Carla Fiorentino

Even the Devil Gets Tired

1. Not Everyone Has the Hands for *Culurgiones* (a type of Sardinian ravioli-like stuffed pasta)

My name is Efi because my mother can't stand that she named me Efisia as a token for having lost a *culurgiones* challenge. It sounds unbelievable, but that's exactly how it is. My name was chosen as a joke. Every time I think about it, I go back and ask my mother how it is possible to choose something as important as a daughter's name as a joke, yet she turns all red and blue and huffs in my face. Then she leaves without answering, as if she were the one entitled to take offense.

I am called Efisia like my grandmother, who won the contest and chose that her first granddaughter be named after her—a name that, in turn, she had inherited from the saint. "It's all your mother's conceit," my father always says when we talk about it. Because everyone knows that Grandma Efisia is the champion at making *culurgiones*, but my mother had set her mind on beating her, and the result is written on my identity card. Then, to make up for the damage, she told everyone that yes, on the registry I was recorded as Efisia, but woe to anyone who dared call me that. For everyone, my name was Efi. Since I learned this story, I have been constantly asking Grandma to teach me how to become the best in the world at making *culurgiones*, but she says that my hands are still too small.

"Not everyone has the hands for *culurgiones*! Let's wait and see."

At every birthday, I go to her hopefully, show her my hands, and ask if they have now reached the right size, but she, with an expression as serious as possible, stares at me and shakes her head. Yet she orders me to stay and watch her, saying that if my hands ever become the right size, I will have already learned the technique. And even though I know that Grandma Efisia never speaks out of turn, I find it very hard to believe her. That swift gesture with which she transforms a sheet of pasta and a dollop of filling into perfect, chubby, teardrop-shaped little ravioli really seems like magic. It would take an imitation spell. If I ever meet my fairy godmother—even though my aunt says that in my case, she would rather be a witch—I will ask her to do it for me. So that when I finally cup my hands to receive my first sheet of pasta, I will leave Grandma with her mouth agape.

My aunt is my mother's sister and lives with a dog and two large white geese that are excellent at keeping guard. Meanwhile, Pluto—called Pluto, the dog who thinks he's a cushion—lies comfortably on the sofa.

"Who says that just because he's a dog he should be the one on guard? The geese are much better suited," Aunt Flu always repeats. In fact, no one can approach her gate if Aunt Flu isn't home. Anastasia and Genoveffa lie in wait, and as soon as someone arrives, they pounce and threaten them with their strong yellow beaks. They seem to have it especially in for males. In fact, my father never likes going to Aunt's house because he says he always feels the eyes—or rather, the beaks—of Anastasia and Genoveffa on him. They would have pecked him on more than one occasion if Aunt Flu hadn't intervened in time.

"I know exactly what I'd make those two impertinent geese do to him," he likes to repeat while pointing at the oven, though it's clear he wouldn't be capable of plucking a single feather from them. My father is a very kind and always gentle man with everyone. That is why he can't stand it when the two geese treat him badly. He's not used to it. My mother always teases him by saying that he would do anything just to please everyone.

"Come on, it can't always go well for you. What am I supposed to say—that I'm disliked by everyone? At least for you it only happens with those two pesky ducks."

"Geese, they're geese. If your sister hears you, she'll come back with her ornithology lectures, and we'll never get out of it."

My Aunt Flu is a zoologist. A difficult word for the most wonderful profession in the world. I, too, want to be a zoologist like her when I grow up, but I don't say it because I know my parents wouldn't take it

well at all. Especially my mother, who keeps telling Aunt that it's time to change her life, that you can't spend your time wandering around like a spinning top—she even says "like a spinning top"—and I imagine my aunt spinning around and around on herself, and I can't help but laugh.

