

*November 26, 1950*

I was wrong to buy this notebook, very wrong. But it's too late now for regrets, the damage is done. I don't even know what impelled me to buy it—pure chance. I've never thought of keeping a diary, partly because a diary has to be secret, and so it would have to be hidden from Michele and the children. I don't like hiding things; besides, there's so little space in our house it would be impossible to manage. Here's how it happened. Two weeks ago, it was a Sunday, I left the house rather early in the morning. I was going to buy cigarettes for Michele. I wanted him to find them on his night table when he woke up: he always sleeps in on Sunday. It was a beautiful day, warm, though it was late autumn. I felt a childish pleasure walking along the streets, on the sunny side, and seeing the trees still green and people happy as they always seem to be on holidays. So I decided to take a short stroll and go to the tobacco shop in the square. Along the way I saw that a lot of people were stopping at the flower stall, so I stopped, too, and bought a bunch of calendulas. "You need flowers on the table on a Sunday," the flower seller said to me. "Men notice." I smiled, nodding, but the truth is, I wasn't thinking of Michele or of Riccardo when I was buying those flowers, even though Riccardo does seem to appreciate them. I bought them for myself, to hold while I walked.

The tobacco shop was crowded. Waiting my turn, with the cigarette money ready, I saw a stack of notebooks in the window. They were black, shiny, thick, the type used in school, in which—before

even starting it—I would immediately write my name excitedly on the first page: Valeria. “I would also like a notebook,” I said, digging in my purse to find some more money. But when I looked up, I saw that the tobacconist had assumed a severe expression to tell me: “I can’t. It’s forbidden.” He explained that an officer stood guard at the door, every Sunday, to make sure that he sold tobacco only, nothing else. I was alone now in the shop. “I need it,” I said, “I absolutely need it.” I was speaking in a whisper, agitated, ready to insist, plead. So he looked around, then quickly grabbed a notebook and handed it to me across the counter, saying: “Hide it under your coat.”

I kept the notebook under my coat all the way home. I was afraid it would slide out, fall on the ground while the porter was telling me something or other about the gas pipes. I felt flushed when I turned the key to open the door to the apartment. I started to sneak off to my room, but I remembered that Michele was still in bed. Meanwhile Mirella was calling me: “Mamma . . .” Riccardo asked, “Did you buy the paper, mamma?” I was agitated, confused, I was afraid I wouldn’t manage to be alone while I took off my coat. “I’ll put it in the closet,” I thought. “No, Mirella’s always going in there to get something of mine to wear, a pair of gloves, a blouse. The night table, Michele always opens it. The desk is now occupied by Riccardo.” I considered that in the entire house, I no longer had a drawer, or any storage space, that was still mine. I proposed to assert my rights starting that day. “In the linen closet,” I decided. Then I recalled that every Sunday Mirella gets out a clean tablecloth when she’s setting the table. I finally threw it in the ragbag, in the kitchen. I had only just closed the bag when Mirella came in and said, “What’s wrong, mamma? You’re all red in the face.”

“It must be the coat,” I said, taking it off. “It’s warm out today.”

It seemed to me that she might say: “That’s not true. It’s because you’ve hidden something in the bag.” In vain I tried to convince myself that I had done nothing wrong. Again I heard the tobacconist’s voice warning me: “It’s forbidden.”

*December 10*

For more than two weeks I’ve kept the notebook hidden without being able to write in it. Since the first day, I’ve been constantly moving it around—I’ve had a hard time finding a hiding place where it wouldn’t be immediately discovered. If the children found it, Riccardo would have appropriated it for taking notes at the university or Mirella for the diary she keeps locked in her drawer. I could have defended it, said it’s mine, but I would have had to explain it. For the shopping accounts, I always use certain promotional agendas that Michele brings me from the bank at the first of the year: he himself would kindly advise me to give the notebook to Riccardo. If that happened, I would immediately give it up and never think of buying another. So I protected myself stubbornly from having to do that, although—I have to confess—I haven’t had a moment’s peace since I got this notebook.

