ALDO CAZZULLO

TO SEE THE STARS AGAIN

Dante, the poet who invented Italy

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Chapter One

Italy, from the very first canto

Dante gets lost before dawn of Good Friday
and finds an ancient poet.

Dante's journey in the afterlife begins in the spring of 1300, just before dawn on Good Friday (some say March 25, others April 7). He chooses this date because it is the most solemn day in his life.

The turn of the century seems like a turning point in history. The first Jubilee is being celebrated upon request of a pope whom Dante despises, in a city, Rome, which he ruthlessly calls the place "*dove Cristo tutto dì si merca*," where every day the Christ is bought and sold. And yet, he is drawn to Rome: he considers it the center of human existence, he venerates it not for its agglomeration of buildings and roads, but because it represents an idea, a moral homeland.

Dante immediately makes it clear that he isn't just talking about himself. The voyage begins "*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*," midway upon the journey of our life, the key word being "our." Dante is talking about us too. His readers, his ilk, his fellow compatriots. His story is our story. It pertains to us, it concerns us. Dante feels so close to us that we don't call him by his full name as we would with other authors, we actually call him by his nickname (his name was actually Durante, probably after his maternal grandfather). What he undertakes is a journey in the depths of ourselves. It is the story of every person who has read, is reading, and will read the *Divine Comedy*.

The author feels the mystical power of the Holy Week. And he feels at peak energy levels. He is in the prime of his life. He is about to reach the highpoint of his political career with his appointment as prior of his city, Florence. And yet, he is unhappy.

It is unclear what pushed him into a dark forest. Even he doesn't know how he got there. He was "*pien di sonno*" (full of slumber), half asleep, incapable of discerning good from evil. The source of his anguish could be remorse for a sin he committed. The dissatisfaction of a failed project. The foreboding feeling of the terrible sorrow that awaits him: exile. Being away from the woman and the things he loves. But after a night spent in the darkness of the woods, he sees a

hill ahead mantled in the first rays of sunlight, at "the beginning of the morning," while the stars of the constellation of Aries are still visible. It is early spring, the season when the world was created, as his mentor Brunetto Latini taught him. Dante would like to reach the top of the hill and leave the forest behind him, but his path is blocked by three beasts.

The meaning of the three beasts has been discussed for centuries: the leopard with its spotted pelt, the lion raging with hunger, and the she-wolf, whose leanness seems to be laden with all the human cravings. These animals are familiar to Dante. There used to be a caged leopard (actually a lynx) on display at the Palazzo del Comune in Florence in 1285; statues of lions were pretty much everywhere; and there were plenty of wolves in the Apennine Mountains. The three beasts probably represent three different passions that man can succumb to: sex, power, and money. Passions that distract us from love, justice, and the legitimate affirmation of ourselves.

Dante is forced to go back toward the forest. And this is when a miracle happens: a fading figure comes to his rescue, he seems "hoarse" from the long silence after not speaking for centuries. A man who lived over thirteen-hundred years ago, but whose works are still alive; especially for Dante, who considers him the pinnacle of poetry of all time.

"*Miserere di me*," he shouts. The first word that Dante's character utters in the poem is a desperate plea for help, a prayer: have pity on me. To reassure him, Virgil introduces himself. He begins by talking about his parents: they are both "Lombards," more specifically from Mantua. In other words, Virgil doesn't immediately start talking about Julius Caesar, Augustus, the "*dèi falsi e bugiardi*" (false and lying gods), or about Aeneas, Anchises, the Trojan War, and his masterpiece, the *Aeneid*. He will talk about that later. First, he mentions Lombardy and Mantua.

The fact that Dante would write about Lombardy is striking. The word is familiar to us, but back then it wasn't the name of a region or a country. It did, however, define a particularly industrious area of Italy: the North in general. Cecco Angiolieri even made fun of Dante during his exile by writing that he had become a Lombard, even though he was living in Verona at the time. But the most important thing is that, according to Dante, Lombardy already existed in the days of Julius Caesar and when Virgil was born, long before the birth of Christ.

Virgil represents the quintessential guide and mentor. The author of the *Aeneid* is here, in fact, to accompany Dante in his journey through the afterlife; and to tell him about what he will have to face.

He won't escape that forest of despair by simply climbing up the hill. First, he will have to descend into the abyss to get to know the eternal torments of Hell and the woeful hopes of Purgatory. It would be impossible to climb the hill of happiness now, because the she-wolf (i.e. avarice, greed, selfishness, envy, discord) is blocking the way, and will do so until the greyhound (*veltro*) comes to hunt her down.

This is another passage over which Dante scholars have been (and will keep on) arguing for centuries. The greyhound is another symbol that is so vague that it could be anyone. Some think Dante might be referring to Cangrande della Scala, the lord of Verona to whom he will dedicate *Paradise*, the last volume of the *Divine Comedy*: after all, Cangrande means "big dog," and the *veltro* is a type of dog, and a hunting dog at that. The prophecy is probably vague on purpose: it doesn't refer to a specific leader, but to the hope for future redemption. The important thing is that the hound will save that "*umile Italia*," that sad Italy for which the virgin Camilla, Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus died.

These four characters evoked by Dante are all heroes from the *Aeneid* who were killed in the war between Trojans and Latins for the control of Latium. Camilla, daughter of the king of the Volsci, and Turnus, king of the Rutuli, fought against the Trojans. On the opposite side, Nisus died to avenge his comrade in arms, Euryalus, the handsome young man fallen under the enemy's weapons like "a crimson flower cut down by the plough, or poppies weighed down by a rain shower." The extraordinary detail is that Dante mixes the opposing armies bringing enemies together and citing the losers along with the winners: they are all populations that will contribute to creating Italy.

In this case, "*umile*" means unhappy. When Dante talks about Italy, he is always critical, stern, distressed. In the *Convivio*, his great work prior to the *Divine Comedy*, Italy is defined as "*misera*," miserable. In the letter he writes on the occasion of the visit of Emperor Henry VII, it becomes "*miseranda*," wretched. After all, we criticize the things we love, and wish they were radically different. Dante's is not a pointless complaint, it is an invective, an indictment that carries within it the hope for rebirth.

Italy seems unworthy of the triumphs of Ancient Rome and its virtues. Salvation is not near. The prophecy is remote, vague. It doesn't make sense to talk about Italy in political terms in the fourteenth century. Every city is at war with its neighbors. It hasn't been long since the Battle of Montaperti: a great victory for Siena, but such a terrible tragedy for Florence that it often resurfaces in Dante's memories.

This is another reason why the author of the *Inferno* is indignant. Outraged. So far, writing for him meant loving, not hating. His works were rhymes of love. Now he proves that he can also use harsh terms, words to condemn, to shout. But he always holds onto the idea that a comeback is possible, that there is a way to ascend.

The poet revisits the theme of Italy's decline in the sixth canto of *Purgatory*. This is the scene. Virgil notices a soul sitting all alone, "*sola soletta*" (one of Dante's many sayings that entered the Italian language), and asks him for directions. Instead of answering, the soul asks Virgil about his life and his country. He only says one word, "Mantua" (again), and the shadowy figure embraces him. "*Io son Sordello de la tua terra!*" (I am Sordello of thine own land!). He is a poet from the thirteenth century: Sordello da Goito, born in a village along the Mincio, Mantua's river. Dante is moved by the hug between the two Lombards. He compares that spontaneous display of affection to the blood-soaked rivalries that are tearing apart the common homeland. If Italians, taken individually, can represent the delightful side of mankind, Italy as a whole can be an abyss of suffering: "*Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello*" (Ah, servile Italy, grief's hostelry), like an unpiloted ship in the middle of a raging storm, a lady not of provinces but of brothels. When the noble Mantuan soul of Sordello hears the sweet sound of his homeland's name, he immediately greets his compatriot festively. And yet, the living can't stop being at war; even those who barricade themselves behind the same walls, or ditch, or inside the same city, they still keep on fighting among themselves.