2. Even the Devil Gets Tired

Since the last time we were at the beach with Grandma, a project has been swirling in my head that I still haven't had the courage to reveal to anyone. Especially since the only person I could tell it to is Aunt Flu, but she's at Lake Natron in Africa studying her beloved flamingos, and it doesn't seem appropriate to discuss it with her over video call. Aunt Flu and I have these very long video calls when she's traveling around the world—a frequency that happens far too often for my taste. She shows me the rooms where she sleeps, which are sometimes tents, other times huts, and sometimes even luxury hotels, and she tells me about her adventurous days. And I listen to her as if I were watching a movie.

My mom is a bit jealous of our closeness, but deep down she's also happy because she knows that if something were to happen to her, Aunt Flu would devote herself to me body and soul. She always says that I'm the only human being who matters to her in the world, that ever since they were children she only cared about animals, and over time—and thanks to that damned job of hers—she's only gotten worse.

My mother is a lawyer; she loves order and precision, and she just can't understand how anyone can live such a disorganized and constantly uncertain life as Aunt Flu's. She has no idea that Aunt Flu and I made a secret pact: when I turn eighteen, I'll travel the world with her in search of the rarest animals. That's why I think she'll like my new project, because it resembles her missions a bit. I, too, want to propose a research project to her—but not one about an animal.

In short, while we were strolling arm in arm along Poetto Beach, Grandma pointed to the mountain overlooking Marina Piccola and asked me, "Do you know what that one is called?"

"Of course, Grandma—after all, there isn't a person from Cagliari who doesn't know the Devil's Saddle. In fact, many even tattoo it on themselves," I replied.

"Now, let's not exaggerate! And do you know why it's called that?"

In that moment, I realized that naming a mountain "Devil's Saddle" isn't something obvious. I stopped and fixed my eyes on that ridge of rocks and vegetation and, for the first time, noticed that near the top it curves in a way that resembles a saddle. With the smile of someone who has solved a precious mystery, I answered, "Because it looks like… a horse?"

"Uh, a little fire."

Grandma is obsessed with the game "Water and Fire," and she forces me to search for the strangest objects she scatters around the house: ladles, shoes, handkerchiefs, brushes, and figurines of every shape. She is a real hoarder. Grandpa always teases her, saying that soon she'll end up on one of those television shows about quirky people—like those who live with a hundred cats, marry a bicycle, or collect chewed chewing gum. But she doesn't get flustered and continues to fill every free inch of the house with her precious treasures. Once, for my birthday, she hid my chocolate cake, my favorite (fortunately, I was guided by its scent and found it before that stupid Pluto stuck his nose in it).

Grandma dotes on Aunt's dachshund as if it were her own child—indeed, even better, according to my mother, who can't stand that disparity in treatment. "When we were little, she wouldn't even let us into her room because we were dirty and clumsy," she used to say, "and now that quadruped sleeps with his head on a pillow," she repeats like a litany every time she sees Pluto sprawled on the sofa while Grandma scratches his belly.

“If you give up, I’ll tell you a story.”

Grandma is a black belt in storytelling, so I immediately agreed, bursting with curiosity.

“It is said that a long, long time ago the angels and the devil began to quarrel right at that very spot up there. The angels were many and fierce, while the devil was alone; and after hours of battle, exhausted, he sat astride the mountain to rest. But the angels, unwilling to admit defeat, took that pause as a surrender and declared that from that moment on, the entire bay would be called the Gulf of the Angels. And so, the poor devil was left with nothing but the Saddle.”

Grandma immediately realized that something about the story didn’t convince me, so she asked, “What is it that doesn’t convince you?”

“Grandma, for heaven’s sake, it’s a nice story but… the devil sitting down to rest, come on, that’s not possible!”

Then Grandma smiled at me and, giving me a smack on the cheek, replied, “Look, my little unbeliever, even the devil gets tired.”

“But still—if the devil was tired, shouldn’t the angels have let it go? Aren’t they the good ones?”

Since then, I haven’t stopped thinking about Grandma’s story. The image of the devil, alone and tired, attacked by a band of angels, tightens my heart. And I don’t care at all about all those things they say about the devil—that he is evil, a tempter, and that all the world’s evils depend on him. Even children know that to be fair, battles must be fought with equal weapons. What lesson can angels possibly teach if they take advantage of a poor, tired devil? Taking the bay away from him like that, without a shred of scruple, seems to me a very unangelic act. To the face of the love for one’s neighbor and of “turn the other cheek” that they teach us during religion class!

