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Break is Over

Translated by Edward Williams

Year zero

There are certain decisions which define the arc that a whole life will follow, and, up till now, I have always taken those decisions randomly. If I'd had to make the same choice over again one minute later, I could quite easily have decided the exact opposite, and I don't think I've faced a single fundamental crossroads in my life with even the remotest form of deliberation or with an eye to any long (or even medium) term objective. My tendency is to try and avoid moving; to procrastinate until all possibilities have evaporated and I can finally go back to wallowing in my cocoon of indecisiveness. Or I let myself be dragged along out of inertia, and at a certain point find myself having done something without ever really having decided to do it, cradled in the reassuring cotton wool of irresponsibility. A couple of years ago, my mother, in the grip of an ephemeral fascination with the Far East, half forced me to read a book which illustrated, among other things, one typical feature of the Chinese way of thinking; a wise man, rather than act with a specific aim in mind, allows circumstances to take him where they want; there's no insisting, in the Western manner, on having by definition to be the forger of his own destiny. If this is actually as I have imagined it, therefore, the point is not that I am lazy, but that I am practically a model of the Taoist sage's wisdom.

The fact that I ended up doing a research doctorate is no exception; if we were to try to figure out how that started, we'd uncover, at the very most, a jumble of random circumstances, views held on to out of mere stubbornness well beyond the realm of reason, and a congenital inability to evaluate the consequences of my actions.

I am not one of those people who has an academic career written in their DNA. Apart from a good reading habit (which I have kept up despite not sharing it with any of my friends and despite my father being openly hostile to it), I was a rather mediocre university student. My only strength was my one skill. I could sense right from the outset what a lecturer wanted to hear people telling them,

and I only studied the things which helped me say exactly that, not a word more. I had a nose for which lectures to attend and which to sign in for and then shoot off, I anticipated which set books had to be read and which needed only a glance at the back cover, and I knew without fail how to identify which bespectacled female student I should ask to borrow notes from. In the end, I almost always stayed afloat like that, squandering much more energy and grey matter on working out what I could avoid doing than in actually doing something.

I got my literature degree, barely more than a decade after I matriculated, with a dissertation on Kafka, partly because the German Literature paper was one of the few I had studied with any pleasure, and partly because the lecturer was a tiny passionate little old man who I had immediately taken a liking to. My dissertation wasn't exactly a masterpiece, but all things considered it was the most enjoyable part of university. So enjoyable, in fact, that I lived with it for nearly three years and in the meantime had to find a different supervisor, because the tiny passionate little old man had passed away. In the end I discussed my dissertation with the new Professor of German Literature: a very tall, middle-aged alpha male who was permanently pissed off and with whom I sensed mutual intolerance at first sight.

After the viva I fell into a state of existential torpor, and for the first time in my life I began to feel my age weighing down on me. Halfway through their thirties, I reflected, my parents had done masses (children, jobs, mortgages, pets), my grandparents had been in the war and rebuilt the country, and my great-grandparents had died from the Spanish flu. Not only had I not done a single one of these things, but they all seemed incomprehensibly far beyond my horizon. And yet, I had always told myself, comparing one generation to another is objectively absurd. Grandparents and great-grandparents had to do things in a hurry, before a bombing or smallpox tore them from the love of their nearest and dearest, and our parents didn't have the internet, or Ryanair, or Pornhub; at a certain point the options ran out and you were left with family and career. Every generation makes its own history; we have a twenty year-long adolescence, but we know how to do things our grandparents only dreamt of doing, like booking a holiday in ten minutes and memorising a mind-boggling number of combinations of keys to play PES.

Unfortunately, however, all of a sudden, my contemporaries started to become adults too. Moronic, ultra-tattooed louts who just a moment before were living off king-size joints and cheap snacks to suppress their chemical hunger, whose horizons got lost somewhere between table-football and fantasy football and who dragged out the morning hanging around bars to avoid the shame of returning home before dawn, from one day to the next started turning up wearing wedding rings, with their offspring in tow: the embodiment of traditional family values. Of course, *I know* that they're the same moronic louts, I know that their happiness depends entirely on how well Juventus

