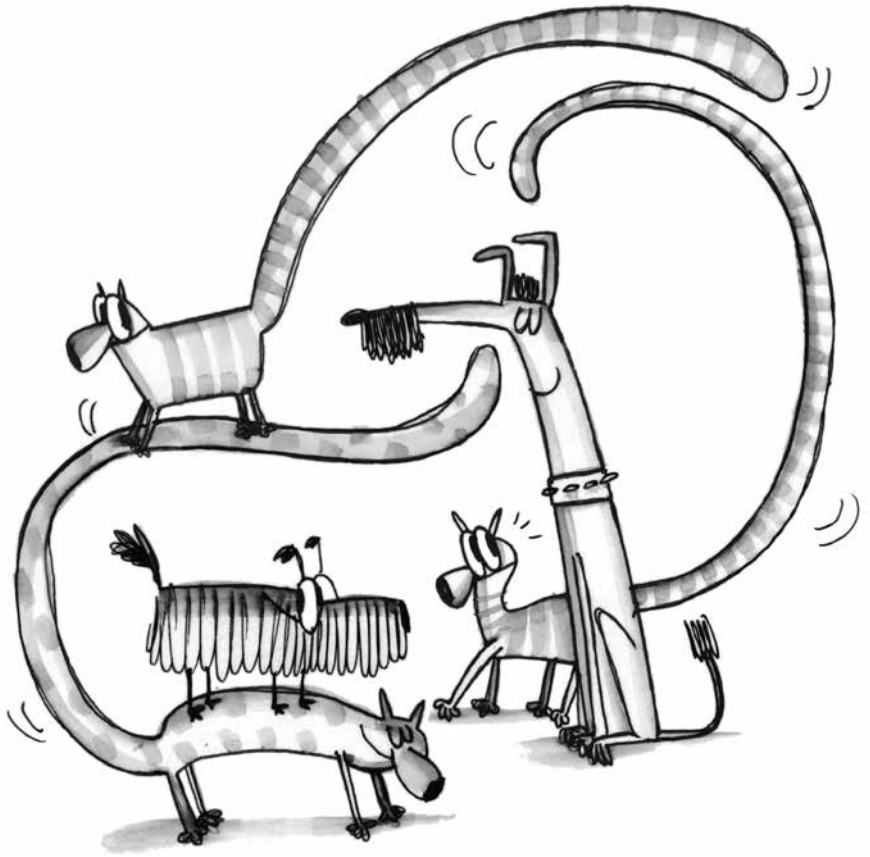
"A sow," Mom says. "Didn't you notice her udders?"

The sow grunts noisily, her four legs firmly planted, determined to finish what she was saying.

"Rosy! Leave those people alone!" they yell from the farm.

The sow turns around, grunts loudly in protest, and trots off as though she were offended. Our jaws drop in surprise.

On the farm live two very nice families. One is blond, while the other has dark hair. They tell us that there's lots of work to do on a farm, and I



learn that the blonds take care of the fields and the dark-haired ones look after the animals. All of them share the work around the house and in the yard. Living on the farm there are two mixed-breed dogs, a whole colony of cats, and

then the stable animals that produce milk and cheese.

We pet all the animals, except the cats because Mom thinks they look sickly. Then we go visit the donkeys, who greet us with a chorus of discordant cries. The donkey who loves children comes over to me, but I pretend not to notice. It's not like I'm an infant.

When I leave the stable I realize that someone or something is following me. I look to the right and to the left, but there's nothing there: no one's behind me. But a cold chill runs down my spine, and I start walking quickly. "What's wrong? Scared of your own shadow?" Francesco makes fun of me.

I can't explain it, but I feel like something threatening is getting closer and closer. Maybe Francesco's right: I really am afraid of my own shadow.

Whatever it is, I prefer to get out of there quick.

# BUONGIORNO!

"Buon giorno  
a ti!!"





# Quasi UN UOMO

[ *Almost a man* ]

“Orazio, that hen won’t leave you alone!” Francesco cries out amused. “But then again, everyone keeps the company he deserves...”

“What do you mean? What hen? We have seen cows, rabbits, geese, turkeys, but no hen.”

“What, do you mean you haven’t noticed? Perhaps if you turn around...”

I do, and that’s when I see her. She is small, round, with white feathers and a reddish head. I look into her orange eyes, and for some reason I

feel a little embarrassed.

“Hello,” I greet her without thinking.

She replies with a squawk. “God day to yee!”

I look at Francesco and ask him if he heard that too.



“What? The hen cackling?”

I look around for Mom and Dad and run towards them. “Dad, Mom,” I begin, “this hen...”

They stop and laugh. “Yes, it’s true, this hen is following you,” says Mom.

“Perhaps she’s in love with you. Careful, the ass could get jealous!” adds Dad.

“No, this hen can speak,” I finally manage to say.

Then I turn to the hen and

ask her to introduce herself to my parents.  
She cackles “Pleased to met yee” and ruffles her feathers into a sort of bow.

“Did you hear?” I cry excitedly.

“Yes, she’s quite the chatterbox,” says Mom.

“Listen to all that cackling!” adds Dad.

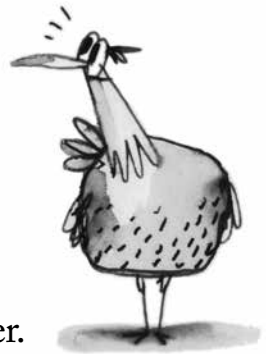
“But didn’t you hear her speak?” I insist.

“Certainly, in her own way. Unfortunately, we don’t speak Chickenese,” replies Dad.

“Chickenese?” says Mom. “That was Hennese, pure Hennese. In any case, utterly incomprehensible.”

The hen squawks again, “Yee are very kind pe-pol”, but my parents just nod with a fixed smile that shows they haven’t understood a word. I decide to give up, they’ll never believe me anyway, and I continue with my experiment.

“We arrived this morning,” I whisper.



“Do you live here?” The hen makes a series of gurgling sounds like my Dad when he rinses his teeth.

Again, I seem to understand what she’s saying. “I live in te rost, behind te grese.” “Grease?” The hen thinks awhile and then corrects herself. “Te gese.”

“Ah,” I say, and then I shut up because I don’t know what else to say. What do you talk about with a hen?

“Well, anyway, my name is Orazio... What’s yours?”

“Who are you talking to?” interrupts Francesco.

“With this hen... she started,” I justify myself.

“Huh, you’re speaking with hens now? Just great! Continue like this and you’ll never be a Black Fighter...” Francesco exclaims in disgust and walks off.