Aunt Flu keeps repeating that it’s madness that Mom insists on making me attend religion class, and indeed I’m very envious of my classmates who skip it and get to spend their time drawing in the empty classroom, but Mom doesn’t want to hear about it. She says that one day, when I’m grown up, I’ll be able to decide the fate of my soul on my own, but until then, she is the one responsible and doesn’t want to take any risks.

“Dad, is it true that the devil is evil?”

My father never refuses to answer my questions. He always encourages me to question the things in the world, not to take them for granted, to challenge my ideas.

“We’re all like that sometimes.”

“But we are also good.”

“Yes, we are also good, fortunately.”

“Then is the devil good too, even good?”

“I imagine so, in his own way. After all, Lucifer was once an angel—the most beautiful one. You’ll learn that the categories of good and evil are not as simple as black and white.”

And then he went back to hanging the laundry as if nothing had happened. My father loves hanging the laundry; it’s the only activity that keeps him away from books for more than a few minutes. He always whistles cheerful tunes while he hangs the socks or lays out the shirts so perfectly that they never need ironing. Mom constantly repeats that had she known this back in her courting days, things would have been much easier for her.

(…)

4. Out of Sight, Out of Mind

The day has finally come for Aunt Flu's return, and Grandma has prepared a buffet that would impress even if we invited all of Cagliari… Mom decided to go pick up Aunt by herself at the airport while we hide at home, hoping to avoid the onslaught of the guard geese—only she can keep them at bay. Dad says it's because she deceives them with her appearance. Yes, because Mom and Aunt Flu are identical twins—they are exactly alike. Perhaps that's why, personality-wise, they turned out so different. I would really love to have a twin sister, but my father says it's impossible because twins skip a generation. Still, I'm not even sure I'd want two twin daughters.

Grandma always says that Mom and Aunt used to mess with her in all sorts of ways. They used to have fun tricking her by swapping clothes and pretending to be one another. Seeing them now, it's hard to believe. Their looks are so different that if you don't look closely, you almost don't notice that they are identical in every way—same nose, same mouth, and the same eyes. Mom is slender and always dresses elegantly, even when at home. Aunt, on the other hand, is sturdier and always dresses sportily, even on important occasions. Once, when I got a bad grade on a math test, I nearly convinced Aunt Flu to disguise herself as Mom and go talk to the teacher in her place, but she changed her mind at the last minute. Not because she thought it was a bad idea, but because she was afraid of being discovered and having to face Mom and her outbursts.

"Are we sure that Aunt Flu likes surprise parties?" I ask Grandma as I help her build a tower of sandwiches on Aunt's dining table. "Not at all—in fact, I'm almost certain that she hates them." At those words, I imagined Aunt's typically annoyed expression when she sees what she would call a "barbaric invasion" of her house. When something doesn't convince her, she squints and her eyebrows end up touching, forming a single black line—a unibrow, in short, that makes her look like the stereotypical Sardinian woman you see in television caricatures.

"So then, why did we decide to organize this party?" "Because your mother wanted to punish Aunt for leaving us with those two once again," adds Dad with a sigh as he arranges meatballs into a pyramid. "And besides, we like parties, don't we?" Grandma says, winking at me. It really is so. Grandma and I are huge party lovers. We love decorating the house for every occasion: Christmas, Easter, Carnival, and even Halloween. Grandma insists that it isn't true that Halloween is an American tradition, that in Sardinia the dead have always been celebrated—it's just that we forgot about it. When she was a child, she used to help her mother prepare "pabassini" biscuits to give to children who knocked on the door dressed in rags, and then, with the sweets gathered by her brothers and the leftovers, they would set up a midnight banquet to invite the spirits to dinner. "Is animeddas has always been my favorite festival, and I have no intention of giving it up just because it's now become an American holiday!" No one dares contradict her—not even Mom, who deep down, judging by the looks she gives, would very much like to.

