

English Translation of Ch. 1.1. from page 11- 28

Chapter One

September, in which a voyage across the Corsican sea leads to the discovery that the inhabitants of a village have all fled and of another surprising absence.

[1.1] *Preposition noun verb article noun conjunction article noun verb preposition noun conjunction noun verb article noun.* Evidently, in the beginning was not the verb. At least not here. Here, in the beginning there was only a trivial ‘preposition’, the unadorned name of a monosyllable followed by other grammatical labels and nothing more; in the beginning, here, was only order without meaning, the exoskeleton of a thought without thought, like the empty carcass of a desiccated insect.

Without comment, without a sigh, I quickly thrust the letter back inside my black leather folio. Sealed with a red string it was soft and redolent of the good things in life. This was where I kept all of the letters sent to me over the years by the *Signora*. I’d always called her that, ever since I was a child. I tucked it away rapidly, like someone who, intently focused on something important, is startled to remember they’ve got some other urgent task to take care of: I would decipher the message later. It was the throaty, powerful blast of the ship’s horn that had startled me: filling the air to bursting, announcing our entry into the bay. Standing on the main deck, I’d been watching the sun on the sea’s horizon when I snapped my head around to look in the opposite direction: we were already in Calvi bay, in Corsica.

Calvi bay is a marvellous natural amphitheatre, emerging from the water and embraced by an unbroken chain of mountains, all peaks and valleys, which almost cuts an ellipse from the sea, the promontory of the old citadel—pointing towards one of the two foci—bears the profile of a sailing ship made of stone. The citadel, the original nucleus from which the settlement had grown, had been fortified by ponderous bastions in the sixteenth century, erected shortly after the inauguration of the Genoese governors’ palace, and now served as a French army barracks. To those arriving by sea, that image of a castle with the silhouette of a ship, anchored in a bay protected by mountains, is imbued with a poignant sense of wonder, and this wonder is all the more intense because it emerges after hours of crossing, when one’s eyes seem to have forgotten the vertical dimension. It creates the impression that it was designed by teams of engineers and architects, like an Emperor’s palace, rather than an unintentional combination of natural forces; yet it’s no less amazing and harmonious for that. The stone, illuminated by September’s slanting light, was a blend of exotic earth tones. Like a piece of Indian fabric with an embroidered hem, it clearly delineated the deep blue of the sky, unmarred by even a white wisp of cloud.

However, I had no time to be moved by that vision, even if it were possible. I’d come this far to work, and I was planning to have it all finished as quickly as possible, so that I could get back to Paris within a few weeks at most. I was there to earn some money: contemplation wasn’t on my schedule.

I hadn’t even experienced the thrill of a difficult crossing. Sailing from Genoa had been exceptionally uneventful. The September sea living up to its reputation: favourable breezes, the tame tailings of a tramontane wind, a *tramontana chiara* as the Italian sailors once called it. That wind had been our constant companion, creating only rare flurries of

whitecaps and a sky so intensely clear that one could intuit the stars even before they appeared. Even now, as we arrived, the weather was impeccable. It was neither a dark nor a stormy night; in fact it wasn't night at all. It was evening, an extraordinarily calm evening, one of those where you see both the sun and the moon in the sky and no longer know which one is rising. The only crack in the gelid indifference that stood between me and that paradise was the perception that, despite the nearness of Corsica, there was an immeasurable distance between the island and the mainland. This wasn't the first time that I'd seen the 'mountain in the sea'—as mariners had once christened the island—but each time it was as if I were entering an alternate world, or rather entering the real world, while the one I'd left behind seemed an implausible memory.

The turbulent reversal of the propellers slowed the ferry, shaking everything and signalling that docking operations were underway. I needed only to grab my backpack and the suitcase with my equipment and I was ready to disembark. With a final glance from the deck towards the bay, I noticed that the sunset light had begun its skirmish with that of the houses on shore. Diverting my gaze to the iron ladder that was being leaned against the keel, I blinked the tenderness from my eyes. The brisk movements of the sailors on the jetty as they hauled on the ropes to dock the ship, the rush of chattering passengers and loads of luggage towards the exits, the greetings of those who had been waiting for the new arrivals: it all should have filled me with light happiness but instead I felt alone and far away, even if I didn't really know from what and especially not from whom. The only truly familiar sensation was the scent of rosemary and grilled meat coming from an inn near the port that was preparing to serve the evening meal. I disembarked with the intention of getting something to eat before locating my hotel.

