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Lea's Villa

May 27

Last night I dreamed that my sister was being sucked down the toilet bowl. She was screaming for help, I ran to the bathroom, saw her shrinking as she flailed around in the water, and promptly flushed, watching her disappear into the pipes. Bye, Lea, I said, have a good trip.

Then unfortunately I woke up and she was lying on her back on the lower bunk, with that self-assured face of hers, confident about who knows what—maybe about being able to do whatever she wants. Like being able to sleep ten more minutes, take her time, and get to school late but not too late, just late enough for someone like her.

Someone like me, on the other hand, has to arrive early, so I got up and locked myself in the bathroom to do my things in peace and, above all, to fix my hair, since I have a cowlick right above my forehead and it takes ten minutes of work with comb and gel before I can leave the house.

Lea woke up grumbling when I had already prepared my snack (spinach and *stracchino* omelette) and was having breakfast. She dashed into the bathroom—she wasn't sucked down the toilet—washed herself, being very careful to splash water everywhere, and ran to rummage through the piles of clothes she keeps on the floor of our bedroom. I ran into her in the hallway, perfect, fresh and clean, with a toast in one hand and her phone in the other.

I opened the door to go out and she, after slipping the phone into her pocket, stretched out an arm toward me.

I thought, here we go, she's lost it, she's showing me affection. Instead, no: she spread her fingers wide and then, with a quick gesture, ruffled my hair, destroying all my work with comb and gel.

REMINDER: hate your sister, hate her properly, every day, carefully, don't lose the rhythm, don't get distracted.

I rushed back into the bathroom to try to fix my fringe as fast as possible and, while my anxiety about being late was rising, Lea was already ready to leave. Mom yelled from the kitchen for me to stop swearing and asked my sister if she was coming back for lunch.
"Nommà, lunchavvillazwiththeatheeerz," she replied. Which translated means: no, Mom, I'm having lunch at Villa Doria Pamphili with the others. For a while now she's been saying *theatheeerz* instead of *the others*.

She also says *myffffrieeendz* instead of "my friends".

REMINDER: hate that slurred voice, hate those mumbled words, never get used to them.

May 28

A normal day, the usual things: school, oral tests, home, homework.
The short paper for the final exam is coming along well. I thought that for geography I could talk about agricultural landscapes or farming systems around the world. I'm also missing math, but what can I come up with to connect math and food? Math in the kitchen? Proportions? Fractions? Anyway, there's no need to cram in absolutely every subject.
Today's snack: savory crêpes with mushroom cream and Fontina cheese.
REMINDER: use less nutmeg in the béchamel. Maybe a bit of pepper.
By now everyone in class is used to it, but the substitute math teacher kept looking at me like I was a Martian.
She had never seen anyone have their recess snack with a plate, a glass, and cutlery.
I asked Giuseppe whether he thought it was that strange. He said no, not really—anyway, it's not the strangest thing about you. What do you mean? And he said: you know, I think you're a good guy, but you're kind of a *character*. What does that mean?
That you're a… and he couldn't really explain it. In the end, after going back and forth, it came out that I'm different from the others. Thanks, Giuseppe, what a revelation, I hadn't noticed.
Because you're a character but you're not stupid, he said, giving me a pat on the shoulder.
I remembered when I first met Giuseppe.
We had just moved from Via di Donna Olimpia to Via Innocenzo X. We didn't move very far, but we went up the hill, to a street with less traffic, which Mom likes much more. The new house is smaller but nice, with a garden next to a quiet little lane.
I was right there in the lane in front of my house, trying to lure a skinny black-and-white cat that had hidden under a car: it was curled up on top of a wheel and trembling. It had tried to poke its head into our garden, only to be immediately chased away by Lily the cat, who had taken the move badly and didn't want to be bothered. Since then she's remained the terror of the area. On the one hand I'm proud to have a cat at home who commands respect; on the other, I feel guilty for those poor traumatized creatures. Anyway, I was crouched there with a nice little plate of sea bass to comfort him—caught sea bass, not farmed—and he wouldn't come out. While I was trying to call him, I heard a voice behind me saying, "Is it small or big?" I turned around and saw this guy with the sides of his hair almost shaved and a tuft on his forehead, wearing a branded T-shirt and branded shoes. I told him it wasn't a kitten but it was young, and he said, "Then maybe we can manage with the mother-cat call—make room." He started searching on his phone and then crouched down next to me. He said, "Come on, set the plate down and be ready to grab him."
So he played this recorded meowing sound, and the cat shot out like a rocket. I stopped him, stroked him; he struggled and hissed, but in the end he was persuaded by the sea bass, because he was obviously starving, poor thing.
I hadn't thought about it in a long time: Giuseppe and I became friends trying to fatten up Coso, the anxious cat. He treated it like a kind of competition, where we were the coaches and Coso was our athlete. He became obsessed with finding the perfect spot to put the food, and in the end we found a little corner next to the steps of Clivo Rutario, a spot that was fairly hidden but easy to reach, always in the shade and, we hoped, safe from rats. That last part didn't really work out, but after a few weeks Coso had already grown sturdier. Then Giuseppe got bored, because after a while he moves on to something else; I, on the other hand, still keep feeding the neighborhood cats, because when I start doing something I don't stop—I keep going, I make it a habit, that's it. Maybe that's why I'm a *character*.