Dante mentions several families relentlessly at war with each other, including the Montecchi from Verona and the Cappelletti from Cremona, which we have come to know as the Montagues and Capulets: it's the beginning of the legend of Romeo and Juliet, which Shakespeare will bring to eternal and universal fame. But when it comes to civil unrest, the poet always ends up talking about his native Florence: where the best men avoid politics and public life, and lesser men

emerge; where laws, governments, and leaders change constantly; where a policy approved in October barely makes it to mid-November. It is almost the portrait of today's Italy.

But who is responsible for the mess? Dante points at the Church, whose priests chase after temporal power. At the emperor, who lost interest in Rome. And even at Jesus, who was crucified on Earth for us: "*Son li giusti occhi tuoi rivolti altrove?*" (Are thy just eyes averted otherwhere?). It is the only reproach that Dante addresses to the son of God in the entire *Divine Comedy*, and he does so out of love for his homeland. He hopes that, perhaps, Christ has future plans for Italy and we just aren't privy to them.

She is servile, wretched, divided. But she is Italy. The common homeland for people from Florence and Siena, from Genoa and Venice, from Milan and Naples, people who are similar and yet can't stand each other, who will even ask foreigners to help them defeat other Italians. Dante lived too early on to conceive of Italy's political unity as a country; his horizon is set on the Holy Roman Empire. But the Empire is intent on pacifying rather than commanding. The freedom of cities and communes is sacred to Dante, just as sacred are the things that unite Italians: culture, its great classical heritage, the Christian faith. And art: a particular way of thinking about the world and portraying it.

Look at the Campanile designed by Giotto, the genius born two years after Dante. As a bell tower, it's a work of architecture. But it's also a sculpture because it was sculpted. And a painting because it was painted. Moreover, there are images at the Uffizi of Giottoesque Madonnas sitting on thrones decorated like that very bell tower: an indication that furniture, objects, and decorations were also crafted in that style. Italy was already the software of the world: the place where new forms, fashions, and ideas of beauty were born. And in just one century it will be time for the Renaissance, which will export them everywhere.

Just before dying on Good Friday in 1520, Raphael writes a letter (with Baldassarre Castiglione's help) addressed to a Florentine pope, Leo X, condemning the state of neglect of the vestiges of Ancient Rome. He expresses his "enormous grief at the sight of what you could almost call the corpse of this great, noble city, once queen of the world, so cruelly butchered." And he pleads to the Pope to save "what little remains of this ancient mother of the glory and renown of Italy." Raphael doesn't say "Rome," he explicitly uses the word "Italy."

Dante's verses on the common homeland will inspire great authors for centuries to come. At the age of twenty, Giacomo Leopardi writes a poem called *All'Italia (To Italy)* and another one

called *Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze (On the Proposed Dante Monument in Florence)*:

Volgiti indietro, e guarda, o patria mia,	Turn, and gaze, oh my homeland,
Quella schiera infinita d'immortali ...	At that vast crowd of immortals…
Volgiti e ti vergogna e ti riscuoti,	Turn, and be ashamed, and rouse yourself,
E ti punga una volta	And spur yourself on
Pensier degli avi nostri e de' nepoti...	By thinking of our ancestors and our children…

Even the young Alessandro Manzoni writes about Italy's former glory and its possible redemption. Long before composing his beautiful political ode *Dei Sepolcri*, Ugo Foscolo is deeply moved when he visits Vittorio Alfieri's tomb in the church of Santa Croce: "*E l'ossa fremono amor di patria*" (And his bones tremble with love for Italy) – it is the first time since Dante that an Italian writes in such a patriotic way. Ippolito Nievo, one of Garibaldi's men, dies at the age of thirty while returning from the victorious expedition of the Thousand; in his posthumously published novel *Confessioni di un italiano (Confessions of an Italian)* he writes: "I was born Venetian on October 18, 1775, on the day of the Evangelist Luke; and I will die by God's grace Italian when the Providence that mysteriously rules the world wants it."

Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch) is the first poet after Dante to write about Italy. But unlike Boccaccio (who adores Dante), Petrarch is accused of envying and despising him to such an extent that he doesn't even own a copy of the *Divine Comedy*. So Petrarch writes a beautiful letter to Boccaccio to explain that the reason for not wanting to read his work was to avoid the risk of imitating him. He then goes on to reassure him that he actually loves and admires Dante's genius and style (he probably even met Dante in Pisa when he was a child at the court of Emperor Henry). And, he adds, "if he had lived until this time, he would have found few friends more devoted to him than myself," without dispelling altogether the doubt of having actually read the *Divine Comedy*.

Everyone in Italy has studied his verses in school: "*Italia mia, benché 'l parlar sia indarno*…" (My Italy, though words cannot heal…). Like Dante, Petrarch also invokes God to help his homeland:

Rettor del cielo, io cheggio	Ruler of Heaven, I hope
che la pietà che Ti condusse in terra	That the pity that brought You to Earth
Ti volga al Tuo dilecto almo paese.	Will turn you towards your soul-delighting land.

What is less known is that Petrarch writes a letter on the eve of the war between Genoa and Venice imploring the doges of the two cities not to fight each other. Genoa and Venice are Italy's eyes: one looking west toward the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the other looking east toward the Adriatic; and Italy needs both of them. When the doges receive the letter, they both tear it up without taking it seriously. And yet, a seed has been planted.

Chapter Two

The lady with shining eyes

Where Mary, Lucia, Beatrice, and all the women loved
reward Dante for his love.

And so Virgil offers to be Dante's guide and help him out. It's the mentor rescuing the pupil, the Classical Age inspiring modernity. He doesn't hide the fact that the journey into Hell will be terrible, between "*disperate strida*" (desperate lamentations) and "*antichi spiriti dolenti*" (ancient disconsolate spirits). He tells him that he will accompany him until a more worthy soul (i.e., Beatrice) will come to his rescue to take him to Paradise and lead him to the face of God.

Dante summons the support of his two great loves, literature and his beloved. He appeals to the Muses and to his memory, asking them to allow him to remember and help him write down what he saw:

O muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;	Oh Muses, oh high genius, now assist me;
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,	Oh memory, that didst write down what I saw,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.	Here thy nobility shall be manifest.

At the beginning of the journey, however, the poet is afraid. It's sunset, the time marking the end of the day, when everyone retires to rest. Everyone except for him: "*E io sol uno / m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra*" (And I the only one / Made myself ready to sustain the war).

Dante will have to travel through such pain. Both physical strain and spiritual suffering await him. Prior to him, only Aeneas and Saint Paul had descended into the underworld and made it back alive. Aeneas was on a mission to know his destiny, while Paul sought to consolidate his faith and mankind's. The former is the real founder of Rome, the forefather of the Empire. The latter is the founder of Christianity: it's Paul, a Roman citizen who speaks Greek, who bestows

cultural dignity to the new faith, who translates it into the language of scholars, who harmonizes it with the ideas of philosophers.

The two characters, Aeneas and Paul, are obviously connected. Just like the two events that Dante considers the most important in history are connected: the advent of the Roman Empire and of the Catholic faith, destined to embrace the universe. Rome is a fated place: it conquered the world as it was then known, giving it a language and laws. And Rome is a holy place because it's where Saint Peter's successor is seated. Christian civilization represents the continuation and enrichment of Latin civilization. For Dante, this is where Italy finds its purpose and its importance.

