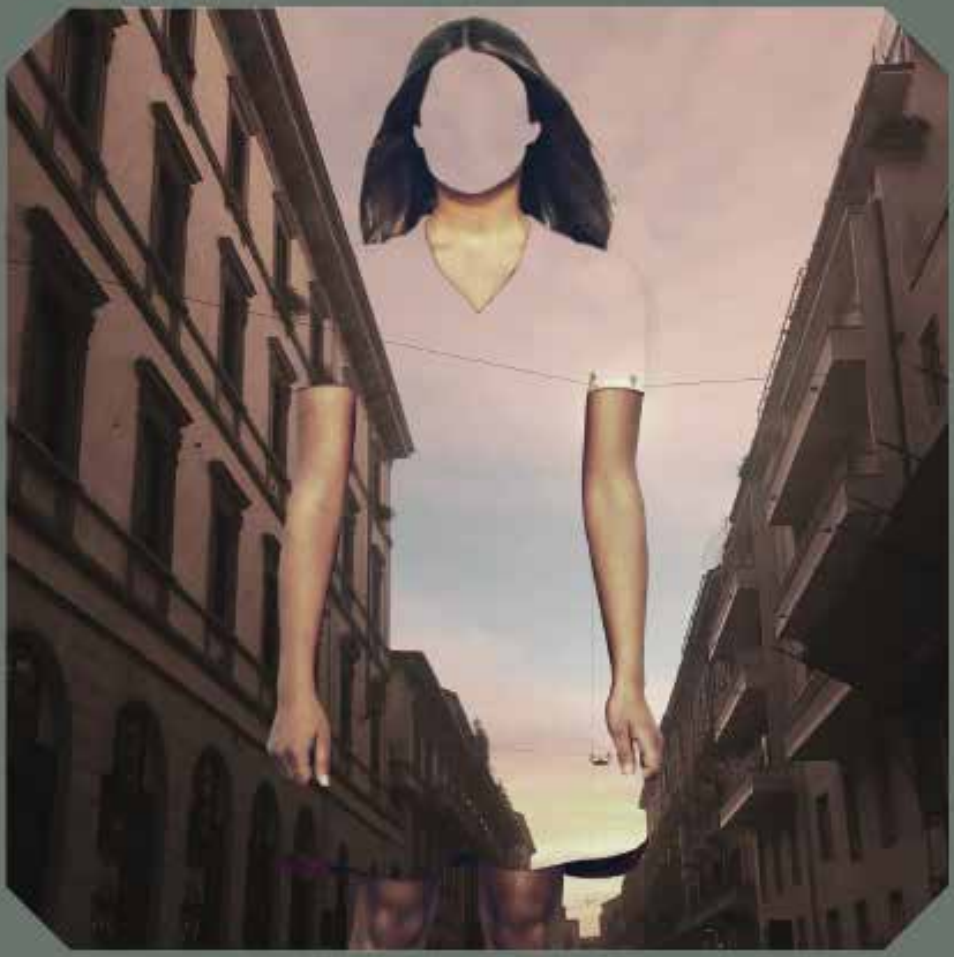

ATHOS ZONTINI

LA BELLA INDIFFERENZA

ROMANZO
BOMPIANI

ATHOS ZONTINI
BEAUTIFUL INDIFFERENCE

translated from the Italian
by Alice Kilgariff

SAMPLE COPY

BOMPIANI

October 21st

Beneath the skin a shock, an alarm signal. His eyes fixed on the telephone display, he dismissed the latest weather update, an advert from a telephone company, and offers from a clothing website. Around him was the usual crowd of raincoats, professionals in grey suits, street sellers, dogs on leads, parents holding their children's hands, students, couples embracing on benches. It seemed a morning like any other, until he put his phone back in his pocket and lifted his gaze. No one had any eyes, noses, or mouths. They had disappeared from peoples' faces. In their place he could see an oval of skin with no features, the smooth shell of an egg framed by hair. He rubbed his eyes, incredulous, reopened them, and his shock transformed into a paralysing anxiety: the passers-by seemed to be mannequins. The bald ones were the most terrifying, there was no difference between the napes of their necks and their foreheads, the only hint as to whether they had their back to him was the direction in which they were walking. Terrified, he

checked himself in a car window and touched his face. Under his fingers he felt his lips, his cheeks, his eyelids, but in the reflection on the glass, there was nothing. He could only see an oval of skin where his face should be. He was shaking, he felt his legs give way and crumpled to the floor. A moment later he was surrounded by people helping him to stand, asking how he was.

He wanted to scream but he couldn't catch his breath, the air wasn't going in, he was unable to breathe. Then, it was as if he had been switched off by remote control: a black flash and he fainted.

