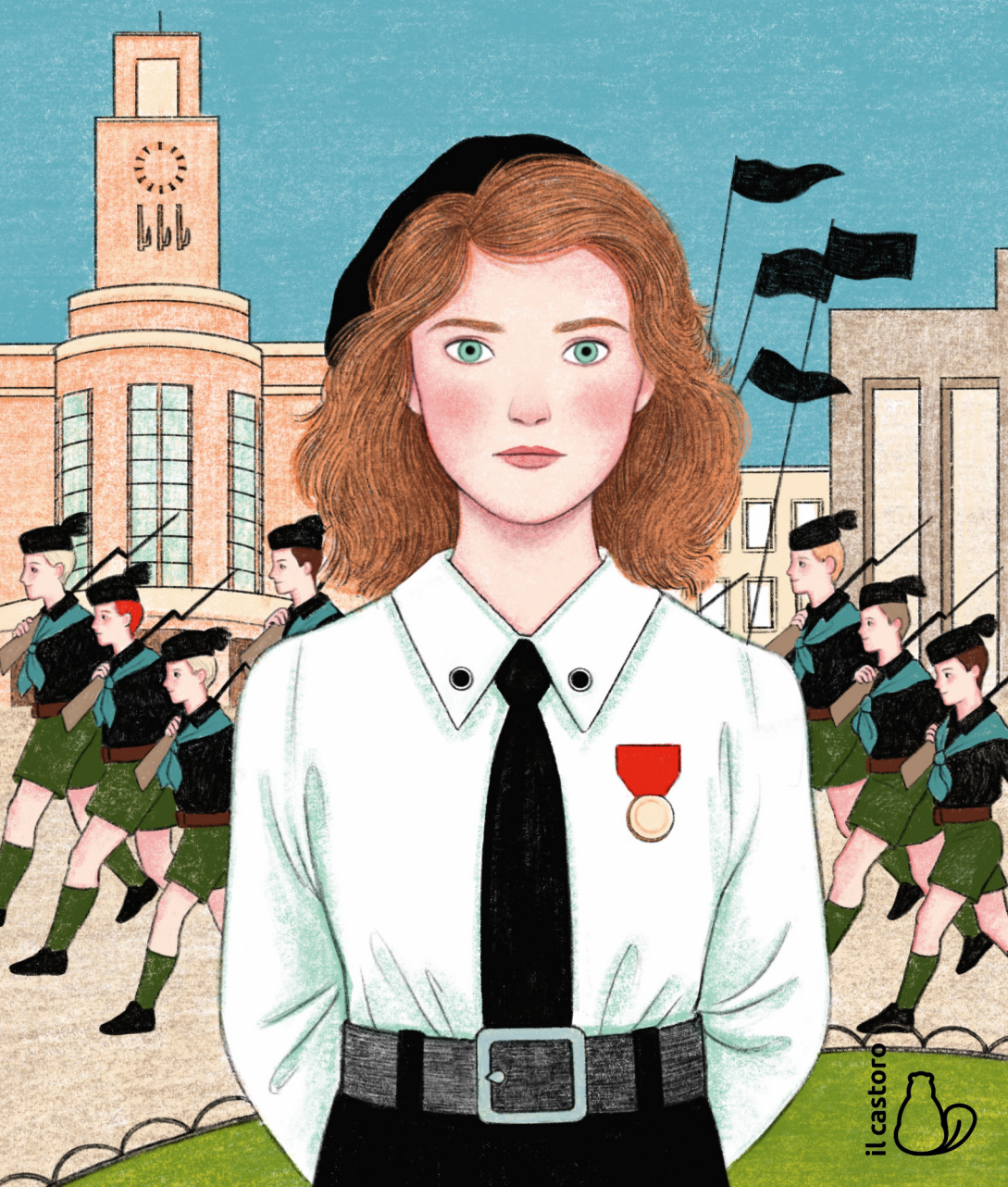


Elisa Castiglioni

THE GIRL WITH THE GREEN BACKPACK



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The Girl with the Green Backpack

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Hanging at my door
is the green backpack you'd take on your mountain hikes
through the same woods where you once fought as a partisan.
Before leaving the house, in my mind's eye I shoulder it
and set off with you by my side.