When we hear the sound of the car, we turn off the lights and hide behind the sofa. As expected, Anastasia and Genoveffa run over happily and chattering to greet Aunt, covering the noise of the stool that Dad knocked over in the dark. My mom says he's a child in a grown body, and that he never learned how to use it properly. As for me, I always hope that sooner or later my paternal genes will kick in so that I finally become the tallest of the trio.

For the occasion, Grandpa also came, though he remains seated in his armchair reading on his iPad. My grandfather was an electronics engineer, and now he spends his days at home behind his computer screen, with a cell phone in one hand and the iPad in the other. Grandma always says that one day we won't be able to find him anymore because he'll have been swallowed up by one of those devices he loves so much, but I'm overjoyed that Grandpa is so tech-savvy because he solves all the family's electronic problems. And not only that. Once I invited him to school because the luminous blackboard provided for our class had broken, and none of the technicians called by the principal were able to fix it. Naturally, Grandpa took only a few minutes to figure out what was wrong, and my classmates gave him

a huge round of applause. From that day on, he became the class legend, and everyone wants to come to his house to meet him and bring him some gadget that isn't working.

"Can't you turn off your damned thing for at least five minutes? You'll ruin the surprise with that light," Grandma hisses at him irritably, but Grandpa, as always, seems not to hear her and continues reading undisturbed. But he did hear, because without saying a word he lowers the brightness of the screen. For several years now, he claims he's become deaf, but none of us fully believe him. We're convinced it's all a tactic to ignore Grandma, who constantly orders him around.

When the key turns in the lock, Grandma grabs my arm tightly, more excited than I am, and as soon as the light comes on, she springs to her feet like a spring and shouts, "Welcome back!" so loudly that I fear I might become deaf instead of Grandpa.

Aunt Flu stares at us in astonishment, and from the door left wide open, Anastasia and Genoveffa come running, pouncing on Grandpa's pants and beginning to tug at them with their beaks. But even this assault cannot distract him from his reading, and the two geese, disappointed, decide to settle on Dad, who, however, is waiting for them and climbs onto the stool he has just righted, bumping his head against the chandelier.

"How is it that with you everything turns into a complete mess?" Mom asks us in her typical reproachful tone as she drags her suitcase toward the bedroom. Aunt Flu, contrary to what we thought, doesn't seem annoyed; on the contrary, she gives me a big smile and opens her arms. I throw myself at her, and we embrace tightly as if we hadn't seen each other in a century—and in a way, that's partly true.

"I brought you some gifts," she whispers in my ear, careful not to let the others hear.

Grandma and Mom are always a bit jealous of the gifts Aunt gives me, so now we keep them secret.

"Out of sight, out of mind," Aunt Flu tells me before releasing me from her embrace, to let me know that she'll give them to me when we're alone. "And well, you really outdid yourselves, huh. Look, look at all these delicacies," she then says loudly, grabbing two meatballs and shoving them into her mouth.

"What's the matter, Flu? Didn't the grasshoppers fill your stomach properly?" Dad asks her, thinking that in the countries he calls "exotic," just because they are far away, they always eat insects and rattlesnakes.

"My dear citizen of the world, just know that African cuisine is poor but flavorful! It's a pity that culinary culture isn't covered in philosophy books."

Dad and Aunt Flu love to tease each other, but I'm convinced that they really do care about one another. We all care in our own way. Even Anastasia and Genoveffa, who have given up attacking the males in the house and settled in Pluto's kennel. The dachshund, for his part, prefers to stay on the sofa next to Grandpa, who occasionally takes his hand off his devices to give him a pat.

"What are you doing, come to the table to eat or would you rather we attach you to the power socket?" Grandma says to Grandpa, who has frozen in place.

We all burst into laughter, and our laughter awakens the geese from their stupor, which in response produce noisy, irritated honks.

