

Daria Bignardi

(translated by Nicola Iannelli-Popham)

THE LOVE THAT YOU DESERVE

Alma

Aal-maa-Maa-ioo, Aal-maa-Maa-ioo.

Since I confessed to Toni about what happened thirty years ago, I've been seeing my mother in my dreams, calling us with her deep voice, modulating the musical repetition of "ma". *Almamaio* was the sound of my first life, the happy one.

I saw him, pronounced "Ma-io" and he was forever Maio. When the newspapers wrote his real name, there were very few who realised that Marco had been my brother.

It was a June evening perfumed by the lime trees.

Maio carried me on his crossbar pedalling close up against the tepid walls warmed by the sun. I brushed his lips with my fingers and he tried to grab and bite them. The more I laughed and wriggled, the more he pretended to swerve to make me shriek.

My bike had a flat tyre and we'd taken his. He rode with just one hand and, in the other, held a spliff of somewhat rubbish marijuana grown on the banks of the river Po.

We'd been to see a film by Antonioni that afternoon and, going home, we'd endlessly repeated the scene where she asks him what he's running away from. He replies: *Turn your back on what is ahead.*

Before dinner, while the pizza was cooking in the oven and I was smoking on the balcony watching the swallow's to-ing and fro-ing, Maio had come out of the shower with our dad's blue robe on, he'd leant out the window with his eyes closed, his hair dripping and his chin up and, throwing wide his arms, he'd declaimed; "What are you running away from Alma?".

When we liked a film we'd repeat its most memorable lines out of context for days on end.

The crossbar cut into my arse as the bike rumbled over the cobbles and Maio went into all the potholes deliberately to make me shout.

“I put on really tough jeans that cushion me” I sang out.

“Fat bum, little bum, I’ll give you some” he replied in the same tone.

He was incredibly thin and as tall as me. Up to three years before we swapped clothes and then I’d grown tits and my hips widened. My father was happy that I’d developed as he’d foreseen a serious dysfunction in my hormonal delay. He imagined in detail illnesses, accidents, financial disasters, scholastic failures and defeats through to the slightest daily problem: closed restaurants, expired tickets, full car parks. His whole life was aquiver with imminent disasters. He had foreseen every possible kind of accident, death and suffering except for the one which destroyed us.

Our parents were already in the countryside while we were waiting for our school results before joining them, even if we knew what they would be: Maio would have to repeat his exams and I would pass them all.

Our father hadn’t got angry; he only feared the onset of problems. Mum had just shrugged: she’d said straight off that my high-school wasn’t right for Maio. I’d insisted it was.

Maio was funny, adaptable, lazy. Not like me.

We were going to stay in the country for his cramming lessons before taking a train to Bucharest. In August we’d go to the sea as we always did.

We were happy with these last evenings without our parents, excited by the start of the holidays. It was all great.

In the square, by the marble griffin, our meeting place, there was only Benetti. It was Sunday - some had gone to the sea and hadn’t come back yet. Michaela would be coming soon, sunburnt and shiny with sun cream and we would have a beer at the Mago bar. The sunset was never ending that evening.

I was seventeen and I didn’t realise that we were happy.

Antonia

I turn onto my back. Left side, back, right side—I've been sleeping like this for two months now. My belly is as round as a drum, I've put on five kilos. Just right, my gynaecologist says. Not enough, according to Leo.

Leo sleeps on his stomach, lucky sod, with an arm hanging off the side of the bed. I turn onto my side and stare at him intently to see if he wakes up. I'm leaving on Monday and I haven't said anything about it yet. I have to say something now. I blow on his cheek.

"Mmm..What?"

"Hi, hello."

"Hello to you too...time?" he mumbles.

"Well and truly nine."

"Early! Give me a break Toni" he complains, turning over and covering his head with the sheet. He only gets to sleep in on Saturdays because there's always some kind of emergency on Sundays: Saturday night robberies, rival out of town football fans, even murders are more frequent at dawn on Sunday. On the other days he gets up at seven, long before me.

"I have to tell you something" I say.

I see him emerge slowly from under the sheet, like a tortoise out of its shell. He lifts one eyelid. He bulgy eye stares at me, already transparently clear.

"What is it?"

"I'm going to Ferrara for a few days on Monday."

"To Ferrara? Why?" He's opened both eyes now. He's slits them as if the light was bothering him and stares at me from the bottom of his pillow. I'm resting on my elbow and my hair is brushing his nose. But he doesn't move a muscle. He looks like a cat mesmerized by the headlamps, his fur up and ears down.

“I have to look into something to do with my family.”

He slowly pulls himself up and sits with his back leaning against the headboard. His eyes are wide open now. He looks at me, puzzled.

“What do you need to do?”

“I just told you.”

“Six months pregnant?”

He’s used to my departures, my site inspections. I’ve published three detective novels with a small publisher in Bologna and every now and again I have to travel somewhere to get some info on the crime scenes. That’s how we met. But I’ve haven’t been anywhere since I’ve been expecting Ada.

“That’s exactly why. I have to go while I still can.”

“Where are you going?”

“Oi, wake up! To Ferrara, my mum’s home town. Very, very close by.”

“So why can’t you come home to sleep?”

Ferrara is less than an hour from Bologna by train but it might as well be on the moon as far as I’m concerned. I used to go to the cemetery there now and again when I was little but we haven’t done that for twenty years now.

Up until three days ago, my mother had never spoken about Ferrara and her family. All I knew was that were all dead. I thought that her memories of it all made her sad and, at some point, I’d stopped asking her about them.

“I’ll need some time so it’s better I sleep there.”

He is really awake now. He throws himself over the side of the bed saying: “I’ll be back right away then you can explain.”

I open the curtains and the shutters while he’s in the bathroom. Our bedroom has a balcony and always has lots of light. It’s early March, it’s still cold and the plants in the flowerpots are shrivelled with cold. I put a jumper on over my nightie and feel

Ada moving. Yesterday the gynaecologist said that she's the size of a large banana. "Like a giant banana" she specified.

I get back into bed. I'm freezing. I like talking in bed, it's like sitting on a cloud, or in a boat - it's a free-zone. One of Stevenson's poems comes to mind: *My bed is like a little boat...* Who knows whether Ada will like reading. I used to read a book a day when I was young, so much so that Alma used to tell me to stop, to go outside to play, to not be obsessive. I didn't know what 'obsessive' meant, it wasn't in my books.

Now that she's told me about her brother I understand where her great fear of addictions comes from. I'd never understood why I'd been the only one in my class to be told off for reading too much.

Here's Leo back. He's got his blue poplin pyjamas on, his granddad ones. Not even my father, who's thirty years older than him, has a pair like that.

Leo's older than me. He's been married before but didn't have kids. When we met he was already separating from his wife Cristina.

"It's a good thing you took him on. I'd have been sorry if he'd been on his own" she told me the first time we met. Cristina's a judge. She's a brisk, committed, intelligent woman. I liked her straight off.

"All she cares about is her job" Leo had told me. "She wasn't interested in having a family. I don't know why she married me."

