

The First to Come Along

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English Translation Sample by Scott Belluz

“At five in the morning, like a real criminal!”

The voice bounced from balcony to balcony, chasing the blinding siren lights up the building’s façade, all the way up to where we stood, well-hidden among the palm tree’s foliage. The whole neighborhood was out in robes, feet stuck between balcony railings, watching the spectacle unfold below: a squad car had parked theatrically in the middle of the street, blocking the way, and a police officer was blithely writing up a report on the car’s roof. The sound of the radio transceiver came from its open door as a rooster crowed in a nearby garden.

In my neighborhood, it’s customary to perch on your balcony to watch life unfolding on the street, everything from processions of saints to funeral cortèges to serenades. Not even the flashing blue light oscillating between buildings – illuminating them like a kind of pinwheel or firework – could break our code of silence, which was well protected by railings, window fixtures, and loggias.

And even though the police had recently burst into our house, my mother and I watched the epilogue of my father’s arrest like average spectators, standing on tiptoe in the darkest corner of our large terrace where no one could see us. From there we watched the squad car drive off, its lights still flashing.

“What an overreaction,” she said, pulling me near by the arm. “Did they stop you down there? Did you say anything?”

“Nothing. They wanted to know who I was, what I was doing here.”

“And they had good reason. What were you thinking coming home at this hour? Who were you with? What did you tell them?”

“Nothing. Rafilina yelled something and they let me pass.”

My mother was no longer listening to me. She hadn't even made eye contact. She immediately got on the phone, the steadiness in her voice that of someone holding back fear. She didn't sense my disappointment. How to explain that I'd been convinced the police had come for me, to take me away in handcuffs?

“Everything's fine, Pierpà. Don't be afraid. Tell Rafilina to come upstairs, she'll make you something to eat. Call Aunt Rosa if you need to, okay?”

I didn't ask questions. I accepted that their only concern at a time like this was who would make me lunch.

Part One

I

There was no room for profit or beauty in the suburbs. Even though my mother remembered fields and peach trees in bloom where our building now stood and my father reminisced about the distant past when people would be out on the streets until midnight, my neighborhood had become a hideous place where cheap rent was the only appeal.

A few patches of countryside were still visible. Along the street where we lived, we'd often encounter the flock of a seasoned goat-herd, who once a year set fire to a strip of vegetation so his beasts could graze. There were families who grew tomatoes. They gathered in paved courtyards to bottle passata which they guaranteed was the best. At night you could hear bottles which hadn't been closed properly exploding in garages where they'd been left to cool. A few people even ventured to make wine, but they always relied on chemical shortcuts. It was mostly the elderly who took on nature, the retirees who collected plums from the trees wedged between buildings. Their descendants, we grew up inside, our apartments shielded by gates and railings. And whoever soared highest enjoyed the privilege of immediate respectability, a permit which those who lived on lower floors could not obtain.

I'd been one of the lucky ones, growing up in an apartment high above the pavement and far from the swarming life below, from the tangled jungle of arms that waved from balcony to balcony. My view, a discontinuous expanse of roofs, rusty antennas and illegal verandas, was so sweeping that the neighborhood stretched all the way out to a ridge of cabins. The entrepreneurs, my father among them, had adapted to this expanse by wallowing in their large SUVs, as though the skiff of snow on Vesuvius's cone were an imminent threat to our busted-up streets. In summer, we were the only ones who slept with our doors open, confident that thieves or any other danger would never reach us up here.

Although the news portrayed it as a polluted place known for the nearby landfill that gave off a lethal stench in the evenings, my neighborhood behaved more like a northern province, where even the unluckiest good-for-nothing could, with the right local connections, consider himself a small entrepreneur and hole up in a sumptuous cottage on an isolated cross-street, cordoned-off and well monitored by sheepdogs and state-of-the-art surveillance cameras. My father, however, found such cottages garish, and happily let doctors from the national health service, or unmentionable criminals, take them. He was like an emir, preferring to erect tall buildings out of nowhere that had recognizable symbols on one façade – ours had a kind of compass rose – like a coat of arms.