He ignored the telephone until it stopped ringing and the voicemail arrived a few moments later. It was Claudia telling him that his appointments were piling up, she didn't know what to tell the customers. He tried to focus on the empty space on the display for writing messages, but he just kept on looking around him. The hospital corridor was full of mannequins, attached to drips, in wheelchairs, waiting on a bench like him, or in the arms of other mannequins escorting them to other departments.

"Corbo?"

He stood up, disoriented, he couldn't understand who was calling him. "Ettore Corbo?"

He lifted his hand and saw a nurse coming towards him. "Follow me, please. The emergency department have asked for a neurology consult."

They walked out into the clinic's courtyard and crossed a small path lined with oleander and rose bushes. Neurology was out of the way in a new build. The steel structure with its large, dark windows seemed more like a luxury hotel than a department for the mentally ill.

On the third floor, the nurse gave his notes to the head nurse and led him into a room.

"Wait here. They'll call you soon."

He went to sit at the back, as far away as possible from the other patients. He could distinguish the women from the men thanks only to the trousers, the skirts, the hair long or short. Again, that feeling of suffocation. He had to remember to breathe, it didn't come naturally to him anymore, he felt as if he were trapped under water.

To distract himself from those meaningless bodies he went to the window. The deserted benches among the red oleander flowers, the gravel around the still-bare rosebushes. He thought of that precise moment in which the past became longer than the time still left to live. Who knows if it had already come for him, and what had he been doing in that special moment; had he been alone or with his wife, a friend, had he been happy, or perhaps bored.

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Beneath the shade of the porticoes lay an old blanket next to some cardboard, but there was no

human figure. He walked towards a deserted square and sat on the edge of the fountain, a rectangular stone basin with a turtle in the middle, its head turned to the sky and a feeble spray spitting from its mouth, as if it were about to run out. He couldn't go home, he needed to think, to understand how best explain it to his wife, to find the right words in order not to scare her too much. He carried on mentally rehearsing the conversation when a message arrived. Claudia again, asking where he was, if everything was ok. He would have to break those hours of silence, but every response seemed wrong. Every time, he deleted the text and started again. Eventually, he wrote: Claudia, sorry for not answering earlier but I'm not well. Please could you cancel this week's appointments. I'll keep you posted.

He closed his eyes and opened them again immediately, the darkness was suffocating. He felt a pressure at his temples, as if his thoughts were occupying actual space and his cranium were no one longer able to contain them: his wife, his work, the neurologist's words. He picked up the telephone, went to the search engine and typed: "Sudden and selective loss of sight". The first result was about retinal vascular occlusion: "The main symptom is the sudden loss of vision. This loss is not generally associated with any pain and affects only one eye." This was not the case with him. The next result listed ailments caused by a panic attack. He didn't

even read it. Instead, he scrolled through until he reached "Ischemic Optic Neuropathy and Phosphodiesterase-5 Inhibitors: Health authorities in US and Canada have been notified of a number of cases of non-arteric ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION) in patients taking phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitors (PDE-5) to treat erectile dysfunction". He closed the page and opened the next one, though the word "selective" had been crossed out. The most common search results were: refractive error, retinopathy, vascular anomalies, ischemic events, retinal detachment, vitreous haemorrhage, disturbed vision and brain tumour.

It was too much, it would take days to read it all. And understanding it was a whole other matter. In the meantime, the association between "disturbed vision" and "brain tumour" had brutally insinuated itself inside his head. He had just been in the emergency department though, they would have noticed such a serious illness. And though the alternative that he was going mad was no more reassuring, the neurologist had mentioned the possibility of a psychiatric pathology. Unless…He thought back the neurologist's brusque tone: could he really trust a doctor who had prescribed only anxiety medication to someone in his condition?

He pulled out the prescription and read the heading in the top left-hand corner: "Doctor Carlo Ferrante – Department of Neurological Sciences". He found his

CV on the clinic's website. The positions he had held over the years were all hugely prestigious, he also had an impressive number of publications, but this meant nothing. He could just be someone with the right contacts, the son of some bigshot.

He felt a cold pain in the middle of his chest, ready to explode the second he moved. He had to move rationally, follow the course he had been given. He found the medical centre recommended by the neurologist online. It was almost six, it would be closing any moment, so he dialled the number and waited. Every ring was punctuated by an overly long silence, he was about to hang up when someone finally answered.

"Good evening, I need to book some tests."

"Absolutely. Which ones?"

He read the list out to the receptionist. In a matter of seconds, she had distributed the appointments out over the next three weeks.

"Is there any way", he asked, disconcerted, "that some of these could be brought forward?"

"I'm sorry but this is the only availability we have at the moment. Would you like to confirm the bookings?"

"Yes, OK."

The receptionist asked for his name, contact details, and told him he would receive a reminder for the appointments via email.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Have a good day."