I feel hurt. The Black Fighters are Francesco’s secret gang: a dozen mischievous boys that strut

around as if they were superheroes. They wander about, wasting time and plotting nasty tricks. I don't know what they do exactly, but I bet they're up to no good. I wouldn't like to be a part of their gang, but I don't like being left out. The hen squawks shrilly and then gives a sort of low laugh.

“My nam iss Carrmen and I am tree yers old.”  
Three years old. Is that a lot or a little? I confess I haven't a clue. I ask her.

The hen cackles: “Tree yers iss not old. Te oldest henn in te world was six-ten yers old. But henns are ussually eten at one...”

Poor hens! I tell her and she clucks a subdued “Tank yee”.

We continue to walk alongside one another while she explains how the farm works. She tells me about the long, hard winters and the miracle of spring. She teaches me how to milk cows and how difficult it is to store grain. I understand



much more than I did after what they told us this morning. She's a real expert.

Then she describes life in the countryside - quiet, tiring, sleepy - and she tells me about her dream.

"I'd like to live in the city and perhaps go to school."

I don't tell her that I have never seen a school for chickens and that, in normal ones such as mine, pets are not allowed. Why ruin the dream?

I lie down on a haystack left out to dry and Car-

men moves closer. She stares at me seriously with her orange eyes. I feel like I've known her forever. "What are you thinking?" I ask her. She gives me one of her squawks. It sounds like two pieces of rusted iron rubbed together.

"Id lick to be a kid."

I lift myself onto my elbow: "I am not a kid".

She shakes her feathers, disappointed, and sighs: "Are yee yeenger?" I grumble and turn the other way. "I'm much bigger. Almost a man." She examines me carefully: "Allmost a mann..." she cheeps contentedly. At that moment, I am overwhelmed with pride and I feel as big as a giant.





# UN tipo intelligente

[ *A Smart Sort* ]

We have a great day at the farm. We walk through the fields, pick large bunches of flowers and milk the cows. I am pretty terrified, but Carmen tells me what to do: “Delicately!” she says, and suddenly I can do it. I’m better than Francesco, who shivers every time he touches the udders.

Then, the head of the dark-haired family secures an old and patient nag to a green-wheeled cart, and we jump on to go for a ride. I turn to

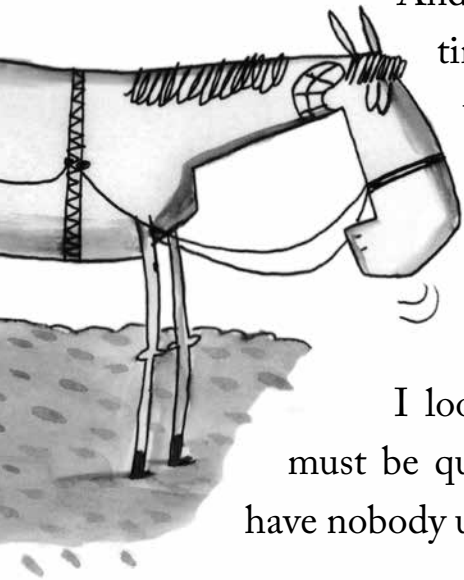
look for Carmen, who finally flaps on board: “I like rading in te cart”.

“Does your new friend never shut up?” asks



Francesco. “Did you hear her too?” I ask him, hopeful.

“Well, you can hardly not hear all that cackling,” giggles Mom. Dad nods. “I like how she sounds. What did you say her name is?” “Carmen.” “A great name,” he approves. “But who told you?” “She did,” I answer. “She’s a talking hen,” I explain, as I know they can’t make her out. “Yeah, right,” Francesco butts in. “If you think about it, why shouldn’t a hen be able to speak?”



And he laughs. “Dimvit. Nothing but a Dimvit,” Carmen whispers. I agree and give her the thumbs up. She’s quite right. He and his Black Fighters are a mass of twits dressed in black.

I look at Carmen and think it must be quite annoying to speak and have nobody understand you. Fortunately,

I do. But how come? When we are alone, I ask her.

She makes a strange whiny, squeaky sound:

“It’s a mater of kidness”.

“So, do you think me kid... I mean, kind?”

“Of cours”, she clucks. After our ride on the cart, we sit at the long table for lunch. I am so hungry I shout out: “I could eat a plateful of chick...” I stop just in time: “... peas”, I continue, so as not to hurt Carmen’s feelings.

We sit down to a real banquet and the food just keeps on coming. Sautéed, grilled, and roasted vegetables. Homemade macaroni in walnut sauce. Meatballs in tomato sauce. A delicious assortment of cow’s and goat’s cheese. And a delicious sponge cake with cream and fruit mousse. Mom and Dad drink a glass of wine. Francesco tries some, but it goes down the wrong way. When he recovers, he clicks his tongue like a connoisseur, but he has stained his shirt.

I'm not interested in trying any. Instead, I flick Carmen a bundle of crumbs, and she pecks away contentedly: "Tellicious!" she cackles, as she closes her eyes which shine like two summer suns.

I must admit, the more I look at her and the more I am fascinated. At first I just thought she was a chicken. Then, I promoted her to hen, and now I think she's a very beautiful hen. Her bright yellow claws are smooth and strong. Her soft feathers are as white as snow. A deep yellow head rises above a necklace of shorter, yellow and pink feathers. Overall, she looks mostly yellow. Except for the flaming red crest that sha-





## le Capre

kes with every movement. Thin purple eye-lids fall over her eyes, and her beak is a deep golden hue. She looks made up!

After lunch, we go and see the goats. There are seven of them and they all have names. We call out to them one by one

and they answer as if we were taking the register. Goats are very smart. We hide little morsels around the place, and they immediately find them and also work out who put them there. I particularly like Luna, a sprightly brownish kid who loves to balance on his hind legs. I stroke her and she licks my hands and face.



“It’s because you’re salty”, Mom explains. “Goats love salt.”

“And goats really love children. Especially those with no front teeth,” says Francesco scornfully. I get mad and am about to give him a kick when Carmen starts clamouring: “Gots like smat kids”.

Her comment fills me with pride, and I get over my thirst for revenge. After all, I am the one who knows how to milk a cow and has made friends with Carmen.

# La spazzola

[ *The Hairbrush* ]

Carmen continues to follow me around, and everyone wonders why.

“She’s got a thing for you,” says Francesco. I think he’s jealous because none of the animals have given him a second thought. Some of his friends have big scary dogs, and he doesn’t even



have one of those.

“She must like you very much,” observes Mom.

“And why not?” adds Dad, smiling.

The people at the farm confirm that Carmen is a really strange hen. They don’t have her long, but they have already noticed her habit of commenting everything.

“Do you understand what she says?” I ask, hopeful.