I always used to be a little sad when the children went out, but now I wish they’d go so I’d be left alone to write. I had never before considered the fact that, because of the small size of our house and my office schedule, I rarely have an opportunity to be alone. And I had to resort to a trick to start this diary: I bought three tickets for the soccer game and said they’d been given to me by a colleague. A double trick, since, to buy them, I pinched some of the shopping money. Right after breakfast I helped Michele and the children get dressed,

I loaned Mirella my heavy coat, said goodbye affectionately, and closed the door behind them with a shiver of satisfaction. Then, repenting, I ran to the window as if to call them back. They were already distant, and it seemed to me that they were running toward a dangerous trap I'd set rather than an innocuous soccer game. They were laughing together and that laughter brought me a prick of regret. When I turned back inside, I was about to sit down right away to write, but there was still the kitchen to straighten: Mirella couldn't help me as she always does on Sunday. Even Michele, so orderly by nature, had left the closet open and some ties scattered here and there; he did it again today. Today, again, I bought tickets for the soccer game, so I can enjoy some peace.

The strangest thing is that when I can finally take the notebook out of its hiding place, sit down, and begin to write, I find I have nothing to say except to report on the daily struggle I endure to hide it. Lately, I've been hiding it in the old trunk where we store our winter clothes during the summer. But two days ago I had to persuade Mirella not to open the trunk to get out certain heavy ski pants that she wears at home since we gave up heating the apartment. The notebook was there—had she raised the lid of the trunk she would have seen it right away. So I said to her: "There's time, there's time," and she rebelled: "I'm cold." I insisted with such fervor that even Michele noticed. When we were alone, he said he didn't understand why I had opposed Mirella. I answered harshly, "I know what I'm doing," and he looked at me, surprised by my unusual tone. "I don't like it when you intervene in my discussions with the children," I continued. "You undermine my authority with them." And while he objected that usually I criticize him for not being concerned enough with them, and came over to me, saying in a teasing tone, "What's wrong today, mamma?" I thought maybe I'm starting to get irritable, cranky, like

all women—it's said—when they pass forty: and, suspecting that Michele had the same thought, I felt profoundly humiliated.

*December 11*

As I reread what I wrote yesterday, it occurred to me to wonder if my character began to change the day my husband, jokingly, began calling me “mamma.” I liked it a lot at first, because it seemed to imply that I was the only adult in the house, the only one who knew about life. That increased my sense of responsibility, which is something I've always felt, since childhood. I also liked it because it allowed me to justify the impulse of tenderness roused in me by Michele's manner, which has remained candid and ingenuous, even now that he's almost fifty. When he calls me “mamma” I respond in a tone that's severe yet loving, the same I used with Riccardo when he was a child. But now I see that it was a mistake; he was the only person for whom I was Valeria. Since childhood, my parents have called me Bebe, and with them it's hard to be different from what I was at the age when they gave me the nickname. In fact, although both expect from me everything one expects from an adult, they don't seem to acknowledge that I really am an adult. Yes, Michele was the only person for whom I was Valeria. For some friends I'm still Pisani, their schoolmate; for others I'm Michele's wife, the mother of Riccardo and Mirella. For him, instead, since we met, I'd been only Valeria.

*December 15*

Every time I open this notebook I look at my name, written on the first page. I'm pleased with my plain writing, not too tall, tilting in one direction, which unmistakably reveals my age. I'm forty-three,

although, when I think of it, I can't convince myself it's true. Other people, seeing me with my children, are also surprised and always pay me compliments that make Riccardo and Mirella smile awkwardly. Anyway, I'm forty-three, and it seems embarrassing to resort to childish subterfuge in order to write in a notebook. So I absolutely have to confess to Michele and the children the existence of this diary and assert my right to shut myself in a room to write when I want to. I acted foolishly from the start and if I continue I'll aggravate the impression I have that in writing these innocent lines I'm doing something wrong. It's all absurd. And yet I have no peace in the office, either. If my boss keeps me late, I'm afraid that Michele will get home before me and, for some unpredictable reason, dig among the old papers where I hide the notebook. So I often come up with an excuse not to stay, thus losing some overtime pay. I go home extremely anxious; if I spy Michele's coat hanging in the entrance, my heart skips a beat and I go into the dining room afraid I'll see him holding the shiny black of the notebook. If I find him talking to the children, I think the same: that he might have found it and is waiting until we're alone to discuss it. It always seems to me that at night he closes the door of our room with special care, checking the click of the latch. "Now he'll turn to me and speak." But he says nothing, and I've noticed that he always closes the door like that, because he's meticulous by habit.