The memory of that morning's events returned vividly to my mind: I had arrived in Genoa from Paris the day before my departure for Corsica and found a room at the *Locanda della Formica*, where I always like to stay when I'm in Genoa. I choose that inn, not only because from my room you could see the church where Andrea Doria—one of my heroes—is buried, but especially because, just below the window, there's a bakery specializing in *focaccia* that rouses my senses better than any alarm clock possibly could. Being awakened by a sensory assault on one's nose is far more pleasant than an assault on one's ears. That morning, intoxicated by the scent, I would never have left that room, that inn, that city, or that country: but I had to leave for Corsica and accomplish the mission I'd been assigned. I was ready: a well-equipped backpack over my shoulders and a bag with everything I needed for the work. Standing up, and just about to open the door and leave the room, I was surprised by my image in the mirror. I looked at myself, stock-still. Mirrors—as you know—don't ever reflect; if anything, they suggest interpretations. Once again the glossy black curls were already springing forth from my round head and my beard—the kind of beard that seems to grow out of nowhere in a single night—, which outlined my well-formed lips, the only one of my facial features that I liked. I tried smiling to see what effect it would have but I was distracted by the image of my body. The fellow who once told me that I had the body of a soldier from the previous century was right: stocky, broad-shouldered, short. With my backpack on I looked as if I'd stepped out of an infantryman's commemorative portrait. Only my small, round, metal-framed glasses betrayed my passion for reading, which was matched only by my passion for food. I sighed, like anyone in his right mind does in the morning in front of the mirror. 'Elia Rameau,' the Signora once said to me, 'your eyes are long and smiling as if

the mystic gaze of the East had acquired the reasoned one of the West; don't waste them. Use them, use them up, fill them with tears of regret and you will be happy.' I was consoled by this phrase, which I didn't understand very well then and don't understand any better now, and yet it still seemed more convincing than most. Rapidly, I grabbed my bag to leave but stopped once more. I looked back at the room. I almost dove back into bed and gave myself over once again to sleep, still entangled in the sheets, lit up by morning's slanting sunlight. Instead, I thrust the door open and forged ahead down the hallway, the door slamming closed behind me, driven by a new current of fresh air. I let myself be driven forward by the same current. Today was a day of tramontana chiara. Time to go.

During the crossing I had gathered my cards, rearranged my maps and thought about how to do my survey. Before leaving I'd bought notebooks, microphones and cables. These last I had rolled carefully, following the grain of the plastic as my friend, a world-class expert both in sound recording and my anxieties, had taught me. Finally, I'd placed each microphone into its own fitted recess in a foam rubber insert that was perfectly adapted to a wooden box that I'd had made to order. Everything had to be in top working condition. My task was clearly defined: record and transcribe everything that was said and written in the village of Pietramala, in Northern Corsica. In fact, this language was the final entry in an unimaginably detailed and definitive linguistic atlas commissioned by the European Union to be compiled by a historic French company associated with the French Academy: the prestigious *Société linnéenne de linguistique comparative*. This missing piece of the puzzle was known as 'Area 44' in the technical taxonomy of the project, and Area 44 was my job. They had warned me that it was completely isolated and that it had been years since anything had been heard from the inhabitants. The site still seemed to be in good condition according to satellite imagery. There was nothing surprising in this. That's exactly how it had been for Area 45 and Area 22: the first in the Hornád Valley, on the border between Hungary and the Czech Republic, and the second in Andalusia's Barataria. If it hadn't been for a bit of money passing into the right hands, or perhaps due to other concessions, as insinuated by my Italian colleagues—clearly experts in the art of persuasion—I would never have managed to record anything.