“Well, not word for word. We understand what she means. If she’s angry, happy, sad, surprised, alarmed... That kind of thing.”

I am a little disappointed by the answer, but also rather proud. If I’m the only one who understands Carmen, perhaps it’s because I am the only one who really listens to her. Or the only one she trusts.

In any case, the afternoon is almost over, and the sun is as orange as a mandarin. “It is time to go home,” Mom announces.

“Already?” Dad protests.

“Yes, we need to put the children to bed,” Francesco adds, looking at me sideways. We say goodbye to the farm owners, pet the animals one last time - the hag, the cows, all seven of the goats, and even the sow and the dormouse - and we move towards the car. Carmen is still behind me. “I have to go home now,” I whisper so that the others won’t hear. She keeps repeating an



## *il* CAVALLONE

excruciating chant: “Take me wit yee. Take me wit yee.”

“How can I? Mom would never let me keep you.” But I can tell Carmen hasn’t given up because she continues to follow me. Slowly, her call becomes a kind of lament and I feel sorry

for her. I really don't want to leave her behind. Suddenly, I remember that at the farm they'll soon roast or boil her. I feel bad. I touch my backpack. It's quite big and it's empty. When we are almost at the car, I slow down, then I bend down, open the zip and - hop! - in she



goes. "But you have to be quiet. Do you understand?" I whisper. Carmen nods. The journey seems to last forever. I get more and more nervous. If they find us out, they'll get rid of

Carmen and I'll be grounded. No football for weeks. And I'll have to clean the bathroom for two months. I keep the backpack on my knees and pat it gently. I can tell Carmen is asleep. Better that way. When we arrive, I dash into my room. I put my backpack onto the bed and open it slowly, fearing - who knows? - that Carmen has somehow disappeared. Instead, there she is, rolled up and sleepy, but happy. She instantly chirps hello and gives me a smile. The smile of a hen is not like ours—it isn't in the beak. It shows in the eyes, which soften, and in the feathers around the neck, which lift. Carmen stretches and gracefully flies off the bed. I describe my room to her, and she listens carefully. We agree on mealtimes and find a suitable spot for her to do her business. She can sleep curled up on my feet or perched on the headboard. Of course, she must be ready to hide in the closet or under the bed whenever someone comes in. Carmen

"Ecco qua.

Possiamo  
riempire il

lavandino...!"



squeaks a question. “Water?” I ask, astonished. Carmen explains that she likes to have a nice bath from time to time, and so I wrap her in a sweater, make sure the corridor is empty, and take her into the bathroom. “There”, I say. “We can fill the sink...” Carmen seems happy enough and then she clucks a question that catches me by surprise. She wants to know whether she can use the hairbrush.

una gallina come animale da



compagnia...



# La CERIMONIA dell' UOVO

*[ The Egg Ceremony ]*

Every day, I am astounded by how intelligent, cheerful and tidy Carmen is. I am surprised no one keeps a hen as a pet. People don't know what they are missing out on. But I don't think that my parents would understand, so we have developed an extremely efficient way of communicating without being heard. Carmen can cackle very quietly, and she can also express herself well using her feathers. She can puff up, ruffle, smooth and flatten them, and every

movement means something different. Puffed up feathers: beware, danger! Ruffled feathers: I don't know what's going on, I'm confused. Flattened feathers: I'm hungry, is it time for a snack? When we go out, I wrap her in a sweater or put her in my backpack and she holds her breath. She usually asks to come with me. But in the morning, when I go to school, she hides among my books. She can't help it: she just can't resist. I realize too late that she's in my backpack and at that point it's best to pretend nothing is wrong. "What do you have in your backpack that's so special?" my best friend Giacomo asks. "N-n-n-nothing", I stutter. "A very smelly cheese sandwich. I'd rather keep it wrapped up." It's the first time I've lied to Giacomo. I told him everything about the Black Fighters. I shouldn't have because Francesco told me it was ultra-secret and I had to swear not to blab. I promised, but then I told Giacomo that they are



a group of mischief-makers who like to boss people about and get up to no good. To be honest, I am a bit worried about Francesco. What if he becomes like them? But I say nothing to Giacomo about Carmen. She curls up even smaller and keeps even quieter so as not to be noticed. I don't know what they would do at school if they found out. They'd probably fill me with hard geometry exercises, and force me to sit in the first

row with Viola, who wears nothing but pink and sticks hearts everywhere. Then they would make me skip break for all eternity, and get me to write an essay every day while the others played. Carmen is enthusiastic about school. She says she wouldn't skip a lesson for all the money in the world. I ask her a thousand times: "But what do you find so interesting? With all the nice places in the world - parks, cinemas, toy stores - why waste time in class?" "Knowledge is a great thing." And so I remind her of the maths teacher's red face when I answer his questions, of when Fabio rips one, or of when Tonio trips me up. Not to mention when the fifth graders steal our snacks and the girls send us love messages. Carmen raises a claw and quickly rubs it beneath her neck. It's her way of saying never mind, none of that matters. If she could, she would gladly sit in the first row with Viola. I refuse to. But I do punch two little holes through

my backpack so that she can enjoy the scene, and she's delighted. Every now and then I think I would love to take her out of my backpack and show her to Giacomo, but I don't know how he would take it. Not everybody likes hens. Few people understand them. What Carmen loves most are books. At home, she always asks me to read out loud and every now and then she guesses a few words until, one day, she says: "I want to lern how to red". And so I teach her, every afternoon. Except those when I can't find

her. I search the house from top to bottom, but there's no sign of her, she's gone.

I don't know where she goes. In any



case, Carmen is a fast learner and certainly has a talent for languages. Now, after a month and a half of practice, she can read almost as well as me. Her writing, however, is a disaster. She has no thumb, so she struggles to grip the pen with her claw. Consequently, her writing is terrible. “Why don’t you try holding the pen in your beak?” I suggest. She tries, and it works. Finally Carmen can write! Her spelling isn’t the best, but her texts are really original. Some are even poetic. Her Ode to the Worm is my favourite.

