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CHAPTER XII

WHEN I AM SHIPWRECKED, I HAVE NAVIGATED WELL

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THE DAUGHTER Can you hear me? Are you listening? I decided to talk to you in order to - It's not easy. I don't know. Perhaps this isn't the time. But if I don't start, I'll end up telling myself that the time will never come. Isn't that how it is? That if we don't force ourselves to start, we'll end up stopping starting? And we'll never start anything again. That's what happens for most things. And one day you look over your shoulder and see that behind you a mountain has grown. It doesn't matter if you want to turn back, the road is no longer there, it's not there, it's gone. And so you may as well grab any moment of any day before it's too late, before the mountain moves, before it sucks us in, before it swallows us up. It swallows us up too. That's why I've decided to talk to you. Because we don't know each other. We still don't know each other. Not completely. Very little in fact. Even if -

Perhaps I wasn't interested in getting to know you. After all, I became indifferent to it. They made me indifferent to it. Because by not talking to you, I stopped believing that you existed. It was as if you never had, as if I could live without you, as if you and I were two different things, two separate worlds, two unknown worlds. And not being able to speak to you. How could I get to know you if I wasn't able to speak to you? Can you hear me? I'm here now. I'm trying. I'm really trying. If what I believe is true, it can't not work. And I do believe it's true. Is it childish? Is it a nasty thing? Believing it's true, I mean. It seems strange, right? It isn't suited to the times. And yet - And yet if not, we die away. Because even if you can't know everything, you can still believe in something. And the more our world grows, the less capable we are of embracing it all. There's too much. It's so big. And that's when we have to start believing, all at once like jumping in ice-cold water. Otherwise - Otherwise -

This is what I know. I don't know anything else and it's not enough, I need to know more. But even if it were enough, even if I didn't need more, I'd still have to tell this. Because stories are covered in soap and they escape, they slide away, if they aren't caught, if they aren't told. To stop them. And that's what I - And that's what I do too.

He was born in a city in the North. In an industrialised zone. The most industrialised at that time. We're in Italy, Europe. Even though Europe doesn't exist yet. There's the continent,



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of course. We learn about that at school. But the concept, that's something different. Italians are Italians, Germans are Germans, and then the French, the English, the Spanish, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia... all different. He was born there, in this city in the North, where they make kitchens and shoes and stuff like that. It's full of factories and people flock there from the South but also from other parts of the North; they come from all over the country. It's a land of immigration. There's work. Oh yes, work. And yet it's not easy to leave your home. But arriving somewhere new is hard too. You're all alone. It's all new but it's a type of new that you haven't chosen yourself. A newness that you've just happened to come across. It's obvious that it won't be easy. At least that's what they say. That's what I've read in books. It's like that. In fact, it's not as if I didn't look into it. I did my reading. I worked hard to understand. I worked hard. But it's just not enough. It's not enough.

Anyway, there are factories and people move there. But if there are factories, there are workers, and if there are workers, there are the workers' wives, and if there are the workers' wives then sooner or later, or later, but more like sooner because in those days they didn't spend ages thinking about it but rather 'doing' it. Basically sooner rather than later, there are children, the workers' children, the immigrants' children, and where there are children, there's a need for schools, and where there are schools, there's a need for teachers, and if there are teachers, who tend to be women, there is also a need for headmasters, and so the headmasters and their wives, who were once teachers themselves, come from all over the country too, and this is how his parents arrived, and then his brothers, and then, last but not least, which turned out to be a good thing in the end because the war had been over for a few years by then, he arrived. The war was over and, even though his grandfather had been wounded in the First World War and had been awarded a medal of honour, and even though his grandmother had lost everything – the villa, the servants, the carriage – and his mother bemoaned better times and his father thought back to his own childhood, alone down in Calabria with his mother reading the letters that arrived from Argentina. Despite all this, he had never encountered history, history with a capital H that is. He was lucky, he was born after, he was born into safety, after the bombings and the hunger and the wreckage. And perhaps it was because of this, perhaps it was because of his growing up in the warm that the desire remained with him, the desire to grab history by its tail.