So, at almost 30 years old, I found myself having accepted a temporary job. Following years of all-consuming study, I was disgusted with the university jobs on offer. It seemed as if the only information they considered pertinent was my date of birth, my sexual preferences and who tailored my jackets—those elements arranged in whatever order suited their pleasure. I'd cursed the day I'd decided to study for the five long years of college, during which I did nothing else, night and day. More accurately: I wasn't able to do anything else, really—I might as well be honest—I hadn't wanted to do anything else. Even now I don't know who or what drove me to study so much and so intently. Maybe it was my parents—in a way that I never understood—perhaps it was my own curiosity, maybe it was the Signora... I admit that the years I spent with her must have been a deciding factor. I still remember her words, her hoarse voice, peremptory and swift, when she spoke to me about my studies: 'Elia, you've certainly noticed that the common consensus is that a Jew's sole and characteristic aim in life is to become rich. Nothing is further from the truth. For Jews wealth is only an intermediate step, a means of attaining the ultimate goal, not the goal itself. The Jew is determined to rise to a higher

level in the cultural world. Even the richest prefers that his daughter marry the poorest of intellectuals rather than a merchant. Even the most battered peddler, who trudges with his goods through rain and mud, will try to choose at least one of his sons to send to school, though it calls for exceptional sacrifices. It is considered as an honour for the whole family to acknowledge among its members anyone who fills the role of an intellectual: a professor, an expert, a musician, as if they are all ennobled through his achievements.’ This is what the Signora told me. Without hesitation, she assumed that I must receive an education based on Jewish cultural values, utterly unperturbed by the fact that I was the son of a Catholic couple.

At that exact moment I remembered the enigmatic message the Signora had written to me, which I’d hastily tucked away in my leather folio. But, it was already late and I needed to find somewhere to eat dinner. I wanted to treat myself well. I was expecting long days of intense work even if—as I knew from experience— there were bound to be a few comic situations. I would encourage the residents of Pietramala to speak, record their voices in their dialect, registering the phonological structure and every nuance of phrasal intonation, every word—rigorously subdivided into the different basic semantic areas into which the atlas’ extensive dictionary was organized—along with every syntactic restriction of the rules that made up Pietramala’s language. Only, who knows how many times they wouldn’t understand and I would have to start over again or even resort to gestures to mimic what I was asking for in the oddest ways.

And to think, I would have preferred a job that required me to look at the sky; it needn’t have been a noble profession, not necessarily an astronomer. I could’ve just been a kite seller. Meanwhile here I was: with my notebooks, my microphones and my cables.

I went up to the little square that links the fortified citadel with the rest of the town. Strange plants, thick and stubby, which they say can never succumb to disease or fire, filled a small dirt field where a group of men that resembled them were playing *pétanque*. Following my instinct, I stopped in one of the restaurants overlooking the square: the one that seemed to be providing wine for the *pétanque* players. The sun had already gone down. I didn’t have to wait long; a waiter, until that moment intent on watching the match, noticed me and came over to my table. Walking quickly and drying his hands on his clean apron as he approached, he seemed like someone who’d have preferred to sit down and eat dinner with me rather than served it. He pulled out a chair and sat down next to me at the table, resting his arm on the tablecloth as if we were confidants: he greeted me in Corsican, his rough voice in perfect harmony with his untamed features, and asked me what I wanted to eat. I returned his greeting in Corsican with pleasant words and a smile but the expression of my mouth didn’t coincide with the worried glance I gave him. Ordering food wasn’t easy for me. I would have to make him aware of what I needed and he surly wouldn’t understand: I would choose the full multi-course meal—from appetizer to dessert—even adding coffee and a small glass of *mirto*, a typical Corsican liqueur; but, I would want them served in reverse order. I gathered my courage and explained it to him with the air of a tour guide who’s describing the same monument to a group of tourists for the umpteenth time. The reaction I expected wasn’t even remotely close to what actually happened: not a sigh, not a smile, not a raised eyebrow. He repositioned himself at the table in order to better write down my order; he lined up the list of courses and then, unperturbed, simply drew an arrow alongside the list, pointing from bottom to top. At that moment it seemed to me that I was normal. It

also seemed that I'd been an ass for underestimating him. Of course I didn't tell him that I would have chosen certain dishes to simplify the dinner. Each mouthful of food on the dish should be arranged in a rational way, and if there are elements that are too disparate it makes it really difficult to combine them symmetrically. In comparison, dishes that have only one element, like some kinds of risotto or a frittata, are relaxing. They don't need to be arranged and combined in a specific way. I know it's really not necessary to combine everything in a particular way, but I didn't want to be disappointed and discover that I didn't have the right balance in my mouth. Besides, all of the trouble I took in combining saved me the embarrassment of not knowing where to look, or rather kept me from attentively observing the expressions and whispers of the other diners: the longstanding couples who chew without saying anything, the colleagues who speak ill of colleagues who speak ill of colleagues, those who are in love for the first time and secretly watch the other's tongue moving, instinctively synchronizing their bites and then—even worse—those eating alone, like me, who recognize that they're not even unique in their solitude. I had no recourse but to my own thoughts, hoping that the few other diners could guess nothing from my gaze.

