

SOFIA ALWAYS DRESSES IN BLACK

By Paolo Cognetti

Dying is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
Sylvia Plath

FIRST LIGHT

One night, the nurse leaned out of the hospital ward window and saw the man's delivery van in the street outside. The man flashed his brights on and off three times, then left them on when she raised her arm in greeting. She asked another nurse to stand in for her, then she took the back stairway down to the tradesman's entrance. There, in an autumnal rain, the man rolled down his window and informed her that he had made some decisions. The nurse looked him up and down, unsure whether or not she should believe him. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, then let him in and took him up to the second floor, where she found an unoccupied room where they could talk undisturbed.

There was a taste of wine beneath the usual smell of smoke in his whiskers. In the room, he embraced her and pushed her toward the bed, but she didn't like his manners one bit: he was rebuffed. He acted hurt. He opened the window, lit a cigarette, and looked out. After a minute he said: "If this rain keeps up, we'll all grow fins like fish."

"Well?" the nurse asked. "Do you want to tell me what you're doing here?"

The man waited before answering, looking out at the rain and swallowing a few more gulps of smoke. Then he announced that he wasn't going back home that night. He'd walked out, slamming the door behind him and shouting at his wife to forget she'd ever met him. He left out the part about going to the bar afterward, but it was obvious. It was a quarter to two in the morning. He ran his fingers through his wet hair and the nurse guessed that he must have stayed out late drinking, talking about women with the other men at the bar, flirting with the waitress, and that was why he'd finally come to see her. He announced: "If you don't want me either, I'll just sleep in the van, it's all the same to me." When he tried to embrace her again, she let him, closing her eyes and doing her best not to think of the mounting pile of his deceptions and his lies.

Later that night, she was summoned to attend to an emergency childbirth. A twenty-two-year-old woman, in her seventh month of pregnancy. She pushed out a tiny baby girl, blue with oxygen deprivation, along with a fair amount of blood. The obstetrician gave the newborn a few smacks on the back to get her to cry and start breathing, but the child refused either to breathe or to cry, and had to be resuscitated and put on life support. There was something about that premature birth that struck the obstetrician as fishy: it turned out that the new mother, without a word to another soul, had taken an ulcer medication that had contraindications during pregnancy, but right now she was too overwhelmed to offer any explanations. She'd suffered severe hemorrhaging. She lay screaming in her bed, cursing herself. They sedated her, inserted an IV tube in her arm, and let her drop off to sleep, putting off further investigation for later.

On the little newborn's incubator was a card with a name: Sofia Muratore. The father came to see her several times every day. Exhausted, baffled, and adrift, he hurried back and forth from wife to daughter, wondering which of the two was to blame for the other's ill health. Unable to touch the baby girl, he watched her intently through the glass, unsure whether to become fond of her, torn between finding her beautiful or monstrous, the way it often is with newborns and tropical amphibians.

The nurse started talking to Sofia at night, when there was no one else around to see. She took a seat next to the incubator and told her stories. It was like talking to the plants on her balcony: it might not do a bit of good, but it made her feel better and it could hardly hurt the little girl. Night after night, she told Sofia everything she could think of: the big farmhouse where she grew up, the life she'd lived until she was thirty, the priest who had persuaded her to pursue a vocation, the cruel nuns at the nursing school, the day she came to live in the city and how she'd wept when she saw the apartment. She'd had to learn to toughen up. Same as it was with the blood, vomit, feces, and infected wounds, the things you were forced to see when a body opened up, when it was infested with disease or mutilated in an accident, and you didn't have the luxury of just looking away. She told her all these things in the simplest words she knew. One night, while she was talking to Sofia, she heard the sound of a car horn, leaned out the window, and saw the man's delivery van in the parking lot. The headlights flashed but this time she didn't budge. She stood there, making sure the message was clear. He got out of the van, looked up at the window, smoked a whole cigarette, then dropped the smoking butt on the pavement and crushed it underfoot as if that cigarette butt was her, climbed back into the van, made a three-point turn, and drove away.

"Sofia," the nurse said in a loud voice, "do you know what being born is? Being born is a ship sailing off to war."

That morning the pediatrician declared the baby girl out of danger, and they finally took her to her real mother.

A PIRATE STORY

At a certain juncture in their marriage, instead of getting a divorce, Sofia's parents decide to move house. Leave Milan and move out of town, to someplace sufficiently different and far away to make them feel they were starting over. In spring 1985 they find a newly built house, in a residential development surrounded by greenery: they tour the house and yard and then climb a small barren hill to take in the view, looking down on the pond that suggested the village's name.

Telling this story on a Sunday morning in the future, Sofia will say that to her, from up there, Lagobello—"beautiful lake," the name hints—looks like a fairytale town. She couldn't have any idea then of how much she'd come to hate it as she grew up. At age eight, what she wants is a dog, a treehouse, permission to ride her bike unaccompanied, and peace between her parents. She's already witnessed a number of fights, and although the root of their problems remains a mystery to her, she does understand the purpose of these drives out into the countryside: something between them's not right, and they hope things will turn out better in a new home. She's thinking: *please, please, let this be the time it works*. Later, when she's grown up, she'll describe the roofs and the chimney pots, the gravel paths sweeping across the green lawns, the way the sun glitters on the roll-up garage doors. While the real estate agent points to the Alps on the horizon, Sofia's mother reaches out one hand toward Sofia's father's hand. Without being called or touched, but as if he'd received some other kind of signal, he reaches out his hand in return and grips hers, and Sofia feels the sense of prodigious power that comes from answered prayers.

