

THE BREAKING
OF A WAVE

Fabio Genovesi

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*Translated from the Italian
by Will Schutt*


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To my mother and father

To myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing
on the sea-shore, and diverting myself now and then
finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary,
whilst the great ocean of truth lay
all undiscovered before me.

—ISAAC NEWTON

THE BREAKING
OF A WAVE

PART 1

The breaking of a wave cannot explain the whole sea.
—VLADIMIR NABOKOV

HI, I'M TAGES. WHO ARE YOU?

There's this Etruscan farmer digging holes in a field and since he's Etruscan he's doing it like three thousand years ago. No tools, no nothing. The poor guy's really doing it the hard way.

By accident he digs one hole deeper than the others and the earth below begins to move. A hand pops out, then an arm, and in the end a whole child emerges, a kid with white hair who leaps in front of the farmer and says, "Hi, I'm Tages. Who are you?"

The man doesn't answer. He doesn't breathe. He's shaking so bad you can't tell whether he's shaking or dancing. He opens his mouth but the only thing that comes out is a terrified scream so loud the whole Etruscan population hears it and races to see what's happening. And what's happening is this crazy thing that the Etruscans saw for real and that I only heard about from my brother Luca. And I know it sounds absurd and out there but I totally believe it.

Then again I believe everything. My name is Luna and I'm thirteen years old and up until last year I still believed in Santa Claus. At first he even scared me. Because let's face it, this story about a stranger who sneaks into your house at night and brings you a bunch of presents, well, it sounded weird to me. I mean if someone gives you a present he'd want you to see him, right? That way you can thank him and tell him he's awesome and he'll be happy. But Santa Claus, he enters through the fireplace when everyone's asleep and then he runs away.

That's not good guy behavior. That's burglar behavior. In fact, the morning after, while the rest of the children in the world were racing to see what Santa Claus had brought them, I was checking the rooms to see if he'd stolen anything.

Like that time I'd begged with all my heart for a new bike, the blue bike I'd seen in the window at Santini's. But on Christmas morning, there was no bike under the tree, there was Mom and Luca, all serious and bummed out, and Mom started saying, "I'm so sorry, Luna. Things are tough this year and we can't—" I stopped her right there. It wasn't her fault, I told her. I knew that sooner or later Santa Claus would steal our presents, and who knew what good my bike was going to do him up at the North Pole.

But he would usually bring me a couple of presents. In the end I even grew to like him a little. Until a year ago when I was in seventh grade and the last day before Christmas break the teacher gave us a homework assignment called "The Big Little Disappointments in Life: How I Felt when I Found out Santa Claus Doesn't Exist."

I wrote it down in my journal, I read it, I read it again, I looked around the room to see if the others were shocked too or if it was just me. But it was just me.

"Excuse me, Teacher, I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, Luna?"

"No, I mean, what do you mean Santa Claus doesn't exist? It's not true. I hate to break it to you but it's just not true. Is it?"

The teacher didn't say a word. Neither did my classmates. For a minute it was so silent you could hear the custodian cursing at the coffee machine in the hallway, then the whole class burst out laughing, calling me the meanest words in the world. The teacher said, "Quiet, quiet, everyone, or you're all getting an F." But no one listened. Instead they started launching crumpled paper balls at me and erasers and pencils and other heavier, harder things, but I ignored them because all I could

see in front of me was Santa Claus waving goodbye, leaving for good. He and his elfin pals were disappearing along with the house at the North Pole and the eight reindeer from his sleigh. Comet, Donner, Prancer, and . . . I can't remember the others but who cares, it's not as if they're real, they're just nonsense made up to make me look like an idiot, and the only thing real in the world were those hard pointy things my classmates were firing at me.