What do you think about when you eat alone? If no one asks me, I know; if I try to explain it to the person who asks, I don't know. That evening my first thoughts touched on my school years, perhaps because of the rancour I was feeling about being there, doing such a trivial job after all the effort I'd put into my studies. I thought of the professors I'd met, and repeated to myself what I'd said more than once: I used to hate the ones who wanted to teach me something. I always preferred those who would let me steal, indeed who invited me to do so, of course without saying so. The ones who made me want to make their ideas my own, and not only ideas but also the ways they expressed them with supreme confidence—down to the gestures, certain oscillations of the voice when they came to key concepts, or a rhythmic opening and closing of the hands as if punctuating the air. I wanted to make them mine. Of course ideas, on the other hand, can neither be given nor imposed. To transmit them it's necessary to make someone feel envy and jealousy, educating by inciting the temptation to steal, and allowing it in the end, and rewarding it with false distraction. The small glass of mirto arrived, just preceded by the coffee. My dinner began.

For some reason I felt completely trapped. I was at an age when I should have felt that anything was possible, as if I still could have become anything, everything; yet I felt nothing. I'd completely lost that sense of vertigo: there was no longer any space for the unexpected in my days and therefore no space for the future. I found myself observing my own life like one looks at those games where you line up millions of dominoes. When you're born the first one falls and, one after the other, they all proceed to fall, each one knocked down by the preceding one, even over long distances, thus eliminating all doubt as to the origin of the causes—at least the most immediate ones—but eliminating along with it every ounce of creativity. A little bell might ring, a coloured ball crash and bounce, a spurt of water extinguish a candle; but everything is more or less predictable and obvious, let's say semi-Cartesian, the *res extensa* part. The only uncertainty in this carillon was, unfortunately, the last possible event: the domino at the end of the line that could no longer be thrust against another. In those moments of realization I had once been surprised and overwhelmed by the awareness that what I could only see happening to others, and what is the only certain thing besides the present—I didn't want to name

it—, would happen to me too. This had stirred a gasp of hope and reason in me, for which I was not well trained. Now, I was just tired. Too tired even to find hope in the unexpected: I felt death—it was no longer necessary for me to avoid the word—coming to meet me. It was coming just a bit slower than boredom and, if they were both hunting me down, it seemed like I might as well expedite the impact and run directly into the arms of the first. Right at that very moment a fragrant chestnut flour cake arrived, perfumed with a perfectly balanced fig jam, followed by an excellent plate of polenta served with beef stew cooked in a full-bodied red wine. The watering of my mouth overrode the tears in my eyes.

I didn't even have anything to read as a distraction during dinner. Not that I don't enjoy reading, quite the opposite, but as usual I'd failed to bring any new books on the trip, and not because they were lacking. I'd spent days preparing them, choosing them, and stacking them on the table, one on top of the other; changing, depending on my mood, the order or number, pulling out or inserting or replacing those which, at the time, seemed soothing to me because of their shape or colour—sometimes their smell—or those that provoked and intrigued me. Then, as always, when it was time to leave the house, I realized that I couldn't take them all. Yet, I was unable to choose one over the others; sweating and sweating and sweating, cold from the anxiety of not knowing how to choose. It happens every time I travel: in the end the stack of books, as I had finally organized them, remained on the table waiting for me to return, like a kind of temporary memorial stone, ready to be disassembled, reassembled and abandoned for another trip—for which I would leave with nothing to read. A cenotaph of words: that was my backpack.

