

DEAD RAT ROAD

NUMBER 1

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1.

That day at eight o'clock, Marina had called the lift. Just like every morning. The fourth floor was really too much for her left foot, which had turned inwards ever since her twin sister had got into a transverse position during the birth. They didn't look alike at all, but they were both girls and it was awkward.

She would have preferred a brother. She dreamed that he would help her, with his strong muscles, to climb the eight interminable flights of stairs when the lift was out of order – which was every other day.

Her twin, Marcella, was ill. She was always ill. Marina, on the other hand, was strong enough to make up for that shortcoming, as Aunt Nellina would say with a disconsolate air, looking at her wayward foot. She would have strangled her if she hadn't been old and rather funny.

Marina was running late; her big blue eyes bulged roundly as she scanned the stairwell, but nothing – everything – was still.

She was quite beautiful. She aroused jealousy, and ugly people consoled themselves by staring at her foot. It was an interesting phenomenon, and every time it happened, she would jot down the date, the time, who had done it, and why in a little notebook. She guessed the reason, she didn't actually know it. When she grew up she wanted to be a psychologist, so she'd look up cases on the internet and make a diagnosis every time. Obsessive-compulsive. Borderline. Just unhappy. Schizophrenic.

"It must be broken", she'd thought, and she'd set off quickly, taking two steps at a time, already imagining the scene with Miss Carla over her usual five-minute delay. She was always amazed at how flawlessly that awkward foot did its job.

2.

That day at eight o'clock, Sergio had called the lift. Even the short flight of stairs from the mezzanine to the front door left him out of breath. His was the smallest flat in the block. That was why the other residents looked at him with a mixture of pity and disgust every time they bumped into him in the entrance hall. His hands were always dirty from whatever he'd been doing a minute earlier. Urgent tasks such as colouring a card for his great-

grandmother's birthday, moulding a clay spider to play a prank on his mum, or kneading bread to burn in the oven.

The lift had seemed out of order, for this reason he'd set off quickly so as not to be late for school. He hoped to bump into the twins on the way – his best friends and, in turn, his classmates. When he grew up, he would marry Marina and be Marcella's boss. When he'd confessed his feelings to Marina, she'd replied encouragingly, "Sometimes you get more handsome as you grow up". When he'd confessed his feelings to Marcella, she'd replied peremptorily, "If anything, I'll be your boss". In both cases, he'd replied, "That's true".

3.

At ten past eight that day, Marcella had poked her nose out from under the sheets with unparalleled joy. Her fever had finally broken, and she was already relishing the role of an only child – something she'd never had the chance to experience, being the twin of that stunning Marina, who, thank goodness, had a crooked foot so that people would occasionally look away.

She'd heard a peculiar commotion on the stairs and thought, "It must be that scatterbrain Marta who always leaves the lift door open; thank goodness I'm resting today", and she'd turned her pillow to the cool side to laze about a bit longer, waiting for her grandmother to come and look after her. She was already looking forward to the games of *Scala Quaranta* and the church gossip that her grandmother knew how to recount in such a special and very funny way. And the soup with cheese, just like when she was little. As she was thinking, she saw a little piece of pink fabric fluttering at the window. It had looked just like Ratta Francesca's dress, but that surely couldn't be possible. She had closed her eyes and fallen back asleep.

4.

At quarter past eight that morning, Mum Sandra had made the beds – all of them except one – because her twin daughter Marcella had seen fit to fall ill the night before. She was already imagining her hectic day ahead, thanks to the half-hour delay caused by her

mother's slowness and bad temper. Whenever she asked her for help with the girls, her mother would always say, "Oh well, I suppose I'll have to miss my game of Burraco, Mass and a stroll in the park with Sofia, but I can take her, can't I?"

The house would soon be overrun by fleas from that dirty but very likeable dog that entertained the twins more than their grandmother ever did. It was drizzling, so everything would soon stink of wet dog and the muddy paw prints would make the floor slippery. She'd imagined her mother lying in the bathroom with a broken femur and Marcella screaming and calling her during that very important meeting at the office. Then she stopped thinking, made herself a coffee and got all dressed up.

She thought she'd heard a scream, then got angry with herself and with her imagination, which had always kept her busy but also filled her head with so many thoughts.

5.

At half past eight that day, Lina had leaned out from the balcony to see if her rat, Francesca, had fallen into the street again, but she hadn't seen a thing. No squashed Francescas, no screaming ladies, no rats on passers-by's hats – all things that had actually happened in the past.

She was very worried. The rat hadn't eaten her kibble and there was no poo in the litter tray. She hadn't drunk her milk. She hadn't chewed up encyclopaedias and hadn't made a nest in her jumpers.

She hadn't frightened the nurse or the carer, who had felt, unlike her, very relieved not to find her. Lina was in a state of utter despair and so she had called her daughter in Paris. Her daughter had shouted back, "Mum, you're mad! You're giving me a heart attack calling me at this hour. I thought something had happened to you. Don't ever do that again!" and had hung up.

But something had happened to her. Something terrible had certainly happened to her rat Francesca, and this had plunged her into a deep state of sadness. The situation was extremely serious. It was just that no one around her seemed to have realised it.

6.

At eight thirty-two that morning, Giovanni, the caretaker of the block of flats, had welcomed the postman and sorted all the envelopes into the letterboxes. He had been working there since he was a child, and that ritual reminded him of his father, from whom he had inherited the role.

He knew his job well and was loved by everyone because he took people's personalities into account. He addressed the twins as 'Miss', greeting them one at a time, something that never happened to them.

He handed Sergio a damp handkerchief for his hands and allowed him to look in his toolbox whenever he took the initiative to build one of his strange robots made of wood and iron. He would take Francesca the rat to Lina's every time she ran off down the stairs, holding her gently in his arms and taking care not to take the lift so as not to frighten her with all that noise. He would hide Francesca in his pocket if he came across a resident who wasn't one of the four who loved the building's rat with all their hearts. For fear that someone might be frightened by the sight of a mouse and even remotely consider catching it or, worse still, killing it.

He paid particular attention to that sour old spinster Marta, who screamed at every creature that seemed to be having its throat slit.

Giovanni the caretaker had one of those little cages designed to catch animals without harming them, and he used it for Francesca and other not-so-welcome creatures that got trapped inside the entrance hall. Bumblebees, pigeons, wasps, spiders, lizards, cockroaches. Once, there was even a giant toad which, as a thank-you, spat in his eyes, covering them in itchy blisters. When the cage was full, he would call the children over and take them to release the animals in the little park next door. They adored him.