Do you follow me? Can you follow me? I'm trying to piece everything together. It's not easy. From my perspective, I mean. What I'm trying to say is that I run away from history, if history means the things of my life that aren't mine but are mine. Because that's the way it was for me, history stuck to me like a handful of wheatears stick to a woolly jumper. You try to get them off but there are so many, so many, that even when you think you've got them all, you're still there picking them off.

Yet maybe he didn't try to invent history. Rather, when he was born, history was already there, because history will always be there. It's like a shadow. It's only Peter Pan who doesn't have one. At that time, history was like this: the countryside was deserted, the cities were growing, Italy was changing and, amongst all that movement up and down this long country, someone had seen that it was the right time. And even if it wasn't, maybe it needed to be, to become the right time, because if they didn't begin, if we weren't able to begin, if we didn't force ourselves to begin, that would be the end not the beginning. But the end had already come and so - Perhaps that's the way it is. Perhaps this is the air that he breathed. And when the air is full of something, it's hard to stay away. We don't live in a



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vacuum, others are all around and you want to put your hands over your ears, your nose and your mouth, they get in, they get in everywhere. They got into him too. Perhaps because at school he was the son of the headmaster and the son of the teacher and all the others weren't. No, they were the seamstresses' kids, the leather cutter's kids, the mechanic's kids. And yet they were his friends, those he kicked a ball around with in that Italy of the 1950s, where the old women went around wearing their headscarves and the kids sped around in their lambrettas. They were his friends at that Sunday school where the priests gave them their first lessons about the world because they had recently returned from Kenya and Eritrea and were about to leave for Mexico. They spoke about leprosy in Sudan because they had seen it with their own eyes and he and the son of the mechanic would stare wide-eyed and listen to them, perhaps just like now -

Are you here? Who knows if you came? I can't see you but I think that you're here, that you came. And I wanted to say thank you, you could've chosen not to. We've forgotten how to say thank you. We don't use those words in this country. They say it's down to guilt. Maybe it is. Maybe there are historical reasons. Either way, it's true. It's a given fact. But I want to say it. Because perhaps sometimes we want to say something, even just one word. It's unnatural. And yet. We stop ourselves. We don't say it. And then, gradually, day by day, you forget how to say it. You simply don't say it anymore. And your children will forget how to say it. Well, that's the way it is. I don't know if I'm able to live in a world which has pieces missing, pieces of the world I mean. Because that's what words are, they're pieces of the world. And yet every day we lose words, we lose them because we're ashamed, we're ashamed to say them.

And that's how he ended up living between two worlds, no matter what. Because up North, in that city full of factories where a class in elementary school was made up of forty-five fourteen and fifteen year olds who'd just arrived from places where no one really went to school, he was the headmaster's son. Then, in the summer he would visit his grandparents down South. He would go fishing with his father and his father's friends, and from twenty, thirty, maybe even forty metres, they would pull in the nets and fish of all different colours would come to the surface, it was incredible, miraculous even. And he would be so mesmerised that he would want to stay there, he who was an outsider, someone from the North. Even though he wanted to come from there, he wanted to be like the others. And he was a little, but not entirely. It was always like this. He was neither from one part nor from the other. Thinking about it, perhaps that's the reason why things turned out the way they did. Because he wanted to sew these worlds together, bring them back together. And he started when he was fourteen. 'And you, which side are you on?' It was always like this. It's hard for us to imagine today. Whites on the one side, reds on the other. He was catholic. He was catholic, his father was catholic, his mother was catholic, his auntie was particularly catholic. But being catholic no longer meant just going to mass, saying your prayers, receiving Holy Communion, or even catechism. Boys went to the playground with girls, not separate like before but together. And then on Sundays they started to go on 'charitable' outings in groups, visiting Godforsaken villages in the middle of nowhere at the foothills of the Alps, villages which were maddeningly poor without even a road. They went there to help, to say a few things about catechism, but rather to help the women by looking after their little children while they got on with the housework. Of course, it wasn't anything



