

MARTINA

“You cross the highway, jump the ditch and cross the fields. If you keep low as you can while you’re walking and go at dusk, no one will ever see you.”

“The bathroom window’s up high and there’s a heap of old roof tiles right below it just waiting to be climbed on!”

Pelo and Nasuto had seen Martina in the shower and she’d had no idea they were watching. It was break time and the two of them were giving a blow-by-blow account of their adventure: her bra on the floor, the fragrant peach shower gel. I detested them for it.

“She takes a shower when she gets back from dance lessons and her bathroom doesn’t have a shower enclosure, just a see-through curtain along the bath.

“A curtain you can see everything through!” Pelo said triumphantly. Then he looked around and spotted my face amongst all the others.

“Hey, four eyes, don’t you listen to this, it might upset you!”

I didn’t bother replying. I was already on my way back to the classroom.

I couldn’t sleep that night, all I could see was Martina, everywhere, even when I shut my eyes: *I have to climb up those roof tiles, I have more right than anyone.* I’m the one with a mega crush, the one who’s head over heels in love with her! The only reason I liked school was because it gave me an opportunity to gaze at her perfect outline against the Periodic Table: Cobalt her eyes, Ruthenium her nose, Osmium, or sometimes Rhenium, her mouth blowing chewing gum bubbles. The only reason I had to wake up in the morning and leave the house was to see how she’d done her hair and how she was dressed. As I pedalled to school, I’d wonder if she’d have her hair pinned back behind her ear with a coloured clip. Would she be wearing the purple t-shirt with the tiny sleeves? I never dared hope she might speak to me, during a group activity or something. I’d have a heart attack for the sheer joy. All I needed was to be able to watch her. Like watch her *for ever, every minute possible.* I

dreamt of moving near to her house and getting a telescope, no, even living inside her house, without the telescope. Being the butler, slave, dishwasher, turning into her bed or her mirror like a barbapapa. I dreamt of having her right there, in front of me, a mere glance away.

Martina had spoken to me just once, after the accident. She'd caught sight of my leg and hadn't said anything initially but on the way home on the bus, she'd given me her seat.

"You take the seat," she'd said, getting up. Then she'd pushed her bag out of the way with her foot to let me past. I'd turned as deep purple as her t-shirt. Martina was talking to me, I could hardly believe it, she was there next to me, her bare tummy moving with every bump in the road, her lips moving as she sang along with the music on her ipod, whereas all I managed was a nod as I sat down. *You take the seat* she'd said. I hadn't smiled, hadn't said thanks, just acted like some sort of invalid, to be pitied.

GRANDMA

In the accident Dad had mangled his hip, I'd bashed my knee. Grandma had hit her head, died and was in the cemetery now, just three minutes from my house by bike. They'd found her false teeth on the dashboard: not a single tooth broken! A dentist friend of Dad's had made them and they'd cost a fortune, everyone kept saying afterwards, "*How can that possibly be? Not a dent on them, it's amazing*"

When a friend of Grandma's came to give her condolences, she asked for the dentist's phone number and another woman kept turning the false teeth over in her hands, shaking her head, struggling to believe her eyes. Come off it, I thought. How can they all be talking about false teeth at a time like this? They should be sitting in silence, maybe crying or something, nothing else. Otherwise it looks like they couldn't care less about the person who died.

For a few months, I'd come home from school convinced Grandma would be there making lunch; I'd pop my head into the kitchen and want to cry. She couldn't be there, she was buried in the ground beside Irma's revolting husband, the stinky old butcher who'd gone around covered in blood with pieces of dead animal sticking to him.

