“Sheriff? John here.”

“What’s up, John?”

“I’m down at the Valley Elementary School.”

“What? Graffiti again?”

“No. They’re saying a kid has gone missing.”

“Missing?”

“During recess. Back in class, the teacher said there was an empty desk.”

“…”

“Sheriff?”

“Wait a minute, I’m thinking. I’ll send Torczon and McClain out to patrol the area. If the kid is out of school, he can’t be too far away. Have they called the parents?”

“George just asked the principal to call them.”

“Okay. He’ll be home by now, I bet.”

“We’ll keep looking around here.”

“You know what kids can get up to!”

“Not sure this time ... George looks worried.”

“…”

“Sheriff?”

“I’ll let Chris know. You guys go ahead and walk the perimeter. I’m on my way.”

THE STICK INSECT

They came to get him at eight p.m.

We’d been arguing because our upstairs neighbor had been down to complain that my music was too loud. There we were, sitting at table in silence, the news blaring out on the TV. The same old duel to see who would cave in first and speak. It was never me. My father wasn’t made for that kind of fight. At some point, he’d come out with something stupid like “let’s remember to buy a light bulb for the patio”, as if he was picking up from where he’d left off. And then he would give me that hangdog look. If we ever kept it up past dinner time, he would come and knock on my bedroom door with some lame excuse. I would stare at him as he stood there in his ratty old bathrobe; he just couldn’t go to bed without saying goodnight first.

We were looking down into our plates and his eyes kept flicking up at me, I could feel it. Then I scored yet another victory when he capitulated as usual with a pathetic “Can you pass the salt, please?”

That was when they rang.

I went to get the door; our old neighbors would have to deal with me later. I yanked it open, and in front of me on the landing was a man with an office-worker’s haircut wearing a leather jacket. Standing behind him were some *Carabinieri* in uniform. The man said that’s what they were: “Carabinieri.” He waved a piece of paper at me and mumbled something about a warrant.

“What?” I said, trying not to laugh in his face.

They marched in, pushing me to one side and flattening me against the wall. Within seconds, they had spread out into every room. Weapons drawn.

My father vanished into thin air. One second, he was cutting a slice of onion *frittata*; the next he was gone. In his place were a bunch of *Carabinieri* pulling out drawers, ripping mattresses open, and tearing pictures and family photos out of their frames.

It was the 6th of October, 2013. As everybody knows, that day Professor Carlo Maria Balestri was accused of kidnapping, murder, and concealing a corpse. I was 27, he was 59. Suddenly I found myself alone in the world.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a pilot. My father would often come home from his lectures with a gift for me to unwrap: a model aircraft kit. My prize planes are still lined up on the shelves in my room. There’s a Corsair F4U-7, for example; as well as an LFG Roland C.II biplane, a Transall C-160, even a Concorde. My best model is the Red Baron’s Fokker Triplane. In the evenings he would sit with me and help me pull all the little plastic parts off their molds. My father observed my excitement at the miniature details benevolently. We had paintbrushes as thin as eyelashes that could reach into the tiniest corners. Styluses of all sizes, brushes, glues, paints, files, solvents… I was obsessed with the minutiae. My father didn’t do anything; he just watched. In the lamplight, his eyes were like ice-blue asteroids looking down on my inexpert fumbling. I was always in a hurry to finish. Applying the decals was a nightmare, my fingers suddenly clumsy. Once I had glued the fuselage down, I rushed to stick the insignia on the wings. “Pity,” he would mutter, imperturbable as ever, bemused when I stuck the transfers at the wrong angle and messed up the smooth plastic surface.

He kept the little girls in a shipping container.

Every summer, we used to rent an apartment at Punta Sant’Andrea for a two-week vacation with days at the beach and evening strolls. My mother would breathe a sigh of relief the moment we landed on the island. She would open up the big French windows and sit on the balcony for the first half hour, smoking and staring out at the horizon as the waves crashed against the lunar landscape of the rocks below.