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great. But the older ones went to Brazil. However, then the news of the dictatorship came in Brazil and that's when things began to change there. In his second year of secondary school, he had a professor of philosophy who was *catto-comunista* – that is catholic and communist at the same time. But this professor was a real communist, not a member of the Italian Communist Party. He was one of those who asks questions. 'What can I know?' 'What ought I to do?' 'What may I hope?' A guy like that was enough to make him champ at the bit and say 'but what are we going to Brazil for?' To evangelise. But that was no longer enough, it wasn't enough, because the Combonian missionaries would return from Africa and would tell them about leprosy. Leprosy is such a simple disease, just three Lire is enough to get rid of it, and so it was a scandal. And yet these others, the older ones, would return from South America and would reveal that in Columbia priests fought against the guerrilla. And everywhere, even in that city in the North with its cheap kitchens and fairly-priced leather shoes, pamphlets and essays circulated. Basically, word got around that evangelising Brazil meant starting the revolution. And from there it was a small step, wasn't it?

It's not easy. It's not easy to speak to you because - God, perhaps it's the other way around. What if you weren't you? If you weren't you, it would be very simple, a walk in the park, entertaining even, telling you all this. In my own words. But you are you. And I am me. I without you - (*She stops*). In other words, us. Two strangers who yet - My own words. Which may even be wrong because I didn't understand, because I don't understand, not really. I try but there's always something that doesn't quite fit. Because I'm not you and I can't - Or perhaps it's because it's always like this, never possible to iron someone out like you do with bedsheets. There are creases. Seams. Millimetres of unreachable, incomprehensible material. I'm like that in front of you. And I'm ashamed about it. Why? Why did I get myself into this mess? Because I couldn't have done otherwise. In any case, I'm here. We're here. One in front of the other. There are times in life when you look into each other's eyes and you see, aren't there? Not like usual. You don't see the other as you do in everyday life. But you see the other as other. OK, I'll move on. I'm sorry, it helps me.

He had finished school and had to start university. In Milan. The Statale. But it wasn't a year like any other and here fate plays a part, fate too. Or maybe not. Maybe it was his nature and it would have happened anyway. It's a small step. Towards the right or towards the left. But his sense of justice, his perception of privilege, Christ, Kant, and a friend who steered him towards Mao Tse-tung and there you go. He was the second Maoist at the University, even though it was a disaster right from his very first public speech because the majority of students had never heard of Mao Tse-tung, and the others, those who were truly Left, the 'Hammers and Sickles', who had started from antifascism, they were much sharper, and so that handful of lads who would come forward to speak out about Mao and co. were nearly lynched. But even in politics, even in politics, there are trends and in just a few months everything changes. All hell breaks loose, at university, in demonstrations, and everywhere else. Mass conversion to Maoism. In the meantime, he and his friends were politically active in the student movement, in the factories, and in demonstrations. The tables were beginning to turn, so much so that their secretary was received by Mao himself. That's when they started to split up. Typical! The cracks started to show. The



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demonstrations became dodgier and dodgier and that's when you have to be careful because you risk being beaten up. At night you have to ask your mates to walk you home: the fascists wander around with their knuckledusters. But your comrades have their wrenches. It took me a long time to understand because it makes no sense, does it? From the outside, it's impossible to understand. At first they're all demonstrating against the Vietnam War and within a few years they're at war in the cities. Mao said it himself: revolution is not a dinner party. Fair enough. And yet -

You know, perhaps what has remained a complete mystery to me is the beginning. The girls in my class said that they were conceived in a Venetian hotel room after a gondola ride when their parents were on their honeymoon, or in the middle of a field during a hot summer's night, or even in the bed in their own house the evening that mummy and daddy watched on TV the first man walking on the moon. But me? What was I the daughter of? Of an afternoon of heated debate over Marxist thought or over the liberation fights in Mozambique? Or an afternoon trying out the theories of orgasm as rebellion against bourgeois repression? Because that's how it was, there was no pretending: when a person wanted it, they would say so, and the ideal reply would be 'why not?' or 'let's do it!' They had a body and it was only right to use it. Or was there something else? The beginning of the end? Another end? And yet why? And anyway, the coincidence in dates? In Piazza Fontana in December: emergency turned into tragedy. And immediately after that, the movement had to get itself sorted. It looked for direct forms of democracy. And so you and some other rebel from the suburbs thought up the *Gruppo Gramsci*. Your comrades went to the working-class areas, to the factories. They had to stand united, they had to be good. Strong. They studied. January. February. Nine months later, I was born.

