ANTONIO DIKELE DISTEFANO

Non ho mai avuto la mia età
I Was Never My Age

Translation by Olivia Jung

7 YEARS OLD

Chapter 1

In the neighborhood where we lived, every family had at least one child. All the kids my age had a brother or a sister, only my wealthy classmates didn't have any siblings. In the afternoon, after school ended, we all hung out at the park for a couple of hours; the swings and slides filled up with excited kids that fueled the loud hubbub, which took over the ordinary and the building rules that imposed silence to allow the elderly to rest. I usually went there too and blended in with the kids my age and their mothers sitting on the benches. But sometimes I preferred to stay home and watch television. I would take over the living room, sit on the floor, and watch cartoons like *Captain Tsubasa* and *Yu Yu Hakusho*. My sister Stefania made fun of me, "When you get mad, you're uglier than them." Or she asked, "How can the ball go so far up in the air?" Those afternoons, even if I was in the room next door, every time my mother heard an ambulance, she always thought I was the one dying.

All the public housing buildings overlooked the same street. The neighborhood where we lived was one long road. The cars took over the sidewalks and time had corroded the walls leaving their beams exposed. From my window, I could see columns of wrought-iron balconies, which were reflected on the street pavement on rainy days. The deterioration that filled the spaces and distances between one street and one life and another was above all a spontaneous gallery of an exhibition that we didn't chose. We weren't part of any cultural heritage even though we all left our homes dressed as best as we could.

It is humiliating to be poor, to be labelled as assisted. It is humiliating to realize that your mother is lying when she talks about the clothes you are wearing, that it is not true that we left in a hurry that day and everything was in the dirty laundry.

It is humiliating to receive the things you wish for always late, getting them as a gift when nobody wants them anymore. The worst thing about having nothing is not having any certainties; if my father had been rich, I would have covered up my fears with his money.

My mother was convinced that everything in life happened for a reason, that everything was right because God had wanted it so. "There are tons of people out there who are better off than us, but they don't have anyone to share their fortune with." "Your classmates have what you're asking me for right now, but maybe they don't have parents, or they don't have a sister like yours." "Love the person you are, find value in what you have, because not all money is worth what it seems," she said to me looking at me from above. I would be lying if I said that she always provided for everything. She provided for nothing and taught me that life takes those who had a happy childhood by surprise.

Chapter 2

My parents got separated because my mother had cheated on my father. They screamed at each other from across the room divided by their bed, shouting things too big for us to understand. They stood in front of one another, right by the windows, on the margins of it all, blaming each other for everything. Mom replied angrily, “I loved you more than my life,” when dad accused her of the opposite. There was nothing left between my parents, it was obvious. For a long time, she slept in the bedroom while he spent the night sleeping in the car. But it wasn’t the betrayal that separated them: a person can insert themselves in a relationship only when the couple is already on the rocks.

Sometimes mom was struck by Christian guilt. She prayed on her knees, constantly, beating her chest. One word after another with the sole purpose of being forgiven. She didn’t feel she had wronged her husband, but God: ever since she was a little girl, he told her through the churchmen that a married woman had an obligation to stand by the side of the man who brought her to the altar. Dad looked at her from the kitchen and always told us, “For humans, God is just the desire to not be completely alone.”

At the time, my sister and I preferred not being at home after school. Our curfew was 7 p.m., so we stayed outside until then, kneeling on the pavement and drawing lines and yellow suns with chalk.

We stayed out because our living room was small and the people who were supposed to protect us were constantly arguing in that space, which was stifling when there were three of us on the couch. Our home was so tiny that the refrigerator was in the living room near the TV set, and we had to lay down mattresses on the floor to sleep at night because we didn’t have a room of our own.

We used to leave without making a sound and, when we closed the door behind us, Stefi often went off with Manuel, her boyfriend. She never took me with her, she just smiled and shouted, “See you later!” from afar. I waited for her outside our building for entire afternoons, sitting on the sidewalk, watching the motionless excavators with their mouths in the air, thinking how I would have used them to build myself a better life.

