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PROLOGUE

There had always been a lot of people who wagered on me. They said I had what it takes, that my merits would take me a long way, in fact, if I really wanted. And so, my excessive faith in such predictions led me to believe that if I worked hard and trusted my lucky star – maybe also aided by a certain optimism, which I wasn't lacking – one way or another I would make it. I would make good, despite the urgent problems in which we're mired around here, and regardless of the fact that I had not started out, let's say, as a favorite to win.

So then, encouraged by other people's expectations and by my own illusions, I steered my skiff toward the safe harbor of a quiet life, a stable job, a roof over my head and, God willing, a wife and kids. All in all I did not think I was asking for the moon, though in the shadow of Vesuvius an objective that is on balance reasonable represents a chimera. And I knew it. What I could not know, however, was that to pursue my mirage I would have to retreat from things that happen, for a long time, nearly my whole life. That is to say not be there, or rather be in a fantasy world where life's sad and joyous music would always and only reach me as background noise. For a good long time, it was like being there and not being there at the same time. In the sense that I was there because it was my fate to be there, in the sense that I was not there because I almost always ended up avoiding anything that happened by hiding behind countless veils of indifference. Events, it made no difference whether near or far, barely touched me. But if you were to ask me why I remember what happened – I was at a turning point, about to hit forty – my answer would simply be that one fine day, when I pricked up my ears to the voices that besieged me, the entire world came crumbling down on me, waking me from that long slumber.

CHAPTER 1

The same thing will happen to Martina. The realization struck me, hand in hand with chance. In a service area on the highway. My eyes fell on a newspaper that had been left on one of the small tables in the bar; then, peering intently at the future, I saw a horizon obscured by enormous dark clouds of suffering. A drum roll sounded in my head and my heart seemed to want to burst out of my chest and take flight.

There had been signs since morning, details that sometimes escape your attention and which you recall only later on, once you realize their premonitory significance. I paid no attention to Costanza's words when she spoke of a sky that portended sadness, or the look she gave me when she said goodbye downstairs, nor did I attach any importance to the deluge that ensued soon afterward. They were merely details and I took no notice of them.

“Hello, Attorney Serra? This is Michele Campo. Unfortunately I’ve had a problem. I’m on the highway... yes, with this rain... and the Vespa broke down besides. What did I do? I had to push it... Actually I’m not feeling very well, I may have a slight fever... All right... Yes, next Tuesday at five. Have the child’s grandmother and her husband arrived yet?... Then will you tell them I can’t be there? All right, I’ll see you Tuesday.”

For a moment I felt relieved, more or less released from the burden of those responsibilities that for a long time have proved to be too much for my inadequate capabilities. Then a vague sensation intruded. Perhaps it was that sense of oppression that had been with me for quite some time already, maybe the fever that threatened to burn up even my thoughts. Almost certainly it was that newspaper open in front of me whose dark portents arrested me. And the more I went on reading the article the more chilled I felt, shivering from head to toe.

Meanwhile, the rain crashed noisily down from the sky in heavy, biting blasts. The outbursts would let up and then return, changing direction depending on the wind. Cars with their headlights on sprayed jets of water on the roadsides. From an electoral poster a young candidate for the Region, impervious to the weather, showed his fist to indicate an apt determination that the slight smile pasted on his face could not manage to suggest. He appeared to be a decent man and posed an unlikely challenge to the man on the poster right next to his, whose sidelong glance seemed to say that he would devour him in just one bite.

The atmosphere on the highway was leaden, the darkness barely relieved by double rows of yellow street lights, lined up one behind the other like wintry spirits watching over a newborn day whose only wish was to die.

The old station attendant, wrapped up in a yellow plastic coverall, dragged himself from the gas pump to the cars with the suffering expression of someone who is probably racked with arthritis.

