His name was Jacques Something, and he arrived from Paris by bicycle. Riding through Italy, he came down to Sicily with the dream of climbing to the rim of Mount Etna. He didn't manage, because the thread of his existence crossed with ours, and his end led to the beginning of this story.

The cyclist's misfortune was to stop a few meters from where Scunsulatu and Santino were suffocating Scordato the notary.

It was a warm night for the middle of winter, the sky pulsated with galaxies and satellite trails, and the bike glided by quickly.

He was almost to Triscina, but decided to stop. Just long enough to smoke a joint, empty his bladder, and eat the rest of a salami sandwich. He leaned his bike against the shelter at the stop for Mazara del Vallo and sat down to roll up under a dim fluorescent light. Over the timetable, someone had spray-painted "last stop to hell."

Not a soul passed by on the road, only a distant mutt on a chain barking its throat out.

The cyclist bit into his sandwich, but it was hard, so he tossed it into the overflowing trash can. He lit up his joint, hopped over the guardrail, and slipped into a eucalyptus grove that separated the highway from the side road a little farther down. Once he found the right trunk, with the joint between his teeth, he spread his legs to avoid pissing on his shoes, squinted a bit, and whipped it out.

I asked Santino how they managed to see him.

"Cuz he forgot to turn off his helmet light," he said.

The two hitmen inside a BMW 1 Series pressed a pillow against the notary's massive mug, but he had no intention of going to the other world. Scordato was a fat heart-attack candidate, but he fought like a bull. The harder they pressed the pillow against his face, the stronger he got.

Scunsulatu was skinny, pushing seventy, but Santino was a strapping savage and already an expert hitman, despite his youth. He had his own personal ranking for ways of whacking dudes. The easiest was a bomb, then a machine gun, followed by a rifle and a pistol. With a knife you need to know how to use it, but suffocating a guy is real tough. The only thing worse is maybe drowning.

"Sometimes they look like they're dead, but then they pop back to life. Like frogs."

And so the two of them were there trying to snuff the notary when out of nowhere came a little light shining on them through the trees. The two killers, surprised, looked at each other while the poor soul flailed underneath them with whatever strength he had left.

"Grab him! Hurry up! I'll deal with this," Scunsulatu ordered Santino.

Scunsulatu was old and had reflux trouble. He ate bland food and didn't drink wine or coffee. He said his indigestion started after the death of Pepito, his beloved poodle.

The cyclist was shaking out the last drips, his mind lost in thought, when he heard a twig snap a few meters away. He looked up and his headlight blinded a man coming toward him, who covered his eyes with a hand holding a pistol. Behind that man, the Frenchman saw a BMW gleaming like a spaceship landed on a desolate planet, its driver's door wide open, a thin man choking the driver. A green plastic tube emerged from the exhaust—to simulate a suicide.

The Frenchman was a fan of TV series, especially crime shows, and for a second he thought he was in an episode of Breaking Bad *or* Narcos*, or maybe on a movie set. There were mafia shows in Italy too, but he saw no lights, no crew, no monitors, so he concluded it wasn't fiction, but reality. He tucked his dick back into his underwear and with a deft about-face took off down the highway.*

He ran in the middle of the street screaming, "Help, help! Aidez-moi!" At that time, there was no one passing by, and even if there had been, they wouldn't have stopped.

The cyclist was an athletic type who could cover three hundred kilometers a day; he was also a competitive canoeist, and he sped along in his tight red and blue skinsuit. Santino, a solid heavyweight with short, bowed limbs, low center of gravity, and heart as big as a Castelvetrano loaf of bread, struggled to keep up but didn't relent. That man was a witness and had to die. The thought of ending up in prison for the rest of his days worried him. In May, he was supposed to marry Sharon Ferlito, a girl passionate about zebras, and he'd already booked a two-week trip to the national parks of Tanzania.

The cyclist, though, had a problem: those damned shoes with the pedal cleats had him slipping on the asphalt. Santino was slowly gaining ground, and at a one point the Frenchman, realizing the mess he was in, hopped gracelessly over a fence, tumbled, lost his helmet, staggered half-cockeyed to his feet, fell again, then got back up amid the black clods of a plowed field.

"Where you going? Stop, you son of a bitch. I won't do nothing to you," the hitman shouted after him with what little voice he had left, but the dude wouldn't stop for shit.

Santino was an ace with his hands, strong as pincers, but not so good with firearms. He aimed at the little black figure and fired a few times without hitting it. Carmela, a black-as-night cow chewing her cud in the middle of the field, took the fugitive down. The Frenchman was looking over his shoulder and head-butted her.