Two days ago Michele phoned me in the office and I immediately feared that he had gone home for some reason or other and found the notebook. As I answered, I froze. "Listen, I have to ask you something . . ." he began. For a few seconds I wondered breathlessly whether to declare my right to have as many notebooks as I want and write whatever I feel like or, instead, beg him: "Michele, under-

stand, I know I've done wrong . . .” But he only wanted to find out if Riccardo had remembered to pay his university fees, because the deadline was that day.

*December 21*

Yesterday evening, right after dinner, I said to Mirella that I don't like her habit of keeping the desk drawer locked. She responded with surprise, objecting that she'd been doing this for years. I replied that, in fact, I've disapproved for years. Mirella responded energetically that if she studies so much, it's because she wants to start work, to be independent, and to leave home as soon as she's of age: then she'll be able to keep all her drawers locked without anyone being offended. She added that she keeps her diary in the drawer, so she locks it, and, besides, Riccardo does the same thing—it's where he puts the letters he gets from girls. I replied that then Michele and I should also have the right to a locked drawer. “We do have one,” Michele said, “it's the drawer where we keep the money.” I insisted that I would like to have one for myself; and, smiling, he asked, “For what?” “Well, I don't know, to keep my personal papers,” I answered, “some notes. Or maybe a diary, like Mirella.”

They all, including Michele, began laughing at the idea that I might keep a diary. “What would you write, mamma?” said Michele. Mirella, forgetting her resentment, also laughed. I continued to speak without paying attention to their laughter. Serious, then, Riccardo got up and came over to me. “Mamma is right,” he said gravely, “she, too, has the right to keep a diary like Mirella, a secret diary, maybe a love diary. I'll tell you that for a while I've suspected she has a secret admirer.” He pretended to be extremely serious, he scowled,

and Michele, going along with the game, appeared worried, said yes, it's true, mamma doesn't seem the same, we have to keep an eye on her. Then they all burst out laughing again, and came over and hugged me, even Mirella. Riccardo, taking my chin in his fingers, asked tenderly, "Tell me, what do you want to write in your diary?" Suddenly, I burst into tears. I didn't understand what was wrong with me, except a great weariness. Seeing me cry, Riccardo turned pale and put his arms around me, saying, "I was joking, mammetta, don't you see I was joking? I'm sorry . . ." Then he turned to his sister and told her it's always her fault that these things happen. Mirella left the dining room, slamming the door behind her.

Soon afterward Riccardo, too, went to bed and we were left alone, Michele and I. Michele began to talk to me, lovingly. He said he understood the impulse of maternal jealousy very well but that it was time I got used to thinking of Mirella as a young woman, an adult. I tried to explain that that wasn't the issue, but he continued, "She's nineteen years old—it's normal that she already has something, an impression, a feeling that she doesn't want to let her family know. A little secret." "And what about us?" I replied. "Don't we also have the right to some secrets?" Michele took my hand, caressed it sweetly. "Oh, darling," he said, "what secrets would we have at our age?" If he had uttered those words in a bold, joking tone, I would have rebelled; but the grieved tone of his voice made me go pale. I looked around to be sure that the children were in bed and that they, too, could believe that moment of weakness was due to maternal jealousy.

"You're pale, mamma," said Michele. "You're too tired, you work too much. I'll get you a cognac." I jumped up, refusing. He insisted. "Thanks," I said. "I don't want to drink anything, it's passed. You're right, maybe I was a little tired, but now I'm fine." I smiled and

gave him a reassuring hug. "Always the same, you recover immediately," Michele commented tenderly. "No cognac, then." Embarrassed, I looked away. In the pantry, next to the cognac bottle, in an old biscuit tin, I had hidden the notebook.