I visit her occasionally and take flowers because you're supposed to take something to the cemetery and flowers are great. Plain biscuits (no chocolate) or sugar-free drinks are good for hospitals but not cemeteries. On her birthday, I took three sunflowers from my neighbour Mr. Pelliccia's garden. Lucio says sunflowers are no good for graves and that chrysanthemums are better. I couldn't care less what Lucio says, even if he is my friend. Firstly, chrysanthemums are ugly, and secondly, where am I going to steal chrysanthemums from? And sunflowers are beautiful: they nod their heads at the sunset, like bashful children. I put them in the vase and gave the Jesus statue a wipe while I was at it, the one with flowers all around the heart.

"People kept asking to see my injury at school and hear all about the operation," I told her. "Even that witch of a teacher Mrs Marangone asked me how it had gone..."

Grandma kept smiling in the photo that had been taken of her at the beach, the one I'd been cut out of, and hadn't commented. Maybe she was trying to remember one of her proverbs. **You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. All that glitters is not gold.** Maybe she had nothing to say and was happy just to listen and have me near her.

"But when I got home I burst out crying because my leg is never going to get better and people are already treating me like a cripple..."

"Now, now, it'll mend. There's no need to cry over spilt milk! You're just like you're poor old grandfather..." I smiled and looked down. My shoes were muddy and there was a long line of ants in the gravel. I'd never seen an ant stand still.

She stopped to think then said, **"never give someone the opportunity to waste your time twice!"**

Fantastic! I'd forgotten that one. I had a sudden longing for my grandma to be alive, it happens all the time at the cemetery. Knowing that she's there, in the ground, doing nothing, not cooking, makes me feel unbearably sad. I never get this kind of

nostalgia at home. When I'm there, it just feels like she's just gone on a trip with the church or is out playing tombola with her friends. Not buried in the ground beside Irma's stinking husband.

MUM

I'll go, I won't go, I'll go. I'd been agonizing over it for a month. I plucked the petals from a daisy one by one and it always ended in "go". I looked out the window and thought, if one of the next three cars is grey, I'll go, and lo and behold, a grey car always went past. If Fefe fishes at least three fish tonight, I'll go. He caught five. For more than a month, I looked to objects for help to make up my mind and they all gave me the same answer: GO! GO! GO! I wouldn't have been surprised if an American tornado with a girl's name hit the town and swept me straight to Martina's window. Whenever it clouded over, I honestly wished one would come. Here I am, I'd say, lifting my arms to the sky. Because if the first step was up to me, there was no chance of it ever happening. Even when it felt like the night was right and I was ready (showered, hair combed, clean t-shirt on) I'd only invent yet another lame excuse and decide not to go, then get mad with myself for being such a big lily-livered pudding. Because I really am a spineless pudding, just like Tanfata taunted me once. For one thing, I've never ever been in a fight. Second thing, in twelve years I've never, ever asked a girl to go out with me.

Anyway, something happened that eventually made me decide to go, and it was neither a grey car or a tornado. It was simply a note.

Sorry! Had to pop out. Kisses, Mum.

What? So I come home with 8 out of 10 in the Maths test and you're not in? And don't try to fob me off with an excuse about it being for work because, mummy dearest, I know you were off today.

I scrunched up my test and threw it at the wall. What diabolic luck! The only person who ever cared about me is in the cemetery, everyone else either ignores me or treats me like an invalid.

You take the seat, you've got a wonky leg, Martina had said on the bus.

He's ruined my life, Mum said on the phone.

He can't come to me, Dad told Lucio.

Other parents who separate are at each other's throats for custody of the children: simpering Sara-with-an-h (who's so prissy she blows her nose once on a paper hankie then chucks it away) triggered a world war with lawyers to boot! Mine are the only ones who fight over *not* having to take me...