Santino said the clunk was so loud that a flock of seagulls rose into the sky as the cyclist crashed to the ground, dazed.

The killer, exhausted, with dirt in his Gucci loafers, a sore ankle and one hand on his spleen, got to him and sat on his chest to catch his breath.

"I told you to stop."

Finger on the trigger, he shoved the gun muzzle between his eyebrows and was about to shoot him, then realized he would stain the Battistoni shirt Sharon got him for their anniversary. He stood up, holding the man at gunpoint, and took two steps back.

"Stop! Stop! Don't shoot him," Scunsulatu yelled, catching up with them in his camel-colored coat. Under the pale moonlight, he looked like a scarecrow come to life in a B horror movie.

On the ground, the Frenchman, his cheekbone broken, groveled. "Please don't kill me! Je n'ai rien vu. I didn't see anything. I won't say anything.

Santino didn't understand. "Why not?"

Scunsulatu didn't deign to answer him and turned to the man on the ground. "On te fera rien. Ne t'inquiete pas." He reached out to help him up, but the other man kept crying.

Santino was puzzled. "What are you, talking French?"

"Sure. I ain't ignorant like you."

"Where the fuck did you learn French?"

"In France. I went to high school there."

"You went to high school?"

"My old man was a doorman at the embassy."

"That's crazy."

Scunsulatu put out his hand again. "On te laisse partir."

The Frenchman grabbed it, whimpering. As the old hitman pulled him up, he cracked him in the nose so precisely that the Frenchman's lights went out instantly. Scunsulatu rubbed his knuckles and winced. "Grab him."

"Me?"

"Who else? Go, move it." Scunsulatu lit a cigarette and headed toward the road.

While carrying the cyclist over his shoulder, Santino asked Scunsulatu: "How do you say 'It weighs a ton' in French?"

"Ça pèse une tonne."

"Sa pays oon ton," Santino repeated.

1.

Aunt Rosi liked the boscaiola, a pizza with mushrooms, sausage and no tomatoes. My mother, the marinara, but without garlic. Pasindu went for the diavola. Me, I took the cafunedda, with tomato sauce, hot dog and lots of French fries.

Fridays was pizza night at the Vasciaveo house, where we'd watched a movie chosen during the week after heated discussions.

I went to get the pizzas from *Ciccio 'u furnaru*, the best pizzeria in Triscina.

For my thirteenth birthday, my mother gave me a black, 1,000-watt electric bike with fat tires, high handlebars, mirrors, a rack, and disc brakes. I tricked it up and it could hit fifty on a straightaway. The gift, though, obliged me to run errands and pick up pizzas on Fridays.

That evening we decided on a scary movie, my and Aunt Rosi's favorite genre. Mom hated them, but she hated all movies except the old, black-and-white ones, and anyway, after ten minutes, she'd go to bed quietly without even saying goodnight.

Pet Sematary. The story of a pet cemetery where zombies come back to life. In Triscina, they don't even have Christian ones, and dead animals stay where they die or end up in dumpsters. If they're roadkill, they wind up as fur or feather rugs.

Pasindu was also with us, a skinny Indian kid who didn't look like much, but could haul marble slabs all by himself. He claimed it was the chili pepper, which he'd have sent to him from Madras. He even put it in his latte and would turbocharge his diavola, which is already spicy on its own.

Armed with a pizza cutter, we arranged the steaming boxes on the coffee table, in front of the new 60-inch smart TV. The rest of the house was dark.

I don't know if you've noticed, but horror films often begin peacefully, in beautiful American houses made of painted wood topped by dark shingled roofs, with normal families—and the more normal they are, the worse it gets. You see the town from above, the woods, the green station wagon, the father, the mother, and their children unloading suitcases, the dog barking happily, and you already know there's going to be pain. The point is, I think, that you shouldn't trust happiness: like caramelized brittle, it exists to be broken.

We were there for ten minutes and the pizzas weren't even half done when the bell rang.

Mom paused the movie.

"Who's that now? Nilo, go upstairs."

I took the steps two at a time to the door.

We live in a basement apartment, four rooms and a big living room with open kitchen. The walls of the stairwell are chamomile yellow. Since there isn't

much sunlight, the plants are fake, and there are some framed old photos of Greek ruins hanging, covered in dust.

When I opened the door Scunsulatu was in front of me, the usual cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Ciao Nilo. Call your mother, please."