does, I know their membership of the families clan is a flash in the pan and that their brats will find themselves with an exponentially increasing number of parents, as their natural ones separate and get hitched again and separate again and get hitched again and so on ad infinitum, finally bringing about the Platonic utopia of a community in which every child is everyone's child. I know this, and yet somehow, I wasn't was incapable of letting this sudden rush of events wash over me like everything else. I suddenly aged. Even the youngsters, the Millennials, that you see around the place with their SUVs, their man-bags, their combovers, have a full grasp of the facts when they talk to you about accountants, Euribor and miniclubs. And that's how I moved from the eternity of youth to the *horror vacuis* of old age, missing out on all the stages in between. And the more I feel myself ageing, the more I see taking shape on the horizon my personal version of the biological clock: the image of my father who wants me to inherit the family bar. I swore to myself and to him, when he dumped my mother (and me too, as a consequence), that I would not take over the Gori bar even if I was dead; and now it's clearer and clearer that he's waiting for my literature graduate's corpse to float past him so that he can snag me and force me to perpetuate his personal micro-business.

Maybe to get this feeling of indecisiveness and looming threat off my shoulders, I decide to make a trip over to Pisa. It only takes about twenty minutes by train from Viareggio, even if the typical Viareggian, reaching the edge of the city, sees rising up before them an imposing mental barrier wisely advising them never to leave, because beyond the city limits there can be nothing good. It's still early September, the invasion of students returning from their homes away from the university has still to begin, and I thought that spending a little time in the bars on Piazza Dante, where I frittered away the majority of my days as a student, might in some way deceive me into thinking that there was still time before I slipped into adulthood.

Barely had I opened my paper than who should pop up but Carlo, the Italian Studies department Scholar who conducted my viva for the Contemporary Italian Literature exam and fastidiously took me to pieces, after which we became good friends. He stays to have a coffee and updates me on the internal affairs of the department. The girl who's going out with the lecturer, the one who's getting a doctorate from Cornell and blithely sends everyone else to hell, the former head of department who's been diagnosed with a tumour on his prostate, the PhD student who, after years of academic intimidation, ended up having a nervous breakdown, the secretary who hasn't stopped deliberately hiding Professor Lanza's papers in an act of wilful and disinterested bullying. He then moves on to illustrate the internal fights over this year's doctoral grant applications. When he got his, there were around twenty-five research grants in the whole Faculty of Letters; today there are four and they are shared between six departments. And if that wasn't enough, one of the four is

destined for the University of Florence, where PhDs in literature have been suspended until further notice.

“Now most of the professors advise against doing a doctorate,” Carlo says.

“Yes, I know. They all tell you to go abroad.”

“Exactly. As if abroad was somewhere you could post your CV to. If they really wanted to help, they should tell you where to go, who to write to. But they haven’t got a clue either. When you think that after my degree, Sacrosanti advised me to try and find something in Berlin, because I was the best in my field. A shame that ‘in Berlin’ there are probably forty universities.”

I smile but, as often happens when he tells me these things, I don’t have a very clear idea where he’s going with it.

“Anyway, the lecturers prefer not to have anything to do with research degrees. It isn’t a field where the barons wish to exercise their power anymore. And yet there are some people who are still attached to it, to the little skirmishes to see who’s got the biggest one.”

“Sacrosanti, for example” I say, because in reality I do have a kind of idea where he’s going with it.

The Illustrious Professor Sacrosanti is a kind of *dominus* in the Faculty of Letters; formerly a left-wing political activist with a whiff of terrorism about him back in the seventies, like the most alert of that revolutionary brood he slipped away in time and reconnected with academia, without even having to renege on his ideas too much. In fact, even today he gets angry if people call him left-wing: “I am a *communist*, not left-wing” he snaps back; and sometimes, as a kind of a pose, he declares himself to be Maoist or even Stalinist. That said, I have an excellent memory of Sacrosanti; he’s someone who has studied all his life and has understood the things he was studying. His lectures were somewhat theatrical, but very enjoyable and he was even up for being challenged. On top of this, he’s not one of those lecturers who get teaching assistants to give their classes or who change direction halfway through the year depending on what they happen to be working on. Basically, seriously, hats off. His Achilles’ heel, however, is the almost erotic pleasure he gets from academic power relationships. Power has always followed him, with all the more reason since he became Chair of the Faculty of Letters. He’s capable of paralysing the whole Italian Studies department if his chosen candidate doesn’t get a lectureship with tenure, of blocking someone from becoming a visiting professor in America if a given friend of his is not invited to give the guest masterclass, or of boycotting an appointment if he’s not allocated two of the four PhD places available.