"And why did you marry her?" I'd asked

"I know nothing about what I did before I met you, don't ask me. I did things because they were there, like everyone does. It's you that's special."

I love Leo even if he hasn't read Stevenson. I'd told him that's why he didn't understand. If you don't read, you don't understand. "Not if you work for the Police" he'd replied. "In the Police you see up close everything you read about in novels: love, betrayal, death."

"What's all this about Ferrara then?" he asks getting back into bed, turning on his side and placing one of his great big hands on my belly.

“It’s to do with my mother. Do you want to hear?” I reply putting my hand on his.

“Go for it” Leo says. He’s put his glasses on and watches me with that air of curiosity and attentiveness that he had the first time I entered his office, in the police station, four years ago. At the time I thought I had never met a man with such a curious expression as his. It’s usually only women who look at you like that.

Alma

Benetti wore heelless boots and had an acidic smell about him. He seemed to know something that I didn't. He attracted and repulsed me. He appeared only rarely, at the weirdest times of the day, when there was no-one about. One Sunday he rang on the door-phone at two in the afternoon asking for a slice of lemon and my mother, a chemist, had understood what it was for. She shook her head sadly. "Poor thing", she said. She didn't tell us not to hang around with him. She trusted us.

I don't know what was going on in my head that evening. It was nine o'clock but I remember that it was still light and the marble on the Cathedral shone whitely amongst the walls of the buildings reddened by the sun. By now Michaela wouldn't turn up. Maybe she'd had to help her parents out at the café.

"What if we tried it too, just the once?" I suggested to Maio all of sudden, nodding towards Benetti.

I'd never thought of it before.

And, for sure, neither had he.

But he understood me straight away. He spread his arms, lifted his chin, crossed his eyes and replied: "What are you running away from?"

We burst out laughing.

I've always thought that there are some secrets you can never tell. I'd never spoken to Antonia about it so as not to contaminate her with my pain.

Not even Franco, my husband, knew all the details of what happened. He knows that my father killed himself but doesn't know how. That my mother got sick and our family fell apart, and that it was my fault.

He cured me but it was Antonia who saved me – I was just twenty when she was born. Now that she's expecting a baby it's time to tell her all about it.

I'd never told her how her uncle disappeared – mainly because I don't know myself.

It was January. One Sunday morning, our mother had come into my room. She sat on the bed and put a hand on my shoulder.

The night before there had been a party and I hadn't enjoyed it. I'd come home at one, on my bike, through a dense, damp fog. Before going to sleep I'd finished reading *The Great Gatsby* to console myself for the pointless evening. Since I'd stopped going out with Maio, everyone seemed so boring.

I'd turned the light out at two after reading and rereading the last sentence in the book: "*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past*". Then I'd put it on the floor, next to the bed, excited and unhappy. I'd got no idea that, tomorrow, my life would be like this too.

On Sundays, Maio and I used to sleep in until late. I'd got my final high school exams so I'd started going out only on Saturdays. However, he'd started going out every evening and coming back after midnight. My father, who worried about everything, appeared not to notice. Maybe he thought it was normal for a boy, in a small town. My mother had her suspicions but said nothing. She worried about my father above all.

His financial ups and downs had made her keep on her job in the chemist's that she'd found while at university, before she got her degree and, during our trips, if anyone asked her what she did, she'd reply: "I'm a shop assistant".

"Francesca, tell them you're a chemist!", my father would exhort her.

"What's the difference?" she'd reply. "I sell sweeties, tampax and plasters. On a good day, I get to measure someone's blood pressure."

She didn't say it in any recriminatory way. She'd chosen that big chemist's, the biggest in town, because it permitted her to work half days: she had two children and a husband who was more hard work than a third child. She loved him. In my mother's day, if you married you didn't spend the rest of your life asking yourself if you'd made the right choice.

I don't think she had.

My father was hard work: apprehensive, inconstant. Unpredictable with regard to everything except his pessimism. I now know that he suffered from depression even if I hadn't realised this at the time. He was slow, passive and silent in the winter, euphoric in the summer. A light went out in him at the beginning of November and came back on in May. He had inherited a small-holding in the country which he managed poorly, even though he spent a lot of time in the house by the banks of the River Po. He fished, walked the dog, tried to manage the land even though the farmer made all the decisions.

When he was in a good mood he used to say it was the hemp crops that had made him crazy. That everyone in his family was crazy. When I said this to the psychologist they sent me to after Maio disappeared, she tried to get me to believe that Maio's propensity for addiction was hereditary and came from my father.

No-one can convince me that, even if I hadn't suggested trying heroin that June evening, he would have started anyway.

If it hadn't been for my senseless idea, my brother would be alive and my parents too, in all probability. My father demented and my mother full of aches and pains, but alive. They would have moved to the country and we would have visited them now and again. We'd have lunched in the sunshine and walked along the banks with the dogs. Antonia would have had grandparents and cousins and I'd have had a different life.

Maio would never have been brave enough to shoot up if I hadn't suggested it. I'm absolutely sure. It's not an obsession – it's a certainty. He never made the decisions, he followed everything I said. He trusted me. Everyone trusted me.

I ruined everything and I deserve the hell I have lived in day after day.

I had turned towards her. I'd touched the hand that stroked my cheek. I'd recognised the ring she wore in front of her wedding ring by its feel, a small sapphire surrounded by diamonds – the one I gave to Antonia.

The freezing cold hand and the stone had alarmed me. It wasn't my father. It was usually he who woke me. Something was going on.

“What’s up?”

“Did you see Maio yesterday evening? He’s not come back and it’s nine.”

“I was at Laura Trentini’s house. You know he doesn’t go out with us anymore.”

By now we led different lives. After the interminable rituals of scoring, he usually finished off the evening in a grotty bar with the pretentious name of ‘Paul Verlaine’.

“He’s probably fallen asleep somewhere, at someone’s house”, I said.

I could just see it. Off his head, he could have crashed out anywhere: in a car, in a public toilet. He’d come back home stinking, crazed or indifferent and conciliatory – depending on just how much stuff he’d managed to get into himself.

“I think so too. But I’ve told Dad that he was sleeping over somewhere, so as not to worry him.”

“So why have you woken me up?”

It was unusual for my mother to do anything without a reason – she wasn’t the impulsive type.

“I just heard something on the radio. Last night...” she began. Then she stopped and took my hand.

“Tell me.”

I was sitting up in bed and had turned the bedside lamp on. Mum had put on a white woollen jumper with pearl buttons over her nightdress. She was always elegant, even when she’d just got up. I liked that jumper. She’d crocheted it herself.

I felt embarrassed by last night’s clothes thrown on the chair, with my panties still stuck in my jeans, socks on the floor together with the book I’d been reading before going to sleep, the stuffy air in the room. I wanted to open the window, tidy up, put everything away. I didn’t want to know what she’d heard on the radio.

“Two boys died from overdoses last night. They found them in a car near Pontelagoscuro”, and she squeezed my hand.

I could feel a chord vibrating in my stomach. A low, bleak note.

“Did they say who they were?”

“Renato Orsatti and Sandro Putinati, both twenty. Did you know them?”

