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Stelle cadenti

(lit. "Shooting Stars")

Translated by Olivia Jung

Part 1

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Chapter 1

Every year our father would take my brother and me in turn to buy new sneakers. When he was arrested, he was returning home with Edoardo: he had just taken my brother to buy a pair of Nikes.

Rosa, the woman who took care of us and the house, was the one who told me that the Carabinieri must have been staking out our house; when our father and Edoardo arrived at the front door, the cops pulled up and asked him to go with them. Or did they tell him "Doctor Montella, you are under arrest"? I don't know, I never asked him. I also never even asked my brother, who was standing next to him; he was beautiful, with long black hair that rippled halfway down his back in neat curls.

I wonder if the two guards were happy to be the arm of Italy's renewed justice system, which was finally cutting off the head of the political system that had ruled and robbed the country for over four decades. I wonder if they were even giddier after seeing that the specimen of that system whom they were leading to just punishment, i.e., my father, allowed his son to grow out his hair like a woman.

What would I have done in his place? And what if I had been there instead of Edoardo? Back then, he was so subservient to my father's authority; I was a Leninist and I used to lash out at the cops whenever we occupied the school and they came to evict us.

When I called them "pigs" on one of the countless occasions when we argued over political issues, my father stood up and shouted, "Don't you dare!" It was the only time he

interrupted the confrontation, disgusted by the derogatory term I had used. Who knows whose side he would have taken if I had insulted the Carabinieri who were taking him away. I know, he would have taken their side.

I was almost eighteen and I had a 6:30 pm curfew on weekdays. My brother was a year older than me. At lunch we ate alone, or rather the two of us sat at the table while Rosa served us our meal and then she immediately got busy doing something else: ironing, hanging the laundry, washing and changing the curtains...

When we were kids, she allowed herself to sit on the couch with Edoardo and me to watch *Lady Oscar* together. I would eat a vanilla pudding cup, like a real superhero. I would rest my head on her bosom, Edoardo would hug her on the other side, and we would be serene, like two children snuggled up with their mommy, even if she wasn't our real one.

Our mother worked late every night: she was a municipal manager in charge of organizing cultural events. She enjoyed her work. The time she spent watching and selecting arthouse films were hours when she was free from us, from the Montellas, from her family, and she would stretch it out as much as possible, every day, always returning home last.

Our father was a partner in an accounting firm. But, more importantly, he was the secretary of the regional branch of the Christian Democratic Party, as well as the vice president of the regional council. He made a point of coming home in time to go grocery shopping and then he would often leave again, for dinner or afterwards, to attend his endless meetings: every day, however, he made sure to fulfill his goal of going to the supermarket near our home and fill two bags with brand-name products. Tortellini, sauce, cookies, jams. He almost never bought meat or vegetables, I think it was because they had no aesthetic potential, no elegance.

On that February day, he was definitely planning on going up to our apartment with Edoardo, dropping off his briefcase, and then going out to buy more things to fill our already overflowing refrigerator while I returned home with my cheeks flushed from the cold Turin winter air. Instead, they arrested him.

Rosa cooked dinner anyway that evening. She made bean soup, but nobody ate it. Her son often picked her up but waited for her outside on the street; that night, however,

he came up to our apartment. He sat in the chair at the head of the kitchen table while she stood by the stove, stirring and crying. He told her that he had already heard the news on the radio: Dr. Arturo Montella had been taken to the *casa circondariale*, the jailhouse. I thought about how absurd it was that they called the prison a “house” and told him so. He always used to be embarrassed when he looked at me and, whenever he met my father, he would smile awkwardly and compliantly. But that time he looked at me with serene indifference, he seemed almost pleased.

He had decided that it was better if we spent the evening at Rosa's house, so he loaded my brother and me into the car, like two well-dressed puppets, and drove us there.

The light in their kitchen was dimmer than ours and there was less space, or perhaps there were too many people in it: Rosa's children were all there, talking about legal strategies, speculating over types of punishments or acquittals. Meanwhile, on their TV set, Claudio Brosio was reading the names of newly arrested people from his notebook; for the first of many times, he named Arturo Montella. He said that he was charged with bribery and receiving illicit party funds, that he had been taken to jail that evening and would have his first interrogation with the GIP, the preliminary investigation judge, the next day.

