

The Barabuia

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PROLOGUE

Leaves drift in front of the frame. The wind whistles. The camera starts to lower, revealing a narrow street ahead. You can tell it is late October. Light seems filtered through a dark veil, shadows yearn to escape and everything is slowed down.

Rollo Calderoni's mother is on her way back from the grocery store with two huge bags hooked to her bike's handlebars: she has big purplish legs and pushes on the pedals as if she were climbing up a mountain. All it would take for her to lose balance would be for a fly to land on one of her bags, that's the feeling. But she makes it, once again.

Giorgia Venturi's dad is reversing his new car, earned after years of hard work; he backs up slowly, closes the gate and the shiny car glides away in silence. Campus's dad is raking leaves in the garden, lost in thought, while he secretly smokes with the expression of someone facing the sun and squinting. Everyone seems to be preparing for the arrival of something. Something ancient, maybe.

The camera now moves on the apartment complex in Piccinino Street 3, it scans the names on the doorbells and then it quickly rushes up the wall, like a feather sucked up by the wind. It stops on the balcony on the first floor. There's a thirteen-year-old kid, rocking on a white plastic chair and typing on his phone. The camera slowly rotates around the kid and the movement causes dizziness.

From above his head the phone screen is in the shot. We can read:

Campus is typing...

Tamara is typing...

Everyone is writing long thoughts, apparently.

The camera now plunges again towards the first floor and then flies, grazing the small road that runs swiftly before our eyes. We notice old oil stains, small holes, cracks, asphalt patches, and the quick shadow of a little flying bird. Until the frame slows down and stops next to a low wall.

The camera slowly rises and simultaneously moves away. First, we run the wall from bottom to top: it's cracked and covered in dark green moss. Then, extremely close-up, we see the hexagonal mesh of a metal fence.

Sudden reverse shot.

Now we see Piccinino Street from the opposite side, beyond the fence. The shot is initially still, then it slowly rises and fall.

As if it were following someone's breath.

Sunday.

The amusement park arrived just before the fog, and both did so in silence. The first one to notice it was Giorgia Venturi's mum, we see her stepping out at this very moment to throw the rubbish bag. She has a firm step and a straight back and, just as she places the card on the sensor to open the bin, she notices something unusual down the street, rising behind the Sita fence.

It's a crimson tent.

The first to notice the fog, on the other hand, was Ias. To see him we must go to the first floor on Piccinino Street, in the house on the corner with Gulli Street. He's in bed, laying on his side. His eyes are open and he's listening. He already heard the noise of the gate opened by Venturi's mum and it

sounded like a lock wrapped in cotton. He then heard the chirping of a single bird, which launched sharp, very short and perfectly rhythmic clicks, a morse code comprised only of dots. He already realised the fog outside is thick.

Everyone else in this story are still sleeping and therefore, for the moment, we're not interested in what they're doing. One of them is studying Medicine in Bologna and she will be arriving in eight days, only hours after the funfair incident, but for the moment she's also asleep.

What interests us now is to look at Piccinino Street because everything will be happening here. It's a dead-end street with four apartment blocks on each side and two two-storey houses. The first one is there, on the left, on the corner with Gulli Street. Aldina used to live there with her family, but something must have happened because it's been empty for a while. In the garden, dry branches come out from the ground and in the vases everything is dead and crumpled. Ah, there: meanwhile, at the end of the street, Venturi's mum is stepping back inside. In two hours, she will text Ias's mum and Campus and Tamara's mum saying that the amusement park has settled in the Sita and that it could be fun to go next weekend with the *kids*, as she still calls them. On the other hand, in this building on the right, in front of Aldina's house and surrounded by trees, live Ias, Campus and Tamara. They all live on the first floor, their apartments share the same landing, and they can even hear each other through the walls. They all go to the Dante Alighieri Middle School, on Coletti Street.

Campus is in first year, Ias in second, and Tamara in third. Campus and Tamara are siblings. Campus's real name is Giampiero, but he has always gone by Campus and that's how we'll know him.

Ias has a sister too, her name is Camilla. She's three years and a half and at the moment she's sleeping too, with a ragged, eyeless stuffed piglet called the Nasty Nap and from whom Camilla never parts. Beware of taking it away, even just to wash it.

Next to Ias, Campus and Tamara's building, there's Rollo's building. Rollo flunked school two years ago and since then he's in Ias's class. With them is Giorgia Venturi, known as Giò to her friends, who lives right in front, on the ground floor. Her room is that one, with the window bars, right behind that plant. In this moment, she has just been woken up by her mum, who already told her about the amusement park. A week ago, Giorgia started dating a guy who lives in Tartaglia Street, but her mum doesn't know this nor she ever will because they will break up in a week. So she's clearly not thinking about going to the funfair now. *Kids'* stuff.

Next to Giorgia's building there's the one where two other teens are living, Alessandro Bruschi e Mattia Briosci, but they always hang out among themselves. What matters, in this case, is the building. Or rather what's in the garden of that building.

