

**Excerpt from**  
**GLI STRAORDINARI**

**by**  
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A milky emptiness settled in as the evening faded. Wiping her shoes on the doormat, Elsa pushed open the armoured door. She had a frantic, bounding gait at odds with her gentle face. Her long legs seemed to carry her from place to place before she'd set even her mind to it. She had a hint of knock knees and the kind of smile that put people at ease.

Elsa did Tai Chi every morning and went rock climbing three times a week, which made her arms skinny and sinewy. She taught a children's digital education class and was part of a volunteer group that met once a month to pick up plastic on beaches.

She put her bag on the floor and took off her shoes, then undressed and slipped into the shower. I joined her in the bathroom after sending one last email. She was handling softly-coloured recycled packaging, handcrafted soaps with powdered wild ginger, biodegradable essences of lemon and rosemary and eco-friendly konjac sponges. I kissed her on the forehead and she smiled at me. We had no desire to make conversation after spending most of our day talking to strangers. But we would make an effort.

This wasn't real downtime, more of an interlude after the exacting demands of the workplace. A time to decompress, in which the arduous transition between public life and home life could take place. As an operation, it was conceptually similar to what astronauts go through when they come back to Earth, calculating the right angle of inclination and velocity to avert the risk of bouncing off the atmosphere or being pulverised by friction. I knew about these things thanks to documentaries I streamed, which kept me company late into the night, and which I relied on to fall asleep.

I experienced a mild thrill, identifiable by small flushes of heat and gratification, when I was able to visualise these frames of life from the outside. When I could piece together the narrative scope of events, concentrated almost entirely in the imminent collapse of Elsa's features, in her tired eyes from which she'd wiped off the makeup. I'd developed a keen, clinical ability to sense the catastrophes barely hidden in those features, the signs of her perpetual agitation.

Prosopagnosia is a neurological disorder that prevents you from recognising people's faces. People are often unaware they suffer from it. I'd learned of its existence a

few days earlier thanks to a long post thousands of people had shared. The person who had posted it described how living with the disorder meant she had to strain to the maximum her concentration and ability to notice details that make up each individual personality. She claimed the disorder had been an opportunity to improve her professional skills and her understanding of the needs of the customers and suppliers she encountered every day, but whose faces she couldn't distinguish.

I had searched online and found articles about celebrities and Hollywood stars who suffered from the condition. I'd learned you can recognise a person through subliminal associations and compensatory attributes, like their tone of voice or posture, or the context in which you see them. In fact, there are a million ways to recognise a person other than their face, which we take for granted.

'Now I'm terrified I'll have an accident and won't be able to recognise your face anymore,' I said to Elsa. 'I guess you'll just have to wear those black lace-up boots of yours forever. I could recognise those among a million other pairs.'

'So that's why you're so upset when I don't wear them,' she said, examining the bags under her eyes in the mirror still lightly coated in condensation.

'Yep. It makes me feel betrayed and confused.'

'You'll be pleased to know I've added some new hiking shoes to my wishlist then.'

'We need to come up with a signal so we can recognise each other whatever happens.'

'I'll be the one with the beautiful hiking shoes—I won't be too hard to find.'

I'd never owned hiking shoes until I reached my thirties. After that I'd become one of those people who lives for the weekend, anticipating the moment I could drive out of the city for an hour to go hiking. Breathable and waterproof GoreTex membrane, front toe guard, full shock absorption, air cushioning on the heel, XvZ modulated compression frame, Megagrip ERA3 outsole, 100% Cloud Fit technology that prevents blisters, DAM10+ support for ankle stability, made from recycled plastics and waste materials.

At 10pm, an app installed on our smartphones would block all notifications, most non-essential functions and any incoming calls from numbers outside those in a small group of favourites. From that moment onwards, we would stay away from screens and electronic devices. 'We need to do offline activities, develop our mental elasticity,' we told ourselves. That's why we'd started a five-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle that took up most of the table.

As I was preparing dinner, Elsa suddenly stopped responding to external stimuli. Mouthing syllables, she seemed to be struggling to find a way out of a trap in her mind. In fact, she had added a piece to the puzzle. The box showed a typical Icelandic landscape—something I was uncomfortable about, as we'd never been to Iceland. It seemed illegitimate and slightly ridiculous to have a five-thousand-piece puzzle of a place I had no physical or spiritual connection to. 'We haven't been to Iceland yet,' Elsa corrected me, 'we'll go next year.'