But Tages is another story. Tages has nothing to do with Santa Claus. He really did exist. Sure, the story of a kid with white hair who popped out of the earth may sound weird, but so what, everything in the world is weird. A man meets a woman, puts his penis in her and after nine months a baby comes out of her tummy—is that any less weird? To tell you the truth I think it sounds more normal for someone to pop out of the earth like, you know, a flower or a mushroom or a whole bunch of other stuff around us.

And if someone says there's no such thing as a kid with white hair, that means there's no such thing as me either, since that's exactly how I was born. I have white hair, white skin, and my eyes are almost transparent. I have to be careful the sun doesn't burn me and what little I see of the world I see weirdly. But that doesn't mean I'm make-believe; I'm an albino. It happens. There are albino birds and albino fish and albino crocodiles and monkeys and whales and turtles. Even plants can be albinos. Even flowers. It's totally normal. But not for people, no sir. People always complain that life's all the same and flat and boring. But if someone a little different walks by they spaz, they freak. Like my classmates, who think I'm the Devil's daughter or a vampire, as if I could put a curse on them or maybe infect them with this thing and suddenly they'd all turn white like me. I don't know what exactly they're thinking. I only know it hurts when they pick on you because you're

different. And it hurts even more when they're scared to pick on you and keep their distance.

Anyway, all this just to say there's nothing weird about the story of Tages. Tages was just an albino kid who turned up one day and started talking to the Etruscans.

"Hello, people! I've come to teach you how to read your fate," he says. And I'm positive they all looked at him then looked at each other and then somebody raised his hand. "Pardon me, Tages, but what's with the white hair?"

Tages gets upset. He pounds on his leg. "Really? I come all this way to talk to you about your fate and you ask me about my hair?"

"Yeah, well, it's weird."

"There's nothing weird about it."

"Actually there is. It's white. I mean, if you were old it wouldn't be weird, but you're not and it is."

Tages shakes his head and doesn't answer. Luckily there's a woman in the crowd who does. "Wait a minute, guys. You're being unfair. If you ask me, Tages isn't weird. He's just a dwarf. An old dwarf who looks like a kid. Isn't that right?"

"No! I'm not a dwarf and I'm not old. I was born with white hair. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, no, of course not. But look, frankly, it's pretty weird."

Tages lowers his eyes. He looks at the hole in the field where he came from. "You people are a bunch of dicks. I've got a mind to go back underground without teaching you squat. I should have gone to the Egyptians or Babylonians. But I'm here now so cut the crap and keep quiet. We don't have much time. I mean I do because I'm immortal but you are not, so listen up."

Tages takes a deep breath then starts to explain. And for a minute the Etruscans continue to stare at his white hair. But his words are so mesmerizing they begin to listen to him for real. Some even take notes. Tages talks about lightning, earthquakes,

and other weird things that happen in the world. He tells them they're all signs sent from heaven. He tells them about the flight of birds, about statues that catch fire and sheep born without hooves, and the more he talks the more they realize that this guy really knows his stuff. And maybe that's why his hair is white, because he might be a kid but he's as wise as an old man.

Only an old man who's in shape, who has his head together. Not like my Grandpa Rolando who thought he was an American soldier named John. Me and my brother Luca would ask him how come, if he were American, he didn't speak the language, and he would say a bomb had exploded next to him and he was still in shock. In fact he couldn't even say the word "shock." He said "sock." And every evening me and my big brother would listen to him tell the same old story about the day he found himself alone staring down the whole German army and he had to flee on foot from an enemy plane chasing after him. At one point Grandpa saw a gigantic tree that he hid behind and there he found a dead soldier holding a rifle. The rifle had only one shot left so Grandpa waited until the airplane was right on top of him, took aim at a bomb under one of the wings and at the very last minute fired. The airplane exploded.

The German pilot ejected just in time, descended slowly on his parachute, then began running toward him with a pistol. Except instead of shooting him, the German shook his hand and said something. And here, at the end of this story that Grandpa told us every night, the same way every time, he always had the German say something different.