On the other hand—here perhaps is God's own truth—I didn't read anymore because I was sick and tired of everything. I'd bought books that turned out to be just saccharin nods and winks at now one and now another cultural icon (which is to say at that most powerful of figures, the editor) good only as food for the critics who count. Or they were books that ask you to contemplate the beauty of a formula while at the same time telling you that you'll never understand it, thus teaching the reader modesty. Stories. I wanted stories to be devoured in a single sitting. The kind of stories that make you feign illness so you can avoid accepting invitations in order to finish them. Stories with a plot, with meetings, confrontations, coincidences, disappearances and revelations: ghost stories, my favourite. Deep inside I just wanted a story that maybe wouldn't end badly. I wasn't asking too much. But, of course I couldn't write it by myself; onanism is already a claustrophobic activity when it comes to bodily fluids, let alone when it comes to words.

And then, even if I had decided to write it myself, I wouldn't even have known where to start writing the story that I would've wanted to read. Should I use the first or the third person, the present or the past? Would it be better to write with pen on paper or on a laptop? At least I knew the answer to the last. Then there's the content: being so used to working with the rules of syntax, I didn't know how to work with semantics. The only element I'd mastered was that very human and very unique phenomenon known as punctuation. So human that no one has yet found any trace of it—albeit even in embryonic form—in the language of other animals. Punctuation is like an EEG of the dreaming brain—it doesn't show the images themselves but reveals the rhythm of the underlying flow—and moreover it's reassuring: if you were to find yourself, say, in the midst of a vertiginous relative clause, which sprouted up, useless and overlong, between

the protasis and the apodosis of a hypothetical period of the kind where you feel lost because at the halfway point you no longer recall what the writer was going on about and you're afraid that you'll have to start all over again and read the whole sentence from the beginning, then you can grab onto the commas clinging to which you'll be able to arrive safe and sound at the end of the sentence, trapping the relative clause between them; or if ever you were not able to stop in time before the full stop of a particularly long sentence, if some point and comma—charming hendiadys of a semicolon, icon of weak thought—had not made available decisive but not definitive resting spot(s) and allowed you, therefore, to slow down, in time. Not to mention the two dashes that, marking the arrival of an aside from a parallel but no less real world, create an emergency lane where a clause can slide in when another one is coming up fast, like two cars on a jammed ring road at rush hour. Punctuation is the scaffolding of the narrative. I would be able to distinguish Tolstoy from Gadda just by observing the emergence of the commas on a white sheet. Indeed, I would go on to say that all of western philosophy is nothing more than a reflection on the punctuation in the works of Plato.

To put an end to that reflection—if we can give that name to those ruminating thoughts—a plate of tagliatelle in wild boar sauce arrived at the table: it was delicious, apart from being a bit heavy on the nutmeg, which spoiled the flavour a little. When used together with cloves and cinnamon I detest it and I'm quite pleased that all three end up simultaneously in strudel so that in one fell swoop I'm relieved of the trouble of avoiding too many recipes. My dinner was well on its way to the best possible conclusion.

Of course, writing would have been a good diversion in an utterly predictable life. I would have written in longhand, in large notebooks. When I was little, I always liked seeing the act of writing on paper, and this was well before I learned to read: the smell of ink and the rattle of the nib as it travelled over the imperceptible ridges of the paper were the murmur of a happy insect sowing its black seed over white meadows in a pattern comprehensible to it alone. Then, once I understood those paths wanted to tell me something, a bit of the magic was lost, but the surprise of the gesture of writing still remained in my nose and in my ears. In the universe, the phenomenon of life—we know—is quite rare, and languages between animals even more so; but writing between humans, that's a truly moving singularity. I don't know if someone in some other galaxy knows how to write, to transfer the regularity of sounds—imprint of thought—onto an object so that whoever observes it makes those sounds live again, even when the person who wrote them is gone. As for the style I would have used to write, it was like the punctuation, but here there was no escape route. I knew that I would have thought and written like a man of the plains. All of that borderless sky, like a Cyclops' blackboard, would be impossible to replace. When the water of the rice fields used to double in spring—and here I'm talking about the sky—then I used to become afraid, although perhaps it was just misinterpreted happiness, that I wouldn't have enough ink for all of the thoughts I'd allowed myself to have.