I liked to listen to the old people sitting on benches. Without looking at them, I wandered between their conversations and tried to picture them when they were young. There was a small park with some trees where children played just down the road, and I would sit on the sidewalk watching them while they had fun.

I always waited in life for other people to notice me, to want to include me in their team. I used to walk in front of them when they played, waiting for them to ask me something. But when it happened, I realized I couldn’t laugh at their jokes, I couldn’t be congenial on command. When I tried to hold up a conversation, I felt like I wasn’t being myself and that I was trying too hard. I was aware that I wasn’t like everyone else, so I started turning down every invitation I received. I couldn’t get into their conversations and they couldn’t get into my life. When my mother realized it, she started taking me by the hand and dragging me to the middle of a group of kids who were playing soccer or chasing each other screaming. She stopped them and asked them to play with me. I hid behind her and stared at them from the space between her arm and her ribs.

“He’s doesn’t say much, but he’s friendly,” she used to say.

I wanted to talk to someone who didn’t ask me why I never spoke.

Over time, she realized that her approach wasn’t working and stopped encouraging me. “He prefers being on his own,” she would say, “my son is the solitary type.” Her words hurt me, because she was my mother and she didn’t realize that I chose solitude so I wouldn’t have to put up every time with the feeling you get when you are in the middle of a group and you figure out that, ultimately, you don’t have anything to say.

Chapter 3

We were sitting on the benches overlooking the park. We started hearing in the distance the clanging of bins being swallowed by the garbage trucks. Stefania was staring away, the heat of the first summer days warming our skin, I was wearing shorts, while she was in a pair of jeans and a shirt that used to belong to our mother. Everyone in the neighborhood had already placed their plastic chairs outside for the real arrival of the summer, when they would all spend time outdoors, talking and playing cards late into the night.

“Do you understand what’s really happening to our family?” she asked.

We could hear the noise of a TV from behind the door that separated someone’s living room from the outside world.

“What’s happening to our family?” I asked.

She kept on looking away in the distance, she seemed sad. More than usual.

The noise of garbage trucks got closer, until they finally reached us, busily hooking up the bins to their metal arms and emptying them as quickly as possible. My sister looked at them for a while, then turned toward me. “You’ll figure out what’s happening to our family soon.”

She got up and headed home without adding anything else. Maybe she was crying. She already knew that dad was going to leave and that in life you can’t force someone to be your parent.

My mother used to answer back that she needed a real man. She didn’t care if we heard. “I did the right thing,” she screamed with her eyes wide open when she was arguing with dad about what happened and he called her a slut. He didn’t see any trace of remorse in her, so he asked for an immediate separation and left without caring about us, as if his absence wouldn’t contribute to our suffering.

I remember that evening perfectly. I didn’t really understand what was going on, but I still felt a sharp pain in my chest. It almost seemed like our parents didn’t have any children, as if they just met the night before and realized in the morning that they made a mistake. Sometimes splitting up is the right thing to do, but they behaved as if leaving to pursue their happiness was enough to justify everything. My father was the first sacrifice that life imposed on me, my first sudden sorrow.

I didn’t cry. My stomach clenched up when dad left us, hiding behind a veil of normality made of goodbyes, but I didn’t cry. At seven, life had already taught me that people can decide to leave you behind. That those who can leave often do. So, to avoid making myself vulnerable

again, I immediately stopped fighting to make them stay. I chose to love only my sister and to be wary of friendships. I went around believing that everybody was happy except us and, when dad left, I started to think that everyone had a father except me. Some people take happiness away when they leave, they take normality away with them. I felt like I couldn't do anything anymore, as if I had suddenly unlearned how to walk, how to put one foot in front of the other.

EIGHT YEARS OLD

Chapter 4

It wasn't long until mom's boyfriend moved in with us. I was convinced she was making a mistake, that the three of us could have done anything together. That our love was worth more than everything we didn't have and couldn't afford. The idea that my mother could love that person was unfathomable to me. Mario, her partner, was a man in his sixties who didn't look bad for his age; he wasn't particularly sturdy, he had a balding spot at the crown of his head, which he covered by combing his hair back. He wasn't handsome, he was authoritarian in his ways, but my mother was always kind to him.