'What about Japan?' I retorted.

'You place too much symbolic value on objects. It's just a nice puzzle,' Elsa said. It was true, I did place too much symbolic value on objects. I knew, for instance, that I'd developed a visceral connection with our Dyson V15s. That my relationship with our Varier Variable chairs was one of blind trust. That I had intimate internal dialogue with the David Shrigley painting, *The ideas come to me at night*, hanging in our bedroom.

I happened, however, to have no intention of changing my ways. Those objects had a tangible aura of integrity I couldn't find anywhere else, not even among the living beings who had designed and created them, sacrificing vast amounts of energy and precious materials in the process.

We were in the kitchen and had no clear agenda as to who was going to set the table, fill the glass carafe with chilled water, slice the wholemeal bread, open the organic wine and so on. The way things took what we'd consider, for purely statistical reasons, their natural course was left entirely down to chance. During that time, mine and Elsa's bodies would brush past each other without ever touching. When we looked set on a path to collision, one of the two would turn away at the last second, with nonchalant grace, and without marking the near-miss with a smile, a cry of enthusiasm or self-satisfaction, or an amused look. Rosy-cheeked and still in her bathrobe, Elsa walked around barefoot, leaving damp prints on the floor.

She opened out the palm of her left hand. 'Scientists have suggested wrinkled fingers are an evolutionary step to improve our grip underwater. But the theory has been disproved.'

'Too bad', I said. 'It was a nice theory.'

Our free time had become a virtual space neatly delimited on Google Calendar or displayed in our diary and synchronised across our devices. An idyllic backdrop in which we moved as if we were on a film set. All the objects we owned contributed to the successful aesthetic performance. Rules were part of the game. No take-aways or frozen meals on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays (Mondays were allowed, and on weekends we ate out), no carbohydrates, a ruthless war on sugar, a glass of wine from time to time. Even if we weren't going out, we wore outdoor clothes to not taint our quality time with the shabbiness of a tracksuit. I wore a Finnish slow fashion T-shirt and wide-legged chinos. Elsa had put on an oversized polo shirt and Lyocell shorts. Though the temptation to indulge in a TV series was sometimes overwhelming, we mandated at least one evening a week devoted entirely to reading with the Wi-Fi modem switched off.

We were exercising our right to log off, but I couldn't stop myself thinking about what I had to do the following day, the tasks already lined up and waiting for me on the planner, everything I kept putting off until after p-Day.

'So?' Elsa asked.

'So what?'

'You were saying something.'

'Ah. I'm not sure. It's completely slipped my mind.'

It was almost always at that point of the evening that a subdued melancholy crept through the state of things, accompanied by a throbbing pain in the pit of my stomach and deep in my legs. Stiff bodies, dry throats. One glorious day's work was drawing to a close to make way for another, with new meetings scheduled, new problems to solve, new projects to complete, to keep the wheels turning in the frenzy we knew so well.

Elsa and I had been back on our feet for a few minutes, resuming our diligent zigzagging. As she cleared the table, I placed the dishes in the dishwasher. I turned the dial to the 'Eco' setting, though I had no idea what that meant in mechanical engineering

terms. Placing a hand on my hip, she leaned over to dump the dinner leftovers into the biodegradable compost bag.

It seemed, sometimes, that in this mutual, well-honed adjustment all our love lay.

I was running my finger, out of tactile compulsion, on the chipped rim of my favourite mug, as I gazed at my reflection in the cold herbal infusion of fennel, chamomile and valerian root. Relaxing, calming, comforting, the box read.

I broke the rules to take one last fleeting look at my emails. The app blocking my smartphone's functions could be easily overridden by entering a four-digit code. One last helping of dopamine delivered by the red notifications, before commencing the nightly wrestle with insomnia. Feeling a fraud, I looked around furtively to make sure Elsa hadn't noticed. I had acted so that my guilt would absorb the specifics of the act, before zoning out again on the hum of the fridge and the sound of the burglar alarm in the distance.

When we turned off the lights and said goodnight, the bad thoughts formed a halo stretching up towards the ceiling, abetted by neighbourhood noises. Possibilities had been decimated, escape routes closed off, the responsibilities unbearable. At times like these being an adult felt intolerable.