*December 27*

Christmas was two days ago. On Christmas Eve Riccardo and Mirella were invited to a dance at the house of some old friends of ours, the Caprellis, who were presenting their daughter to society. The children had welcomed the invitation joyfully, because the Caprellis are a very well-off family who give lavish, tasteful parties. I was also glad because it meant that I could have dinner alone with Michele, as when we were just married. Mirella was pleased with the idea of wearing her first evening dress again, which she had inaugurated at last winter's Carnival, and Michele would lend Riccardo his tuxedo, as he did last year. With this evening in mind, I had bought a scarf for Mirella, of voile seeded with flecks of gold, and for Riccardo, a dress shirt, one of those modern ones with the unstarched collar. The afternoon passed pleasantly, since all four of us had the promise of a happy evening. Mirella looked lovely in her dress, the anticipation of the coming entertainment had dispelled her usual slightly scowling, faintly stubborn expression. When she came into the dining room and whirled lightly in a circle so that we could admire her full skirt, hiding her face behind the scarf in an unusual gesture of shyness, her father and brother let out loud exclamations of wonder, as if astonished to recognize in their daughter and sister such an attractive girl. I also smiled, I was really proud. I was about to tell her I would have liked to always see her happy and pretty like

that, as a girl should be at twenty. Then I considered that maybe with others she is like that, completely different from how we know her. And when I asked myself uneasily if one of those attitudes is a fiction, a deception, I realized that it's not that she's different, but the roles she's compelled to play at home and outside are different. The most disagreeable is reserved for us.

Riccardo went to dress right away, inspired by the sight of his sister. A few minutes later I heard him calling from his room. From the tone of his voice I guessed immediately what was happening. I will confess that I'd been afraid of it for days, but only at that moment did his cry of "Mamma" oblige me to acknowledge my fear. Michele's tuxedo jacket was too tight for him, the sleeves too short. Standing in the middle of the room, he gave in to the shock of his disappointment. The tux had been tight the year before. We had laughed about it, saying he'd have to refrain from embracing any girls for fear of hearing the jacket rip at the back, the sleeves come unstitched. But Riccardo has grown more robust since then, and maybe also taller. He looked at me, hoping that at my appearance everything would magically right itself, as it did when he was a child. I, too, would have been glad of that. For a moment I thought I could say, "It looks great," and he could believe me. Instead I said, "It won't do." And then right away I went over and felt the sleeves, the chest, imagining lightning-speed adjustments that I wouldn't be capable of making. Riccardo followed my hands anxiously with his gaze, expecting a favorable diagnosis. I repeated, discouraged, "There's nothing to be done."

We went back to the dining room together. Riccardo's eyes were red, his face pale. "We can't go to the party," he announced in a spiteful voice. He looked at his sister as if he would have liked to tear off her dress, his look was like a bite. Mirella, afraid that not even a

rebellion on her part would be enough to avert this disaster, asked hesitantly, "Why not?" He showed her that he couldn't button the jacket and that the sleeves left the wrists of his new shirt ridiculously exposed. "Papa has narrow shoulders," he said rudely.

We went rapidly through the list of friends and relatives who might be able to lend us a tuxedo. I realized that I had already done that, unconsciously, two days earlier, and had concluded that none of the people we know now would have one. Clinging to a thread of hope we telephoned a cousin, but he needed it himself that evening. Mentally, we weighed and measured friends, shaking our heads. Another relative, asked on the phone, was astonished by the request: "An evening jacket? No, I don't have one. What use would I have for it?" Riccardo, hanging up the phone, said with a nervous laugh, "All the people we know are poor." And Michele replied, "People like us." Then Riccardo, pretending to joke, suggested, "Couldn't we rent one? Like an extra." Michele said, "That's all we need." I felt that he was thinking of his tailcoat, of the morning suit he wore the day of our wedding: both are hanging in the closet under a white sheet. Certainly, he was thinking of his father's blue and black uniforms. "That's all we need," he repeated severely.

I understood very well what had led Michele to speak that way. I, too, recalled many things of the past that are hard to separate from, and yet I thought I should have said that Riccardo's idea was a very good one, we could rent an evening jacket. I felt that my son expected me to say it, and I would have liked to help him out, but, gripped by an indefinable uncertainty, I refrained from speaking. Meanwhile Mirella was staring at me, and I said decisively, "Mirella will go alone." Michele wanted to reply. I continued without looking at anyone: "We have to start accepting new situations—not having

an evening jacket and letting a girl go on her own to a dance, which is something I couldn't have done in my time. There's an advantage to everything. You take her, Michele. Then come back. We'll be comfortable just the same, the three of us. Riccardo, you'll have to live with it."