In these fortresses (which did not smell like a landfill at all) we were the masters and we escaped every expectation. Despite the compass rose, there was nothing I could use to orient myself at home. I knew very little about my father's business. He was always preoccupied with phone calls and referencing people and places whose unpronounceable nicknames I had no desire to decipher. Even the presence of my own mother eluded me, disoriented as she was by her role as housewife, most of the duties having been entrusted to Rafilina. My parents knew

even less about my life. It was enough for them to know I had progressive ideas, was well-educated and unaccustomed to the vulgarities of dialect. We were steadfast in this unspoken agreement.

According to my father who was born and raised here, the best thing we could do to enjoy our privilege was to stay far away from the squalor of the suburbs, even though they would always be my roots. At worst, staying high up in our apartment (which Rafilina kept spotless) we were buffeted by winds that howled their way in through every crevice. There was nothing outside that belonged to me: I'd leave the house with my head down and only look up once I got off the train in Naples.

I endured the sacrifice of getting up every day at dawn and getting tossed about on public transportation in order to attend high school downtown. My mother offered to drive me for the first few months of the school year but then grew irritated: "You're an adult, you don't need a chauffeur."

While my friend Angelo was just waking up and still groggy with sleep, I was already crossing the bustling city. He thought I was crazy and I was flattered when he said so. Angelo came from a decent family who was obsessed with hospitality. My parents were easygoing so I often stayed over at his place. My father was happy I had a good friend; winking, he'd repeatedly tell me not to lose him: "He might come in handy."

I was quickly won over by Angelo's exuberance. At school we were a pair, he took me everywhere like a little brother. Angelo had many girlfriends but even they couldn't split us up. I was used to one of them being around while we studied in the afternoons at his house. He'd kiss them, tease them, sometimes undress them in front of me and jokingly ask them to flash a boob. I

was just as embarrassed as they must have been. When he took them into his room, he'd hide his phone on a shelf and record everything. Then he'd let me see what they'd done while I finished his Latin homework. He was a narcissist – I, a born spectator.

My parents never talked about sex. My mother always said she was happy she didn't have a daughter: "They're too much trouble," she'd say smiling, satisfied with her one male child. My father came into my room just once to ask if everything was functioning normally down below. Still, I was equipped with the information I needed to address the issue without embarrassment – I was not unprepared. After all, what else did guys talk about when they hung out together? If on balance Angelo had more experience than everyone else, no one felt ashamed. Even those of us who were late bloomers always had some anecdote related to sex which could be reformulated several times before it lost credibility. When it came to machismo, there was no joking around unless everyone was in agreement, indulging in patting each other on the ass or grabbing each other's balls.

And so I made it through adolescence without having to go through the obligatory stages and rites of initiation. While others were trying to define themselves, I leaned on my best friend's charisma.

I could always get away with it. I was intelligent, I got high grades in school with minimal study. Teachers liked me. As vestals of the sons of the bourgeoisie, they were betting on me. And in fact, I was the only one who passed the entrance exams for medical school after graduating.

Mine was a mind trained by books. I wasn't interested in what I was studying. What saved me was the habit of it, the certainty of spending afternoons doing equations, translating

Greek, memorizing dates and battles in order to reaffirm with my raised hand during class that I was there, that I existed. I was first in class and would always be.

To launch the school year, the dean gave a brief welcome speech. He wore an elegant suit and, with the unshakeable conviction of a politician amid an election campaign, he reminded us that we were there for a reason. We'd passed the test. Once again, we were the best. We would soon be admitted into the high-income guild of seaside villas, marriage and children that had set apart his own generation. In the name of Hippocrates, we'd swear to work exclusively for the health of our community. We'd treat their injuries, carefully diagnose their diseases and ailments, handle their deaths while secretly hoping that nothing similar would happen to us, or at least not for a long time.

I placed a great importance on luck, ascribing a congenital form to it. I couldn't explain why misfortunes seemed to always concern others and not me.

Perhaps something was missing from my life; maybe I merely took refuge in luck.

I realized this when we went to visit my uncle in Cicciano who was old and very sick. His body couldn't take any more of the energetic man he'd been and it was taking revenge by way of metastasis. You could read on his face the countdown towards the end but still he had the fortitude to summon his family's different branches to take his leave with dignity. Sitting in the middle of the sofa in his pajamas, his skin yellow, the old man clearly recognized all of his nieces and nephews, and gave his benediction by pointing a finger at each one of them.