In front of the TV that evening, the word GIP made me think of *Cipì*, Edoardo's favorite book when we were children. I saw superimposed on the face of the sparrow protagonist of Mario Lodi's text that of my father, with his beard, tie, and two tiny yellow wings: “Cipì, Cipì, I want to get out of here.” I found out that it was actually the GIP who had requested my father's arrest.

I didn’t see my mother that night: neither Edoardo nor I tried to look for her; we knew she had gone directly from work to the lawyer's office.

A few weeks earlier, she and my father had a conversation in the living room after dinner; only the television light was on and I was sprawled in the armchair.

They were on the couch and my brother was in his room. I was enjoying it all: the comfort of the footrest that came out automatically by pulling a lever on the left side, a true luxury in the early Nineties; the warmth of the radiator on which I rested my feet until I felt them burning; the satisfaction of my life that continued in a linear and powerful way

toward expansion, to the tune of good grades, student collectives, and crushes that were always requited.

“Why are you saying this? What did they tell you?” she asked him.

“It’s nothing, but it could happen and I want you to be prepared.”

“It could happen?”

“Yes, it won’t happen, but just in case it does, you need to call the lawyer…”

They stood up and walked to my father’s study. I didn’t ask anything, I didn’t get up, I didn’t follow them, but I had figured out that my father was telling my mother that he might be arrested.

Did I not know that I was part of a system that was collapsing, or was I aware that it was no longer possible to change course, that I might as well wait comfortably for the end of an era?

I didn’t even tell Edoardo about it. He wasn’t only my brother, he was my only family bond that amounted to a daily presence, the only person I felt I could count on.

Our parents, resplendent in their enviable lives, were stars shining far away. My father was always caught up in party quarrels and outside attacks, always intent on explaining action and defense strategies to his people or receiving folks who asked him to help with an unruly son or an unemployed brother. My mother was in the office all day, Monday through Saturday, busy constructing an identity for herself beyond being Arturo Montella's wife. They were both concerned with our dignity: we had to be respectable, in the way we spoke, dressed, and behaved, but they were completely disinterested in our passions and never expressed a desire to spend time with us.

I think that is why Edoardo and I never considered the option of not getting along. Many other siblings might argue, but we would have condemned ourselves to true loneliness, the kind that goes against the human instinct of being social creatures. We had very different personalities, which would have naturally led us to altercations; but they weren’t important, they faded into the background compared to our bond, to our unspoken covenant: we are allies, we are on our own.

By the time my mother returned home the evening of the arrest I was already in bed.

The following day, she woke me up like every other morning: “Ludo.” Back then, no one called me by my full name, and I loved that nickname. When I was three or four years old, my father told me that Ludo is the first person of the Latin verb “to play,” that my name represented joy and all the things that make us happy: playing, dancing, poetry; he then told me that my full name, Ludovica, meant “strong in battle,” that this name was given to little girls who would become successful women.

“You are going to be a university president,” he would tell me. And I enjoyed contradicting him, “You think I'm a bookworm, but I'm not. If anything, I'm going to be prime minister.”

“The left will never come to power, at most you can become the minister of culture, since we always leave that cabinet to you...” We argued about what shape my future would take, but we were both certain that it would be extraordinary.

All my mother had to do in the morning was say my name, not even that loudly, and I would get out of bed. I had girly sheets, they were different from my brother’s, but our beds were the same: a carpenter had carved a heart on both of our headboards. My mother had a boundless love for objects: she took revenge for her husband's absence by buying stuff with his money and using it to show us her affection for us, the best feeling she could muster. Buying us something that would keep us warm or make us more beautiful, more comfortable, or too elegant for our age was her way of loving us. That is why we lived wrapped in and surrounded by custom-made furniture, brand items like Ragno tank tops, Gabel towels and blankets, and everything was strictly white and scented. Without this stuff, she didn’t know how to show us that we mattered to her.

She usually called me back to reality whenever I spaced out drinking tea or stood still staring at the utensils in the kitchen instead of getting ready to go out. Sometimes I thought that if I had been the only person left on Earth the next day, my ignorance, my imposture would immediately come to the surface: I wouldn’t know how to reconstruct most of the things I used on a daily basis; furthermore, if some extraterrestrial visitor had come to my aid, I wouldn’t have been able to give him the slightest instructions on how to recreate, for example, that orange, high-powered iron that Rosa used every day to erase all the creases from our clothes.

“Are you done meditating?” my mother would ask me. Only then would I get up to go wash myself.

