

from BUONGIORNO, WUHAN by SARA PLATTO

1. EVERYTHING IN ONE NIGHT

The confusion tears away Matteo from sleeping with the same frenzy of scissor with paper. Outside of the door dull sounds that he can't recognize spread.

Maybe mom is cooking a special breakfast to wish me happy birthday, he thinks with satisfaction. Is the 23rd January morning and his twelve years must be celebrate in a big way: a party with friends, his favorite dishes to eat, maybe some of the presents he asked for – very diplomatically- in the last months... what if a super breakfast has been added to the program? Like those he wolfs down in hotels, when he accompanies his mother to some conference around China. Matteo yawns and stares at the window while he moves the blanket to get out of the bunk bed.

From the shout blinds not even a beam of light comes through.

Still night?

The confusion goes on. But there's no noise neither of crockery nor of pot on the burner. It seems that someone is measuring the room perimeter with his feet, with long and quick steps. The board indicates a time he doesn't expect.

Twenty past two? Do twenty past two exist in the morning?

Curiosity could get the better of him, but Matteo knows how to put it to rest.

After all, his mom always wakes up very soon. She has two jobs and she loves them both. It doesn't matter if it's five in the afternoon or in the morning, when she has to write an article or prepare some lessons.

Matteo turns around to go back to his interrupted sleep, grabs the duvet, covers himself up till his nose, closes his eyes again.

He tries to focus on his birthday party. He tries to guess the present of Jack, the words that Kate will choose to write the greetings card. Or Gingy's wheedling just woke up. That cat, beside the legendary seven lives, must have also a sixth sense, because he sniffs out the news in advance. The thought of his big red cat leads him slowly to sleep. But it is a restless sleep with a thick weave of dreams that dissolve only in the morning.

-Matteo.

He didn't hear the door of his room open, but as soon as his eyelid opened he notice the dark silhouette of his mother against the light of the living room. There's something unusual. Mom just called his name in an unusual way. The every morning hurry is missing, the haste of the

thousand task to complete. Her voice is a whisper; it resonates with an accent that Matteo has almost never heard before. This is concern.

-The government opted for the lockdown.

Sara's English is almost as perfect as his, but that word is not clear for Matteo. She walks towards him, explains better. She's good at this, his mother.

-It means that in just over two hour the city will be shut.

Matteo looks at the clock. -From ten o'clock? What does it means shut, mom? What's going on?

-It's because of the coronavirus. No one will enter or exit, not even the virus. Wuhan will be blocked. We'll be blocked. At home. Alone.

Now Matteo is more awake than ever.

-But... just today? And my birthday? Jack will come here for the party. He and Jonathan...

And Kate.

His mother is quiet. She moves a lock of red hair from her glasses lenses; she looks at him with tenderness. She smiles, but a sad smile. She nods.

They won't come. A party without guests.

-But we'll celebrate with them in some way, I'll promise. - Says mom, finding again her strength. - Get out from the bed, come on. We have little time before they close everything... and we have something to do!

2. MOTHER TONGUE

October 2019

Matteo's school is just two hundred meters away from the University where Sara works. Both the buildings are close to the residence that has been their home for eight years, a modern neighborhood where, above the wide streets asphalt, stand out the luxuriant branches of monumental plane trees and the even higher buildings balconies. Every morning mother and son walk together the street between the residence and the schools and in the meanwhile they give an account of their lives.

Matteo is talkative in the morning.

Actually, he is always talkative but clearly he's more inspired in the morning. He tells his mom which classes he will attend to, the school situation of his best friends, he makes list of what he expects from his afternoon activities, he reveals his new passions.

Lately he's obsessed with stand-up comedy, after having seen the Marvelous Mrs. Maisel series. They watched it together, at evening, before dinner. All the three seasons in just over two months. Four times in a row.

-When will you take me to a show? Did you find if there are in town places for comedians?

-I already told you ten times. Yes, I checked. Yes, there are places for stand-up comedy in Wuhan. And yes, I'll take you. And that makes eleven.

-But when? I just want to know that... when?

-Matteo!

Kate's voice spares Sara the embarrassment of coming up with a random date. Matteo's friend comes forward, elegant as usual, and smiles with two fascinating dark eyes. Eyes where unusual intelligence and irony spark.