

white

The night silently slipped away after the rave. Sitting on the bed, with sunken eyes due to the ecstasy, I heard the bell tower toll throughout the night. At seven fifteen in the morning, my legs stopped shaking and my mouth assumed back its regular shape. The amphetamine pills had reacted like cement in my facial bones blocking my jaw while a considerable part of their toxicity had become active in my muscles and my sinews making them snap like a lizard's docked tail. And only when dawn was breaking, by daylight, my bony body's gears resumed working efficiently. Every now and then hallucinations would last until the evening of the following day but at that point I had learnt my lesson: I would neither drink alcohol nor let melancholy haunt me. Once back home, I would drink two glasses of cold milk, undress, and then, with my hands on my knees, wait that the real world would show its slides again. If I turned my head, I would end up superimposing the images of what I was seeing, and it often seemed to me as if some of them would suddenly disappear or get stuck in front of my disjointed eyes. In this way, I added some movement to the time that seemed to be motionless. I would overstep with my memory the shell of what my senses had formed around me, until I would again savor the taste of some days far back in the past. The noise of a walk, my sister Corinne's voice in a black-and-white video, sheets of ice falling from the summits of the Gran Sasso mountain range, or the squeak of bulldozers working near the tunnel. Any detail coming from the real world was useful at reviving my mind during those nights of confused anthropology. And as my bodily functions were adjusting, I would better place myself in space and time, and I would even begin to loosen the sinews in my neck and to better regularize my breath. I would feel my damaged hand beginning to move again by clutching the sheet, and my sweat getting less salty. Then, I would recall the books I had to study scattered on my desk, and my work at the weather station. I would remember the cupboard that I had to fill up and my main identity as a geologist specialized in studying winds. I would even recall my father – whom I had never met. During those awakenings, my life appeared to be stubbornly bound to recollection.

The morning after the rave, I went down to the garage shortly before eight o' clock. It was really hot for July on the Abruzzian mountains. My canvas carryall containing my sporting equipment was stuck between the washer and an old dented Innocenti Lambretta scooter with flat tires. Yona didn't allow me to use any other space in her garage claiming that those merciful would be forgotten, and kindness showed by a humble person would eventually turn into a cage of regrets. And regrets could even cause cancer.

«Since you will live in our mansard and help us with the works in the basement, you can keep your carryall in the garage» she had told me a year before, one evening in June. I had arrived at the village a few weeks before and I knew no one there.

«Thank you, Ms Hensel, I'll make good use of it» I had answered her.

«I hope so, Abele. And remember: if a man is fated to drown, he will drown even in a glass of water» she had whispered before closing the door.

The mansard I had rented from the Hensels was situated on the third floor of a ramshackle small building in the center of Assergi. The L-shaped building occupied a corner of the old oven's little square, and it was hemmed in on its sides by other already decrepit stone houses, at whose windows no one had ever appeared. That place could

not be reached by car. The silence of that small Medieval village was full of oblivion. Families frightened by the collapse of the houses had fled away to give birth to new children far off. Beside the closed balconies, only a sulfur smell and a small statue of St Frank with a wolf had lingered on the square. The scaffolding had eventually covered it too. The nettle grew rapidly on the walls of the deserted houses, and the ivy didn't die in the wintertime. On the pavement, there were puddles of dirty water that wouldn't disappear for months, and Zev and Yona Hensel's five nameless dogs would avail themselves to drink after going without food for days at a time. I watched them from the kitchen windows, and I wonder how cruel one could be not to name a dog. People gave a name to everything.

I didn't have many friends, but the few people I knew had always found a way to give a name to something. Even my mother had been able to come up with names and definitions. Doctors maintained that her Asperger was not that serious after all, and it was not wonder that she named the coffins she drew. In her youth, she had designed several of them: they were marble and tuff coffins. My sister Corinne didn't understand why, and on top of it our mother never talked. We knew about her work at the museum of the ancient city and so, with the years, we explained her fondness for coffins as a sublimation of an unnatural interest for old things. They actually could be more tombs than coffins. But it did not matter: it would have been impossible to talk about it anyways.

That July morning, I sat on an oak bench outside the garage for several minutes and admired my *stone* shining under the rays of the summer sun. I still felt some light jars on my face – between my right cheekbone and my chin –, but the worst was over.

