

**Fabio Volo**

**Una vita nuova**

**A New Life**

**Translation by Olivia Jung**

## Chapter 0

I loved my dad from the very beginning, he was my gentle giant.

One day, when I was a child, I asked him to fly for me and he said that he couldn't. I was convinced that he was wrong.

He preferred to walk slowly in life, maybe because it was the most suited pace for his sad gaze, his kind eyes, his silences.

He was made of silences, which I was never able to interpret. My father was made of the things he didn't say.

I often asked myself what he didn't forgive himself. He kept everything bottled up inside, his pain, his life, the words I didn't want to hear.

The thing I loved about him most was the kindness he kept hidden within: when he smiled, the sky opened up, it was like a rainbow after the rain, and it was immediately overshadowed by discretion.

## Chapter 1

"Paolo, can I come by your place tomorrow morning to jerk off?"

I remained silent.

"I have my sperm test and I absolutely have to turn it in within forty minutes from..."

"So what?"

I was just getting back from a long day at work and I wasn't interested in knowing all the details.

"I don't feel like jerking off in a small, sad, aseptic room. And it takes at least an hour to drive from my house to the clinic: my poor sperms would die in the car ride, it's a massacre I don't think I could face. But you basically live next door."

The fact that it was totally normal for Andrea to masturbate at my house made me feel uncomfortable. If it had been the home where I grew up, I would have understood; but it was different now with a wife and a six-year-old son.

Andrea and Marina had been trying to have a baby for months.

“Maybe I’m the problem,” he said before bursting into a nervous laughter.

I realized at that moment how serious the matter was for him.

“How ironic would it be if I were sterile? A life of scares and pulling out at the last second.”

When we were barely twenty, he hooked up with a girl in the parking lot of Altaluna, a club where we always used to go. A couple weeks later, she came looking for him: she was ten days late. Andrea ran to my house, his face as pale as a ghost, his eyes in a daze, I had never seen him like that.

He sat on my bed, cupping his face in his hands. “She’s usually precise and punctual, like clockwork, you know? Like a Swiss watch. I’m a dead man. My life is over. A Swiss watch, shit, a Swiss watch! And now she’s ten days late.”

He kept on repeating that thing about the Swiss watch, I laugh every time I think about it.

“Ok, tomorrow morning at my place, glad to give you a hand,” I said in the end, when I had already arrived and was looking around for parking.

“The house is enough, as for the hand I can do it on my own.”

I laughed.

As soon as I opened the front door, Tommaso came up to me. I would have wanted to pick him up, toss him on the couch and play wrestling with him; but then I thought about Alice and how she keeps asking me not to do it because he gets all riled up and it takes forever to make him go to sleep.

Actually, I always thought there was more to it. She is tired of being the one who always tells him “no,” while I take the role of the superhero who plays and jokes around with him: everything is possible when I’m around, even jumping on the couch.

We often argue over the “no” thing. She would like me to be stricter with him and less of an accomplice.

While she was loading the dishwasher, I mentioned that Andrea would stop by the next day to have breakfast. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I instinctively lied at the last moment, I was embarrassed to tell her the real reason.

She immediately rebutted that she was going to her parents for a few days and that she would be taking Tommaso, making him miss school. It was like settling a score: Andrea’s morning invasion for three days of Tommaso’s absence, without even consulting me. We were in the midst of a deep crisis, everything was a battleground for negotiations, exchanges, and spite.

When I got to bed that evening, Alice was already asleep. I wondered who she was and what I still felt for her.

Then I remembered that Andrea was going to come over in a few hours to masturbate.

One time, when we were teenagers, we ended up at a friend's party. Andrea went to the bathroom and found some panties on the doorknob. He couldn't resist, he grabbed them and sniffed them, then he started masturbating while holding them under his nose.

Our friend's mother suddenly walked in on him. She immediately kicked him out of the party, and me along with him.

As we walked back home, I kept on telling him that he was an idiot. He stopped and said, "Paolo, you don't understand. Those panties weren't fresh from the laundry, they'd been worn. What the fuck could I do?"