# Ode to the Worm

Waite,  
sofft,  
sugry,  
yee crawl  
trough te eart  
and I lift yee  
into te sun  
pink  
and blue  
sparkss  
and I swallow  
yee down  
Tasty,  
humbol,  
obetient

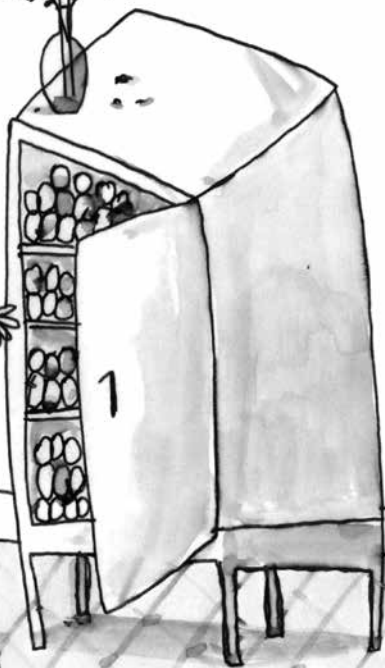


In my room, I have a binder in which I keep all her writings and drawing. She loves to add a self-portrait to her drawings and one day I ask her why. "I draw tem, don't I?" You can't argue with that. But I still think it odd to see a ship in a stormy sea and notice a small white hen in a corner. She shake her wings, which in her own language means: "What can I do?" She also draws a picture of herself in the portrait she makes of me. For six days, I pose without speaking, almost without breathing. In the end, she shows me her drawing with pride. I look at it and it's really strange: the face looks like me, but... everything is reversed. The hair is dark, and I'm blond. The nose is long, while mine is round. The eyes are black and almond shaped, while mine are big and blue. I don't say a word for fear of upsetting her, but she understands and tells me that the mistakes are intentional. "I didn't want to stel any part of yee." And so,



not to steal any parts of me, she simply removed them. “It’s becoss I’m fond of yee!” she clucks. Then she crouches and produces an egg, which she delivers with a small ceremony of twirls and bows. “For yee.”

Com'è che ci  
sono sempre  
così tante  
UOVA?!



# Piccoli MISTERI DOMESTICI

*[ Small Household Mysteries ]*

Ever since she laid her first egg, Carmen hasn't stopped. She delivers at least one per day and, quite proud of herself, solemnly deposits it in front of me. "Good girl," I tell her, running to put it in the refrigerator before anyone notices. "How is it that we always have all these eggs?! Honey, are you buying them for the pancakes? Don't you think you're overdoing it?" Mom yells. My father protests his innocence. I pretend not to know what she's talking about and display

the most befuddled expression ever. I ask Carmen if she can stop laying eggs, or at least lay less of them. She replies that she can't help it: it's something she can't control. This problem

aside, our lives are continuing pretty normally. There's school in the morning, and then in the afternoon,

after I do my homework, we play poker. In the evening,

we curl up and read an exciting adventure story or tell each

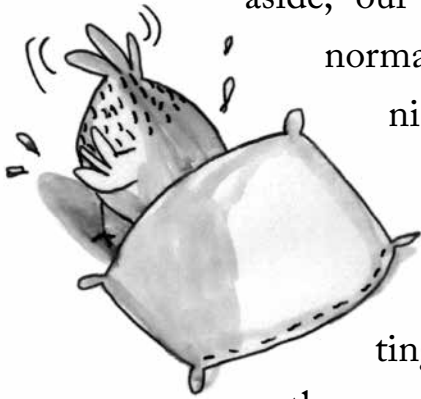
other scary stories. Every so often Car-

men disappears for a few hours. I get upset, but I always find her, as if she had never left at all. I

don't ask her about it. After all, there's nothing wrong with it: she has the right to her own life

and secrets, too. Naturally, I spend much less time with Francesco now, seeing him mostly at

dinner. One day my brother asks me: "Not that I care or anything, but how come you never come



and bother me anymore?” I shrug and pretend to yawn: “I have other things to do. Anyway, you’re always busy with your little friends ...” Francesco glares at me. “I have no choice. That’s what happens when you’re part of a gang. Anyway, you already know what’ll happen to you if you ever tell anyone about it, right?” I nod decisively. But Francesco only becomes more suspicious. My answer doesn’t convince him, so he starts showing up in my room unannounced. “What are you doing? What game is that?” Luckily Carmen has excellent hearing and incredible reflexes, and she’s able to hide under the pillow, behind the curtains, even in the closet. Once, when Francesco was too fast for her, she stood perfectly still and pretended to be a doll. “Nice stuffed animal.” “You like it? I have others that are even better,” and to distract him, I handed him Ferocious Tiger, Limping Teddy Bear, Grey Wolf, and the Three Duck Sisters. But France-

sco couldn't take his eyes off Carmen. "Give it to me for a second." "I can't." "And why not?" I think quickly and say: "Because last night I had a nightmare and, well ..." "Well, what?" "I had a little accident ... and I had it with me." Francesco's eyes open wide. "Go ahead and keep your doll. It must really stink ..." he says and, luckily, he leaves. Carmen relaxes and congratulates me for thinking on my feet, but we decide to hang a little bell on the door handle. You never know. Carmen is very neat, certainly neater than I am, except for her bathroom. We've put it in a cor-



ner of the room next to the shoe shelf and I clean it every day, but Carmen scratches around with her feet and kicks seeds and poop all over the place. The result is that I'm cleaning constantly. My parents don't know what to think. "You're going to put a hole right

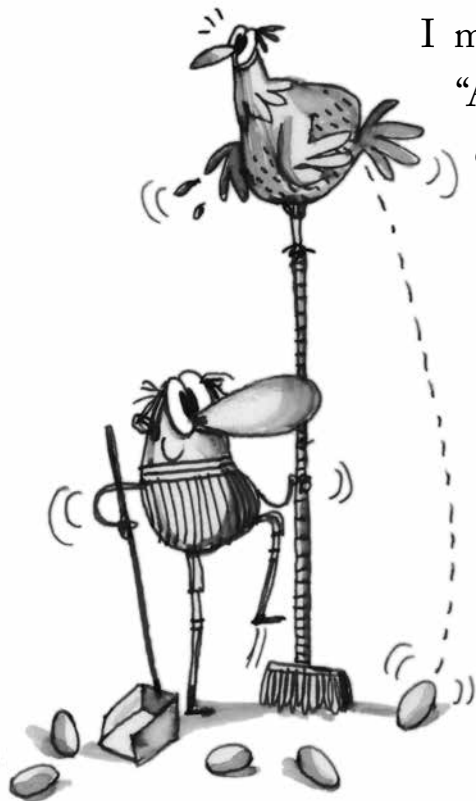
through the floor if you keep cleaning so much,” Dad tells me. Francesco doesn’t say a word, but gives me a horrified look. His room is an absolute mess. It’s such a pigsty in there that a pair of his tennis shoes have begun to sprout leaves. He claims he did this experiment on purpose, but we all know it isn’t true. In any case, I said that at school they’ve taught us about bacteria and told us what happens when you live in a dirty environment. “The continuous struggle against bacteria weakens our body and consumes precious energy,” I explain, repeating what my teacher said, word for word. “Huh,” Dad replies, “I actually thought that a little dirt helped the organism’s defence mechanisms, that it actually made the body stronger ...” “Anyway,” Mom concludes, “I’m proud of you.” In addition to the endless supply of eggs and the cleanliness of my



room, there are other mysteries as well. How come, every so often, people heard a ticking sound coming from my room? “You don’t have a clock, do you?” Francesco asks me suspiciously. “No,” I reply, deciding not to explain that it’s Carmen dreaming of being out in a meadow and pecking at a pile of corn kernels. “Maybe it’s my bed creaking,” I say. “Sometimes

I move around in my sleep.”