5. Pink Flamingos Are Not Born Pink

It has been a week since Aunt Flu returned, but we haven't yet had the chance to see each other alone, and I can hardly contain my excitement to tell her about my plan. Even though, now that the moment is drawing near, I'm not so sure it will be so easy to convince her to come with me.

Perhaps I was too optimistic. Maybe I should invent an excuse and reveal the true purpose of my mission only when we're already on the road, so that she won't be able to back out. Aunt Flu never backs down. Mom says she's more stubborn than a beagle (which, according to her, is the most obstinate

dog there is), and when she starts something, there's no way to change her mind. And besides, I would very much like to bring Bianca and Min with us too, but on that front, I think I have to give up.

Aunt Flu is still traumatized by that time she agreed to take us to Molentargius Park to explain the life of the flamingos. Bianca, Min, and I were all excited because it seemed like a fantastic adventure. Even Bianca, who normally doesn't like to draw attention to herself, found the courage to ask Aunt a question. She asked her about the love life of flamingos. Bianca is the romantic soul of our little trio and sees hearts and lovey-dovey things everywhere. Imagine what thoughts a completely pink animal could awaken in her…

"They pair off each season with a different partner, but they are very strong when it comes to friendship. In fact, let's say you could very well be three flamingos," Aunt Flu explained.

"In what sense?"

"In the sense that they maintain friendships that last for decades."

Bianca's eyes went wide in disbelief. "Really, how long does a flamingo live?"

"Well, in protected conditions, even forty or fifty years."

"Wow, they're real old souls—maybe it's because they always do yoga?"

"Yoga?" Aunt Flu looked at me, puzzled.

"Well, yes, otherwise what else do they do, standing on one leg for all those hours?"

"They regulate their body temperature. That way, they don't freeze both legs at the same time, but only one at a time. Clever, huh?"

But the real surprise of the day was discovering that pink flamingos are not born pink. When Aunt Flu, after a thousand warnings and extracting a promise from us not to tell anyone, took us to a forbidden area to observe the nests with the chicks through a telescope, we were astonished.

"And what are these supposed to be?" Min asked, and among the three, she seemed the most disgusted.

"They're chicks."

"Ah, exactly. And why are they among the flamingos? Were they adopted?"

"No, dear Min. The chicks are flamingos."

"It doesn't seem that way to me."

"Here you go, Konrad Lorenz has arrived!" Aunt Flu appeared visibly impatient. "It just so happens that they are."

"And then why aren't they pink?"

"They aren't pink because they turn pink after two years."

"Do they paint them?"

At that point, fearing the worst, I gave Min a little pinch that nearly made her jump and almost sent her straight into the pond. She would have deserved it. Fortunately, Aunt Flu switched into professional mode and didn't get any further riled up.

"No, they take on the color of what they eat."

"Big Bubble?"

"Who made me do that… Artemia salina. A crustacean rich in the pigment that gives color to their feathers. Are we done with the interrogation?"

In the end, it was clear that she enjoyed answering our questions. Otherwise, she would have sent us to the devil a long time ago.

“So, is the water in the pond pink because this little shrimp lives in it?”

“It’s not a shrimp, but a tiny crustacean also called the ‘sea monkey’.”

Faced with this revelation, we all fell silent. Flamingos are pink because they eat a monkey… Without even consulting each other, we simultaneously thought that Aunt Flu had started firing off random answers just to quench our thirst for questions. But then, a disconcerting spectacle caught our attention and made us cry out. One flamingo was pecking at another’s head, drawing bright red droplets of blood. It looked like a horror movie.

Aunt Flu caught our gaze and, instead of recoiling in horror herself, her face lit up with a wicked smile.

“It would be fun to tell you that you’re witnessing a splatter scene, but it’s not.”

“Oh, really?” Min replied in an insolent tone, risking truly angering Aunt Flu.

“The ‘gozzo milk’ is a substance that certain bird species use to feed their chicks. It takes on the color of what they have eaten, so in the case of flamingos it acquires this beautiful blood-like hue. It was one of the strong points of my thesis.”

