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## **NORMAN ISLANDS**

by

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*(Le isole di Norman)*

ENGLISH SAMPLE

“Walking in the footsteps of the past is never a good idea.

You might end up finding that the past doesn't exist, not in the shape you've always thought it did.”

*(from the back cover of the book)*

## CHAPTER 1

### GEOLOGY

Elena knew she was running out of time. She had an hour, maybe two, before her mother's return from her usual sad pilgrimage from one doctor to another. She pushed the white wooden door with a strong hand. She entered the room with narrowed eyes, opening them a moment later to peer into the dark. She looked at the columns of books for a few minutes before deciding what to do. Then, she went down to her room on the first floor. She tore a piece of paper out of a notebook, picked up a pen, and went back upstairs. From the threshold, she had a full picture of everything: the bed structure, the double mattress, the white wooden headboard with two nightstands on the sides, and the piles of books. She had taken measurements of the room, counting the tiles. Twelve tiles in width, twelve in length. She had drawn a grid on the paper and written numbers and letters next to it. From 1 to 12 horizontally. From A to N vertically.

That day, the day she made her first map, was a Friday, and that somehow seemed like a good sign. She liked Fridays. *Fridays, don't hesitate.*

After preparing the grid, she blackened the boxes which matched the books' columns and took note of the codes at the bottom of the page. There were four: B1, B7, F1, J8.

J8 was the one that gave her the most to think about. It matched the side of the bed that used to belong to her father. It was occupied by one book now. *The Magic Mountain* was on the pillow, resting like a head. She had approached the window. A clear, windy morning was spreading behind the shutter. Hair of women on their way back from the market twirled restlessly, and the swollen sails were shuffling away from the small Harbour. She had opened the window, the door frame covered with a uniform patina, and the wind had flooded the room. She had jumped to sit on the windowsill, her legs dangling, breathing hard, and holding her first map tight in one hand. She had touched the wood of the shutter with her index finger and sucked the salt from it. And then she lingered like that, hanging around, while on the opposite building site somebody was working inside a pit.

From the first day on the Island, she had loved that room and its view. The room at the top, isolated, as small as a ship's cabin, with a large window overlooking the sea and another one on the roof, shaped like a porthole. Tiles like waves, where fierce cats fought each other. But that wasn't her room. She had another one downstairs. That room belonged to her mother.

A few years have passed since that first map; years that Elena spent observing with firmness and dedication. Whenever she can, she rushes upstairs. The position of the columns, the number of books per column, the column arrangement. It may happen that the piles remain on the same box, with an order apparently unchanged; and only by watching carefully, the changes emerge. A book, even just one, that moves from the top of one pile to the bottom of another. Diligently, Elena takes note of everything.

To her, maps are a thread holding her mother tight to the house. She keeps them locked up in the desk drawer of the study where she had moved when she gave her room to her father. It hasn't been a sudden change, no fights, no screaming, nor explanations at the table. It happened the way things usually happen in their family, with no one talking about it explicitly. One day she saw her father coming out of the bedroom carrying his reading lamp, and she understood. The black cable of the lamp, slithering on the floor between rooms, sanctioned a definitive move.

Each one of them occupies a different room now, and Elena has taken over the studio. A long, narrow room, just enough space for a bed, a desk, a dresser, and a chair. It's a dark room, with a frame that was once a broken glass. Next to the window, a small door gives access to the old wooden staircase going upstairs. There is a hidden room there where her father, as soon as they arrived, had arranged a darkroom, with an enlarger and some bowls on the landing. Even though he has given up photography for years now, the drying threads still go up the steps, fading away into the darkness. Elena studies her maps in this little room. On Sundays, when time itself seems to stop, she hangs them in orderly sequences and contemplates them for a long time. In the dim light of a lampshade, she tries to decipher her mother and the constellation of her mood. Pile of fifteen books in J6: a good sign. Moving the pile from I4 to J9: nervous submarine movement; trouble in sight. New cruiser A3-A4-A5: opening towards the sea, change. Look for a connection. All the maps from January: identical and sad, like the end of the holidays but not of the cold. All April maps: always different, the first one makes you crazy. All the maps from September: month of good intentions, unreliable. She is looking for a connection, patiently and stubbornly. She draws diagrams on an old slate board hung on the wall. The number of books, positions, dates are presented in rows and columns. She looks for a link, trying new combinations. She adds the columns up, subtracts the lines, looks at the diagonals. She goes back into the darkroom exhausted, resigning herself to staring at them all together, as if her desire can be enlightening, as if a developing bath could reveal the image of the woman who had been her mother.