With my eyes fixed on the polished granite surface, I lingered on each vein, amazed by each scratch that from the plastic handle expanded on the rounded sides. I even tried to lift it with my damaged hand, but I had no strength. Curling had been one of my greatest passions. Since my teens, I had been spending my savings buying brooms, leather bags to keep my granite stones and uniforms in good-quality fabric. I used to ask Corinne nothing but Balance*Plus* shoes and supplies of *pebble* as birthday presents. Anyways, it had been months since I had quitted training. My dissertation and my hand's deterioration had absorbed my full attention. My work at the weather station would resume soon and I wouldn't have much time for anything else. In those July days, the only hobby I could indulge in was sitting outside the garage rifling through my canvas carryall, among bats and shoes' worn-out rubber, while my stone was still tanning in the middle of the courtyard. And so I did that morning, after walking all night long at the bottom of the slopes of Grand Sasso hunting for the *blue* deer. Sitting on an oak bench, I was happy with being a different person and still alive, still in the world. I closed my eyes, and a few tears rolled down my already warmish face. I was carrying some bottled sparkling water, and every now and then I drank, then I reopened my eyes and stared at the bubbles going up. I carried on until everything was back to normal. I tried to sleep with my head resting against the scaffolding that was protecting the ravaged buildings. For a fleeting moment, I thought of my mother. The image of her I had in my mind was the one of a skinny body stunned by the disease. She had given me the canvas carryall for sporting equipment as a gift from her, but fifteen years had passed by since then.

When I woke up, the sun had drifted towards the valleys and its rays broke right on the scaffolding's iron grates. There were more shadows in the small deserted courtyard and my stone outside its leather holder had ceased to shine. I would have remained seated until the evening but I had to stand up, the time for inspecting the basement was approaching and I didn't want to arrive late. After all, I considered it more like a shelter than like a real work. I often had the books for my research open and my notes on which I was working for my dissertation; during some night shifts, I hadn't even gone up to sleep at home. What I was actually interested in understanding was a different kind of *history*. The fans running, the wine bottles that had to be inspected and turned upside down, the wet clothes to wipe dust off, the mold climbing in blotches towards the cracked balks, the gas leaking from the pipes in winter, the rats' shit and the low-voltage bulbs; they couldn't mean anything to those who didn't live in that filthy shelter. The cold bouncing off the thick walls, the rotten preserves and the black bags full of empty Philadelphia containers and blue tin boxes – empty of cookies – but containing more tin boxes which were smaller, empty of candy: each item in the basement stood for the possibility of understanding. And yet, the abyss in which the Hensels' family history went astray, reassured me: there was something tenderly human and untruthful about it. They told me that they had fled from ghetto passing through the sewers. «Warsaw was so beautiful» Yona would say, whenever she got drunk. And that July morning I imagined her happy, with a pink ribbon in her hair and a linen scarf on her shoulders, clasping her husband Zev's hand. In my mind, they were keeping close together, walking through a dark tunnel towards a future filled with rage.

The evening sky was expanding like a red-stained purple curtain. No voice was coming from the alleys, only the cicadae's weary chirp. I was observing the stony courtyard and the remains of the houses from the kitchen window. The Hensels' apartment looked like an empty old storeroom. Zev didn't want any intrusion into his life, so he would leave the shutters ajar even in the summer, both during the day and at night. The plaster on the external walls had blackened and fell into pieces during storms. There were cracks on the door and layers of moss climbing on the oxidized pipes. The slabs of marble serving as balcony were partly damaged, with patches of cement covering the holes. Hanging from the railing, a sign hand-written by Zev said: DO NOT TRESPASS. YOUR PRESENCE IS NOT WELCOME HERE.

Livio had called and arranged to meet me at the bar of the Assunta at 9 pm. Usually, the first thing he would do was inviting me to dinner or to have a pizza with him. He assumed that he wouldn't convey serenity, and so he would speak in a small voice, or maybe he would cough with embarrassment; then he would apologize, and the resulting wait tasted of moderate grief. In the previous few months, I had often happened to walk with him on the street, and if a woman's head peeped out from a door, or an old man emerged from a blind alley, Livio would walk a few steps further and not listen anymore to what I was saying. He sometimes would answer after six or seven minutes, but only if the alleys were empty and there was no one left, even up there, on the balconies of the last few houses still lived in. I didn't mind his polite homosexuality, nor his intended attentions while he was trying to establish a real, more intimate contact on the phone, relying on my understanding that never made him feel improper or pushy, like he often happened to. I preferred to eat alone at home though, as I did that evening. After my shift in the basement, I spent the rest of the day lying on the couch and staring at the humid ceiling. I was looking at the bottles of sparkling water but I was not thirsty. I felt peaceful because the voice of those who had been defeated gave me the strength and forced me to hope. Livio's voice reached me soft and yearning for protection. I believed his anxiety. Before hanging up, he would always say «it was nice talking to you!», maybe because he found the evidence of his isolation in that resigned goodbye. I would not answer though, I was not ready to thoroughly grasp the meaning of such a despair.