Struggling, he stood up from the fountain's edge. The sound of the traffic returned, the horns, the shouts from the crowds, the shapeless ranks of mannequins on the pavement. The shadows of the passers-by grew long over the asphalt, tracing terrifying outlines with overly long legs and arms, curved spines, anorexic giants in the dim light of the late afternoon. He took the road that led home, trying to keep everything at bay. The metallic paint of the cars, the faded grey of the cement, the rusted streetlamps all had an analgesic effect, whilst just one glimpse of a person would leave him feeling lost.

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Unable to get to sleep, he tried to return to the moment in which it had happened: the second before, the last face he had seen. He was walking along the pavement, just a few steps from his studio, but if he had looked at any passers-by, he had only done so in passing. He was sweating. He threw off his covers, hoping to find a little relief. How long could he stay off sick from work? Sooner or later he would have to go back, but he couldn't imagine being in the midst of his colleagues, his clients. They would notice something strange, they would realise he wasn't well. The idea of telling his associates the truth was even more terrifying.

In an accountancy firm like his, with production goals and shared dividends, any fear about his mental state would be too dangerous.

He didn't know what to do, he felt an overwhelming need to confide in someone, someone close to him who would keep his secret, someone able to give him the right advice, but he couldn't think of anyone. Childhood friends, school companions, relatives, but how? They had all lost touch. It happened for no reason at all, they had simply stopped meeting up and had each forgotten the other. And yet some of them had been like brothers to him. The faces of those men formed in his mind, as if he needed to catalogue the memories and hold them close, afraid they too would end up disappearing. And as he made his way through the list of people who were gone, the more he missed just anyone. The newspaper seller on the corner, the greengrocer down the road, the barber. Even strangers: those nameless faces he barely noticed when he stamped his metro ticket, or ordered in a restaurant, or bought something in a shop, suddenly felt necessary.

He stood up eagerly, opened the window and stood there looking out. Who knows if he would ever again meet an unknown woman's gaze in the street, one with elusive eyes, so very precious in those days filled with boredom, when he felt his best days were behind him and made up of wasted hours, doubts, and indecisive days.

The trees trembled, shaken by the wind. Those old plane trees with their roots that flowed up through the

asphalt, their weary posture, their branches heavy with yellow leaves, which spilled all over the pavement. He took that road to work every day. He thought back to the early days, just after he had graduated, when he had just entered the studio. He remembered the strange euphoria of those mornings, as if something were always just about to happen to throw him off his habitual trajectory. And so, the years had passed, one after the other, until he could no longer ignore the fact that he had become an adult. And he felt lucky that nothing had ever happened. He had a stable job, a beautiful wife, some money set aside.

Is it possible that his life had taken such a different direction from the one it had made an effort to pursue for so very long?

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He had been there for two hours with his telephone pointed at the customers lining up at the bar, pretending to check emails, write messages, look something up on the internet. He still couldn't believe it: enclosed within a five-inch screen, the world returned to what it had always been. The variety of features, expressions that were happy, concerned, tired. They were so beautiful that he couldn't stop looking at them. Then, a message arrived, arrogantly dominating the screen.

Hi

I've just finished my appointment.

Marta had the habit of splitting up phrases, a kind of addiction to sending.

He was about to ask her how it went at the gynaecologist's when the answer arrived, this time all at once: These are the right days.

He reread the phrase, trying to distance himself from the image of his wife in bed, naked and without a face. Even when he was tired, didn't feel like it, even when he had a fever, he had never missed that ritual coupling, carried out in their room every month with the light out. An act both cold and loving, one which only a couple who have been together a long time are capable.

He left the bar, he needed to walk, to tire himself out. He hoped the time to go home would never come. A film poster, the advert for an airline, for a high fashion label: the perfect faces of the models posing on the adverts made the contrast with the mannequins on the street even more startling. He picked up his telephone once more, and as he trained his camera on the crowds, he heard someone behind him saying hello.

He stayed still, paralysed with his arm in mid-air. He couldn't turn around and frame the passers-by in search of a known face. Whoever it was – a friend, or worse, a client – it would be a strange scene, embarrassing, difficult to explain.

He brought his phone to his ear as if he were talking and carried on walking, pretending he hadn't heard. But after a few steps he heard someone call out his

name once more, louder this time. He quickened his pace, avoiding the mannequins who were coming towards him and took the first available side street. As soon as he turned the corner, he began to run and slipped down a lane. He couldn't understand why he had thought of exposing himself so much. He had told work that he was at home, ill, but it was obvious that in the centre of town, at lunchtime, he would have bumped into someone.