One time he said, "Dein aim ist equal to dein courage, Herr John." And another time: "Today you have taught me what courage is, dear John." Or: "John my pal, join me at the bar, I'm buying this hero a beer . . ."

Whatever he said was always new and always beautiful to

hear, but then I wondered aloud how the German knew his name was John and where the two of them had managed to find beer on a battlefield . . . That's when Luca would squeeze me hard and clamp a hand over my mouth. "Come on, John," he'd say, "it's late. Time to hit the barracks. The two of us'll keep watch tonight."

Grandpa would say yes, it was time, salute us military-style, and wander off to bed. Exactly the same night after night, year after year. Then in September Grandpa died.

Just like that, in his sleep. When he went to bed he was alive and when he woke up he wasn't. A couple of elegant men arrived to place him in an open casket and arranged it in the living room so that people could come see him. Except no one came.

Every so often Mom would go in for a bit and I would go with her, except I'd stand by the doorway because I was scared to look Grandpa in the face. I kept my eyes down and looked at his hands resting on his tummy, and since I don't see too well they seemed all one thing to me, white and frozen and fake. Then I looked up and there was Luca beside the coffin. He'd stayed with Grandpa all day and all night.

At dinnertime I stuck my head in the door to ask him if he was going to eat with us. "Coming," he said. But he never came. So Mom sent me to fetch him again.

"You coming? We're having fish sticks and peas."

"Yum. I'll be right there. I'm just going to finish saying goodbye."

"You're saying goodbye to Grandpa?"

"No, I already said goodbye to him. Now I'm saying goodbye to John and the German soldier."

"Ah," I said, "I see," even though I didn't see very much.

"I was just thinking, do you know the German soldier's name?"

I shook my head.

“Me neither. Grandpa never said. Why didn’t we ever ask him?”

I thought about it, didn’t know what to say, said nothing.

“Too bad. It’ll remain a mystery,” said Luca in that calming voice of his. Then he went back to chatting quietly with all the people he was saying goodbye to in the coffin.

I nodded as if I’d thought that stuff about the German myself. But I hadn’t thought about it at all and suddenly in my head I could see all these people together, waving goodbye and leaving for good. Grandpa, John, the nameless German. They were all going where Santa Claus and the elves and the reindeer had gone, where Grandma had already gone, and where my first goldfish had gone, too. (His name was Signor Vincenzo, and in reality he was more black than gold.) I saw them going round and round, fast, like in a vortex, becoming smaller and darker and finally vanishing.

Then I felt this stinging around my eyes. I ran to the kitchen, buried my face in Mom’s sweater while she was setting the table, and hugged her hard. And she said, “Oh no, Luna, cheer up, don’t cry . . .” but from her twisted, broken-into-tiny-pieces voice you understood completely that she was crying too.

It’s normal, I think. Sometimes things happen that you can’t do anything about, you can only have a cry and go on, waiting for something different to come along. Like the Etruscans, who in my opinion cried a whole bunch at the end of that afternoon, when Tages stopped talking and waved goodbye and then went back underground same as the setting sun. And in my opinion they returned to that spot every day and the farmer who discovered Tages continued to dig really deep holes all his life, hoping that sooner or later he’d find him again.

Because Tages had taught them a lot: how to read the will of Heaven in what happens on Earth, how to read your fate in the world around us. Great, thanks, Tages, but why are you

leaving now? What's the point of recognizing fate and the things that come your way if you can't avoid the bad stuff, and the good stuff, even if you hug it tight, slips off into the vortex of the past? Like you and your Etruscan friends who are all dead and have left nothing behind but smelly, dusty tombs. Like Santa Claus and Signor Vincenzo and Grandpa. Like everything that blows in and blows out, and where it all ends up I don't know.

THE HAPPY EXPLORER

It's Saturday afternoon and I'm trying not to fall asleep while Mr. Marino is talking about the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of mass, and a bunch of other mysteries in the faith. But the biggest mystery of all is why on earth every Saturday Mom forces me to come to catechism.