.

THE GREAT RIVER

*You are the dawn of life,
You are the hope of the Fatherland,
You are, above all, the army of tomorrow.*
Benito Mussolini

I

Whenever I think of Isabella, a morning star appears before my eyes.

That's how my mind works. I associate people with images. If I think of father, I picture his stethoscope. If I think of mother, I picture her cyclamen-coloured pillbox hat. If I think of Camilla, I picture her primary school bag, the beige one with leather trimmings. On the first day of school, I stared at it for ages before plucking up the courage to go in. Camilla was already at the centre of the classroom, introducing herself to the other girls. As usual, she knew just what to do. She jumped right in, while I hung back, filled with doubts and questions.

I haven't seen Aunt Isabella since last February, and I really miss her. I could tell *her* how I feel. I guess I could write her a letter, but even the idea of setting my feelings down on paper paralyses me with embarrassment.

This winter has been harsher than usual, yet the morning stars have managed to bloom and grow. People call them snowdrops, but their real name is morning stars. I know this because Isabella is passionate about calling things by their proper name. She's obsessed by the meaning of words; she corrects you when you use them inappropriately and chooses hers with great care. I think it's because she's a journalist. «Words are the tools of my trade» she often says, as if to excuse herself.

On that Sunday in February, we took a long walk through the thick of the moorland. Leaving the river behind us, we entered the beech wood, a no man's land where you don't know what country you're in and where hunting has no laws.

Starting from the hut the poachers camp out in, Isabella insisted on counting the one hundred and fifty steps that supposedly mark the distance between Italy and Switzerland. One hundred and fifty steps and you're in a different country. I've never thought much about Switzerland, maybe because it's so close, and I would never have thought of counting the steps to the border. It seemed to matter a lot to Isabella, though, so I followed her. A few minutes' walk that felt like forever, with her voice counting our every step.

«One hundred and fifty.» Aunt Isabella came to a halt. I stopped too, and looked around. It seemed so odd that

nothing had changed, yet the ground beneath my feet and the trees in front of me belonged to another country.

«But everything looks the same» I told her. Who knows what I'd been imagining.

«Yet everything is different.» Isabella stared at the invisible line cutting the woods in half for a long time.

We set off again in silence. The birch trees were creaking in the wind. Here and there, the half-light in the underwood was brightened by the sunbeams filtering through the empty spaces among the branches. «Look, there they are – the morning stars.» She pointed to the pure-white corollas growing between the roots of a young oak tree. They looked like fragments of light. «They're the earliest flowers to bloom, heralding the spring. Just like the planet Venus, the first star to appear before sunrise, was known as "the morning star" in ancient times.» A shadow crossed her face, and I thought she wanted to say more, but she remained silent and, looking down, bent to pick a morning star. Gently, she placed it behind my ear. «You know you're my favourite niece, right?»

I smiled. «That's because I'm your only niece!»

Aunt Isabella burst out laughing and we sat down on the bank to watch the river go by. Water with neither salt nor waves, calm on the surface yet always in motion. Smoothing stones, eroding the banks, silently rebelling against the form in which it has been confined. For a long moment, Aunt Isabella was lost in her thoughts, then she asked me –

with one of her typical point-blank questions – if I was in love. I said no. Perhaps too emphatically.

She raised an eyebrow at me, her gaze serious. Almost worried. «Alida, you need to learn how to lie if you want to survive in this world.»

I blushed, and she burst out laughing again. Then she tapped a finger on her lips with an amused grin. «I'm giving you the letter R.»

I smiled at her. I knew we'd end up playing the letter game, like we have ever since I was a little girl. We take turns choosing a letter and have to come up with the name of a person, thing, animal, plant and city beginning with that letter. The first to give up has to pay a forfeit.