His breath was heavy, his forehead and neck bathed in sweat. He crouched down on the step of a large door and stayed there, staring at the statue in the middle of a roundabout a few metres ahead. The white-stone pedestal, the horse's muscles blackened by the exhaust fumes, the rider in the saddle with his bloody sword, and in the distance, an old red tower, proud and worn out by time.

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Everyone slept. The two sisters, the father, the older brother, the elderly grandparents, the small boys. Only the mother's eyes were still open, although she, too, lay still, stretched out on the mattress of rushes, her skirts rumpled. She struggled to raise her head. The little girl standing in the doorway looked at her with curiosity. She didn't know why that drowsiness, that terrible tiredness, had overcome everyone in the farmhouse. Her grandparents had been asleep for

three days. She began to move closer but her mother lifted a hand to stop her. 'Don't touch me,' she said. 'Don't touch anyone.' The child did as she was told. In that sense she was a good child. Even when she didn't understand – which was often – she did as she was asked. A year earlier, when she had developed the dreadful fever that had raged through her little body, a fever that neither cold sponging nor boiled herbs did anything to allay, her mother had been certain they would lose her, like the four other babes they had already lost. But this one survived. Her vivacity, however, and the eagerness with which she responded to and imitated everything her elder sisters did, the quickness with which she comprehended and reacted, somehow seemed dimmed. She was still very tiny – four years old, or perhaps still three – and it was hard to tell how badly her mind had been enfeebled. Her grandmother said she was just a little slow, something that would pass as she grew. Her mother hoped so. She was the youngest and the prettiest of their daughters. Watching her run around with the chickens, as blond and happy as an angel, filled all their hearts with joy. But beyond childhood, should it remain unsullied by smallpox or accidents, that very beauty would one day represent a danger. They would need to watch over her, her mother had thought: she's not a rich man's daughter whom men will treat with respect.

Now, though, the child's mother knew that none of them would aid her. The child who had remained

miraculously untouched by the contagion would confront life alone. 'Listen carefully,' her mother said to her. 'You must go to old Gostanza, the woman who lives on the far side of the wood. Do you remember? The house close by the big oak tree. We went there last year, together with your sister Vanna, to help her chop wood for the winter, and she gave us a little pot of the honey her bees make, to say thank you. Do you remember?'

The little girl nodded, her eyes bright with the memory of that honey which had been so delicious. She licked her lips.

'Run straight to the hearth now. Get one of the baskets. Put two loaves of bread in it, and some apples, and some walnuts. As much as will fit. You can eat some if you get hungry along the way, and whatever's left you'll give to Goodwife Gostanza, and tell her it's from me. Tell her that here we are all sleeping and that I beg her, for the love of God, to take you in. Take the goat with you, too. Her milk will feed you both.'

'And afterwards shall I come home?' asked the little girl.

'You will never come home. You would not find us here. You would find no one.'

'Where will you be?'

'In a beautiful place. Where the Virgin Mary is.'

'Why can I not come with you?'

'Because you're still too young. You will join us once you're as tall as your father.'

'So Vanna and Gemma cannot go with you either.'

'That's enough, Cate. Do as you are told. Fill the basket. Put on Vanna's grey shawl, and wear Gemma's heavy cape on top of that, the red one, and go to Goodwife Gostanza. You won't lose your way. Just follow the path along the riverbank. Go, before it gets dark. Go!'

She felt her energy ebbing away. Her eyelids were heavy, and when she tried, with great effort, to lift them, she saw only black. She feared Cate would still be in the farmhouse when the men arrived to take them all away.

'Go!' she repeated threateningly. 'At once! Else you'll anger me!'

It broke her heart to bid the child farewell in this way, but no time remained.

The little girl hurriedly did as she was asked. She filled the basket, put the halter on the goat, wrapped herself in the shawl and the cape, and set off towards the river. She was already a good way from the farmhouse when she noticed that the dog, the bigger one, had followed her. 'Go back!' she said. Her mother hadn't mentioned the dog. But it had no intention of obeying.

She walked and walked. There was no risk of her losing her way, she simply needed to stay close to the river's edge. The child did not stop to eat the apples or the walnuts. She wanted to be sure to arrive before nightfall. The wood began to fill with rustling noises. The birds sought the safety of the treetops. Darkness fell, but there was a moon, and its reflection shone

out from the water and illuminated the stones and the cracks and the tree roots that surfaced along the path. Would she have to wake Goodwife Gostanza, if the hour were late when she arrived? Would the old woman scold her? Would she send her away?