The number of children removed from their original families by emergency order of the Juvenile Court is continually on the rise; and many of them will never return to their home. What awaits them is a long ordeal, being passed around between protective care, sheltered communities, foster homes or institutions; or temporary placement with willing relatives or families. Adoptions as well. And when these fail, being returned. At eighteen, if they have not yet found a family to accept them, or if they have been rejected, unable to decide their own lives, they find themselves on their own, alone and with a great deal of anger inside. So then they will look around with mistrustful, frightened eyes, they will see traps everywhere, and they will never view anyone's look as sincere. Behind a promise or a helping hand they will always see betrayal lurking. The stories of these children are a tangle of painful events. There is Manuela who is sixteen years old. Her mother died of AIDS. Her father has another woman. She has two failed placements behind her and says she does not love any one. She would rather stay in the community, where she has been living for three months, that way no one will ask her to return the affection they say they feel for her. Luca, on the other hand, is nine years old and has already spent three of those years in communities: in the beginning he used to eat dirt from the garden. Then there’s Matthew, eleven years old: he gouged out a tooth with a screwdriver. And Maria, thirteen years old: she started cutting herself with a razor blade.

The article concluded with the testimony of some educators and a series of numbers, statistics and percentages on the types of abandonment, temporary foster care homes and permanent placements.

Head buried between my shoulders, I was floundering in a sea of anguish. I had never given too much credence to chance, or at least, whenever I ran into it, I had never been able to fully trust its divinatory powers. Things just happen and that’s that, I thought, a simple matter of cause and effect.

And the results of that report, reinforcing my conviction, emerged as a fitting epilogue, sad though it might

be, of Martina’s entire story, a faithful mirror of her future.

One day she too will end up swelling the ranks of children adrift. Those children who ended up belonging to no one, who cut their flesh to allay the pain, who are passed around from hand to hand, from house to house, who fall asleep in the dim light of cold rooms embellished by some fetish of happiness. Who will wake up crying for the loss of their own shadow, dissolved with the dreams of the morning. Then they will rack their brains to understand, they will wander from street to street foaming with rage and resentment to the end of their days, and finally they will grow weary.

The same thing will happen to Martina.

But must someone born the way she was necessarily end up that way? And then too, was her young life truly at risk? Had menacing clouds capable of redefining a new life for her gathered on her horizon? They were questions to which I could not find a shred of response. I only knew that one day someone she had never seen before, whose voice she had never heard, whose existence she didn’t even imagine, had decided that the life drawn for her at the world’s lottery was not worth living. Who knows who had determined that being born to that mother meant having to stay in limbo, in a world where, though you were there, you didn’t really exist. A little like having been only half born.

CHAPTER 12

I knew that someday all I would have left of my father and my mother would be a faint memory deep in my heart, at most a few objects of little value that would soon stop speaking for them. And I was certain that there would be no inheritance for me and my brothers, neither a house, nor a nest egg to divide among us, except for a couple of thousand Euros which our parents had set aside to pay for their final farewell. All inclusive, hearse, flowers, wreaths, candles and a few offerings.

I had my sights on something else, something that no one else coveted, which only my mother possessed and that I wanted to make mine. I would not leave this gift to others, it would only be used by me, and for that very reason I considered it priceless: the art of sewing.

My mother’s talent was evident from the very beginning, in the way she handled the material. She would bend the fabric to her will to create new forms. She wielded tape measure, chalk, scissors and thread in a deft, focused way; with the same dogged patience of an artist who has a clear image of what he wants to portray in his head and sees it gradually take shape before him just as he conceived it. As a child, fascinated by the creative act of that prodigy, I would curl up among the fabrics and be transported to faraway places as I dreamed. Over time, breathing in the smells of the fabrics, I grew to love the elegant Prince of Wales check, the bizarre hound’s-tooth, the rustic herring-bone tweed, whereas flannel and satiny carded vicuna were pleasant to the touch, and I liked to stroke the sturdy Tasmanian wool; later I learned to recognize the fabrics for spring and summer, like single weave gabardine and the more robust English drill; the polish of poplin and the fresh suppleness of Irish linen enraptured me.

At one time, almost everyone, at least once in their lives, indulged in the pleasure of a pair of custom-made pants, and despite the poverty of the town where I lived, my mother managed to make ends meet. But when my father decided to take a blind leap and move to the city, she could no longer dream of making a living with that work.