Normal parents I get. That's just how they are. They complain about having to look after the house or keep up with work and having no time to do the things they like, and meanwhile they force their children to live like them, school and homework all week, and Saturday and Sunday, which could be free, really aren't free at all because of catechism and mass. But Mom, she's different, sometimes almost too different: When the sun's out, for instance, she doesn't wake me up. She says it's too pretty out to shut yourself in a dark, stinky school. Say I have an assignment due in class that day, or my teacher is planning to quiz me. Instead I open my eyes and it's already ten o'clock. I call the shop where Mom works and tell her I'm ruined. Tomorrow at school the teacher is going to kill me. That's just for starters. And over the noise of the hair dryer and her customers' chatter she answers me all upbeat: "What's the fuss? You won't go tomorrow either. Problem solved, right?"

No, problem not solved. That may work for Luca, who gets up in the morning, slips into his wetsuit, and heads to the sea with a surfboard tucked under his arm. He only goes to school every once and a while, when there aren't any waves, just to do something else for a change. He takes his seat and everyone

crowds around his desk, all worked up and happy to see him. Then he earns a string of great grades and it's thanks a bunch and catch you later.

In fact, Luca doesn't even have to show up to school. He got a good grade this week even though he's off in France surfing with his friends. Yesterday, he told us, the philosophy teacher was supposed to quiz him, but since Luca wasn't there, the teacher gave him a B+, on faith, saying that Luca would never earn anything below a B+. Luca can breathe easy. I swear that's what happened. He himself sent us a text about it, and Mom and I laughed long and hard.

Although honestly it's not fair. I mean I'm happy for Luca, since I may not know what philosophy is but you can bet he does. He knows about everything in the whole world. What I mean is it's not fair when teachers do that. And it's not fair when they mark you down for misconduct if you show up late to school or don't do your homework, while when I do that, unh-unh, with me they smile and tell me not to worry. They think my white skin makes me frail and weak and that even though I'm in a normal class I'm not at the same level as everyone else and if I make a mistake it doesn't matter, the important thing is I tried.

They even want to assign me a special needs teacher. Every year they tell me so and every year I tell them I don't need one. Sometimes they insist. That's when Mom takes over. She tells them I don't need any help, that what they should do is hire someone to clean up the bathrooms—they smell like roadkill. They also want to give me a computer because the print in books is too small for me; I look at the pages and seem to see several straight rows of ants lined up next to each other. But I use a magnifying glass made for that very purpose. I slide it over the lines to enlarge them, and even if it's heavy to carry around and makes my head spin a little, with the magnifying glass I can read for half an hour a sitting, which may not be

long but it's a hundred thousand times longer than a lot of my classmates.

At any rate, it's not fair that I need a magnifying glass to read. It's not fair that they treat me better or worse than the others. None of it's fair. But what is really unfair is that today is Saturday and the beach is two minutes away yet I can't go because for some mysterious reason Mom makes me come to catechism.

So here I am, in a dark, damp room that stinks of boiled potatoes, sitting at a desk identical to the ones at school. The catechist reads stories from the Bible and afterward we have to summarize them and write down what we think about them, which is practically the same assignment we get in literature class, except about God.

The Bible stories describe either the life of Jesus or stuff that happened way before him—that stuff's called the Old Testament and it's way more exciting because God is always getting angry and destroying cities with balls of fire or sending killer insects to eat people.

With Jesus, on the other hand, there's never any action. I like him, I do, but sometimes, as a character, he resembles me so much he gets on my nerves. People treat him like dirt and he says nothing, just stands there and never retaliates.