This last case happened just recently: two of the PhD bursaries are allocated to Italian Studies (one of which will go in the end to Italian Studies and the other to Literary Theory, both fields headed up by him), one to History of Theatre and Cinema (as a result of which with hindsight there

will be a fratricidal clash between the Theatre faction and the Cinema faction within the Florence performing arts course) and the last one to Modern History, which is already destined for a student from the Scuola Normale, a twenty-three year old who already has to his credit a highly quoted monograph on the economy of the 17th century and was acknowledged by Carlo Ginzburg in his most recent essay.

“And do people already know who Sacrosanti’s candidates are?” I ask Carlo.

He smiles. You get the idea that he’s inherited a little of the libido that comes from handing out livings, because of all the Sacrosantists he is one of the Illustrious Professor’s most highly rated scions. “Raffaele says not, but that’s all part of the game. But it is true that this time there aren’t any names he’d fight to the death for.” Raffaele is Sacrosanti’s Christian name, using it being the exclusive prerogative of a magic circle to which Carlo thoroughly deserved one of the honorary membership cards thanks to fifteen years’ collaboration, which was not always remunerated.

“So why did he want two bursaries?”

Carlo shrugs his shoulders. Maybe he’s a tad floored by such a naïve question. Then he offers an answer which in his mind should clarify things for me. “He’s retiring in a few years’ time.”

I respond with one of my bovine looks.

“Yes, in fact...” he tries to explain, “these are his last shots. If he wants one last student to supervise, he has to take them on now.”

“So you mean no one’s been co-opted?”

“I didn’t say there’s no one. I said the game is still open.”

“Except that...” I invite him to pull the rabbit out of the hat.

He shows me a piece of paper. Names and numbers. Initially I don’t understand, then suddenly I remember. Carlo is a kind of bookie. He’s showing me the odds he’s giving the competitors for the doctoral bursaries.

“The list isn’t complete, given that applications are still open. And so even the odds are susceptible to change. Say a mafia boss applies, it’s obvious I’m going to give him odds of 1/2 and the others’ odds will increase a bit. But if you want to make a bet now, these are the odds.”

The doctolottery. I used to bet regularly, but the dynamics of the university were always so obscure to me that I never even got anywhere near landing on a winning name.

I glance over the candidates; there must be seven or eight of them.

“So few?” I ask.

“These are just the possibles.”

They range from the lowest odds of 2/1 for one Camasta, to the highest of 25/1 for the last two.

“Who are these?”

“The last one is Giacomo Mattei. You remember him?”

“No.”

“Of course you do, come on. It must be the twelfth time he’s tried for a doctorate. He’s the guy with the 1980s glasses who claims to have written a Manganellian dictionary but can’t find anyone to publish it.”

“Of course! The guy who used to go to summer camps where they only speak Latin.”

“But with the *restored* pronunciation.”

I smile and gloss over it: “And the other one?”

“That’s all the odds and sods. The ones who don’t appear on the list. Or rather the ones who objectively have no chance.”

“But do you have to choose one of them?”

“No, you can make a block bet.”

“Ok, well, tempting...”

“It’s a suicidal bet, though. If someone’s going to win, rest assured that I will know.”

“Hang on, let me have another look.”

I run my eye over the other names on the list. I know almost all of them; and, anyway, my ten years at university can’t have slipped past without leaving something behind. Crossing off Giacomo Mattei, who by definition has no chance, the others are all the cream of the student body. People who got their degree on time, who got firsts, did further study, read a lot and did an Erasmus placement at the Sorbonne or in Tübingen. People for whom, thirty years ago, a post would have been kept warm even before they had their viva on their dissertation, and yet today, by contrast, you find them fighting over the crumbs and in a few years’ time, if all goes well, teaching Italian and history in the Lower Po Valley at the Germano Mosconi vocational institute where they speak in dialect, interrupt with swear-words and where teachers are the lowest rung on the social and human hierarchy. And there’s every chance those same teachers will turn up to school armed with Kalashnikovs the day they discover that even the Head spells <po’> with an accent instead of an apostrophe.

“Who’s the favourite, Camasta? Do I know him?”

“No. I don’t know her either.”

“So how come you’re giving her odds of 2/1? What is she, a student from the Normale on amphetamines?”

“She’s from Bologna, Savoia’s favourite.”

“Who?”

“Come on, you even sat an exam on his paper. The Pirandello expert.”

“Oh, yes, of course! *One, no one and less than one* by Giovanni Savoia. I never read it; with a title like that I thought there was little chance it would have anything intelligent to say.”

