

All His Women

by Caterina Bonvicini

Extract translated from the Italian by Katherine Gregor

Lucrezia, 89 years old (*His mother*)

Ada, 61 years old (*His ex-wife*)

Francesca, 57 years old (*His sister*)

Cristina, 46 years old (*His wife*)

Paoletta, 33 years old (*His eldest daughter*)

Camilla, 26 years old (*His lover*)

Giulia, 16 years old (*His youngest daughter*)

Part I

Christmas

1. Camilla

(*His lover*)

You see, you'd never thought about oil. Whether it should be bitter or fruity, for instance. Or *balanced*, perhaps – a *balanced* oil? – and come from Umbria, Apulia or Tuscany. Until that moment, as far as you were concerned, oil was just a rather slimy bottle in the kitchen that left a ring you needed to wipe off afterwards. Your mother would fly off the handle if you used a sponge with a bit of water. Absolutely not. In order to remove oil from any washable surface, you had to use water and ammonia, squirted on a paper towel. And you'd huff. Why couldn't one just use a little water? However, you'd be about to go out with your boyfriend, there was a party at stake and you'd be hoping to get special permission to stay out late, so you wouldn't protest. All right, I'll clean the kitchen counter – stained with oil bought from the supermarket, in a large container, on special offer, full of organoleptic defects and critical chemical measures, therefore non at all extra-virgin (except that you hadn't started paying attention to that yet) – and, holding that stupid ammonia spray, you'd just be trying to do it quickly. All right, I won't use the sponge wetted under the tap. How old were you? Nineteen? It was so great being nineteen years old.

Not that you're much older now. But seven years make a big difference. Partly because at your stage, one ages in dog years. Also because you've made some decisions of your own: you've moved to Milan, graduated from university, got a job and the odd lover. Of course, you're still a little clumsy – and right now the fruity oil is there to remind you of that – but only you know just how far you've come.

To start with, it's Christmas Eve and you're not at home. Using the excuse that you had too much work on, you haven't gone back to your parents'. It even makes you smile. You're still too immature to realise that the fib you've told your family isn't a milestone worth celebrating, especially if you've ended up with someone else's.

Moreover, you smile at the wrong moment. Because the lady opposite you is in the process of saying that there's *a much better* oil.

"I could have brought you all a few bottles," she says. "How stupid of me not to have thought about it. Never mind. Next time."

You think it's wonderful that there should be a better oil (even though you haven't yet worked out what's so special about this one) but your smug smile risks offending the hostess, who's not smiling at all.

"Thank you, Ada," Cristina replies coolly, "I'm always on the look-out for good oil. You're a *star*." And she articulates the word *star* the way you'd articulate witch, pig or bitch from hell.

You're utterly fascinated by her intonation. You may not know a lot about flavours, because you've always eaten whatever you happened to come across, but you're always very aware of power and humiliation games. You're used to following your instinct – or else you've tripped and learnt – so you've soon picked up on everything there was to pick up on. It seems this is how classy people hurt each other: with a great deal of politeness. *As though it were a gift.*

Within seconds, you decide to stand up for the person who invited you. Partly because it's in your interest to keep her on your side. You realise you're also a hypocrite, a

big fat hypocrite, but this discovery in no way upsets you. Rather, you're annoyed about being incapable of hypocrisy as elegant as theirs.

However, you realise you're too late when you say, "This is the most delicious oil I've ever tasted."

Nobody seems to have heard you, and the others pretend you didn't even speak. Including Cristina, who dismisses your remark exactly as she did the previous one, by passing you an oval dish. *Capocollo* purchased in Piacenza, *bresaola* brought from Valtellina, *culatello* from a friend in Parma. Why does she always have to state the origin of the food? It's like being at customs.

"Camilla, would you like some more?"

All this food mythology is getting on your nerves. Nowadays, it's food that devours us and our thoughts, and rumours to the contrary are mere appearances. So you lift your chin and look at the others with a sense of irony.

"No, thanks," you reply. "It's all delicious, truly delicious, but no. No, thank you."

Now, you're no longer sorry you're too young to know everything they know. All of a sudden, you're very happy you're twenty-six years old. Because you know that you're very lucky at your age: you can just sit there and watch, and you don't have to say anything at all costs. Nobody expects you to keep up with the level of the conversation. What level, anyway? What conversation? Frankly, you expected something better from these kinds of people. Instead, they're discussing *oil*. Once again, you smile and don't give a damn if the timing is right or not. Fuck olive oil and all its characteristics. If they really want you to, you, too, can contribute with an argument about vaseline. You give a little cry

and raise your lip as though you have a twitch. I don't give a fuck if it's bitter or fruity. Then you remember that you're only there because someone's fucking you.

"I'm sorry, my husband's always late," Cristina says, getting up again. "I think I'll get the first course ready, anyway. Too bad, he'll have to eat the risotto reheated." She rushes to the kitchen door. "Rashmi? You can start browning the leeks. Remember we don't want any butter at the end, won't you? You just need to make it creamy with parmesan, thanks."

You study the women sitting with you at the table – they all shake their heads and say, *No, that's all right, let's wait* – then you look at the empty seat, the clean plate and the napkin, still folded. Where on earth is Vittorio?

This wait is exhausting, also because you don't know how he's going to react when he sees you here. Unfortunately, it was only at eight o'clock that you realised that it was his wife, not he, who invited you – and especially that he knew nothing about it. When you came in with a panettone that was still warm (a panettone that cost as much as your electricity bill) and Cristina grabbed your coat, saying, "Let me take that for you, *my dear*, I'll hang it up next door. Vittorio isn't here yet but he'll be very happy you've come, you'll see. You cheer him up."

And now, an hour and a half later, while the hostess is getting worked up, you feel like a total creep. You think it's your fault if Vittorio has decided to do a runner on Christmas Eve, of all times. He found out that you were here, sitting between his mother and his daughter, opposite his sister, and is searching for any excuse not to be here. It was a big mistake – you should never have accepted the invitation. But it's too late now, so all

you can do now is keep your seat and behave like a polite person. And try and exchange a few words with your neighbours, even if it's not easy.

Vittorio's youngest daughter should be the most approachable, given she's sixteen. However, communicating with her is impossible. Hunched over her mobile which she keeps in her lap, under the tablecloth, she's only present on WhatsApp. When you try talking to her, Giulia replies hastily, making it clear you're disturbing her.

"I failed my exams, so now I go to a private school."

"Oh, really? Where?"

You don't know any of the high schools in Milan but you pretend you do. Even though, as far as you're concerned, one school is like any other. Without even looking up from her screen, Giulia quickly mutters a name you don't even catch. End of conversation.

Actually, Vittorio's mother is worse. Lucrezia isn't just slightly deaf, but also treats you like an autistic teenager, like her granddaughter. She graciously addressed you only once, to ask you to read a text message on her mobile. Because she didn't know how to.

"It says Happy Christmas, signora. Just Happy Christmas," you say.

"And who is it from?"

"I don't know, signora. The number isn't stored in your contacts."

"Well, never mind. All this Happy Christmas is so boring."

Vittorio's sister, on the other hand, is stifling you.

It's up to you to avoid a conversation, even if that means keeping totally quiet.

"So you're no longer *a trainee*," she says.

"No, signora."

"Does that mean they've hired you?"

"Not yet, signora. For the time being I just have a provisional contract," you reply patiently, even if you can't stand this third degree anymore.

"Then you correct the proofs? I've also corrected so many of those for my brother." Then she laughs, tossing her hand behind her ear with a flick of her wrist.