«But you have to tell me his name if you lose.» She winked at me.

I shook my head. She'll never change.

I won that day.

If only Isabella were here now to ask me the name of the boy I'm in love with. Now I'd be ready to tell her everything. Although I doubt that someone as pretty as her would understand how unrequited love feels. But she'd tell me what to do, and I'd do it. She's always understood me better than I understand myself. I think that's why I picture a morning star whenever I think of her. A flower that brings light.

Closing my eyes, I think of myself, waiting for an image

to tell me who I am. Once you know who you are, you also know what to do. But nothing happens, as usual. I'm still in the dark.

Maybe the sea will help me clear my mind.

II

I can never sleep the night before going to summer camp. Nervous and excited about the upcoming trip, I toss and turn restlessly in bed. It was almost dawn when I finally fell asleep (*just for five minutes*, I told myself), and I woke up with a start two hours later as the bells were chiming eight. Jumping out of bed, my eyes wide open but still half asleep, I took off my nightgown and put on the clothes I had left out on the chair last night.

Before brushing my hair, I checked my suitcase for the umpteenth time to make sure I'd packed everything: my black bathing suit and a spare white summer uniform, my school books and notebooks for homework.

Father pops into my room. «Ready?»

«Yes!» I exclaim, shutting my suitcase.

He shakes his head with a glance at my mussed hair and crooked blouse collar. «Hurry, or you'll miss the train. I'll be waiting outside.» He takes my suitcase.

He and mother both see me as the awkward, scatter-brained daughter sent by Providence as their only offspring. Always last in sports competitions, but top of the class in every subject, as if to compensate my inadequacy – my not being enough – by studying hard and getting high marks.

I straighten my collar and brush my hair. There's no time for breakfast. As I leave the house, I run into mother. She's just come from the market. Setting her bags down on the doorstep, she hands me a paper bag. «For the trip.»

«Thank you.» The bag smells like peaches.

She looks at me closely. «Behave, eh?» Her soft accent lacks the brusque roughness of the Varese dialect. She's lived out here for eighteen years, yet she's never lost her Milanese inflection. I actually believe she holds onto it to remind people – including herself – that she comes from a big city and an important family. That she grew up in an elegant villa with an array of servants. Even though now she has to do her own shopping.

She smiles at me, and her tone grows gentler. She tells me to have fun, then hugs me. A quick hug, but long enough for me to feel her angular frailness and the anxiety quivering under the surface. I feel it too; it's the same anxiety

that keeps me awake the night before a trip and makes me check my suitcase a hundred times.

«You'll miss the train if we don't hurry» calls father from the street, where he's tied my suitcase to his bicycle rack. It fits, although it seems against the laws of physics.

I say goodbye to mother and get on my own bicycle. Father and I ride quickly and silently. We're often silent when it's just the two of us. Words feel like intruders breaking up the subtle communication between us. With mother, on the other hand, silence is an intruder suggesting an intimacy we're not ready for.

When we get to the station, the train is already at the platform. Father unties my suitcase from the bicycle rack and hands it to me. He waves to Miss Ludovica, the supervisor who will be taking us to camp. After some last-minute advice, he gives me a big hug. «Be good.»

The train whistles and I sit in the first car next to Camilla, who starts complaining about her seat and asks to trade places, since I have the window seat. I'd like to say no. I want to glue my eyes to the window, waiting for the sea to explode in my face, blue and endless. But I say yes. Like always.

Across from me is a girl I've never seen before. She has brown hair in a pageboy cut and dark eyes. She looks smart. «I'm Miriam» she introduces herself.

«And I'm Alida» I reply with a smile. I turn towards

Camilla, expecting her to introduce herself to our new travelling companion, but she just keeps talking to me, ignoring Miriam completely. Embarrassed, Miriam pulls a book out of her bag and starts to read. The book is called *Spartacus*.

«That looks interesting» I say.

«It is! If you want, I can lend it to you when I'm done.»

«Sure, thanks!»