Every once in a while I succumb to the fantasy that if she had thought on a larger scale, I could have become a tailor; I would have learned from her, and together we would have expanded; over time I would have opened a shop of my own, which little by little would have built up, with customers throughout the neighborhood, and I, rich and famous, would have become one of the great couturiers, among the most

renowned in the city. I would have vied with the sartorial master Isaia, I would have been more important than Attolini and that Kiton who sews clothes for Clinton and Prince Charles. I still find joy – and I owe it all to her – in wearing custom-made pants when I can, the kind that rest as they should on the waist, that fall just right on the legs, lined, slit pockets at the sides, a small double pocket below the waistband when needed, with or without a cuff, depending on the style, with darts or not, as fashion requires. In my closet there are at least two pairs, one for summer and one for winter. They help me remember who I could have been.

When I arrive at my parents' house that Sunday morning, although the kitchen is a beehive of activity, my father is walking around the house in slippers, still in his pajamas, his thinning white hair hanging uncombed over a face that is more sullen than usual.

Light floods the room and the sun's rays filter through the window panes, warming my back. As if by magic my mother has spread out on the table, before my eyes, the tape measure and a bolt of tobacco-colored linen. Hearing my request, she pulled it out of a cabinet as if that length of cloth had been there waiting for me all along. I unroll it very carefully, I stroke it over and over again with the back of my hands, I feel the texture beneath my fingers, coarse and delicate at the same time. And I seem to sense the smell of wood and leather from afar. I'm ready: under my mother's watchful eye I begin outlining in chalk, with a sure hand, the lengths for the waist, crotch and legs. Then a mark for the creases, a stroke for the side pockets and one for the two small pockets, and there we are! the sketch for what will be the first pants made with my very own hands. Then, encouraging me to move on to the scissors, it is she who leads the way with the first cut. My hand is trembling, but the steady crunch of the linen under the scissor blade lends assurance to the cut. After only half an hour there I am, thimble on my finger, retracing the drawing with needle and thread. However, it is she who sits down at the sewing machine. Operating the pedal of the Singer with her shoe tip, she begins to define the waistband with loops, without my missing a single movement of her hands.

I've always seen her that way, my mother, sitting at the sewing machine, in her corner near the window, touched by the cold light of a neon lamp, surrounded by a myriad of odds and ends, bags and garments, scraps of fabric at her feet, and spools of white, black and gray thread at hand. I've always seen her that way, her head sunk into her shoulders, her eyes fixed on the edges of the fabric to be gripped with dexterity and fed under the shining metal plate, while the Singer's piston with its gentle clatter plunges the needle in and out.

And I can still see her that way, as she doubles the strands, knotting the ends, and moistens them first with her mouth to thread them through the eye of the needle on the first try, with a precise flick of her wrist. Then the fabric becomes compliant in her hands, she joins it, fastening it in a virtuoso jabbing of fingers, her forearm snapping up.

I have seen my mother resurrect any garment. A skill out of the ordinary: she would rip the stitching out and pick it apart piece by piece, then reshape and adapt the item, changing its features depending on the client's needs or desires. And when faced with a difficult task, she resolved it with a solution all her own. From the hump that has developed below the back of her neck I could quantify every hour every day every month and every year she's spent sewing, one adjustment after another, one pants' crease here, the other gone, a zipper, shortening the sleeves of a shirt, refitting the waist of a jacket, turning a collar, a couple of inches to take in on the sides of a skirt. In my house there was a parade of people coming and going at all hours of the day, until late in the evening. And the litany was always the same: "A little longer here, a little tighter there, shorten it an inch up there and widen it an inch down here, there, yes, pull it a little this way and move the buttons over." The customers tried the clothes on in front of a mirror over and over again, clearly satisfied with the care and precision of the work, though that did not keep them from haggling over the price, which was already low. It was always she who gave in, however. And there was no way to convince her that the compensation for her work – unlike that of the various tailors in the neighborhood who were paid handsomely – was unfair, given both the quality and the effort expended. This was especially true of clients

such as engineers, architects and doctors who when it came time to pay the bill stalled like deadbeats. My mother's reply was always the same: "I would feel like I was stealing... it doesn't take me much, and then too I have to keep my customers." That innate elegance of hers ended up disarming me, and more often than not I swallowed that lump of anger and went away in silence.