“Never heard of them.”

“They were from somewhere else, Massafiscaglia. Poor things.”

The fact that they were from somewhere other than Ferrara was reassuring. They were nothing to do with Maio.

Nonetheless, my mother had made the right link. Two deaths from overdose meant that there was a batch of over-pure heroin around. In the following months, from the investigations amongst Maio’s friends and the dealers in the area, they found out that a lot of addicts had taken a fantastic trip that Saturday night.

They had all come back, except for Roberto and Sandro. And Maio.

Except that Maio had disappeared.

Antonia

Leo's hand is warm. I love his great big hands and strong, blond and freckled wrists. The day we met, while he was patiently explaining investigation procedures to me, I observed his wrists that emerged from the sleeves of a faded, blue shirt the same colour as his eyes. The same colour as the pair of pyjamas he's wearing this morning, an old man's pyjamas even if he's only forty.

He looks older – maybe because he's got a bit of a paunch, glasses and a strange, monk-like baldness. He's got a bald patch the size of a teacup in the midst of his thick, copper coloured hair streaked with a few grey hairs. I realised what Leo was like from his wrists. I fell in love with his wrists.

“Remember I went to eat at my parents' on Wednesday? My mother was very nervy. She was so strange that I thought she must be running a temperature. Franco was dining with the Vice-Chancellor so we were alone. While she was making dinner she announced she'd decided to tell me something very important. She sat me down, poured out some wine – she who never drinks at all – and told me an amazing story.”

Leo is paying great attention. He's stopped stroking my belly and has crossed his arms over his chest, as if he's sitting in his armchair by his desk at the police station instead of being in bed.

“I'll summarise it because I'll never be able to repeat it word for word. You know her brother?”

“What brother?”

“I told you she had a brother who was a year younger than her called Marco. They all called him Maio. I thought he'd died of something. She never talked about him.”

“Instead..?”

“He disappeared just before he was seventeen. They think he's dead but they've never found his body.”

Leo uncrosses his arms and takes his glasses off like he does when something doesn't add up. He leans towards me.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Do you see why I want to investigate? It’s a crazy story. My mother is convinced that it was all her fault.”

“Her fault?” He looks incredulous.

“She said that one night she suggested they try out heroin and since then he continued using and one night he disappeared.”

“Your mother took drugs? Are you nuts?”

He puts his glasses back on and looks at me as if I’m having him on.

“Don’t come the policeman with me. It was the end of the Seventies and they were kids. They just tried it once. She didn’t do it again but he continued. On the night he disappeared, two others died of overdose so they thought he must be dead too and that he was with someone who must have hidden the body so as not to get into trouble. My grandfather killed himself six months later. And my grandmother got cancer.” I get it all out in just one breath.

“Holy shit!”

“Yes, holy shit.”

“You said your uncle disappeared thirty-four years ago?”

“More or less.”

“And what is it you want to do?”

“Go there, talk to people who knew them. Get an idea.”

“Why?”

“To help my mother. She’s still convinced that it’s her fault, after all this time. Can you believe it! But also for me.”

“Look darling, it’s not one of your thrillers. Apart from the fact that you’re six months pregnant, no-one will have any revelations about something that happened such a

long time ago. The police will have investigated. What do you think you can find out that wasn't found out then?"

"You tell me that sometimes you don't work as well as you might. That someone from outside can't imagine the sloppiness of some investigations, evidence lost, enquiries made by chance...."

"You're nuts, I never said...", then he stops because he knows he has.

"Antonia..."

"Yes darling."

"I love you..."

"Me too."

"Can I help you?"

"You can tell your colleague in Ferrara that I'm coming to speak to him. They keep these records don't they?"

"More or less, it depends. I can ask him to look for something. Tell me the date of the disappearance. If they haven't moved offices, if they haven't lost the file... the ones who did the investigation will be dead by now"

"Maybe not. They might just have retired."

"Maybe. Don't you want me to do this? It would be easy for me."

"I'd prefer doing it myself. To go there myself. I have to get my head round this situation. An addict uncle, a suicide grandfather... Even if I never met them, still..."

"Your mother's a fine one...telling you a story like this while you're pregnant..." Leo looks pained.

"She said she did it deliberately. That pregnant women are invulnerable."

"If you say so.."

Leo sighs. He loves my mother. Sometimes, just to poke fun at me, he says that she's more beautiful than I am and maybe she's the one he's in love with. He's right about her being beautiful. She always was, even if she doesn't know it.

Alma's a strange person. She seems insecure but, in reality, she's very strong. Unpredictable, contradictory. She always has to be the one making the decisions. She's so sensitive that you can't help but love her, even if she thinks she's being unbearable and often she is just that. It wasn't easy to get on with her when I was a teenager – she seemed like the teenager and, at times, she still does.

“How long do you think you'll stay in Ferrara?”

“A week at the most. I've got a check up next Monday. I'll try to talk to the people they knew, as well as the police. I have to do it before Ada's born. I never knew anything about my mother's family. Now I know why.”

“Have you told her?”

“I can't. She'd be upset. Actually, you have to cover for me. She doesn't make any sense when she's talking about this whole thing. You can't imagine... She's convinced she destroyed her entire family!”

“What about your dad?”

“I haven't spoken to him yet. I'll go tomorrow. There are a load of things I have to ask him. Alma's in Rome for the Ghirri exhibition so I've asked him to have lunch together.”

“What does Dr. Marchetti say?”

“That I'm fine and that there's a first class midwife in Ferrara anyway.”

“Are you sure she said that?”

“No darling. Come on, do you really think I'm going to tell my gynaecologist something this personal? But I'm fine, really. Your mum said she worked up 'til the day before you were born and look how you came out.”

“But my mum... Ok, Toni, do what you want. You'll do it anyway.”

“I’ll be back on Sunday. At the very latest. Don’t worry.”

Alma

We went with Benetti to the house of someone who sold it. He was a grown up, with sideburns. I'd never seen him before. He didn't look like an addict and didn't want to make us pay. We thought we'd been really lucky. He seemed amused and was polite. He did it for us and it was if he injected a really, really strong drunkenness into our arms, instantaneous and violent. We threw up all night and the day after, when we woke up, green in the face, it was very late.

We rushed to school on our bikes to see the exam results, without saying a word. Maio had to repeat his Latin exam in September, as we'd known. I'd passed with an average of eight out of ten, higher than expected. We were neither happy nor upset - just empty and tired as if we'd distractedly lost something precious but were ashamed and not wanting to admit it. On the bus that took us to the country we just said: "Never again", without looking directly at each other.

I really did never do it again. I had felt so ill that I also stopped smoking spliffs. Maio, however, tried again after the holidays. Without saying a word, he went to look some out one evening. Something had bitten him, the poison had been inoculated into him. Who knows how these things work. It's a mystery. I had the antidote, he didn't.

He did it once a week, Saturday evenings, for a month. Michela told me.