A murky gloom had crept into the house, lingering over the industrial furniture and the LG PuriCare 360 air purifier. The Flos Arco floor lamp had been an old bargain of mine, or a fatuous indulgence, depending on point of view. The philodendrons had been Elsa's idea. The Scandinavian-made vintage oak bookcase with a pull-out shelf was the one we'd both always wanted.

You couldn't say we were unhappy. But you couldn't say we were happy either.

## **Part Two**

### **ELSA**

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When Elsa and I first met, we were both still at university. Until then I had never had the obstinacy and zeal required to fall in love, but my lasting impression of that meeting is of an ineluctable inertia: something tangible I could in no way tame. Something deep inside my iris being put to the test.

The spring of my twenty-third year was coming to an end and I had nothing much of consequence to show for it. The days of my life followed one another haphazardly; I had no ambitions, no long-term goals. No inner fire stirred in me. I was a university student in a Communication Sciences degree, with average grades, running a semester behind schedule.

The news at that time was full of nothing but the recession and a lack of prospects for our generation, and we'd internalised the rhetoric and stopped imagining ourselves too far in the future. We took on seasonal jobs and unpaid internships, waited tables, gave private guitar lessons or tutored high school students through their finals. We tried our hand at national exams and tenders for cultural initiatives that never amounted to anything. The most disdainful among us would drop out and get hired by supermarket chains, electrical appliance megastores or IKEA, find part-time jobs in fast-fashion stores

in the huge shopping centres that dotted the motorway encircling Rome. They had shifts, a regular salary at the end of each month, and a semblance of routine at seven euros gross per hour. In all truth, I also had a semblance of routine at that time. I worked six days a week cash in hand at a vintage clothes store in San Lorenzo, which attracted a varied clientele made up of misfit teenagers, costumer designers, former punk junkies and wealthy tourists. On weekends they would all pile into those few square metres crammed full of old Levi's, worn-out Dr. Martens, gaudy leather jackets, Missoni jumpers, acetate jumpsuits, oval glasses and floral shirts. I was constantly tidying up, getting lost in the crowd and straddling the pandemonium of rush hour, in a vain attempt to prevent the shoplifting that happened all the time. Sometimes I would chase after the petty thief of the hour—more to stretch my legs and break the day's monotony than out of any real devotion to the cause. It was the closest thing to being in a movie I'd ever done, and even the soundtrack was clear in my head. I had never managed to catch any of these shoplifters. But no one seemed to care all that much: even the shop owners had a distinctly punk attitude and stopped by only sporadically; a little tampering with the inventory was all it took to balance the accounts. It was a great job, considering that most of the time all I had to do was sit there listening to music, scrolling online or reading, with a respectable salary to take home and first dibs on the best clothes when the weekly loads of clothes arrived. Back then, my wardrobe was an object of much discussion and envy.

As a regular customer, Elsa had blagged her way to becoming the shop's social media manager for a few hundred euros a month, back when it was still rare to make money that way. She would come in frequently to take symmetrical photos of the shop's modern antique furniture and artfully arranged clothes, which she would share with short captions, the odd emoji and a few hashtags. I watched her bony fingers adjusting brightness, cropping 1:1, choosing filters, fiddling hyperactively with the small screen of a beaten-up, early model smartphone. She would often skip her morning classes to take photos when the shop was empty—except for me, trying to write my dissertation on hacker culture in contemporary class struggle, which I was extremely behind on.

Affinities between us emerged as we chatted, on the music to put on for her shootings, and in lively discussions revolving around films and TV series, which Elsa helped me download, along with the subtitles, from pirate websites—something which, despite my dissertation, I had no idea how to do. We were averagely idealistic; a confused jumble of vague ideas, needs we didn't fully understand and abstract intentions, which made up, more than anything else, the image we wanted to project of ourselves. All at once we fell brazenly in love.

For a while, we didn't tell anyone about our relationship. Not that anyone cared, but we liked the idea of living illicitly. Whenever we had the chance, we professed how free we were from 'toxic monogamy'. No couples' dinners with friends, no official public appearances, no handholding. We never arrived at parties together, but we would leave together, ostentatiously, just so people would talk about nothing else the rest of the night. We had very high expectations about what the time we spent together should hold.