Once however I was unable to silence my outrage. It was one of those acts of youthful rage that you feel in your gut, when you are filled with a sense of justice that has not yet been compromised by the prudence and cowardice that come with the age of reason. And it remains one of the few headstrong acts – not that there have been very many of them – which I have never regretted, and that I would do a hundred or a thousand times over, without hesitation.

I was about twenty, give or take; it was a typical Neapolitan day, clear skies, sunshine, a picture postcard sea, and I was about to sit down to dinner. My mother, who had worked late into the night, had gotten up early to complete the heap of mending for the lady upstairs, the wife of attorney Rinaldi (who in a short while, before leaving on her trip to Capri where she would spend the Easter holidays with her family, would stop by, in a big rush, to pick up what had become a veritable brand new wardrobe). Right after that she had busied herself with the meat sauce, eggplant parmigiana and homemade gnocchi. My father, tired of ranting about how late my mother had started cooking, took his place at the head of the table. The television, meanwhile, displayed images of the big genial face of Nanni Loy, who was bidding Italians a pleasant Sunday with a program that took its inspiration from the name of a flower, and which promised to become an entire series: The Rhododendron. As always, incited by the director through the air waves, my father never failed to rattle off an entire litany of things he had to get off his chest, starting with my mother being too busy, sitting there sewing in her corner all day, the lies which, to hear him tell it, she constantly dished up to him, and ending with how late we sat down to dinner on Sunday. Actually, every opportunity was a good chance to make a fuss, and when things went well, we managed to finish the meal between one bout of cursing and swearing and the next. Sometimes, however, plates and anything else within reach went flying.

But it was during the holy feasts that my father was at his best. For a long period of my life, Christmas was a veritable torment. I could never understand why he turned so mean during those particular days. Maybe it was the frenzied pace of the holidays, the crowds in the markets when you went out shopping, the insane traffic in the streets. Who knows. Even today, when that season approaches, I am overcome by a sadness that makes me want to skip it and only wake up when it's all over.

That day however dinner was proceeding quietly. Nevertheless, when the sound of the doorbell grew insistent, my mother stared at us with a mortuary pallor, stood up and disappeared, closing the door of the dining room behind her; my father didn't bat an eye. Several minutes passed during which neither he nor my brothers seemed to show any signs of impatience. Envisioning a scene, however, I got up to hurry my mother along. I joined her in the "miracle room": she was stammering in an attempt to counter the attacks of the "lady" who, with the ferocity of a merchant in a bazaar, was haggling over the cost of three pairs of pants, two jackets, some shirts and a pair of curtains altered for the new home in Capri. Seeing my mother overcome with mortification wrung my heart, it struck at her dignity and mine. So that thought and action were simultaneous: I grabbed the bags with the clothes, I went over to attorney Rinaldi's wife and put them in her arms.

"Here, consider this a gift from my mother for Easter" I said, pushing her out the door to the elevator. "Now go away and don't ever set foot in this house again."

My heart in my mouth, still upset over what I had just done, I closed the door and looked at my mother. She did not show the slightest regret for that impulsive act. I patted her shoulder and took her back to the table where my father, I don't know why, welcomed her with a loving look. "Eat, everything will get cold."

How beautiful my mother seemed that April afternoon, a ray of sunshine brightening her hair and lighting up her blue eyes, that face of bygone days and those gentle features that I can still see in an old photo of her:

wearing a beautiful gray suit, posing beside a rose bush in the courtyard, smiling.

It was then that I vowed that in the future I would never quibble over the work of anyone beneath me. As for what happened that long-ago Sunday, my mother never said another word about it, nor did I ever learn what thoughts had crossed her mind. Nevertheless, later on, during frequent family bickering, whenever the subject turned to me or to my presumed merits, she never failed to mention humility. And then I would know that she was reliving that moment.