That summer, shortly after the move, with the walls still bare and the books still in the packing boxes, Roberto comes home from work with a little boy. Oscar is the son of one of Roberto's old friends, and Oscar's father asked him to take the boy in for a while because of his wife's precipitating state of health. She's a friend too, but in a slightly different way: she's been sick for so long that by now everyone's used to seeing her hairless, her face puffy and yellowish, used to thinking of her that way when they talk on the phone or discuss her among themselves, as

if it were her natural appearance. No one is foolish enough to think she might get better, but they've lulled themselves into believing she can tread the razor's edge, sick but still alive—if not forever, for at least some indefinite present tense. But now things have suddenly turned critical.

"Here they are," says Rossana, looking out the kitchen window and seeing the car arrive. Inside, the table is set for four, and a pot of water is boiling on the stove. She puts out her cigarette in the kitchen sink and adds: "Remember what you promised me."

To prove she hasn't forgotten a thing, Sofia opens the door and takes up her stance at the threshold. Someday, when she's big, she'll act out this scene in other rooms, playing tonight's little girl for her future audience. Shoulders braced against the door jamb, hands concealed behind her back, chest thrust forward, exactly like the way she's started to see her mother welcome her father home from work since they moved to Lagobello. A parody of a wife—made still more grotesque by the eyeglasses she wears, with a patch of gauze on the right lens to correct her lazy eye. At the end of the driveway, Roberto pushes the gate with one foot—his hands are occupied with his briefcase, Oscar's backpack, and a bag of fertilizer that he bought at the nursery. He kisses his daughter on the forehead and walks into the house, leaving her the task of welcoming the young guest tagging along behind him.

"Ciao," says Sofia. "Are you hungry?"

"That depends," Oscar replies. "What's for dinner?"

"Meatballs and mashed potatoes. I mashed the potatoes myself. And ice cream for dessert."

"What did you do to that eye?"

"Oh, that one's fine. It's this one that's a little lazy. I have to teach it to work without the other one, otherwise it'll give up working entirely."

"Can I see it?"

"All right," says Sofia, with the same nonchalance she'll display as she takes off her clothes a few years later. She lifts her glasses onto her forehead and does her best to keep her left eye under control. But, partly because she's excited and partly because of all the time she's been left partially blind, it doesn't turn out quite as she'd hoped.

"Cool," says Oscar. "How do you do it?"

"I'm not doing anything."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sorry about your Mamma," says Sofia, remembering the phrase she's practiced. Oscar is caught off guard. He shrugs his shoulders and lets fly with a halfhearted kick at the front step with the toe of his shoe. Then a voice from the kitchen summons them to the dinner table.

That night other interesting discoveries await Oscar. At ten o'clock Rossana sits down on Sofia's bed, removes her glasses, folds them away in the case, and places a finger on the tip of her nose. Slowly, she moves the finger away as Sofia struggles to keep it in focus. They repeat the exercise several times, and after that Roberto joins them for a ritual of a different kind: they say an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a prayer improvised then and there by Rossana, in which she gives thanks for the good day just ending and for the new friend who has come to stay with them, and asks that they be granted a night that's every bit as good as the day has been.

"Amen," says Sofia. Rossana leans over her and kisses her goodnight. It strikes her as the right thing to do the same with Oscar, only he's not sure how to react, he flushes with embarrassment, he pulls the bedclothes up to his chin and shuts his eyes tight. At last the light is doused and the grownups file out of the bedroom.

"Do they always act that way?" he asks, when the two parents are out of the room.

"Act how?"

"All those smiles and kisses."

"They didn't used to," Sofia says. "They used to just fight all the time. But they made a promise to each other, to try and fall in love again."

"That sucks," Oscar says, rubbing his forehead.

They have two brand new beds, in a bedroom furnished from a catalogue only a few weeks ago. Since they'll be paying for the next three years, Rossana and Roberto spared a thought for the future and decided to make the bedroom a double. They've been talking about another child for a while now.

"So what were those things?" Oscar asks.

"What things?"

"Those poems you were reciting."

"You mean the prayers?"

"Sure. The prayers."

Sofia turns and gazes thoughtfully at his silhouette in the dark. She's never met anyone who doesn't know what prayers are. Roberto's voice comes in through the half-closed window: he must have gone out to water the lawn and now he's talking to a neighbor.

"Prayers are for talking with God," she replies, choosing her words carefully.

"And what do you say to God?"

"First of all you thank Him. We thank Him for all the things He gives us and we ask His forgiveness if we've done something wrong. And then, if we have a special wish, we ask Him please to help us make it come true."

"And does he?"

"Sure," says Sofia, and the minute the word is out of her mouth she realizes that she's given a reckless answer. There's the whole question of God's will. It's more complicated than she's making it sound, but now she'd afraid to retract her statement. She hears her father say goodnight to the neighbor and twist the outdoor spigot on.

"Cool," says Oscar, as the good smell of wet dirt wafts up to them from the garden below.

The next day, when Oscar drags her out of bed and then out of the house, assembles all the neighborhood boys in the park, and immediately assumes command of the company, Sofia quickly discovers that there will be need to treat him with kid gloves. It will take no special effort to become friends with him. At age nine, Oscar is a wild child: the fact that he's older; his inevitably tousled hair, gleaming in the sunlight; all the tales of adventure he knows and that he's capable of staging—all these things make him an ideal leader and companion. When she grows up, Sofia will always fall in love with men like him, men with obsessive yet inconstant passions. And in 1985 Oscar's chief obsession flies a black flag: there will be other summers, one devoted to Apache braves, another devoted to the merry bandits of Sherwood Forest, and one for the prospectors of the Alaska gold rush, but this is the year of pirates, and the park of Lagobello seems to have been designed especially for his purposes.