After eating scrambled eggs, I had a yogurt with cereals, and a yellow pear spiced with honey and cinnamon. It was twenty to nine. In order to kill the time, I took out of the lacquer piece of furniture under the TV set the pipe with which Zev had decided to pay off my work the month before. I had used it only once to smoke the anise-flavored tobacco that Marlena had given to me. Zev had wrapped it up in a kitchen paper sheet and tied it with an amaranth ribbon.

«This is for you, kid!», he had told me while thinning out the coat to one of his dogs with a box cutter. He had stopped only to take the pipe out of his pocket.

«I cannot accept it, Zev. I thank you but it's not my birthday. I am here to get my pay» I had answered trying to attune the tone of my words in the best possible way. The Hensels' kitchen stank of bleach.

«There have been some issues, kid. My wife and I will take some days to discuss it over but ... for the time being this is your pay». Before he had even finished his sentence, he bent on the dog's head, a black dachshund with a brown tag. He had accidentally cut off part of his ear.

«I will accept the pipe, Mr. Hensel, I will even find a way to use it but I think this won't be enough to make me feel respected». After preaching at him, I moved towards the door carrying the pipe in my damaged hand.

«It's easier to earn money than to save it» Zev had screamed out. The blade sticking out between his fingers was covered in blood and hairs. «We do it for your sake, Abele. I don't understand why people must distrust even the aged», and he had violently cut off a handful of hairs from the dog's skinny back. «Jesus Christ, you young people's brain is all fucked up!» he had added afterwards, but the door behind my back was already closed. On the stairs, I found another of the Hensels' five nameless dogs. At first sight he looked like a greyhound, one of those animals able to bolt with lightning speed. But that would be a short-lived image if one approached him a few meters. The animal suffered from a pelvis problem and walked crookedly, like a shopping cart with lopsided wheels. He was furless, and along his back he had pustules giving off a stench of sardines. While I was passing him by, he hung his head and hid his tail as if to apologize. I couldn't bring myself to pet him.

That evening, while I was having my solitary dinner, Livio called up two more times but I didn't answer. He had never been so insistent before, so I thought that something must have happened. When I set off for the church of the Assunta to join him, the old courtyard's sulphureous air had disappeared like a dream dreamt at dawn.

The alley running steeply down towards St Frank's Square was dark and slippery. The walls of the deserted houses had kept their smell of burnt mint and hay. The suffocating air was devoid of children's joyful screaming and deflated balls thrown against clothes drying on the line. The rubbles resting in iron bins released dust during windy days and only at night, when youth seemed to have never reached the Abruzzian mountains, only then one could understand how necessary memories had become for those who had decided to stay. I had been living in Assergi for about a year, and the only thing streets and alleys could not get rid of was fear. The bell tower barely shook the houses' holed roofs with its tolls. The noise of the wrought bronze sank on the small village like the last pangs of a heart close to its end. Everything around was inaccessible to me – not only the empty rooms blocked by the windows and the harsh reflection of the barriers lined up under the street lamps, barriers on which Civil Protection had put up signs saying: UNSAFE BUILDING, SEISMIC AREA; inaccessible to me were above all the warmth, the contact with the banality of everyday things, the laughter of young people like me who sometimes would come back on Sundays. The private ceremonies and the useless work projects around which revolved the life of ordinary people with no ambitions left, were inaccessible to me. Walking alone, among the shadows of the old walls, I would always end up thinking that people sheltered in those houses wanted to save me from the pain, to keep me away from a dreadful truth or maybe to drive me away. But I had found a remedy for silence. I knew how to escape that unavoidable pain. All I needed was a patch of moist soil and my electronic stethoscope.