“And yet it’s a great book. He’s someone they invite to Stanford once a year. And on top of that he’s close friends with Raffaele.”

“But why aren’t you listing Pier Paolo as a dead cert?”

He frowns. Pier Paolo is a student from the Normale who Sacrosanti rates highly and objectively it seems odd that he’s not a favourite.

“In my opinion he’ll choose to do his doctorate at the Normale and not in the department here.”

“Well, ok, I get it; Camasta is the safest bet.”

“How much are you betting?”

“Ten euros. But put them on Giacomo Mattei. In my opinion this is the year of the underdog.”

Once I’m back from Pisa, I go and have dinner at my dad’s place; he’s responsible – according to the post separation agreement – for one dinner a week, the only time I don’t have dinner at home with my mother or eat pizza with someone, so effectively the one time I eat badly.

I know that, on the brink of turning thirty, I should be a little more independent, but, given my professional situation, it’s impossible for me to cover the cost of rent from my expense account. If all goes well, in the winter I scrape together 50 euros a month on Saturday evenings as a waiter in the restaurant where my friend Franz works, 50 euros every other Sunday doing the lunchtime shift, since the boss took out a season ticket so that when Viareggio are playing at home he doesn’t come into work, a hundred or so euros a month from giving private Italian lessons to some middle-school kid whose parents are desperate because they can’t afford a real teacher and fall back on me, because I charge 12 euros an hour and go to their house for the lessons as I haven’t got a house of my own, and finally a little money now and then from updating – in three languages: Italian, English and somewhat creative German – the website of a local firm which manufactures expensive fabrics and has international ambitions (a job that I refer to with the English term *copywriting* to give myself a share of international flavour too). Total: I barely make it to 500 euros a month, mercifully almost all cash in hand.

This evening, however, I have to admit that my father is not on his worst form. We’ve almost finished eating the chicken and potatoes that he got from the deli, by drowning it in heaps of mayonnaise and drinking Morettis, and he still hasn’t broached any of his usual hobbyhorses: what

I'm wearing; the fact that I do nothing morning, noon and night; the fact that I don't want to go and work with him at his bar; some important milestone reached by one of my contemporaries, usually the offspring of friends of his who I suspect of telling him a load of bullshit, which my father laps up like pure gold because it confirms in his mind that he ended up with a son who was the only renegade in the whole province of Lucca.

The fact that we didn't get onto any of these subjects means that we ate practically in silence, not having many other subjects of conversation. Anyway, I sense that our evening was, all things considered, an acceptable father-son one, and I am feeling for him some sort of remote form of affection, for no other reason than because I think he finally went to a different deli. Maybe now that we have both reached a certain age, we can begin to have a more mature relationship. I even decide to share that thought with him, in some form or another.

"Hey, you know, that chicken was pretty good?"

"What do you mean?" he asks suspiciously.

"Nothing. Just that it was good."

"I got it from the deli; it's not like I cooked it myself."

"I know, but it was better than usual." I accompany the comment with a smile, as if to emphasise that I'm not joking, being ironic, provoking him or deploying heaven knows what other subtle tactic of covert aggression, but just showing a banal courtesy like normal people do when sharing a meal.

He, on the other hand, doesn't seem to trust my peaceful intentions, and I think there are two reasons for this; the first is that we have practically never had a normal conversation, and the second is that smiling is not my strong point. I suspect it's because I have to make a deliberate attempt to smile, given that smiling doesn't come naturally to me, and therefore the result looks like a sneer, or at best a temporary paralysis.

"Roberta's on holiday," he says, then pauses. "Anyway, you're right, this chicken is good. It's cooked under a brick, instead of on a spit." This expansion into superfluous details surprises me even more than the change of deli.

He gets up to clear the plates and the foil cartons and comes back to the table with two bowls, two teaspoons and a tub of proper hand-made ice cream. Now it's my turn to be suspicious. I'm prepared to believe that he wants to share his opinions on the delis of Viareggio with me, but that instead of picking up the tub of twin-flavoured chocolate and vanilla from Esselunga he should have gone to an artisan gelateria without an ulterior motive seems to me frankly implausible. I find myself wondering what bitter pill this ice-cream is intended to sweeten. Two hypotheses spring to mind.

The first is that he has some illness he's about to announce to me. His meekness over supper could be a clue to support this hypothesis; he was trying to resign himself to the idea of leaving an imperfect world and an even more imperfect son, and to enjoy those little pleasures in life which he has always denied himself: changing deli, eating artisanal ice-cream, not insulting me.