But he isn't a hero nor a saint. So why does he get tasked with such a significant and terrifying mission? Enter Beatrice, the embodiment of love. Dante is so in love with her that he imagines she left her seat in Paradise to descend to the gates of Hell and take care of him.

Beatrice, whose name means "she who blesses," was the daughter of Folco Portinari, a banker who lived next door to Dante. She died when she was just twenty-four years old, possibly during childbirth. Dante writes in *La Vita Nuova (The New Life)* that he first saw her when he was a child and then met her again nine years later, just before her wedding to another banker called Simone de' Bardi. What he feels for Beatrice is pure love. She represents an untainted feeling.

There is a beautiful painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a Pre-Raphaelite artist born in London to an English lady and an Italian exile from the Risorgimento who named his son after his favorite poet. The image depicts Dante looking at an angel kissing Beatrice on her deathbed. It's his kiss, entrusted to a divine creature.

Someone wrote that Beatrice never existed, that she is only an imaginary woman. But you can't fall in love with an abstract concept. And the Beatrice who accompanies Dante through Paradise is no longer the angel-like woman from his *Stil Novo* rhymes; as pure as her soul is, she is also a woman with a strong personality, who spurs him on, reproaches him, and is obeyed. She guides him with loving sternness to beatitude and peace.

Dante doesn't actually give us a physical description of Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*. He doesn't tell us the color of her eyes and hair. He just describes her as "*beata e bella*" (blessed and beautiful), with an angelic voice and eyes shining brighter than the stars.

Beatrice goes to Virgil, who was "*tra color che son sospesi*" (among those who are suspended in Limbo). She calls him *"anima cortese mantoana"* (a courteous Mantuan spirit, designating him again by his hometown) and asks him to rescue Dante; in return, she would speak well of him to God. Virgil accepts immediately. And here he is, using beautiful words to describe Beatrice, a "*donna di virtù*" (lady of virtue). It's thanks to women that mankind can overcome anything contained within the circle of the moon, i.e., on Earth. Women are God's masterpiece, the wonder of creation; and for Dante, his beloved Beatrice is the marvel of all marvels.

Unrequited love doesn't exist according to the poet. As he will write later in his encounter with Paolo and Francesca, love doesn't allow for a loved one not to love in return, even if in an otherworldly form. This is the reason why Beatrice comes to Dante's rescue; not only that, but she also sets in motion a chain of women to save the poet from the dark forest.

The first one is Mary, referred to as a "*donna gentile*" (gentle Lady) but never mentioned by name in the *Inferno*. She goes to Lucia and asks her to warn Beatrice that Dante is in danger and that he needs her; she has nothing to fear from the eternal flames because she is blessed: Hell can't touch her (another expression which has become part of everyday language).

At this point, if we were cynical, we would think that our poet was a little bit megalomaniac: he imagines that no other than the Virgin Mary, Saint Lucia, Beatrice, and Virgil come to assist him in his journey in the afterlife. And, in fact, Dante has a fairly high opinion of himself: he will declare that he is certain that both Heaven and Earth were involved in creating his poem. Even though the language he uses is extremely modern (more modern than many authors closer to our time), he is still a man from the Middle Ages. He is devoted to Saint Lucia, patron saint of sight, because he believes she helped cure his eyes from the ailment that affected them when he was young. The Virgin Mary is the queen of the afterlife, which Dante doesn't perceive as ethereal, unreal, or mysterious, but as a concrete, tangible, rational world; it's an actual place that awaits us around the corner, and that can somehow communicate with us. The dead aren't dead forever. They look the same as they did when they were alive. And the way to talk to them is through love.

It was Dante's love for Beatrice that helped him escape the "*volgare schiera*" (vulgar crowd) and inspired his most beautiful verses. It's love that allows him to undertake his journey in the afterlife, and that will enable him to write the *Divine Comedy*.

Dante is reassured when he finds out that Beatrice is looking out for him. He perks up: like a flower, drooped and puckered at night, which uplifts itself as the sun returns to shine upon it. The thought of seeing his beloved woman once again gives him strength and courage. And so he follows Virgil down a steep and perilous path and finds himself in front of the Gates of Hell.

Chapter Three

Into eternal pain

Where Dante and Rodin discover the Gates of Hell together
and the Pope is reproached for resigning.

"*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*" (Abandon all hope ye who enter) is probably the most famous verse in Italian literature. It has become a banner at stadiums to intimidate visiting fans. Generations of students have written it above their school's entrance to frighten incoming freshmen. These words have become so commonplace that they have lost their terrific meaning.

These days, we aren't used to the concept of "forever," we are resigned to the idea that everything ends: love, marriage, work, friendships. As Francesco De Gregori sang, "*Domani ci accorgeremo che non ritorna mai più niente, / ma finalmente accetteremo il fatto come una vittoria*" (Tomorrow we'll realize that nothing ever comes back, / But we'll finally accept the fact as a victory). Things don't stay and they don't repeat themselves. In the words of Eugenio Montale, "*Svanire / è dunque la ventura delle venture*" (To vanish / Is therefore the greatest of all adventures), it is the destiny of destinies.

But not for Dante. According to him, Hell is eternal and everlasting. It was created by the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son, and the compassion of the Holy Spirit. It is a manifestation of God's supreme justice, and the punishment of sinners is also a part of that justice. In 1339, eighteen years after the poet's death, Ambrogio Lorenzetti completed the fresco *Allegoria del buon governo (Allegory of Good Government)* in Siena's Palazzo Comunale; in it, Justice wields a sword in one arm while the severed head of a man sentenced to death rests on her lap. Punishing an offender wasn't considered cruelty, it was a way to reestablish harmony and civil society, to protect the weak and the victims (albeit in a way that we find repugnant in our modern times).

Hell, however, was also made by "*primo amore*" (primordial love), by divine charity. Sinners are punished, but they are still alive in a way, even though they are reduced to tormented shadows. They are alive so they can keep on suffering, to serve as a warning for others, to atone

for their sins, but alive nonetheless. Some remain despicable creatures, and Dante portrays them as such (as we will see later on with his enemy Filippo Argenti), while others look similar to us and induce us to weep for their fate; they feel closer to us than all the saints, archangels, and blessed characters who, instead, feel ethereal.

The Gates of Hell have inspired several artists, including the greatest sculptor from the nineteenth century: Auguste Rodin. He worked on his version of the Gates for thirty-seven years and was unable to complete it. The *Divine Comedy* had become an obsession for him: "Dante is not only a visionary and writer, but also a sculptor," Rodin wrote. "His expression is lapidary in the good sense of the word. When he describes a character, he portrays it solidly, with its gestures and poses... I lived a whole year with Dante, living with him and him alone."

Rodin drew inspiration from the Gates sculpted by Lorenzo Ghilberti for the Battistero di San Giovanni in Florence, which Michelangelo dubbed the "Gates of Paradise," also as a counterbalance to the ones from the *Divine Comedy*. Rodin's Gates feature several figures: Dante is portrayed in the pose of the thinker, with his head propped on the back of his hand. And then there are Adam and Eve, Count Ugolino, Paolo and Francesca, and other characters that we will meet along the way. Rodin died of influenza in November 1917, during the darkest days of World War I. He never managed to cast the Gates of Hell, but several plaster reproductions were made from his original bronze casts and can now be seen in some of the most important museums around the world. Moreover, Rodin's Gate is also featured in the videogame *Dante's Inferno* as the gateway to the underworld.