Mario didn't like having us around, he didn't want us in the house. When we played in the living room, he called us "gypsies" and mom immediately asked us to stop with a stern look on her face. Mario didn't like black people and immigrants. He liked our mother. Her breasts, her round bottom, it was clear from the way he looked at her every time she passed in front of him. He looked away from the TV set and bit his lip. Mom made him feel virile, there wasn't love in his eyes but something quite different. He felt her up even when we were around, when she bent over to open the oven or to pick something up; she giggled and asked him to stop, looking at us a little embarrassed. We had seen our parents basically avoid each other for years. Sex was absolutely not a topic of conversation in our family. When we watched television together and two persons kissed, our father used to immediately change the channel without uttering a word. My sister and I exchanged a quick glance and laughed, hiding our faces under our pajama shirts.

I never saw my parents kissing.

Mario believed that jobs should go to Italians first, that citizenship should go only to the children of parents who had fought in the war. He supported the repressive immigration policy known as the Bossi-Fini Law and using an iron fist against those who didn't want to assimilate. When the news was on, he got carried away when there were stories that treated immigration like a public order issue. My sister always tensed up when that happened. She started to quietly mutter mean things between her folded arms, then she would get up and leave, slamming the door behind her.

One evening, she couldn't contain herself anymore.

"If you hate black people so much, then why are you here?" she shouted at him.

Mario turned around, looked at her, and told her to sit down and shut up, but Stefania kept on talking over him.

"I'm black, I'm a *negra*! That's what everyone calls me at school. What are you doing here? What do you want from us?"

Mario suddenly got off the couch and slapped her. He didn't even think about it for a second. He just did it. "You need to learn to shut up," he yelled at her.

Stefania was shocked, she just stared at him cupping her cheek with her hands as if trying to hold her face together. In that moment she realized just how brittle her supposedly tough exterior was.

Stefi looked down and headed toward the bathroom. She stayed in there for half an hour, until mom forced her to get out and go to bed. "This way you'll learn your manners," she said before turning off the light and slapped her gently on the back of her head. Stefania cried all night. Not because of the pain, but because she expected our mom to defend her.

There were many things during our childhood that seemed unfair but perhaps weren't. Maybe they were supposed to make us grow up. So, from this perspective, we always interpreted the irresponsibility of the people who took turns raising us as a challenge.

Long ago, when our father was still around and we had just recently moved, the first time some white friends invited us to play at their house, our mother stopped us by the front door and straightened out the collars of our jackets. "I'm glad you have some new friends," she said, "but be careful. White people always see something bad in black people."

NINE YEARS OLD

Chapter 5

That man who had taken over our home from one moment to the next used to say that Stefania and I reminded him of our father. It didn't take him long to convince our mother to kick us out. She packed our bags without our knowledge, then whispered in our ears that we were going to take a train to reach dad.

"You're leaving in a week," she said, touching our hair and kissing our foreheads. I remember that the sun was exploding like grenades in those seven days before our departure, and I was always laughing. Not because I was happy, but because laughing was noisy. It was a weapon I could use to draw their attention and at the same time distract them from who I was and what I was feeling, distract them from the child full of problems, who always wore the same clothes to school and pretended to be happy and carefree to cover up all the rest. I felt bad every time I got back home, for myself and for my parents; I was convinced I was actually guilty of something and that was the reason why I felt unhappy. To stop thinking, I used to lie down on the floor with some sheets of paper and write fairy tales; they were just a few lines long and they always ended with a trip, with someone who left to go to a more colorful place.

When my mother took us to the train, I smiled at her from the window. She was standing there, looking at us from the empty platform with her arms down by her side and her purse in her hand, wearing the dress she reserved for special occasions. Before the train conductor decided it was the right time to leave, she was already heading toward the stairs and would disappear shortly thereafter without ever looking back.

"She isn't coming back, looking for her is pointless," commented my sister.

I still hadn't taken my seat yet, I was looking out the window with my hands pressed against the glass. I was touching an imaginary picture that was just in my mind now, like with prisoners and visitors.

"I know," I replied in a whisper.