At this point in the story, Sofia will trace a circle in the air. She'll sketch a pond with an islet in the center, linked to dry land by a small wooden causeway. On the islet there is a cabin with a thatched roof. A dirt lane, punctuated at regular distances by a bench and a lamp, runs around the pond and climbs the hill, lined by two rows of newly installed hedges. This artificial landscape, likewise ordered from a parks and gardens catalogue and meant as a setting conducive to contemplative seclusion, is transformed in Oscar's hands into the Caribbean Sea at the turn of the seventeen hundreds, territory fought over by the various European colonial powers and infested with outlaws. Under Oscar's leadership a platoon of well nourished, siblingless children, raised from birth in apartments, with pollen allergies and no real experience with sunlight, incapable of distinguishing bees from wasps, are unceremoniously embarked onto two enemy warships: one crew made up of enlisted men and officers, both commissioned and noncommissioned, pitted against a motley horde without military rank to whom Oscar assigns the positions of helmsman, cannoneer, lookout, bosun, and quartermaster, keeping the title of captain for himself. The rules are elementary. The British navy has been sent to storm Tortuga and sweep it clean of rabble and riffraff, while it falls to the pirates to resist, take to hiding, strike from ambush and flee, and retake the island at the cost of their own blood, if they should have the misfortune to let their stronghold be taken from them. That's Oscar's favorite role. He withdraws

to the fastness of the hilltop and from up there he plots his revenge. He devises strategies for his counterattack, he sends out spies to monitor the enemy's maneuvers. He passes weapons and munitions in review and delivers one last rousing oration to his men. Only when they are literally leaping out of their skin in bloodthirsty eagerness does he unleash the boarding party. That's when you'll see him galloping headlong downhill, brandishing a green whip torn from some sapling and shouting at the top of his lungs: "Take no prisoners, yield no quarter, you filthy buggers!" or else "Buccaneers forever!" or even "Draw cutlasses and charge, brethren of the coast!"

With the exception of Sofia, his pirates are all boys. The girls control another part of the park, where the swings and seesaws are. So one night the two of them talk it over.

"There are other things I could do," says Sofia. "I don't know, care for the wounded. I could make ointments to smear on the injuries and bandage dressings. Or I could keep the island clean and tidy."

"Is that what you'd like?"

"I think so."

"Would you like that better than being in battle?"

"No, it's not that I'd like it better. It's just that it might be more normal, don't you think?"

Oscar switches on the bedside lamp. He gets out of bed, opens his school backpack, and pulls out a book. It's a treasure that Sofia will never forget: a hard black pictureless cover, gilt-edged pages, a red ribbon marker, and that majestic title: *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, by Captain Charles Johnson. Oscar lays the book down on the pillow and runs his hand over it as if to remove the dust of the ages.

"It's really old," he says. "Just look."

As he slowly turns the pages, Sofia admires the ink drawings portraying those terrible captains. Long braided beards, fearsome glares. Some of them are missing an eye or a hand, and they all wear outsized hats and gold earrings.

"Here," says Oscar, holding the book up into the light to show her one of the last chapters. The drawing that swims into view before Sofia's eyes is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, a portrait of two pirate women. Both of them are wearing torn blouses revealing bare breasts, a detail that makes a strong impression on her, conveying a whiff of the obscene. One of them brandishes a flintlock pistol, the other waves a cutlass. They wear triumphant expressions, and what with the weapons and the tattered blouses, it is only natural to assume that they've just emerged victorious from battle. Beneath the illustration the caption reads: *Anne Bonny and Mary Read, Captain Calico Jack Rackham's two lovers*.

"Can I read it?" asks Sofia in wonderment.

"Only if you're capable of keeping it a total secret."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Can't you see for yourself?"

Sofia stares at the drawing with her lazy eye. The snowy white breasts of the two women and the word *lovers*.

"It's a promise," she says, reaching out her hand for that treasure trove.

Corsairs, buccaneers, freebooters. At the dinner table Oscar talks of nothing else. The lives of the pirates, unheard-of names. Henry Avery, Samuel Bellamy, William Fly, and Edward Teach—also known as Blackbeard. The circumstances that drove them to a life of pillage and plunder. The bloody episodes that served as the building blocks of their murderous reputations. From time to time, Rossana, ever the dutiful hostess, feels obliged to ask a question or two, while Roberto eventually stops even pretending to listen. The television blares out the evening news and he has the remote control next to his plate. He picks it up and raises the volume when the images streaming past strike him as important. The Italian lira has just plunged to the miserable exchange rate of 2200 to the dollar. A rushing wall of mud hurtling down from a mine-tailing storage pond has killed over two hundred in the northern region of Trentino Alto Adige. The nation is falling

apart while a nine-year-old boy explains the protocols of life aboard a pirate ship: the rations of grog, the shares of loot, the floggings and keelhaulings prescribed in cases of cowardice or betrayal. It was a hard life, Oscar says. Even so, sailors aboard merchantmen mutinied even before the buccaneers had a chance to board them: after all, they were galley slaves in their present condition, but once they became pirates, they were the masters of their fate and men among equals; in fact the Jolly Roger heaving into view over the horizon was celebrated as a foretaste of liberation.

"The thing is, though, we don't have one," Oscar says, eyes downcast on his cold spaghetti. "It's the one thing we still lack. It sucks."

"What is it you lack?" asks Roberto, catching a snatch of their conversation.

"The Jolly Roger."

"What's that supposed to be? A parrot?"

"It's supposed to be a flag. A flag with the skull and crossbones, you know what I mean? Sometimes they were crossbones, sometimes they'd cross something else. Calico Jack had two crossed cutlasses as his distinctive symbol. But anyway, no matter what else, *he* was always on the flag: King Death."

