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Una cosa stupida
(lit. "Something Stupid")
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Chapter 1

I hate playing music. I figured it out over time, after spending my entire life believing it was the right thing to do. I hate playing music because every time I pick up an instrument, not only do I feel the weight of the pieces forming that vibrating object, I also feel the weight of expectations. I feel the burden of the concept that music is where my father and I meet one another; I feel the weight on my chest of the hopes he has for me when I'm doing something that comes naturally to me even though I don't care about it that much, even though it means everything to him.

The first time I felt overwhelmed was when my father gave me my first violin. It wasn't an unbearable weight, but it was enough to start realizing that my predisposition for music could become a problem. It was a distant but constant buzzing in my ear, a distortion, like tinnitus: it began to vibrate incessantly and, over the years, it would turn into an insufferable whistling sound.

"Adriana, this is an antique violin," said my father as he handed me that piece of wood like someone sharing a priceless treasure. And that solemn adjective had already filled me with anxiety. Antique: meaning singular, unique, so precious as to be beyond my reach.

"Antique? Look, the girl can't practice with this," said the teacher a few days later. He pulled it out of its velvet case in a rather indelicate way to examine it closely. He looked suspicious.

"Too antique?" asked my father, resentfully.

"It's not antique, it's just old."

That afternoon, my musical training became their battleground and my violin lessons became the weapon they used to fight over who knew more about music. Until then, playing music had been a natural consequence of the home into which I was born. But starting to study the violin seriously meant making a commitment, leaving the room where I had learned on my own and with my father, and taking lessons with a stranger.

The expectations surrounding the object that would officially launch my career as a musician were so unbearable that I thought I should tell my father I had changed my mind so I could escape that stifling responsibility. Why play the violin when I could sign up for a volleyball class? I also had the excuse of my height, which was well above average and compatible with the basic requirements of a sport I knew nothing about, except for what I had learned from watching the anime *Mila e Shiro / Attacker You!* on Italia 1. Balls deformed by speed turning into oval torpedoes, knee pads, jumps, and that's about it. The charade lasted a few weeks, creating a climate of general turmoil at home. After everything my parents had done to get me into the middle school's music program, in the highly sought-after violin section, I changed my mind: I

invented out of thin air a passion for a sport in which I had never shown any interest until that moment. To counter this unprecedented move, my father cornered me and blackmailed me with a pair of shoes: it was either the shoes or volleyball. They were Nike Air Max 97s, everyone at school called them “Sivers,” and they cost almost two hundred euros. It was the price to pay to enter the cool kids’ circle, those who understood which way the wind was blowing in terms of fashion and therefore power.

The eighth-grade girls wore fluorescent Lycra tops over low-rise pants; when they sat leaning forward, part of their colorful thongs would stick out. Their diaries were full of inscriptions they exchanged with each other, written in puffy letters surrounded by lots of doodles. Their hair was straight, brushed to the side, with bangs that stuck to their foreheads, which were greasy from all the hormones. They didn’t wear makeup yet, but to me they were full-fledged women with sensual adult names: Giulia, Martina, and Federica. They were born in 1990 and they were fourteen years old; they listened to Gabry Ponte and Prezioso's dance version of the song “Voglio vederti danzare.” It made me laugh when I heard that bumper car version of a song that my parents used to play on road trips, making me listen to a mix of Franco Battiato songs over and over again.

Giulia, Martina, and Federica were always together. They were a cloud of cotton candy perfume called Pink Sugar mixed with sweat, which lingered in the hallways during recess, or when they opened the café and we all crowded around the counter to buy a squashed sandwich wrapped in Saran wrap. Nothing like Adriana, an old lady name or a baby name, a sound that kept me suspended between embarrassment and resignation. I wasn't Giulia, and I never would be.