She's really getting on your nerves now. It's as though she's trying her best to belittle you.

"No, signora. I'm not an editor. I work in the press office."

"Oh, now I understand." Francesca finally seems satisfied. "You're a *PR*."

You turn to look at her. It's been centuries since you heard that word. *PR*. It was a word you were fascinated by as a child. A friend of your mother's always used it to talk about women who'd moved to Milan and there become not so respectable. They're *PRs*, you know. You didn't realise they were in public relations, and were certain it was the abbreviation for a rude word – prostitutes? – and that your mother and her friend used only the first two letters to avoid being coarse in front of you. You used to fantasise a lot about these *PRs*, fallen women, perhaps, but who'd had the courage to leave the village. Gone to Milan. Lucky them.

"Yes, I speak to journalists, I escort authors to various places, I organise presentations."

"And have you also *escorted* Vittorio anywhere?"

Is she trying to use the verb in an ambiguous way? As though you were an *escort* – another word that's fallen into disuse, strangely enough. There and then you're astounded. What is she getting at? Is she hoping you'll tell her that Vittorio recommended you? It's not

even true. You didn't get this job by fucking her brother. You got it by fucking someone else.

The editorial manager, to be precise. A good-looking forty-year-old, very married, naturally, who got his eye on you the moment you arrived at the publishing house. One coffee generates another, it happens. However, coffee is bad for your heart and also your nerves, so you move on to an aperitif because at least it's relaxing. Except that drinking on an empty stomach makes you dizzy, you risk acting rashly, and that's how you justify dinner. Once the six-month training period was over, the other girls had to look for a job elsewhere, but you didn't. They happened to need someone at the press office to cover maternity leave.

Vittorio is nothing but trouble for you. You even risk reprisals if your affair gets out. It will be his fault if you never get a permanent contract. Maybe Francesca doesn't know this but Vittorio is no longer in a position to recommend anybody. Ada married him when he was still a student, Cristina stole him from her as soon as he became famous, and you got him once he'd fallen into disgrace. For a moment, you laugh to yourself – as usual, you're a masochist: a romantic masochist – then you reply, "Yes, I've *escorted* Vittorio. I've escorted him *many times*."

That's when you notice that someone is staring at you. You look sideways and meet the gaze of Vittorio's eldest daughter. Paoletta is the only one who hasn't even made the effort of saying anything nice, like Happy Christmas. Nothing whatsoever.

Now she says, "Are you sure Dad remembers it's Christmas Eve? Maybe he's gone out to dinner with a friend, we all know what he's like."

There's a chorus of laughter. What a funny comment. A chorus of denial, and they all deny in unison. Ada is the one you find the scariest. The dominating ex-wife – although this place could be a dominating women's contest – Paoletta's mother, who's cast herself into the role of the best friend. There's no knocking her off that throne. Vittorio tells her everything, including about his secret affairs. From the way she's looking at you – she's at the head of the table – it's blatantly obvious he's told her about you, too.

Meanwhile, Cristina, unable to sit still, says, "His mobile is still switched off. I don't understand."

You look down. You reach out for the oil. Everybody is having it with bread and you're also starting to feel hungry. You used to think it was coarse to wipe your plate with bread but, apparently, it's acceptable with fine oil. Wiping sauce off your plate is a big no, but if it's a thread of green liquid, then you can erase it with a piece of bread entirely. You can obliterate all trace of it.

2. Giulia

(His youngest daughter)

"Giulia, put that mobile away! Please, at least on Christmas Eve. *Join us, thank you.*"

I don't answer. I just send one last message before hiding the phone in my napkin.

Curfew  can't chat  crap  Will WhatsApp u l8r

My mum's such a loser. I'm almost glad I've been named Miss Blow Job of the Year. Better than ending up like her. She really doesn't get it that nobody wanted to come here. Ada'd rather spend Christmas in Paris and she made her rearrange her flight. A bully, as usual. My sister must have made herself totally stupid with tranquillisers before leaving the house, just so she's able to get through the evening: she's falling asleep at the table. And Gran had to give up the Christmas Eve concert ("At my age, you're only happy to be listening to music, and not to all the nasty things your family says," she said as she came in). The only one who's happy about this initiative is Auntie Chicca. But then she's worse than my mother.

I can't stand women whose purpose in life is to say If-it-weren't-for-me. Mum is so pathetic that she invited *that woman*. She wants to manage even my father's fucks. As soon as she senses he has a lover, she invites her for dinner. She has to have control over everything.

My mother is the sort who picks up Dad's phone and answers instead of him. That really pisses me off. I say, if I dialled *his* number it's because, clearly, I wanted to speak to *him* and not *you*. But she doesn't listen to me.

You always feel as though you're going through customs. I told her once. You're not a wife, you're customs. To have a relationship with Dad, people have to pay duty to you. But she doesn't understand and says I'm being nasty. And then she complains when her husband runs away. If I wasn't sixteen, I'd run away, too.

As a matter of fact, his absence now doesn't surprise me in the least. First of all, my sister's right, it would be just like my father to have completely forgotten that today is Christmas Eve. I think he's having a drink with somebody at Cucchi's and will only remember about the dinner when the person he's with gets up, thanks him for the three rounds of spritz, and says Okay, Happy Christmas. And then Dad will touch his forehead: Oh, fuck.

I wish I could also switch off my mobile. If only I could. So nobody could find me ever again. But I can't. Because Francy is digging around. Maybe she's found out who wrote the question on Ask: *Is it true you've been named Miss Blow Job of the Year?* The bastard (or bitch) asked anonymously. I spent an afternoon thinking about my answer, then it came to me: *As illustrated by this victory, darling, it's not just the FRONT side that counts.* It was very popular, I got loads of *Likes* and many people complimented me.

I bend over for a second, while Gran is shielding me, and go back to Chat mode.



Any news from Scotland Yard???

Marty says it was Castellini coz you didn't blow him



Do tell: it was impossible to find him



Ha! Ha! Ha! You're ace



Love ya



"Giulia? Have you decided what you want to do at university?"

"I've still got another four years, Auntie," I reply. "Or have you forgotten they failed me?"

I understand why my cousin went to study in America and, under various pretexts, never comes back to Milan, not even for Christmas. His mother was always breathing down his neck, so only the Atlantic could save him. And I also understand why her husband committed suicide. And to think that Chicca teaches Psychology at uni. Not only did she not notice that Uncle was depressed but that he was hanging himself in the bathroom. Poor Chicca. Another mega loser.

"Yes, but you must have a dream, surely, darling, a passion for something."

She insists. So crass. Yes, Auntie, my *dream* is to become an Escort (does it take a capital?) I could tell her that. Blow jobs are my *passion*, Auntie. And my talent has been widely recognised because I'm the school's youngest Miss Blow Job. An *Enfant prodige*, as that snob Ada would say.

Ah, here's the risotto. They've finally made up their minds. I'm starving. Dad's not coming, anyway. He'll turn up at eleven o'clock with one of his preposterous excuses. A story worthy of a novelist, as Mum says. She's always justifying him. Worthy of a liar, more like. But that's the version she prefers. Ah, the napkin's flickering.



Latest!

Greta says it was Traversi but she made me swear not to tell you.



Is T jealous coz there's no Miss Pain in the Arse of the Year title???



Ha! Ha! Ha!



My mother stretches her arm towards me. Fuck! She wants me to hand over the phone. No way!

"Giulia, I've told you to put away that mobile."

"No, please!"

"Come on, give it to me."

"Mum, please... People are sending me Christmas messages..."