In reality, I didn't know anything. I didn't know that sadness was a matter of numerical subtraction, or that I was expendable to my mother. I felt as if she had taken away a piece of me by leaving like that.

I expected her to at least say goodbye, that she would try to lead me on, but it wasn't so. She chose the easy way out: to let me grow without looking at me.

"You can't expect anything," said an old woman talking on her phone from the seat in front of us. She was sitting next to the window and she was wearing a cream-colored shirt. She was looking outside as she talked, then she turned at us just for an instant and smiled at me. My parents told me several times, "Don't listen to other people's phone conversations," but I couldn't help it. Her voice was clear and I could hear what she said perfectly without making an effort. My sister was asleep and, every time we reached a stop, I bumped her arm to let her know because I was afraid of missing our stop, but she didn't open her eyes. She stayed out late with her friends and Manuel the night before. And she had a hard time getting up that morning.

The old woman was talking about a previous experience of hers: she had lent some money to someone who didn't pay her back and didn't help her when she was in need.

"So, never expect anything?" I asked myself when the train was running again at full speed. I couldn't find an answer, I could only feel all the misplaced hope churning inside me, wishing for our father to be at the end of that trip, waiting for us, along with a better life.

Chapter 6

"It isn't always this cold," explained dad in the car as we crossed Via Tommaso Gulli for the first time. He came to pick us up at the station, he was waiting for us on the platform holding two coats in the same size and color, as if my sister and I were the same person. As we walked toward him uncertainly, encumbered by our suitcases, I noticed that he was not alone. He was accompanied by a man in his forties; his dark hair was slightly greying and he wasn't particularly robust.

"This is your uncle Thierno," said dad. Then he kissed us on the cheek.

The first thing I thought and didn't have the courage to ask him was why he didn't come pick us up by himself.

Our “uncle” had a wooden stick in his mouth that he passed around his teeth with his fingers. He drove a red 1992 Fiat Punto. I know that because he told me so, a little bit to justify the dents on the doors and the worn-out seats, and a little bit as if to say that he was going to get another car soon. He was lying, that car was probably the only valuable object he owned. I learned to discern lies by growing up with my mother, she had always been a serial liar. Mom usually lied to herself, telling herself stories that she then repeated as if they were true, thus lying to everyone else too.

There was a strong smell of incense in the car, the kind used by Senegalese. On the backseat where we were sitting, there were four half empty water bottles, a pair of work shoes, the kind with steel toes, and an orange reflective vest. I kept my hands on my knees and the seatbelt around my chest impeded my movements.

Thierno wasn’t our blood relative, we picked up on that immediately because he didn’t speak Lingala. Besides, he was too sure of himself to be related to dad. But the concept of family is much broader in our culture than it is for white people. For us, it is the community that raises you, not an individual person. A relative is someone who loves you, someone who gives you a hand or even just a ride to the station; that is how we were raised, calling people “uncle,” “grandpa,” “cousin” even if we didn’t know their actual names. That man who was taking us home, and who turned around at every red light to try to chat, he was Senegalese. The incense and his accent said so. Senegalese have darker skin than us, while we have bigger noses. That’s what I learned from life, when I was in the street trying to pick up on the visible differences between Africans. Because we don’t all look alike, despite what white people wanted me to believe when they said that I looked like a friend or a neighbor of theirs just because I was black.

The first leaves were falling, and they just announced on television that it was going to be the coldest October in the past decade. The sky was so heavy that it looked like it was going to fall on us.

Stefania just nodded at anything he said. She was looking out the window at all those abandoned-looking buildings, at the sidewalks in front of the pharmacies illuminated by the vending machines. Every now and then, her face lit up when she picked up her cellphone. That broken phone screen was her way to exchange messages with Manuel. And, looking at her smile as she typed attentively, it almost seemed as if that relationship were the only thing keeping her alive. She was attached to him like someone living plugged into a power source, and she sensed that trip would unplug them in due time. Stefania was in pain, you could see it from the outside. When you are a teenager, you don’t know that there are roads you have to take and places you can’t go back to. You don’t know that you go forward and start over like a new book, that there will be people you will miss like the answers you didn’t give in time.