Whenever he sees me hanging around my mother too long, my father starts bustling around the table, attentive to the slightest detail, without grumbling, contrary to his usual habits. He's just trying to make himself heard, occasionally, with a bit of a clatter from the kitchen: the clinking of dishes, a dropped glass, a cabinet door carelessly slammed. Meanwhile, the pants are deftly basted. All that's left to do is carefully stitch around the buttonholes, choose the buttons, finish off the fly and back pockets, slip the grosgrain through the waistband, reinforce the cuffs and try the pants on for the first fitting. Details that my mother with some apprehension prefers to put off until the following day. Late with the final touches to the meal, she's afraid of triggering one of my father's bad moods. But it is a sudden plunge into the crater of memories that darkens her face: that pit I pushed her into simply by mentioning Geppina. All it took was that name, spoken casually, almost without thinking, to suddenly stir something inside her. Something that weighed on her and demanded to come to light, something rooted in her youth, in the early months of her marriage, when she had decided to do what she felt was necessary and could no longer be put off.

That day, she says, she remembers as if it were yesterday, because she found herself facing the portent of a malediction that would accompany her and me for the rest of our days. She was about twenty years old, and that morning, when she awoke, the floor seemed like a carpet of algae undulating in the current. Not feeling well at all, she would have liked to stay in bed, but she told herself she had to put an end to that story. And so, supporting her swollen belly, she went out early with her husband. My father took her to the corner where the Church of the Assumption was, bombarding her with warnings and advice. She should be careful in her condition. She had passed the due date by a couple of days, and with a belly like that the least that could happen was to give birth to me in the street. Her mother's house on Via Sant'Anna, where she had lived until a few months ago, was not far, and she proceeded briskly. But just as she was about to enter the street her sister Francesca met her, running, her heart in her mouth. She was mumbling that the car from Pescara had already arrived, but that Geppina had shut herself up in the attic and would not listen to reason. The urging of her mother and sisters was of no use. Not even the two nuns had been able to persuade her, nor had Don Attilio, the pastor of the Assumption, who had retreated with her spitting and swearing at him. From the attic window Geppina was shattering the quiet of that backstreet by throwing whatever she got her hands on at anyone who approached. Gathered around the front door was a crowd of neighbors and the usual curious onlookers who had rushed out in their pajamas, some half-dressed, some still barefoot. Only when she spotted her sister's silhouette at the end of the street did Geppina suddenly fall silent, restoring the street's quiet. My mother then entered the house and, making her way through the crush of relatives, friends and neighbors, climbed up the steep stairs to the attic. In the dim light, she saw her standing on a wicker chair, one leg already on the window sill; her look, full of hatred, was menacing. For a while they stood there, facing one another, not saying a word, while the litanies of their sisters rose from down below, mumbled like at a funeral. My mother, looking her straight in the eye, approached with an outstretched hand. Geppina seemed petrified. When she was a step away from her, my mother grabbed her and pulled her toward her. Clasping her tightly to her breast, where she took refuge sobbing, she stroked her unkempt hair and tear-streaked face.

Then they started down the stairs, one behind the other. My mother, who was in front, her hands holding her belly and her heart pounding wildly, suddenly felt a light touch on her back and lost her footing. Surrounded by her sisters' frightened screams, she found herself lying at the foot of the stairs, her eyes staring up at the world spinning around her, while a stream of viscous liquid flowed between her legs. She was about to lose

consciousness when she heard Geppina’s voice whisper in her ear. “What you’re doing to me will come back on that one you’re carrying in your belly”.
At the very moment when the girl was forcibly put into the car and taken to the sanitarium in Pescara, where my mother had arranged to commit her forever, I came into the world.

Listening to my mother’s words as she tells me about Geppina, I think that that woman must have spent her days, her months, her years with a rosary in her hands, counting the beads that were none other than all the wounds that life had inflicted on her. One after another, each one more bitter than the ones before it. The morning I asked my mother to give me the gift of the art of sewing, I don’t know why, but I see myself reflected in one of those beads. That thought alone is enough to insinuate the doubt that an insidious destiny, pulling the strings of our lives at will, is manipulating us like puppets.