I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe it. I was scared but, above all, I was angry. I tried to talk to him but he made light of things. He said it was nothing special and I shouldn't worry. My mother realised and she made him take methadone. She never lost her head. Paradoxically, the fact that, in some ways, the thing was familiar to her because of the kids who went to the chemist's to buy syringes worsened the situation. She didn't get upset, she didn't dramatise. But he would take the methadone in the morning and shoot up in the afternoon. That way he became an addict even quicker.

We didn't know how to tell my father. He thought that Maio was tired because of school. I was studying for my high school exams, went out with my friends, but a light had gone out. When some enormous problem comes into a family, there's like a silence, an emptiness that scrapes the stomach, a permanent sense of unease.

I was angry with him, with my parents, with everyone. I thought it wasn't fair. I'd just been messing about that early summer evening. I was just seventeen. It'd been stupid, like when we got drunk on fruit grappa in the mountains. He couldn't do something like this to me if he loved me. It wasn't fair. My mother said he'd get better, that she saw lots like him. She sent him to see a psychologist but as soon as he left the session, Maio would rush off to shoot up. "That arsehole makes me feel worse" he told me once.

He'd changed. When he was high, he'd never shut up. He'd say banal, idiotic things. If he wasn't, then he'd be silent, wide-eyed. I think that he had to deal it to be able to buy it. He'd go out straight after lunch, at two in the afternoon and he'd come back at eight. He wasn't studying anymore and often bunked off school. I was so angry that I couldn't even speak to him. I didn't know him anymore. I couldn't stand him. I couldn't stand his betrayal and my own sense of guilt.

One evening, at dinner, there were veal escalopes with Marsala. My father had taken two portions and then had looked at Maio's untouched plate and said: "Aren't you eating? Aren't you hungry? You've always liked escalopes."

I couldn't stand it any longer. I exploded: "Dad, he hasn't eaten in months. How can you not have noticed?"

My father looked first at me, then him, then my mother.

"What's going on? Are you sick, Maio? Francesca, tell me the truth."

And Mum, at long last...: "Giacomo...Maio has a problem with addiction, but we'll sort it out. I'm looking for re-hab."

Maio tried to smile. He said: "Forgive me, I'm sorry. It's not that bad, it's just that I'm really not hungry."

He was scratching himself. He stank of rancid sweat and smoke. He was high and I knew that he was sorry about it but not as much as I was.

He didn't care about anyone any more.

My father got up from the table and went to hug him, from behind. Maio stayed sitting down, with his back rigid and his face immobile.

My father was crying and hugging him. "Forgive me all of you", he said too.

Then he went to lie down in their room.

I couldn't see what we had to forgive him for but I hated him, I hated them all. My mother who couldn't take any decisions and my father who was so weak. Why didn't they get angry? No-one was protecting us. No-one was protecting me.

That was the last time we four were all together.

I don't know what my parents said to each other that night but you could see the light filtering out from under their door until very late. I expect my mother was comforting my father.

The next day was a Saturday and I went to school, my mother to the chemist's and my father to an appointment with the agricultural consortium. Maio slept until lunch time. The cleaning lady said that he'd had some tea and biscuits when he woke up. Then he went out on foot. We never saw him again.

Antonia

“Did she tell you?” my father asks.

We have just sat down at the Diana, his favourite restaurant, in Via Indipendenza.

“Yes. Did you know?”

“She’s been thinking about it since you got pregnant. She’s always claimed she couldn’t tell you before.”

The waiter with the long nose and grey hair brings us a plate of Parmesan flakes and mortadella cut into cubes. He’d been here since I was a baby and he always seems the same: a handsome man with a nice smile – but I’ve never known his name. I ask my father.

“I have no idea” he replies, “why?”

“Just because. Why couldn’t Alma tell me about her brother and all the rest before? What was she afraid of?”

I often call my parents by their names: Alma and Franco, as I heard them calling each other when I learnt to talk. I’ve noticed that other only children do the same.

“Of lots of things. Discovering that your grandfather committed suicide and your uncle disappeared is not something to be taken lightly.”

“Did you never think that I should know?”

“I thought about it. But I stood by her decision, as usual.”

“Do you think it was her fault?”

He pours me a tiny bit of Lambrusco.

“Can you drink?”

“Half a glass is ok.”

He fills the small round wineglass. It’s a light, pleasing, slightly fizzy wine.

“Of course not. It was chance. Everything happens by chance. But there’s no way of persuading her because we will never have any indisputable proof. There is only one thing that might give her some peace of mind, possibly.” An imperceptible smile lit up his expression. “Have you thought about it. Can you tell me what it might be?” he asked, staring at me.

My father wouldn’t stop being a teacher even in the midst of a catastrophe. “Can you tell me, amongst the objects that surround us, which are the fire resistant materials?” I can imagine him asking me while everything about us is exploding and the flames lick our ankles.

But I have the answer. I have thought about it.

“If I discovered how he disappeared.”

He looked at me with satisfaction.

“Will you try?” he asked.

The waiter with the long nose brings the tortellini. He is smiling more than usual and I feel that, before long, he’ll ask about my pregnancy – I caught his glance moving from my face to my belly.

I drink a spoonful of warm, tasty soup before answering. It’s delicious. Since I’ve been pregnant, I taste everything as I’ve never done before.

“Of course I will.”

Franco puts down his spoon and looks at me with pleasure.

“I would have liked to have done it when I was younger.”

“What stopped you?”

He looks at me intensely while he twiddles the wedding ring on his left finger between his thumb and index finger. It’s an old ring made of red gold. I know that my grandmother’s name, Francesca, is engraved inside and my grandfather’s name, Giacomo, inside my mother’s ring. They were their rings, amongst the few things that my mother has kept of theirs. My grandmother’s engagement ring, a small sapphire surrounded by diamonds, she gave to me. I always wear it, even now. Now that I

think about it, it's pretty strange that they have never talked about my grandparents but they wear their wedding rings on their fingers.

"If I said something that might seem senseless to you, would you think your father's lost it?" he asks, lowering his gaze.

"I wish. It would be nice to hear you say something senseless once in a while."

Now he smiles broadly.

My parents have always been enthusiastic about anything I say, just like when I was four years old and began to write a few words on the blackboard they had given me. "Dog". "Cat". "What a clever girl!."

As a teenager I had begun to suspect that the role of parent was something alien to them that they had needed to learn to play the part in the most right and correct way – but without any vocation for it. I had wanted to leave home before I began to detest them for it.

Franco dries his already dry lips with the Diana's large white napkin.

"I was sure that only you could do it, as if it were a task destined for you. It's an irrational belief but I can't manage to be ashamed of it."

Despite claiming that he isn't ashamed, his cheeks are very red. It must be the soup, or the wine.

"Semel in anno licet insanire - once in a year one is allowed to go crazy. You are my once a year. You always have been." he says.

I am just going to answer that it doesn't seem to me to be such an enormous folly to hope that I might find out something about our family but the waiter beats me to it, asking: "What would you like next? The usual roast vegetables? Or do we want the roast meat trolley?"

As expected, he's noticed my belly and has started on the hints at pregnant women eating twice the normal amount. The point is that this commonplace is true, at least in my case. I eat more and I'm greedier.

Franco indicates that he has had enough but I can do what I like.