Goodwife Gostanza, though, was not at home. The door was ajar, the lamp unlit. The child knew how to light it, and did so. She saw that the copper pot on the table had been overturned. But the old woman's grey cat sat next to it, so she reasoned that he must be to blame – for this and for the trampled bundles of dried herbs lying scattered on the floor. She called out, and called out again. No one replied. She climbed up into the hayloft, but it too was empty. As she circled the house, she noticed that the pretty beehive she remembered from her previous visit was missing. Gostanza had told them it needed to be moved from time to time, so that it was always near whichever flowers were in bloom. She imagined the old woman had gone off to move the bees, that she must still be travelling, and that tomorrow she would be home. Now, however, the child was hungry and also very tired. She ate an apple and a little bread. She milked the goat using an earthenware bowl the cat had knocked to the floor and that had ended up under the table, and she drank the milk. Then she looked for the old woman's bed, she climbed onto it, using the cape as a blanket, she shed a few tears, and she fell asleep. She was certain that old Gostanza would be back in the morning. She was certain that her mother had sent her to

a place where she would be safe, a place where someone would keep her from harm. The goat fell asleep too. So did the dog, and so did the old woman's cat.

The following morning the little girl awoke gently confused, not immediately sure where she was. Then she remembered. And she sat down to wait. The dog wandered off to hunt for food. The goat came to find her, bleating to be milked. Cate drank the milk and ate almost all of the walnuts from her basket. Behind the cottage she found a little henhouse and three hens. There were two eggs. She took them into the house but didn't eat them. She put them aside for old Gostanza, who would be hungry when she arrived. But Gostanza didn't come back. The little girl waited. She finished all of the food she had brought with her, and she ate the eggs too, piercing their shells with a pin in order to suck them. With the copper pot, she collected water from the river, taking care not too lean out too far and fall in and be dragged away by the currents, as her mother had so often cautioned her. Darkness fell, and she slept on the old woman's bed for a second night.

The following day she continued her vigil. But Gostanza did not return. Towards midday, Cate stepped out onto the grass in front of the cottage and picked leaves from the plants she had been taught were safe to eat. Since she didn't know how a fire should be lit in that unfamiliar home, she ate them raw. She knew it would make her belly ache later, but she was terribly hungry. In the afternoon she walked a little way

into the wood and found some mushrooms and some strawberries. The dog trailed behind her wherever she went, as if to keep guard. It barked at an adder that crossed their path and chased it off.

Gostanza hadn't come back. The third night arrived and the little girl now began to worry. She feared that the old woman had gone to meet the Virgin Mary too. Perhaps her mother had not been informed.

Her fear was well-founded. Her mother hadn't known that, two days before the rest of them, Gostanza, too, had been overcome with sleep, and that, warned by the Searcher who toured the land around the village, the men had come to carry her away on their wagon, taking her off to the pit where the plague dead were covered with quicklime or burned. They had come hastily, fearful of the contagion. In their fear, they had not even bothered to ransack the cottage, or to loot what few poor furnishings it had. Nor had they taken the hens from the coop. Although one man – the most expert among them – had thrown a black cloth over the beehive and had carried it off on his back.

Gostanza would never return. As the third morning dawned, the little girl began – dimly and confusedly – to understand as much, and decided to make her way back to her parents' farmhouse where everything was at least familiar to her – the animals, the tools, the well, the hearth, her parents' big bed and that of her grandparents, the smaller cots of straw on which the youngsters slept. Back to the farmhouse from which

– a quiver of hope – her family had perhaps not yet departed; the farmhouse where they would listen and would agree to take her with them. Her mother would be angry at her disobedience, she would use harsh words and punish her. But was staying here not a crueller punishment – waiting and waiting in this strange and unfamiliar home?

She tied a rope to the goat's halter and fetched the now-empty basket. She wondered whether she should take the chickens with her, but couldn't think how to carry them. She wrapped herself up in the shawl and the cape and, the day still young, set off for home.

They arrived at the house before sundown. The dog and the goat saw where they were and made their way straight to the farmyard. Cate cried out, 'I've come back!', but no one replied. She ran into her parents' bedroom. The bed was empty. And so was that of her grandparents. And so were the cots where her sisters slept. The two cows and the mule and many objects from the house were missing. Some were still there but broken, or in disarray. They had left in a hurry, she thought. Leaving behind them a great silence which enveloped her as though it were a second cape.

Then she heard her father's voice asking, merrily, 'Who'll help me chop the wood?'

He hadn't left with the others, then; he had waited for her. A great wave of relief surged through her heart. 'I will help you!' she replied, running into the courtyard behind the farmhouse, running towards the voice she

had heard. No one was there, nor could she see any wood or hatchets. 'Indoors with you now, there's a storm on the way!' shouted her father. The voice came from the top of the big tree. Had he really climbed up there to knock down walnuts at this time of night? Cate peered up through the branches, astonished. The dusky sky was cloudless; the air was still. What storm? Was her father teasing her? Cracking a joke at the expense of the little girl who had just returned? Was that why he was hiding up amid the leaves? Then she heard the whirr of wings flapping, and caught sight of something black swooping rapidly down and perching on the lowest of the branches. A bright yellow beak tapped her shoulder. 'Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?' asked the mynah bird. A bird her father had brought back from the fair, one May Day, a few years earlier. A bird he had taught to imitate his voice. Just a few phrases. And a couple of others that the bird had learned for himself just by listening. 'I'm Cate,' said the child, in case he hadn't understood.