Dante, the real one, couldn't know any of this when he was describing the entrance to the kingdom of the dead. Modern theologians have even speculated that Hell might be empty and that God has forgiven everyone, even the worst criminals. But for the poet, Hell is visible, tangible, audible.

The sky is starless, the air is dark. Time no longer seems to exist. Virgil takes Dante by the hand to encourage him. They can barely see anything, but they can hear everything:

Sospiri, pianti e alti guai [...],	Sighs and cries and wails […],
orribili favelle,	Horrible dialects,
parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,	Accents of anger, words of agony,

voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle… Voices high and hoarse, and sounds of blows…

It's the cowards, people who lived without infamy or praise. Death for them is a forlorn hope because they were never truly alive to begin with: they didn't leave behind a trace of themselves and the world has forgotten them. They never made a choice, never felt indignant or made a move in the face of evil, and now they envy any other fate but their own.

Every condemned soul is punished based on the sin they committed. So, according to Dante's *contrapasso* (poetic justice), cowards are constantly stung by hornets and horseflies, their faces are streaked with blood and tears, and they are forced to frantically chase after a banner that never ceases to move. And there are so many of them that it seems impossible for death to have undone so many human beings. Dante doesn't stop to talk to them. Virgil cuts the conversation short with a verse that still sounds familiar to this day: "*Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa*" (Let us not speak of them, look and pass on). They are words used to dismiss someone, not our enemies, but someone mundane, unworthy of our attention: haters on social media, drivers who flip us off, buffoons who insist they are right even when they are wrong, or fools who cause us harm without even benefiting from it.

This indolence nowadays is synonymous with cowardice and mediocrity. But Dante actually places some dramatic figures in their midst. The angels who didn't take a side when Lucifer rebelled against God are among them: nobody wants them, neither Heaven nor the deepest pits of Hell, and nobody likes them, neither God nor his enemies. There is also a famous character among the hordes of cowards: "*Colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto*" (He who made through cowardice the great refusal).

Dante doesn't name names. Some think he was referring to Pontius Pilate. But the coward in question is almost certainly Pietro da Morrone, who became Pope Celestine V only to resign a few months later.

His contemporaries recognized the reference, and some even took offense. Celestine was considered a saint, not only that, but he was also canonized in 1313; by that year, however, Dante had already finished writing the *Inferno*. Besides, a poet isn't tied down in his judgements by the Church or by the world's policies: a poet is the arbitrator of his characters' salvation and damnation. And Pope Celestine is placed in Hell despite being a beloved figure when he was still alive.

Pietro da Morrone was the eleventh of twelve siblings. He heard God's calling when he was young and lived as a hermit in a cave above Sulmona on Mount Morrone, in Abruzzo. He went to Rome to become a priest, but he returned to his mountains a year later and founded a monastic order, a branch of the Benedictines. He then sought even more extreme solitude in the Maiella Mountains, which he only left to walk to the Council of Lyon to implore Pope Gregory X not to suppress his order. He was basically considered a god-crazy and out of touch hermit.

Until April 1292, when one of the longest and most uncertain conclaves in the history of Christianity began. There were only twelve cardinals, like the number of the apostles, but they became eleven when the French Jean Cholet died of the plague. The internal rivalries within Rome's aristocracy, however, made it impossible to reach any agreement: there were two cardinals from the Colonna family, three from the Orsini, but the strong man was Benedetto Caetani. Meanwhile, the King of Naples Charles II of Anjou needed a pope to ratify his peace treaty with the Aragonese; so, after two years of endless discussions, he burst into the conclave to urge the cardinals to make up their minds. Caetani stood up indignantly and showed him the door.

That is when, from the top of his mountain, Pietro da Morrone predicted that there would be "severe punishments" if they did not elect a new pope promptly. "Let's elect him," suggested Caetani in hope that he could manipulate him later on. The others objected that a hermit without any political experience could not be a pope, but they were persuaded otherwise in the end. On July 5, 1294, after twenty-seven months of deliberations, they appointed Pietro, who took the name Celestine V.

One of the messengers who climbed up to his cave to inform him described him as "an old man dressed in rough cloth, stunned and hesitant upon hearing such big news." His eyes filled with tears, he fell on his knees in front of the ambassadors and prayed for a long time. Charles II hailed the election of any pope as a personal victory. He rushed to Mount Morrone, sat the new pontiff on a donkey, took the bridles in his hand, and personally led him to L'Aquila to be crowned in the beautiful basilica of Collemaggio, where he is still buried.

The papacy of the hermit was a disaster. He didn't speak Latin so he imposed the use of vernacular instead, which foreign prelates couldn't understand. He didn't dare to say no to anyone, so he often assigned the same position to multiple people. He became a hostage of King Charles II, who brought him to Naples and locked him in a room in Castel Nuovo, which is when

Pietro started to contemplate the possibility of resigning. But could a pope step down? Cardinal Caetani encouraged him: of course he could choose to step down.

On December 13, 1294, after five months of papacy, Celestine V abdicated "to recover the peace and the consolation of ancient living," much to the chagrin of Charles II. The congregation was dumbfounded and organized massive processions to implore him in vain to change his mind.

Eleven days later, Benedetto Caetani was elected pope with the name of Boniface VIII and the first thing he did was to place his predecessor under custody. Pietro tried to flee to Brindisi and set sail for Greece, but Boniface had him captured and locked up in one of his castles in Fumore, in Ciociaria. Pietro died almost immediately, exhausted, after celebrating his last mass. The new pontiff cleansed his soul by immediately starting the canonization process to proclaim him a saint.

It was an enormous scandal. Jacopone da Todi, a Franciscan friar and poet, wrote some scathing verses about the resigning pope:

Que farai, Pier dal Morrone? [...]	What will you do, Pier da Morrone? […]
Quanno l'omo vertuoso	When the virtuous man, whose heart is sound,
è posto en loco tempestoso,	To a hard and storm-tost task is bound,
sempre 'l trovi vigoroso	Vigorous and faithful is he found,
a portar ritto el confalone.	He will bear his banner steadfastly.

The virtuous man doesn't give up on holding his "*confalone"* (gonfalon) up high, a banner that resembles a lot the "*insegna"* (flag) chased by the cowards in Dante's *Inferno*. But, above all, Jacopone da Todi especially hated Boniface, so he sided with the Colonnas, who were trying to invalidate the pope's election. He was thrown in prison and, when he received his excommunication notice (which he calls *"prefazio,"* ban), he responded with some caustic verses in which he went so far as to challenge the pope to a duel:

O papa Bonifazio,	Oh Boniface, who art the pope,
eo porto el tuo prefazio	Thy ban is heavy on my hope;
e la maledezzone	Thy malediction and thy hate
e scommunicazione.	Have made me excommunicate.

Co la lengua forcuta	Thy forky tongue so like a snake's
m'hai fatta esta feruta...	This wound upon my spirit makes…

Dante hated Boniface as well. In autumn of 1301, the city of Florence sent him to Rome as an ambassador with two other delegates, il Corazza da Signa and Maso di Muggerino Minerbetti. The pope made them wait for a long time, then he dismissed the two emissaries and asked Dante to stay. The poet considered it an honor, but it was a trap. He was a respected man capable of using words to stand up for himself, and they needed to keep him away from Florence to give his enemies time to take over the city.

During his journey in the afterlife, Dante will later tell the story of Boniface VIII, the downfall of Florence, his exile, the events of 1301 and the tragedy they represented for all of Italy. But he is done talking about the cowards for now. "Let us not speak of them, look and pass on."

The poet feels the need to tug onto the narrative, to raise the level of the story, and he puts on stage a truly memorable character: Charon, *"un vecchio, bianco per antico pelo"* (an old man with a white bush of hair).