I pulled off a chunk of bread and went into the bathroom. I sat on the toilet and took off my glasses to have a proper cry. I don't simper, I thought, and when I take studying seriously, I can get EIGHT. EIGHT OUT OF TEN! So what's wrong with me? It can't just be looks? Mike Cardella doesn't wear glasses and he doesn't limp like me but he is so much uglier. He has a nose like a pizza slice and skin that's all saggy and see-through like a jelly fish's. Worse still, he's got this weird brown gunk in his ears which looks like wax but isn't. Wax is yellowish. And it can't be poo, unless he sticks it in there on purpose, because there's no way poo can just randomly end up in your ears. Sooner or later I'm going to have to extract a sample and send it to a lab to be analysed. So, Mike is disgusting and horrible yet his parents drive him here and there, smiling from cheek to cheek, in their SUV. What on earth do they have to smile about with a son like that?

I went back into the kitchen, picked up Mum's note and tossed it in the bin. The only thing that could stop me feeling so angry would be to see Martina in the shower. I just had to get through the next seven hours without coming up with a ridiculous excuse not to go. If you don't do it tonight, I told myself in the mirror, your leg WILL NEVER HEAL. It was a sort of self-inflicted curse, you could say, to force myself into action. The anxiety hit within seconds, so I picked up one of Mum's magazines to calm myself down.

MAKE UP: TEN TOP TIPS

FOR TOP-TEN MAKE-UP

SANDALS IN THE SUN: WHAT THE STARS ARE WEARING ON HOLIDAY

I like these magazines, they're full of girls in swimsuits with games and crosswords, too. I realized I was hungry so I fished the note back out of the bin, corrected it and left it on the table.

Sorry! Had to pop out. Kisses, Mum. Ernesto

I rummaged through her bags looking for coins. I came across a photo of her dancing in a nightclub, smiling between two dudes in vests who were nuzzling her neck. So it's true what they say at school! My mum goes with men in nightclubs! I sat on the sofa for ten minutes, eyes shut, holding the wretched picture in my hands. In the silence, I could hear Salvo and Tanfata laughing, any doubts I'd had turning to painful truths that were impossible to swallow. I ripped up the photo and threw the bits angrily into Pelliccia's garden, then headed out to the coffee bar to buy myself a sandwich. On my way out, I bumped into Salvo with a football under his arm. He smiled an evil smile and asked if I wanted to be referee.

"What? A four-eyed referee? As if!" Tanfata said. "He's as blind as a bat!"

"Get your mums to be referee, why don't you," I thought and left them there, laughing over their ice-creams like a pair of idiots. I went past the white and brown stretch of old people sitting on benches and headed down the road to the fields with Lucio. The air was still and hot, the sun was hidden by a grey mist and looked like it'd been drawn with a compass.

"Take it easy, the road's full of potholes," Lucio said when I started pushing him.

"It'll be summer in a month," I said, scrabbling for something to say that had nothing to do with the potholes or Tanfata.

"Do you know what?" Lucio said. "You shouldn't let people treat you like that!"

Lucio's hair was tidier than usual, his middle parting looked like it'd been drawn with a white pen. I pushed him to the big olive tree then parked myself on the grass beside him. The words that weren't allowed were "paralysed", "run", "Lazarus", "spinal column", "on your feet", "accident", "stand up and walk," and all swear words.

"Well, it's worse if I get angry," I said. "Then they just insult my mum again, to wind me up even more, like they did the other day..."

"But if you don't stand up to them, they'll keep doing it!"

I threw myself back on the grass. How many millions of leaves are there on an olive tree? If I were to hang Tanfata on the big olive tree, would they ever find out it was me?

"Ernesto, can you help me down?" Lucio asked. "I want to lie down as well."

I stood up, scooped Lucio in my arms and helped him sit on the ground beside his wheelchair. I heaved too hard and let slip a stinker which made us laugh like a pair of hyenas.

"You weigh a ton!" I said.

He kept laughing then stuck a blade of grass in his mouth. I thought of Martina. A couple more hours and I'd be seeing her in the shower. Just the thought of it felt like a giant was grabbing my stomach and wringing it out like a wet sponge. I was all set to tell Licio when I thought twice about it. He'd only try to change my mind and make me feel guilty about it.