In an old high school photo, she sees her faraway smile, a tail of black hair, some big round sunglasses, and a skirt too short.

*It's Friday, like for the first map*, Elena thinks as she unwillingly clears the table. Her mother watches her from behind a coffee cup while her father reads the paper and waits. One map. she would only need to make one map. *A map to straighten the day*, she thinks on her way to the bathroom.

"Don't take too long," the woman says.

"I'll fix my hair," she replies, locking herself in.

*A map to catch my breath*. Alone in front of the mirror, she stretches out her hand to turn on the spotlights on the sides. She pulls down the zipper on her sweatshirt to uncover her neck. As she keeps staring, she grabs a rubber band, puts it between her lips, and pulls her hair back. She starts turning her ponytail, one, two, three times, until she feels her forehead and the back of her neck pulling. Then she stops, putting her palms on the sink. *One map, it wouldn't take much*. In all these years, she has developed quite an eye. *Twenty minutes, half an hour tops*. *A map to give me courage*. She turns the water on and starts playing with the faucets. Hot, cold. Cold, hot.

Lunch made her nervous. The noises come muffled from the closed door. Everything is normal, she might say. But lunch made her nervous, nonetheless. Her mother's tone was as distracted as ever but with a high note that lingered in her ear like a whistle. Every time she talks about her youth, Elena gets impatient. No matter how carefully she listens, she can't put places and dates together. The timeline is always uncertain, she can never really understand what came before and what came after. Like the story of Renato, and her intense years in Milan. She just can't understand when her mother might have been in Milan. But maybe there's nothing to understand, and it's only her fault. She can't stand the tales from a world of which she wasn't part of yet, a world that her mother reports with nostalgia. *One map, just one map*. *A map to put everything back*. *It's just nerves, that's all*. Then again, she's happy when her mother's chatting at the table. It's better this way than when she locks herself in her room, lost among the columns of books. *I wonder what she does in there all day*. No TV. No phone. No radio. Just books. Maybe she reads them all. Maybe she plays with the covers, swapping them like dolls' clothes. Perhaps she forms columns based on suggestions, on feelings, on memories. Or maybe she puts them on the ground, laying them in a spiral, and she stands in the middle, and then kicks them down. All the books fall around her, from first to last, like dominoes. *One map, one map*.

[...]

"Elena!"

Her mother's behind the door.

She opens her eyes, putting a hand on the forehead.

“Your father’s waiting in the car!”

“I’m coming!” she screams, sticking the can back where it belongs. She goes out of the bathroom and finds the woman there.

“Why did you put your hair like that?”

“Did you go to a different perfumery?”

“Why?”

“The eye contour... it’s not your usual one.”

“I don’t know, yes... I think my aunt gave it to me.”

“And don’t you smell anything strange?”

“Elena, why are you going through my creams?”

“The smell, I mean. Doesn’t that remind you of anything?”

“I don’t like how you put your hair.”

“You noticed it too, didn’t you?”

“Elena, what’s gotten into you today? Is this about the university? Don’t you want to enroll? Daddy will take you, what more can you want...”

“Mom, did you notice that or not?”

“Is it because your hair is dirty? All right, come on, it’s okay.”

“I don’t have dirty hair. Anyway, it’s fine, let’s do it as usual,” says Elena as she collects the paper sheets on the chest and puts them in her backpack.

“Then let it down. All women look better with their hair down”, she screams from the landing while Elena is already on the stairs.

They cross the bridges, leave the Island, and go through the deserted city of the *controra*, reaching the cemetery road, and then the highway. Oleander bushes on the road block sight of their lane, while on the radio a man tells of a mummy just found on the Similaun. Elena looks at her father driving seriously, his gaze fixed in front of him. The beard well cared for, with some hints of white but still thick. The cigar dangling from his lips.

On that September of several years before, the Friday of her first map, she had sat at the window and watched the sea and the workers dig. With a salty taste in her mouth, she had thought about their days at the beach. Her father was reading *The Magic Mountain* under the umbrella. The book swollen with sand and salt. Her mother next to him, hiding in a huge hat, smiling.