Bianca had covered her eyes, and I had to pull her away. When she reopened them, tears were streaming down. Something told me she remained convinced that she had witnessed a terrible act of violence. Fortunately, she didn’t tell her parents—otherwise, who would then listen to Mom? She would have had a scene with Aunt that would have sparked one of their terrible quarrels.

“Do you know what flamingos are called in the Oristano area?” Aunt Flu was clearly trying to distract us. “They say ‘genti arrubia.’ The red people. It’s a definition I really like.” Then, seeing that this statement had no effect on us, still recovering from the terrible spectacle, she clarified: “When I see them all together, chatting, dancing, and fluttering about, they really look like a group of cheerful old ladies gossiping on Via Garibaldi, don’t you think?”

That comparison woke us up from the state of shock we had fallen into and drew a relieving laugh from us. Aunt Flu is very sensitive when it comes to flamingos; she has studied them for such a long time and even kept one at home. It was an injured specimen that needed constant care, and the veterinarian had entrusted it to her to look after. Aunt Flu claims that for many years, after they had released it, every time she returned to the pond, Federico would come up to greet her. Mom calls him “your aunt’s great love” and says she has never seen Aunt Flu’s eyes as dreamy as when she recalls the evenings spent on the couch with her Federico perched next to her. It is for him that she had that pool dug in the garden, where now a happy community of frogs croaks (another one of Aunt’s great obsessions). But that’s another story.

6. If Courage Were Found in Surprise Bags

So, Aunt Flu called me a little while ago and invited me to a pajama party at her place. This is the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. I should be happy and relieved, but instead I’m in my room with my legs moving on their own and I don’t know how to stop them. I’m both anxious and excited. Now that the moment has arrived, I’m not sure I’ll have the courage to make my request. I’m terrified she might say no.

I adore Aunt Flu, that much is clear, but deep down I’m a little afraid of her. Specifically, I fear her notorious bad moods. We all do. When she’s taken over by what Grandma calls the “demon of bad mood,” Aunt Flu becomes unmanageable with everyone—even with me. Not that she yells or throws tantrums; she just withdraws into an impenetrable silence. In those moments, all the closeness between us seems to vanish, and I feel a bit like Bianca: I lose my ability to joke and start stuttering. Then the only thing left to do is to leave and let her be, waiting until her mood passes—then she’ll come around. Mom says she was like that when she was a child too, and that after the first few times she realized there was nothing to be done but wait.

The problem is, if I make my request and Aunt Flu falls into one of her moods, it will be impossible to try again. She's too strong; every time it has happened, I haven't been able to revisit the topic. I'd rather give up than challenge fate once more. Now I absolutely must stop thinking about it, because if I fixate, I'll never be able to talk to her about it again for fear of upsetting her. It would trigger what my father calls a "vicious circle."

"Dad, what's this 'vicious circle' you always mention?" I once asked him.

He looked up from the big book he was absorbed in, thought for a moment, and then said, "You know the snake that bites its own tail? That's it."

Since then, every time I hear my father or someone else say that something is a "vicious circle," I picture an enormous snake—a boa constrictor or an anaconda, one of those huge ones that could swallow a whole man—forming a perfect ring by biting its own thick tail.

That's it. Here I am, not asking Aunt to accompany me on my mission for fear that she'll fall into a bad mood, and then I won't have the courage to bring up the matter a second time, like a huge snake forming a perfect circle by devouring its own tail. I must act before it's too late. I think it would do me good to go for a walk.

Since I turned eleven, I've been allowed to go alone as far as Piazza Garibaldi and meet up there with Bianca and Min, who live nearby. Usually, we use our parents' cell phones to coordinate, but today I can't bring myself to call them, since I can't involve them. I'll go for a walk on my own and distract myself by watching the little kids on the slide, the mothers chasing after them, the cats lounging in the sun, and the passersby.