As for the child, she now realized with great sorrow that she had been deceived. Her father was not there. There was no one at the farmhouse any longer. There was no longer anyone at old Gostanza's cottage. They had all departed. There was no one anywhere. She was alone in the world. But she was at least home, with her animals.

The dog pressed its wet nose into the palm of her hand.

CHAPTER TWO

During the first year of the great famine, when his wife had died in childbirth, leaving him with two lads still two and nine years old, the blacksmith Sestilio Salvadoreschi had decided it would be wise, once the requisite months of mourning had passed, to take another wife who could attend to the house and the boys. The elder of the two, whose name was Lorenzo, already helped him out a little in the smithy, and was a sensible well-mannered lad, his manners learned from his mother who, as a girl, had been in service in Cerro Alto, in the household of Signor Lomi – the richest and most influential in the town, but also the most cultured and refined.

Even after their wedding, the blacksmith's wife had remained on good terms with her former employers, to whom she paid visits from time to time, accompanied by the children. They made her presents of cast-off clothes, the occasional quart of chickpeas or millet, and sometimes olives and cheese, but above all – and for

this she was the most grateful – they offered the salve of kind words and consoled her on those occasions when her husband had been in his cups and his blows had rained down hard. During those visits, Lorenzo was allowed to play with Signor Lomi's children, of whom there were seven – boys and girls, and some of them his own age –, children who had been taught not to scorn common folk, especially not lads and lasses as young as themselves. From time to time Signor Lomi had taken him for walks in the countryside together with his own children, teaching them all the names of plants and insects and, on evening walks, the constellations in the sky. Signor Lomi was a man of eccentric character, much criticised – behind his back – by people of good taste, because he had also chosen to offer his daughters an education of a kind inappropriate for females, instructing them in the fundamentals of Latin, grammar, music and geometry and, as we have seen, in the science of natural history as observed in the field. To those who dared make remonstrations to his face, he replied that Galileo himself had provided the very same form of education to his own two daughters, both of whom had then become nuns.

Herbs, adders, crickets and streams were familiar to Lorenzo too, but grammar and geometry were not, and this pained him. One of Lomi's little girls had made him a present of an old sheet of well-worn paper on which a song, or perhaps a prayer, was printed, and had taught him a few of the letters on it, but not enough of

them for its meaning to be clear. Lorenzo treasured it and kept it hidden beneath the sack of rushes on which he slept.

When she had begun to sense death approaching, his mother had instructed him to take care of his younger brother, whose name was Ippolito, and in addition to his other duties helping his father out in the forge, Lorenzo now had to take the toddler everywhere he went. He loved the child tenderly, but Ippolito's age and maternal indulgence had made the babe exuberant and capricious, and he was therefore perpetually mischievous.

When their father announced that he had chosen a new bride and that the following week a stepmother would be joining their household, Lorenzo was greatly relieved, although the memory of the mother whose place this stranger was coming to fill seemed yet more poignant. He was, though, convinced that Ippolito was in need of a womanly tenderness that he himself could not provide.

The new wife arrived. She was a young widow and brought with her a little boy who was still suckling. The blacksmith was content and failed to notice that, after just a few days, far from caring for him as though he were her own, the woman had taken a dislike to Ippolito and left him wrapped around Lorenzo's neck or placed him outside the door – a rival to her own child and bothersome to her. And she often slapped him for being too boisterous, almost as though she

relished his yelps and tears. And she never sufficiently filled his bowl with millet porridge, so Lorenzo was forced to eat less of his own.

The lad complained to his father, but the man, whose new wife made him more than happy in bed and showered him with flattery, shouted at his son and flung a piece of iron he'd been hammering on the anvil at the boy, who would have been badly maimed had it hit him. Two days later, however, and as though, from up in heaven, his dead first wife were avenging her little ones, a horse the blacksmith was shoeing reared up and kicked him hard in the head. The surgeon was called but, as soon as he saw it, pronounced the wound mortal, and a few hours later Salvadoreschi did indeed die. The new wife wept, tore her clothes, and made great show of her grief. But she also sent straight for the scribe, to record that it was she who inherited the forge and the house and everything in it. The scribe observed that a portion was perhaps due to the two sons born of the first marriage, who might also consider themselves heirs. 'If I tend to them and maintain them until they are adults, and if I arrange for them to learn a trade,' replied the woman, 'their part will be consumed in costs.' And she said it with so many flattering smiles that the scribe found himself – or wanted to be – convinced.