Camilla snorts. Miriam and I start chatting about books and discover that we both love Salgari's adventure novels and that we'll be going to the same school in October. I'm happy; I like Miriam. We share my peaches: one each.

We get to Cattolica in the afternoon. The camp is less than a kilometre from the station. We walk in single file, carrying our suitcases in silence – we're tired from the trip and the heat. But as we get closer to the beach, our tiredness gives way to the excitement of being on holiday. A salty breeze leads the way.

The camp looks like a giant, fully-equipped cruise ship. The long, sandy beach is coloured by rows of red and yellow sun umbrellas. The sea is as blue and endless as I remembered. The Italian flag stands still on the flagpole. The wind died down as soon as we arrived. A few metres from the water's edge, a giant sheet embossed with the profile of Mussolini hangs from two posts. TO US, is written below.

On seeing the image of the Duce, I raise my arm in the Roman salute, an automatic gesture performed by all the girls.

As soon as Miss Ludovica leaves us, some of the girls take off their shoes and run towards the water's edge. As I watch them, I realise how happy I am that we're here together. We don't always get along, of course, but we're more than just friends – we're comrades. We vowed to take care of each other, to sacrifice ourselves for the group, to be honest, generous and obedient. We made a solemn vow before our group leader and each other. «You're strong together. And united, you're invincible» she often tells us. Whenever we're together, I feel like I'm part of something big.

I clearly remember the first time I ever felt like that. It was on 5th May 1936, and I was twelve years old. Father was working at the hospital, mother was in the kitchen making dinner and I was studying in my room we heard an announcement over the radio. Every Italian was called on to gather in the town squares to hear the Duce announce the latest news from Africa.

Right afterwards, all the bells and sirens in the province of Varese began to ring. Mother and I left the house to find the streets crowded with people of all ages. The square was decorated with flags. Some men were fastening loudspeakers to the balconies of the buildings housing the local branch of the Fascist Party and of the Balilla youth group for boys. Most of them were wearing black shirts, while

others were still dressed in their work clothes. All around us, people began to sing the popular marching song *Faccetta Nera*. Mother's eyes were shining and she squeezed my hand tight. The platoon of Balilla drummers lined up below the balconies. Through the loudspeakers hooked up to the radio, we could hear the thunderous applause from the square in Rome where the Duce was about to address a live speech to the nation. Several people began chanting his name, and the square soon became a single sound, a single name: "*Duce. Duce. Duce*".

Mother and I joined the chant, our arms raised in the Roman salute and our faces turned towards the loudspeakers. My heart was bursting with enthusiasm.

Silence fell as soon as he started to speak. His voice reached us from the sky. With his crisp enunciation and exaggerated way of speaking, he announced that General Badoglio had captured Addis Ababa. Italy – *we* – had won. Applause broke out in the square, and the cries of "*Duce*" became louder. "*Duce, Duce, Duce*". The lampposts began swaying, and one fell to the ground.

«The war is over!» Mother beamed at me before being dragged off by Rosetta and the other ladies of the charity organisation for Africa. Left by myself, I turned around and saw *him* next to me. Alfio. We looked at each other, he smiled at me, and the crowd suddenly faded away into the background. Drawing me close, he kissed me on the lips.

A kiss so fleeting I sometimes wonder if I dreamed it. My first kiss. And my only one so far. The bells started ringing again, and he vanished into the moving, celebrating, marching crowd.

I was stunned by both the kiss (Alfio Tommasini was the cutest and most popular boy in town!) and the atmosphere in the square. Eternity pervaded the air that night, along with excitement and exhilaration. We were no longer a poor peasant country: we were citizens of a Great Empire. Even I, who never won any competitions, had won a war.

A week later, a straw-thatched hut selling books on Ethiopia and African handicrafts appeared in the square. BANANAS ARE A PRODUCT OF THE REGIME, said a sign hanging from the crate.