Charon, the ferryman of dead souls, is not a character from Christianity, he comes from the Classical Age. Dante describes him almost with the same words used by Virgil to introduce him in the *Aeneid*: *"Orrendo nocchiero, […] a cui una larga canizie invade il mento, si sbarrano gli occhi di fiamma, mentre un sordido mantello gli penzola dalle spalle"* (A grim ferryman, […] with a mass of unkempt white hair straggling from his chin, flames glowing in his eyes, a dirty garment hanging knotted from his shoulders).

Charon senses that Dante is alive, not destined to Hell, and he tries to push him away. But Virgil orders him to let him pass, using an expression so striking that it becomes immortal: *"Vuolsi così colà dove si puote ciò che si vuole"* (This has been willed where what is willed must be). God is the one who wills his journey, and His will is the way. His words are soon quoted in a register in Bologna in 1317, when the poet still has four years left to live: it is one of the first signs of the *Divine Comedy*'s immediate success throughout all of Italy.

The scene that takes place on the shores of the Acheron, the infernal river, is so overwhelming that Dante trembles in fear: thousands of naked souls are crying, blaspheming

God and their parents, cursing the human race, the place, the time, and the seed of their conception and their birth. Suddenly, an earthquake rattles the landscape, a strong wind rises from the tear-soaked ground, and a bolt of lightning strikes, making the narrator lose consciousness.

It should be said that Dante faints fairly often. It is a literary device used to dramatically introduce a change of scene: a technique that Shakespeare used as well. The story is so dense that it requires him to take a break every now and then. This, however, doesn't relieve the tension; on the contrary, it only increases the anxiety that Dante (and therefore the reader) feels when he encounters the damned in the netherworld.

Reawakened by a clap of thunder, Dante finds himself across the river and on the threshold of the first circle of Hell: Limbo. Virgil is pale. Dante thinks it's fear, but it's actually pity that is draining the color from his face. Limbo is populated with children, men, and women who didn't commit any sins, but their merits weren't enough to save them because they didn't know God.

This is another invention of Dante's. According to doctrine, only the souls of children who died before being baptized end up in Limbo. But Dante imagines that this place is also inhabited by great spirits from ancient times, gathered together in a castle where they talk about philosophy, science, and literature. Their only punishment is to live on in desire but without hope: longing for an impossible grace is their torment. This is where Virgil lives. Shortly after his arrival in Limbo, he saw the resurrected Christ descend to this place to free the patriarchs.

Jesus' descent into Limbo is a recurring image in the mosaics and frescoes from Dante's time. Jesus knocks down the gates of the underworld and imprisons the demon that was guarding them. Then he reaches out and grabs the arm of Adam, the first man, to lift him up and take him to Paradise along with all the other souls waiting in Limbo. Dante imagines that among them there are also Abel, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, David, Jacob, his twelve sons, and Rachel: the woman *"per cui tanto fé,"* for whose sake Jacob did so much.

The poet captured a beautiful love story in just four words.

Jacob is on the run. He deceived his blind father Isaac, who blessed him and gave him his birthright instead of bestowing it to his older brother Esau. To escape his sibling's wrath, Jacob seeks refuge with his uncle Laman. When he sees his lovely daughter Rachel, he immediately

falls in love with her and asks him for her hand in marriage. Laman agrees, but first he will have to work for him for seven years.

When the wedding finally takes place, the bride is veiled as per custom. But afterward, when Jacob is finally alone with her, he discovers that it's not Rachel under the veil but her sister Leah. He complains to Laman, who replies that he had promised him his daughter's hand in marriage, but he hadn't specified which one, and Leah was his daughter too. If Jacob wants Rachel as well, he will have to work for another seven years. And so it is. Now Jacob has two wives; but while Leah gives birth to one son after another, Rachel seems barren. So she tells her husband: "Take my handmaid and have two children with her; we will raise them as our own." But Leah gets jealous, so she asks Jacob to have two children with her slave as well.

Finally, Rachel miraculously gets pregnant and Joseph is born. This is why he is Jacob's favorite: because he is the son of the woman he loves. His brothers are jealous of Joseph, so they take him to the desert to kill him, but one of them (Judah) suggests they sell him instead to a caravan of slaves headed to Egypt and they let their father believe that his favorite son had died.

Dante knows this part of the story well, also visually. During the late thirteenth century, mosaicists were already at work in the Florence Baptistery – the *"bel San Giovanni"* (beautiful Saint John) where he himself was baptized – depicting the lives of Jesus, John the Baptist, and Joseph.

The young Jewish man becomes the right-hand man of Potiphar, an Egyptian high dignitary. His wife tries to seduce Joseph, who flees but drops his cape on his way out; the woman picks it up and shows it to her husband, falsely accusing Joseph of rape. Potiphar might not really believe her in his heart of hearts, but he has to pretend that he does: the young man is thrown in prison, in the same cell as the pharaoh's cupbearer and baker.

Both prisoners have a dream. The baker is carrying a basket of bread on his head, and there are crows pecking at the bread; the cupbearer is pressing grapes and pouring wine for the sovereign. Joseph prophesizes that the baker will be decapitated and that the cupbearer will return to court. And so it happens.

The pharaoh also has a mysterious vision: seven lean cows devouring seven fat cows; and seven withered ears of grain consuming seven healthy ones. None of the fortune-tellers can explain the meaning of it. The cupbearer remembers the Jewish man in prison who could interpret dreams: Joseph is freed and brought to the palace. He predicts that there will be seven

years of abundance followed by seven years of famine; he advises that they should build silos and store the surplus grain so they can use it and sell it later on in times of need. The pharaoh is impressed, he nominates him to be his vizier and orders him to carry out the project.

When the famine strikes, Joseph's brothers are among those who come to Egypt to buy grain. He recognizes them, but they fail to recognize him. So Joseph devises a plan to test them and see if they have changed.

He asks them where they came from and what their story is. That is how he finds out that Jacob and Rachel had another son, Benjamin. At that point, Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies and has one of them arrested; he orders the others to return home and bring young Benjamin back to Egypt if they want to get their grain.

Jacob resists, despairing at the thought of also losing the other son he had from Rachel (who has died in the meantime), but in the end he allows Benjamin to leave. When Joseph sees him, he is overcome with emotion: he recognizes his mother in his face. But he still doesn't trust his brothers. He dismisses them after placing his silver cup in Benjamin's sack of grain, and then has the guards chase them down. The brothers despair at the prospect of losing their youngest sibling, their father's new favorite, Rachel's son; so Judah, the one who sold Joseph into slavery, offers himself as a slave in exchange for Benjamin's freedom.

Only then does Joseph reveal his identity. He forgives his brothers, he hugs them, and he asks them to bring Jacob to Egypt as well. His twelve sons will be the forefathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. According to Jewish tradition, Joseph makes himself known to his father by citing the verse from the Torah that they discussed the last time they saw each other many years before.

Dante evokes all of this with a fragment: just five syllables, *"per cui tanto fé"* (for whose sake he did so much). He knows how to speak to readers who know the Bible well. Stories portrayed and sculpted in churches in Florence and across Italy.

Chapter Four

The castle of great spirits

Where Dante meets Homer,

and Plato debates Aristotle.

After the brief encounter with the patriarchs, Dante catches a glimpse of a flame inside a semicircle of darkness, where the "honorable" souls reside. Words like "honor" and its derivatives appear five times in just a few verses. The poet expresses his utmost admiration for the characters he is about to meet, even though all their work and ingenuity were not enough to save them without faith.