"Help your mother at the store."

"Get married quick."

"Make a lot of money."

When it was my turn, the old man hesitated, then opened his eyes wide and with a desperate, sensuous look he said: “Pierpà... Enjoy life!”

I felt an annoying sense of dismay when I got home. The moments in which I looked beyond my world were rare. If I spent too much time at the window my heart raced, the unobstructed view over those roofs and verandas was like a blanket of pollution that left no escape route – there wasn’t even a bridge. Maybe they were panic attacks, but I’d never heard anyone verbalize their own weakness: this wasn’t an option in the Tammaro household. I could simply turn my gaze back inside, to the invincibility of my parents, to the reassurance of my mother: “If you want to study in America, just tell me, tell your mother, we’ll send you,” and everything went back to the way it was before.

II

All this solidity was bound to give way.

The first fissure was the gift I got for my eighteenth birthday: the latest model of a cream-colored diesel FIAT 500 that was among my father's first business failures.

On the day we picked it up, we weren't even a kilometer from the dealership when a kid who wasn't wearing a helmet slid off his scooter, launching himself into our bumper. As my father was leaving the mechanic the next day with a new bumper, he left the door open as he backed up and it scraped against the wall. Along with the smell of new car, I sensed a bad omen in the interior.

I was a man now that I had this car and could easily cross the city, cover any distance or linger at a party without having to beg for Angelo's generosity. I learned to accelerate decisively at intersections, slide around the oval of Capodimonte and glide up the ascent to the old general hospital.

Angelo and his friends experienced a new kind of freedom thanks to their flexible university schedules. They were always on the move, spending entire afternoons in Park Virgiliano or eating fish by the seaside. They were all enrolled in economics, but preferred the study halls downtown to those at the Monte Sant'Angelo campus since they were closer to their homes and high school friends. And it was there that I found myself every day, on the ground floor, my biology textbook already chock-full with Post-its.

They'd open their books and handouts but after an hour they'd head out into the sunlight, leaving their spots occupied, returning to find their books stacked badly with a note full of insults tucked between the pages. Resisting them wasn't easy. And so my goal when I finished studying for the day was to head up to Angelo's terrace on the seventh floor which was surrounded by an enormous arbor where in the shadowy dome of a church (the name of which nobody knew) doves nested.

Looking down, you could make out the MADRE museum's installations. Angelo threw trendy parties down there. So many people came that the palazzo's stairs and galleries would be jammed. More than once, someone called the police but his mother would handle them, happy to do her part in some way. In the shadow of the dome – Angelo, Lollo, Jacopo, il Cimmino all lying on deck chairs where above us, except for a few nosediving pigeons, was only cloying blue sky – we were the exact expression of our lightheartedness. We had confirmation that we were in the right place.

Actually, I suspected that all this freedom scared us to death, and that the joy that kept us together was like those friendships on American sitcoms: merely a way to cushion our impact with adulthood. We were each other's wingmen. Our parents saw nothing wrong with getting home at dawn then sticking our heads in the toilet to throw up in the afternoon; they'd even rush

to hold our foreheads. When, on the odd occasion that Angelo would crush an 8-ball of coke on the seat of his scooter, we were merely enjoying how well-off we were at the time. Then maybe after an internship in Milan and a Masters in London we'd fill our fathers' shoes. We had our parents' blessing. The only lesson they had to give us was more like an indoctrination: everything would go in the right direction.

My father taught me how to drive.

Right after lunch, he took me out to a long country road and gave me the wheel. Luckily, I learned fast – Angelo had already taught me the basics – and this reduced the embarrassment and frustration of this rare father-son moment, which was intimate enough to reveal how little we knew of each other. My father had always been concentrated on himself and his own life filled him so fully with satisfaction that he was incapable of accommodating others. As for me, it was enough to see that I was healthy and to know that I was hanging out with decent people, convinced as he was that a certain amount of social determinism was enough to make me a man. After all, everyone had to go through the same stages, it had been that way for centuries. “Pierpà, it's easy. As soon as you see a girl you like, without her even noticing, you whip it out.” A lesson that had been passed on for centuries before him, whispered from man to man. And nine times out of ten, however embarrassing, my father's advice worked.