Manuel and Stefania were arguing a lot in the weeks before our departure, one evening they even hit each other in front of everyone in the square. They had weird ways of saying “don’t leave” and it seemed like they went out of their way to almost hate each other because they both knew that the opposite, added to the distance, would hurt them more in the long run. Manuel swore to her and to everyone around her that he wouldn’t let her leave, that he would assert himself, but he also didn’t believe his own words, you could see the insecurity in his eyes. Promises are often just an excuse to delay a truth. Two persons shouldn’t miss each other or at

least, when it does happen, they should have the chance to see each other again. But that was unlikely for them.

Looking at it from behind the glass, the world seemed dimmed out and the outskirts of the city seemed so quiet, so unprepared to welcome us.

I had always been afraid of new things, of unexplored places where I didn't know how to defend myself. When I was young, I didn't eat unknown dishes because I was scared of the effect they would have in my mouth, and this always stuck with me.

We only found out later that we were in a popular housing neighborhood. "As soon as you see the projects, you're there," that is what a lady told my sister one afternoon when we got lost, thinking we knew the way, besieged by the monotony of the province. We had to go to the supermarket to buy two loaves of bread and we ended up at the racetracks. I saw a horse for the first time in my life. We looked at him captivated and slightly intimidated. We tossed him a few blades of grass from a distance and laughed happily, that day.

Chapter 7

The apartment immediately seemed too small for the three of us. It was furnished with the bare necessities and getting lost was not an option because all the doors led to the living room. My sister and I slept in the same bedroom. As soon as we stepped into our room, she chose the bed closest to the window. I didn't say anything because she was older and I might have been beaten up for objecting. In our culture, it is okay to hit someone younger, it isn't seen as an act of violence but as an educational tool. I had to endure and also fear my sister to not disrespect her. I remember that I kept on promising myself that as soon as I learned how to defend myself, I would never allow her to beat me up again.

The beds were on opposite sides of the room and they had blankets with the American flag on them. There was a slight smell of disinfectant in the air and there were new clothes in the closet that came from a thrift store, it said so on some of the tags that dad forgot to take off. Dad, who forgot to raise his kids for two years, ignoring them. It was almost as cold in the apartment as it was outside, the wind was cutting through the cracks like a blade making us shiver. The window didn't close all the way and the heaters were colder than our hands. Before switching off the light that night, Stefi said, "Sleep with your coat on, don't take it off." Then, she turned on her side, holding her phone in both her hands. The light from the screen pierced the room and split it in half.

I also lay down. The color of the ceiling wasn't uniform because water infiltrations had turned it yellow like the pillow under my head. I started to ask myself if it was rain or pee, but the second hypothesis was impossible because nobody lived upstairs. I smiled and decided to go to the bathroom. I opened the door and that is when I saw my father on the couch kissing my "uncle." I stood there, frozen, looking at them. They were kissing with their tongues touching, entwined in a tangle of arms and legs. He saw me out of the corner of his eye and gestured at me to go back to my room. I closed the door behind me and took a deep breath.

"What are you doing?" my sister asked bewildered, seeing me standing there, petrified.

“Nothing,” I answered.

“Then go to sleep, it’s late,” she said annoyed.

I never learned how to express the things that were tormenting me. My sister used to get mad at me when she found out that someone offended me or made fun of me at school. She would shout in my face, “Why didn’t you tell me?!” Once, I told her that I liked a girl in my class but that I didn’t want to meet her. “I just want to look at her,” I explained. She laughed and all she could say was, “You are not normal.” It hurt me. I wasn’t quiet because I lacked courage, I just understood by being around others that there were certain things inside me that I couldn’t talk about.

That night I decided to fall asleep carrying everything I had seen inside me. A voice in my head kept on repeating, “It won’t happen again,” but I did everything I could to ignore it because I didn’t trust it.