Outside the ancient walls, there were some grassland and some raw land. The newly built houses had their shutters wide open and the lights on until late. People said that they felt no fear there, that open spaces were safer and moreover they allowed them to bring up their children, to wash their cars, to pile up firewood easily, and to scream out,

if necessary. Along the road running down to L'Aquila, restaurants had even appeared again, along with a bar where they offered a karaoke night on Fridays, and also served food. They were places furnished with plastic chairs and Swedish-style tables from Ikea. They were the afternoon meeting places for laborers in dung-stained boots and for people in their thirties who had decided not to do anything at all for their future.

Somewhere near St Frank's Square, I turned into a lane leading to a field of wheat. There were neither houses nor cattlesheds there, only a curved and dark precipice descending to the valley. Far off, a few owls were screaming their song to the stars. I didn't have much time. Livio would soon call me, and I didn't want to worry him any further. I ran and reached the area of the field where the grass was short, and I lay down with my belly on the ground that smelled of vanilla and maple. I remained there, with my face pressing the grass, waiting that a pack of dogs hidden by the dark night would stop barking. Sometimes I thought I could die in that position and dry in the sun, thanks to the rainfall in autumn I could sink into the tall grass, and in wintertime my bones could nestle in the snow until they would become framework for ice. I often got lost in such fantasies. My life was a minimal fairytale consisting of extraordinary transformations, and during one of such adventures, sooner or later, I would meet my father, I would sniff his neck, and then I would disappear through a passage dug in a tree trunk.

When complete silence reigned, I took my electronic stethoscope out of my pocket, and I laid it on the dry soil. My eyes were closed and the earplugs tight in my ears. That was my best moment, the suspended second in which my short and insignificant life story established contact with the energy of the universe. In my mind, crumbling stone balconies and rooms sealed with dark sheets didn't exist anymore. Far away from any concern and any unfriendly look, I could hear the bowels of the Planet move around and generate sounds and forms, until it would strip reality of any color or any known size. In my search for real life, everything shrank to an imperceptible breath of existence. I pressed the earplugs on my head with my damaged hand, so that the reverberations and the harmonies of such generating mechanics could come closer. I breathed gladly, admired by the star-studded July sky. I listened unconcernedly to the Earth moving its invisible nerves while they were running after the beat of a lost universe.

Not far from the abandoned fields, the matter's weak breath kept awake the mind of men and women in white coats. I had never been in the Lngs physics labs but I could hear their bustle at night, while lying with my electronic stethoscope nobody knew of. I abandoned myself to the lulling underground sounds that evening too, while Grand Sasso's dark summits were stretching out their heels in order to reach the sky, and a man was wandering about among the bar's tables in the company of a touching secret.

Livio was sitting at the corner table, away from the pool table with the worn-out cloth and next to the opaque glass looking onto the square. His eyes lit up when I came in through the door but – immediately afterwards – a faint worried sigh dampened their glow. He was wearing an ordinary light-blue shirt, an ordinary black and yellow watch, ordinary long jeans without a belt, and a pair of white canvas shoes, also ordinary. He neither gave me a hug nor smiled at me when I came up to him. He laid a hand on my shoulder, and that sufficed to convey the warmth of his virgin joy to me. The bar was

almost empty, and it was terribly hot. Livio's face was damp and throbbing composedly. He ordered a Martini Bianco for himself and a Red Bull for me.

«Thanks for coming, Abele» he told me while wiping his forehead.

«I am glad too to leave my place every now and then. I tried to come here as soon as possible» I answered while pulling the collar of my black t-shirt. An old man holding an envelope in his hand passed by outside the bar and stared at us for a moment.

«How is your hand doing? Can you move it now?» he asked me stretching his arms forward as if he wanted to stroke me. Then he pretended to cough, changed direction and dragged his chair away towards the wall.

«The operation didn't fix much. Doctors had told me that they couldn't work wonders, and so it was. I think they won't attempt it any further» I said. I kept my damaged hand in my cargo shorts for a few more minutes, and then I laid it down on the table. I thought it fair to give Livio a reward for his concern.

«I guess you will have to quit playing curling. Do you remember our last match, before Christmas, when I slipped the broom under the stone while running, I fell on the ice and broke a tooth?» he asked me, and a smile spread across his face.

«I think that in a few weeks, I will be able again to throw some stones on the rink, but it will be only not to submit to fate. Maybe you can come with me, and I will teach you how to sweep with the broom» I said. His smile came out like a rose.