The girls with Dimensione Danza tracksuits, Freddy shoes that folded in half, and watermelon-flavored gum in Seven pencil cases, they were the ones who played volleyball in the schoolyard. They carried books with pages decorated with highlighters and glitter pens, Diddl planners, and *Cioè* magazines inside their light blue or purple Eastpak backpacks. They had already had “flings” with boys from other classes, kissing them (even French kissing) at parties in the basement of a nightclub called Day Night – a cave that smelled like a sewer, near the courthouse; everyone organized their birthday parties there, more out of emulation than by choice. When they organized volleyball matches at the gym, every eye in the room was on them, on their blue knee pads and tight jazz pants, rolled up as if they were shorts. Why, then, had I chosen the violin, if volleyball could have made me a little more like them? Because I actually hadn't made the choice for myself.

It was very cold on the day of the admission test for the music department of Pirandello Middle School. The sea was rough and the sky over Catania was covered with thick, rain-filled clouds that were about to burst. It was February and I was still in fifth grade, but the selection process began well in advance of the start of the school year, to give time to those who weren't admitted to find another school.

My parents were busy that morning, so the mother of one of my classmates had dropped me off instead. My father was on tour with his band, the same one he had been playing with since the late Eighties, and my mother was at the high school where she taught art history.

My parents aren't very similar and they never loved each other passionately, but they both decided from the beginning that they would raise me to be creative. We must always do something, and we have to do it in such a way that a piece of ourselves can be glimpsed in every concrete or abstract emanation of our spirit. We must listen to music and draw. Every now and then, we might get bored. But even that boredom can be a creative boredom, made of silences that should be used to meditate instead of succumbing to existential angst. A new self-awareness should emerge from that boredom.

While I was waiting for the commission to test me, I was bored to death, but I couldn't come up with anything creative to do. At eleven, I was already about as tall as I am now at twenty-six, even though my period hadn't interrupted my childhood yet. The fear of that hypothetical day filled my nightmares to such an extent that I hoped it would never come. I hoped I was defective, that I didn't have what it took to "develop," a word that all the women around me used to explain the benefits of that unforgettable transition in which I would stop being a child and become an adult. I prayed that I would never find myself in the shoes of my classmate Giorgia. She was my age and already carried the weight of enormous breasts, she struggled to run during recess and looked like a pin-up girl dressed in an elementary school uniform: a dark blue sweatshirt with a white collar and a stylized elephant on the chest, the symbol of both the city and the school district.

It was the same uniform I was wearing that morning in the hallway overlooking the auditorium of the Pirandello school: the blue synthetic tracksuit that I wore every day for five years and made static sparks when it rubbed against something. I was wearing my red fleece hat with earflaps and Donald Duck skiing and rolling like a snowball printed on the front; it already clashed not only with my age, but above all with my height.

Looking around, I realized that all the other candidates were accompanied by their parents, a detail that I only noticed at that moment, when I would have wanted to ask my parents for some spare change to buy something from the vending machine. I often had to do things on my own, even important ones, like what was about to happen in the auditorium of the school I hadn't even started attending yet.

My father is called Edoardo Franco and he is a drummer. He played in a band for several years, touring around the world, doing what he liked, the way he liked it.

He managed to get away from Catania and from that dimension of isolation that living there inevitably entails. A city that is both close to and far from everything, arrogant in the belief of its autonomy but also ready to complain about how everyone always forgets about it, leaving it behind. Then, to survive his responsibilities and deadlines, tours and concerts, he began to take on all kinds of jobs, from playing at weddings to teaching in music schools, coming to terms with existential compromises he hoped he would never have to make.

My father was never a performer. I don't know if "artist" is the right word to describe him, but if we use that term for someone who can make a unique and valuable contribution to any form of art, then I would say he was one. Yet, despite his talent and original ideas, stability has always been a mirage in his working life, an obstacle course where the jumps got a bit higher with every turn.

My mother, Silvia Carbone, is much more stable in this regard. She gave up her career as an illustrator early on and immediately decided that she would start teaching, without wasting

any time. In our family, my father's ambition was enough, already too worn out by reality and intertwined with my future before I even had a chance to choose it. From what my parents tell me, my relationship with music was instinctive from the very beginning. When I was in my stroller, all it took was an ambulance passing by for me to start rhythmically moving my head back and forth. They say that, before I even learned to speak, I was able to follow a song by clapping my hands or banging something on the table. I don't know if these stories were a way to legitimize my supposed predestination or if that is how it actually went.