She snatches it from my hand and puts it in her pocket. So she wants war then. I get up abruptly. I'm going to shut myself in my room now. Lock myself in. And I'll put the computer on, so problem solved. But she runs after me and takes my arm before I reach

the corridor. I know perfectly well that she's not looking for physical confrontation: she can't exactly show everybody else what goes on in our house. *In private*, we get a bit physical. It happens in the best families. But Mum doesn't want people to know.

Once, she gave me a black eye and then treated it with a frozen steak so the pharmacist wouldn't suspect. She could at least have used arnica, I said. But she shook her head: What will people think? Another time, during a scuffle, I accidentally broke her wrist and she didn't even go to A & E. She said it was only a sprain, that it just needed a little ice. It still hurts her when the weather changes.

Now she's screaming because she wants to be heard next door. Mum *loves* to play the victim. The-One-Who's-Always-Sacrificing-Herself-For-Others.

"Do you want to ruin my Christmas dinner *on top of everything else*, Giulia?"

Now that's too much.

"Me? Me? And where's Dad, then?"

Silence. In the corridor as well as the dining room. Enough, maybe I'll stop being angry. I go back to the table and finish my risotto. And take Gran's mobile. Under the pretext of helping her read her messages I can get my updates on it. If I delete the exchange quickly enough, no one will notice.

Write to me on this mobile. Mine confiscated. Can't WhatsApp, it's a piece of old junk fit for the blind

Whose mobile is it?

Gran's :)

BRILLIANT. Love u

Miss Blow Job is resourceful LOL but cut to the chase or they'll catch me at it

Just chatted with Barocci: suspects your ex. That's why he chose anonymity... Coward with no balls, as ever.

Which ex???

Stupid... HIM

I confess I feel a bit queasy. Gran gives me a very sympathetic pat. "Come on, Mouse, don't be sad," she says. "Dad will be here soon, you'll see."

Who gives a shit about Dad? He can come back for New Year, for all I care. Could it really have been HIM? I mustn't cry, I mustn't. I think I'll go to the bathroom.

Don't be mysterious, send a text, I'm in the loo for 5 mins, I can chat

Out of charge

Not true, you bitch

OK, sorry: I still have ten euros to last for 2 more wks. Besides, got no more news, I swear.

C u l8r

Like hell we will!

Hey, calm down.

It might be the slag he got together with at the Halloween party.

Probably her idea: she's reeeally nasty, u know

She's capable of anything. She sold her bedroom furniture on eBay so she could buy an iPhone. You can imagine her parents not impressed

Yeah, but that's cool. I really have to go now. Christmas presents and all that crap. Luv u lots.

Handbag???

Hope so, dk, they're pissed off coz of my grades, maybe punished

Let me know if Prada or not. Love u. BFF

What about your dad?

M-i-s-s-i-n-g

"Giulia, darling, are you all right?"

I need to build myself a bunker so my mother leaves me alone. She won't even leave you in peace when you go to the loo.

"I'm coming. I'm peeing."

As I walk across the corridor, still holding Gran's phone, I notice a message from Dad. Strange. Why is he writing to the only person who can't use a mobile? I open it, imagining something like *I called at 23.44 on 24/12/14*. Free notification from the Vodafone CALL BACK service. But no. It says: *I'm sorry. I need to take a year's sabbatical also from my life.*

I get back to the dining room, pale. "I've got news," I say.

3. Paoletta

(His eldest daughter)

Milan is so firmly middle class. Even immigrants take on a middle class air, here. The Filipino maids are even more conformist than the ladies they work for, and any Slav whose is familiar with the understatement. My father tells a fib on Christmas Eve and things carry on, elegantly, as though nothing has happened. Hidden beneath the admirable mythology that justifies this restraint – stoicism, politeness, dignity – is a paralysing fear of guts, considered as tangled up stuff that should be hidden in a – preferably flat – stomach.

It was obvious Cristina's sham wouldn't have the outcome she was hoping for but nobody expected a murder mystery dinner. I can barely conceal my admiration: this time, Dad has really outdone himself. This time, he's really done it, and maybe his wife won't try to commandeer every public holiday again. Praise be to the *Liberator* (or the *Liberated*). *Hallelujah! Hallelujah!* The man has rebelled at last.

I wonder where he is. Maybe his lover knows. I look at Camilla but she isn't looking at me. She keeps her eyes down. Especially since the announcement. Cristina is also very taken aback. She thought if she took the girl hostage, she'd be all set. Apparently, this preventative measure wasn't sufficient.

My mother is having even more fun, I know her well. She's even pleased she didn't go to Paris, because she wouldn't have missed this kind of scene for all the world. My aunt is providing her with the maximum entertainment by wanting to call the carabinieri.

"Ada, I'm dialling 118."

My mother: "That's the ambulance, Chicca. I rather thing we're all in good health even without him."

"I meant 112," Ada stutters. "What if he's been mugged by *Romanians* and they've stolen his mobile."

Mum has tears in her eyes from laughing. "And you think they'd be *apologising*? Talking about *a sabbatical from life*?"

Meanwhile, sea bass in salt crust is served because this firmly middle class city does everything it's supposed to, in accordance with the programme, come hell or high water. After the risotto, you have to serve the sea bass. So let there be sea bass.

Gran, not worried in the least, is the first to help herself. Since she's a bit deaf, we're all wondering whether or not she's fully understood what's happened. Giulia is trying to probe her but she's completely unfazed.

"It's true I can't read text messages on the mobile," she replies, "but that's not so important. Obviously, it's *me* my son wanted to tell."

Mothers will always be mothers. At this point, we all laugh.

"Let's hope he also tells you where he is," Cristina says.

But Gran isn't joking. "I get the impression Vittorio has no wish to be contacted."

Silence. She's eighty-nine years old and won't let anybody help her, not even to get into a boat. When her bag got snatched, a month ago, she chased after the mugger. And, on 7th January, at nine o'clock sharp, she'll be loading her luggage onto an intercontinental flight because she's in the process of refurbishing a flat in Tel Aviv. However, if ever there's an opportunity to enjoy the true perks of old age – for instance the freedom to say what she thinks without any self-censorship – then she never holds back.

Now, all you can hear is the sound of the cutlery. Roast potatoes are being passed around. The potatoes scheduled for that time, that day. So let there be potatoes.

I want to see if they've got the courage to open the presents. Cristina is perfectly capable of making us stick to protocol to the very end. For *Giulia's* sake, naturally. Even though my sister doesn't give two hoots: taking advantage of the confusion, she's already retrieved her mobile and started messaging again. She's not even listening to us.

Meanwhile, my aunt, tragic as ever, is whispering into my mother's ear, and Mum bursts out laughing very loudly again.

"What suicide?"

As usual, Mum isn't very tactful. When people talk of suicide, she immediately thinks of Pavese and Morselli, but never of Francesca's husband. She isn't even aware of her *faux-pas*.

In the meantime, Camilla has completely clammed up. This will teach her to disrespect people. How old is she? She's probably six or seven years younger than me. In any case, she looks much younger, more like she could be a friend of Giulia's. Perhaps Dad looks for girls so he isn't crushed by the umpteenth woman. Who knows?

In any case, I get up, say goodbye to everybody and go home. I don't feel like panettone. I'd rather have a grappa on my balcony, while watching the muddy waters of the Naviglio canal. Besides, they say it's going to snow, and I'm on my bicycle.

"Where are you going, Paoletta? What about dessert?"

I knew it. Cristina just doesn't give up.