I hope you're still there. I hope you're hanging on. Now we're in the same boat. We're sailing together. At least, that's what I tell myself. Because even I am tempted to let go, don't think that I am not. But anyway. The first memory I have is of my mother picking me up from my cot. I'm holding my hands tight between my legs. A pale green and pink baby blanket. Pastel coloured wallpaper. The cot is made of metal. I'm at my mother's parents' house. The apartment building is made of green brick and marble and there are flower beds and magnolias outside. In the morning, a pink light shines in and the birds sing. Silvana, the maid, is at the door. A different side of Milan. Then disconnected snapshots, one after the other. *Nonna* Wilma, wearing her grey linen suit, her hair stiff with lacquer and her lips painted bright red, calling the lift. Mum, with her flowery skirt and clogs, holding my hand down the street in town where there are lots of columns. *Nonno* in the living room smoking his pipe. And then - Then - I - I with my little white dress, lace socks and shiny shoes with a strap. Being held, in a room full of big men. It's you, you with your long beard, who is holding me. But this isn't a memory. No, it's a photo. It's a photo which I must have found much later on. Which I still have. Like I still have that little oil painting with the paints all dried up from when we used to paint together, when my hand still fitted inside yours. I can still smell it. It's in the tin box together with all your - Your - In my head, you were never all together. You. Mum. My grandparents from Milan. My grandparents from Varese. Never together. Many different worlds. I was rich as a child. Everyone else had one family. Crazy or normal. Quiet or raucous. I had three or four. And they were all different. I loved it!

You had written on the walls 'I want to be an orphan' and then you became a father. You



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were my father. A strange thing these parents who live on their own and just meet up, but never during the holidays. And it's your grandparents who decorate the tree with you at Christmas and buy you your Easter egg, take you to the beach in the summer and sledging in the mountains in the winter. And you two? You two were the exception. I got what little time was left, after the idea had gotten into your heads to serve the masses. A family together no, but the revolution yes. That, yes. Do you remember the time I asked you? 'But do you really believe that you're going to start a revolution?' No, you said. I felt like shit when you said that. But after all that bedlam? No, Italy had to become a laboratory for permanent class struggle, with factory committees, school collectives, neighbourhood collectives: 'the working-class mind'. Italy had to move further towards the left. Yeah, right.

Nonno and *nonna* pulled me in the other direction. When I was five years old, they signed me up for ballet classes: a girl must learn how to be graceful, how to walk with her back straight, and preferably how to tie her hair back in a ponytail, nice and tidy so that her hair doesn't fall in her eyes. When I was six, they added private English language lessons. Mum tried to oppose but at that time she had other things to worry about. Things had become complicated. The question of defence had become urgent and the problem of violence more and more serious. After being blockaded at demonstrations many times, her friends, as well as using lemons against the teargas, started bringing Molotov cocktails too. There was nothing left to lose, right? It was only a response. It took me a long time to understand. At school, Ghandi and Martin Luther King; at home, pasta soup on a Sunday and cakes with Chantilly cream. And then that other planet, where you both lived, where people went off the rails through sabotages and proletarian repossessions. Thinking about it, your heroes had been the partisans and the Third World freedom fighters. And the idea of the Storming of the Winter Palace had remained with you all. Of course, at first I knew nothing about it all. *Nonna* Wilma was always on the lookout and made sure nothing leaked out. Newspapers weren't for children and after the evening TV programme *Carosello* I'd be sent to bed. Except the days I'd stay with one of you two and I'd realise that even rules came with exceptions. Oh yes, exceptions. Then mum left the group. She got out. And things started to change for me too. If for no other reason than that she was living on her own now. Although her house was very different to *nonno* and *nonna*'s. For a start, it didn't have mattresses and sleeping bags all over the kitchen floor all the time. It was a tiny house, always full of stuff, always messy, as *nonna* Wilma would say. But at least, as *nonna* Wilma would say, it was 'a normal house'. And it was full of light, when the sun shone. I saw you less and less. At first, once a week. Then, perhaps every ten or so days. Then *nonno* and *nonna* said it was better not to. And they'd take me to the cinema. They'd take me to do my homework at Valeria's, my friend from school who had bright blue eyes. Sometimes I'd be allowed to stay afterwards to play. At first, only for an hour. Then, for two hours. And then, until dinnertime. They hardly spoke of you. Even mum spoke little of you. That other one had appeared, mum's friend Giorgio. He was nice but he didn't have a beard, he rolled his 'r's and had a lisp, but, more than anything else, he wasn't you. And so Vale and I started calling him 'Mr-Consonant-Less' in secret. He didn't last long either. Then began a period which mum called existential descent, petrification of the soul and hermitic closure. I had no idea what all that meant but I'd heard her say it to a friend on the phone. And so I looked it up in the *Palazzi* dictionary that she kept on the shelf, but I still didn't really understand, until one day, by chance, I happened to find a picture of a hermit in my school textbook and, as he had a beard, I thought of you.