"*King Death*?" asks Roberto, furrowing his brow. He turns away from the evening news broadcast. For some reason, hearing the word *Death* on a young boy's lips strikes him as an obscenity deserving of a round scolding.

"We could check at the stationery shop," Rossana intervenes, beating Roberto to the punch. "Maybe they sell them there."

"The Jolly Roger's not something you can buy," Sofia says. "The sailors would stitch one up themselves, after running down their English or French flag and agreeing to turn pirate."

Oscar nods solemnly. Sofia looks at her mother, her eyes brimming over with hope. Sure enough, the next day Rossana goes into the city: she buys a yard of white cloth and two yards of black cloth, and when she gets home she sets to work before the children's admiring eyes. She's never used needle and thread except to sew buttons, but she attended the Academy of Fine Arts and she's nimble-fingered. She uses a felt-tip pen to sketch a skull and two lightning bolts on the white cloth: Oscar's choice for his own personal heraldic device. She scissors the pattern out of the white cloth and stitches it onto the black fabric. She adds a pair of ribbons at each corner so that the flag can be tied to a staff, and then she stretches it out on a table for the children to scrutinize. As each child surveys it from his or her perch atop a chair, she suddenly feels a stab of anxiety. She rummages through her purse for her cigarettes, but she can't find her lighter. Oscar runs the tip of his finger over the stitching. He smooths out the fabric here and there where it's wrinkled or creased.

"It's perfect," he says, finally. He grabs the Jolly Roger, plants a kiss on Rossana's cheek, and runs out of the house with Sofia following, eager to devise a system for hoisting the flag over the roof of the cabin.

So there Rossana sits, alone, in the kitchen, her cigarette dead and her heart in her mouth. It's not like her to put herself on the line so carelessly. By now, Roberto has a name for it: the *Oscar Effect*: it's all bound up with his wife's mood and other surprises awaiting him when he gets home from work. One night he finds the table set as if for someone's birthday, with plastic plates, brightly colored paper napkins, soft drinks and potato chips, and the three of them running around outside in the yard spraying each other with the garden hose. He's seen Rossana get Oscar dressed first thing in the morning, shower him with kisses, tousle his hair, and inquire earnestly to ascertain his wishes and whims, as if she were trying to compensate him in advance for everything he was bound to miss out on as he grew up without a mother. He's not sure that it's a particularly healthy idea. But in the meanwhile, he enjoys the most placid and untroubled summer since they were married.

But what was it like before? Before Oscar showed up, just what was life like for them? There are scenes from last winter that Sofia will never forget as long as she lives. Rossana in bed,

with the shutters rolled down in broad daylight and the air rank with tobacco smoke, only the red cherry of her cigarette suspended in the room's darkness. Roberto striding angrily away down the shoulder of the highway, after slamming on the brakes in the middle of a fight and getting out to let his fury boil over. Images lodged in Sofia's memory like alphabet flash cards from first grade: a bunch of grapes to remember *g*, a brightly colored butterfly for *b*, a pulsing red dot in the darkness for *Depression*, her father's hands seizing locks of his own hair for *Exasperation*. As for herself, she'll later tell how that was the time when she first set out to rescue herself from the same fate.

"Because I was just like her," she'll say. "And she was teaching me how to grow up to be the same kind of woman." She'll recount how her life as a tomboy, her life as a member of the male brethren, began right there, in the thrill of attacks armed only with clubs and cutlasses, hurtling headlong down the face of the hill in pursuit of Oscar, gathering all her physical courage to win him over, dreaming of herself as his pirates lover, like Anne Bonny or Mary Read at Calico Jack Rackham's side.

All around them, Lagobello was in the full blush of the unforgettable years of its first foundation. Newlywed couples are its colonists, real estate agents are the bards singing its praises. Each Saturday dawns to the tune of moving vans honking as they round the curve: the wives of the village hurry to their front windows, wrapped in bathrobes and with their breakfast mugs hot in their hands, eager for a glimpse of the new neighbors, trying to guess what each family does for a living, where they'd lived before, and which of the last unsold houses they're were going to occupy. The husbands give only fleeting attention to these questions, focused as they are on the instruction booklets of their new electric appliances, or busy using sanders, nailguns, angle grinders, and reciprocating saws, power tools whose operation will forever remain a mystery to them, and which they'll abandon to gather dust in the basement after only one or two uses. And the new arrivals also look in this direction as they drive past. They gaze out at the newly planted gardens, the yards that were all identical just a few months ago but are now starting to resemble the owners. Every flower planted, every toy abandoned in the grass is just one more piece in a broader story and you could even start right there: trying to reconstruct the history from a lounge chair, a planter full of lavender and rosemary, a plastic table with four folding chairs, a hammock, a tricycle, a dog bowl.

The two children stay awake talking late into the night. It's hard to say exactly when the conversation shifts from piracy to religion. From what Oscar understands about it, there too everything revolves around death: if it weren't for death, there'd be no need to pray or to go to church, to obey anyone who's bigger than you, to refrain from cursing or telling lies. But seeing as you have to die, the problem becomes how to figure out where you're going to wind up afterward. Hell or Heaven. Inferno or Paradise. He likes that detail especially. That's why it matters how you act on earth: because when you die, God reckons up the good and bad things you've done and decides where to send you.

"Is that right?" he asks.

"More or less," says Sofia.

"And then that's where you stay forever?"

"Exactly. That's eternal life."

"So what's this Heaven like?"

Heaven, Sofia explains, isn't the same place for everyone. It changes from person to person. If you like the seaside, then your Heaven will be a beach where it's always summer. If you like to eat, it will be a dinner table where your favorite dishes refill themselves endlessly. And so on.