“I’ll take the Italian mixed grill with double cream croquettes. Thank you.” I reply in the knowledge that I’ll make the waiter happy by ordering the richest things on the menu. I want to repay him for the fact that I’ve known him for thirty years and still don’t know his name, even if it’s not my fault but that of my parents’ pathological shyness. In effect, he’s delighted and can’t hold back any longer. “Fantastic. That will do you a world of good! When’s it due? Can I congratulate the Professor on becoming a grandpa?” he explodes looking at my father who has no idea of what to say and limits himself to nodding with a polite smile.

Now the Professor will have to learn how to play the part of the grandfather.

Alma

I've started to think about when we were children again. About the family car journeys, our games. About bats.

In the summer, in the country, if we left the windows open and the lights on in the evenings, the bats immediately came in. This was the only thing that got our mother worked up. She would start screaming: "Giacomo, Giacomo, come quickly. It's come in."

My father would arrive and relieve the room invaded by the bat's blind flight, chasing it out of the window with blows from a broom. We liked seeing Mum scared and Dad arriving like a knight about to defeat the dragon and, sometimes, we left the window open and the light on deliberately. The next day we'd look for the corpse in the courtyard: it was so small that it was difficult to spot it, a sweet, hairy mouse.

In order to atone for our cruelty, I had ordained that the fallen bats should be buried under the walnut tree, with a ritual that required candles and coronets of wild flowers.

My father killed himself in that house. I found him.

It's not quite right to say I found him. I heard him. I knew exactly what was happening when I heard that sound. I'd feared he would shoot himself for days. It's awful to say it but, at the time, it was almost a relief being freed of the terror that he would do it. How much that feeling of relief has cost me.

The first weeks after Maio's disappearance, my father seemed like a different person. He'd wanted to be involved in the Police investigations but acted independently, with a degree of determination and imagination that I had never seen before, even in his liveliest moments. His and my mother's roles seemed to have been reversed: she was annihilated and he, untiring, was full of initiatives. He had even gone to Rome, to the Home Office. He had taken on a private detective, he talked to the parents of Maio's friends, stalked the bars he went in, interrogated bar owners, drug dealers, passers-by.

"I'll find him, Francesca, I'll find him."

But he didn't find him.

Maio had disappeared into the fog.

We didn't even find out if he'd been shooting up that evening, nor with whom although it was a sure thing that he had because he could no longer go a day without heroin. His traces had been lost in the afternoon of that Saturday. He'd been recognized by the cashier on the till at the cinema where he'd been to see *The Omen*, a horror film, at the first afternoon screening.

I thought he had probably gone on his own so as to have a place where he could shoot up, or retreat, or sleep. Since he'd been on heroin, he no longer read anything and didn't go to the movies any more. It was as if he was brainless. The last person to see him was that old cashier when he went out from the cinema at five into Piazza Carbone. She recognised him by the studded belt he had on in the photo published in the papers.

There were at least two places where they were dealing in that area but no-one admitted to having given it to him. They never found out who had sold it to Sandro and Renato, the two kids who died that night.

My father's unnatural energy gradually petered out. On the evening of my high school graduation exams, an evening perfumed by the lime trees just like the one when it had all started, we went to eat out, in a restaurant where we four had all been together on several occasions.

My mother was trying to smile but had a stomach ache and couldn't talk. We ordered grilled eels and white wine but none of us managed to eat. My father drank three glasses of wine and then began to cry, silently. It was hot and humid and his tears fell into his plate. He didn't look at me, he didn't move. My mother put her head in her hands.

I thought my life was over. I can remember it. And I remember that it didn't seem fair, I hadn't deserved this.

I've asked myself over and over why some families disintegrate when faced with some dramatic event and others no. Why some have the strength to accept, overcome and others are unable to react.

Sandro and Renato's parents had also lost a son, and their children had lost a brother. When I was in middle school, the sister of one of my school friends died in a car accident. Another of my friend's mother got cancer. One boy's new born brother died and whose birth he had feared and hated.

Bad things happen. What holds a family together when tragedy strikes? Faith? Their love for each other? Generosity, balance, chance?

I think about the families in impoverished nations, where their children die of hunger or disease. The world is full of suffering. Why can some bear it and others no?

We four loved each other.

Why did my mother not force Maio to stop? Why didn't she cure my father's depression? And him, why didn't he allow himself to be helped? Didn't they love each other enough? Didn't they love me enough? What could I have done that I didn't do?

What was missing?

I've lived my whole life terrified that my new family might fall apart at any given moment. I chose a dependable and rational man so that it wouldn't happen – a balanced man.

I fought and continue to fight every day with fear, even now that I'm fifty and am about to become a grandmother.

Some people never find peace.

Antonia

I walk beneath the arcades shiny with rain, looking at my reflection in the shop windows. This wide coat makes it almost impossible to see my bump.

Alma's right when she says that pregnant women are invulnerable – I haven't had a cold all this winter. I think about what I should pack for Ferrara: two pairs of black trousers, the biggest jumpers I've got, my laptop, iPad, nightdress. I might take an umbrella because I don't think Ferrara has arcades like there are here.

I like the idea of being on my own for a couple of days in a hotel and discovering the town. All my thrillers are set in Emilia but I don't know Ferrara – the place where my mother was born and where my grandparents are buried. I've never felt it to be somewhere with which I have any connection, it's almost like an invisible and distant place. The few natives of Ferrara I've met have boasted of its beauty as if it were something to do with them and this has always put me off it. We're more critical in Bologna with regard to our city.

My father said goodbye quoting the Aeneid at me. He compared my mother with Juturna, a nymph of fountains and springs and the sister of Turnus. She tried to protect her brother in his duel with Aeneas but was forced to abandon him to his fate on Jupiter's orders.

"She feels guilty about being alive, just as Juturna cursed herself for being immortal. *Immortalis ego* – why do I have to be mortal – she despaired. Poor Juturna. Her divine status was a condemnation since it was no use to her in preventing her brother's death", and he left me with a kiss on my forehead before taking the bus home to his afternoon readings in his armchair.

The mobile in my coat pocket rings. It's Leo.

"What did your father say?" he asks without saying hello.

"That I'm the only one who can find something out. And that I have to read the twelfth chapter of the Aeneid."

"And there was I hoping he'd dissuade you. What's in the twelfth chapter of the Aeneid?"

“I’ll tell you later. I’ll be home soon. When are you back? Did you speak to your colleague in Ferrara?”

“I’ll be back by six. I’ll give you his number later. He’s called Luigi D’Avalos.”

“Luigi what??”

“D’Avalos. He said he’d look out the file and get the details of the person on the case at the time – if he’s still alive. Look, he’s a Neapolitan.”

“Who?”

“The colleague.”

“So?”

“So he’s very generous. He wanted to come and get you at the station. I said I didn’t know when you were arriving and that you’ll call him when you’ve settled in.”

“That’s a shame. I’d have enjoyed arriving at the hotel all sirens blaring.”

“Idiot. Criminal.”

“Ok darling. See you later.”

“Toni?”

“Yes?”

“I didn’t dare tell him you’re pregnant.”