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That was the point you disappeared. One Sunday which, according to my calculations, I should have spent with you, mum made me stay at her house and early next morning she put me in the car. 'We're going on a trip', she said. It was cold and raining and her idea didn't seem like a good one to me. I asked her if we were going to pick you up, or if we could at least phone you to let you know that we were going to be out of town and could we change our meeting to the following week. At first she didn't answer and then she mumbled something like 'he's gone away to work'. 'Away where?', I must have asked. 'Far away', she told me. And when I kept on, she conjured up the name of some city in America, Chicago or Philadelphia or something like that, something about a film, but she said it in a film voice too. And even though you'd started teaching at the university, and I knew that university professors sometimes go to conferences or on trips abroad, I had the feeling that it wasn't true, although I didn't have enough to go on to form a real and complete doubt. I thought it sounded strange, that's all. And then, when it came up again and *nonna* told me that you'd decided to spend six months at that American university and that everything was so last minute that you hadn't had time to say goodbye to me, but even more so when, in response to my straight question, she replied that you couldn't phone because you'd been tasked with conducting research in an area in the south, along the Mexican border, that's when I started to imagine that you'd left with another woman, that you'd got together with a young, freckle-faced American whose Italian was worse than Giorgio's, not because she was short of consonants but because she didn't know how to speak it. And perhaps you had another daughter, her too unable to utter a single word of Italian. And maybe you were no longer able to speak Italian and that was the reason you slipped away and didn't write. And within a few months, I'd convinced myself that I would never see you again.

I hadn't spoken to anyone about your disappearance. I was slightly ashamed. Your clever idea of abandoning us just like that was enough to show the whole world that I, as a daughter, even though I was doing well at school and at nine years of age already knew a few words of English, I wasn't worth very much. And mum was worth even less because she wasn't even your wife, not like my classmates' mums who were their husbands' wives. She wasn't even your girlfriend, like some of her friends who had children with men who called them their girlfriend. To you, mum was just a comrade and it was almost as if I, ten years from then, would set up house with Stacchiotti, the boy who sat at the back of the class, the boy who was repeating the year and, on the first day of school, came in with an alarm clock in case he happened to fall asleep. Anyway, I didn't say anything at school. We didn't talk about it at home. *Nonno* and *nonna* only turned the TV on if some TV series was showing and they preferred listening to their Vivaldi records than to the radio. Mum popped in every two or three days, but she would usually shut herself in the study with *nonno* and they wouldn't appear again until dinnertime. It was all sad, grey and horrible, but everything was going smoothly. Until that day. That's when the cracks started to appear. My teacher had given us a free writing task. I'd written about a cat which we'd found in the garden. Valeria had written about her Austrian grandmother. Others, about their most recent Sunday trip or about their passion for karate. Fabbri had written about his father, who was a head physician at a big hospital. Our teacher asked him to read his essay out loud. At the end he had written that he felt extremely lucky to have such an important father who was able to heal the sick and that he should thank God for this gift because not everyone was as lucky: some children's fathers were factory workers, others unemployed, or even in prison. And these misfortunes, that's what he'd written, 'misfortunes', happened often and there was even someone in the school like this. At that point our teacher interrupted him and, when one of my classmates raised her hand to ask whose father was