Suddenly, she feels like she can’t breathe, so she rolls down the window.

She doesn't like to leave her mother alone. What if she goes out and gets lost? What if she leaves and then she can't find her way back? The heat of early afternoon clashes with her cold thoughts. It might be because of that mummy. The cold coming up from her legs might be at fault.

There's nobody on the street. The chimneys peep out from behind the hill, announcing the industrial area. The cylindrical silos, the tankers in the background.

Maybe it's how she saw her earlier at the kitchen table that makes her feel as if she's going backwards, even though the car is moving ahead. Then there's Etna, with its asymmetrical form. You can't see the top. It's foggy today.

"How does mom look to you?" she decides to ask.

"Beautiful, as always," he replies. "Are you sure you didn't forget anything?"

"She seemed upset."

"You filled the form out right, didn't you? And did you get the receipt? Do we have to go back?"

"You already asked me that. It's university enrollment, not NASA".

Her father nods without a word.

Elena knows what that means. It means he doesn't want to talk about it.

"I don't think it's good for her to talk about unreal memories."

"What do you know about it? You weren't even born."

"You don't need to be born to know things. But all right, forget it. As always."

[...]

When she finally gets out of the administrative office, she looks for her father's car and finds him reading the newspaper in the driver's seat impassively.

"All done?" he asks her after she has closed the door.

"Yes."

"You're a freshman," he smiles, tapping her leg. "Now what? Where do we go?"

"Home."

"Weren't you supposed to see some rooms?"

"I cancelled."

"But why?"

"I've decided I'm not moving anymore."

"What do you mean, you're not moving out?"

"There are buses."

"Every day? But that's more than three hours!"

“It’s not so much in the end. Besides, I like buses.”

“What are you talking about? You have always thrown up in the car ever since you were little.”

“That’s not true. I didn’t throw up today.”

“Ever since you were little. All the time.”

“I said I’m not moving. That’s final.”

“But you’ll get tired.”

“I’ll only go to the classes I’m interested in.”

“Going to university means many other things too.”

“Like what?”

“Socializing. Getting by on your own.”

“You sound like a parlour sociologist. Besides, you used to travel as well.”

“But what’s that got to do with it? I was already engaged to your mom. I didn’t want to leave her alone.”

“That’s right. Me too.”

“Uh-oh! This is an announcement! You have a boyfriend, and you tell me nothing?”

“Boyfriend? What are you talking about? I’m 20, and this isn’t the 19th century.”

“What’s he doing? Is he studying?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend, dad, stop it. I have mom as well...”

“What do you mean?”

“We can’t leave her alone.”

“Well, I’m staying with her.”

“Suppose one day you’re not there. What if something happens?”

“Elena, don’t talk nonsense. Nothing will happen. What’s going to happen? Mom and I will go on with our lives, like we always have. As usual.”

“As usual.”

“That’s enough. Shall we discuss what’s usual? Maybe from a mathematical and statistical point of view?”

“I wouldn’t dare. Not with a math teacher. It’s just that I can’t help thinking about that story, you know? *All happy families are alike...*”

“Get out of here. You read too many books, like your mother.”

“Why do you want to send me away?”

“I don’t want to send you away. I just want you to be free.”

“But I am free.”

“With this situation... these last few years...”

“What did you do to change it?”

“It’s not as simple as it looks.”

“Why don’t you answer me?”

“I’m your father. It is my duty to be responsible.”

“Oh yeah? Is that why we stopped for coffee at the machine?”

“What’s coffee got to do with it now?”

“So, you could put four bags of sugar in it without mom knowing it.”

“Elena, stop it. Don’t you want to move? Fine, don’t move. I just wish you’d get out more, see people. And instead it’s like...”

“Like what?”

“No, come on. Let’s stop arguing.”

“Like what?”

“Like if you want to watch over mom. You didn’t even want to go on that school trip.”

“They were going to Greece. I hate Greece.”

“All right. Come on. Stop. Can we buy a candy bar?” he touches her leg again, smiling.

“You can’t, and you know it.”

“Like many years ago, come on.”

“Many years ago, you weren’t sick yet”, Elena replies, *and even then there was little to celebrate*, she thinks.