The real reason my father had started working as a musician for others, often sacrificing his career as a freelance independent drummer, was because I was born. I wasn't a mistake or an accident. My mother had already lost two babies before she managed to have me, and my birth was welcomed as some kind of miracle. It wasn't religious faith, but an enormous gratitude towards an unspecified god, the architect of my arrival, the accomplice of their happiness. The problem, rather, was that Edoardo and Silvia thought that what they had when they started their family would always suffice. They relied on a moderate fatalism, confident that they would somehow manage to obtain the bare necessities for a normal life, their only aspiration was to do what they loved. From a material point of view, their families had been involuntarily absent, interrupting that flow of continuity that usually binds parents and children, which leads to exploiting the past to push forward into the future. My father's father, Grandfather Ettore, died suddenly when I was just two years old. He left his son nothing except for some bureaucratic red tape regarding the inheritance of a house in a small village near Mount Etna, which was of little value. Grandmother Sara died a few months later, even though she was twelve years younger than him; all it took was moving into a nursing home to fade away like a toy whose batteries had run out.

My maternal grandparents, on the other hand, died before I was born, leaving Silvia and her sister Rossella with a keen sense of practicality that resulted directly out of necessity. My maternal grandmother's name was Adriana, maybe that is why it seemed so old and young at the same time. Like her, that name was an insubstantial memory made of black-and-white photos taken shortly after the war, when the other Adriana in the family paraded through the city streets wrapped in her checkered dresses, which she made herself. She was also a constant presence in the stories my mother used to tell me. I understand my mother: to compensate for the sadness of being left alone prematurely, she wanted to bring another human being into the world at all costs. I also understand my father: with all the things he had to think about, including me, he never wanted to look at his childhood photos. On the other hand, I used to revel in them to build a mental picture of a past in which I wasn't present. I was intrigued by those photos I found in the drawers of him as a teenager in white Sergio Tacchini shorts and the saturated colors of film rolls from the Seventies; they were like the beginning of a movie that featured him as the protagonist and which I would never be able to watch because the screening always ended earlier than expected. Despite all the reasonable explanations for the inexorable fading of a family ("These things happen," says my mother when she talks aloofly about her faded past), despite unexpected yet predictable setbacks, there is a thought that I can't get out of my mind. A thought that occasionally flashes through my brain and turns the lights off, leaving me in the dark and cold.

I believe I was the real cataclysm in Edoardo Franco's life, his first misfortune. The first in a long series of detours that led him to a point of no return, where I now watch him, many miles and many years away from our hometown. I think this was also why, when I approached the drums as a child (driven more by the fascination he exerted on me than by an actual interest in the instrument), my dad immediately directed me elsewhere. It was as if that pile of wood, drum skins, and steel that had captivated him as a child, keeping him glued to his drumsticks for entire afternoons until he dropped out of school so he could continue playing, represented a danger compared to other musical paths, considered more official and better defined. The violin was a serious instrument, it was the right path to take, unlike the drums and the genre that he had always played. It was the most appropriate way to continue what he had started, but with a more serious note, which was necessary to avoid making the same mistakes he had made. I had to be like him, but better. Needless to say, I never succeeded.

When they called me for my admissions test, I was watching the kid who auditioned before me. He had just come out and his mother, or maybe his grandmother, a tall, elderly woman, was pulling him by the elbow. "Arturo, hurry up," she said, while Arturo dragged his feet in his blue and gray New Balance shoes, his eyes like a rabbit startled by headlights. He was wearing my same elementary school uniform, but I felt like I had never seen him around before. His hands were as dry as tree roots, his fingers very long, and there was a stiffness in his movements that made me think he was completely unfamiliar with the concept of music. Music cannot be rigid. It can be lively, repetitive, slow, boring, obsessive, but not rigid. Arturo had auditioned to join the violin section, like me; he had played the theme tune from *The Simpsons* on the piano, an instrument we all had to know at least a little bit in order to demonstrate that we had some general musical knowledge. I could hear that familiar melody from outside the classroom: his straight, bony fingers failed to tie together the melody's execution, turning the performance into a grotesque, mechanical version of the tune, like a broken music box. "How awful, I hope they don't accept him," I thought as I watched him walk away, pushed along by his mother, or maybe his grandmother, who had to get back to work.