“It’ll be a surprise. Like an Easter egg.”

“He’ll think we’re nuts.”

“But we are nuts.”

“Ok, take the piss. Just be there when I get back.”

“Where do you think I’m going to be?”

“I mean.. just be there. Understand?”

I don’t understand but I’ll be there.

I didn't ask my father anything at all. And he didn't explain anything, as usual. Neither how Mum was when they met, nor what she told him about her brother. He didn't make any suggestions about who to look for in Ferrara, nor places to go. No hints other than the Aeneid.

Alma

I was on the phone when I heard the shot. I looked out of the window and the sky was blue, without a single cloud. It was four in the afternoon and the light was blinding.

I'd been expecting it to happen every day since he'd started crying at the dinner table on the evening of my final exams. I'd seen where he kept his hunting gun and I'd asked my mother to hide it but she'd just told me not to talk rubbish.

I put down the phone without saying goodbye and then I screamed: "Mummm" and shut myself in the bathroom.

She ran into the room where my father had been, their bedroom. I heard her scream and then go downstairs to the phone. I listened through the door. I didn't want to see him. That at least I could be spared.

The ambulance arrived from the village ten minutes later. Our house is isolated, close to the banks of the River Po. I waited for it sitting on the ground, outside the main doorway, watching the ants scuttling in and out of the cracks in the pavement.

"Upstairs. Second door on the right" I said, pointing with my thumb to the inside stairs.

I went behind the shed, below the wisteria roof where I used to play at mothers and fathers with Maio. I was the mum and he was the dad and I used to make dinner on a wooden crate laid with flowers, pebbles and leaves. "Here's a nice plate of spaghetti, dear. I've made meatballs for after" I would say handing him a leaf covered with bits of grass. "Yum, yum, very nice darling!" Maio would say rubbing his tummy. After the meatballs – bits of gravel with a sauce of poppy petals – I would hand him a stick: "Here's your cigar dear". The cigar was the bit he liked best and if I forgot he would ask: "And my cigar darling?"

I don't know where we had seen or heard husbands and wives call each other dear and darling – probably in the crosswords magazine – but it made us laugh and we carried on calling each other this for many years, even when we were teenagers.

I began to pick up poppies and buttercups in the field and a ladybird climbed up my arm – the ones that are supposed to be lucky. I felt cold on the back of my neck and I needed the toilet but I didn't want to go into the house.

I knew what had happened. I knew he'd killed himself and how and that my mother wanted to be on her own with him, without me. I believe they loved each other, in their own way. Nonetheless, I hadn't been enough for them to survive and there was nothing more I could do, not even for her.

I'd been ill for months but he didn't kill himself because of that. I knew it was because of Maio.

We stopped being a family on the day Maio disappeared. We been incapable of saving him. We'd had just the four of us before, nothing more, and after, we had nothing.

Antonia

“My dear Mrs Capasso.”

Leo’s colleague is more than generous, he’s enveloping.

“No, I won’t make you come here. I’ll be at the hotel in a jiffy” he’d said on the phone. In a jiffy? What planet is he on?

We’re sitting at one of the three round tables in a small café looking over the hotel’s internal garden. He’s ordered two coffees. He hasn’t revealed whether he’s noticed my belly or not. He’s a few years older than I am, but younger than Leo. He’s handsome in a rather mundane way: very blue eyes, tight, black curly hair a bit long at the back, overly white teeth. If he’d been taller he might look like a movie star, one of those with a complex about their excessive attractiveness who always quote books and plays in their interviews.

“My husband has told me that you write crime thrillers. I’d like to read them.” This is the first thing he says to me after shaking my hand.

“A small publisher in Bologna does my books and they don’t have a big circulation”, I admit, “But I think you can get them in Ferrara. They are only distributed in Emilia because the investigations take place here.” Then I add, regretting my involuntary and implicit ‘if you buy them’. “I don’t have any on me, otherwise I would have given you one.”

So that’s how Leo had set it up: not a turbid, private drama but professional curiosity. It was the right choice with this guy anyway.

“No, no. You have to buy books. Not get the author to give them to you.” D’Avalos says rather smarmily. Then he adds: “Unfortunately I have to tell you that the person in charge of the investigations you are so interested in died two years ago. But I know the vice-inspector of the Flying Squad. He still lives in Ferrara because he married a woman from here. I can ask him to meet up with you.”

“I can do that myself, if it doesn’t seem inopportune to you.”

“There is nothing inopportune coming from you” he smiles.

Seriously?

“Have you looked at the investigation files? Don’t you think it was strange that nothing more was found out?” I ask brusquely.

If possible, his smile broadens even more. I don’t know if I’m dealing with a Lothario or an idiot.

“Do you know just how many people disappear every year, Mrs Capasso?” he asks smoothly while pouring soda water from the carafe into two miniscule glasses.

I had chosen a central hotel that I thought looked fairly downbeat but, in fact, it’s furnished with antique furniture and carpets. My room overlooks the main street, one of the thoroughfares in the town. It’s a bit noisy but has a beautiful frescoed ceiling. We’re the only clients in the café and the waitress is particularly attentive. She probably knows the Inspector. Maybe everyone in Ferrara knows and fears him. Before I met Leo, I too felt somewhat in awe of members of the police force.

“How many can there be..five a month? Ten? More?” I ask.

“Thousands, Mrs Capasso. Every year thousands of people disappear into nothing” he replies, stirring his coffee with a pained expression. “But the investigations into the disappearance of Marco Sorani were very thorough, also because they were linked to the death of two young addicts” he adds.

“And what did you find out?”

“Personally nothing, because I was just a child at the time” he quips. “But, last night, I read the investigation files and got an idea of it. If you like I’ll take you there.”

“Where?”

“You’ll get a better understanding of what I think when you see the place with your own eyes.”

He seems superficial and formal but he’s read the documents of an investigation from thirty years ago and has formed an opinion that he wants to illustrate to me. He’s anxious to look good. I get up.

I have a long, wide jumper on which covers my trousers down to mid-thigh but he can't miss my bump. Nonetheless, he still makes no comment. He helps me into my coat, leaves five euros on the table and takes my elbow. As we leave, the waitress runs after us holding my grey scarf that I left on the chair. He takes it and winds it round my neck.

He helps me into a dark car driven by a plain clothes policeman and sits next to me.

"Mrs Capasso is the wife of a colleague from Bologna, Raffaele. We're helping her with a family matter" he says to the policeman behind the wheel. "We're going to the bridge over the Po at Pontelogoscuro."

The family. I'm part of the family. The great family of the police force. Maybe that's why he's so collaborative.

It's a damp, grey day but I've felt how close we are to the eastern coast since I got off the train. Like a diviner, I can feel the presence of water and I saw on the map that the sea is only fifty kilometres from here and, closer still, there's the River Po, a dockyard and the Comacchio valleys. There's even a moat round the Castle in the centre of the town. There's a whole load of water around. And there's a different light here than in Bologna – colder, clear but opaque.

On the way from the station in the taxi, I had spotted the Castle right in the centre of the town, just a few metres from my hotel. Now we're passing in front of it again before taking a spectacular avenue paved with cobbles.