For the two young orphans there now began a period of insufficient food and lavish cuffings. often leaving

them black and blue. As for the meagre nutrition, their stepmother had no difficulty explaining away to the townsfolk the sight of two thin and pallid boys, because the ongoing famine had worsened and in the surrounding countryside many went hungry, and many made their bread of acorn flour or ate weeds which left them ill with terrible gripe.

The woman and her son, who in the meantime had been weaned, instead ate well and heartily: polenta made of millet or of maize, cheese and fatty mutton, chicken broth and eggs, all bought with the money paid her by the man to whom she had rented out Salvadoreschi's forge. Lorenzo no longer had time to care for his brother, or to go out into the countryside to set traps or gather wild berries and mushrooms with which to dampen the little one's hunger, because his stepmother had hired him out along with the smithy, and his new master expected him, slight as he was, to pump the bellows from dawn to dusk. But some of the local women began to mutter about it, especially when they saw the widow's toddler gambolling, fat and strong, and taking his first little steps, while Ippolito, in ragged clothes, sat languishing on the doorstep all day long and didn't grow, and hadn't even the energy to be naughty or to yell and cry as he had when his father was still around.

This chatter worried the widow, who feared the scribe might choose to return and denounce her and oblige

her to forgo a part of the inheritance. She therefore resolved to rid herself of those two encumbrances, but in such a way that none of the townsfolk could accuse her of doing ill.

So she put out word that a relative of her two stepsons, a distant cousin on their dead mother's side, a rich man possessed of every comfort, who lived with his wife in a parish ten miles from Montieri and had remained childless, had sent for the two boys who were his only heirs. And she herself would accompany them, hiring a cart and mule for the journey.

Lorenzo did not remember his mother ever having spoken of this cousin, but was so relieved that he and his brother would be leaving behind that household and its privations that he jumped cheerfully into the cart, carrying with him what few rags they possessed: a small bundle, inside which there nestled that old sheet of paper once given him by the Lomis' daughter, and on it the words of a song.

The stepmother left her own little boy with an old woman who lived nearby, and climbed into the front of the cart. She whipped the mule to urge it on, eager to make her way home before sunset. She didn't take the high road but turned off along tracks unfamiliar to Lorenzo and overgrown with weeds and bushes. They passed a swamp and then a copse of small oak trees and then an old meadow in which the grass had ceased to grow. They reached a strange clearing where, poking out amid the

brambles, there were flowers of a kind that need no food or water.

'These are heaven-sent!' exclaimed the stepmother, bringing the mule to a halt. 'Now you need not present yourselves empty-handed when you meet your lady aunt! And I know from experience that where such flowers grow, delicious mushrooms are always to be found. Come now, climb down from the cart and gather them. Take this basket. And of the flowers make a posy. I will wait for you here.'

The two lads did as they were asked. The flowers were plentiful and growing alongside them there were indeed mushrooms, which Ippolito eagerly began to pick and to eat, raw as they were. Lorenzo instead placed them carefully into the basket.

When the stepmother saw that they were absorbed in their harvesting and that their backs were turned to the cart, she turned it hastily around and whipped the mule, and set off back along the track they had taken, disappearing amid the oak trees.

Lorenzo realized she had fled and abandoned them only after many minutes had passed. He was mightily distressed, not out of any fondness for her, but because he had no idea where shelter might be found for himself and his brother in such a wild place. Nor did he know where his cousin lived, and for the very first time it crossed his mind that this cousin might not be real, and that the woman had simply invented him so that she might take the boys

out of the town and leave them here. He gathered Ippolito into his arms and began to look for the track along which they had arrived, intending to walk back into town, but many paths led off from the clearing, all pointing in different directions, and he could remember no landmarks or signs that might help him distinguish the track their stepmother had taken. Meanwhile dusk had fallen, and with the darkness came cold. Ippolito began to cry. Recognising that they were lost, Lorenzo was overcome with sadness and dejection, made worse by the thought that that cruel woman had driven off with the bundle of rags and, with it, his old sheet of paper and the words of the song.

He did not, however, give in to despair. He decided that if they were to avoid being attacked by wild beasts, it would be wisest to spend the night not in the shelter of the undergrowth but high up in the branches of a tree. So, tying his brother to his back with the sleeves of his doublet, he chose a trunk that looked easy to climb and began to scale it. Once they had reached a point high enough and had settled themselves into a fork that seemed strong enough to bear their weight, he glanced around, his eyes scanning the surrounding gloom, and much was his delight when he caught sight of a light flickering, out beyond the beech wood. It didn't seem too far off, so – reasoning that the route would be perilous in the darkness – Lorenzo made a mental note of

the most distinctive and unusually shaped treetops framing the spot. Then, somewhat comforted, he laid his head on the branch and, weak with fatigue, fell asleep.