He is approached by four shadows, who look neither sad nor happy. The first one is Homer. Dante was never able to read his works, if not for some fragments here and there. The Middle Ages go almost entirely without Ancient Greek culture and literature, except for Aristotle. The other texts will be rediscovered during the Renaissance. Bessarion's arrival in Florence along with the other scholars accompanying the emperor of Byzantium will play an instrumental role. The emperor will come to Italy on a mission to reconcile Orthodox and Catholics, and to ask for help against the Turks. The attempt will fail: the two Churches will remain divided, Ottoman forces will invade Constantinople, and the Eastern Roman Empire will fall. But the Western Roman Empire will gain a cultural treasure.

So Dante has never read Homer. But he still knows him as the forefather of poets, and he depicts him with a sword in his hand, like a warrior king. There are three other authors behind him, Dante's favorite. Horatio: the poet of the fleeting moment, of seizing the day while putting very little trust in the future, or, as he wrote, *"carpe diem quam minimum credula postero."* Ovid: the poet who died in exile, the author of the *Metamorphosis* and its stories of men transformed into plants and women who became stars. Lucan: the epic poet of *Pharsalia*, the story of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.

There is another Latin poet whom Dante also admires, Statius. He even goes to the extent of imagining that he was saved: divine mercy rewarded him for protecting persecuted Christians

and being baptized, albeit in secret. Dante will run into him in Purgatory in a moving scene. Statius doesn't recognize Virgil, but he confides in him that he would gladly put up with an additional year of punishment just to have had the chance to live at the time of the author of the *Aeneid*, which was like a mother and a nurse to him. Virgil turns to Dante and signals to stay silent, but Dante can't contain himself: he reveals that the poet accompanying him is actually Virgil. So Statius bends over to kiss his feet, but Virgil steps back: *"Tu se' ombra e ombra vedi"* (You are a shade and a shade is what you see), both of them are nothing but shadows, insubstantial spirits with no actual bodies to embrace.

The great poets deal with Hell with grace and dignity. Homer, Horatio, Ovid, Lucan, and Virgil make a nod to Dante, who joins the group as *"sesto tra cotanto senno"* (the sixth among such intellects). The message couldn't be clearer: the father of the Italian language is the heir of Greek and Latin traditions. Christian faith and humanist culture (of which Dante is the forefather) complete the system of values and beauties upon which Italy's national identity is founded. And to express it, Dante chooses a new language, real and alive: the same language spoken in the markets in Florence.

The poets cross a stream walking on water, another sign of initiation to spiritual life. They pass seven concentric walls and enter a castle inhabited by *"spiriti magni"* (mighty spirits), the protagonists of mythology and history.

Dante builds his pantheon in just a few verses. It might seem like a list at first glance, but it is actually a world set in a timeless aura, in a borderland between Classical and Christian culture; inside this microcosm isolated from good and evil, the poet brings back to life the great souls that grasped what was real and what was just, without being able to quite reach them because they didn't know God. He imagines them conversing about science and poetry.

The first character he encounters is a woman: Electra. Zeus fell in love with her, and their firstborn son Dardanus became the founder of Troy. When Electra saw the city in flames, she was so grief-stricken she wished to die, so she was transformed into a star along with her sisters: the Pleiades. Dante portrays her in the company of the two most illustrious Trojan princes: Hector and Aeneas. A reference made in passing, almost hastily, so much so that Aeneas and Virgil don't even have the time to greet one another.

After all, the *Divine Comedy* is set to a rapid pace, dropping one name after another, telling one story after another. So, if you are explaining Dante, you inevitably end up having to abide by his laws, following his movements, and keeping up with the speed of his talent. Suffice it to say that there is only one circle of Hell and just a handful of verses separating Hector and Achilles (whom we will encounter shortly).

There are also two female warriors among the heroes in Limbo: Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons who died defending Troy; and Camilla, the virgin warrior (previously mentioned in the first canto) who perished in battle fighting with the Italian armies against the Trojans. Dante returns to the concept that Italy germinated from the encounter between those who escaped Troy's destruction and the populations of Latium who are celebrated in the *Aeneid*. In fact, this is also where the Latin king lives with his daughter Lavinia, who was offered in marriage to Aeneas to seal the alliance between their people.

Then there are some major names from Rome's history. Caesar, with his *"occhi grifagni"* (falcon eyes) like a bird of prey. Brutus: not the one who killed Caesar (that one is in the pits of Hell), but the one who overthrew Tarquin the Proud, the last king of Rome, and opened the way to the Republic. Next to him stands Lucretia, the Roman noblewoman who killed herself after being raped by Tarquin's son: her suicide was an extreme act of protest that ignited the people's revolt against the tyrant. There are two other examples of Roman virtue standing by her side: Julia (Caesar's daughter) and Cornelia (the mother of the Gracchi brothers).

But the extraordinary thing is that Dante also includes infidels in the circle of honorable men, despite the fact that Muslims were considered enemies at the time. We will also encounter Muhammad later on in the *Inferno*, but here among the great souls in Limbo's castle there are: Saladin, who conquered Jerusalem without spilling Christian blood; Avicenna, the father of modern medicine; and Averroes, whose commentaries of Aristotle's work preserved his philosophy for future generations.

Aristotle is the greatest philosopher ever for Dante. It brings to mind Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens*: the fresco in the Vatican that depicts Aristotle gesturing to the ground while Plato points at the sky. The two great Athenians are the fathers of two schools of thought that made it through Dante's time and reached us all the way to the present day. Plato and his followers separate and juxtapose Sky and Earth, spirit and matter, high and low, the Idea and the shadow of the Idea: we are all prisoners chained in a cave and all we are able to see is a

reflection of things; the truth is elsewhere, history tends towards a destiny that escapes us, but the Ideal will manifest itself sooner or later. Augustine participates in this philosophy with his distinctions between the City of Man and the City of God, between the Jerusalem on Earth and the celestial one. The utopians, Plato's grandchildren, dream of a perfect world, which is of course somewhere else in time and space. It's a line of thought that reaches all the way to Hegel and German Idealism; Marx will develop a materialist version of it, which nevertheless considers inevitable the magnificent and progressive fate, the evolution of history toward an end.

On the other side, Aristotle and his disciples believe that everything is on Earth, and that it's actually all in the mind of man; everything can be analyzed, explained, and understood through logic and syllogism (if A equals B and B equals C, then A equals C). Medieval philosophy, with Thomas Aquinas and Scholasticism, is also imbued with Aristotelianism.

But Dante looks even further back in history and recognizes the dignity of the first philosophers: Socrates and the Pre-Socratics. So, among the *"spiriti magni"* (mighty spirits), there is also Democritus, *"che 'l mondo a caso pone"* (who ascribes the world to chance): everything we see is the result of the random motion of atoms. Thales, who considers water to be the origin of all things; after being accused of cultivating only abstract thoughts, he proves that he also has a talent for concrete matters and enters the olive oil business, becoming very rich. Anaxagoras, who is charged with impiety for asserting (correctly) that the sun is an incandescent mass and the moon a rocky globe rather than two divinities. Diogenes the Cynic, who lives in a barrel and rolls in sand in the summer and in snow in the winter. Heraclitus, the philosopher of *panta rhei*, everything flows: you can't bathe twice in the same river. The mysterious Empedocles, whom they claim performed miracles and stopped epidemics: the port zone in Agrigento is named after him, Porto Empedocle; it is also the town where Andrea Camilleri was born, making it the real Vigata di Montalbano.