"Franco, Adriana."

"Here." I picked up my backpack and walked into the classroom.

"Good morning. Are you here alone?"

"No. My mom's at school and my dad's on tour, so I came with my friend's mom..."

That statement seemed to suddenly betray a certain sloppiness, like showing up at a party without a gift, a feeling I had experienced several times when my parents were too busy to take care of those details.

"Okay... what are you bringing us?"

"A piece by Yann Tiersen, it's a soundtrack."

At that point in my life, I was obsessed with the soundtrack of *Amélie*, a sappy film that had sparked an imitation frenzy among many girls in the early 2000s. A black bob, fingers buried in a bag of legumes, floral dresses with combat boots. And then, of course, there was the soundtrack. How I wished I had Amélie's little French nose instead of the ugly, irregular nose I had on my face, borrowed from my father and never returned. Dreamy and melancholic, Yann Tiersen's music was the perfect backdrop for those scenes shot in Paris, sepia-toned photos that

had become a reference point in our imagination as girls who were a bit different and special. We didn't listen to pop stars who danced provocatively with albino pythons wrapped around them, nor to boy bands that were flirtatiously coy and sleazy. I was still caught between Harry Potter and *W.I.T.C.H.* comic books; I hadn't even entered my true adolescence but I already felt the need to plaster a sticker on my forehead to be immediately recognized as someone who did things differently, that is, perfectly identical to all the others who believed they were different. I thought, naively but also with a hint of arrogance, that my choice would immediately place me on the highest shelf: the pedestal of the connoisseurs.

I hadn't studied piano with a teacher. I had learned by watching my father, who spent hours poring over theory books and practicing scales, trying to reconstruct a melodic structure in his head, which was completely occupied by rhythm. Every now and then we played a game where I would ask him for the words to a song: not only could he not remember any of the lyrics, he had no idea how the chorus and verses went either. The only thing he knew was the rhythm, which he reproduced by drumming his hands on his chest and his leg.

The physical aspect of the drums was what attracted me most to that primordial instrument, the same aspect that makes it seem so unfeminine to an outside observer, so unsuitable to become the beating heart of a song. When I went to see him play, I could feel the bass drum beats my father played with his right foot inside my chest, like a second heartbeat that went down to my stomach. The drums were always present in his life. When he took my hand to cross the street, I could feel his fingers tapping rhythmically, almost imperceptibly but constantly. Often, when I talked to him, I noticed that he wasn't listening to me: he would look me in the eyes, but it was as if his gaze was projected behind me, passing right through me. It was stronger than him, he could never stop playing, even when he was talking or listening.

With the piano, however, it was different. I saw him agonizing over the sheet music, squeezed into an outfit that wasn't his. All the physicality of the drums, that mixture of complex calculations that remained imprinted in his mind and in his theatrical physicality, they all disappeared, crushed by the grip of the black and white keys. He was amazed by the elasticity of my still immature brain, which could bend to the possibility of learning something new, unlike his, which was hard and sculpted like marble by years of routine. I learned his exercises twice as fast and without even reading the sheet music.

"Sing," he would say every time he sat me down on the piano bench. "Try singing while you play. It's difficult, but once you learn how, you'll open a wonderful path for yourself." That invasion of my improvisational space made me immediately feel self-conscious. I could never bring myself to open my mouth while using my hands: singing means not having an instrument to act as an intermediary between what you think you want to play and what you are actually playing. When it comes to singing, the responsibility is entirely yours, it's your vocal cords and your skin.

"I don't want to, Dad," I replied, whining.

"You know it's a waste, don't you?" he said, shaking his head with a hint of disappointment, just enough for a bit of emotional blackmail without turning into an excessive display of authority.