“And another thing,” Mom cuts in, “can anyone tell me what those little marks are on the ground in front of the bathroom sink? They look like Y’s, except they go in all directions and there are dozens of them ...” I turn all red. Think of something, Orazio, think. “Maybe I have a





... pebble in my slippers! I'll check," and I make to go to my bedroom. "Good," Mom approves, before turning towards Dad. "What is it, dear? Did you want to say something?" "Yes," he replies, "what I don't understand are those feathers I keep finding in my hairbrush. They're small, white and yellow. Whose are they?" Everyone looks at him perplexed. They think he's joking.



# Regolamento CONDOMINIALE

[ *House Rules* ]

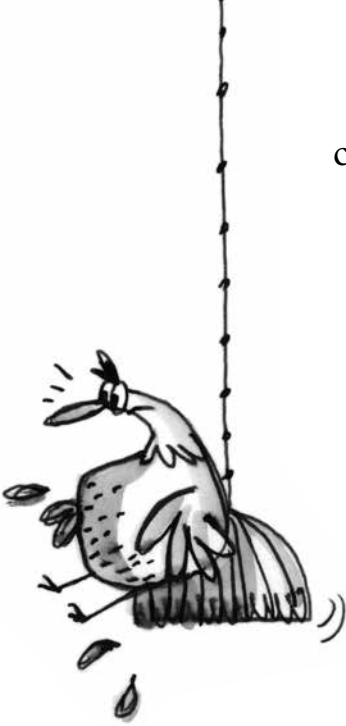
One evening, I fall asleep without saying goodnight to my parents. The door opens suddenly. The bell hanging from the handle tinkles, but Carmen hasn't the time to hide. She is sleeping next to me, her head resting on the pillow. She staggers upright and tries to fly off. Too late. "What's a hen doing in your room?" Mom yells angrily. Dad examines Carmen: "That's not just any hen. It's the one we saw at the

farm, the one that followed you everywhere”. Mom explodes: “Do you mean to tell me that it’s been living with us for almost three months?!” Really, has it been three months already? I think about it for a moment and nod. No point lying any longer. Carmen tries to reassure them by clucking gently, but they take no notice. All they can see is a hen crouched on my bed. Mon continues to yell that she can’t believe it, that it’s the most absurd thing that’s ever happened to her, and so on and so forth, while Dad and I remain silent, waiting for her to calm down. “And why exactly did you keep that hen?” Mom suddenly asks. “I ... I wanted a dog...,” I try to explain. “And what, pray tell, do you do with a hen?” Dad asks. “Oh, many things. First of all, we go to school...” “What?” Mom cries. I instantly regret saying that, but it’s too late. Mom’s face has turned purple. “You mean you take him to class with you?!” “Well,

yes, but only occasionally, and she sits quietly in my backpack. She never disturbs, and what's more, she learns a lot." "So she's a wise hen!" Dad tries to joke, but Mom gives him a dirty look. "Yes, she loves school. She has learned to read and write. And in maths, she's even better than I am." This isn't actually true, but I trust they won't check. "So you do your homework together?" Dad asks, shocked. "Certainly, she helps me. Carmen is very good at quizzing me, and if I make a mistake she corrects me immediately." "None of this makes sense," Mom sighs. "We have to take her back." "No! Why? What harm does she do? She lives in my room and I clean up after her. She only uses the bathroom twice a week, for a bit of a splash..." "Does your Carmen use the hairbrush?" Dad suddenly asks. "Yes," I admit, "but only after a bath." "And the eggs I keep finding in the fridge..." "They're hers," I confess. A threatening

silence descends. Carmen bows her head and shakes a leg. “It’s just that we can’t keep her, even if we wanted to,” Dad explains. “The house rules expressly forbid keeping farmyard animals in the house.” “But Carmen isn’t a farmyard animal!” I protest. “She’s not?” Mom asks. “No, she’s an animal that can stay in the bedroom, at school, on a bus, in a shop, at the gym. She






can stay anywhere...” “That may be,” Dad admits, “but she is still considered a farmyard animal.” I get upset and rub Carmen quickly on the head. “It’s not fair. The people who wrote the rules don’t know much about life. And I bet they never lived with a hen or with any other animal.

They can’t even imagine how much company a hen is. First of all, it’s thanks to her that I always wake up on time and in a good mood. I go to school willingly and I do all my homework.” Almost in a whisper, I add: “And, at night, I am no longer afraid of the dark and I no longer have nightmares.” “Carmen is like a friend, like a sister. She explains my lessons to me when I don’t understand

them, she draws geometric shapes for me when I get them wrong, and in history, she tells me the dates when I forget them.” “Talking about dates,” Mom interrupts, “you’ve got three more days—until Sunday—to enjoy your hen. Then she’s going back to the farm she came from.” “But you can always go visit,” Dad tries to comfort me. Just then my brother appears, and, at the sight of Carmen, his jaws drop. “What are you all doing huddled around a hen?” He looks upset about something, his t-shirt is torn and there’s a cut under his right cheekbone. He must have got up to no good with the Black Fighters. I’m more and more concerned about him. I’m afraid Francesco is being led astray. For a moment I think about talking to Mom and Dad, but Francesco gives me a dirty look and I keep quiet. After all, it’s up to him to decide. I smile at him so he knows I’m on his side and that he can come and talk to me whenever



he wants. But Francesco just looks at me with the contempt of an elder brother.