"I'm a little tired," I reply, "and tomorrow I have a long shift."

My mother kisses me and tells me not to worry, that she'll take Gran home. Not a single word about what's happened, as though everything were perfectly normal. She informs me that she'll be leaving for Paris on the 26th.

"Don't spend New Year's Eve on your own," she says.

"Don't worry, I'll sort something out," I reply. And, since I know how to push her buttons, I add, "Do you need a taxi to the airport?"

Mum looks down and shakes her head. She can't stand the fact that her daughter is a taxi driver, and stiffens as soon as I mention my job.

All right then, bye everyone. I wave. Happy Christmas! I give my sister a little kiss and she jumps from the shock and immediately turns over the screen of her mobile so I can't read the message she's just received. A kiss to Gran, who, unfazed, keeps pushing away the bones from the sea bass. I kiss Chicca, who strangles me with a hug fit for a funeral. A silent goodbye to Camilla, who reciprocates by raising her arm shyly. And a very Happy Christmas to the hostess. Thank you for a lovely evening, Cristina, thank you. *Feliz Navidad. Merry Christmas. Joyeux Noël.* What a splendid idea for us to celebrate all together. Nobody would have thought of it. *If-It-Hadn't-Been-For-You.*

I go out into the cold and get on my bicycle. The streets of Central Milan are so dark, so stifling. Even the most beautiful buildings, with façades that, in Paris, would deserve to have at least a boulevard and not an alley in front of them, seem to suffer from a lack of air. Dark, even beneath the midday sun, these are streets that allow only the fog to cross them. And me, pedalling on small porphyry cubes, damp and slippery, trying to avoid the tracks of the tram.

Still, all I need is to come across a cascade of ivy from a balcony, and I make my peace with my city once again. Immediately, I start picturing the inner courtyards, the secret gardens of a Milan that conceals its beauty as a matter of principle, or out of politeness, or – who knows? – out of spite.

I reach wide horizons and start breathing more easily as soon as I get to Piazza Vetro and the Pillars of San Lorenzo. I now pedal freely, fast, towards the Navigli district, my home, my refuge. I admire those who know how to run away. All I can do is hide.

4. Lucrezia

(*His mother*)

Don't ask me how it went, Marika. Yes, dear, take my coat. *Ah quel dîner*. Where are my slippers? And Happy Christmas! Happy Christmas, my dear. Honestly, I can't stand being told Happy Christmas. I much prefer being told Have a Good Day on an ordinary morning, but what can you do? Did you manage to call your son? Oh, good, I'm glad. Yes, that's true... I really need to relax for a moment. How about we open that bottle of Roederer they gave me? This way we'll have a little toast, you and I. It's in the fridge. Go and get it. I'll wait here. Yes, those glasses will do. There are also the crystal saucers but I think we've put them away. After all, nobody ever uses them. Can you open it? I haven't got strength in my hands anymore. Cheers, my dear, Happy Christmas. Yes, do go to Mass with your friends. Don't worry, I'll lock up. No, it's fine, I'm just tired. My son's women are such hard work. I find it easier to build a skyscraper in Beijing. Did I tell you, Vittorio didn't even come? He could at least have warned me, and I could have spared myself that dinner party. Silvia Maria was right: at our age, it's better not to upset our habits, and I should have gone to the concert with her. I shouldn't have allowed myself to be persuaded. Could you pass me the cigarettes? Thank you. Oh, I couldn't wait. *Those women* won't even let me smoke. I wish they'd leave me alone, let's see if they get to the age of eighty-nine. I think people who are too busy with self-care take themselves too seriously. Could you give me that ashtray, please? You know, Cristina tried to liven up the evening by inviting Vittorio's latest flame, except that the girl didn't say a word. In any case, nobody was interested in anything she had to say. It was an instrument of torture aimed at

my son. Luckily, he didn't come. That's what I thought, you know. Luckily, he didn't come. I also thought about my future, if I have to be totally honest. It may well be short but I demand that it be up to the usual high standards, at least in terms of dignity. You know, that kind of woman scares me. She uses others in order to keep her husband a prisoner. Oh, Marika, I hope I never get ill, because I'm sure she'd keep me hostage, too. It would be just like her to sacrifice herself to take care of me just so she can blackmail him. Oh, no. Ada would certainly not save me. She's the most self-centred woman I've ever known, so she simply wouldn't have the ability. She spent half an hour telling me that they made her *Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres* in Paris. Of course, she told me about the ceremony with a certain degree of self-mockery, but she was my daughter-in-law for twenty years, so I didn't buy her self-mockery. For example, when one of my chairs ends up in a museum, I don't bore everybody with it. Narcissism is a form of insecurity and she's insecure, even if she doesn't look it. Especially with me. I trigger primeval insecurity in her, I always have, an insecurity she can't control. There's a reason she kept going on with that *Chevalier* story: she has finally received one of the few honours I didn't get. Do you understand, Marika? It's always this way. Poor thing, she's so competitive. Even now. Even if Vittorio is no longer her husband and I'm not her overwhelming mother-in-law anymore. And we're all too old to prove anything. However, it's Chicca who dealt me the final blow. Like all people on their own, she talks too much, exasperates people and doesn't even realise she does. She'll never find a partner again, about that I have no doubts. It will be a miracle if she finds as much as a friend, but I've lost all hope of that. I feel sorry for my daughter, Marika. You're the only person I can confess this to. But my feeling sorry doesn't make it any easier to put up with her. And that's the worst thing about it, you know. After all, I'm

her mother. Even Vittorio has always found it hard to put up with her, even when he was a child. It's not easy to defend yourself from an invasive sister. Unfortunately, she worships him. If computers didn't exist, she would copy his manuscripts, like Tolstoy's wife did. Why do you think she bought that tiny, dark flat one block away from his place? She'd been trying to move into the same area for years. She's coming for lunch tomorrow, right? Oh, heavens, I need to be patient. I can't die being nasty, Marika. I wonder how long I have left. A few months? A few years? I try to be kind, you understand? Never mind. I understand myself, and nobody else does. In truth, I'm more worried about my granddaughters. Giulia this, Giulia that. They're destroying her with their mollycoddling. And there's nothing I can do because I can't talk to her. The only relationship she's capable of is with her mobile phone. At one point my daughter confiscated it but then she took mine. She's compulsive. They spoilt her too much and now she looks down her nose at everyone, as though she's the only one who knows anything about the world. And the world – which knows us much better – is going to swallow her up. And I don't know how to prevent this. In any case, my big concern is Paoletta. They never leave her alone, poor sweetheart. Of course, she doesn't do anything to avoid criticism, even the most obvious ones. This evening, for instance, she could have put on a jacket. Or at least a clean top. Instead, she turned up in a sweater she bought from the Chinese and military trousers that looked as though they were a hand-me-down from a marine. No wonder she can't find a boyfriend. However, the black mark against her is the taxi. Nobody can forgive her that. For years, it was the same old tune: Paoletta's finished university, so now she has to support herself. You weren't even allowed to give her a present. All that in the name of high principles, of course. Oh, God – Milan and its strong principles. Always *against*