The second hypothesis is that my father has 'found love again', as old people say; that at nearly seventy years old, his heart has started beating again and that now he's about to declare it, maybe with some clumsy words which will make me awfully embarrassed for him. I wonder who could possibly make my father's heart beat (apart from Herrera's InterMilan and, a bit less, Mourinho's) but above all I wonder whose heart my father could set a flutter because, even though he might have been quite attractive in the past, he now seems little more than a grumpy old man with Mephistophelian breath stinking of MS cigarettes (despite, at least officially, not having smoked for the last twenty years). Maybe, I tell myself, some carer from the former Warsaw pact; a woman who grew up under real socialism and escaped from a patriarchal society made up of violent men, permanently swollen with vodka seems to me the only human type to whom my father might seem a good match. Clues supporting the romantic hypothesis: freshly shaved, acceptable smell in the house, interest in the difference between chicken cooked under a brick and on a spit.

The ice-cream might have been even better than the chicken, but I gulp it down with my head sunk between my shoulders, waiting for my father to play his trump card. But instead, we eat in silence, and I am just this close to taking the initiative and telling him he's ill. Or in love. In either case something serious. But in the end, I hold back; a few more days of not knowing can't do me any harm.

"Oh, hang on a moment," he says when I am practically out of the door and have my jacket on and my helmet in my hand. "I got this for you," he says, handing me a paper bag from a bookshop (not so much a bookshop, more a book supermarket, but I am too disconcerted to split hairs). He's got me a gift: a sign that things are even more serious than I thought.

A heavy gift, I ascertain when I take hold of the carrier bag.

"But..." I stammer, looking at him I'm not sure how.

I don't finish my sentence and take the large book out of the bag. Title: *954 posts for reception and security staff. Public exam for the Ministry of Cultural Heritage*. I'm confused. Then even before I understand, I can feel the anger rising up inside me.

"What is this?" I hiss. My father has never in his life got it right with presents, but this is a masterpiece of manipulation dressed up as a gift.

"It's...one of those books to help you prepare for public exams. There's one part with the things you need to study and another with boxes to tick."

“What public exam?”

“The Ministry... well, some Ministry. All you need is a high school diploma, to enter, anyway it’s a permanent job and all the rest.”

“What all the rest?”

“I don’t know. The salary, for example. Piero told me there was this public exam, you know, his daughter works at the Ministry in Rome, she’s the director or something...”

“...”

“Hmm, I thought I was doing you a favour. Seeing as you don’t want to come and work at the bar...”

“So, I’m supposed to become a museum guard? Spend the day in an empty corridor staring into space and telling children not to flick their snot onto the pictures? I’m supposed to tear off people’s tickets for the rest of my life? Is that what I studied for, in your opinion?”

“Yeah...well you’ve studied now...It’s just you find work repulsive. And you’re also a snob, thinking that the jobs that normal people do are to be spat on.”

My father, maybe for the third time in his life, went into a bookshop, and not to buy my first work and realise that he had a genius for a son, but to pick up a 40 euro volume in the hope that some permanent little job as a guard in an empty museum might be within his (that is to say my) reach. Or even that my giving in to sitting that public exam might smooth the way to my agreeing to start managing the bar.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I say with resentment.

“Because you always thought you had a golden willy. He has to play the *intellectual*, doesn’t he.”

“Yes, I am an intellectual. And so?”

“And so, who do you think is going to give you the money to play the intellectual your whole life?”

“The university.”

“So, now the university is paying you? Have they decided to pay permanent extras?”

“I’m starting my doctorate in January,” I fire off.

“And that means?”

“That means that the university will pay me a salary to continue my studies.”

“Pay you?”

“Yes, pay me. It’s the first step towards becoming a university lecturer.”

My father isn’t sufficiently familiar with the academic world to raise objections, and I think that for a moment the idea passed through his brain that maybe he underestimates me. This

hypothesis lasts a fraction of a second and I'm sure that immediately afterwards he must have started thinking that a doctorate, which would be the glory of anyone else's child, must have virtually no value at all.

But I don't give him the time to respond, and in a split-second slam the door and rush down the stairs four at a time as far as the front door. *I will do a doctorate*, I tell myself in a state of rage, exaltation and the complete collapse of all reality, as I kick start my Vespa PK hoping that for once it'll burst into life straightaway.