"Welcome to the most beautiful street in Europe" D'Avalos says, "Corso Ercole I d'Este. You know it I'm sure."

"I used to come to Ferrara with my mother now and again as a child but we only went to the cemetery. We only went about four or five times."

"The Charterhouse is magnificent. Have you read Bassani's book?"

"Can I call you by name?" I decide to ask him. I feel ridiculous with all this Mrs Campasso and Inspector D'Avalos.

"My name's Antonia. Zampa by surname. Leonardo and I aren't married."

“Of course, Antonia. I’m Luigi”, and he looks at me with the most sincere of the many dazzling smiles provided so far.

“Do you like working here? How long have you been here?” I ask him.

“Three years. I’m from Naples and you can well imagine what a change... Ugo and Parisina, Bradamante. The town is as you see it, of a heart-rending beauty. The biggest problem is one that we created.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He looks at my knees, as if he’s ashamed.

“Federico Aldovrandi...”

I possibly judged him too hastily. Maybe handsome men suffer the same prejudices of which women are the victims.

We pass by what Luigi indicates as the Palazzo dei Diamanti which is hosting an exhibition he advises me to visit. He seems more like a tourist guide than a policeman, but he’s right: I will have to walk down this street. It is magnificent. Wide, very long, straight and lined with Renaissance buildings. Not a shop or a street sign. No parked cars. If it weren’t for the traffic signs you might feel as if you had gone back five hundred years.

We’re out of the town in just a few minutes. We pass through an orderly and tranquil suburb of old council houses that fade into a countryside of poppies and fields and, after just a few kilometres we arrive at a large iron bridge over the Po.

Raffaele parks in a clearing to the right of the bridge entrance, surrounded by bamboo rushes.

“Come on” Luigi says.

The river is wide, turbid, mud coloured and dotted with whirlpools. The grey bridge is very long, supported by five pairs of cement pillars. In just a few moments, the fog has risen and I can no longer make out the other side of the riverbank. While arriving I had spotted another, narrower bridge just a few hundred metres along the river. It’s

invisible now but we can hear the sound of the train rumbling across it. This place is decidedly creepy.

“It was even foggier that night” says Luigi. He looks deadly serious now.

“The car was parked right here. It was a white Golf, belonging to Renato’s father. Renato was in the driving seat, Sandro behind him. I believe Marco was with them. That when they felt ill, he went to get help and fell into the Po, or threw himself in.”

“How do you know all this?”

“After your husband... after Inspector Capasso called me, I read the files. There weren’t that many users in Ferrara then and it’s more than likely that your uncle bought the same stuff that the other two injected. The fact that we found one in the front and one behind makes me think that there was a third person sitting next to the driver.”

“And the body?”

“If he fell into the Po, it would be hard to find it. The current is very strong here. And, as far as evidence goes, thirty years ago forensic science was not like it is today. It was an extremely foggy, Saturday night and they were found at four in the morning by a security guard going home on his moped.”

“You’ve already spoken to the Vice-Inspector haven’t you?” I ask him.

“How did you work that out?” he asks surprised.

“I write thrillers and I live with a cop. It seems to me that your ideas are far too lucid for having only read a few old files. You didn’t want to tell me so as not to deny me the pleasure of talking to him myself? What ‘s Leo told you about me?”

It’s really cold. Damp rather than cold. It creeps into your bones with the fog.

Luigi hesitates but doesn’t seem embarrassed.

“...I wasn’t sure whether the ex-colleague would have told you what he told me. I spoke to him this morning. He’s seventy and a very private person. Nonetheless, he hinted that the person responsible for the investigations, Inspector Zanni who died

two years ago, may have felt sorry for your grandfather and, given the lack of evidence, decided to leave him with the illusion that his son might still be alive.”

“Unfortunately, however, my grandfather then killed himself.”

“All the more reason for not saying what he suspected.”

“He might have killed himself anyway.”

“Maybe.”

Luigi is now looking at me as if I’ve amazed him but his expression is amused, almost maternal.

“Haven’t you got a hat in that bag?”

“I left it in my room.”

“It’s better to have it on you at all times here in Ferrara. The fog is very, very damp.”

“I can see that, I can feel it...”

“I’ll take you back. Where do you want to go?”

“To the hotel. I have to make some phone calls. There are people I need to find, friends of my mother and her brother.”

“If you tell me who they are, I’ll look for them.”

“Why are you being so nice?”

“Because you’re a colleague’s partner? Because you’re beautiful? You choose.”

I can’t understand whether he’s making fun of me or paying me a compliment.

Just for a moment I think: “Now he’s going to kiss me.” But, luckily he doesn’t. He grabs my elbow and leads me to the car. It’s getting dark and I can’t even see his face.

“You didn’t know I was beautiful yesterday so it must be for something else. Thank you anyway.” I comment.

“I’m a cop, Antonia. I know everything, even things you can’t imagine I might know.”

He's tone is different now. More tired.

He opens the car door and sits beside me, going round the car to get in on the other side.

"Back to the hotel, Raffaele."

We don't talk in the car and I can see him checking the messages on his mobile. When we get to the hotel I say: "I thought I'd look up Laura Trentini. My mother was at her house on the night Maio disappeared. And also the boy who took them to shoot up the first time, a certain Benetti. Then there was a girl, Maio's girlfriend, Michela something, but I don't know her surname."

"Michela Valenti, she was questioned" Luigi nods. "I'll send you their numbers this evening on the number you called me from."

This time he doesn't get out of the car and doesn't open the door. He suddenly seems distracted. When I turn round on the hotel doorstep to say goodbye, he's talking on his phone and doesn't look at me.

Michela Valenti has agreed to meet me by the Cathedral.

“In front of the right hand griffin” she said gaily and hurriedly. I can’t remember what a griffin looks like. Michela, who must be a year or two younger than Alma, sounds like a teenager.

Last night I got a message on my phone: “Trentini emigrated, Benetti dead, Valenti 335 5387231. Regards, Luigi”. Police style and no flirting. So much the better.

I called Michela straight away and explained who I am and what I want. She didn’t seem surprised.

“Alma Sorani’s daughter? I was thinking about Alma just a few days ago. How is she? It will be a pleasure to know you. I’ve got a space tomorrow between 10 and 11 if that’s okay with you.”

I was just going to say that she’d recognise me by my bump but then I thought I’d find out if she thinks I look like Alma. At the very worst, I’ll recognise her: there can’t be that many fifty year olds waiting in front of a griffin at ten o’clock, whatever a griffin looks like.

Soon I’ll find out what she has a free space from. Is she a psychoanalyst? A teacher?

I drink some tea and eat the cream from a gigantic brioche in the hotel’s breakfast room, deserted apart from a couple of elderly Germans. Then I go to my date. Today there’s a pale, veiled sun too weak to illuminate the dark, static water in the Castle’s moat. The square alongside the Castle is named after Girolamo Savonarola: the white marble statue triumphs over what might be the load of wood forming the pyre. All I can remember of Savonarola is that he was burnt alive by some Pope in Florence. I didn’t know he was from Ferrara. He looks haughty and agitated, with his arms in the air.