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in prison and our teacher answered that it wasn't important, a couple of children said that they knew too. But since they saw that the teacher wanted to change the subject, they shut up. Yet one of the two looked at me for a moment and then quickly turned away and so, when I came back into class after break and saw that written on the blackboard, I didn't take it too badly either. Things got worse at lunchtime, when we were sat at the table, when I asked *nonna* and she lowered her head and mumbled something. And as soon as I started crying she hugged me saying 'they're horrible, horrible' and 'poor little girl', and she held me so tight that I nearly suffocated.

After that I started spying on them. And putting money away to buy the newspaper. I would get *il Corriere della Sera*, the paper *nonno* once read. At first it made me angry that, when they were alone, they'd call you those names and they'd say never again, never again. I would think that it wasn't fair, that I was your daughter and that I'd fight back. But then I read what had happened, what they said you'd done, and I understood that you, my daddy, you, yes, you were one of the commanders of the Red Brigades, that's what was written, and what these Red Brigades did, because that was written too. Then one day, I suddenly realised that they were right and I decided that you were dead to me. Little by little our house would go back to being like any other house, where we would watch the news at lunchtime and dinnertime and the daily papers wouldn't be kept under lock and key. You were a criminal, mum a rather wacky big sister and the three of us a normal family.

That's what I used to tell myself. It was there in black and white. In huge capital letters. On the front page of the national newspapers. Fabbri was right. Sometimes misfortunes do happen. You were my misfortune. What would happen to my daddy, the man with whom I would collect sticks on the beach while we were on holiday and in whose house I could draw on the living room walls and he wouldn't mind? You were the man who, after dropping me off at school, would turn into the leader of a gang of evil men who would get together to decide which big shot to kidnap and murder next. I felt sick, sick to the stomach. Then I'd say to myself: it's not your fault that your father is a murderer. My head was already full of all sorts of different monsters. There was no room left for you. And I burnt away a little piece of my heart each day. That winter *nonno* decided to have the fireplace cleaned which, ever since I was born, had served only as a resting place for a large vase of flowers. He would light the fire every evening as soon as he got in from work and, when he left the room, I would secretly burn the newspapers which I'd secretly bought and avidly read in search of some new detail. Truth was like an onion and I'd only just started to peel it.

It isn't your fault that your father is a murderer. In any case, he's still your father. Does he wonder how you are? Can you imagine what he must have been through? These voices would quieten down from time to time, if only for a few days. Then they would come back. Right on cue. And when the theorem had been pulled apart and even the judge had to admit that you weren't the monster they'd made you out to be, it turned out that you actually had nothing to do with terrorism. They decided that your sin had been opening the doors of your newspaper to the *Autonomia Operaia* movement, whose ideas weren't that similar to yours after all. When you got out after a year, and those who had never doubted you welcomed you back with open arms, the distance between you and I was truly too great by now. I could no longer be ashamed of you, but the anger remained. Anger from being betrayed. Anger because you chose an ideal over me. 'Tough luck', I would tell myself. 'Too bad for you'. And yet, I felt so horrible that I'd end up being ashamed of myself instead.



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We began to see each other again like before, once a week. We'd go to the cinema or for a pizza in the Navigli district. And usually when I got home the thoughts would begin to race around and turn upside down in my head for a few days. And in my mind the never-ending list of the whys and what fors would strike up all over again. What had driven you to all that? Why had you been so thoughtless? Why did you stir up all that trouble without working out an escape route? Why let the dogs out without taking cover first? Was it self-destruction? Self-pity? The persistent stigma or trauma of Catholicism? Even Richard III, right in the middle of the War of the Roses, realised when it was time to leg it, 'my kingdom for a horse', but you, you had to carry on right to the bitter end, drink the poisoned chalice, and bring us down with you.