She didn’t make any jokes that morning. She was already set to go out. She called us into the living room and told Edoardo and me that our father was definitely innocent, that he would soon be released from prison, and that she would work to make this happen as soon as possible. That we had to go to school with our heads held high and respond in kind to any comments made or reported to us, without backing down. That in the event that someone said something too harsh or offensive, we should let her know and then she would take care of it. In all other cases she urged us to be responsive, brave, and, above all, as autonomous as always.

She didn’t hug us and we didn’t touch her. We listened to her as we stared at the floor and then watched her, with her perfect hair and make-up, as she left the house for the first time as a thief’s wife.

Edoardo and I never told her about any of the taunts we endured in the months our father was in jail. During the many lunches and dinners that Edoardo and I had together during that period, we also never told each other about all the “Montella, did you buy some oranges?”, “So, Montella, are you gonna become poor now?”, “Montella, can I hit on your hot mother now that your father’s in jail?”, “Montella, are you a thief as well?”

I only talked about it once with the mother of Mariella, my best friend. We were in the car, she was driving, and my father was mentioned on the radio. She immediately turned it off. There was an embarrassed silence. From the glance they exchanged, I understood that Mariella had received very specific instructions: she had to pretend that nothing had happened.

“They asked me some embarrassing questions at school,” I said leaning forward in the space between the two front seats.

“I’m sorry,” replied the woman.

“Me too,” said Mariella as she turned toward me. I became agitated and longed for that state of dull and calm repression I was in before I spoke.

“He’s in jail, but he’s innocent. It’s been nine days, my mom told us that they’ll definitely let him out by the end of the week.” I believed it, but the compassion in the eyes

of Mariella’s mother gave me no consolation because, for the first time, I was the one who felt guilty.

I decided never to put myself in a vulnerable position when I was outside the house. I got good grades in school, also because my father considered it the only important thing in our lives. Everything else was our business, not only did he not have time to concern himself with it, but he had also developed his own educational theory about it.

He boasted that his detachment from our feelings, fears, and desires was an act of benevolence on his part and a great freedom for us. We were like trees for him: we would grow by ourselves and bear fruit, because that was our nature, his seed. There were two things, however, on which he insisted and there was no way to object: we had to have dinner at home every night (few exceptions were admitted) and we had to do well in school. It was inconceivable for my brother and me to violate these two duties. I kept on studying hard even during the months of his incarceration, when he couldn’t ask us the one thing he ascertained every day (“Did you do your homework?”).

Apparently, my father was studying while in captivity. After a few weeks of being locked up, a local newspaper published a long article about him, about the habits he was developing in his new home, the jail. The journalist was almost as fascinated as anyone who had dealt with him; he wrote that, according to the prison librarian, inmate Montella had asked for new books almost every day and that he spent his time reading. There was a picture of him in that article, one of the usual ones from election posters, but my mind created a different snapshot: my father leaning sideways on his bunk, with one hand on a book and the other arm pulled back, in a state of tension, as if he were about to deliver a tennis shot. He often read like that, with an imaginary tennis racket on one side, reaching out, as if even the words on the pages were challenging him.

We did not break his rules even when it came to dinner. We ate at home, refusing Rosa's insistent invitations to take us to her place; she thought, in good faith, that we needed familial warmth. She loved us and she often said that we were like her children, which was also partly true: it was that kind of love that is granted without blood being involved. Blood that passes from body to body, that begets offspring, sisters and brothers; blood that warms up when you fall in love, becoming thick, which is why they say the heart beats faster, leaving you breathless... it is the blood that undergoes the tide of desire

or feelings. Rosa's family, on the other hand, didn't love us at all, and I had started to feel a distrust that made me uneasy. I told Edoardo that I would never go back there again.

Our mother never ate dinner with us because she often went to see the lawyer after work and, even when she had no reason not to return, she still decided to stay away from our home. It was as if she had sensed that the Montellas' perfection was beginning to spoil with the same ease with which she noticed a misplaced ornament or a loose thread on a jacket. And she had never learned to stay where the sun didn't shine.

We could get by just fine on our own, as we had been doing all along. Edo would have preferred to go to Rosa's, the chatter from all those people kept him company, they lightened his mood. Moreover, Rosa's husband was a very kind man and he made you feel at peace even just by looking at him, seated at the head of the table, happy that he had started a family made entirely of normal people who could never disturb his serenity.