I loved meeting up with the local kids. At the beginning, we were awkward, as if we needed to get to know one another again each time. Especially Angela. She changed every year, but that August of ‘98 she was totally transformed: her body, her behavior, her gaze, everything was different. We were both twelve, and there was something new in the air that put us on edge. Every afternoon, I left my parents under their beach umbrella and escaped to the little cove where the locals went. Marco had become my rival. Until the year before, we had been blood brothers; now, rather than playing, he challenged me at every turn. He never missed the chance to point out the pain in the ass we vacationers were: we loaded up our cars with everything we needed, even our own toilet paper, and came over to this paradise from the mainland bringing nothing but trouble.

The evening I had my first kiss, Marco wrecked my bike.

While I was showing off my high dives to my summer sweetheart, another little girl was locked up in a pitch-black cargo container. A furnace in that heat. A chain around her neck. An iron bed frame soldered to the floor. The stink of her piss and shit. My father must have left enough supplies for her to survive the whole two weeks of our vacation; I wonder how he felt about that little gamble deep inside. She had been held there since March ’93, around the time Amanda disappeared. She was only seven at the time. The same age as me. When they searched our house in 2013, they found a lock of her hair in the pages of a book.

Angela and I used to write each other letters. In September there was one a week. Then, as the months went by, there were fewer and fewer, until in June and July we were down to nothing. The following August, the cycle would begin again.

We wrote stupid kids’ stuff, with sweet nothings at the end of each page. I would sometimes open the envelope I had sealed the night before and copy out my letter one more time, being careful not to go too far. Other times, I regretted sending it the second I dropped it in the mailbox.

In February of ’99, things changed. Rather than write about what me and my friends were up to, or how mean my teachers were being, there was something more urgent to deal with, something that shifted all my thirteen-year-old priorities. My Mom was sick. The light in our house was beginning to go out.

Angela was the only one I could talk to. She wrote long letters back, pages and pages of words, which I gripped onto desperately. What I liked was that she never tried to reassure me. I had asked her not to tell her parents; we didn’t need any more phone calls in the house, and I didn’t want our correspondence to be poisoned by her mother and father’s words. We were still us; we wanted nothing to change. Except that now I was walking around with a knife in my heart. I wrote about Mom’s medication, her pain, the doctors who cost my father a month’s salary for one appointment. Angela made her presence felt through her letters, without ever talking about Mom’s illness. She told me about her favorite singers, films she loved, books and graphic novels I had to read because they had changed her life. Sometimes, she would slip a photo into the envelope, either of herself or of a landscape, with a message written on the back.

I followed her orders precisely. I bought CDs and 300-page books filled with dragons. I went to the movies on my own. Or I would stand by the window, where I could see the entire Gulf, and gaze out at sea. From my sixth-floor apartment, there were evenings when Elba looked a stone’s throw away, with the shadow of Corsica behind it. Angela was there, on the side of the island hidden from sight. I could see her anyway, trapped on that spit of land, like a princess in a tower waiting to be rescued. Maybe she was there now, writing to me. A racking cough would shake the walls of my parents’ room and I would pick up my pen and start writing back.

In April, I was woken up in the middle of the night. I thought to myself, “Okay, I’m ready”, though it turned out not to be what I’d expected. It was Mom, who was still able to stand back then. She’d just called an ambulance.

My father went straight to the emergency room. He had a perforated appendix, so bad it could have killed an elephant, with no warning signs and no apparent explanation. His diet was monastic, in fact: he never used salt, and only ever ate light broths, vegetable soups, or white meat, with a drop of olive oil if he was in the mood for indulging - but that was rare. Wine was reserved for cooking, if that. The only treat he allowed himself was a pastry once a month; he couldn’t resist the Sicilian *cannoli* they made at the via Lamarmora bakery. Cramming the thing into his mouth, he would say, “A *cannolo* a month makes life worth living*.*”

It didn’t seem serious at the time, but it almost did him in. It was a freak case: he went straight from the operating table into a coma for two days. After a spell in intensive care, they kept him in ten more days to check on his progress and allow him to regain his strength. I stuck close to Mom, who had enough problems of her own. The idea that I might find myself alone in the world was killing her. But, in the end, if he had died that night, it would have been better for all of us.