On the first floor of the last house on the left lives Ias's great grandmother, who's ninety-eight years old and is always still in the corner of a room whispering prayers and passing the rosary between her fingers, as if she were rolling some *strozzapreti* pasta. The street is all here, it is small both in name and in fact. Not even seventy metres long and dead-end.

But beyond the fence that marks the end of the road there's what everyone still calls the Sita. This is where in seven days and thirteen hours the fury will explode.

THE BEGINNING

Chapter 1

On the day Ias and Campus went to the garden, they couldn't imagine that this would be the last time they would play together.

As usual, they came down the stairs of the apartment building with the energy of two young adventurers, leaping two steps at a time and bouncing off the walls as if they were trampolines. They overtook each other, bumped into each other, stumbled on the last step and finally reached the front door at the same time, in perfect synchrony.

They left at nine thirty in the morning and they entered the tunnel of bikes up to the wicker table where the board game *Jaws* was waiting half-played. They had had to suspend it the previous afternoon as darkness approached and left it in the tunnel as it was.

They brought out the table with the solemnity reserved to an ancient manuscript, being very careful not to move any squares and not to drop any piece. They placed it under the porch that sheltered them from the fog and the cold and picked up where they left off.

On the board, in the upper left-hand corner, the words *Orca, act II* stood out, and in the centre was a half-destroyed boat with the crew still aboard. Ias was playing simultaneously sheriff Brody, oceanographer Hooper and captain Quint.

Campus, on the other hand, played the shark. It could not have been otherwise, because whoever played the three characters did not have to know the monster's location.

As in each round, the shark began underwater only to resurface unexpectedly around the boat to try and destroy it and to devour the whole crew.

Campus decided to use the Shark Ability card called *elusive target*: the monster's escape value increased by three.

Ias moved Quint by two squares, he reached one of the shark's Resurface points and drew his weapon, a hook. He then did the same for Brody and Hook. "I'd say I've surrounded you."

The Resurface card forced the shark to emerge at that exact point.

"Wait." Campus rolled the die: four. He then played his last Ability card, *tail whip*, to add two extra points and carried out an attack that shattered two pieces of the boat and sent Quint plunging into the monster's jaws.

"One down."

"Shit."

A magpie called from the nearby rooftops with sharp, mean clicks like the cry of a large prehistoric bird.

Leaves hung from the branches, still and heavy. Fog muted and separated every sound. A shutter went up. A car door slammed shut. The bell on the mast of a fishing boat, moored in the nearby canal port, jingled.

Ias was about to move Brody by two squares, when a dirge reached them from afar.

Campus turned around. Ias looked up. They both stretched their necks to gaze beyond the shiny, dark ivy that curled around the entire gate.

They saw a long banner emerge from the mist. It slung slow and heavy. Or weak was he who carried it.

Ias and Campus raised slowly, careful not to make a sound with the chairs.

“What’s that thing?” Campus asked.

The fog frayed into shreds and revealed what appeared to be a procession.

It paraded slowly and sadly before their eyes. The dirge was a single cavernous wail.

Two bow-headed nuns closed the line. In an air of suffocating windlessness their black robes fluttered like beaten sheets.

That image channelled itself into Ias’s mind and sent a shiver down his spine. He stood still. Meanwhile the procession had unleashed an overwhelming and disturbing silence, combined with the strange perception that an explosion could happen at any moment. Or so Ias *felt*.

Then sound came back to life. A dry leaf lay on another, rustling on a bed of dead leaves, and from a rooftop a seagull cawed its broken call. Ias heard Campus calling him.

“Hey, are we getting back to the game?”

The fog started slowly retreating like a pair of old curtains and unveiled the entire morning stage. The first few rays of sun were swords that slit the branches with curtains of light.

Ias had reached the point when he was supposed to launch the shark attack with sheriff Brody when Camilla, his little sister, appeared behind the door.

She stopped with a concerned look on her face, her index finger on her chin, and when she saw them she signalled to open by knocking hard on the glass. The moment she was out she sprinted towards them, slamming the Nasty Nap back and forth.

“What game is this? Can I play too?”

“Is it OK if she stays downstairs with you for a while, while I finish cleaning the *garagoli*?” From the balcony Ias’s mother asked the usual belated request.

Ias looked towards the balcony. “What else is there to do, mum...”

Camilla hopped evenly around the table and tugged at Ias’s sweatshirt. “Gara-goli! Gara-goli! Gara-goli!”

“Oh, come on, you’re going to rip it.”

She then started pushing Campus’s chair, making him lose balance. “Gara-goli! Gara-goli! Ga...”

Camilla stopped, a crossed air on her face. She raised her arm slowly and, with her small chubby finger slightly curved like the broken beak of a bird of prey, pointed to something far away. “*Whaddat?*”

Down there, at the end of the street, beyond the low wall and the wire mesh separating the road from the Sita, beyond the roof of the disused factory with its broken glass and smashed roof, in a spot where the fog rolled in like candy floss pulled by giant lips, there, right there, sprouted the red-and-white-striped top of an amusement park’s tent.