Dante also mentions another philosopher, Zeno. He is so in love with freedom that he conspires against the tyrant of his city, Elea; when he is arrested, to avoid revealing the names of his co-conspirators he bites his own tongue off and spits it in the despot's face. But students know him for his paradox, an anecdote that proves how pure logic can lead down some absurd paths: Achilles, the fastest man on Earth, chases a tortoise, the slowest animal on Earth, but never catches up to it; no matter how fast Achilles moves from one point to the next, the tortoise will have taken another little step in the meantime… Zeno obviously teaches his students to think

differently, to explore the vertiginous infinity of possibilities. In this, he precedes the great Protagoras, the first to claim that "man is the measure of all things": man establishes what exists and what doesn't, hot and cold, fear and courage.

Dante, instead, believes in absolute truth, which was denied to the Ancients. But he still recognizes their grandeur. He will go even further in *Paradise*, where he will doubt that the "mighty spirits" are actually condemned for eternity: why should a virtuous man be denied salvation just because he was born on the shores of the Indus River where nobody knows of Jesus? *"Ov'è questa giustizia che 'l condanna?/ ov'è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?"* (Where is this justice that condemns him? / Where is his fault if he does not believe?). On Judgement Day there will be "Ethiopians" (i.e., infidels) who will be much closer to God than many Christians. But for the time being, the great minds of the past live in Hell, albeit without suffering, in a noble and also melancholic atmosphere.

After the philosophers, there are the fathers of medicine: Hippocrates and Galen. And also Euclid, the father of geometry, and Ptolemy, the astronomer who gives the world an order destined to reassure men (including Dante) for centuries, placing Earth as the stationary center of the universe around which the Sun and the rest of the cosmos rotate. There are also writers from Ancient Rome, Cicero and Seneca, and poets of Greek myths, like Linus, who receives his lyre directly from Apollo.

But the saddest one of all is Orpheus. Thanks to his sweet song, he is allowed to get his beloved bride Eurydice back from the underworld as long as he never turns back to look at her. Obviously, he can't resist the temptation and so he sees Euridice vanish before his eyes forever.

Chapter Five

Falling in love in Rimini

Where Dante suggests to Francesca
the most famous love poem of all time.

Rimini. If the *Divine Comedy* is also a journey across Italy, it is only fitting that this should be the first stop.

Rimini is the real *axis mundi* of Italy. It's the place where people are as efficient and fast as they are in Milan, and as hospitable and friendly as in Naples. They are great inventors of parallel worlds: inland, the old town with the Roman Arch of Augustus, the Tiberius Bridge, the magnificent Renaissance temple of the Malatesta; on the seashore, the cardboard town of beach resorts marked by colorful numbers so children don't get lost.

Rimini is the Italian city that endured the most bombs and it's also where the post-war period started: the first seaside holidays for Italians, the first moments of collective joy, the place where yesterday's German enemies are welcomed as friends.

During the Sixties, the energy of the Reconstruction crossed paths with the 1968 protests, the Italian economic boom overlooked a world rattled by tensions but also a yearning for freedom. And, just off the coast of Rimini, a group of kids turned an antic into a political case: they built a platform in international waters to make some money and they declared it an independent state in the spring of 1968: they called it Rose Island, drafted a Constitution, and made Esperanto its official language. In the end, the Italian government blew it up with TNT.

Then came the Eighties: the beach was inundated with nightclubs and lifeguards were replaced by dancers. There are less Germans and more Russians in Rimini nowadays. Tonino Guerra is gone, but his memory lives on in the hills of Santarcangelo, just like Federico Fellini's: the singer Vasco Rossi spent the summer of Coronavirus in his suite at the Grand Hotel. Sometimes it snows in the wintertime and the beaches become all white. All sorts of conventions take place in the city, including masonic ones. In August, Rimini opens its doors (in alternating or even overlapping weeks) to members of the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation

as well as to porn stars, to aristocrats who always stay in the city's Art Nouveau hotels as well as to new proletarians with their kids' names tattooed in massive letters on their backs. After sunset, the beaches turn into a no man's land and can even be dangerous.

Zanza, the last playboy, died on the job: at night, in his car, in the company of a Romanian woman in her twenties. There were throngs of inconsolable German women from three different generations weeping at this funeral.

Francesca da Rimini is perhaps the most famous character in the *Divine Comedy*. Even though Rimini isn't actually her place of birth: it's the city where she found her death. Like many other souls, the first thing she tells Dante about herself is her place of origin. It's a little bit like the question "Where are you from?" that starts almost every conversation in our global world, because we all like to talk about our origins, about our homeland.

Francesca comes from the seashore where the Po River descends into the sea (at the time, the river still reached Ravenna). She is the daughter of the reigning family, the Da Polenta. Dante uses the word *"marina"* (seashore) to describe the immense body of water of the delta as it flows into the Adriatic Sea. A little-known but fascinating corner of Italy where some people go hunting on boats with their dogs keeping a lookout at the bow, others build huts among the reeds, and kids bathe on the river's beaches. And then there is the tranquility of Rovigo and Adria, which lends its name to an entire sea (i.e., the Adriatic Sea); the rich fishing lagoons of Comacchio and Chioggia; the Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna and the glorious Roman ruins in Aquileia, whose inhabitants fled the city after it was destroyed by the Huns and went on to become the founders of Venice. Dante can't possibly know it at the time but, on that same "seashore where the Po River descends into the sea," he will contract malaria in the summer of 1321, which will bring him to his death.

Rimini is instead the hometown of Gianciotto Malatesta, the most famous perpetrator of femicide in history. Nowadays, *"ciotto"* is Roman slang for a muscular jock, but during the Middle Ages it meant crippled, lame, awkward. The Malatesta and the Da Polenta are rivals. The wedding between Gianciotto and Francesca is arranged to seal the peace between the two families. But the bride falls in love with Paolo, her husband's brother; when Gianciotto discovers their tryst, he kills them both.

The murder happens around 1283, when Dante is just eighteen years old. It causes a sensation in Florence: Paolo was the city's Captain of the People the previous year. According to Boccaccio, Francesca was deceived with a switch and bait similar to what had happened to Jacob: she was supposed to marry Paolo but, at the last moment, she found herself in front of his brother instead, the lumbering Gianciotto. But this is just a legend: as it turns out, Paolo was already married back in 1269.

To tell the truth, Dante doesn't explicitly call them out by name. There are many other stories he tells in detail, mentioning the names of families and houses. But this time he keeps it vague because Paolo and Francesca's story is more than a gruesome piece of news: it's actually a universal story. It concerns us all, because at least once in our lives we all lost the righteous way, our reason and common sense, just to chase after an impossible love. We feel sorry for the fact that Dante places these hopeless lovers in Hell among the lustful. But the poet's mercy, affection, and empathy are such that the fifth canto is probably the most beautiful chapter in the *Divine Comedy*, which therefore makes it the most beautiful page ever written by mankind.

The poet reaches the second circle of Hell, where he finds himself in front of Minos, the king of Crete. He is an infernal judge, like he was in the *Aeneid*, but Dante goes a step further and transforms him into a sort of snarling demon that coils its tail a number of times corresponding to the circle where the forsaken soul must descend.

But why Minos? Because according to the ancients, he was an unyielding legislator. But there is a bestial element in his fate. His father Zeus had turned himself into a bull to abduct and rape his mother Europa. Zeus' wife Hera was furious when she found out about it, and she struck Minos with a terrible curse: his wife Pasiphae would lust after animals. It is a sexual deviation called zoophilia: Maria Luisa of Parma was accused of being in love with her horse Alexandre. In Pasiphae's case it was bulls, so she had Daedalus, the court architect, build her a hollow wooden cow covered in cowhide so that she could mate with one.