Having your own car meant an immediate supply of dates. Angelo, for example, would use his Audi just to take a girl to the parking lot of the football fields at Fuorigrotta, after he'd stunned her with cheap wine.

A sociology student named Valeria had set her sights on my new capacity as chauffeur. Among all the guys at study hall, she'd developed a certain curiosity about mister goody two-

shoes. As I drove her home, I listened apprehensively to her long speeches which, more often than not, concluded with an absent gaze, her mouth half open like she was expecting something and then finally, one night, her hands undid my belt and she gave me – I never would have expected – a blowjob in the car along a country road. There was no guilt the next day in study hall, she didn't expect goodnight messages or dinners out. An enviable situation, according to Angelo.

There'd been others before Valeria. They'd almost all been chosen by Angelo, friends of friends of friends. Shy girls, never bright. They presented themselves without malice, as though seduction was not within their reach. There was always something terribly mannered in their gestures, especially in the clumsy jerking of their wrists, when in the face of my reluctance their last resort was a nagging wank.

The slight developmental delay I was experiencing – we didn't talk about sex anymore and Angelo had stopped calling me while some girl was giving him a blowjob – didn't bother me except at certain moments which coincided with the change of season, as though new beginnings were cause for alarm. When the first rains of autumn caught us unprepared and clumsy at handling an umbrella, I was struck by a kind of new dismay that felt like a seasonal flu.

“You need to get laid is all,” Angelo's advised.

And so, like a real man, I showed up unannounced at the gates of Valeria's villa. I waited for her in the car while two big dogs darted out behind the gates. I was more excited by my gumption than anything else.

Valeria wore light blue jeans. She had a warm smell and there was electricity in her hair, like she'd just left the hairdresser. I used Angelo's method. I pulled out a bottle of wine with a plastic stopper. It was undrinkable but we liked it because you got a buzz by the second glass.

“This wine is disgusting. If I don’t eat something I might pass out,” she said, gesturing in a childish way that I didn’t like. I turned onto Augusto Boulevard. The street was illuminated by blinding signs with American names that indicated bars with plastic tables, pizzerias with greasy, crowded counters, places serving kebabs and pitas that made the sidewalk slippery with mayonnaise. They were open all night, even on a dead Monday like this.

“Not a very scenic area,” I said, trying to downplay the squalor. But Valeria, already half-drunk, was speechless. I didn’t say anything, it wasn’t far to the parking lot by the football fields that Angelo had recommended. I knew the way: Angelo was convinced I was a murderous fullback, and had forced me to play in a football tournament with eleven players per side where luckily I only had to gain a few meters on the field while he shot down the sidelines and scored a direct free kick.

Kissing, on the other hand, was something I knew how to do. I took her head in my hands confidently. I could have stroked her hair for hours. Then Valeria climbed onto my lap. I went blind. I could hear the thudding kicks coming from the football field. Valeria pulled down her jeans. Someone in the bleachers cheered. The risk of a complaint for an obscene act in public made me wary. The referee whistled constantly. Valeria stirred and began moving decisively. I tried to follow my father’s advice but I wasn’t aroused when I pulled my pants down, I was just vulnerable.

“H-h-h-hey...I d-d-don’t...” I stuttered. The spasm in my tongue transferred to my leg so conspicuously that I had to smack it with my hand. Valeria took her seat. “You better take it easy for a while. Maybe we’ll talk again later,” she said, buttoning up her shirt.

III

It felt like I was under observation. I hoped Valeria hadn't told anyone about what happened, trusting in her innate female discretion.

But I woke up every morning with an inexplicable feeling of guilt. I made it clear to Angelo from the beginning that Valeria wasn't my type. I mostly expressed vague desires whenever we found ourselves talking about girls. I was never vulgar like the others. I usually offered up a rather boring example: light hair, freckles, Mediterranean anemia – “but redheads smell!” – perhaps with some kind of unspecified artistic talent. My reference points were never the outrageous porno-divas Angelo preferred or our high school art teacher, but always refined television personalities.