I saw Alfio again at the river on Sunday. My heart skipped a beat, and I was so nervous I couldn't say a word. Not even "Hello". He pretended not to see me either. Maybe he was afraid that his friends would make fun of him for showing his feelings. Deep down, I was sure he loved me too; he just wasn't ready to admit it. I decided to wait until he was. It's been two years now, and I'm still waiting.

Miss Ludovica comes back and scolds the girls who had got their feet wet. The wind starts blowing again, the flag unfolds along the horizon. Miriam puts her hand on my shoulder and asks if I'm all right. Camilla answers for me:

«She's just lost in her thoughts. You'd better get used to it, it happens all the time!».

I glare at her. She's been my best friend since our first year at primary school, when she defended me from a bully who'd stolen my snack at recess. She's my yardstick. When I think of myself, I do it through her. I'm shorter than Camilla, less athletic, less impudent, shyer and more awkward, less jolly and frivolous. I can't imagine my life without her, but sometimes I wish she were a bit more sensitive.

Miriam smiled at me. «I know how you feel. It happens to me too.» I smile back at her in relief. It feels good to have someone who understands.

Rolling her eyes, Camilla joins the others.

«Get a move on, girls, the director is waiting.» Miss Ludovica beckons us to follow.

We walk into the entrance hall, with its high ceilings, white walls and chequered floor. You can see the sea from the windows. The director is waiting for us next to the staircase that leads to the bedrooms. She's a husky, middle-aged woman wearing a green suit with a matching turban. «Welcome» she says, and before we even have the chance to set our suitcases down, she starts reading out the list of rules.

After repeating meal and rest times, she stares at us for a long time in silence, as if to make sure we understand that she's in charge. «That's all for now» she adds. «Now you can

get settled in your rooms and, if you like, go to the beach. Today is your day off. You'll have a medical check-up tomorrow morning.»

They assign us to our rooms – or rather, to our beds, since we'll be sleeping in large dormitories separated by white screens that make up tiny rooms with no doors and low walls. Miss Ludovica will be sleeping with the other supervisors on the same floor, but at the end of the hallway.

We set down our luggage, put on our bathing suits and rush out to the beach to swim and sunbathe. The afternoon passes in the blink of an eye, and evening falls before we know it. After dinner, we go to bed early. I'd like to stay up chatting with the other girls, but I soon fall fast asleep, exhausted by the trip and the previous sleepless night. And by all the thoughts I'd hoped to leave behind me and which, instead, had followed me on holiday.

The next morning, after our medical check-up, Miss Ludovica takes us to the beach. She instructs us to lie down on the sand and open our arms and legs as wide as possible to absorb the sun. We stretch out in parallel rows. «Heliotherapy should be done in silence» she says. «The sun and the sea will strengthen you, body and mind. That's precisely why you're here.»

I try to be still and quiet, but the sand tickles my skin and it's starting to get quite hot, and my temples itch from my white bathing cap. I turn towards Miriam, who looks

as fed up as I am. She makes a funny face and we burst out laughing.

«You two! Move to the front row where I can keep an eye on you!» Miss Ludovica scolds us.

«Great, now you've annoyed her» snaps Camilla.

A few minutes after stretching out in the front row, we slide slowly forward – without Miss Ludovica noticing – until our toes touch the evanescent waves.

That's probably why I picture sea foam whenever I think of Miriam.

III

We're standing in front of our newly-made beds, shoulders straight and heads high, like we've been taught ever since we were little girls. We're wearing the uniforms of the *Giovani Italiane* youth group for girls: black skirts, white shirt. I wear my uniform proudly; I feel good, it's like a second skin. When I wear it, I feel safe. I feel like I'm enough.

Miss Ludovica walks up and down the row of girls, her hands clasped behind her back, a whistle around her neck and a harsh look in her eyes. She stops in front each of us. Sometimes she nods and moves on; sometimes she shakes her head and tells us what to fix. A crooked collar or button, an uneven skirt hem... «Today is our beloved Duce's birthday and I want you all to look *perfect* for the rally organised in his honour.»