Back in the town, the stepmother regaled all who would listen with tales of the warm welcome the two brothers had received from the cousin's family, and of how prosperous and abounding in resources his farm was, even in a time of famine. And to those who enquired as to the name of the family and the place, she replied with an invented answer, a lie she had prepared in advance so that no one could ever, out of sheer curiosity and hoping to greet them, go looking for Salvadoreschi's two orphaned sons.

But up in heaven, once again, the two lads' mother was apparently preparing her revenge for so much shameless cruelty, and the very next morning the ill-meaning stepmother awoke with a terrible fever, her body livid with the swellings which were the mark of the disease that had, over recent months, begun to sweep through the parish and which would soon dispatch the majority of its inhabitants, innocent and guilty alike, applying no distinction.

Roused by the rising sun, Lorenzo climbed down from the tree with his brother still strapped to his back, and set off in the direction of the spot in which he seen the tiny flicker of light. After an hour's walking, they came across a low building made of stones and small

branches, like the huts shepherds improvise while on the move in search of fresh pastures. Here, however, there lived not a shepherd but an anchorite who had withdrawn from the world to pray and do penance. He had two goats living with him, and offered the young boys what little he could in the way of succour, and said he knew the way back to Montieri, and would happily travel with them as soon as they had rested and eaten. But once he heard of their stepmother's wicked deeds and intentions, he advised them not to turn back, but instead to make their way to the Keeper of Orphans who, as the magistrate appointed to the task by the Grand Duke himself, would find kindly folk to foster them and would ensure they recovered all that was rightfully theirs. Ippolito, though, was dreadfully weakened and in no condition to venture out on a journey which must inevitably be made on foot and which would take several days to complete, given that the hermit possessed neither cart nor a beast which could pull one. The old man, who had some small knowledge of herbs and medicine, enquired of Lorenzo as to his brother's age, and upon learning that Ippolito was four years old, remarked, 'But he looks like a babe mere months old. See, he struggles to stay on his feet.' Lorenzo, he warned, must prepare himself for the worst. For far too long his brother had been deprived of sufficient nourishment, and his body was now so shrunken, his strength now so diminished, that nothing more could be done to restore it. 'Many

have perished in this way since the famine began,' he explained. 'The famine is not to blame,' said Lorenzo. 'The fault lies with my father's wife.'

He refused to accept the grim verdict. So, heeding the boy's pleas, and with what little his poor hovel furnished, the old man prepared a porridge of milk and millet and attempted to feed the little one. But the child could no longer swallow and his head drooped to one side, and the food trickled out of his open mouth.

On the second day, Ippolito died. Lorenzo's grief was so bitter that he would not leave the little grave and begged the hermit to let him remain. He did not want to return to the town. His rancour was directed not only at his stepmother but also at the townsfolk who had failed to defend the two boys. The old man said, 'One day you will wish to return. But you may stay here with me for now.'

Lorenzo lived in the hut for many years, serving and assisting the holy man as the latter grew weak with age. He and the friar prayed together, and when he saw the old man's breviary and realised the hermit could read, he begged to be taught. He told him of the sheet of paper with words on it which his stepmother had taken away on the cart, and of Signor Lomi's daughter who had presented him with that gift. 'When I am gone, instead of the Keeper of Orphans, you must go to Signor Lomi and ask him to take you in,' the old man said. And Lorenzo promised to do so.

The years went by, and throughout the parish the pestilence wreaked its carnage. But the contagion never reached the hermit's cell, where Lorenzo grew into a healthy and vigorous young man. And it never returned to Ca' del Nero, where little Catherine grew up utterly alone.

Athos Zontini
Beautiful Indifference

LA BELLA INDIFFERENZA

The story of a man who sees all the faces around him disappear. A book about loneliness, isolation and mal de vivre.

One day Ettore Corbo finds out he can no longer see people's faces. They have been replaced by a void, an oval void stretched over their faces like the one of mannequins. Medical tests do not give measurable results, and for Ettore, a tired accountant working in the family business and trapped in a joyless marriage, there is no way to escape this partial blindness, a blindness concealing others from him; or perhaps showing them in their whole inexpressive nakedness. Gradually his loneliness grows, and he becomes more and more ferocious, thorny, unaffected by daily life and rituals. Indifferent to the political climate getting tenser around him, Ettore closes himself off the rest of the world while another possible life seems to disclose, as absurd as the life of a flat-faced mannequin can be. A tense and terrifying book, cruel and merciless, reflecting in the deformed story of an individual the indifferent drifting of an entire world.

ATHOS ZONTINI lives in Naples and works as a screenwriter for the TV series *Un posto al sole*. Bompiani has also published his book *Orfanzia* (2016).

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