"Then I know what my Mamma's Heaven would be like," says Oscar. "It would be a mountain meadow with a fast-running stream and lots of flowers, and no one else around but the

ones she loves. There aren't many people she likes. Mostly, she likes animals and trees.

"My Papà's heaven would be a Formula One race track," he adds. "He'd have a Ferrari all for himself and he could race it as fast and as long as he pleases.

"And mine would be tropical island. No, wait, make that an atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It should have a volcano and there'd be a jungle, and coral reefs all around it. There would be waves at least sixty feet tall."

"Mine too," says Sofia.

Eventually, once they've completed their fresco of Heaven, after populating it with crocodiles and pythons, carnivorous flowers, tarantulas and black widow spiders, they come to the most baffling aspect of the whole matter. What about Hell? What's Hell like?

Sofia isn't sure she knows the answer. No one's ever told her much about Hell. She understands that the demon imps and the flames don't really exist, but she doesn't know what there is in place of them. The worst thing about Hell, in fact, strikes her as the fact that no one knows what it's like.

"If you ask me, this is what it's like," says Oscar, seizing the initiative. "It's like Heaven but the other way around. Hell ought to change from person to person, just like Heaven. It should be thing the one thing that scares you more than anything else on earth. You know how it is when you dream that you've fallen down a ravine? Or you're drowning? Like that, just imagine a nightmare that never ends."

"Maybe you're right."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Me? Being alone."

"Alone? What do you mean alone? Like home alone?"

"No, it's not one specific place. It's sort of everywhere. Like when I was little and I got lost at the supermarket. I turned around and my Mamma wasn't there anymore, I started looking for her but I couldn't find her. The cashier ladies had to make an announcement over the PA system. When I saw her, I slapped her in the face because of how scared I had been."

"You slapped your Mamma in the face?"

"Yes."

"Then that's what your Hell must be like. A place where you get lost forever."

"That sounds right. What are you afraid of?"

"Me? Nothing," says Oscar. He clasps his hands behind his head and looks up at the bedroom ceiling, as if it were a star-spangled night sky and he were reclining on the bridge of his ship. He says: "I guess I'll find out when I get there. I won't know what my Hell is like until the day I arrive."

(Sofia will think back on this conversation a few years later, as she draws up a list of childhood fears to use in a theater workshop. The first item on the list, of course, will be the fear of *Divorce*. Second place goes to *Kidnapping*, because of the little boy who was kidnapped in 1987, his face wallpapering the evening news shows for weeks. One of those pictures where the person is smiling, but then the picture is used to announce their death or disappearance, so that even the smile starts to take on a new and entirely different meaning. Roberto would mock that fear, telling her: "Why on earth would anyone want to kidnap you? We aren't rich you know." And Rossana would just assume it was an excuse for not going to bed. The third word on the list will be *Tumor*: not the fear that you'll have one, but that one of your parents will. Just one more variation—as the theater director will be eager to point out the minute he scans the list—on a single overarching fear of abandonment. And then Sofia will think back to this night. She'll remember that she said to Oscar: "Me? Being alone." She'll remember how fragile the so-called certainties of life seemed to her as a little girl: families were like so many submarines subject to the risk of unpredictable catastrophes, depth charges released from on high in a naval battle between you and the inscrutable will of the Almighty.)

Prayers are their secret. They kneel as they recite them, on the two opposite sides of the

bed, so that Oscar can watch Sofia and imitate her gestures. He learns to cross himself, he memorizes all the words of the Our Father. Then he asks: "Aren't there any others?"

"Well yes, there are lots of them."

"Then teach them to me."

It's not easy to persuade him that that's not the point. The power of prayers, Sofia explains, has nothing to do with how many of them you know. A prayer isn't a magic spell, and the words alone aren't worth a thing. What counts is *you* as you say them: if you manage to concentrate especially well, if you can push all the distractions aside and think only of the one thing you want to ask God, then and only then is there a chance that He will hear you. Even if it's just one prayer. Otherwise, you might know a million different prayers, but it will always be the same as saying them to a brick wall.

So Oscar starts training himself to concentrate. He shuts his eyes, plants both elbows on the edge of the mattress, clasps his hands tight against his forehead. Now Sofia's the distractable one. She stares at his lips as they say: "Thy kingdom come, they will be done." When they say: "Deliver us from evil, amen." And as he supplicates a brand new God with all the ardor of a convert, imploring Him to cure his mother of her illness, Sofia's prayers begin to sound more like idle chitchat between old friends. She knows that lesser wishes are more likely to be granted, so she helps Oscar to adjust his requests and to aim a little lower. Please, she thinks, let her live another week. What's seven days to You? Don't take Oscar away from me right now. If You love me, and I'm certain that You do, please let him stay with me a little longer.

There's a time each day when they find out whether their prayers have worked. It comes around five o'clock, when Rossana leans out the window and calls Oscar to come to the phone. And Oscar stops in mid-battle, sweaty and filthy, sniffs loudly, looks over at Sofia, says: "Wait for me here," and runs into the house.

At that point, something happens with the children. The game stops abruptly. Captain Kidd and Captain Moody, one an expert tree climber, the other an infallible hurler of mud-balls, First Mate Maynard, condemned by his head of red hair to be a British officer for all eternity, and the bounty hunter Barnett, inseparable from his little off-yellow lapdog, and the enlisted men and nameless pirates, combatants relegated to the background because they're too clumsy, too feeble, too worried they might break their glasses—all of them freeze in place, afraid even to look at each other. Luckily, it doesn't last long. A few minutes later Oscar reappears, eyes on the ground, feet dragging. He's dejected the way he always is after talking to his mother on the phone. In the short distance from the house to the pond, his dejection is transformed into ferocity: once he's back at Sofia's side he picks up his club, screams a war cry, and resumes command, ready to reconquer his Tortuga by any means necessary.