“Okay, fine,” he smiles. “If we’re lucky, we’ll find mom still around the house.”

*As if she could disappear at any moment*, Elena thinks, but she immediately regrets it. Her dad’s obtuse optimism makes her nervous, but so does her cynicism, and there’s not much she can do about it. She feels like a prisoner, because she only wants one thing too. For her mother to be awake, waiting for them at home.



## CHAPTER 2

### WASHING MACHINES

They reach the house after dark. The whole street is dark. Only the lighthouse above the prison roof is lit, casting the shadow of the Bourbon building on them. The One-Eyed House, as they call it, has been empty for almost a year since the Santa Lucia earthquake. But the lights still shine, making its desertion even more gloomy.

“Broken,” says her father, pointing at the streetlight in front of the car.

“It must have been one of the Lupo guys,” Elena remarks. She opens the door and looks back towards the car. The Lupo family, who live in the tangle of alleys behind them with the banana tree, are masters of the block. They have a herd of children who have fun throwing stones at street lamps and torturing cats.

There’s no one about. She goes down, looking out onto the balcony of the house, trying to catch the light inside.

“Good evening, Miss Pretty!”

A voice in front of her makes her jump.

“Hello Filippo”, her father says.

“Mr. Filippo, excuse me. I didn’t see you”, Elena stutters.

“No harm done, Miss,” he replies, smiling at her. “Good evening, Mr. Michele! How are you?”

“Not bad, Filippo. And you?” her father answers, opening the front door and turning the stairs light on.

“Here we are, Professor,” the man replies, while a black snout peeks between his legs.

“Achille, what about you?”, her father bends, and the dog approaches to smell his hands. He’s a mutt who lives with Mr. Filippo in one of the basements under their house, among the fishermen’s potholes. Mr. Filippo is a skinny man with crooked legs like a soccer player. No one knows much about him, not even how old he is. He lives alone and sees no one. When they arrived on the Island, he was already there. His tattoos speak for him. *Denise I love you*, written inside a pierced heart on his left forearm, and a star in the hollow between his thumb and forefinger. Rudimentary in their conception and technique, they refer to long pauses of consideration; a prison, a nursing home, a transoceanic journey to peel potatoes. He has little hair left, long on the shoulders and tied in a narrow ponytail, and few teeth in the mouth. He smiles frequently, showing his gums.

“He ate half a chicken today,” he says to her father. Although the front door is already open, Mr. Filippo doesn’t seem to want to say goodbye.

“Do you need the car, by any chance?” her father asks him, taking a step back and turning towards him.

Mr. Filippo is a multitalented repairman, as stated on the cardboard hanging from the glass of his door in twisted but firm capital letters: REPAIRS. Sometimes he asks to borrow the car to retrieve some parts from the reseller or in the landfill. “I manage, but my speciality is washing machines”, he told them once. He always leaves his door open. So Elena passes by and greets him, even when he is hiding behind the flowered sheet pulled through on a wire which delineates his bedroom. The dining room is the outside step on which Mr. Filippo shares his meal with Achilles, and where he often stays even in the afternoon, rolling cigarettes, and hoping that some broken washing machine pops out of nowhere.

“I’ll lend it to you, Filippo, but you know the rule: no slippers. You can lose your grip and then, you know, it only takes a moment...”

“Professor don’t worry. I’m a pilot,” the other one says, tapping his hand on his chest. “It’s small business, half an hour tops. I have to go to the city to pick up just two pieces. It’s like I’m already back.”

“Take care of yourself,” her father says handing over the keys.

“I told you not to worry. And however, look here, Professor”, he says, pointing at his feet: he brings a pair of closed shoes. The previous owner must have had huge feet. They are so big that Elena doubts that the safety level has really improved, but she says nothing, as the man starts the car while Achilles stiffly sits in the passenger seat.

The light on the first floor reveals that her mother is still awake. She appears on the top of the stairs.

“Oh, you have arrived, finally. The washing machine is broken. the washing machine is broken,” she repeats without even saying hello, twisting in her hands a dishcloth that’s dripping on her feet.

Several puddles appeared in the hollows of the old floor, all over the kitchen, and the living room.

“What happened?” the father asks.

“I don’t know. I ran it as usual. But it didn’t finish, so I opened it,” she says, heading for the stairs to her room. It’s always like that. The unexpected confuses her, and she responds in the only way she knows: Locking herself in her room.