'When I am shipwrecked, I have navigated well'. You know I've always hated Latin. I've never got it and anyway, what am I supposed to do with a dead language? What did you mean? You were shipwrecked? Great! But I was shipwrecked with you and I didn't navigate well. I stayed stuck to the bottom of your boat like a fly with wet wings. I don't get this story about a shipwreck, nor the idea of speaking to me by way of a letter. You've never written to me before and now that you've ended up working on the other side of Italy, you've suddenly become all nostalgic. That's exactly why we say 'my old folks at home'. Because those who were born first are always older. So much for inventing youth, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones. You, my mother, and all your mates: you're just as old as everyone else.

Who or what fucked you up, then? Your studies? Your books? Those theories you'd all filled your heads with? Except when you went around shagging everyone, forgetting the link between cause and effect. I wouldn't have done it, I no longer needed to read, I just wanted to stop, I did stop, I didn't want to learn anymore, there was nothing more to learn, and learning didn't solve anything anyway. I would've burnt everything, I did burn everything, I no longer needed role models, I didn't want to know which ideals to strive for, I didn't want to be a revolutionary, I didn't want to be a guerrilla fighter, but I wouldn't be the wife of a wealthy man either, or worse still, the wife of a powerful man. I wouldn't be a powerful woman, I wouldn't be anyone's heroine, I wouldn't amount to anything, I'd be a nobody. Because you lot had already been and done everything and its opposite, and all that was left for me was this bright, shiny nothing of a future. But, at any rate, I'd exist perhaps.

Around this ounce of suffering gathered years of raw and pointless torment, without even a shadow of sense, so much so that we had to ask ourselves not only *how* did we end up in this open-air madhouse but also *why* did we decide to stay there day after day. Perhaps the only thing that saved us was that we were all feeling just as useless. An entire generation of frantic souls because no one had let us understand, not you lot with all your errors, not even your enemies, your fathers and your mothers, with their orthodox answers and their rules and discipline. It wasn't until years later that I started to wonder if it was all linked. You lot, reduced to powerlessness. Us lot, disillusioned. And the majority of people, indifferent. In such a wilderness, one might wonder how fate could have been so efficient.



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Perhaps the first time I went to Leoncavallo squatter community in Milan, I did it for you. It springs to mind now, as I'm talking: a social centre was the only link between your rebellion and mine, a rebellion that was still possible for me. It's like when you only wear certain trousers or a certain colour around your first crush because you know, you imagine, or you just sense that *he* adores precisely those trousers or that colour and, from a distance, you stage a play for him. And he, my he, was you. But this means that if you weren't you but you were someone else, my play would have been different. If you'd been on the other side of the barricades, I would've been someone else. This is why I thought about - This is why it was better to abandon everything, to shed my skin. And that's what I did. I scratched away everything that didn't seem to belong to me, to me as a human being, everything that wasn't me. Did *you* do this? Was this *your* history? Was this *history*? Because the same thing must have happened to you too. They must have stuck to you too: the ears of corn of your time, of the post-war era, when all children were lucky because the storm had passed. But what's left? What?

Perhaps I hurt you. Perhaps I'm still hurting you. Just like you hurt me. Perhaps between parents and children there's a struggle for territory too. It's just that we're not contending for space, but time. Time that I want as mine, and you still want as yours. And like in any war, the reasons are all over the place, and getting through it isn't easy. Yes, there are long, sweet moments of truce which melt inside a yearning desire for happiness. But people are still too much like animals to turn a feeling into consciousness. Perhaps that's exactly what you meant. What you've been chasing all your life and if that's the case, then that's fine. But I want to finish this. I want to tell you the reason for my somewhat late decision. The reason for my push towards -