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Obviously I can't find my book anymore. It must be buried under my sister's clothes, which is the same as saying it's lost somewhere beyond the solar system. Or maybe it was taken, leafed through, and left in some corner of the house—or of the neighborhood.

That's what Lea does: she touches all my things just for the pleasure of meddling, takes them without even having a reason, and then dumps them wherever she happens to be. There's no point complaining to Mom; she always answers, "Ah, sort it out between yourselves, please don't drag me into these stories."

I liked it a lot—it was a mystery novel set in London, *The London Eye Mystery*. The London Eye is the Ferry wheel in London, and in the book a boy receives a ticket as a gift to ride it. It's a bit like winning the lottery, because the ticket is expensive. Except that he never comes back down; his cousins wait for him at the exit but nothing—gone, just like the book. If I want to know how it ends, I'll have to go to the library.

REMINDER: hate your sister, etc.

I should get revenge, but how? If I steal something from her, she wouldn't even notice. She doesn't even know what she owns. Burn her clothes? But the bedroom is mine too, and the smell would bother me more than her. I could take her phone, but she practically sleeps on it and has some kind of alarm system in her brain for these things. I can't even cut her hair in her sleep because it's already really short. Kill her—I've thought about it, I could strangle her—but Mom would be upset, I'd feel bad for her, she's sad enough already. Besides, it's not my style. What is my style? I haven't figured that out yet. I'll think about it.

May 29

Yesterday I saw Lea at Villa Doria Pamphili—or *avvilla*, as she calls it. Actually, everyone who lives around here calls it that, Villa and that's it, at most Villa Pamphili if they really want to make themselves understood by outsiders.

Only Dad, besides me, used to call it Villa Doria Pamphili, which is the full surname of the last extremely wealthy family who owned the park before it became public. It started like this: once, when I was learning to read, I saw a sign at the entrance that said "Villa Doria Pamphilj," in the old style, with the long i.

To me *ph* was a p, and the long i—I had no idea what that was. To be safe, I read it as Villa Doria Pampigli, and Dad burst out laughing and said, well yes, Pampigli is much better. We called it Villa Doria Pampigli for a long time; then the game slowly faded, but the habit of that Doria in the middle stuck with us.

Anyway, Lea was there, obviously with Tudor and Fion, her slaves. For a year now my sister has gone out only with them; just once in a while she sleeps over at Amira's place, her best friend ever, who hardly ever comes to our house anymore.

The inseparable trio was sitting on the big lawn in front of the little library building, looking around in silence.

That's how they are—I've never seen them talk the way people usually do; they either stay quiet or whisper incomprehensible sentences to each other. When they're at our place they make huge snacks, stay on their phones, sometimes they look at each other and burst out laughing for no reason. I always get the impression they're laughing at me. Most of the time I go shut myself in my room and stay there until they leave. If I absolutely have to go to the bathroom, I cross the living room quickly, trying not to meet their eyes. I never know whether they're sizing me up or whether I'm invisible to them.

I recognized them from far away and didn't want to run into them, so to get into the building I avoided the lawn and went around the pine grove. At the end of the school year the library is full of older students, so there's never any place to sit and read. I didn't care; I just wanted to get the book and leave, so I went straight to the desk and gave the title to the librarian, who started searching the catalogue. Because there was a connection problem, I had to wait.

In the meantime I looked around and noticed that among the tables crammed with students there were some occupied by just one person—guys of all ages, a bit dirty. From the empty space around them you could tell they didn't smell very good. One was sitting with a book in front of him; it didn't look like he was reading it, more like he was staring at it with wide-open eyes. He looked like a puppet someone had left on a chair. A very skinny woman had lots of plastic bags set down next to her chair and was staring at a computer screen. She seemed very focused.

Then the connection came back and the librarian told me they didn't have that book and that in nearby libraries it had already been checked out. "Do you want to request an interlibrary loan?" she asked. I didn't understand, and she explained that they can borrow books from other libraries, even far away ones. "You'd have it in about a week," she said. In a week I can read even four books, but what else could I do? I agreed. Then it turned out that for that kind of loan you need a special card that costs ten euros. It was all the money I had in my pocket, and I really hate spending money. Besides, with ten euros I could almost buy the book again. But the woman explained that the card is valid for a year and that with it I can request many books, not just one. In the end I pulled out the money.

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After the shock of the ten euros, my sister had slipped my mind, so when I went out I crossed the big lawn in front of the little building and found her right in front of me, together with her two faithful servants. They were looking at me with their usual, impossible-to-decipher expression. Maybe to them I really am invisible, except that I still always feel judged. I gave a small wave hello with my hand and they looked at each other in surprise, as if to say, *oh my God, who is this person greeting us?* That made me so angry that I walked over and said hello out loud. Lea tilted her head and gave that wicked little smile of hers that sends the blood rushing to my head.