"Edoardo, when are you going to cut your hair?" he always asked with his wholehearted laugh.

"Let him be, he's so handsome," Rosa intervened. Then Edoardo would make a seductive face and Giorgio would laugh again, as if everything in life could make him at least smile, "Everything but death," he repeated.

My brother was aware that we couldn't split up and that if I made a scene at Rosa's house, he wouldn't know how to react. When I argued with our father – often because "I was a communist" – Edoardo never had any doubts about whose side to take: dad's. Those discussions strictly occurred only in our dining room, at most in his and our mother's presence, and there was no need for him to defend me. Not only was I in our home, safe, but more importantly, I had brought it on myself: it was incomprehensible to him that instead of choosing to enjoy the few moments when our father could enlighten us with his wisdom and experience, I persisted in winding him up, provoking him, and contradicting him. Edoardo didn't understand me, but he didn't reprimand me, while I sometimes called him a scab and a traitor.

Because of our unspoken pact to support one another against outsiders, if I had done what I threatened to do at Rosa's house (i.e., call her grandson a stinky fascist and her son an idiot), he would have been bound to defend me. So, he accepted my decision

to boycott those dinners, on the condition that I would agree to let his friend Tommaso move in with us.

Tommaso used to visit us often even before. He was attracted by the stability that my father's attitude radiated throughout the house like an aura, like a cosmic lock, even when he wasn't there or maybe it was precisely by virtue of his absence. There was a symbolic authority at home that guaranteed peace and prosperity, but also absolute freedom, considering that the sovereign was never there and, as his subjects, we were only required to regard him as a munificent leader worthy of the highest esteem.

His father was rarely home as well, and maybe that is what all parents did back then. Sometimes I imagined a journalist from the future asking them "What activities do you enjoy doing with your kids?" or "How many times a week do you spend some quality time with them?" And our parents would laugh out loud, exhaling smoke in the reporter's face.

When Tommaso's father returned home, he would get mad and beat him up with the pretext of being stressed out from work, as if Tommaso were an adult, a coworker of his who pissed him off, or his department head, and not a kid who went to high school. He would take it out on his son with the excuse that he was rebellious and rude, but when he was at our house, he was always docile and hungry.

Edoardo would sit on my father's armchair, I would be on my mother's, and Tommaso would sit on the couch, watching TV along with many other strangers, listening to what was happening to our father. We ate the dinner for spoiled children that Rosa prepared and left for us every evening and carefully watched Arturo Montella in handcuffs as he left the police van to be escorted in front of the preliminary investigation judge. Sometimes I would get close to the screen to get a better look: his complexion, whether he had combed his hair, but all I could memorize was that he had a scraggly beard and that he wasn't wearing a collared shirt but a polo. I recognized him, but I saw a man my father had never been, without a tie and somewhat hunched over. A defendant.

Without commenting, we listened to the new criminal charges, the allegations of further bribes, the names of other culprits who, along with Arturo Montella, had apparently been eating away at the foundations of the Italian justice system for years. None of us said a word, and Tommaso was the only outsider who wouldn't show pity or

embarrassment when faced with the evidence that our father had suddenly become a criminal.

He missed him, too.

Maybe because he was Edoardo's only friend. Tommy was the only one who could stop by our house without an invitation or a specific reason; he would have dinner with us, participate in that ritual in which the Montella family gathered together to discuss politics, but also what my father called "more pleasant topics": books to read or events that happened around us, which could be talked about only if we did it without becoming gossipy. My mother was reprimanded the most because she failed at an exercise that her husband considered of paramount importance: avoiding chitchat.

Every now and then, she would have liked to retort with a minimum of malice to the rumors about her: the number of furs she owned, the fact that wearing all that jewelry wasn't elegant or that having hair that long wasn't appropriate, or the fact that her breasts weren't as moderate and Christian Democrat as her husband. But, as soon as she started to speak her mind about any of their common acquaintances or party matters, my father would interrupt her, sometimes good-naturedly, condescendingly, more often chiding her that she had never understood anything about politics.

When Tommaso was around, my mother would turn to him and say, "In this family, only the two of them understand everything" and she would point at me and her husband. Sometimes, when she sat down at the table last, she would caress Tommaso's face to show him that she was glad he was with us again. He received her display of affection like a cat who only lets those he really likes touch him: he would close his eyes and lean his head back. I stared at him while Edoardo lowered his gaze.