"You have a knack for this, you learn quickly," he said, secretly delighted about having a daughter who could become a much more versatile version of himself. It was the tangible result

of my father's musical exposure, which he had planned for me ever since I was born; but, while it generated amazement and enthusiasm in him, for me it soon turned into boredom mixed with discomfort, which sometimes became fear. As I would discover years later, the final stage of my mixed feelings was hatred, the driving force behind concrete actions that I never thought I would be able to plan, let alone execute. Yet, today, even the tiniest pieces of this mosaic seem fundamental when I say I did the right thing.

The committee consisted of four professors seated behind a long table. They stared at me blankly. The harp teacher had a mass of mahogany red hair, her dress was in a style between new age and a medieval fair. The flute teacher was bald. The piano teacher was very tall, his hair was salt and pepper, and he had long hairs coming out of his nose, like a werewolf. Then there was the violin professor, Antonio Cicero. Cicero was chubby, jovial, and genuine, almost too spontaneous for the place in which he was. He didn't have much hair and his blue eyes disappeared in his enormous face. He spoke with a strong accent from the countryside, in one of those variations of Catanese that city folk immediately recognized as foreign: he said *accudi* instead of *accussì*, branded. He had gone to the conservatory in Messina despite coming from a small town on the slopes of Mount Etna. He later told me everything about his years as a transfer student, the camaraderie in the dorms, the insults he received because, unlike his classmates, he always wore wool underpants, which were essential in the mountains, but less so in Messina, where the temperature never dropped below ten degrees Celsius, even in the middle of winter. Cicero, who seemed like the least drowsy of the four examiners, immediately asked me if I felt cold. I hadn't even taken off my fleece hat after sitting on the piano bench.

"So, why do you want to study the violin? Why not the piano?" he asked, subjecting me to the routine question to assess if my interest in the instrument was real. What I actually wanted to reply was that I hadn't decided to study the violin, it was something that my father cared about and it didn't really make a difference to me. "Because it's the instrument that most resembles the human voice," I answered, using a catchphrase I had picked up by listening to adults talk.

"That's right, well done. Let us hear you play the piano, then we'll ask you a few more questions."

I played the piece at an unprecedented speed, which surprised me as well, but I didn't make any mistakes, just a few minor stumbles at the beginning with the middle finger and the F sharp. It wasn't very challenging, and I had the finger movements engraved in my mind.

Even today, the only time I enjoy playing, on the rare occasions when I find myself in front of an instrument, is when I know the piece by heart so well that I don't need to think about what I have to do, it just comes naturally, like walking. Everything in between, from the beginning of my relationship with a song to the moment when I know it so well that I don't need to read or think about what I'm doing, terrifies me. I would like to have a database of songs already uploaded into my brain, like at karaoke, and choose what to play when needed, so as to make everyone happy. Instead, I was well aware that playing the violin meant that I would have to study, learn, make mistakes, without ever getting to the fun part.

"Where did you study the piano?" asked the harp teacher, who had briefly awakened from her torpor. She looked like Phoebe, Rachel and Monica's strange buddy in *Friends*, a series

that aired in the evening on Rai 2; my mother only watched it to point out how stupid the main characters were.

"I learned at home, my dad is a musician and we have several instruments."

"And which one do you like most?"

That question always made me panic. Only now do I realize that I could have answered truthfully, immediately freeing myself from a heavy burden: the little talent I have I inherited from a father who has lots of it, if talent really exists and can be inherited; I am lucky enough to be able to learn how to play an instrument in a very short time. But as soon as I have to go deeper, beyond the comfort of a not-so-well-developed perfect pitch and a good sense of rhythm, I get bored and irritated. I can play a little piano, a little guitar, a little drums, a little bass, a little flute, basically a little bit of everything, except singing, which continues to be the only real barrier between me and attempting to make a sound. Even though I hadn't started yet, I already knew at that moment that it would be the same with the violin; for a while, it would seem clear to everyone that Paganini had been reincarnated in that eleven-year-old preteen who immediately memorized the rudimentary movements, the first position, the scales. That girl who was taller than her classmates, with very long fingers and dark, thick hair that sometimes got caught in her chin rest. Even my appearance, not particularly attractive but curious enough to seem stylized, matched the preconceived notion of talent in musical circles. And then, suddenly, it wouldn't be like that anymore, I would go back to being normal, or a wasted talent, as they say in these cases. At that point, after exhausting my takeoff energy and remaining stuck on the ground, unable to fly but having nevertheless learned to pilot an airplane, I would give up the violin. Like everything that has happened to me, ever since I can remember.