someone, never in anyone's favour. I wonder why. So one day I got fed up. I build skyscrapers, so why can't I give my granddaughter a two-room flat? All right, so she sold it. But the taxi licence she bought with that money has been a liberation for her. After all, why did she have to do an intellectual job at all costs? Wherever she went, she was Ada and Vittorio's daughter – I, too, would have been paralysed. True, when she left the weekly magazine and joined the queue at the station, we thought it was madness. But then why did she take on that job in the first place? Because the editorial manager was doing a favour to her mum and dad. Paoletta says that her taxi allows her to see much more of the world, and that there really is continuity with a degree in Philosophy. I don't know if that's true but somebody has to believe it. And I'll be that somebody. Now you really must go, Marika, or you'll be late for Mass. I'm wasting so much of your time with my chatter. Where? San Satiro? You and your friends have good taste – I think it's the most beautiful church in Milan. Everyone knows the Generali Tower and the Vertical Forest, but have no idea that, a few steps away from the Duomo, there's this little piece of work by Bramante. No, I don't need anything, really. I'm going to put on my nightgown, have another drop of this wine and smoke one last cigarette. You've no idea how uncomfortable I was tonight. A whole dinner without a single puff, worse than on an intercontinental flight. And they even rationed my wine. Yes, please, a bottle of water on my bedside table is all I need. Thank you, my dear, thank you. Enjoy Mass. And remember to have a look at the Lamentation, even if it's not as beautiful as the one by Nicolò dell'Arca. Sorry, what did you say? Can you repeat? I had my back to you so I didn't see your lips. Oh, I don't know. He sent a strange message I couldn't even make out. It said something about the year's

sabbatical he's taken from the university. But I decided not to ask questions, otherwise those witches would have said I'm deaf.

5. Cristina

(His wife)

It's just after midnight. All he needs is the vibration on his thigh and he'll immediately know it's me. He'll take the mobile out of his trouser pocket and quickly read the message. Then he'll get up from the sofa, holding the phone (rule number one: never conceal anything – if you don't want to be found out, you must simply divert attention elsewhere) and tell his wife something like I'm going next door because the kids are too noisy here. His unhurried step and the calmness with which he'll reverse the blame – the noisy kids – will work and his wife, hunched over a castle of dinosaurs, will shout from the living room Wish your sister a happy Christmas from me.

Carlo will not reply (rule number two: never lie. Better just keep quiet), walk down the corridor quickly but without running. He will then carefully close the kitchen door behind him. A kitchen that looks like a spaceship. Doors without handles, cooking hobs all on one level, nothing lying around, like a showroom kitchen. Just a single gleaming block reflected in the floor resin like an Alpine peak in a lake. Then, looking around with satisfaction, he'll say I can talk now, what about you? I have a predictable lover. I don't mind, because my husband is all too unpredictable.

"Yes, I can talk, too," I reply. "They've all gone. Giulia is next door and she can't hear us. She's already shut herself in her room, anyway."

I also look around. I'm trying to hang up my red dress in the walk-in wardrobe without having to get the stepladder from the storage room. But I can't reach even

standing on tiptoe. So I'm looking for the stick for hanging clothes. I could leave the dress on the chair but I can't help it. Things have to go where they they belong.

"How was your Christmas Eve dinner?"

"Vittorio didn't turn up."

"You're joking!"

"Honest. He-didn't-turn-up."

"I can't believe it."

"He warned me with a text message. Typical novelist. He managed half a line."

"Why?"

"Who knows? He felt the need to be on his own. The sabbatical year he's just taken from the university wasn't enough for him. That's more or less what he said."

"At Christmas, of all times? Couldn't he have expressed this need in a couple of days' time?"

"Forget it. I'm furious."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have invited his lover."

"Vittorio didn't know I had invited her," I reply. "It was *a surprise*."

A thud. While trying to grab the stick, I've accidentally knocked down a box full of summer accessories: sarongs, swimsuits, hats and beach bags.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing." I bend down to pick everything up. The secret is about picking everything up. And putting it away. Then everything's tidy. All you need is to pick everything up.

"Is she attractive?"

"Who? The Tabellini girl? No way. You feel like taking her to hospital and not to bed. She's so pale and has dark rings under her eyes... I don't know what he sees in her. She looks at you with that emaciated little face of hers, covered entirely with a pair of huge glasses, but, if you notice, she has large thighs, probably full of cellulite. And even at her age, she has a large arse, *poor thing*."

"Have you also calculated her body mass?"

"Idiot," I reply. But I don't laugh.

I'm sure that in a moment, Carlo is going to step out on the balcony and light a cigarette. At his home, this constitutes a transgression worse than a secret affair: his wife is a pulmonologist and would sooner forgive him a betrayal. He's probably already thinking he must remember to clean his teeth afterwards. I'll bet he's already started searching for mints in his pockets.

"What's that sigh? Have you lit a cigarette?"

"Yes," he replies. "I was dying for one."

I can hear another deep, full puff.

"So Vittorio couldn't have been with her," he says. "I mean the Tabellini woman."

"Clearly not. Who knows? Maybe he has other lovers."

"Jealous?"

"Jealousy belongs to past, definitely happier, times," I reply.

"Are you ever jealous about me?"

I sigh. I've no desire to reassure him *at this particular moment*.

Rather, I want to be reassured. After all, my husband didn't show up for Christmas Eve dinner. As usual, I have to be reassured by things. While I chat, I put my scarves in order. I arrange them by colour. Black with black, blue with blue.

"Look, I'm in a foul mood tonight. Try to understand," I say a little abruptly.

He's probably extinguishing his cigarette stub now (rather angrily) and throwing it down from the balcony. With the tip of his shoe, he makes sure he deletes all trace of ash, tar and tobacco. Meanwhile, he tells me that all he's trying to do is to understand *him*. That all he's trying to do is listen to me. Something my beloved Vittorio has never been able to do, for instance. My tone of voice annoys him. "But it's not appropriate to have an argument on Christmas Eve," he says. "Just like it's not appropriate to disappear on Christmas Eve."

I'm certain he's looking at the fir tree next to him, right there on that terrace, that large hand of needles that looks as though it's trying to caress him, there to remind him that he should go back into the living room. That tangle of fairy lights on the branches, those small, irritating lights that illuminate the tree on and off, and which have been put up personally by his three children. Three noisy, unruly creatures he will never leave. Who are waiting for him indoors to help them finish building the dinosaur castle.

He's probably thinking that all he can offer me is love. In the beginning he thought it was wonderful that all he had left to offer was love – since he couldn't offer anything else – love without fringe benefits, without bonuses, love outside any management logic. Then he realised that this very immeasurability, at least in concrete terms, was a double-edged sword if not an actual rip-off, because it's never enough for a woman.

"Sorry, I'm a little tense," I reply. "I spent the whole evening putting up with his mother, his sister, his daughter, his ex-wife and even his lover. *And he didn't turn up.*"

"And how did they take it?"

"Oh, *them*," I snort. "*They're* always the same." I tell him my mother-in-law has now become unbearable. I've tried giving her a hearing aid as a present but she got offended. And to think that I wasted an entire afternoon at the ear specialist's! Three hundred euros just for a consultation. Ada, just for a change, spent the whole evening only talking about herself. About a conference in Sweden, and how they invited her to speak about something or other on television, and how she wrote a controversial article about someone or other.

"Her ego makes her impossible," I say. "She's just published another book. The umpteenth attack on women. Women here, women there. She's been dealing with the same topics for thirty years. Enough."

He interrupts abruptly. "You haven't wished me a happy Christmas yet."

"If this is the way it has to be then *Happy Christmas*," I say. "Go back and celebrate with your wife. I've had more than enough of them today, thank you very much."

Carlo says nothing. He's putting up resistance. Resilience, to be precise. There's a load and he doesn't want it to fall on him. Except that silence makes you feel much more intelligent, silence overestimates you. And when you need to speak – sooner or later it happens – you're back to being the way you are. For example, a very predictable man.