Someday she'll have crystal-clear, marginal memories like these. Like family photographs that don't depict anything in particular, and no one knows exactly why they were taken or when, but years later are worth so much more than entire photo albums devoted to birthdays and weddings. In one memory, Roberto is standing at the kitchen door, drying his hands on a dishtowel and watching Rossana in the hallway. She's on the phone with Oscar's father. A long conversation in which she listens more than speaks, her cigarettes and lighter within reach on the hall table. The role of confidante had fallen to Roberto in the early days: after all, the two men are old friends. But they're men, in fact, and their friendship is based more on doing things than talking: they need to lend money, take care of each other's children, hop in the car and drive somewhere fast to give proof of their love. Problems without solutions—problems that demand only the patience to stand there and listen—are problems that fall under the heading of women's specialties, and at a certain point Rossana took on that burden. And that is why there is a mixture of admiration and pride in Roberto's eyes. Because this wife who once seemed weak and has

shown herself to be so courageous is his, all his.

In another of Sofia's memories, she's with her mother in the bathtub. Sofia's sitting behind her mother, scrubbing her back with the loofa glove, and as she scrubs away Rossana tells her about her visit to the hospital earlier that day.

"You mean," asks Sofia, rubbing a bar of soap on the glove to make a little more foam, "they're not giving her any more medicine?"

"The medicine they were giving her before was like a kind of poison," Rossana explains. "It was meant to poison the tumor, but at the same time it made her feel worse. Now that she's stopped taking that medicine, she feels better."

"Does that mean she's being cured?" Sofia asks, even though she understands perfectly that the cessation of the chemotherapy means exactly the opposite. But sometimes she takes advantage of the fact that she's eight years old to attain effects like this one: she watches as her mother's shoulders tense up, observes her ribs relaxing in a sigh. She's curious to see how she responds.

One August night she wakes up in the midst of a gusting thunderstorm. She's never heard such a furious downpour. In Milan, her bedroom had double-glazed windows, an apartment above her head, another beneath her feet, and even a raging thunderstorm was just noise that could be shut out, like car alarms and ambulance sirens. But here, the thunderbolts shake the windows. The wind rushes down the rainspouts, producing a weird howling noise. The whole house feels like a bulwark just barely strong enough to hold up, and it might give way any minute.

And yet, Sofia discovers that she's not afraid. As soon as she gets used to it, the noise of the thunderstorm begins to keep her company. She doesn't like darkness and silence because they're empty, and it is their emptiness that frightens her. The thunderstorm is different: it's dense, it's packed full, it's made up of light and sound, it's alive.

She feels the urge to talk about this with Oscar, so she turns over in his direction and turns on the bedside lamp. Only he's not in his bed. The sheets are all rumpled, the pillow is crammed together and shoved down to the foot of the bed. Sofia looks at his clothing on the chair: a faded blue T-shirt, a pair of grass-stained denim cutoffs. She wonders whether he needs her help. She gets up and goes in search of him.

Downstairs, she checks the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, the cramped little laundry room, and the room that was meant to become her father's office, then she goes back upstairs and finds Oscar in the last place she would have thought of looking for him: her parents' bedroom. He's in the bed, between the two of them. Roberto takes up more than his half of the bed, snoring open-mouthed, with his chest heaving up and down. Rossana is curled up on her side, face turned to the wall, as if she were always cold. Oscar sleeps snuggled against her back. Did he wake them up when he went into their bedroom? And what might they have asked him? So, Sofia will say when she grows up, of all the possible phobias, this is what that old pirate will be afraid of: thunder, lightning, and storms at sea.

She's not sure she likes what she's seeing, whether she'd like to be in that bed with them, or instead call them to order with an indignant shout. Then she feels like an intruder, there at the door spying on someone else's family, and so she leaves them sleeping and goes back to her own bedroom.

The story she will tell about the last day won't be the farewell, but instead something that happened immediately prior to it. It's the end of the daily battle: Oscar is leading a handful of survivors on a last-ditch attack on the bridge when Sofia, from the cabin where she's being held prisoner, sees a man arrive; she thinks she recognizes him. Perhaps it's because from a distance he resembles her father. Oscar and his loyal followers have been encircled—by this point the only choices left to them are to surrender or face slaughter—but at that moment Sofia's interest is drawn more to the stranger than the battle. His hair is thinning and unruly, and his face is creased

with weariness. He wears an elegant but rumpled suit, and looks as if he might have slept in it. Once he reaches the shore of the pond he takes off his jacket, drapes it over the backrest of a bench, and sits down. He unbuttons his shirtsleeves and rolls them up to his elbows; then he sits there watching the children play. He's in no hurry to interrupt their entertainment. If anything, he wishes he could let this moment draw out: let Oscar keep on playing pirates, spare him the bad news, rest for a while in the sunlight. He notices that a little girl, tied to a pole in the cabin, is watching him, and he recognizes his friend's daughter. She has a bandage over one eye. She has shot up like a weed since the last time he saw her. Why do children stare at people? Why don't grownups teach children not to stare at people? Why shouldn't we stare at anything that catches our interest? From a distance, the man smiles at her. And Sofia smiles at him.

Some time after Oscar's departure, there's a party. During the summer, while the last few houses still remained to be sold, the village of Lagobello was recorded on the official land registry maps, so where once there was a blank space now there's a cluster of houses with a name. To celebrate the event a number of the residents have suggested a village picnic: how nice it would be, they said, if this turned into a tradition over the years. And so, one September Sunday the men set up a long picnic table in the park, while the women make far more food than they'll ever be able to eat. The picnic is pretty successful. Though it's hardly the village festival a few residents dreamed of, a number of people who'd never spoken before have now shaken hands, and many linger to continue the conversation after the coffee is served. One or two hurry home to fetch a bottle of liquor. A radio is tuned to the championship soccer matches. On the meadow sit empty chairs, isolated pairs of card players, and a single boisterous table with children running around it.