All the lights were out and the streetlights outside partially illuminated the room with their bright white glow. I looked around and noticed that I had fallen asleep without realizing it, right after laying my head on the pillow. I didn’t know what time it was, but there was complete silence and the hum of cars in the distance led me to believe that it was really late. I sat up on the bed. Stefania was sleeping on her side in a disheveled position that was indicative of how tired she was from the long trip. I woke up because I had to go to the bathroom. I got out of bed and left my room without thinking. Only then did I remember everything. My father and that kiss. I instinctively took a step back, but then I headed toward the only glass door in the house. The bathroom was all white, even the furniture and towels. There was a glass on the sink with a blue toothbrush and a wintergreen toothpaste. There was a strong smell of shampoo and the bathtub was covered by a shower curtain that was fraying at the bottom. Dad was a tidy man, everything was in its place, and I felt as if I were violating his privacy. I peed sitting down to avoid turning my back to the door. I was afraid that someone might walk in. I took some toilet paper to wipe the seat and then flushed the toilet. When I opened the door, I found my dad standing outside, waiting for me in the dark. The light from the bathroom reached halfway across the living room lighting it up partially. I couldn’t look him in the eyes, I kept on staring at the floor. I don’t know how long we stood like that. Despite the fact that he was my father and there had never been any incidents before, I was scared that something might happen to me. He leaned down toward me and got almost down on his knees. We were a few inches away. He lifted my chin with his finger so that I would look at him. His eyes were watery, he couldn’t hold back the tears. Then he looked down. There was a desperate expression on his face. He wiped his eyes with his forearm, then he kissed me on the forehead and whispered, “Forgive me.”

I WAS NEVER MY AGE

Chapter 63

"See you Monday, then," said some voices in the distance.

It was already dark outside. I turned around and said goodbye, "See you Monday," I replied as I closed the door behind me. Anna's mother wasn't there that evening either.

"I wonder where she is," I asked myself, looking around several times.

"I'll take care of you, don't worry," Anna's mother said to me the first time we spoke of that open spot at her factory, and she really did come through. I wasn't used to promises being kept. To words turning into actions. I was used to my father, to my mother, to my uncles who filled their mouths with words and then forgot about them. "I'll buy you a scooter when you turn sixteen," my mother promised me. But she didn't even show up for my fourteenth birthday. I kept on waiting for her all evening long, I was sure that she would show up at the last moment and then we would immediately go for a walk around the neighborhood. On my first day of work, like that birthday evening, I cried.

But those were tears of joy, because I could finally offer my sister the tranquility that she pretended she no longer sought. "No, I don't need anything," she always said with her messy hair and that blue pajama that covered her figure.

As I headed back to my station after forgetting my gloves in a drawer, my coworker Luca asked me worried, "Are you really going to walk back?" Then he added kindly, "Come on, I'll drive you if you wait for me." He was working on the edge of a piece of iron with a metal file. I don't know why but I turned his offer down, maybe because I thought he would insist, maybe because that is what life taught me. I learned to avoid the possibility that people could use it against me in the near future.

"But where's your bike?" he asked me as I headed toward the exit.

"They stole it, Lù," I answered with a bitter laugh without turning back. I put my hands in my pockets, made sure I wasn't forgetting anything, and headed home.

My bicycle was stolen by a group of guys younger than me. They were hanging out outside my building a few days ago and I wasn't quick enough to stop them.

But I saw them and I was sure that I would manage to track them down through common friends, asking around if anyone had a bike to sell. Sharif knew all the kids who sold used bikes, I was going to ask him as soon as he calmed down.

That was the first time since I started working in the industrial district that I walked home that late. Like on the way over, I encouraged myself by telling myself that I needed to walk, to observe the places where I grew up and where I used to take refuge. Behind me, I could hear loud and confused voices overlapping from behind the stained plaster walls.

It wasn't just voices talking, but also the noise of machinery and striking metal.

I walked quickly along the muddy road populated with abandoned factories and rusty street signs. I was wearing a giant ash grey coat and a black scarf that covered the lower half of my face.

“I’ll be home in half an hour,” I told myself after looking at my watch. The downtown area was full of people.

It was Saturday, but I had forgotten about it because I never looked at the calendar lately and didn’t care about anything outside of work. And Anna.

Like every Saturday, the university students who stayed in town occupied the bars and nightclubs, filling the streets downtown.