"Come on," he says, "let's make peace."

"Peace," I reply.

I'm panting because I've decided to move down the jackets, in the place of evening dresses I never wear – to go where? – clothes that can easily be inaccessible.

"Darling, are you crying?"

I burst out laughing. "You must be joking," I reply. "I'm actually sweating. My jumper is too thick."

"Take it off," he says.

I am certain that he keeps turning towards the terrace glass door to check no one's coming.

"Stop it."

I opt for a slightly shy laugh to make him understand that I don't feel like erotic games – *not now*. But, unfortunately, my pussycat sounds excite him even more.

"Take off your panties, too," he insists. "What are they like? Are you wearing those purple lace ones I like so much?"

I'm growing more irritable. "I don't think you understand, "I'm really not in the mood tonight. Really." I say, once again, "I'm sorry, but I'm not in the mood."

I don't know what humiliates me more: the presence of my husband's family or my husband's absence. Carlo is probably wondering what a lover's for if all she talks about is family problems, and not even a family we have in common. Maybe he'd rather go back indoors and play with dinosaurs. But I feel humiliated and all I have to say concerns this humiliation. So I'll tell him the usual things, never mind.

That Paoletta is too fat and that her obesity is a danger to her health, but I can't say a word because the others accuse me of being jealous or cruel. That she didn't even thank

me because she takes everything for granted, always. That I kill myself organising a Christmas Eve dinner and nobody asks if I need any help. Etc. Etc.

Carlo is probably thinking that we don't love each other anymore, that we use each other to compensate for too many frustrations. That the frustrations have won: we, too, have become a frustration. A clandestine frustration to add secretly to the official load.

But he only says, "You have a call waiting."

"Oh, God!" I put my hand over my forehead. "It's probably my sister-in-law again. She's called me three times already."

"Perhaps she's worried about Vittorio."

"I told her I'll let her know if he comes back. But she can't help it, she just can't control herself."

"What about you? Are you worried?"

"No, not at all," I reply. "If anything, I'm angry. I don't know what happened to him or why he behaved like this. I only know not everything is about him and sooner or later he has to realise that. Why are you laughing?"

Silence.

"You're right, all I do is talk about my husband," I admit. "One of these days you'll tire of me."

I'm still in the walk-in wardrobe. All my shoes and scarves are on the floor, at my feet, like rags. But from this sea of fabrics I will be born again, like Venus.

"You know, this evening I wore the bracelet you gave me." Ah, women's ability to recover when they sense they are in danger. "I got nothing from Vittorio. And not just because he didn't turn up. I didn't get anything last Christmas, either."

I'm sure he's also smiling now. He probably spent hours choosing that bracelet. Vintage, 1930s costume jewellery, an elegant little thing by Trifari.

"I don't know why they call them parallel lives," he replies. "Two parallels can never touch. We can touch but only every now and then. It makes the suffering worse."

"I know."

"Did anyone notice? I mean the bracelet."

"I noticed it," I reply. "But you'd better go back indoors now, or your wife will start asking questions."

"My wife hasn't asked me any questions for years. We're only interrogated by the children. They're the only ones who ask us *why?*"

We're about to hang up when I hesitate. Perhaps I have something else to say. Carlo notices and waits. Maybe he thinks I'm about to whisper something sweet, like I love you. He still hasn't got the fact that I have other things on my mind tonight.

"You know something? I think next Christmas I'm going to disappear."

6. Francesca

(*His sister*)

She could even be considered an attractive woman, they say. At the university, everybody makes fun of her. You can measure her by the number of lemons up her arse, they say. It's a bit coarse but does convey a certain kind of rigidity. There's a young man who's good at imitations and Fumagalli is his specialty. He walks down the corridors, stiffening the muscles in his neck and pursing his lips: *Guys, you're wasting my time*. And everybody laughs.

Many female students also take the piss out of the way she dresses. Ballet pumps or moccasins, white tops with high collars, belts that emphasise her size 12, proudly preserved at the age of fifty-seven. And always those designer jackets, tight at the waist. They wonder if she wears her string of pearls also with a swimsuit.

There's only one person in the entire Faculty who doesn't join in. It's a tiny girl, under 1 meter 60, with two huge, round, slightly protruding eyes. Her name is Frida Cannavò. To be near Francesca Fumagalli, she even managed to rent a one-room flat owned by her, in the same building. In the beginning, Fumagalli was rather puzzled.

"You're a student of mine, Cannavò," she protested. "I can't take money from you. It wouldn't be *right*."

"But I've already passed my exam. I'm only attending your lectures because I enjoy them."

"You could ask me to supervise your thesis."

"I've already asked at Development Psychology."

"No, we still can't do this. I'm sorry." She shook her head. "This wouldn't be acceptable in the U.S. A lecturer who gets paid by a student would immediately be dismissed."

Afterwards, she'd given in because the flat was vacant for a long time. Besides, nobody wanted a landlady like her. A proper bitch. One of those who ring your doorbell every day to check you haven't damaged anything. However, that was exactly what Frida wanted: to see Francesca every day. Because she was in love with her.

Fumagalli is a very lonely woman, so two weeks later she forgot all her principles. So now she goes to see Frida every day, even if it's just for a chat. She no longer cares about behaving inappropriately. Of course, she always needs an excuse. To check the boiler or take the rug to the dry cleaners. But the point is, they're all excuses.

"Do you have an invasion of ants, by any chance?" she asks. Or else, "A pipe burst on the third floor. Is there any damage?" Alternatively, she takes her a petition to sign against another resident. "The children on the fifth floor play ball in the living room after 10 p.m." and hands Frida a letter of protest she sat drafting until two in the morning.

Frida lets her in and offers her a drink. Usually, pineapple juice because Fumagalli won't touch alcohol. Not only because alcohol is fattening but because it's bad for the liver.

"You shouldn't drink so much beer, Cannavò," she tells Frida.

She even checks how much glass the other residents put into the recycling bin. "Sormani, up on the fourth floor, is an alcoholic." She shakes her head. She's got it in for Sormani for many reasons, and this is one. As far as she's concerned, failing to be moderate is inconceivable.

Frida can't call it a friendship yet – this would definitely be a huge conquest – because Fumagalli is a very restrained woman who only relaxes to a point. However, there's now a connection. Even though they're not on first-name terms yet. And Frida is certain that tonight – Christmas Eve – Francesca will drop by. Not necessarily to wish her a happy Christmas. She doesn't expect that much, but, from the little she knows about her, perhaps to complain about the neighbours who are celebrating a little too loudly. Never mind. Frida will be happy with that.

And here she comes. *Ding-Dong*.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Francesca says, "but unfortunately the family upstairs have the bad habit of setting off fireworks even on Christmas Eve, as though New Year's Eve weren't enough. Did they scorch the plants on the balcony, by any chance? It happened last year, you know."

Frida admits that there have been a couple of Catherine wheels, but that they've caused no damage. Meanwhile, she lets her in.

"Happy Christmas," she says with a smile.

She invites her to sit down on a damaged sofa which Fumagalli herself put in a one-room flat for rent. Naturally, Francesca doesn't even take off her coat.

She should teach Distance Psychology, they say about her. And laugh. Frida doesn't. She never laughs at these jokes. And not because she's in love with Francesca. She doesn't laugh because she thinks it's pointless for these young people to study Psychology if they can't put themselves in other people's shoes. She thinks it's sad to study for nothing.