Sofia is hidden under the table, leaning her back against her father's knees. Surrounded by grownup legs—the women's shoes kicked off into the grass, the men's belts loosened—she watches her friends at play. A couple of times since Oscar's departure, the kids have tried playing pirates again, but it never quite worked out. The war cries rang out feebly, there was a lack of the requisite fury in the hand-to-hand combat. It had all turned fake. At a certain point someone said: "Who wants to play soccer instead?" and the others raised their hands with visible relief.

Still, this afternoon, during breaks in the soccer game, while playing goalie, or when the ball is far off down the field, each child sooner or later stops, looks up toward the cabin's thatched roof, and gazes at the old Jolly Roger. The flag has started to weather under the sun and rain, it's started to tatter and fade. More days will pass before a gardener decides to haul the old flag down: today King Death still flutters over the empty bottles, the melting leftover ice cream, the napkins that have blown onto the grass, the coffee grounds in the bottoms of the demitasse cups. Not far away, in the houses still scented with fresh paint, certain finishing imperfections are about to become permanent. The bare electric wire on the stairs, the section of moulding that's missing behind the sofa: defects that no one will bother to mend anymore, flaws that will live on in commemoration of these pioneer times. The kids too will have a mausoleum to their childhood. Not even years from now, as they set overgrown pet turtles and goldfish free in the pond, dare each other to perform death-defying dives in spite of the rules against them, or sit on benches trading, variously, confessions, boredom, shared cigarettes, and sexual fantasies, not even in the days of *Lagonero*, *Lagomerda*, *Lagobucodiculo*—twisted distortions of the name Lagobello, changing it from Lake Beautiful to Lake Black, Lake of Shit, Lake of Assholes—will they ever be able to look out at their little islet without thinking back to this first summer, the golden age of piracy.

That night Rossana and Roberto start fighting again. They've both had too much to drink and all it takes is a spark to set off a brushfire. Sofia hears them shout words they've never uttered before. She peeps into the kitchen and there she sees her mother and her father, with pulsing veins, bulging eyes, and a clear itch to hurt each other. She takes fright and runs back

upstairs.

Shortly afterward, kneeling beside her bed, Sofia breaks off in the middle of an Our Father. She feels as if she might have gotten something wrong. Did she just say *debtors* or *begetters*? She can hear the two of them, her parents, her begetters, shouting from all the way downstairs, and she repeats this new version to hear how it sounds. *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our begetters*. She knows that she's blaspheming, but this sacrilege has no particular effect on her. They're only words, she thinks: they didn't work when they were supposed to make Oscar's mother better, they didn't work to keep Oscar with her, and now they're not going to work to make those two downstairs quiet down again. She gets to her feet. She decides that prayer is useless and that she will never pray again.

Then she takes the bedside lamp from her nightstand. She pulls out from under her mattress the book that Oscar left her, not as a precious gift but as rubbish, because that last day he was so angry that he never wanted to hear another word about Hell, Heaven, secrets, or even his cherished treasure. The *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. Sofia throws open the armoire, sticks the bedside lamp inside, wedges herself in between the linen drawers beneath and the clothes on hangers above, using a pile of sweaters as a cushion. Once she's made herself comfortable, she turns on the light and opens the book. She extends one foot out of the armoire and pulls first one then the other door shut, and all that remains of her bedroom is a dark and uninhabited expanse.

TWO HORIZONTAL GIRLS

The little girl had taken all the postcards to bed with her. She called them *the collection*. They were scattered all over the sheets and wedged between the pillows, where she could line them up, arrange them in columns, switch them around, alphabetize them or put them into chronological order, or distribute them as if they were cities and towns and the mattress was one big map. The big girl, stretched out on the floor at the foot of the bed, had first explained to her that she couldn't really refer to them as a *collection*, since they had all been sent by one correspondent, that is, her father, and then she'd done something far worse. With an enormous effort of the will, she'd reached up a hand from the linoleum-level where she lay to the bed-level, and she'd convinced the little girl to hand her the first three, four, or five postcards in the row. The room they were in was dominated by white. The walls were white, the sheets and pillowcases were white, the curtains on the windows were white, the gauze bandages on the little girl's wrists were white. The big girl had laboriously opened her right eye, like a shipwrecked sailor blinded by that expanse of blinding white pack ice; then she'd checked the stamps and the postmarks and asked the little girl why on earth she thought the postcards had all come from the post office of East Verona, if each of them were marked with a different city: Amsterdam, Aosta, Athens, Bangkok, and Berlin. She had even been on the verge of explaining to the little girl that her father wasn't an archeologist or an explorer, much less an agent working for the intelligence service, constantly moving around the world. Her father was quite simply just one more husband who had left his wife to start a new life, probably with a younger woman, somewhere in the greater Verona metropolitan area. Then the thought of family, any family at all, had triggered a surge of nausea, so instead all she'd said was: "Oh what the fuck do I care; as far as I'm concerned you can all just drop dead. I'm mustering my last ounce of strength to keep from vomiting."

Maybe the little girl had understood or maybe she hadn't, perhaps she'd already figured it all out on her own, maybe she'd just heard the phrase *drop dead* and had taken it to heart—whatever the case, she'd burst into tears. She's started to sob and wail, stretched out on her belly in the middle of all those world capitals, and she hadn't stopped since.

"Please, please, please, please," the big girl had said, eyes shut tight and fingertips pressed against her temples. "I already have a million white-hot nails hammered into my brain."