Mom is always watching movies with a Chinese guy named Bruce Lee, and the stories of Bruce Lee begin just like those of Jesus. You see him walking down a street or in the middle of a marketplace. At a certain point some thugs turn up and start bothering him. But he keeps walking with his head down. Then one of them goes too far, pushes him or insults his mom. That's when Bruce Lee loses it. He lets out this weird scream and flattens two guys with one kick. He hurls another at the rest of the gang. Then he knocks the dust off his pants and heads back out onto the road with all these people massacred behind him.

Not Jesus. He's the son of God and if he wanted to, he could bring down a river of fire from the sky. He could turn his enemies' hair into a bunch of cobras or vipers that bite their necks a million times. Instead he just stands there and takes it and never fights back. In the end the only move he makes is when he turns the other cheek. Some feat. The catechist says that next year we'll be confirmed and confirmation means joining Christ's army. But what's a guy who never fights need with an army?

If you think about it, though, things could be worse, a lot worse. In place of Mr. Marino we could have Mother Greta for catechist. She's from Trentino and looks like a very old, very ugly man dressed as a nun. She has a massive jaw and one eye larger than the other, which, when she looks at you, aims a little above your head. She's not the only nun with this defect. There are at least three. Maybe it's because nuns always keep one eye on earthly things and one on those saints up there.

Anyway, Mother Greta is everyone's worst nightmare, and after catechism she waits for us outside in the convent playground. Which is really just a stretch of asphalt with a single seesaw and a crooked bench. As of a few weeks ago there's also a heap of deflated truck tires that the nuns use for a new game they came up with called "The Happy Explorer": they line up the tires in a row, snugly, one after another, so that they form a kind of tunnel, and the goal is to crawl in one end and slither out the other. But the tires are all dirty and hard and uneven, and the tunnel is narrow and smells like pee, and even if many of my classmates are pleased to play "The Happy Explorer," I wonder what there is to explore in there. I'm especially curious to know how this is supposed to make us happy. Confined spaces scare me. In fact as soon as I see the sisters pick up the tires I tell them I want to go pray and then disappear into the chapel. But last Saturday Mother Greta caught me. With her, my prayers don't stand a chance.

“Where do you think you’re running off to?” she asked, stopping me in the middle of the schoolyard, with that voice all gravelly dribbling down her double chin.

“Excuse me, Mother, I’m going to chapel to say a Hail Mary to the Virgin.”

“Save it for later. Come, we’re playing ‘The Happy Explorer.’”

“I really wanted to pray right now.”

“You can pray later. The Virgin is in no hurry. Mary has many virtues and patience *is* one of them. I, on the other hand, have no patience, so go on, get in the tunnel.”

But I couldn’t get in. More importantly I didn’t want to. I only wanted God to help me, to rain down fire from the sky or send locusts to eat Mother Greta. If God were too busy, a saint would do fine. Just as long as Jesus didn’t come. Please not him. I already knew what he would say.

“Luna dear, go on, get in the hole.”

“But Jesus I don’t want to!”

“I know. But get in the hole anyway. And remember to forgive them.”

“I have to forgive them too?”

“They know not what they do.”

“That’s not true. They know exactly what they’re doing. They’re hurting me!”

And Jesus would have looked at me, smiled, and raised his eyes to heaven. Then he would have crawled in the hole with me to keep me company and do a bit of suffering together.

“Go on, little girl, move it!” insisted Mother Greta, while all the kids jumped up and down, shouting, “Move it!” Unlike me, they couldn’t wait to get inside.

“Don’t you see you’re ruining the game for your friends? Why is it they play along and you don’t? Do you think you’re special? Do you think you’re different? Don’t you see you’re the same as all the others? Come on, kids, give the wimp a hand!”

That was exactly what they'd been waiting for. They dove on top of me, took hold of my arms and the hood of my sweat-shirt, and shoved me into the tires.

I was chest deep in the tunnel. They kept shoving me in by my legs. Someone even untied my shoelaces. In my mind I kept repeating the thing I always think of when I suffer some abuse: it could be worse, I could have been born in Africa.

