

MARINA DI GUARDO

NELLA BUONA E NELLA CATTIVA SORTE

In Good Times and Bad

Mondadori, 2020

English sample

PROLOGUE

Suddenly, it was quiet all around.

You could no longer hear the rustling of the leaves, the rhythmic chirping of the cicadas, the many unknown sounds that surrounded the woods.

It was as if time had stopped when Irene found that little girl's body lying improperly on the ground, with clothes crumpled and muddy, and hair covering much of her face.

And then there was that rivulet.

Dark, dense. A reddish flow widening like a stain and holding the head inside a ghoulish halo of blood.

A shiver coursed down her spine. It was something that she had never experienced before, not even when she was sick. It was the only vital sign in a body paralyzed and nailed to the ground, as if she had put down roots like the tall, still trees around her. Those evil shadows waiting for the outcome.

A voice made her wince.

"Irene! We must run now, or they will catch us. And it will be too late".

She finally managed to move one hand, followed by the other, and then every single part of the body.

She looked at Alice with ill-concealed admiration. Unlike her, Alice stood up to the fear and was already reacting, showing a strength that Irene had always envied.

"Yes," she could hardly answer, pulling back her hair.

Alice took her hand in a warm and welcoming hold, a safe guide in every moment of pain and uncertainty.

"Do you feel like running?"

Irene replied with a nod and together they rushed on the paths of the forest, the ones leading to the village. The brambles scratched their legs and arms; several times they fell, got up, turned back.

No one was chasing them.

They kept running, aware that they were not safe yet. They slowed down only when they saw the first lights of the town.

"It's best if we split up now. I'll go raise the alarm. You run to your parents. They must be worried." Alice said.

"Don't leave me alone, please," Irene begged her.

"We will meet again soon. We are safe now. Don't waste time. Go to your parents at once".

She saw her disappear behind a fence with a slower, confident pace. Irene felt another long shiver down her spine, but this time she ignored it and walked home.

She rang the doorbell. Her father looked out, his face warped by worry. He immediately went towards her, holding her and crying as if he had seen someone he had already taken for gone.

Irene, realizing his despair, could not hold the tears as well.

“Where have you been, my dear? I was so worried about you. Why didn’t you come straight back from school? Where did you go?” her father asked as he held her face in his hands, staring at every detail, checking that she was not hurt.

With a deep breath, Irene wiped her tears with a sleeve, cleared her voice, and tried to pronounce the words that was stuck in her throat.

“Something terrible has happened...”

ONE

The road became more winding all of a sudden. It was almost a prelude to the difficulties waiting ahead. A flat track was followed by hills, bends, and meadows of flowers.

She looked quickly into the rear-view. Through the window, her daughter, Arianna, was gazing at the world with an expression she knew all too well, the one of gloomy days. She would have turned 10 that October. It was easy to understand when she was sad by the way she held her eyebrows: constantly frowning. It was the only sign of discouragement in an altogether impenetrable look.

They were so alike. Arianna was growing up, and every day she discovered a new detail in which she recognized herself. Her blond hair was turning to that ashy shade that had belonged to her since youth. Her unusually blue eyes, wide and open on the world. The high cheekbones on her scarce face, the freckles on her nose, her slim figure. Looking at Arianna was like taking a leap back in time and remember how she used to be years before.

They had the same personality too. Both reserved, a bit shy, perfectionists. Like her, Arianna was good at drawing. Irene was hypnotized by the way she sketched confidently on the paper, the fast movement of the pencil, the innate ability to capture the essence of every detail.

Thinking about how much her daughter resembled her, she smiled softly until something brought her immediately back to reality. She had snatched her away from her habits, from the best school in town and her classmates, from the beautiful house she had lived in since she was born – all to drag her towards a new life, a life that Arianna would never have chosen.

For a moment, her gaze moved from the street to the mirror: the blue of her eye, the same as her daughter's, was now black. It was not a smoky effect of her makeup, but the dark halo of a beating. Because of that bruise, she could no longer recognize the delicate beauty of her Pre-Raphaelite face. She drew a long sigh, concentrated on the guide, and turned up the volume of the radio. They were playing a song that she listened to when she was young. She mentally hummed the words that brought her back to a time when everything was new, still to be discovered. Only ten years before, the world seemed to be at hand. Now, at the age of thirty-five, she was driving on a road she had never thought of going down before, her car overflowing with suitcases, pots, sheets, and a daughter with a terrible mood in the back seat.

“We’re almost there, Arianna. You’ll like it. I assure you.” she tried to console her.

“I don’t think so. Living in the country will be horrible”.

“Come on, keep an open mind. I was very happy there when I was little”.