Valeria didn't belong in any of these categories. A curly brunette with a trace of adolescent acne on her right cheek, she was the last resort on every eligible girlfriend list. We were all of the opinion that she was an excellent trial run, a way to stay in shape: “If you lose momentum, it's over.” I only went out with her because Angelo told me to; I had to invent

something to justify why I was lagging behind. It wasn't a question of inexperience. I remembered the frenzy with which I'd scanned Valeria's body for something that might activate all five senses at once. But nothing seemed tangible to me. I blamed it on her small tits.

I didn't think it was necessary to contact her again. I was better off without her. Meanwhile, I got my self-confidence back by intensifying my work pace, spending hours and hours shut up in my room studying. I had a fast-approaching exam so I'd abandoned the chaos of the study hall.

When I decided I'd been a hermit for long enough, I resurfaced to join Angelo and the others on his terrace.

Since the weather was good, Paula served dinner there. We ate at the ping-pong table between matches. After midnight, we'd go out to one of the trendy bars. There was always a table reserved for Angelo and we contributed a nominal fee.

Now that I think about it, it was a lot of effort to be stuck in the traffic that clogged up Via Coroglio for hours, to find parking, to make our way through the motley crew of sweaty bodies who were already high and often arguing. And yet nothing seemed to dissuade us, not even bad weather. We followed a precise ritual, strengthened by the gregariousness of being men among men, where there was no room for intimacy or displays of uncertainty to which the others would have responded to with a generic kind of encouragement anyway. They were all in agreement about Valeria: I should have kept it going with her until I found someone better.

The only one of Angelo's friends who seemed to share my disappointment with Valeria was one of his new university comrades, Francesco.

I talked with him a lot. He looked like a virgin: his wide mouth and bovine eyes strongly communicated warmth but his big nose and belly laugh indicated a simplicity that ran the risk of verging on narrow-mindedness.

“He’s a great guy...” Angelo summed-up whenever he spoke enthusiastically about this new friendship which had immediately put down sincere roots.

We talked about everything. He about his pathological need to find a new girlfriend as fast as possible, and I about how embarrassing Valeria was, and how I was actually looking for something else, without ever specifying what.

When we were leaving the study hall one day, Francesco invited just me to follow him home instead of joining the others at Angelo’s. He lived in a stark apartment in a ’70s residential complex with his mother, who was out working all day. She’d come home from the atelier tired, and reheat a dinner that her parents, an elderly couple who lived in the apartment across the hall, had prepared. And this is what we were doing now, sitting at the unset table eating two focaccias that had been reheated in the microwave. The place was sparsely furnished. The pantry was almost empty except for a few snacks and juice boxes with straws. As soon as we came in, Francesco had put on a big pair of slippers that made him look funny, like a friendly giant.

“I don’t know what else I can offer you. Usually I eat at my grandparents’. That’s where we keep everything.”

“Can you make coffee?”

He pulled a few different stovetop espresso makers out of the credenza: “You think this one will work?” It took him awhile to find the grinds. He measured the water slowly and filled the funnel with surgical precision.

“Valeria didn’t show up yesterday, thankfully.”

Francesco smiled. I liked the immediacy of his reactions.

“Why do you keep insisting that you don’t like her?” he asked me as if he were bored by this obvious fact. “Girls are tiresome after a while.”

We spent the rest of the time sitting on two large sofas. There was treadmill folded up in the corner of the room. Francesco sat with his legs crouched up but he was still enormous. His head drooped like an animal in a stable.

“I feel like an abandoned dog in this house,” he said suddenly, massaging his neck.

There was a tennis match on TV. I can recall the tennis player’s concentration, his head down, determined. It was the same kind of concentration that was getting on my nerves as I held my ground, no false moves. The reason why we had preferred this bare and sad place to Angelo’s terrace was weighing on us. Did he want to show me something? Why didn’t he make a move instead of sitting there, hugging the sofa cushion?

When the first set was over, I made the first move: “Want to go out? What’s Angelo doing tonight?”

Francesco looked at me, relieved. He jumped up and went to take a shower.

The evening took a different turn. We drove around in the car, passing beneath the long row of lights illuminating Via Caracciolo. When we couldn’t find parking, we retreated along the curves of Via Manzoni to eat some fresh fish on the hood of our cars. The amount of condiments Angelo used never ceased to amaze us. I pushed my spaghetti around in oil and waited for the moment when we’d head back.