Bianca, Min, and I love watching people sitting on a bench under the trees—especially that retired teacher who pretends to pick up his dog's poop, bows, makes sure no one is watching, then puts the bag back in his pocket and walks on straight. There's a whole world around our square and we are its undisputed queens, and when our parents give us permission, we buy a small pizza with steaming mozzarella and sit happily, admiring our kingdom with our lips glistening with oil.

Walking past the newsstand at the far end of the square, I see the surprise bags lined up on the door. I think that buying one might distract me. Who knows, maybe I'll even find the courage inside it to talk to Aunt. I rush home and ask my father for money for an ice cream; if I add it to the money from yesterday's ice cream that I didn't finish, I should have enough to cover the price of the bag. Fortunately, when my father reads, he doesn't look anyone in the face and hands over money very easily, just to be left in peace.

"One day, your daughter will even ask you for underwear, and you won't notice until your butt freezes," he once joked.

"Don't exaggerate."

"Do you think that couldn't happen?"

"Not that my butt would freeze—in this house it's always terribly hot!"

When I go to the newsstand, I say that the surprise bag is for a present for a little cousin. Mrs. Vania, the newsstand lady, is such a gossip and I don't like the idea of her going around saying that I buy surprise bags like a snotty kid. I run off to open it in my room—Mom is at work and Dad is reading, so no one will disturb me.

Of course, inside the bag there's no trace of the courage I had hoped to find, but instead there's a comic book that I lay on the floor and read, which entertains me until the doorbell rings. I jump, heart in my throat, because I know it's Aunt who came to pick me up for the pajama party, straight from Molentargius Park, where she spends most of her days in Cagliari.

"Where's my little niece?" I hear Dad ask as he dives into the armchair at the entrance without taking off his shoes—he couldn't care less that Mom doesn't want us to be in the house with regular shoes, let alone those that Aunt uses to walk through the mud! But when Mom isn't around…

“Here I am,” I reply, already ready with my little backpack on and the comic book I couldn’t finish tucked under my arm.

“Here she is!” repeats Dad, as if finding me there without having to call me was somehow his achievement.

“Good job, Filippo. How happy you must be that I’m taking her away so you don’t have to interrupt your reading until your wife decides to close the study!”

“Mind how you treat her, alright? And keep her away from those enraged feathered ones, or they’ll give her back to us all riddled with holes!”

Aunt Flu winks at me and stands up. Only now do I notice she’s got her helmet with her. That means she’ll be taking me home on her motorcycle, and if Mom finds out, she’ll punish us both. Aunt Flu has a bright yellow Ducati that looks like a huge plastic beak. She rarely rides me on it, but when she does, it feels like I’m flying. A few Christmases ago, she gave me a helmet that fits me, and Mom didn’t speak to her for two weeks and threatened to lock me in the house for a year if she ever saw me wearing it.

“Would you prefer that she comes without it?” Aunt asked her, which made her even angrier.

In the end, however, we almost never disobey because we both know it’s not wise to push Mom too far. Anyway, today I’m glad she came by motorcycle. I really needed that.

And when we’re speeding along Viale Diaz—a long road that leads to the sea (even though Aunt always goes slowly when I’m with her)—and I feel the wind moving my hair, it seems to me that anything is possible. It isn’t cold, but the crisp late-afternoon air pinches my cheeks and makes me feel happy. So I cling tightly to Aunt’s jacket and, without thinking, shout, “Do you feel like coming with me to look for the devil on the Saddle?”

Then I close my eyes tightly as if the darkness could delay the response or cancel the question.

“At this hour, the devil goes to sleep!” Aunt shouts to me, unruffled, and revs the motorcycle, which roars and makes me jump.

Then I feel so sad because it seems to me that this is exactly Aunt’s typical way of saying no without actually saying no. And I hate myself so much because I’ve blown my chance and even ruined the pajama party—since now I’ll be gloomy all the time with my mind fixated on Aunt’s unspoken response.

I’m thinking of letting myself roll on the asphalt to create a distraction and move Aunt to pity when, unexpectedly, I hear her add, “Let’s go, my first free Sunday!”