Irene wrinkled her forehead. It wouldn't have been easy at all.

“But at 10 you went to live in the city! And I’m doing the opposite,” Arianna replied with a snort.

“You know that we have no choice. But it will be better this way. You’ll see. I promise you”.

A deep wrinkle furrowed deep into her forehead. The premises of that escape were not reassuring: a house to fix up, little money available, no help to count on, and a daughter who was a wreck. But, as she had repeatedly told Arianna, they had no choice. Running away was the only option.

She grabbed the headphones from her bag, put them on, then looked at the phone searching for the last number she called, Alice’s. She must have been on her lunch break at that time.

Although afflicted, Arianna did not miss a single move by her mother.

“What are you doing, mum?” she asked, intrigued.

“I’m calling Alice, so I can tell her about our departure”.

Her daughter nodded as a sign of approval. She had never met before her mother’s childhood friend, but Irene often thought about organizing a vacation, all three of them together. It would have been nice to see each other again. Sooner or later, they would have to do it.

“Hi Alice, we left an hour and a half ago. Still thirty kilometres to go and then we’ll be there”.

The voice of her friend echoed in the earphones. Irene imagined her sitting in a very fashionable London restaurant for a quick lunch, dressed in one of those career women’s pantsuits, with her short brown hair and piercing, almond-shaped eyes.

Alice seemed surprised by Irene’s decision.

“Then you really listened to me. I was afraid you had reconsidered. Did he follow you? Did he attack you again?”

“I waited until he left for work, then I grabbed as much as I could and left with Arianna”.

“And how did she take it? I remember you already told her about it”.

Irene hesitated for a moment. She did not want to unbutton too much in front of Arianna, but then she thought it was better to be open and sincere.

“It was a nasty surprise for her, but I explained that our departure was necessary, for the good of both of us”.

Alice let out a long sigh. She did not answer immediately either. She cleared her throat, waited a few seconds, and then said: “It was the only decision to make. You had to get away from that bastard earlier. How’s your eye? And the pain in your chest?”

“The eye is always black, but it hurts less. Luckily the ribs are only cracked, but driving doesn’t help with the pain. I should rest for at least three or four weeks and avoid lifting, but today I had to drag heavy suitcases and boxes. I’ll take a painkiller tonight, and in the next few days, I will try to look after myself, even if I doubt it”.

“But you’ll have to, for your own sake,” Alice replied.

“Some friends of my parents stayed at the house. I guess they left it in good shape. But it’s been empty for three months now. I’ll have to clean it from the ground up. And then there are the repairs to be done”.

Irene felt her heart beating faster and her face getting red. It was happening more and more frequently. She had been off antidepressants for a few months, maybe it was best to take them again, considering the difficult time she was going through.

“What is happening? Tachycardia again?” Alice asked in a worried tone.

Irene wondered how her friend was able to guess it. She had told her about the accelerated heartbeats, the feeling of not being able to breathe, the dizziness she felt in those moments: all obvious symptoms of a panic attack. She was often amazed at Alice’s instinctive ability to understand all her maladies, worries, and anxieties on the spot.

“How did you know?” she asked in a whisper.

“We have known each other for almost thirty years. Does that seem little to you?”

It was really like that. They had spent their childhood together, always in the same class. A spotless friendship that survived through their teenage years, even if in different schools, and then when both their families moved to other towns, until Alice went to live in London for work. They had seen little of each other since then, but they talked on the phone, even if not regularly. She was the only person with whom Irene could really be honest.

“It was nice to hear from you last week after so long. Thank you for helping me to finally make the decision to leave that house”.

“It’ll be hard, but eventually you’ll be happy with this choice You’ll see”.

They said goodbye.

Irene kept on driving without using the GPS. She remembered the way to the villa perfectly. She had lived there until she was ten years old. Even though she was still a child then, she had memorized every little detail of the place where she had spent her childhood.

She drove through the village. New stores, the park where she went every Sunday with her father had different toys and the little train she liked so much no longer existed. The lake was as she remembered it: placid, mysterious, with mountains surrounding it in a blue casket.

“Look, Arianna, I used to come here to play when I was a child. I would see the lake and think I was always on vacation”.

Arianna took a distracted look at the landscape, making a grimace that was supposed to resemble a smile. She did not answer, and her expression became more and more a frown.

“You’ll be fine. You’ll see,” Irene continued. “At first it won’t be easy, but together we’ll make it through”. She reached towards her, looking for her hand.

The little girl leaned forward and held it tight.

“Yes, you're right. Together, we'll make it,” she said after a while.

Looking into the rear-view mirror, Irene saw her wiping a tear with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.