UN tesoro

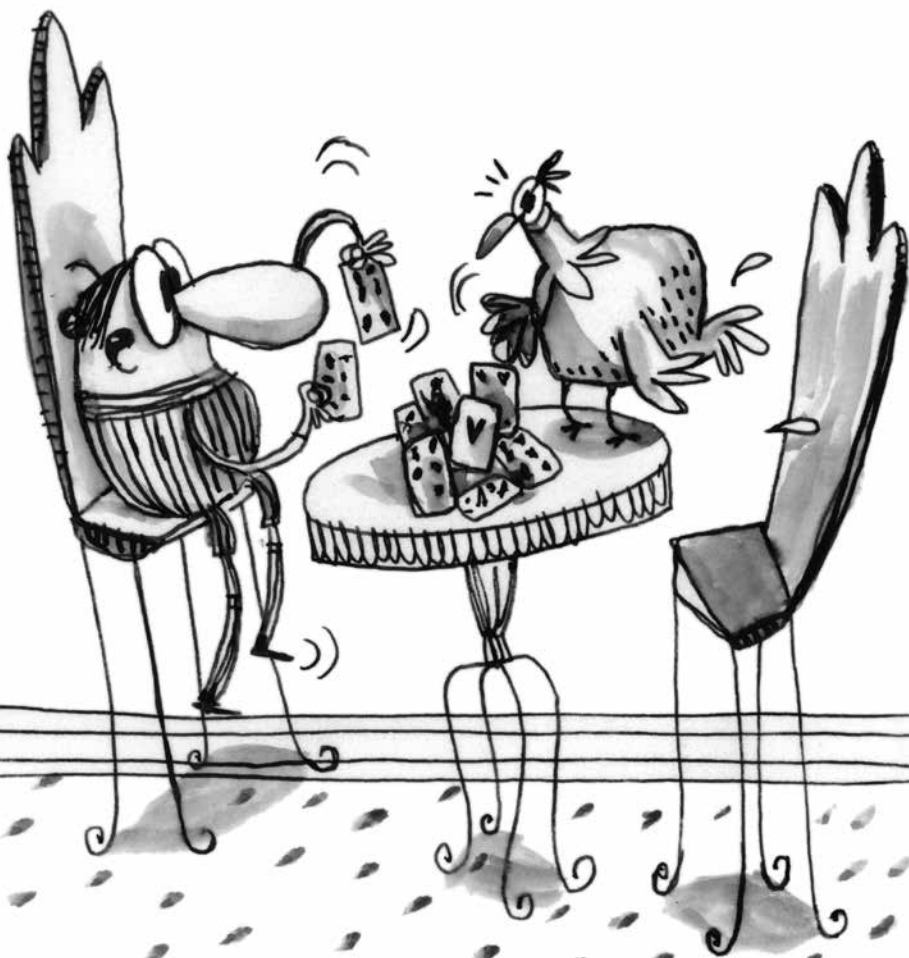
Prezioso

[ *A Precious Treasure* ]

This afternoon my brother is going out with his classmates. Or that's what he says, but I know he's going out with his gang. As usual, he is tense: he continues to try on different shoes and sweatshirts. In any case, he seems



happy. "Home before dinner," Mom reminds him. "Understood," Francesco replies, swinging his jacket on his index finger. I spend a quiet afternoon. I am teaching Carmen to play cana-



sta, and she's already pretty good. After winning three games - usual beginner's luck - she asks me about Francesco. "What about Francesco?" I ask. "Franciescco hasn't arrive yet...and it's eight clock," she points out. Mom and Dad must have seen the time too. I hear them talking about it and I approach the door to eavesdrop. "He hasn't come back," says Dad. "Could he have got lost?" Mom asks. "Do you know where he was going?" "I haven't the foggiest," Mom confesses. "And he left his phone behind." Finally, Francesco puts his head through the door. He looks dreadful, but he tries to laugh it off. He's as pale as a ghost and has a swollen eye. "Did you get into a fight?" I ask him. "No," he cuts short. Carmen moves closer in order to comfort him, but Francesco pretends not to see her. At dinner, Mom and Dad don't notice a thing because Francesco sits in the darkest corner of the kitchen. I would like to speak to him, ask him

what happened, but I don't say a word because I can feel it's the wrong moment. The next morning, at seven o'clock sharp, someone knocks at the door. They give several sharp knocks. I jump into my slippers and run to the front door. I see Mom, in her dressing gown, open the door and find two policemen who hand her an envelope with a very serious countenance. Dad arrives: "What is it, dear?" "A message from the court," she answers in a whisper while she opens the envelope. She reads through the letter and suddenly blanches. Dad embraces her: "What is it?" Oh gosh. It's about Carmen, I am sure of it! Someone has noticed her and ratted on us. "The house doesn't accept... The house doesn't approve." And now, we'll all end up in jail because of some stupid rules. And in separate cells. They might even turn us into galley slaves, and Carmen will be roasted. The best thing to do is fill my backpack and go, to another coun-

try, change my name, cut my hair. There must be somewhere in the world that appreciates hens! Mom's voice cuts my planning short: "Francesco is being summoned to court." "What?" Dad exclaims incredulously. "Yes, apparently Francesco is part of a gang, The Black Fighters, which goes around vandalising, stealing and threatening people." "Francesco?" Dad repeats as he shrinks backwards. "Our Francesco?" I tremble. And not just with the cold. Even though I know that Francesco is part of the Black Fighters and that they are a bunch of scoundrels, I am quite certain that he has never done anything wrong. While my parents knock at my brother's door, I lock myself in my room to discuss the matter with Carmen. I tell her what has happened in a few words. "I knev," she announces calmly. "You did? How?" "I folloved him. I saw. I drew tem." Carmen reaches out for a notebook and shows it to me as she flicks through the pages. They



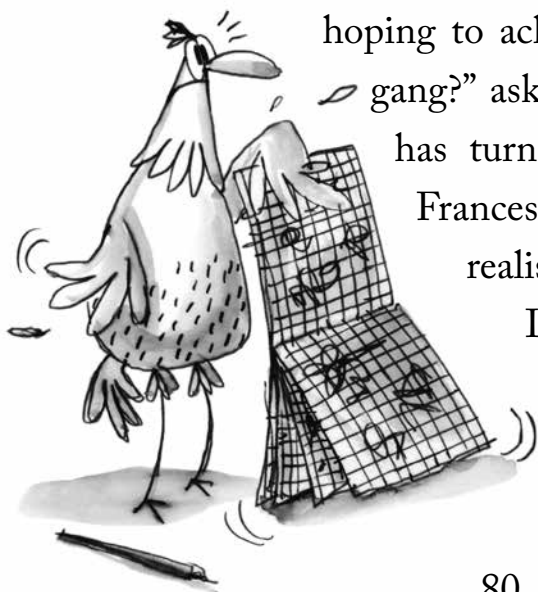
contain quick yet accurate sketches of the Black Fighters and of Francesco. With the usual “signature” in one of the corners—a small portrait of Carmen as she observes the scene. That’s where Carmen went when I couldn’t find her! She was following Francesco. In Carmen’s drawings, the Black Fighters destroy a car, while Francesco

repairs a motorcycle. Or burn a bin, while Francesco polishes a skateboard. In another image, the Black Fighters surround a group of kids, but Francesco is one of them and his t-shirt is torn. We run to find my parents. “Look!” I scream. “Francesco is innocent!” and I show them Carmen’s drawings. Dad smiles, albeit sadly. He is amazed by Carmen’s drawings. He didn’t know that hens could draw. Then he perks up and heaves a sigh of relief. “I always knew my Francesco wasn’t a trouble-maker.” “What were you

hoping to achieve by joining that gang?” asks Mom, whose nose has turned red from crying.