Sometimes I would have preferred having the mind of a man of the mountains, one used to observing the light appear and disappear between boundaries drawn by rocky peaks. I would have felt reassured by the established limits imposed by that natural stage, and perhaps, in the end, I would have had more imagination. Captivity, intermittent and utterly predetermined by the light that appears and disappears behind those profiles, would have made me equal to the classic poet who writes his tragedy following a certain

number of known rules and who is freer than the poet who writes whatever is running through his head and is a slave to other rules which he ignores.

So, I had punctuation and style, those yes. But, I had no story to tell: I was like someone who had all of the equipment to make a steep climb but lacks a mountain. My despondency came back in a rush like a hot flash rising from my belly up to my chest and into my face, so much so that I was afraid it would be visible. Fortunately the appetizer arrived: crostini with olive pâté and sliced meats. Dinner was almost at an end and once again I'd managed to render that stupid and insipid Italian expression *essere arrivati alla frutta* meaningless, seeing that I'd had the fruit at the beginning.

I was pleased at the synchronicity with which I'd fully consumed both my thoughts and the food at the same time: I need neither invent new reflections nor order more food in order to balance accounts. Just then, I was struck by a sudden thought, like a sneeze in my sleep, which interrupted my ruminations (more mental than gastric) as I remembered the message I'd tucked into my leather folio. I pulled it out and reread everything, immediately, all at once and much more carefully. I read it over again. Nothing. My pride crumbled. If only the margins of the page had been too small I could have bragged that I'd solved the enigma but hadn't had enough space to write the solution and returned it to the sender. But, the margins were broad and ample, they were virtual town squares in which to gather ideas; and those were exactly what I lacked. I hadn't understood anything then; but now that I do understand, I also know that it would have been worthless to write down the solution, because if I hadn't followed the path that led to it, the solution would have been completely incomprehensible. That journey began that very night; and now, though I am old and my black hair has grown white, we can follow that path once again as I tell my story. So, I'll set out from here and you, if you'd like, may follow.

Meanwhile, the time had come to pay for my meal. The waiter must have sensed it as he reappeared, once again drying his hands on his clean apron: 'Eleven euro,' he said as if he'd long ago calculated the bill. 'A perfect total,' I replied, without getting any reaction. I'd never lost the habit of thinking about it. I am—just as well to say it now—polydactyl upper left. In concrete terms that means that I have six fingers on my left hand: an extra finger between my pinkie and my ring finger. This had of course left its mark on me, a fairly precocious child who was little inclined to take the world's measure with someone else's yardstick. Having learned how to count on my fingers on my own, I was convinced that 11 was the archetype of the perfect number, the parts into which everything was naturally organized. I still remember, when I was yet quite small, my mother sent me to buy a package of eggs for the first time. I came back home jubilant, sure that I'd been given an extra one for free. Then there were clocks, for me they had an hour too many twice a day, which I'd never understood how to explain or employ. Then, when they told me that you count by tens, I adapted and rethought all of my arithmetic (while continuing to think that perhaps clocks weren't built correctly). I became expert at using this new way of counting until, a few years later, my mother sent me to buy eggs again. At that point I had become the recipient of two free eggs: exactly—and surprisingly—the same number as there were extra hours in the day. In this I recognized the element of mystery for the first time. I surrendered. Then, as a young man, after the business of the eggs, when confronted with the issue of the Trinity, I finally understood that the world is not to be deciphered relative to the number of one's fingers.

Okay. I was in Corsica. I'd eaten but I was despondent, beyond despondent. There was nothing left to do but go to the hotel that I'd reserved, but one consolatory thought had come to me: my despondency was a stroke of luck. Sometimes it functioned as a shield that protected me from the delusion that necessarily comes from happiness assuaging expectations. At other times it was a providential mental bruise: keeping the mind swollen and painful, and thus quieted, but only for a short time, only because you mustn't hurt it again and so you leave it alone to rest and recover. I bid the waiter good evening without conviction. He seemed to take it with good humour. I picked up my backpack and stepped out onto the street. The wind had changed, it carried a different scent, a bitter one. I fastened up my jacket and cinched up the straps of my backpack. I had to start walking: I needed to get to Calenzana, the town where I'd planned to set up my base and from which I'd start my ascent towards Pietramala. A few drops of rain fell to let me know that the space between the clouds and my body wasn't void of content, but I never imagined how full it would become from that moment forward.