The problem is that if Carlo had to quote me odds in the doctolottery, he'd have to quote me at 40/1, or significantly more than Giacomo Mattei's improbable victory would pay out, given that he has to his credit at the very least a solid experience of failed doctoral applications. There isn't a single variable on the table which could work to my advantage. From the curriculum to academic sponsors, from charm to political contacts, from personal relationships to my age, there is objectively no reason for choosing me instead of anyone else.

And yet I am now *committed*, as people say in poker, even though the cards I have in my hand would wisely advise me to walk away. At this point I've wagered so much that it's no longer worth my while passing; I might as well tempt fate, however improbable.

I've given away too much, and worst of all to my father, to afford to call myself off. So, I start studying again, despite being aware that it's inconceivable that I could make up the gap which had built up over a decade of unmethodical and for the most part forgotten reading versus the flawless, enriched and well organised academic journeys of my adversaries. The only advantage of trying for the doctoral bursary is that for the time being it resolves my problem of having too much free time.

In the time I dedicated to preparing for the exam, I managed to re-read my (super-respectable) undergraduate dissertation, revise a few things in the Italian Literature manual, *aka* "Ferroni", and attempt to decipher the notes I made for the Contemporary Italian Literature paper that I took with Sacrosanti.

And then if it doesn't work out, I'll deploy the standard alibi: in the end, it's not what you know...

Three days before the written exam, I get a message from Carlo.

"So, you're doing the exam?"

It seems almost like a reproach.

"Oh yeah," I reply. I want to keep an eye on my investment."

"But why didn't you tell me?"

“You’d have advised me not to.”

“Of course.”

“Chill out Charlie. I won’t upset your Bolognese girl.”

“No risk of that.”

“Do I have any hope of coming second?”

“No.”

“Tell me one thing; what odds are you giving me?”

“There’s no chance I’m giving you odds. You’re in the odds and sods list.”

“So, can I divert my ten euros to odds and sods then?”

“Your bet is invalidated.”

“So, you’ll give me back my ten euros?”

Carlo stops replying.

The following day he messages me: “At least take a look at Sacrosanti’s *Pragmatics of the Novel*.”

“And my ten euros?” I insist.

“That’s the price of the advice I’ve just given you.”

The he shuts himself off in a silence which I know this time will last at least until after the bursary process is over.

Taking a look at *Pragmatics of the Novel* is, in fact, all I manage to do. In the sense that Carlo has advised me to take a look with less than 48 hours to go before the written exam, and surprise, surprise, they don’t have it in the Viareggio library; I have to order it on Amazon. And in the end that tome of nearly 500 densely written pages, the Sacrosantian *magnum opus*, requires more than the one afternoon and evening I can dedicate to it, and not even the whole evening given that I had to go and retrieve my good luck charm from Dario, a hypochondriac friend of mine, who needed it for heaven knows what medical tests, and we end up spending the evening mucking around.

And so I just about manage to get three quarters through the introduction to *Pragmatics of the Novel*. Maybe, I tell myself, I’ll pick it up again on the off chance they put me forward for the viva. Or more likely, probably never.

The stubs of Giacomo Mattei’s fingers, eaten down to the bone from years of ferocious nibbling which has already made his nails disappear along with various layers of skin, extract from its envelope the topic for the written exam: “The grotesque. Basing their work on Bakhtin and Kayser, the candidate should summarise the grotesque aesthetic of an author, a movement or a period of

their choice.” The thirty or so present look at each other with an unmistakable expression of bewilderment. The phrase practically everyone is muttering beneath their breath is: “What a fucking topic.” Which is undeniable, but what do you know, it’s exactly *my* fucking topic, seeing as in the only text which I revised for the exam, that is to say my undergraduate dissertation, there is a whole chapter dedicated to the grotesque in Kafka. In virtue of this, *by pure chance*, I have an idea who Bakhtin and Kayser are, and so I set about writing an excellent essay, thinking of all the wells of knowledge sitting around me being pulverised in one second by my stroke of luck.