Riccardo said nothing. Mirella hugged me lightly. Then, unsure whether to say goodbye to her brother, left, intending to move modestly and instead, because of the rustling of her dress, flaunting a hint of boldness. I hoped that, before we heard the house door close, a miracle would occur and I could hurry to Riccardo, laughing, as if until then I had been acting in a comedy. I saw myself pulling a new tuxedo out of the closet, I saw the shiny satin lapels. When the door closed, Riccardo scowled and I repeated, "You'll have to live with it."

I said it in a humble tone, as if I had something to be forgiven for, and it was precisely against that feeling of guilt that I rebelled inside, even as I said it. I would have liked to promise Riccardo that I'd buy him a tuxedo on the installment plan, as we'd bought Mirella's dress, but a man's suit is more expensive, and then a man doesn't have to find a husband. So I had to acknowledge that I couldn't burden our budget with this superfluous expense. I remembered when Mirella and Riccardo were small children and asked for toys that were too expensive. I would say that the bank had no more money: they believed it and surrendered to that insurmountable difficulty. But I can't resort to such subterfuges anymore.

When Michele returned, and we sat down at the table, it seemed to me that Riccardo looked at his father differently, as if measuring him. It was an unusually good dinner and yet we ate halfheartedly. I had bought dried apricots, which Michele really likes, but when I put them on the table he didn't even notice them. The opaque, wrinkled fruit gave off a sense of sadness and poverty.

After dinner we sat listening to the radio. I didn't dare mention the bottle of spumante that I intended to uncork at midnight. Riccardo's obstinate silence and his hard gaze restrained me. I've seen that hostile expression in his eyes often lately, and I don't like it in him, such a sweet, polite young man. It's always there when he has to stay home because the money Michele gives him every Saturday for his personal expenses has run out. He sits near the radio and listens to dance music, sulking, or he pages through a magazine. On Christmas Eve, I understood for the first time that his bad mood is an accusation against his father and me. The truth is, he sometimes claims that although Michele has worked for so many years in a bank, he isn't a businessman, meaning that he wasn't able to get rich. He says it with a fond smile, as if that failure were merely a habit or a vestige of snobbishness. And yet, in his slightly protective tone, I always seem to hear something patronizing, as if he would gladly forgive his father for having made him a victim of this ineptitude. Basically, for Riccardo the joke is a way of feeling sorry for himself by giving the impression of absolving his father.

So I went over to Michele, sat down beside him, took his hand, and held it tight in mine: I wanted them to make a single hand. Riccardo was listening to the radio and his head was leaning against the back of the chair, so he wasn't looking at us. I saw him as he said "Papa has narrow shoulders." And in hearing those words again—good Lord, I hardly dare confess it, I'm writing in a moment of exasperation, maybe later I'll erase these lines—in hearing those words again I have to admit I felt myself become mean. I would have liked to get up, stand in front of Riccardo, laugh sarcastically, and say to him derisively, "All right, let's see where you are in twenty years." I scarcely know the girl he talks to on the phone for hours, in a low voice, a slender blond girl named Marina, but I felt that he was

thinking of her at that moment, of linking arms with her and going off. I would also stand in front of her, then, and, still laughing, I'd say, "We'll see, we'll see."

I remembered the day when I told Michele that we could do without a nanny, and he had said yes, without looking at me, he had said the children were big now—they were five and three. I remembered when, later, I told him it would be better to let the maid go as well and, faced with his hesitation, mentioned the risk that she might gossip about what we bought on the black market. And finally, the day I came home and, happily embracing Michele, announced that I had managed to find a job: I had a lot of time available now, since the children were in high school and the house didn't give me too much to do. "We'll see," I said, laughing, to Marina, "we'll see," and meanwhile I squeezed Michele's dear hand.

*Later*

It's two in the morning. I got up to write: I can't sleep. Yet again it's the fault of this notebook. Before, I'd immediately forget what happened at home; now, instead, since I began to write down daily events, I hold on to them in my memory and try to understand why they occurred. If it's true that the hidden presence of this notebook gives a new flavor to my life, I have to acknowledge that it isn't making it any happier. In the family you have to pretend not to notice what happens, or at least not to wonder about its meaning. If I didn't have this notebook, I would have forgotten Riccardo's behavior on Christmas Eve by now. But with it I can't help being aware that something new took place between father and son that night, although apparently nothing is changed, and the next day they were affectionate