"Which one do I like the most?"

I pretended to think about it for a moment. "The violin, even though I've never played it before," I replied, lying.

"Adriana, what a pretty name. That was also my grandmother's name," shouted the harp teacher, chewing on a stick of natural licorice that is used to clean teeth.

"Let's do some solfeggio now," said Cicero, looking at my hands as if he were inspecting my tools. I wasn't very good at reading the notes, but I still managed to piece together the four movements needed to mark the tempo indicated on the score. It was going well, better than I expected, I thought.

"Now try solfeggio singing." Never mind. I didn't know how to respond without making a bad impression, so, to avoid subjecting myself to that little torture, I improvised an excuse and pretended to have a cold.

"I don't have much of a voice, sorry. Maybe we can try another time?"

The cold room in which I was displaying my skills had seemed almost welcoming up until that moment but, when they asked me to sing, it suddenly turned into a cave full of ravenous beasts. I was haunted by my father's inexplicable obsession with an act that I had always perceived as violent. Hearing my own voice sing is like one of those nightmares where you find yourself naked and everyone is staring at you. My father, on the other hand, claimed that it was my true talent. He said that, unlike him, I could sing so well because my brain hadn't yet been clogged by an obsession with rhythm that sacrificed melody. My mother could carry a tune better than him; she had taught me some songs, mostly cartoon theme songs, or pieces from Zecchino

d'Oro, which we sang in the car or into the microphone in the room where my father and his band rehearsed.

"Don't worry, just follow the notes we play on the piano. We'll just give it a shot, it doesn't really matter if you have a cold," replied the harp teacher. Only then did I notice that the flute teacher was fiddling with his Nokia 3310, absorbed in what I imagine was a particularly heated game of Snake.

"Okay, but I'm out of tune."

"Don't worry, just follow the melody."

"How did it go?" my mom asked me when she picked me up outside the school. I had just gotten into the car when big raindrops began to fall from the sky. My mother used to drive around town in a red Fiat 500. She'd had it restored a few years earlier, spending lots of money on it, even though it was almost impossible to drive and constantly at risk of being stolen due to the black market for vintage cars in Catania. I was embarrassed to see her arrive accompanied by the engine's chugging noise, as if she were a character from some Disney cartoon.

"I think it went well, they didn't tell me anything."

"And when will they let you know?"

"I don't know, soon, I guess. Didn't you ask them at the school's office?"

"It doesn't work like that at my school. They call you at home to tell you if you've been accepted into the music program... But I don't see why they wouldn't let you in, you already know how to play, you're talented, and you have us supporting you."

"All the other kids had their parents there."

"What do you mean?"

"I was the only one unaccompanied. Why didn't you come instead of having Marianna's mom drop me off?"

"Because I was working at school, you know that. Dad's on tour, what was he supposed to do, come all the way from the US just to hold your hand?"

I didn't feel like responding to her provocations. She knew how to defuse every moment of panic, while I just wanted a shoulder to cry on, to blow that little snowball out of proportion into an avalanche of tears.

"They also asked me to sing. I can't sing. I made a fool of myself."

"Nonsense, your Dad says you sing beautifully. Please don't start making one of your scenes."

My "scenes" were performances that I offered free of charge to my parents, who were so hungry for creativity. They were real pantomimes in which I chained myself to their legs if I wanted something at all costs, such as a hamster, a goldfish, a toy, a dog, or a sibling. I had clung several times to the front door to prevent my father from leaving, and I had broken all his cigarettes to make him stop smoking. I had hidden his car keys in various places around the house; I would hear him shout irritably as he wandered from one room to another until I finally gave in out of pity and handed them back to him, claiming the gesture was like a kidnapping or an attack. He rarely got angry, but I sensed that he would have smashed something over my head if he had been a slightly different person. When he left on long tours, I used to sleep with the T-shirts he wore when he played so that I could smell him. I had never seen him truly angry with me except for the time when I tore a T-shirt that had been in his closet for twenty years, cutting

right through it with the scissors with which I was playing. It was a T-shirt from a festival in Chicago where he had played, and it was the only tangible evidence he had of that irreplaceable moment in his life. It was from a few years before I was born, before he had even met my mother, when it was just him, looking at the future with only his drums on his mind.