Now the little girl was crying harder and harder. At linoleum-level, as the big girl cursed

her own bad habit of always standing up for the truth, no matter the cost, she heard a very familiar cadenced sound coming down the corridor toward them. Rubber clogs, on their way. They traveled the entire corridor and came to a halt just a few feet away from her head, right outside the door of the room. The big girl held her breath. She imagined the nurse stopping to consider, weighing the pros and cons of a possible intervention. She imagined the nurse putting her ear to the door, trying to decide whether that sobbing constituted sufficient cause to go in and check on the occupant, or whether the terms of therapy didn't instead recommend allowing the crying to die out on its own. Then the little girl seized the initiative and, unable to contain her sobbing, took a lion-sized bite into her pillow. The good taste of clean linen helped to calm her down. Detergent plus fabric softener plus ironing and starch: a providential sedative that helped her to stop her sobbing in no more than thirty seconds. The big girl lay listening. Outside, the rain was tapping at the glass, inside a clock tick-tocked away. A couple of attendants had been sent out to look for her in the van along the asphalt road, following the one and only possible escape route out through the forest. The entire ward and the dormitory would be searched thoroughly, without haste, room by room, bed by bed, closet by closet, if the attendants were to come back empty-handed. The clogs reversed course and went back to where they'd come from.

"Christ on a cross," said the big girl, once the nurse was fading into the distance. "I need a cigarette." She was stretched out on the floor as if her back was broken or she had a bullet in her ribs an eighth of an inch from one lung. She said: "I have a million, no a billion white-hot nails hammered into my brain."

"I'm *shorry* but I don't have a *shigarette*," said the little girl, as she sucked on a corner of her pillow at her bed-level.

"Obviously you don't," said the big girl. Cautiously, as if she were still in the crosshairs of the sniper on the roof, she extended her right hand toward her jeans pocket. From that pocket she extracted a transparent plastic cylinder, identifiable at first glance as the outer shell of a ballpoint pen, stripped of its ink reservoir and snapped in half. She lifted it to her lips, pinching it between her thumb and forefinger, and took a long, solemn drag of pure ambient air. She held her breath for a few seconds, then blew out that imaginary smoke. Then, last of all, she twisted her head to the right and to the left, cracking the vertebrae in her neck and relaxing her cervical muscles.

"Are you smoking a *ballpoint pen*?" asked the little girl. She still had a corner of the pillow in her mouth but now she wasn't sucking on it anymore, she just nibbled at it every once in a while, observing with great interest everything that was happening at linoleum-level.

"This isn't a ballpoint pen," said the big girl. "It's a metaphysical cigarette."

"What does *metaphysical* mean?"

"Something that you can't see but it's still there, you understand?"

"And why did you want us to *all drop dead*?"

"Oh, that's nothing but a manner of speech. I always talk that way, I always say *drop dead*, *drop dead all of you*, *I'm dying*, or else *kill yourself*, *go hang yourself*, *why don't you all just kill yourselves*, but no matter what I say nobody ever dies. It's just a way of letting off a little steam."

The big girl took another drag on the cylinder. Even during their conversation her sense of hearing was focused like a sonar device in certain key points of the compass. The courtyard, the corridor, the other patients' rooms. At the moment, she was not receiving any anomalous noises.

She said: "Anyway, what's your name?"

"Margherita," replied the little girl.

"I saw that on the postcards. It's a perfectly nice name for a well behaved little girl, but it sounds like just the kind of name your parents must have stuck you with."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know anything about Indians? I don't mean Indians from India, I mean redskin Indians. The Sioux tribe, you know about them?"

"More or less."

"Then listen. Try to pay close attention and understand everything I tell you, because I

have no intention of explaining this twice. When a Sioux child was born, its parents gave it a sort of provisional name. Just a name to call it by while it's still small, you follow me? Like Margherita. But when the child grew up, and his nature revealed itself, the tribe's medicine man would observe him for a while until he had come up with the right name for him. You do know what a medicine man is, don't you?"

"Of course I do. A sorcerer."

"Right. But it wasn't the medicine man who was choosing the name, it was the name that made itself known. The medicine man was only a good observer. You understand the difference? You understand that no one else can decide who you are?"

"But I like Margherita," said the little girl.

"Oh Christ. They ought to study you at the university. You may be a freaking lunatic who just sliced open the veins of her wrists, but at least you like being named *Margherita*."

The little girl swallowed with a gulp. It wasn't clear to her whether *freaking lunatic* was an insult or a compliment. Finally her curiosity got the better of her.

"So what's your name?" she asked.

"Jonah," said the big girl.

"But isn't that a boy's name?"

"That doesn't make a bit of difference."

"How long has that been your name?"

"Since right now. Since two seconds ago. Since three or maybe four seconds ago. I, the undersigned, stretched out on the floor of Margherita's room, hereby declare that from this instant forward my name is Jonah, and I choose to be called Jonah until I change my mind."

"What did your name used to be, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I do mind you asking, because that name no longer exists."

"That's a shame," said the little girl.

Meanwhile, as the big girl was talking, her supersensitive ears had picked up a signal from the courtyard. Tires on gravel, in a puddle, on muddy grass. Attendants back from their sweep of the forest. The van pulled to a stop, then voices penetrated from outside. There wasn't a lot of time left now. The big girl took another drag on the cylinder.

She said: "So, anyway, Margherita, I beg your pardon for the invasion. I just needed a change of scenery."

"How's your headache?" asked the little girl.

"Better."

"Can I try it too?"

"Try what?"

"The *megaphysical* cigarette."

"That's absolutely out of the question."

"Drop dead," said the little girl.

(sample translated into English by Antony Shugaar)