Francesco doesn’t reply. I realise he feels ashamed.

In the end he shrugs and says: “I wanted them to take me seriously, instead they





just laughed at me like I were a clown, pushed me around like I were a dogsbody... And now..." "Now," Dad reassures him, "the police investigations will show that you did not take part in their wrongdoings." "Yess," Carmen says, waving her notebook. "Yee are innocient." "I never got up to any of their shenanigans," Francesco justifies himself. "I did nothing wrong. Actually, I was their favourite victim." Carmen hides her head between her wings. And we all pat her, before hugging Francesco and holding him tight, like a precious treasure.

# Una specialissima Civetta

*[ A Very Special Owl ]*

The investigators have checked the security cameras and the footage confirms Carmen's drawings. The court has upheld Francesco's appeal and Carmen's notebook has been kept as evidence. Francesco is not in trouble, but they'll be keeping an eye on him for a while. The danger over, my parents can now start breathing again, and they congratulate Carmen. They say she is good, beautiful, intelligent, and all the other things that people say on such oc-

casions. I watch on, open-mouthed. Mom scratches Carmen's head and Dad pats her on the back. "You saved Francesco," Mom murmurs. "You're so brave," Dad says. Now, I'm no longer the only one who wants Carmen to stay with us. Francesco is even keener than I am. "Let's



keep her. This hen is amazing.” “I told you,” I boast, “Carmen does homework, she writes and draws, she eats flies and ants, she makes lot of eggs. And she saves people. And we can fill our pillows with the feathers she loses. And...” “Okay, okay, we get it,” Mom interrupts. Dad puts Carmen on his lap and tickles her crest. “But what about the house rules?” This time Mom picks Carmen up and rocks her. “We act as if nothing has happened. Who knows about Carmen? Only we do, and we can keep a secret.” Francesco rejoices: “Do you mean to say we can lie outright?” “Of course not. But we can choose not to mention it,” says Dad, and I am almost sure I saw him wink.

Ever since that evening, Carmen wanders freely about the apartment. Dad has built her a sort of great nest in the living room, which Carmen loves. But at night she still likes to sleep on my bed. They have bought her a lo-

vely pink basin for her baths, and she enjoys rolling around and splashing about in the water. Mom has even got her some special linen: small orange towels, the colour of her eyes. “Tank yee,” says Carmen with every new gift. However, I am still the only one who can understand her. The others, at most, have a vague idea of what she’s saying. Now, our family does nothing without Carmen. We take her to the supermarket, to the doctor, on holidays. She has learned to crouch quietly at the bottom of a backpack or bag, and if she accidentally cackles, we pretend to cough or that something has gone down the wrong way. No one ever suspects. Not even the porter! When we visit our grandparents on Sunday, we hope Gran doesn’t start with her usual rigmarole on chicken broth and roast chicken, her two favourite dishes. Fortunately, Dad had the brilliant idea of telling her that Francesco and I are allergic to

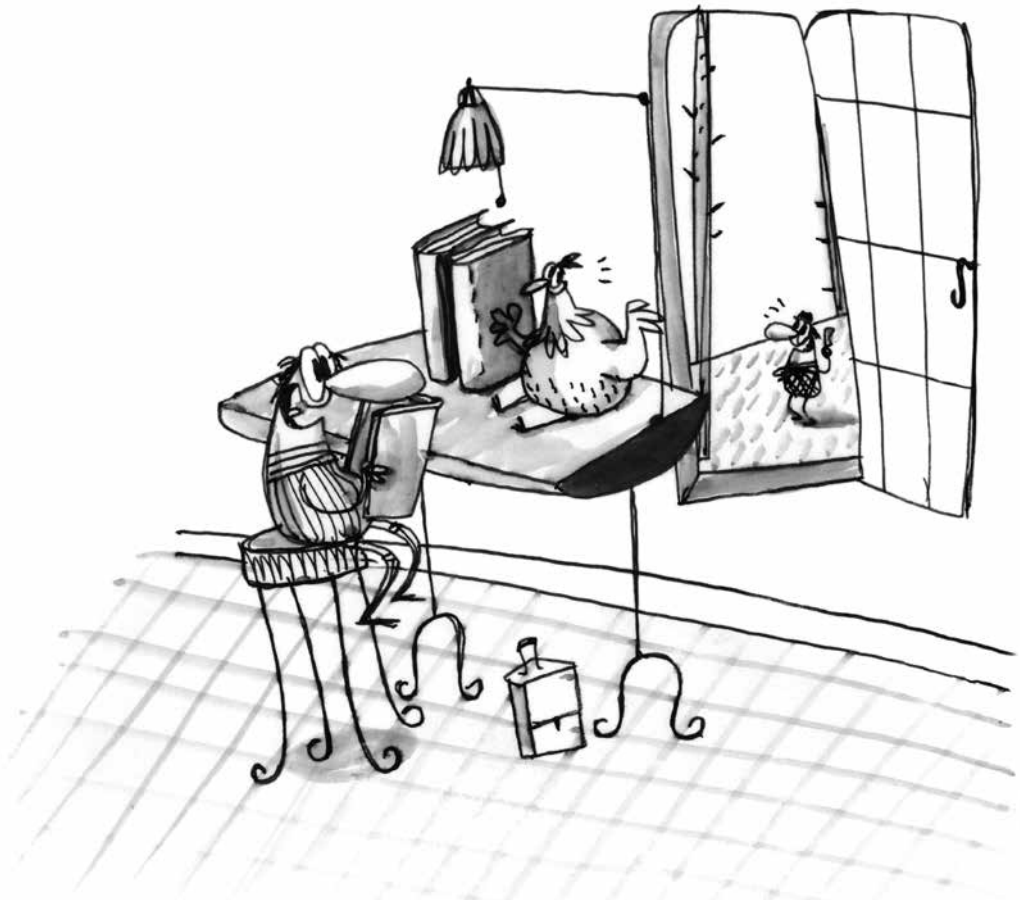
chicken meat. At first, Gran was very downcast. But then she shifted her focus onto turkey, and that cheered her up. Every now and then we go back to the farm so that Carmen can say hello to her friends. Throughout the day, her feathers tremble with joy and emotion, but when we get back home she confesses that she is much happier living with us in the city. “Why?” I ask. “Te world iss more intersting,”

she answers. “What did she say?” Mom asks me upon hearing her cackle.