"We can call Dad on the phone tonight, if you want. You can tell him how it went, he'll be happy to hear about it."

"Okay, but don't tell him they made me sing."

"Why not? What's wrong with that?"

"Because then he'll get it into his head that I've got to sing, and I don't want to sing. It's embarrassing, I have a horrible voice."

"But everyone mistakes you for me on the phone... do I also have a horrible voice?"

"It's not the same thing, Mom."

The 500 danced over the lava stone pavement and, every two hundred meters, my mother would take out a handkerchief to wipe the fogged-up windshield. It was two in the afternoon, but it felt like eight p.m. because of how dark and gloomy the sky was.

The house where we lived was near the train station. It was located between the historic city center and the worst working-class neighborhoods, which were being dismantled year after year by urban planning regulations; it was an area where ugly architecture from the construction boom of the Seventies commingled with buildings that had a decadently aristocratic appearance. We lived on the top floor of a building that had a view of Mount Etna, a daily companion at our dining table. Between the station and our house there was Via delle Finanze, the historic street of prostitutes and the beginning of a sort of red-light district. On the other side, there was Catania's courthouse. We were in a middle ground, in a limbo of semi-civilization, between the law and its total absence. I never really felt in danger, not even when I rode my bike in the square in front of my building, where Catania's ultras gathered after the game to celebrate and old folks hung out at the kiosk drinking *seltz limone e sale* (i.e., seltzer with lemon and sea salt).

There wasn't a lot of furniture in the house, just the essentials: a bedroom for me, one for my parents, and the room where my dad played music. He had soundproofed everything with egg cartons, but it wasn't enough. So he got an electronic drum kit so he could play wearing headphones and he placed it next to an upright piano inherited from a Neapolitan aunt; there were stacks of papers and lost objects that accumulated behind it, even my hamster Yuri hid there once. There were three guitars (an electric, a classical, and an acoustic guitar), a bass, various percussion instruments, amplifiers, and a tube stereo from the Seventies with beautiful round, satin-finished knobs. Above all, there was a display case that was at least two meters tall, overflowing with vinyl records and CDs. It was my father's collection: he was very proud of it. When he wasn't there, I would lie down in his music room, on the dusty rug that covered the wall-to-wall carpeting; I would stare at the ceiling and lazily switch from one instrument to another for a few minutes, until something else distracted me.

"Dad? Yes, it's me, yes, I can hear you... I had my audition for the music section. Yes, it went well, I think. I played a piece by Yann Tiersen, the one you also know, but I only played half of it. I did some solfeggio too, yes, but they didn't make me sing. The violin teacher seems nice, the others not so much... Yes, there were a lot of us, but I was the only one on my own. In the sense that my parents weren't there to accompany me. No, they didn't ask me anything about

you. I don't know when the results will come out, maybe in a few weeks. Of course, if they come out before you get back, I'll let you know. Okay. Okay. Good night then. Here's Mom."

Two weeks later, I received a call from Pirandello Middle School's secretary to inform me that I hadn't been accepted into their music section. I sat on the floor of our music room and thought about it all afternoon before deciding whether or not to tell my parents. Then I resigned myself to the fact that they would find out anyway, since the secretary had specified that we would be receiving a letter with "valid alternatives." My father had just returned from his tour and my mother had a headache that evening (her school board meeting had lasted longer than usual). I waited until we were all seated at the dinner table to let them know; I spoke rapidly to get it over with, hoping that the information would be quickly dismissed.

"The school called this afternoon."

"Oh, and what did they say?" my father asked immediately, taking his eyes off *TG1 News* and looking at me.

"They said I wasn't admitted into the violin section."