Sometimes we'd spend entire Tuesdays in bed—days which suddenly disappeared, subtracted from the ferocious reality around us, from the physiological rhythms that mark the survival of individuals in a civilisation. When distance was inflicted

on our physical bodies, we'd spend hours on the phone, a running live commentary, interrupted only to buy rolling tobacco or step into lifts. Long phone calls that would trail off into deep lethargy. Or we'd write fanciful emails to each other in exile's tones, record voice notes of entire chapters of our favourite books and send messages in whatever chats applications were available to us. Sometimes we'd conduct parallel conversations on different platforms.

I would tremble in anticipation before the three dancing dots, before the *typing...*, would tremble in silence, lying in the dark, lit only by the throbbing blue light of a small screen.

Elsa made sure she never stepped on gratings and always crossed the street on crossings. We'd say: 'Your existence has invaded me'. We'd say: 'Your eyes see the darkness on me'. I would never again be as strong and immune to sadness as I was in those first months of our love. Later versions of myself would not withstand comparison. Never again would I have found myself so exactly where I wanted to be. Never again would I have been so keenly aware I could bend time and space to my sheer will. Never again would I have compromised so little: not the slightest yielding of the soul, perfectly in control, resolute and upright, in the centre of the room, on a planet rife with malice and despair.

Things had gone on like this for about a year, until just like that, in one of her recurring bursts of pragmatism, Elsa had moved in with me, to cut costs. Back then, I shared a flat with depressed academics, penniless musicians, nurses on zero-hour contracts, freelancers with impostor syndrome and other such fanciful figures. They would materialise in my life for a few months before disappearing forever, leaving a couple of bills unpaid—an inconvenience that wouldn't stop us from continuing to like each other's content or comment on the funniest posts and most successful selfies.

The flat was in the San Paolo neighbourhood, near the faculty of Roma Tre university, on the fourth floor of a building that leaned to one side due to hydrogeological instability. We were fortunately guaranteed that the situation was regularly monitored, as confirmed by emails forwarded by our building manager, which I never opened. I was very fond of that ramshackle refuge, not least because it was bathed in sunlight most of the day and that was all we needed. Three rooms, a bathroom, a large kitchen, and a balcony big enough to fit a small table for two. My room overlooked the back of a school and disused railway tracks, so there was the lively hubbub of playtime in the mornings and complete silence in the evenings. Rent was one thousand two hundred euros per month, excluding expenses, to split among housemates. It was the most we could afford, and we could barely afford it.

A few months later Elsa and I moved into a dusty attic flat in Garbatella all to ourselves. It was a bargain—the old landlady, who lived in the flat next door, wanted the six hundred euro in cash—but moving out was tearful. We weren't quite sure why, but it felt like the end of an era.

We had graduated within days of each other, during yet another hottest summer on record. In no time at all, the city had emptied out and the streets had been engulfed in a torrid air that led nowhere. Stretches of posters of events now past crinkled on the walls. Fluorescent green and orange signs hung on the shutters of shops closed for the

holidays. The sunlight was so blinding it seemed the darkness of night would never come. There were also days of strong dry winds and sudden rains that lasted only a few minutes, after which, on balconies or in inner courtyards, ladies in dressing gowns and slippers would rush to straighten fallen pots, hang out laundry and feed stray tabby cats. On the pavements the puddles had already evaporated as lunatics slowly resumed their wandering near the crooked railings and yellow bus stops.

Memories of that period might include the very few trips we were able to afford with low-cost airlines, more often than not taking advantage of the hospitality of friends who'd gone to live in Barcelona, Berlin, London or Marseilles. On low-resolution Skype calls, we'd get to know their housemates, who with wobbly pronunciation would say an awkward 'ciao'. Trips to look for work had become spiritual journeys, and spiritual journeys had become sentimental ones. Some left to do volunteer work, some to pursue further studies abroad at exorbitant cost, some to look for themselves on the other side of the world or to wash dishes in dingy restaurants. Very few would come back. And no one ever left just to go on holiday. Day after day, in bars, at concerts or dinners, there were fewer and fewer of us; we were busier and busier and more divided and distant.

Memories of that period might include Elsa's silhouette as she dances, engrossed, with her feet firmly on the ground, as if to take up the Earth's entire surface. In these images there's sweat on her forehead and on her keeled sternum—one of the things, like the way she danced, I'd never fall out of love with. They might also include the layers of dawn sedimented in the sky at the motorway's end, the hazy spiritual abandon when we got home still high after the party, or the whistling noise that would stay trapped all night in our ears.