She looks at Fumagalli and finds her beautiful, more than usual. Shame about that grimace, her lips protruding as though about to give a kiss, because she's angry with

somebody, the neighbours perhaps. Frida longs for a kiss. She knows it would never occur to Francesca. Not only is she not a lesbian, she's not a heterosexual either. She just isn't interested in kisses, it's obvious. She's a creature who's never been able to make herself even a little happy. Maybe that's why Frida loves her so much.

Once, she told her about her husband, the one who killed himself, but she didn't talk about him lovingly or with a sense of guilt, nothing like that. She said, "There are such things as hotel rooms." As though what irked her most was the fact that the nanny should have brought her son back from school earlier than expected that day. "I didn't even have time to clean up," she said. Frida was thinking of how dirty death was, but Francesca would never have ventured into such a visceral subject. For her it was only a matter of order and decorum. She still doesn't realise that life, too, is dirty, Frida thought. And she never will, even though every day she lectures on how we should handle our souls.

Frida has bought her a present all the same. After all, it's Christmas, so she has the perfect excuse to dare this kind of act. She's got her a CD. Because Francesca once told her that she'd heard *Folk Songs* on Swiss radio and liked them. That's what love is: remembering things. Of course, she'll get all embarrassed, Frida knows her well enough to know that. Never mind, she wants to make her happy even if it's impossible to make a woman who's never been able to seek happiness happy.

However, before giving her the package, a leap that could upset her or make her even more tense, Frida wants to chat for a while.

"How did the Christmas Eve dinner go?"

"Oh, a total disaster. That Vittorio didn't even turn up," Fumagalli replies. Whenever Francesca uses the determinate in front of his name, it means she's in despair. She has grammar in her arteries: if you sever it, it's in order to bleed to death.

"But wasn't the party at his home?"

"Yes, of course, but he didn't come all the same. Maybe because his wife decided to invite *that woman*," she explains, breathlessly. She's always so precise, and yet she loses any ability to be exact as soon as she touches on things that she cares about.

"That woman?" Frida makes no secret of the fact she has difficulty following.

"Vittorio's girlfriend, his new flame," Francesca replies. "I certainly didn't agree to inviting her, I assure you, of course, we didn't feel the need to. A gesture in very poor taste. Isn't our family complicated enough as it is? But Cristina thinks we're her property, just like Vittorio. If she thinks she can keep hold of my brother this way, she's very much mistaken. As a matter of fact, he ran away. At least I hope he did. That nothing's happened to him, in other words."

"Ran away?"

"Yes, it already happened when he was married to Ada. But then Ada crushed and humiliated him in every possible way. She did everything to make him feel insecure, so all Vittorio could do was run away. You have to be strong in order to leave. If you make someone weak, he won't leave, he'll *run away*. Remember this, Cannavò."

"Of course."

"All you have to do is see the state their daughter Paoletta is in."

"Because of Vittorio?"

"No, because of Ada! I wouldn't wish a mother like her on anybody. My niece is depressed, and I speak as a professional, not as an aunt. I've suggested she see a psychologist but she doesn't want to, says that she despises them all. Of course, I didn't take offence, we know that depressed people become very aggressive."

Frida senses that Francesca is trying to talk about herself. She's taking her niece's issues to heart because she can't take her own to heart. We're in confession territory. She, too, has been crushed by her mother's personality. However, as soon as she realises she's opened up too much, she changes the subject. Swerves away from the subject, to be exact. It's not a smooth procedure: Frida even hears the sound of the skidding.

"*Luckily*, my son hasn't called me yet," she says. "I wouldn't know how to tell him that Vittorio's disappeared. I don't want to worry him."

The fact that her son isn't even back for Christmas is a bad sign. But Francesca immediately justifies him, "He's gone to Mexico with his girlfriend," she says. "*Poor thing*, he works so hard at his studies. He has so few holidays."

Meanwhile, she looks down at her knees. Because she doesn't have the courage to look in the eye the person to whom she's telling all this bullshit.

Except that Frida has already worked out that things weren't going well with the son. She noticed it one evening when she'd gone up to Francesca's flat to teach her to use Skype. "He doesn't call me from the States because he has no money, *poor thing*," she said. And Frida wanted to help her. So she'd listened to a trial conversation. No sooner had they managed to activate the video, than Francesca immediately managed to irritate Marco. "Heavens, so many pimples!" she said. "Perhaps you should stop gorging on fish and chips, *Duckling*. Have you ever wondered why there is no much obesity in the States?"

"Mum, how many fucking times do I have to tell you I don't want to be called *Duckling* anymore?" he replied.

In just a few minutes, she'd managed to turn a free chat into an expensive one. It was pointless resorting to technology and the miracles of technology. Afterwards, she was so upset. She nearly cried. You felt sorry for her.

"Are you having lunch with your mother tomorrow?" Frida asks, not to rub it in.

Francesca smiles. She is reassured by elevator pitches. So reassured that she tends to give something away after just a few words.

"Of course I'm having lunch with my mother," she replies. "There's no way I'm letting her be on her own on Christmas Day. Even if yesterday we argued."

Then she touches her hair, in that simpering way only Frida likes so much. She raises her upper lip, as though to give a kiss, even though she doesn't mean to kiss, because she never thinks of kisses. It's just a tic.

"Why did you argue?"

"Because she doesn't want a carer," Francesca answers, raising her eyebrows. "Unfortunately, Marika can't stay the night because she has a husband. It's a big problem. Except that Mum can't be left alone at night, she really can't."

And now she brings up the carer, another obsession of hers. Sometimes she finds her and her obsessions ridiculous. However, she knows she's a twenty-two-year-old lesbian who isn't in the least interested in family dynamics. Perhaps that's her blind spot. After all, other people have their problems, too.

"What if something happens to her? What if she feels ill? Last month, for example, she fell in the kitchen. She climbed on a chair to look for biscuits I'd hidden. That stuff's

full of butter, a poison for her cholesterol. *Will you believe it, Frida, she went and broke her femur.*"

Frida feels her heart beat faster. Has she just called her by her first name? It's the first time and she didn't even notice. Of course, she would have preferred Francesca to do this in a different context, and not in relation to her mother's femur. And yet she's thrilled.

"She's just turned eighty-nine, so we can't act as though this weren't the case. If only Ada wouldn't interfere. Do you know what she said to that Vittorio?" Francesca continues, unperturbed, not even noticing the determinate again. "That Lucrezia still draws objects that will make Design history and I want to get her a carer. That's exactly what she said. So I'm a bad person. Of course, Ada doesn't give a damn about Mum's health. After all, she's not the one who's going to look after her if she ends up in hospital. She even defends her when she smokes. On that front, Mum even managed to corrupt Marika..."

Frida wishes so much she could put one hand over her mouth and, with the other, silently stroke her legs. They're still attractive. Shame Francesca only opens and closes them to do abdominals in her living room, lying on a light-blue mattress she bought from Decathlon for nine euros ninety. Frida has fallen in love with a woman who is neither a lesbian nor a heterosexual, because her neuroses don't allow her to be *anything*. She must remember that.

"Marika had the audacity to tell me that I can't decide what my mother should and shouldn't eat. According to her, I should obviously let her drop dead. Sorry, but I have a conscience. That's why I suggested to Cristina that she prepare sea bass this evening. If she'd made cutlets, Mum would have happily put away three. I mean, why don't we just kill her with fried food?"

Frida nods. She sees why men run away from people like that. She, however, is a woman, so has much more patience.

"And she drinks. She has a gin and tonic every night before bed. Her doctor told me. But no point beating ourselves up about it. When she goes to China or Israel, nobody can control her. Vittorio says that we'll kill her for real if we take her work away from her. But these are intercontinental trips, so I'm a little worried."