«Everything is gonna be all right!» he said misty-eyed, then he drank a sip of his Martini.

«It is not that important» I replied bending my head. And from that moment, we started talking about work, about holidays ending soon, about his new living room with lavender curtains, about my sister Corinne and how I could live away from my family. We talked about his parents, whom by then he had neither heard from nor seen for thirty years, and about the new cableway that had just been inaugurated and that ran down to L'Aquila. We drank one more can of Red Bull and a pair of Martinis, without getting bored, Livio then suggested to go fishing in the lake. He had spent the last few weeks at home, he said. He didn't know anymore where to go and whom to talk with. He had already told me about his passion for fishing and about the lake at night, how his father had taught him to place the bait before he disowned him as if he were a heretic. We both knew that we could hide in Assergi for millennia, unnoticed by destiny. Sharing secrets somehow helped us re-shape our solitude.

«If you want, I'll leave you my car keys and set off on foot. I'll wait for you under the expressway bridge, there is never a living soul to be seen there in the evening» he said, and he stroked his sweaty neck, and then his forehead with his hands.

«It's not necessary, Livio, we can go there together» I said. His lips remained tight for a few seconds, as if they were trying to find again a regular rhythm. He clenched the table in his hands and breathed expanding his chest more than usual.

«I don't know yet how we are supposed to live» he whispered.

«No one does» I replied «that's why people are so unhappy».

After filling up a bag with speck-and-cheese rolls and small bottles of sparkling water, we set out for the car. The ancient church of the Assunta was lit up by a streak of ivory light coming from the street lamps down below and reaching upwards the little stone bell

towers. We walked together not smiling much, but with such a softness in our eyes that made us alike. Livio's bowed head told me that I shouldn't fear any regrets, that a small bubble of joy had settled in his stomach and it didn't hurt, that there were not many days left in which there was nothing to do and that we should seize the opportunities for understanding each other. Once we left the old small village, we sped up to the expressway bridge without saying a word. Livio's grey Passat smelled of currant and wild blackberries.

The car started to totter after a few minutes. The roads were not paved anymore and the only natural light was coming from the rocks that the moon sprayed with its light. Livio kept on switching on and off the stereo carelessly; whenever he realized it, he would try to smile to conceal his tenseness, but I pretended nothing had happened and I pressed my hand on my pocket to hold my stethoscope. Even though Livio had received me like a son or a younger brother, I didn't want him to know about my close encounters with the universe.

«Are you thirsty?» he asked me looking straight ahead.

«Not for now, thank you. Would you mind pulling over here?» I said.

«Here? But it's completely dark. Is anything wrong, Abele?» he answered. The grey Passat stopped under the foliage of a beech. Beyond the branches, the gate of a pitched-roofed cabin was fastened with a rope.

«I'll be right back, Livio, don't switch off the engine» I said, I then got out of the car.

Livio didn't know about my interest for mailboxes. When I put my hand inside, there wasn't much there. I turned my wrist several times around in the hole and eventually took out the notice for a wire, two Carrefour folders, an ad for an herbs cream, and a postcard. I put back the rest and kept the postcard for myself. I smelled it, but the ink's sweet scent had already faded away. I went back to the car and switched on the light.

«What are you doing?» Livio asked; he had dark sweat rings on his shirt.

«Nothing, I take care of useless stuff» I answered.

The car stood still some more minutes, neither Livio nor me were in a hurry to leave. I clutched the postcard between my legs, then the car drove off, and it was only then that I brought it closer to the light and took a better look at it. Livio pretended not to be interested in order not to spoil all that we had been sharing until then. It had actually been nothing exceptional, and just the awareness of not being special kept us going on, directing the Passat's wheels through the brushwood, and pushing each other behind each other's shoulders as to say that we had nothing to be afraid of. Livio rolled down the window to let in some more hot July air, and I rotated my bust a few degrees in order to cover with my left arm the message on the stolen postcard. It had been sent from Dover, South England. It said: WE DON'T KNOW YET HOW WHITE THE CLIFFS ARE, BUT HERE AT THE RAMADA HOTEL EVERYTHING IS WONDERFUL! HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO YOU TOO, WITH LOVE ... YOUR GRANDCHILDREN.