Judging from the marks for the written paper, however, my enthusiasm in the heat of the moment was less justified than I had thought; it went ok, definitely, certainly better than the predictions the day before were suggesting, but it wasn’t quite the triumph that I was anticipating when I handed in my essay. I got 27, an excellent mark, but not enough for me to sit the viva as the favourite. Agnese Camasta, the girl from Bologna that Carlo’s doctolottery had at 2/1, got a nice round 30, which I would say places her comfortably beyond my reach, but also beyond the reach of anyone else. I come next with my very honourable 27, and after that two of the favourites – Pier Paolo and Virginia – who also got good marks, but less than mine: 26 and 25. All of which might, from a false perspective, make one think that I start in pole position for the second bursary (three years at 1,200 euros a month *to study*, I tell myself again, savouring the dream before it slips from my grasp), but in truth, once we factor in other qualifications and the dissertation marks, I’m number four. To win in the viva, I’d have to get past both Pier Paolo and Virginia by at least two marks, which honestly seems impossible.

Even being allowed to take the viva, however, is a victory. There are just four of us out of thirty, which catapults me among the best, something which I have rarely been in my whole life. I won’t be able to capitalise financially on this business, spending three years studying at the expense of the Ministry of Education and Research, but I will be able to leave my university experience with my head held high. And that’s already a victory, if you can be satisfied with that; and in all modesty, being easily satisfied is one of the things I do best.

On the 10 December the four of us who’ve got through to the viva find ourselves in a corridor on the fourth floor of Palazzo Ricci, beside the puny little room where they’ve decided to examine us. I will be the third to go in, according to the notice they’ve stuck to the door with a bit of Sellotape. As a former student of this university, and in the presence of that girl from Bologna, the *crème de la crème* of foreign scholarship, I’m a tad ashamed of this almost ostentatious sloppiness. Fortunately, the tone is raised somewhat by the arrival of Sacrosanti, elegant and poised, who,

before shutting himself away with his colleagues, stops to greet us personally, and says a word and half a remark to each one.

For me he has in store a “You’re Kafka, aren’t you?”, referring (I hope) to my essay. He gives my hand a good shake, firm but not overpowering, sure of itself but reassuring at the same time. Him passing through has the effect of releasing the tension. We start chatting. It takes me just five minutes to realise that all three of them are from a different planet than me, and I’m not just referring to the notions that they display with regard to literature and literary criticism, but also their deep knowledge of academic geopolitics. In this field, the unchallenged expert is Pier Paolo, the Normale student from Puglia who got his degree under Sacrosanti and who, it seems, preferred to study for a doctorate with him than doing it at the Normale. Pier Paolo, with admirable competence, rattles off plots and sub-plots from Italian literary academia: who studied under whom, who can’t stand whom, who nicked whose wife, who copied whom, who doesn’t go to whose conferences, who goes to whose conferences but bad mouths them in private, who dumped whom, who owes a favour to whom, who can’t bear whom but has to hide it because that person is much more powerful than they are, who has no hope of securing a post from whom unless who intervenes, who destroyed whose career, who had to flee abroad to escape whose vetoes, who is waging war on whom from abroad, who brought his brain back to Italy to get it mangled by palace intrigue, who writes an article for a journal edited by whom with the aim of making whom pay off their debts and create a post for whom putting a spanner in whose works. When his systems of equations reached five unknowns, I stopped following him.

Pier Paolo’s overview is interrupted by Virginia – a pale, quiet girl who as far as I could make out had specialised in the 16th century – who makes the most of a second when Pier Paolo is catching his breath to ask the girl from Bologna what areas she studied for her degree.

In less than ten seconds she reveals the intimately supernatural side to herself; even though up till one second before she looked quite anonymous, barely has she opened her mouth than she suddenly becomes totally stunning, with a charm which I don’t fall in love with straightaway only because I don’t want to risk contaminating her divinity. She has a deep voice which a slight Emilian lilt makes immediately attractive. She tells us about her dissertation on *Eros and Priapus*, but she could be talking about anything at all, given that after thirty seconds we are all under her spell. And yet she deftly moves from Gadda to *Breaking Bad*, thence to a few far from banal judgements on *The X Factor*, and then on Ghali and *The Lady* by Lory del Santo without failing to slip in a remark on the way Grand Theft Auto has remodelled the collective and relational imagination of teenagers. Whatever she touches on, she does so with lightness, refinement and edge and she seems capable of ennobling a tv series or a YouTuber simply by mentioning their name. In a moment we’ve forgotten

the sordid academic plotting that Pier Paolo had been revealing with great competence and we allow Agnese Camasta to lead us by the hand to peaks of alexandrine erudition, thence to glide down over the most ingenuous pop: from Bolaño to Lukaku and then from Bello FiGo to Berlioz.