In Africa being an albino and steering clear of the sun is hard enough. But the real problem is that down there, albinos don't last long. There they are in their villages walking around without a care when a jeep arrives and guys with giant knives hop out, kill them, and carry them off. All because witches concoct magic potions with albino legs and hands and hair and blood. Any piece will do. When an albino dies, the family has to cover them with bricks, otherwise at night someone will dig them up and rob the parts he needs until bit by bit there's nothing left. And if you're a girl like me, then it's even worse, since men with AIDS think that by sleeping with an albino woman they'll be cured. So they rape you, infect you with AIDS—and goodnight.

In other words, look, this is just to say that things weren't going so badly for me. They were pushing me into the tires where I might catch some infection, sure, but I definitely wasn't catching AIDS, and instead of chopping off my legs they were only untying my shoelaces. So inside the tunnel I kept saying to myself, "You could be in Africa, you could be in Africa . . ." Then they started to bang real hard on the tires with their fists and feet. From inside it felt like a lot of bombs exploding all around me, like the German ones that almost killed Grandpa, back in the days of soldier John, when he went into shock after all that bombing. Maybe I would wind up the same. Maybe I would come out of that hole and go crazy and think I was someone else too. It actually didn't seem like such a bad thing to crawl out the other end and not be me, since, from where I

stood—stuck in the dark, smelly old tires—my life really sucked, and the one good thing about being in there was that no one could see me when I stopped fighting, lay my head on the rank rubber, and started to cry.

So that explains why the sound of the bell signaling the end of catechism sends a shiver down my spine like a diabolical serpent and I begin to shake. Last to leave, I get to the schoolyard and brace myself for what has to happen. But when I take a look around, I realize immediately that I won't run into any more trouble: in the playground, for the first time ever, is Zot. I'm spared.

Zot's in the same class as me. He arrived last month. The principal brought him in one day and told us his name was Zot, that he came from Chernobyl, and that it was our job to make him feel at home. I looked at him. He kept his eyes down but maybe for a moment he looked at me too, and it was clear that for me the worst was over, that Zot had come to save me. Short and scrawny, he had on a giant pink wool sweater so long it looked like a dress; extra wide, worn-out loafers; an old-guy gray checked jacket, and a hat crowned with a feather set crooked on his rug of curly poodle-like hair. I put on my glasses and took a closer look. It was clear that from that day on I could breathe easier at school, because if an insult were flown, or a gob of spit or a punch, they were all headed for that boy there, like bugs to a light bulb.

But Zot had yet to be seen at catechism and I had thought that because he came from Russia he was a communist and an enemy of religion. Yet here he is, already being manhandled by some boys and shoved inside the tunnel and screaming, "Scoundrels, quit it! You're making me perspire! You're ruining my cardigan! Mother, I implore you to come to my aid! Bring these people to their senses!" in his thin little voice and the flawless, granddaddy Italian he speaks.

They continue to push him in by his feet and poke fun of his worn-out loafers, which I can see now too, since I'm standing just a foot away. I smell the odor of the tires and feel something boiling up in my legs and chest, like a force growing bigger and warmer and driving me to move, to stop them, or at least try to, to scream that they suck and deserve to burn in the depths of Hell. Maybe Jesus himself is making me boil, to jolt me, to urge me, "Go on, Luna, don't be afraid of your convictions, don't be scared of what they'll do to you. It's the right thing to do. Do it for me . . ."

But I stay put. I shake my head and say, "No way, Jesus, forget it. I'm not doing that for you. You're the Son of God and you could stop them in a second. You could send locusts or make frogs rain down or change the playground into a lake of fire and only save Zot and me. You could let us fly far away, to a place where we'll be left in peace."

But as usual Jesus does nothing, just makes my arms and chest shake and stands there reminding me what I should do. The only day things went my way and I could return home without a care in the world, practically problem free. Yet here I am, opening my mouth, talking, trying to do something.

Besides, if I wait for Jesus—goodnight.