“Oh, nothing important,” I say. Sometimes, I feel sorry for Carmen that she can only roam free in our apartment, and so I dream of taking her to a fa-



raway country where she can walk beside me like any old friend. We sit at a bar table, each in his own chair, and talk freely, watching the sunset and laughing. I would also love it if at school she could sit at a desk like the others and become Giacomo's friend, instead of remaining in my backpack. I tell her, and Carmen sighs: "I'm appy as I am." The feathers around her neck lift and her eyes soften into a smile. "You look like an owl when you do that," I say. "My very special owl." "Tank yee," she answers, her chest swelling. "Yes, your eyes are as big as two suns. By the way, my history book says they were the goddess of wisdom's favourite animal." "Henns?" "No, owls. But never mind that. We have lots of homework for tomorrow. What a bore!" "I'll help yee," Carmen suggests. At that moment we are distracted by a gentle noise against the windowpane. Carmen flies onto the windowsill and peeks out.



She's all excited and flaps her wings furiously. She turns and calls for me to come with a decided gesture. I run. "What is it?" "Shhh..." she says, and she tells me to look outside. When I am next to her, she whispers in my ear. "Yeer



friend Ciacmo iss here.” She’s right, Giacomo is wearing his backpack on his shoulders and is waving a hanky as if to say: “Come down to play”. I look angrily at my schoolbooks. “Do you think we can?” I ask Carmen. She looks at me with those round, clever eyes that make everything seem possible. “Of courss!” she smiles.



Guida Risari è un'autrice per bambini e ragazzi apprezzata in Italia e all'estero. Ha pubblicato albi, romanzi e saggi. Tra i suoi libri, *L'alfabeto dimezzato* (Beisler), *Achille il puntino* (Kalandraka), *Il taccuino di Simone Weil* (rueBallu), *La porta di Anne* (Mondadori), *Il viaggio di Lea* (Einaudi Ragazzi, finalista al Premio Strega ragazze e ragazzi 2016) e *Gli amici del fiume* (San Paolo).



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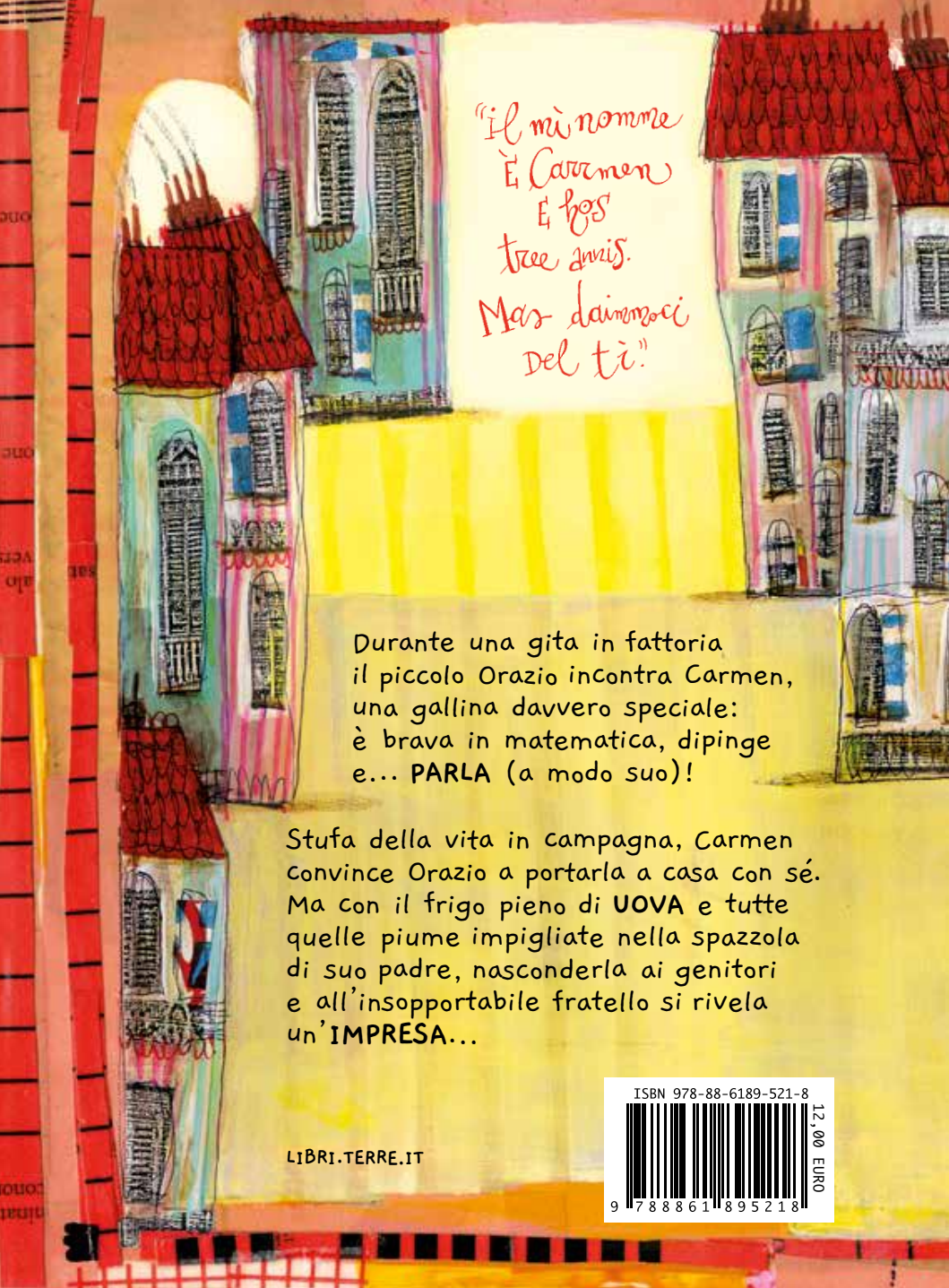
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*"Il mi nome  
È Carmen  
È hos  
tree anni.  
Mas daimoci  
Del ti."*

Durante una gita in fattoria  
il piccolo Orazio incontra Carmen,  
una gallina davvero speciale:  
è brava in matematica, dipinge  
e... **PARLA** (a modo suo)!

Stufa della vita in campagna, Carmen  
convince Orazio a portarla a casa con sé.  
Ma con il frigo pieno di **UOVA** e tutte  
quelle piume impigliate nella spazzola  
di suo padre, nasconderla ai genitori  
e all'insopportabile fratello si rivela  
un'**IMPRESA...**

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