Virginia and I are enchanted, and we compete for who laughs loudest at her subtle and brilliant remarks; Pier Paolo tries to intervene and let people see that he knows stuff too, about both culture and trash, but he comes over as crude and affected where the girl from Bologna is light and perfectly natural. I am genuinely happy that she should secure one of the bursaries, and I feel a certain pride at even participating in the same championship as her, despite knowing that there's no match between us.

The viva is just a chat.

The questions are insubstantial and simply serve to fill the required half an hour without serious embarrassment, conversing as if we were in a bar: about the course of study, the dissertation and possible research projects. The examiners display courtesy and bestow smiles, and I feel like punching all three of them. All they are doing is confirming one of Carlo's old sayings: no examiner worth their salt allows the viva to decide anything. The game is decided between the written exam and the evaluation of qualifications; a dull viva guarantees that the balance which has been established a priori be maintained, far from prying eyes. Which in our case means the totally justified triumph of Camasta and the second bursary to the very solid Pier Paolo.

In the final ranking, which they attach to the notice board with a piece of Sellotape that afternoon, again printed out crookedly on a sheet of A4, I come out third, three marks below Pier Paolo and one mark above Virginia.

The first of the losers. It niggles me a bit, but objectively it's better than I could have hoped for.

"Hey, Carlo!"

"Marcello..." he seems to hesitate.

"Tell all. I thought you'd ghosted me."

"Well, the exam is over now."

"I did pretty well, didn't I?"

"Listen..." he begins to say. I don't like his tone.

"Hey, is everything ok? You sound odd."

"Camasta turned it down. She won a bursary from the Cattolica in Milan, and she's turned this one down."

"You what?!" I say. Then I realise: "So that means...I've got one?"

"You have got a bursary, yes." His voice is still funereal though.

"And aren't we pleased?"

"Well, in my opinion you're making a terrible mistake."

"By doing a doctorate? You don't want me to follow in your tracks?"

"It's a world of shit, Marcello."

"Listen, Carlo, you guys who say it's a world of shit but then sit in it up to your necks are killing me. Who forced you to sit in that world of shit?"

"Raffaele isn't happy at all."

"But excuse me, if he was the guy who gave me the bursary?"

"You didn't *win* a bursary; she turned one down."

"And what can I do about that?"

"It would have been better if Virginia had got it."

"So, they couldn't have placed her ahead of me, then?"

"Right; that's what I said."

"In what sense?"

"Instead, they put you in third place because in any case they knew the other two were safe, then Virginia needed to be put in fourth place so as not to have all Sacrosanti's students on the podium. Sacrosanti is someone who's keen on form; if he wins, there's no reason to win hands down."

"So, I was there just to give a veneer of transparency?"

"Come on Marcello! You don't really think you're better than them? Camasta is a phenomenon, someone who at twenty has already translated Perec, and Pier Paolo has published his dissertation and three articles in Q1 journals. And even Virginia..."

"I don't need you to spell it out. I'm perfectly aware that I'm second-rate. If they applied for a hundred bursaries, they'd get all one hundred, and I'd get none. And yet in one of those hundred, I come in third and the number one is heading off to study somewhere else, mortally wounding Sacrosanti's ego. But what can I do about it? That's the way things went."

"Things went even worse than that."

"In what sense?"

"She's going to study with Martesana."

"And who is Martesana?"

"You really do know sweet fuck all."

"Affirmative."

“Martesana is Sacrosanti’s arch-enemy.”

“God, these sixty-year-olds have arch-enemies; it’s not like they’re Batman.”

“Those two have been working on the same subjects all their lives, always giving each other a good beating.”

“Wow. Cassius against Foreman.”

“Much better. More subtle, more compelling. A clash of pen nibs which has lasted twenty-five years. Every time one of them publishes anything, everyone’s trying to find the jibes against the other one.”

“Compelling, for sure.”

“Oh, but aren’t you the person wanting to get into this world?”

“And you lot don’t want me there.”

“It’s not that we don’t want you there.”

“Well...”

“Well, it’s a delicate situation.”

“Meaning?”

“Think about it: Sacrosanti was supposed to get the finest brain of your generation, apart from the fact that Camasta is five years younger than you...”

“Six. She did reception class.”

“Anyway, Raffaele was pretty happy because he was getting the phenomenon and instead Martesana is taking the phenomenon and he ends up with...”

“Me.”

“Exactly.”

“And is that serious?”

“See for yourself.”