«I think Miss Ludovica has a crush on Mussolini» I whisper to Miriam, who stifles a giggle.

Miss Ludovica blows her whistle and points at me. «You.» She glares at me.

I turn pale, terrified that she heard me. I don't want to be punished by the director today of all days. I want to have fun with the others. Miss Ludovica stands in front of me, her hands on her hips. «Your braid is a disgrace! It's lucky I noticed how crooked it is.» Her whistle dangles before my eyes.

I breathe a sigh of relief. She didn't hear me. Miss Ludovica orders Miriam to remake my braid, then changes her mind. «Forget it, it wouldn't do any good.» She turns to Camilla with a smile. «Will you take care of it, dear?» She doesn't call any of the other girls "dear". Camilla is her favourite; they even look alike.

«Of course» Camilla answers primly, sounding like the perfect teacher's pet.

«Everything has to be perfect» repeats Miss Ludovica, more to herself than to us this time.

I realise that she's flustered about today's big event, but she's being really disagreeable. Especially to Miriam. Ever since the holiday started, she's treated her rudely with absolutely no reason.

Camilla pulls my hair into a braid so tight it hurts. When she's done, Miss Ludovica inspects the result. «Very good»

she tells Camilla, before ordering us to go down to the beach. Sedately and without running. «We'll march into town from camp.»

On the beach, she hands Camilla the Italian flag and sends Miriam to the end of the line, where I join her.

As soon as we set off, the tension that had built up all morning seems to disappear. The sunlight smooths the way for us. Miss Ludovica starts singing the official anthem of the Italian National Fascist Party. Her face is relaxed and her eyes are shining. Looking at her, I think she's really pretty right now. We sing and march together. Light and strong.

We arrive in front of the town hall right on time. The square is decorated with flags and crowded with men in black shirts, veterans of the Great War, women in their Sunday best. A giant close-up of the Duce is draped over the Town Hall façade. He's gazing proudly ahead towards the future and is wearing a soldier's beret. He's not handsome, but they say he has a magnetic gaze, and that women fall at his feet.

The church bells ring out at four o'clock on the dot. «Here we go!» Miriam claps her hands. The mayor steps out onto the balcony, salutes us and reads a long letter wishing the Duce a happy birthday and recapping the extraordinary life of Benito Mussolini, son of the people, born in Predappio on 29th July, 1883 to a blacksmith and a school teacher. «Our beloved Duce works tirelessly for the Fatherland. He

is the strong man we have all been waiting for. He is the Man of Destiny and we are his loyal people.»

Miss Ludovica dries her tears; I bet she really does have a crush on Mussolini. The mayor ends his speech by thanking Mussolini for being born during our era so as to revolutionise it. Then he turns to us. «You young people are the spring of a new and stronger race. You are the chosen ones destined for Victory. You are part of the collective design of a glorious destiny he has envisaged for you. For us.»

Applause breaks out in the square, and the band starts playing. We raise our arms, singing at the top of our lungs. *“Viva il Duce!” Long live the Duce, long live the King, long live us!*

«Long live the Duce!» I sing and feel the words deep inside. Long live the Duce and long live us. I look at my comrades; their eyes are shining with excitement too.

After the rally ends, we march back to camp. Miss Ludovica has just told us that the director has organised a surprise for the occasion. We'll be taking a photograph of us girls lying on the sand to form the sentence *“Viva il Duce!”* and mail it to Rome along with a letter signed by all of us.

I think it's a wonderful idea. I love the Duce. He cares about us girls and boys, he talks to us through his speeches, he considers us important. He shows us the way. He's like a second father to us.

When we get to the beach, Miss Ludovica asks me to lie

down on my stomach. «You're the last line of the letter E» she tells me.

I lie down as straight as possible, keeping my arms close to my body just like she instructs me.

«Don't move until the photographer says you can» she tells us.

The sand stings my face, but I don't care, and stay still. It's just too bad Miriam couldn't join in. At the last minute, Miss Ludovica told her we didn't need the exclamation mark.