Sometimes the local residents complained about the noise and the occasional fight. The police intervened quickly, but none of them got arrested. The men in uniform preferred dialogue, they didn’t force anybody to lay on the ground with a gun to their head. I hated cops.

In my neighborhood, the older kids called them “*negri*” because, according to the society in which we grew up, black people represented the lowest level, scum. And for us, that is what cops were. When the older kids talked about *negri*, the cops didn’t get it, they laughed at the fact that black people spoke disparagingly about other black people. When they walked up the stairs of our buildings, knocking down people’s doors without asking questions, they made fun of those who didn’t speak their language fluently and they asked each other, “What did this one say?”

We learned to hate them when we were young, when they violated our property and treated our parents as if they were dumb. My neighborhood was far from downtown, it was where all the well-dressed people thought the city ended. I walked pensively by some students. I thought about Inno and how powerless I felt. About Sharif and how he decided to give up on our friendship. And about Claud, who was going to land in just a few weeks and come back to all this madness that was our life. When I reached my neighborhood, I realized that there weren’t any cars on the street, just a few scooters. The yellow and white lights that came from inside the houses gave me the impression that the place where I grew up was too tired to notice me, unlike downtown where everybody looked at me with suspicion.

It was almost as if my essence blended in with the degradation. I looked around and started to remember all the times I spent at every corner and on every square foot of every sidewalk, of every bench and park. I remembered when we were kids and nights were a time just for us, we used to go up to the roof of the world and scream like crazy. We were fourteen years old and we thought that coming “from the streets” was a badge of honor.

We showed it to everybody, we showed them everything we lacked, the bones under our skin and our red eyes.

We felt like we were the heirs of worn-out benches and kitchens with rusty stoves. We looked at other people as if to say, “You’re not from the streets.” We talked about her as if she were our mother, as if she had raised us. It was partly true. We were only fourteen and we didn’t know that a mother was never supposed to kill her children, that she should never exchange their future for a prison sentence. I was a few steps away from home when I heard voices from the other side of the street. It sounded like a bunch of guys exchanging profanities. As I walked closer, my heart started pounding and I felt a strong sense of nostalgia. Nostalgia for the reassuring belief that my father held when he said that the only way to ensure yourself a future was to leave the neighborhood. “Because if you swim in mud, you get dirty,” he complained the few times he drove my sister and me to school. The mud he was referring to were all those situations we couldn’t control. The thefts at our doorstep, the cocaine and prostitutes as our neighbors, our black skin. But our father was right: a man alone in the jungle

becomes an animal. And with our constant solitudes, we would just end up like criminals. That is what I was thinking when I received a message from Stefania; she had just gotten back.

"Are you eating at home?"

I didn't answer, I stuffed my phone back in my pocket and kept on walking. Three guys wearing hoodies appeared in front of me. They were dragging someone their age out of a car, yelling at him, "Stop moving!" They pinned him down to the ground and started beating him up while one of them searched the car. I was trying to figure out who they were since I knew everyone in the neighborhood.

The three guys were wearing black and one of them was noticeably shorter than the others. I almost fainted when I recognized Sharif.

I shouted out his name and launched myself in his direction without thinking. My intention was to take him home. When I managed to grab his arm, some cop cars showed up from around the corner with their sirens wailing. Somebody had called the police. "*I negri!*" everyone started shouting, "*I negri!*" Sharif freed himself from my hold and ran in the opposite direction. I tried to keep up with him when I realized that a cop spotted me and was yelling at me, "Hey you!"

I tried to outrun him to save myself. I was running so fast that I didn't notice what I was bumping into. Immersed in that mud from which my father never escaped.

Someone looked out of their window attracted by the sound of sirens and the word "police" spread around the neighborhood almost like a chorus. The streets rushed under my feet as I looked for an alley where to hide, in that place that I knew by heart. I glimpsed a familiar face walking in the opposite direction. A thousand names swirled through my mind until I found the right one. "Diabry!" I shouted, stopping for a second.

"Diabry!" I shouted again. I was out of breath and placed my hands on my knees from the exertion.