So I told her I had just been to the library to reserve the book she'd made me lose, and that if she took something of mine again I'd smother her in her sleep. She parted her lips slightly and slowly shook her head, the way she always does when, in her opinion, I don't even deserve an answer. Then she turned toward her cronies and they burst out laughing, all at the exact same moment, as if they had a hidden stopwatch somewhere. I couldn't think of anything else to say and I walked away. What was I expecting? That she'd apologize?

As I was leaving, I passed the tiny woman with the bags—the one who'd been at the computer in the library. She was walking slowly, swaying from side to side and stopping every now and then.

From far away Lea shouted, “Oh, tell Mom I’ll be back inawhale.” *Inawhale* means in a little while.

REMINDER: if in a few years you start talking like that too, throw yourself into the Tiber.

Anyway, I was wrong to tell her I’d smother her in her sleep. For sure she’ll take something of mine again, and then what do I do? Do I really strangle her? I can’t, for Mom’s sake and because of that whole style thing. Besides, maybe I gave her an idea—you never know with her. Just in case, tonight I’m sleeping with my Swiss Army knife under my pillow.

May 30

We have a substitute math teacher filling in for the terrible Tombini. She seems kind; today at recess she walked around between the desks and complimented me on my snack. A savory brioche braid with walnuts and herb cheese. I let her taste it, and when I told her I’d made the brioche myself, her eyes widened and she said, “Hey, so besides math you also have a talent for cooking!” I don’t know if I have a talent—I follow the recipe, I replied. After all, that’s what I do with math too. She said it’s not exactly the same thing, then thought about it for a moment and admitted that in some cases it works in a similar way, for example with algorithms. At that point Giuseppe slowly backed away to get out of the teacher’s line of sight without being noticed too much. I, on the other hand, was right in front of her and had no escape.

The teacher, all enthusiastic, explained that algorithms are procedures that have existed since ancient times to solve certain problems through elementary steps, and that now they’re used to program computers and for many other things.

Giuseppe waved goodbye and ran out into the courtyard, while I got stuck with the whole lesson. All in all it was interesting—I could talk about it in my food-themed paper. There’s data, instructions, and a result: you add fixed numbers to other numbers, mix, cook, divide, keep the remainder, and serve at the table. “Professor, then I’ll send you the algorithm for the brioche braid,” I said at the end, just to wrap it up. She must have thought that since I do well at school, don’t dress like a rapper, and like to eat well, I don’t need recess. I sometimes have that effect on adults.

Not just with adults, to tell the truth. Giuseppe always tells me I seem like an old man, and he does a perfect imitation of me setting up my desk for snack time or organizing my things in my backpack. I don’t like seeming like an old man, but what can I do—Giuseppe makes me laugh. The bit he does best is the scene where I get angry because I’ve stained my T-shirt. He’s too good at it, and you can tell he doesn’t do it out of meanness, quite the opposite. The problem isn’t Giuseppe; the problem is that everyone else, even if they call me a genius, considers me weird.

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Sometimes I wish I were called normal, not a genius, not weird. I wish that in class they’d say to me, “Hey, you’re really normal!” That they’d talk about me saying, “Who? Him? The normal one?”

Except I wouldn't want to change myself—I'd want everyone else to change. I'd like to wake up one morning and discover that they've all become so different from one another that at that point I'd be just one among many and no one would pay attention to me.

Here—maybe I could write a story about this whole thing of being different among people who are all the same. I'll think about it. After all, a diary is also for coming up with ideas, besides practicing writing, using new words like *algorithms*, remembering what I do, organizing myself. What else is it for? For having an appointment with my thoughts, as Dad used to say. And also for feeling like an old man, because who in my class keeps a diary besides me? Actually, I don't know—maybe someone else does.

Anyway, if this is my private diary, I might as well write things in it that I wouldn't tell anyone, for example that I'm sorry I'm not a social type like Giuseppe. Am I jealous? Yes. There, I've written it. He knows a ton of people, even from other classes, and above all he's already had two and a half girlfriends. The half is Carola, whom he didn't manage to kiss because he burped and she got offended. In my opinion that doesn't count as half a girlfriend, but he says that all that time spent first looking at each other, talking, asking each other out, and then avoiding each other has to count for something.

Giuseppe, burps aside, doesn't have any trouble being in a group and talking to girls, which is something I don't manage to do very well. Still, I'm happy for him, because he's my friend—actually, Giuseppe says I'm his best friend precisely because I'm made this way. Made what way? Weird? Different? A nerd? No, not a nerd.

Then better a genius.

Maybe I'll write a story like *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss, with those strange creatures that had stars on their bellies and looked down on the ones that didn't. I loved it so much—I had it read to me so many times. I still know some parts by heart.