The lake's surface was still, the reflection of the moon was marking a flat scare on the water, and the cobbles along the bank barely creaked under our shoes. Livio had turned on a gas lamp and assembled a wood table on which he had placed his fishing rod, a Tupperware with moist bread, worms, and thin phosphorescent plastic sticks. «These are floats» he said, he put them into his pocket and started to wind the reel. «When you see them disappear under the water, it will mean that the fish is biting» and while he talked, he tightened the line with some knots to block the signaling stick. I sat down on a small rock, took off my shoes, and walked barefoot into the lake. We were two flashing dots on a forgotten radar. I took a picture with my iPhone, but on the screen my feet seemed cut, they didn't show. I tried to photograph the Gran Sasso's summits, where the stars seemed to form a bright led shawl: only a whitish halo suspended in the dark came out. I deleted the photo, also the one with the missing feet in the water dazzled by the flash. Livio threw the line into the night, let the reel run, then secured the rod to the ground. He took the bag containing the rolls out of the car and sat down next to me. Fishing – at that point – was over.

He silently looked at me, with a sweaty face and his wrinkles turning it into a sort of sorrowful mask. He looked at me as if he had things to say or to make amends for. His swollen belly didn't make his fifty years of age heavier, and the gestures he was giving me were neither tired nor resigned. With a faint whisper similar to a wave that had just broken on the bank, he asked me whether I was bored or regretted coming there with him. He was sitting like a young boy scout awaiting instructions, his legs bent and his knees leaning against his chest. Then a light appeared far away, on the slated bridge. Livio said that they were the wild boar hunters while I thought he had noticed nothing. He was sitting there, rocking like a float torn off and lost in a sea of regrets.

After crying, he wiped his cheeks and said that Riccardo had left him. My legs got stuck in the water. I thought about hugging him, but then I kept my hands in my cargo shorts' pockets. The world had suddenly sunk into a black hole. The lake's water wasn't producing any particular sound, and from time to time one could hear the faltering echo coming from Livio's throat that seemed to arise from his weeping. The rod on the bank wasn't moving, and a wolf was howling in the dark. Livio apologized in a choking voice and held his knees, resting his sweaty forehead on them. I seized my iPhone and took a picture of him without flash, in that position, crouched like an egg. It didn't show much, but it was still the story of an affliction.

The following hours were less silent and passed by quickly. Livio told me about his separation from Riccardo, and how the last loveless weeks had changed. He told me about structureless days: no breakfast in the morning, and in provincial bars for lunch because he couldn't eat at home. Usually, he would choose a bar outside L'Aquila, where they re-ran old films on tv, and there were neither young nor old people. In the evening, he would walk along the road going up to the Gran Sasso, while listening to the music that Riccardo loved and that now he – somewhere – had decided to abandon, burying it along with all the images of their love. He would spend the night in the living room, watching documentaries broadcasted on Discovery or the series about sex therapy on FoxLife. He would go out only on Sundays, he said he had a direct connection with God, and he needed neither priests nor forgiveness. He would spend the afternoon at

the lake, reading the Bible and praying for his old parents hidden in the mountains in Sicily. That is where his thoughts would turn to.

«What do you most miss about your region?» I asked him. The float had disappeared some time before and the rod stood still. The line didn't even show.

«I don't know anymore. I've been away from home, I haven't seen them for almost thirty years» he said. He fastened his shirt's buttons up to the neck and lay down on the cobbles.

«I too haven't spent much time with my family in the last few years, first because of the university, and now because of work ... but it's different.»

«Don't you miss your mother?»

«She doesn't talk much, that's how the disease works. I'm missing all her past, I'm missing my childhood memories. Only she knows what happened, only she can tell me how I used to sleep, and when Corinne and I started walking. As you know, I have never seen nor met my father. Therefore, all that is left of him is buried in my mother's silence too». I felt like leaving, but I tried to resist. Livio had turned on his left side, bending like a newborn.

«But maybe they love you, you never know» he said, he then handed me a bottle of sparkling water. «Drink, you are sweaty, Abele» he whispered. And suddenly, he started to cry again, to crouch until he disappeared into his own clasp. I looked at him and felt almost guilty. I took out my feet from the water and they were bright purple, mushy like a dead animal. I could barely hear Livio's voice, and everything coming out from his mouth tasted bitter. His parents had kicked him out because of his homosexuality, and he couldn't have done anything but run away. I didn't know what to say. I was sitting there, with my sponge-like feet, watching a kind man's personal tragedy. I walked away a few steps. I turned off the lamp, and took another picture of him.