Diabry was Claud's brother. I hadn't seen him as often since Claud left. He used to be on the late shift with me and we sometimes biked back together for part of the way. His eyes widened but he didn't recognize me. The street was separating us and he was looking at me without realizing who I was. I remembered at that moment the scarf that I was wearing around my face and took it off exclaiming, "Shithead, it's me!"

In that very moment, a cop car blinded me with its lights and in a few seconds I was surrounded with two guns pointed at my head. The mud was drowning me, it wasn't below my knees anymore, it was filling my lungs and getting in my hair. I knelt on the ground, slowly, keeping my hands in plain sight.

Frightened, I tried to explain that I had nothing to do with it and that I just stopped to see what was happening, without ever mentioning Sharif's involvement. The policeman was yelling at me without listening, spitting on the ground and insinuating that I didn't understand Italian.

"You won't get away with it this time, you people have been causing too much trouble around town." He spoke in the plural as if I had already dealt with him in the past, as if being black automatically made me part of a gang.

"I didn't do anything," I replied convinced that they were listening. At that point, one of them slapped me in the face to make me shut up.

I instinctively got up to face him. "What the fuck are you doing?!" I exclaimed. That is when they immobilized me and started punching me and kicking me while I was on the ground.

“Fucking *negro*,” they screamed as they spat on me. The kicks came from afar to strike my belly. I wasn’t moving anymore but one of the cops, not satisfied, hit me in the face with his baton and broke my lip.

And then a second blow to the back of my head. I didn’t realize until then what kind of threat I represented to them. Without asking me anything, they had decided for me and dispatched my future to a museum of tragedy. I could hear my father’s words, my sister’s screams when she couldn’t stand him anymore, I heard Inno, Claud, Sharif, and the voices that came from the higher floors of the housing projects. I felt like someone who had carried the ocean with them for a lifetime and felt like I was drowning for the first time.

I heard my mother’s voice repeating, “White people always see something bad in black people.”

CLAUD

I arrived from Marseille on November 2.

They kept it from me so that I wouldn’t suffer, that’s what they said. I didn’t react when I heard the news, I just stood there looking in the distance through the window of my brother’s car. There was no remedy, we had lost him and there wouldn’t be any rematches. It wasn’t like when we were kids, when we could insist until we convinced everyone to play again after we lost.

Sharif tried to commit suicide but failed. He didn’t have the courage to go through with it. He keeps on staring at the floor and repeating that it is his fault, that they took him away from him. I think instead that it is life that takes people away from you. I think that the street doesn’t love its children, because nobody loves you while ignoring you.

Nobody loves you while taking away glimpses of a future.

Inno instead was released shortly later that night, not because of justice but because they felt bad for him. Because a friend of his had died at their hand. And in his eyes, I saw the fear of not knowing where to restart. “I’ll never be innocent as long as I stay here,” he told a journalist with thick glasses. I ask myself: will we ever be able to feel free? To trust without the fear of frightening them?

I saw Anna for a few minutes. She was wearing a black dress and she was crying her heart out. I didn’t have the courage to talk to her, to say those mundane things you tell someone who doesn’t really need you.

Stefi and her father will never get over it and I don’t know what to say to them, especially when they could really use a word. Because there are words that speak to the soul, that are enough to not die.

We were happy until our country was our neighborhood.

Once I knew for sure that I was going back, I really believed that it would have been a better time for all of us, like when we were kids and we believed in nice things, in people who then turned out to be wrong, in apparent solutions. We had survived everything while everything

around us died. The sidewalks died, our peers because they were too impatient, and the public housing projects were being cleared out while we played at being happy.

I will never come back here. This country is the reason why I will run forever and will never want to get attached. This country took away our adolescence, because we were never our age.

Happy birthday Zero, I would have wanted to say more, but maybe it would have been better if I had done it sooner.

Christian Mpasi died on October 19 around 11:30 p.m. after an altercation with the police while they were attempting to handcuff him.

According to local media reports, the boy's relatives disagree with this version of facts and argue instead that the police officers, all white, assaulted him during the arrest. The boy wasn't even eighteen years old yet.