Well said – no beating ourselves up about it. Especially if you're already beaten, Frida thinks. She decides the time has come to interrupt her. "I have a present for you," she says.

Francesca stares at her, surprised, clearly not expecting it. "You shouldn't have, Cannavò," she replies.

Any act of tenderness immediately forces her to cling to formality, she can't help it. Yet she unwraps the package furiously, impatiently. When it comes down to it, she's a woman like any other: one who falls in love either with absence or with attention, it depends.

"It's nothing much," Frida says.

"Oh, the *Folk Songs*! I really wanted this. Thank you. Thank you so much."

She says nothing else, because she's overwhelmed with emotion in a part of herself where she's not used to feeling emotions and, rather than getting stuck – she, who talks so much – she keeps quiet.

"My favourite is the Azerbaijan love song," Frida says, "because it doesn't mean anything. Cathy Berberian couldn't speak Azerbaijani, but one day she listened to an old record and transcribed the lyrics by ear. The result is a text that makes no sense. The only

verse she understood, she understood because it was in Russian. It said that love is like a stove. But that doesn't make much sense either. Do you like things that make sense?"

7. Ada

(*His ex-wife*)

17 December 2014

Yesterday, I went to a party, a kind of Ambrosian Rite that's the same every year. You walk into the courtyard and there's a guy playing the bagpipes. They shove a candle at you and you have to climb the marble staircase like a good little shepherd, with boiling wax dripping over your hand. Upstairs, however, what awaits you isn't exactly a burns unit. The average age of the guests is eighty per leg, so I'm young in comparison.

Naturally, Vittorio was there, but without Cristina. She doesn't want to come anymore. She accompanied him one year and the hostess, not famous for her tact, said to Vittorio, "So you've brought *your daughter*." Vittorio took it on the chin with a laugh. He reminded her that we were separated and introduced his new partner. The hostess shook her hand and said, "Oh, it's *her*," and walked away.

"As you know, my wife doesn't have much self-irony," Vittorio said, accepting the candle torture. I'm not used to hearing Vittorio mention his *wife* and mean another woman, but I smiled. After all, I was very glad to see him there, especially without his *wife* at his side.

Before the dinner, with two hundred place settings, you have to sit through the concert. Everybody has to applaud the young talent of the day as though they're at La Scala. Even though you can see people with their heads drooping, asleep with their mouths open, individuals at death's door in wheelchairs, who moan between notes, and

there's always someone who's carried out on a stretcher during the interval, the post-concert comments are very appropriate. The educated Milanese never get caught unprepared about music – that would be shameful. It's all part of the *genius loci*, and forms a complete package, the Lare included – the Lare being La Scala.

Naturally, we sat very close to one another at the table, beneath a large golden cupid. It was a huge candelabra that threatened us with its elbow, but we tried to ignore it. We talked intensely, slightly hunched over our plates to avoid banging our heads against the precious arm. The presence of the candelabra was so imposing that we had fun consulting it. "What do you reckon he thinks of this?"

He may not miss me much as a wife, but very much so as a friend. Vittorio was dying to tell me so many things, especially about the book he's writing. Cristina isn't in a position to help him, she expects to get her hands on his manuscripts but only makes the situation worse. Fortunately, he realised this and has started to defend himself. You can accuse me of many things, and justly so, but not of this: of not having understood what my husband was doing. I may have neglected everything else – his body? The family? The house? – but not his work. Definitely not that. It's no coincidence that Vittorio hasn't written a novel worthy of the name for sixteen years. That is since we broke up.

Cristina has ruined him. Go and pick Giulia up from school. Will you take Giulia to the swimming pool? Giulia would like to go for a bike ride with you. How can he concentrate like this? Every time he has a novel published, Vittorio brings it to me, his head low. "It's just *a little something*," he says. As though apologising in advance. I read it straight away, hoping to find the writer I loved (and also married), but of that man there's no trace left.

"Do you think it's the fault of success?"

I burst out laughing. I looked at the golden cupid to see if he was laughing, too.

"You're such a masochist that you haven't even managed to enjoy your success," I replied. "Besides, you haven't had enough of it to use it as an excuse."

"Do you think it's old age?"

I got annoyed, because his old age is also mine, since we're the same age, but I didn't let on.

"You waste too much time," I said, a little tense.

He sighed. "Moreover, I used to live only for literature."

Was he trying to say that he'd discovered real life after me? Since the conversation was taking an ugly turn, I got up to go and fill my plate at the buffet.

After three glasses of wine, Vittorio confessed that he was seeing a young woman. *A twenty-six-year-old*, he insisted on specifying. I poked fun at him affectionately – a conversation for average Italian males – but I was thinking: this is a sad complicity. Vittorio is able to tell me about his escapades but not to have a serious conversation about our daughter. Actually, I don't have the courage, either.

Why do you think Paoletta is putting on so much weight? That's what I would have liked to ask him. What did I care about his twenty-six-year-old? I'm not obsessed with nutrition, like Cristina and Francesca, who check everything people put on their own plates, but Paoletta is challenging all my indifference to the subject. She gets so much fatter every day, it's almost frightening. She's like a menace. It's as though she wants to take over my space, to crush me. As though she were trying to say to me, Mum, am I not noticeable enough? There's also that damned taxi, which she bought to annoy us. I get the feeling her

every life choice is aimed at spiting her parents, and that's not good. It means there's no freedom.

But I'm a coward and I don't tackle the problem. I'm very aware that my relationship with Vittorio works because I don't play the part of the ex-wife or his daughter's mother. In his mind I'm his best friend. The venting is always one way and you need a lot of patience, as well as dedication, to make every conversation revolve only around him. However, I'm not doing charity work here, I admit it: it's a desire for power. Every now and then I get a bit fed up with the role, despite its huge rewards. Then I tell myself that, after all, a divorce like this one is precious and I carry on enduring. Deep down, I enjoy seeing that Vittorio can't make a single move without asking my permission. Of course, my narcissism – which I can't say is in any way inferior to his – is somewhat frustrated by the lack of reciprocity, but at the same time extremely flattered by the importance Vittorio gives to my every word. I give my own words far less importance. In the end, using them is an operation like any other. Only the most cynical or the most naive among us call it literature.

24 December 2014

I'm dying to give him a piece of my mind. He's certainly a piece of work. When I told him that, frankly, I was a bit fed up with spending Christmas at his place and that this year I was thinking of escaping to Paris before that, he literally begged me. Ple-e-ease, Ada, don't-leave-me-alone. As if he feels *lonely* without me. And, idiot that I am, I was touched. And then he didn't show up.

All right, it was worth being there just to see Cristina's face when she said, Sorry, I don't know what happened to my husband, all flustered, while the risotto was getting overcooked. A memorable page from the Fumagalli history which will not reach posterity just because I keep a diary which my daughter will burn. Paoletta has already warned me that she doesn't want to inherit any books because *they take up too much room*. She'd rather take up all the room herself. It's her revenge against paper, to which we have, as a matter of fact, devoted all our energy.

I've never had a talent for families – and I mean the strict minimum: a husband and a daughter – so I don't understand what I've done to deserve an extended one. I get divorced and, instead of getting rid of something I never really wanted, I receive stock options on the subsequent family, and became its unwilling shareholder. With a thirty-year-old daughter and an unhappily remarried husband, I could have gone anywhere I pleased. Instead, I let myself be trapped by a Christmas Eve dinner and he was the one who left. Honestly.