“Michè, you got embroiled in this situation because of me, I know that” my mother says, “but I’m afraid for you...”

Perhaps she is thinking of that invisible skein of hatred that binds us all together. Her sister to me, through her.

Seeing her like that, I cannot find the words to tell her the news that she, like my father, has been waiting her whole life to hear: that her firstborn son, now about to grow old before her eyes, is about to become a father.

I don’t know why, but when Costanza joined us for dinner, I asked her not to say anything, not yet.

CHAPTER 24

It was a little before eight when the phone rang. Costanza was already out of bed – for weeks she hasn’t been able to wait to escape my looks and my dark mood – and was in the shower, at least so I imagined from the sound of running water. I on the other hand had ducked under the covers again and was sipping my usual coffee, reflecting on the days that now followed one another endlessly, all the same, days in which everything seemed senseless and empty to me. Days when I felt a silent rage rise inside me and I would slam the door even when I only meant to close it, or raise my voice even when I thought I was just speaking normally. Perhaps it was my way of filling the void that threatened to consume me, like a child stamps his feet on the floor when he’s afraid of the dark.

Cup in hand, I lifted the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Michele? Good morning. It’s Giuliana Conti.”

“Hello. How are things?”

“Forgive me for calling at this hour. It’s just…”

“Is there any news?”

“Yes, I wanted to tell you … Well to notify you that we’ve found an adoptive family for Martina.”

Silence. I set the cup down on the nightstand. Too forcefully. It shattered.

“Hello? Michele…”

“Yes! I’m here! I’m listening” I said, lying.

“I know how painful it is, but…”

“When?”

“Tomorrow…”

Silence.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, that’s why I called at this hour, I thought maybe you would want to say goodbye to her, see her one last time.”

“One last time?”

“Yes…”

“Who are they?””

“Michele…”

“Are they from Naples?”

“Michele…”

“What do they do? Do they have other children?”

“Michele, Michele, stop! You know I can’t tell you. She will be fine, don’t worry. I chose them carefully. I’m sure she will be fine. Now, though, I have to go. I have a frantic day. Don’t forget, go see her…”

“All right.”

“Bye, talk to you soon.”

I hung up. I heard the bathroom door opening, the sound of footsteps echoing through the house. Costanza. From a distance she asked me who was on the phone. I didn’t answer. I jumped out of bed and went to the window. Sky, clouds, the sea. I focused my gaze on a distant point, absent. I don’t know how long I stayed there, motionless. I felt alone. All alone. Deserted. I felt like crying. I needed kindness and attention. Warm, constant loving attention. It should be Martina who feels that way, I thought. Instead I was the one who felt like a man ridiculously starved for affection. No matter how hard I tried, self-pity was reduced to self-contempt.

And Costanza thought she could dispel my bad mood by reading me the list of contemporary British artists on display at the PAN, from the invitation she received the day before. At which point I turned around and yelled at her to quit that usual artsy-chic pretentious act of hers. I didn’t give a shit. In fact, I never gave a shit. I had had it up to here with always having to prove something. Keep abreast. Struggle to keep up.

Pretend. Convince myself that being around suffering wasn't good for me, that pain loved a vacuum, and was nurtured by its sound. She hadn't wanted Martina and now I hated her. I hated the fact that she considered my grief a trifling thing, which could only be relieved by analyzing it, the way she did. I hated how little importance she gave to my sorrow. Did she perhaps think that just because she had left the possibility of becoming a mother in that clot of blood, that everything else didn't count? The mistake was to continue staying with her, that was the mistake.

Costanza stared at me without saying a word. She just stared at me. Disoriented and frightened, the way old Coleman Silk stared at his Faunia when, after one of her anguished rash moments, she threatened to never want to see him again.

Then, pushing away the coffee cup in front of her, she rose from her chair and said: "I'm going, I'm late".

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