I'd left everything behind once again. I looked elsewhere. Milan had clasped hold of me, and yet it had always been the only world that could contain me, unless I erased everything and tried elsewhere. I began my first year of university like some restless student. I put my rucksack on my back and went interrailing. First stop: London and the United Kingdom, both for the language which, rightly or wrongly, I had picked up, and to experience an open place, a city made up of many cities, a country raised by many countries, a culture born of a thousand cultures. It was as though the imperialism which you lot had always fought had created a more democratic world over there. Bizarre. And then the opposite: the satellites of real communism, from Hungary to Poland, where four of our Lire could buy rivers worth of spirits and whole packets of the most lethal cigarettes, and where they danced night and day to the rhythm of music from twenty years earlier but passed off as the latest fashion in the modern world. The second summer of university I landed in Hamburg, where a friend I'd met on the road had invited me to stay on his bedroom floor. He ran a small centre in an old, abandoned station for social misfits. We all lived together with this family. They were always pissed and filled their mouths with tirades against 'the capitalist pigs', even though they weren't able to write that whole sentence. They all stole like crows and the more groceries I bought, mainly to free myself from being in debt with my host, the emptier the fridge was because they constantly pinched things. The father was in prison and the children would go out and beg. But they would never scrape together anything and would cry. The mother did nothing apart from drink from morning until evening and in the end the older sister, not knowing how to make the children quiet, would go to the supermarket and steal baby food, sausages and nappies.



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When the father returned from prison, the first thing he did was burn all the doors of the house to warm up his family. It was like all life-forms from *Anything Goes*: no more rules, no restrictions. One guy was so off his face on vodka that he experienced delirium tremens. Another was so high on LSD that he would run around dressed in red from head to toe and you could see him arriving for miles. He was an electrician and one time he sorted out the wires in the bathroom but, as he really didn't care, he just pulled up the floor and left a note in the bathtub saying 'please don't take a bath: you will die'. The others that year were linked to the military vessels full of nuclear waste and had been charged with disrupting vessel traffic. But when the judge tried to help them, they turned on him because 'we don't want any favours'. It was the '80s and everyone scraped by as best they could, but in the end, surviving or going under, it was all the fucking same. They were 'the reflux years', when everything was returning to order, that's what they said anyway. But this too is a word that we no longer use, perhaps because it shows that there was an after but that there was also a before. But no one wants to talk about this 'before' anymore, and we're all neck-deep in the 'after'.

Perhaps this is my final reproach, because the world that I'd seen through your eyes wasn't the one that I found. And that's what pushed me under. Because, however much I turned around, for years and years I didn't recognise anything or anyone. It was as if what you'd all told me was a fairy tale. And I cursed you. You and my mother. Not only for having me but for having me when the future was so bright, that everything was already over. And for making me believe that something was happening when in fact, it's as if nothing happened at all. Quite the opposite. Shipwrecked. Yes, I was too, but all alone in the end – perhaps – exactly - It's as if in my way, in our way, us, we only came after, in our way. Us too. Yes, we tried to see it through. We got lost as well, and yet because of that we are still -

How did I get to where I am today? I almost don't know. All I know is that fifteen years ago little Nora came into my life. And perhaps one day she will be speaking to me as I am speaking to you now. But I chose to - It took so much strength to come here and tell you all this because - To say this to you. If I asked you now, later, but who knows, perhaps not too late, or maybe - I don't know. I'm speaking to you because I never would have thought it. I didn't understand. Because I didn't know -

During the final week of *nonna* Wilma's life, I spent a few hours with her each day. She wasn't always clear and sometimes I had to play along with her, in fact, unbridled imagination. And it wasn't without sadness that I did so. But one afternoon, right in the middle of a dreamy conversation which was bordering on absurd, she raised herself from the bed - with what strength I don't know as she was at death's door - and with her hand she gestured towards the white wardrobe and told me to get the ladder and go up. When she asked me to look for a biscuit tin behind a blue bathrobe, which was still in the bag, I don't know what made me listen. It was almost as if I knew that, amongst the many delirious images, there was something real there and I couldn't help but listen to her. Hidden between the bathrobe and a stash of linen towels which had her initials on, was a tin of Lazzaroni biscuits with a picture of a cocker spaniel on the top. I recognised it immediately. And inside, held together with a silk ribbon, were the hundreds of letters you sent from prison to your little girl.