Back inside my Fiat, Francesco was distracted. He’d been happy to leave the afternoon’s gloom behind. Almost as interference, he suddenly came out with an unpleasant, aggressive question: “Well did you eventually fuck Valeria or not?”

As with any question about sex, I was caught unprepared.

This time I responded with a bewildered shrug of the shoulders, which could either have meant “of course I fucked her,” but also “of course not, what a question.” Sex continued to be a complicated affair for me. I wasn’t used to – no one had taught me – following impulses that were mine and not everyone else’s. None of my friends had wasted the amount of time I had asking themselves who they should be. They already knew. They tried it at home and outside, on football fields or the seats of their scooters, during the summer around bonfires.

If for others sex was an impulse that had the right to remain undefined, for me it was an already-written law of desire to be obeyed unenthusiastically. Who knows, maybe without knowing, I sent out signals to the universe, like the probe of a satellite, waiting for a sign that would confirm the reality of my instincts. I could recognize seduction, looking at someone in order to be looked at, the repeated batting of certain eyelashes, the unreasonable insistence that pushed me into the proximity of others. Impetuous glances from across a train compartment, that darted from the end of an alley or the threshold of a doorway, men who flanked me for a few meters while walking in Via Toledo – but when they drifted, stepping uncertainly into the crowd, leaving me in pursuit, I fled breathlessly, as when convulsions wake you up from a suffocating dream.

Sometimes in the warm and crowded carriages of early morning, someone might put their hand in your bag. Me, I once felt a hand slide deep into the large pocket of my jeans while I was sandwiched between bodies. I let it happen, yielding completely to the touch. I can still recall the hand’s movement, sliding up and down in my pocket and the shame when this fantasy, which

was more like a hallucination, was extinguished by women crying in alarm: “Your bags, be careful!” as the thief quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Sometimes those above suspicion, often elderly men, would at the slightest of glance extend a hand in the elevator, or lean imperceptibly to push their pelvis against your defenseless and unsuspecting hand, and suddenly you’re a hotbed of sensations – is someone robbing me again? Seriously, this old man who stinks of piss is touching me? Is this actually happening to me? – except once you step out into the light and take a few steps you forget all about it.

Instead, reality arrived one morning after breakfast, with my cold ankles sticking out of my pajamas while I was deciding what to do and watching the nine o’clock news. As I threaded together my memories from the afternoon at Francesco’s place, the image of him seated on the sofa, in a domestic pose so similar to my own in that moment, it became indisputably clear, a revelation. I sat up worried, looking around. *Is anybody there?*

IV

The hunt for clues was on.

I'd stretch out my feet out under the table in the library. On our drives home I'd carefully touch his knee with the back of my hand as I shifted gears. It was a lot of work. Frustration mixed with horniness – it could make me dizzy.

I collected the secret moments of tenderness: when he grabbed my hand as we made our way into a club, when he offered to listen as I repeated the first model of genetics for an impending test. He didn't talk about girls with me anymore. My company was enough for him. We showed up everywhere together. I discovered a previously unknown vitality. I became a nocturnal animal. Going out Friday nights became routine. I no longer feared that the bouncer at the entrance would say to me: *no, you, no*. I quickly grew tired of the shallow hedonism of these kids, their hands in the air waiting for subwoofers to rattle their chests. In fact, my favorite part of the night was when we left the club: the muffled sounds of the evening in progress, the gravel under our feet as we headed to the parking lot. Francesco made sure I always ended up in his car.

He was happy to drive me home, he liked driving the ring road and wasn't afraid of the holes that dotted the street. Sometimes we were so caught up in our confessions that we'd linger in the car until dawn. When I went inside my mother would run over, pretending to smell my breath. She always feared the worst but I'd reassure her: "We were out front talking in the car."

"And what do you have to say to one another at six in the morning?"

With Angelo's influence removed, I learned a new kind of belonging. Francesco lived close to the Health District and sometimes I'd meet him at his place. I realized it was much better than going to study hall. My rigorous preparation helped him concentrate. We spent afternoons studying in two separate rooms. Honestly, I spent most of the time metabolizing an inexplicable happiness that left me unable to concentrate and that I repressed into a kind of adoration towards him and everything about him.