“Don’t worry. Come on. We’ll work it out. We only have to call someone,” the father says to Elena. For a moment, the idea of checking Mr. Filippo’s abilities springs to mind. The father shakes his head, smiling.

“Too bad”, Elena says.

“After all, he’s out picking up pieces,” her father jokes.

“Yeah. Who knows when he’ll be back.”

“We must hurry.”

They call a toll-free number. And after a while someone rings the doorbell as they move on a floor packed with bathrobes and towels.

The technician puts his metal case on the kitchen table and tinkers with the machine for the better part of half an hour. Finally, he pulls out a piece of cloth and puts it on the table together with his invoice. Elena picks it up. It is a flowered belt with metal eyelets. From the length, it seems to belong to a little girl’s dress.

“That must have been it,” the man says. “They get stuck in the basket, especially if they’re old.”

Elena looks at the patterns on the fabric. She seems to recognize it. They’re red poppies. She turns to her mother, but she has returned to the kitchen.

“What time is it?” the woman asks without looking at her. She’s not so pale anymore. “Mr. Filippo isn’t back yet?”

The thought of Mr. Filippo caught them unprepared.

“What if he comes back just as the technician is leaving? What if Miss Lidia tells him?”

Miss Lidia lives below their house, next to Mr. Filippo. She’s so discreet that they couldn’t say exactly when she arrived. The first time Elena saw her was early in the morning. She was sitting on the front step, smoking a cigarette. Her hair dyed a bright red, a long fake silk dress printed with big flowers, a thick layer of make-up on her face that made her look like a mask – an effect emphasized by the eyelashes: long and soft gull wings, which seemed to yield in the trembling of the first heat.

“Good morning, Madam”, Elena had said to her, but the woman hadn’t answered immediately. Only when the girl had almost closed the front door behind her, she heard her answer, “You too, Miss”.

“He was looking for some pieces”, her father repeated. “Take the money from the Butter Jar and give it to the gentleman”, he adds, addressed to Elena. The man looks at him strangely, while she goes towards the cupboard, lifts the lid of a ceramic box, and pulls out some bills.

“And then, see? He’s not back yet,” she says as she gives the money to the technician. The possibility that Mr. Filippo might find out they had their washing machine repaired by someone who wasn’t him – and for a fee, to make matters worse – fills them with embarrassment.

“He’s such a good person. How can we disappoint him?” her mother is saying as she walks around the kitchen table, holding napkins and cutlery.

“Well, let’s tell him he was my boyfriend!”, Elena replies, pulling her head out of the fridge. There’s nothing ready to eat, as usual. But it’s nine o’clock, her mother is usually in bed by then. Instead

they're all together in the kitchen. She finds some olives and a piece of cheese. Still unsatisfied, she climbs on a chair to look in the cupboards. One can of dried tomatoes, two cans of tuna.

All three of them sit at the table now drinking wine and telling tale after tale in sequence. Each adaptation makes them laugh harder than the last.

"Why can't I have a boyfriend?" Elena insists.

"But no. he was one of dad's colleagues, a working-class teacher," the mother answers.

"Shut up, everyone! I know it. He came to ask if we could recommend him to Mr. Filippo, the most famous washing machine repairman on the Island", her father replies.

It's difficult for them to stay serious when Mr. Filippo eventually rings the doorbell, way past eleven o'clock.

"You'll have to excuse me, Professor. Something came up."

Looking out the window, Elena and her mother see only Achilles, wagging his tail and smelling a big clutter. A water heater maybe.

"Don't worry, Filippo. There's no problem. Whenever you want", the father says.

"My regards to Mrs. Clara", the man says and closes the door, while mother and daughter go back to the kitchen giggling.

"Everything all right with the forms?" the mother asks her as she's busy clearing the table.

"Everything's fine," Elena replies, and her feelings, the irritation at her mother's overly high-pitched tones that she experienced only a few hours before, seem far away. She goes to her room happy and slips into bed. *The cloth with the poppies. I had to ask her what that piece of cloth was*, she says to herself, almost asleep.

Then she falls into a deep, intense sleep. She dreams about a carnival of many years before, a masked party, children dancing happily; As if that night she had made not one, but a hundred maps.