That is how the ferocious Minotaur was born, half man and half bull. Minos couldn't show him in public, but he also couldn't kill him either: after all, he was still his son to the eyes of the world. So he orders Daedalus to design a prison where the Minotaur could live but couldn't escape: that is how the labyrinth was created. Daedalus was also locked into his creation along with his son Icarus to prevent them from revealing its secret.

In Dante's *Inferno*, Minos stands guards over a dark place *"d'ogne luce muto"* (mute of all light), wracked by opposing winds. The souls of the lustful are swept away by the infernal storm, just like they couldn't resist the whirlwind of passion when they were alive. Dante compares them to cranes, drawing a long line in the sky as they fly, singing their lamentations; and to starlings flying over the city, forming swarms that go *"di qua, di là, di giù, di sù"* (hither, thither, downward, upward).

Virgil tells the story of these wretched spirits, starting with four women.

Semiramis, Queen of Babylon, so corrupted by sensual vices that she made it legal for people to lust however they pleased. Dante foreshadows a linguistic and cultural debate that has lasted for centuries, which can be summarized in two expressions. The first one is *"s'ei piace, ei lice"* (if it pleases, it's allowed): if something gives you pleasure, if it makes you happy, then do it. This verse from Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* is spoken by a choir of shepherds mourning for the Golden Age when man was free to fulfill his desires. The second expression flips this verse around: *"se ei lice, ei piace"* (if it's allowed, it pleases). Wanting to fulfill one's duty is more in line with Tasso's later work *Gerusalemme liberata (Jerusalem Delivered)* and with the Counter-Reformation: man is no longer at the center of the universe, he is just a fragment at the mercy of fate and under the strict laws of the Church.

The *Divine Comedy*, which represents not only the pinnacle of poetry but also of Medieval thought, clearly supports the primacy of reason over passion and duty over pleasure. Aeneas' story exemplifies this dilemma. He falls in love with Dido, the queen of Carthage, who breaks her vow of loyalty to her dead husband Sychaeus by loving him in return. The two are on a hunt when they are surprised by a storm, so they seek shelter in a cave, where they reveal their feelings for one another. Aeneas loses interest in his mission and his people until Mercury, the messenger of the gods, reminds him of his duty: the leader of the Trojans has to venture on to Italy. But before he leaves Carthage, he has one last dramatic encounter with Dido: she begs him to stay at first, then she curses him and prophesies the eternal rivalry between their two people until an avenger (i.e., Hannibal) will rise from her bones. Aeneas sets sail nonetheless, heartbroken. Dido stabs herself in the heart with the sword he gave her and then throws herself on top of a burning pyre. He runs into her again in the Fields of Mourning when he journeys into Hades, but she doesn't even look him in the eyes; she turns away from him and returns to her husband Sychaeus, whom she has rejoined in the underworld.

Next to Semiramis and Dido, Dante places Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, who seduces first Caesar, then Marc Antony, and finally kills herself, perhaps after failing to also seduce the new overlord, Augustus. The fourth woman is Helen, who causes the Trojan War. She is in Hell with her beloved Paris, but also with Achilles: the strongest man on Earth is ultimately defeated by his love for Paris' sister Polyxena and is treacherously killed by her brother.

Along with the heroes from Greek and Roman times, there is also Tristan, the knight of the Round Table who falls in love with Iseult, the wife of his uncle Mark. And so we move on from classical literature to the Matter of Britain and its concept of love, which evolves in a spiritual direction and leads to the *Dolce Stil Novo*: the style that gives rise to the verses crafted by Dante's best friend Guido Cavalcanti and to Guido Guinizelli's *"Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore"* (Love always finds shelter in the noble heart). Dante himself writes some beautiful love poems:

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare	So gentle and so full of dignity
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,	My lady appears when she greets anyone
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,	That all tongues tremble and fall silent
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare...	And eyes dare not look at her.

But here, in the *Divine Comedy*, he goes one step further. Courtly love and chivalric literature can lead to perdition.

Dante sees two souls that are also joined in death, flying side by side like doves. He would like to speak to them, and Virgil encourages him to call them over. They reply to Dante with words that have never been written before or since by another human being. They are sublime from the very beginning: *"Se fosse amico il re de l'universo"* (If the King of the Universe were our friend) – God is almost ever mentioned by name in the *Inferno* – *"noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace, / poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso"* (We would pray unto him to give thee peace, / Since thou hast pity on our woe perverse).

The infernal storm calms down for a moment. Francesca is always the one speaking, even on Paolo's behalf, even in the name of that love that still hasn't left them, as Dante can attest. Every triplet starts with the word *"amore"*: love that swiftly blooms in a gentle heart; love that releases no beloved from loving; love that leads the two lovers to the same death.

The verse *"Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona"* (Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving) is so modern that it could have been written yesterday. It inspired the notes of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, the verses of Silvio Pellico and Gabriele D'Annunzio, and even contemporary music, like a song by Antonello Venditti. And it's one of the mysteries of life: is love really always requited? Or could the opposite be true? Maybe every love is unrequited: beyond what the songwriter Franco Battiato called *"vibrante intesa di tutti i sensi in festa"* (the quivering harmony of all my senses filled with rapture), beyond the corporeal ecstasy, there is always someone in the couple who loves more and someone who loves less.

People who fall in love are often rejected. Someone madly in love is usually perceived as frail, awkward, even funny, but never as seductive. Don't we fall in love with someone who doesn't want us more often than not? Isn't there a masochistic streak in many of us? It also happens to women (maybe especially to women), they dig their heels in and sometimes lose their heads over a worthless man who doesn't deserve them; they delude themselves that he will change for them, they would like to redeem him, save him, and in doing so they become the makers of their ongoing unhappiness. And, as men, we have sometimes identified with another one of Venditti's songs, *"Compagno di scuola"*:

Ma Paolo e Francesca,	But Paolo and Francesca,
quelli io me li ricordo bene	I remember them well
Perché, ditemi,	Because, tell me,
chi non si è mai innamorato	Who has never been in love
di quella del primo banco	With the girl in the first row,
la più carina, la più cretina...	The cutest one, the silliest…

But Dante has a different understanding of love than us. Maybe idealized, certainly literary. The spark, the cause of it all, is actually a book. The poet asks Francesca how passion allowed her to get to know her *"dubbiosi disiri"* (dubious desires). That is what Dante calls those exciting moments of uncertain longing that we have all felt: we fall in love with someone and we hope they return the sentiment, but we don't really know how they feel. Francesca replies that they were reading the story of how Lancelot and King Arthur's wife Guinevere fell in love; their

common friend Gallehault picked up on their mutual feelings for one another and lit the spark of an impossible love. This time, it was a book that played Gallehault's part.

Paolo and Francesca are alone. They are not aware of the other's feelings. But what they are reading makes them look up from the page time and time again, their eyes meet and they both blush: the story is about them. When they reach the scene where Lancelot finds the courage to kiss Guinevere, Paolo gives Francesca a trembling kiss.

"Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante" (That day we read no more): with just one verse the woman evokes that love that overcomes reason and surrenders itself to the senses, to pleasure, and to remorse. Paolo listens without uttering a word, he just weeps silently. Dante is so overwhelmed by emotion that he faints, *"E caddi come corpo morto cade"* (And then I fell as a dead body falls).

The ensuing scenes that unfold in the drama – the lovers' passion, her husband's terrible discovery, his blind jealousy, and their brutal murder – are all left pending. The killer remains in the background. Neither his sword nor the couple's infernal punishment could break their embrace. The love that binds Paolo and Francesca doesn't abandon them: it remains inscribed in these timeless verses in which generations of readers have identified and will continue to do so, ensuring the eternal youth of the *Divine Comedy*.