What a strange town this is – so tranquil and slow. In the city centre in Bologna, at this time of day, there’s a chaotic bustle of cars, buses and pedestrians, even in the

middle of the road. Here there are few cars, few pedestrians. Only cyclists who whizz silently by and bicycles parked everywhere. There are more bicycles than people.

I can see lots of statues of lions opposite the Cathedral. Leaning on one of them is a girl wearing velvet trousers and a sailor jacket. She can't be fifty. She doesn't even look forty but she waves at me cheerfully: "Antonia? I'm Michela, hi. Let's get a cappuccino or do you want to walk? You don't look like Alma. Did you know we used to meet up exactly here, she, Maio and I?" says the girl stroking the pink marble of the lion which, in effect, is not a lion but has the beak of an eagle and wings.

I know I don't look like Alma so how had she recognised me?

"Let's walk", I reply, shaking her hand. She has a small hand with strong, slender and slightly yellowed fingers, a smoker's fingers.

"We're not far from the cinema where they saw Maio for the last time. Do you want to go?" she asks.

So much already? She's very collaborative, and direct.

I thought it would be complicated exhuming an old story like Maio's from the past but it seems to be very present for everyone, even for people who weren't involved, like Luigi D'Avalos.

"I didn't know where they saw him for the last time. My mother told me almost nothing other than the fact that she feels she's responsible for everything that happened to her family."

My strategy in life is to always tell the truth. It's the most surprising and effective solution on earth. People react well to the truth: it shortens times and distances and establishes intimacy.

"How am I supposed to feel since I left him because he was an addict?" Michela returns.

I like this woman. Maybe she too always tells the truth. I usually recognise people like me.

"Did you feel guilty?" I ask her.

She walks quickly despite the fact that she's wearing boots with a very high heel under her trousers. Up close I can see the fine lines around her eyes and a perceptible slackening of her cheeks. Now I can see her fifty years.

"For a time I cursed not going to the date I had with them on the evening it began. Then you appreciate that nothing depends on you and you come to terms with it" she responds looking straight ahead.

We turn into a dark and narrow, medieval alleyway and, from there, we emerge into a rectangular square. The Apollo cinema is closed. They're showing an American film that I liked a lot on - the story of a young CIA agent who apparently captured Bin Laden.

"What did you want to know? I have to be back in forty minutes" she tells me.

Michela has taken papers and tobacco from her bag and sits on the pavement in front of the cinema to roll herself a cigarette.

"What do you do?" I ask.

"I'm a speech therapist. I make people who don't talk, talk. And you?"

"I'm a scribbler. Thrillers, all set in Emilia."

"Go on! Do you like mysteries?"

I sit on the pavement as well. The square is damp and desolate. It must be identical to how it was then. Maio walked this pavement, saw these walls, wandered through these alleys.

"I wanted to ask you about Maio. What were he and Alma like as teenagers, and also their parents, my grandparents? What kind of a family was it? I know virtually nothing."

Michela lights her cigarette and blows the smoke in the direction away from me, turning her head. She says nothing for a while.

"Maio was very intelligent, even if he did all he could to hide it. He was sensitive, original and he'd got loads of ideas. But, on the other hand, in some ways he was...passive. Of the two of them, Alma was in charge. She was really clever at

school, brilliant and intolerant. Possibly a bit of a bully. She protected him from everything. I think their parents had some kind of problem. I don't know if it was financial or something else. You just felt there was something. They were solitary and not very integrated and they didn't have any relations in Ferrara. If I'm not mistaken, your grandfather's parents were dead. All four of them seemed very united but closed off from the rest of the world. I hardly ever went to their house. Maio and Alma came to mine mostly. Some time ago, an aunt of mine who worked at the chemist's with your grandmother told me something strange: that Alma's mother, many years before Maio disappeared, had had an affair."

The square gives onto a deserted alleyway and the alleyway onto a street of shops where I can see lots of people going to and fro. Michela gets up and puts out her hand to help me. Maybe she's noticed my bump. But I stay sitting down.

"How do you mean, an affair?" I say. This bit of news is a surprise. No-one had told me that Maio was so intelligent either. While the fact that my mother was intolerant and tendentiously manipulative is true. She suffers because she realises this but isn't capable of stopping herself. She has always been the victim of her own bad character.

"My aunt is dead now, otherwise I'd ask her more. I used to go to see her every day and we would talk about the past. She told me lots of things I didn't know about my own family too. One day she asked me if I was still in touch with "my unlucky friend". I knew she meant Alma. I said no and she replied: "Someone should tell your friend that her mother enjoyed the jewels she got". The aunt had Alzheimer's so I didn't pay much attention to it. However, if you've started investigating something that happened thirty years ago with that belly on you, it's probably better that I tell you everything I know, even if it may not seem important. Do you want a cappuccino before going back?"

Michela brushes off the back of her jacket with her hands and I stretch out my right hand so that she can help me up from the step.

"Who else do you think I should speak to? My mother mentioned Laura Trentini, but I've found out she doesn't live here anymore. Can we meet up again with a bit more

time to spare?" I ask. So she had noticed my bump "That belly" she'd called it, not an insignificant word.

"Laura married an American. I think I might have her number but I don't think she'll be able to tell you anything. She wasn't Alma's friend. Alma didn't have any close friends other than me. Of course we can meet up again. We can go out to dinner if you like. I won't invite you home because we won't be able to talk with the kids around. Is tomorrow okay?"

"Tomorrow is great. Do you still see one of your friends from back then called Benetti?"

"He wasn't our friend. Anyway, he died of Aids about twenty years ago" she replied brusquely. "Where are you off to now?" she asks entering a cafe on the square and ordering two boiling hot cappuccinos.

"I can't decide between the newspaper library or the Palazzo dei Diamanti. Someone suggested I see an exhibition there..."

"Who told you that?"

"Inspector D'Avalos. Do you know him?"

"I've heard about him" Michela commented with a smirk.

Did one of her patients tell her about him? Or one of her friends? I feel a twinge of jealousy. I must be crazy – I'm not even jealous of Leo.

"Are you not going to see your grandparents at the Charterhouse?"

"You're right. Maybe I should start from there."

"It's just that I feel sorry for the dead who are abandoned. I sometimes pass by their tomb when I go to see my aunt's. There are never any flowers. I'll call you tomorrow to tell you where we're having dinner and if I remember anyone else you might talk to."

"Thanks Michela. I haven't asked you anything about yourself, not even how old your kids are..."

“I’ll tell you tomorrow. And thanks for the cappuccino, it’s still money...”

She’s just about to leave and then she turns towards me, stops and looks me in the eye. “Do you know the name of the protagonist in the film that’s on at the Apollo this evening? Have you seen it?”

“Zero Dark Thirty? I’ve seen it and I liked it but I can’t remember.”

“Her name’s Maya”, Michela says. “What a coincidence!”

And she goes, leaving me in the exact spot where we met, beside the pink marble griffin. Its back is very shiny. I touch it. It’s cold and smooth. Who knows how many times Maio leant against it.