But it wasn't enough. I needed undeniable proof.

One night at Angelo's house, I overstepped.

We'd eaten so much during dinner. His mother really cared about hospitality. Several times I'd heard her say that her son would never look like he was dying of hunger so long as he had friends. Francesco had collapsed on a deckchair while Angelo and I challenged each other to a rematch at the ping pong table.

"You win. I'm busting a gut," I said, throwing myself on the deckchair next to Francesco.

"Spoilsports. I'm going down to get another racket." A tournament was in the cards.

My body was going crazy trying to digest the meal, blood was pumping everywhere. Francesco didn't seem to be breathing, he'd taken off his shoes and was his feet dangled in striped socks. From the street far below rose an echo of engines and the remote cries of kids

playing ball late at night. The air was humid. Moving imperceptibly, I placed my hand on his side. An ordinary kind of touch that establishes a presence without declaring one. Slowly, I let my hand slide down into his defenseless palm which was turned up as if expecting something. I held my breath and waited for the signal to return to the surface. There was a kind of spasm in his palm, soon followed by the slightest of pressure. But who knows? I slid my fingers in between his but as soon as Angelo came back, we immediately retracted our hands. The others joined us. Jacopo brought a bunch of weed and the rest of the evening was spent following Angelo's inconclusive ramblings until it was time to regain clarity and one by one, everyone left the terrace.

The drive home was pleasant. The silence we granted ourselves in the car created a new intimacy after the evening at Angelo's.

The city was deserted. Alongside the road, the countryside threw off the dark shadows of ugly buildings. I wanted the journey to last forever but the old mushroom-shaped aqueduct marked the inevitable entry into my neighborhood. Francesco easily executed the complicated maneuver required to back into the driveway, and I was home.

He turned off the engine but neither of us moved. He fiddled with the stereo knob. I didn't know what was holding him back, whether it was a grimace of annoyance or embarrassment across his face.

I've never had much charisma, but I knew that certain opportunities don't often repeat themselves. I could have grabbed him by the neck and slipped my tongue indiscriminately into his mouth but, without proof that something natural like this could exist, it was all unthinkable. Not knowing the ways of the world, I distrusted my instincts, couldn't dive in if I wasn't certain that someone else had done it before me without breaking their head open.

“I have to tell you something” he started.

“You want to come up?” I asked him.

“Isn’t it a bit late?”

“We can sit on the terrace, no one will hear us.”

“Alright” he accepted, “but we need to talk.”

We were taking off our seatbelts when a blinding light flooded the car’s interior, forcing us to hide. A car passed quickly, parking poorly in the driveway. One after another, lights came on in the building.

“Jesus” Francesco exclaimed, “the police.”

“They must have come to retrieve a stolen car,” I said to reassure him. But he’d already started the motor, as if afraid he’d be charged with something.

When I saw the door of our building wide open and a big crowd at the entrance I started to worry.

“I’d better go,” he said.

“Thanks for the ride.”

Tenants leaned out over their balcony railings, calling to one another between floors. Everyone was looking down. They’d seen us. I was barely out of the car when a cocksure policeman came forward. “Who are you? Do you live here?” he asked, followed by a series of threatening questions I couldn’t bring myself to answer. What should I do? Put my hands in the air to show I’m innocent? Stunned, I stood still, looking around for help. “He’s the son, he’s the son, let him come up!” yelled Rafilina who lived on the ground floor and, in addition to being our maid, was the building’s porter.

I held up my house keys to show I belonged in the building but the policeman stood guard, holding his arm out in front of my chest so I couldn't get by. I turned around to see Francesco backing up, abandoning the scene. He could have waited, surely the police were here for a tenant entangled in who knows what kind of trouble. But instead it was my father who emerged from the building escorted by another policeman. Short in stature, he was wearing shorts and limped along in old loafers, no socks, hands hidden inside a faded sweatshirt.

“Pierpà, everything's alright, go to sleep!” he yelled.

His face was red; he looked like he was having a heart attack.

They escorted him towards the car, pushing him in by the head just as I'd always seen in the movies. Following his order, I went upstairs quickly. Someone behind me whispered: “At five in the morning, just like a real criminal!”

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