From the Mercedes behind him, Santino waved at me.

"Tell her it's urgent. We got a special delivery."

I ran downstairs.

Aunt Rosi looked at her watch. "At this hour? Really? Without calling first?"

Mom scoffed. "Come on, move the furniture." And she went upstairs, grumbling.

Pasindu and I pushed the sofa and armchairs against the walls.

"That's not okay. I was just getting into the movie. Nilo, I don't understand who the old man is." My aunt took the pizzas.

"He's the neighbor," I replied as I pulled the cart with the TV into a corner.

Mom came back downstairs. "You two go to my room. And you, Pasindu, give me a hand."

"Can't I stay?" I pleaded. "I'll be good, I swear. I'll help you."

"Outta here."

My aunt and I locked ourselves in my mother's room, and while I ate on the bed, careful not to dirty the quilt, she looked at herself in the mirror.

"Is Santino there too?"

"Yeah."

She'd never admit it, but she had a crush on Santino. She knew he was about to marry Sharon Ferlito, the cashier at the dry cleaners in Tre Fontane, but you never know, providence can smile. Nothing's for sure until they walk down the aisle, and even afterwards, anything can happen. So whenever Santino came, she'd make herself beautiful, show off her curves in tight dresses, and Mom would get all twisted up.

Aunt Rosi widened the part in her hair. "Can you see any regrowth?"

"A little."

"How much?"

I showed her on my finger. "This much."

The front door slammed and up from the stairs came the screams of a foreigner and Santino's curses.

"I'm really sorry, Signora Agata," Scunsulatu said, mortified. "We had a serious problem."

"You tell Pecuredda no way. For this one he's paying me double."

"No, no!!! What do you want to do to me? Bande de salauds, laissez-moi! I beg you… I won't say anything. I didn't see anything. I was just riding my bike. Je le jure," the foreigner howled in desperation.

I asked my aunt what language it was.

“German.”

You could hear a thud.

I approached the door to spy on them. “Did they knock over the new TV?”

“Pasindu! What are you doing?! Are you helping?! Wake up. Get him! Stop him!” my mother said.

Suddenly, the door flew open, hitting me on the shoulder. I fell to the floor as a hulking man dressed as a cyclist charged into the room, tripped over the space heater’s extension cord, and collapsed onto the bed, atop the pizza boxes. He tried to get up, looking for an escape route, his toad eyes and nose swollen, leaking blood.

Scunsulatu hit him across the back of the neck with the broomstick and knocked him down. Pasindu and Santino grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him outside.

Meanwhile, Mom was screaming from the corridor.

“Close the door. Nilo, close the door.”

I did, but I left a small opening. The cyclist, despite the caning, was still lively. Santino jumped on top of him, crushing him to the ground. Mom opened a drawer in the corridor dresser, took out the eye masks, and handed them out to everyone.

The cyclist was terrified.

“What do you want to do to me? What are you doing, bon sang? Pourquoi? Pourquoi?!”

Mom pulled out the keys tied to a string from the neckline of her dress, approached the bathroom door, and opened the three locks one by one. First the bottom one, then the top one, and finally the middle one. She put on her mask and rested her hand on the knob.

“Go ahead, put it on.”

The three of them slipped on their masks.

“Done?”

“Yes.”

“On three. One, two, and… three.”

Mom, blind, turned the handle and my aunt, who was watching with me, dragged me back.

We looked at each other as we heard the poor guy screaming, the bathroom door slamming shut, another scream, and then another, fists on the wood and then silence.

The perfect silence of our home.

They arrived on the empty six o'clock bus. First the mother got off, then her daughter, who handed her the trolley suitcases. The girl wore oversized glasses and fox ears on her head. The woman wore a skimpy denim miniskirt and worn cowboy boots.

At six in the morning, Triscina is as still as a moth on a log, nothing moves, no one breathes, even the sparrows are ashamed to chirp.

The woman lit a cigarette and looked around, trying to figure out where the hell they had wound up. Low, thorny vegetation grew among the rocks, in the distance the silhouettes of grazing horses, farther away the concrete skeletons of unfinished houses. The straight roads stretched like landing strips for ghost planes. Next to the bus shelter were piles of burned garbage, a flickering streetlight, and dawn smearing the turquoise night with orange.

She'd read online that the sea was nearby, but couldn't see it from there. It must be beyond the long, jagged strip of apartment blocks and low gray houses.

"This way," said the mother. And her daughter, dead tired, followed.