If it weren't for the algorithm occasionally suggesting old videos and photographs lost in the feed, I wouldn't have been able to swear this was the reliable version of events.

I wouldn't have been able to tell you why Elsa and I never thought about leaving Rome. Maybe we liked seeing ourselves as survivors, but also felt that that kind of talk didn't really represent us. The idea of leaving and radically changing lifestyles seemed so exhausting and devoid of any real rationality. No choice was preferable, one place as good as another, so we might as well stay in our city.

Encouraged by Elsa, I'd also found an easy job as a social media manager in a café just outside the faculty and a stone's throw from our home. It had been recently converted into an organic bistro in keeping with the gentrification of the university district. I would post pictures of kiwi, celery, cucumber and apple smoothies, vegan croissants, matcha tea, rice-milk cappuccinos, aromatic salads, bowls of quinoa, hummus and fermented red cabbage, soy burgers. Everything was incredibly expensive, but the freshman clientele was never in short supply, and I could fit the job around my shifts at the vintage store. Things were going well, even seemed to make sense.

It was around this time that we read about pANGEA on a website of job adverts. It described itself as a Swedish company specialising in digital communication, strategic consulting and technology development. It pledged to hire hundreds of young graduates and revolutionise the contemporary world of work through innovative ethics and heightened environmental awareness. An up-and-coming giant we'd never heard of, but which seemed to have always existed. The website spoke in generic terms of 'radical change', 'making a difference', creating 'added value' and 'new paradigms'. It sounded

like an exciting place, where great things were happening. Like our favourite bands, these companies usually chose Milan for their Italian headquarters, but pANGEA had chosen Rome because of a scandal related to the Expo, and the opportunity seemed too good to miss.

We had sent in our CVs, which we'd peppered with made-up skills, and within a few days had forgotten all about it.

Not long after that, we were having dinner at a restaurant, one of the all-you-can-eat sushi sessions I was occasionally subjected to against my will. My aversion to those repositories of incongruity and premonitions of death had been roundly defeated by Elsa's enthusiasm. I let her order for me too, choosing on the tablet mounted on the table dishes with exotic names, which I could associate neither with a taste nor a specific shape. I tried unsuccessfully to ward off intrusive questions about the place's hygiene standards. The smell of deodorant and carpeting. The pervasive sticky coating on all surfaces. The flat-screen televisions, turned off, hanging inertly on the walls.

The other diners burst into fits of laughter, opening their mouths wide, spraying their faces and chests with fish debris. You could order enormous amounts of food for a set price, but leaving leftovers was against the rules, so the tension was palpable. We all ate under the watchful eye of waiters who would rush to the table to remove empty plates, lurking like sentries, ninjas or Nazi guards.

Out of the blue, Elsa had put down on the table the chopsticks she was holding with her right hand and the smartphone she was holding with her left. She seemed to suddenly want to distance herself from what she'd just read on her phone. There was a fateful consternation in her eyes. She'd pulled her hair behind her ears and started biting her nails—a gesture I'd see her repeat countless times in the years to come.

Finally, she spoke. 'Check your email.'

'What's going on?'

'Just check it!'

We'd been shortlisted by pANGEA for an informal interview, which would be followed by another and then one more after that. Within a short space of time, we'd be hired as junior staff, then become senior and end up as creative co-directors of Digital Innovation: a department created to venture out into what they called the post-digital, post-internet, post-ideological era. We would win international prizes and awards, earn the trust of the most sought-after clients, be invited to exclusive events and gala dinners, share tables with all sorts of celebrities—Elsa and I, always together, like a single entity.

I had watched her as she struggled to contain her elation about the interview and had felt a love so solemn and profound it bordered on suffering. For a few moments I had had the feeling I was sinking into it and wouldn't be able to stand it.

In the following years, that same person would become an instance of my thinking mind, a yardstick, the interlocutor to whom all my inner monologues were addressed.

On the greasy touchscreen of the tablet in the all-you-can-eat sushi restaurant, three emojis had appeared to rate our dining experience. There was a smiley face for excellent service, a serious face for adequate service and an angry face for terrible service.