I burst out laughing.

Before I fell asleep, I went to the bathroom and removed Alice's underwear from the dirty laundry.

## Chapter 2

"Dad has to sign some documents to close that old bank account. Can I come by this evening?" I asked my mother as I headed to work.

"Come over for lunch, I'm making meatballs."

I usually don't have time for lunch, but I had a cancellation that morning, so I accepted. It felt like a Sunday.

When I got to their place, I rang the buzzer but got no answer. I tried again. Silence. I was seized for a moment by the thought that something had happened to them.

"We ended up running late at the supermarket and then went to your aunt's," my mother said candidly when I called her. "Hold on, let me put her on the phone so you can say hi."

She always does it: pass the phone to other people she's with, even if they are strangers. That strange habit of hers doesn't bother me anymore, even though I never know what to say.

"I have to get back to work, I'm leaving the papers on the table."

I actually had time to spare, but I wanted to make her feel bad for running late. I never went to their place for lunch during the week and they ended up not even being home because they were running errands. They made me feel like I wasn't important, and I couldn't figure out why. I had stopped trying to make sense of the behavior of those two retired persons a long time ago.

“You can let yourself in and eat, it’s all ready, you just have to heat it up,” my mother tried to remedy. I had managed to make her feel guilty.

I used the keys that she had given me a couple years back. “What if something happens to us one day and we end up locked inside?”

She couldn’t simply tell me that she wanted me to have them, that it made her feel happy or safe. She had to envision in her mind that I would find them lying on the kitchen floor, dead.

When I pointed it out, she immediately replied: “I’m just the kind of person who thinks about things ahead of time. You don’t know what kind of stuff happens every day.”

She wasn’t a pessimist, she was a realist. She wasn’t a catastrophist, she was farsighted. She was careful, not anxious. And she had always been that way, it just got worse over the years.

I rented a beach house with a small pool a few summers ago. I was sitting in the garden looking at Alice and Tommaso laughing and playing in the water. The sun was low, the sky was starting to turn an intense shade of blue, the grass was shimmering in a vivid green, sparrows were soaring in the air, everything was perfect.

I thought about my parents, how I would have liked to have them there with me, surrounded by all that beauty. I wanted to share that magical moment with them, so I grabbed my phone.

The first words that my mother said were: “Be careful with that swimming pool, do you know how many children drown in those things? All it takes is a moment, and then... Just the other day they were talking on the news about a three-year-old who fell in the water and drowned.”

I looked at Tommaso swimming with his floaties and in an instant I saw his small, lifeless body floating on the surface. An image that stayed with me for the rest of the vacation, and which I would have gladly done without.

My mother had erased all the magic: the sky was dark, the grass was brown, the sparrows had turned into crows. I felt the anxiety rise as if there were an imminent catastrophe.

These days the catastrophes always concern Tommaso, while back in the day they were about me and my brother Nicola.

When I was riding a bicycle, I had to be careful not to get hit by a car. If I went to the mountains, I had to beware of cliffs, or avalanches if there was snow. When I went to a concert in an indoor venue she even told me: “Be careful, stay close to the exits.” And when I bought myself a Vespa: “You’re really asking for it.”

I could make an endless list of things I didn’t do because of my mother’s worries. These days, I don’t even need to talk to her to transfer me her anxiety, I can just hear her voice in my

head. Her pessimistic-annoyed-scared program is perfectly installed in my brain and operates autonomously.

Sometimes I use it with Tommaso, especially when he was younger: every corner, every step, every game at the playground, I saw blood and irreversible damage.

My mother's anxiety mutated over time like a virus, installing itself in my brain in a new 2.0 version that activates itself just for fun and giggles.

If I'm not home because I'm at work, then it's fine; but if I'm not there because I'm skiing in the mountains with some friends, then I immediately think that I'll die, that I'll never see Alice again, and that Tommaso will have to grow up without a father.

I opened the door and said "Hello" to make sure that no one was actually home.