

Klaus Zambiasi



The smile of the moon

based on a true story

**Klaus Zambiasi**  
**The Smile Of The Moon**

*The Smile Of The Moon:*  
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# Title

## **The smile of the moon**

based on a true story

Klaus Zambiasi

translated from **Il sorriso della luna**

by

Giacomo Lilli<sup>1</sup>

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# Dedication

Your idea, your idea

Don't give up, defend your idea!

Do you remember when you used to give birth to a song

And when hope had your eyes?

You'll win, if you want to

But don't let your years fool you!

Now there's a reason why the sky is blue

Stop love, don't let it go away!

*La tua idea (1) Renato Zero*

I invoke the stars, eyes fixed up above

But everything has ran away, in the river of us

My desire is your image

The sweet countryside that once bloomed

Sitting in the middle of the night, I wish I could implore you

I trace your name on the earth, in your glow

We'll love each other forever, even after we're gone!

Sitting in the middle of the night, and the nature here

To remind me about love, adolescent upon me

We'll love each other forever, even after we're gone

Your body is thought, even after we're gone!

*Dedicated to my grandmother*

*I TN (Translator's note): Your Idea. The original*

*Italian lyrics are as follow: La tua idea, la tua idea / Non*

*mollare, ma difendi la tua idea! / Ricordi quando ti nasceva una  
canzone / E quando la speranza aveva gli occhi tuoi? / Vincerai,  
se lo vuoi / Ma non farti fregare gli anni tuoi! / Il blu del cielo  
forse adesso ha una ragione / Ferma l'##amore, non lasciarlo  
andar via...##*

# The news

Itâ##s 8.03 pm on an April evening in 1970. The black and white TV atop the fridge in the townâ##s bar is broadcasting the national news on the first channel.

Paul McCartney, in the middle of an endless array of microphones, has just announced during a press conference that the Beatles are officially splitting up, shocking millions of fans across the world and throwing them into a turmoil.

Itâ##s the first story of every national and international news, the scenes alternating between teenagers, young girls and ladies of any age, all desperate for the end of their idolsâ## band.

The bar is dominated by cigarette smoke, with a couple of classical still lives hanging on the wall.

Thereâ##s an old man, white-bearded and pipe in hand, looking like a sailor, and seeing him here, in a small town in the middle of the Dolomites, feels somewhat odd. Heâ##s celebrating the latest victory of Gigi Rivaâ##s Cagliari, about to win its first ever football championship. The â##loyal regularsâ## are playing cards and drinking red at their usual tables.

An abstract and unexpected sensation sweeps through the air, some family men go back to their homes.

The 8 oâ##clock news is also reporting about the American space shuttle Apollo 13, which has just taken off from the

space station in Cape Canaveral, Florida on a mission to the moon. While orbiting in space, during the attempted moon landing, some technical problems hinder its arrival. The event is broadcasted across the world, keeping the viewers waiting with baited breath. Apparently, the three astronauts on board won't be able to come back.

They risk an awful end on live TV, unless they manage to repair their malfunctions and return in time, landing safe and sound on the Pacific Ocean.

There must have been some strange and particularly hostile conjunction of stars these days in the April skies.

That's probably what Mr Remo also thought when they told him what happened at his house.

He was there at the bar playing cards as usual; in theory, come dinner time, a good husband should be home with his family.

But we all know how these things go, one more game, let's play another, the rematch, the final, and so on, time flies. He fit in that context, at least until the news, the shocking news, reached him.

He doesn't even have the strength or the courage to go back home. Remo can neither know nor imagine what's waiting for him there.

A dear friend of his offers to put him up for that night, and the following too, should he need to. Remo gladly accepts: after all, friends are often an essential anchor one can cling onto for a little comfort at painful times like these.

Not far from there thereâ##s a great bustle, some commotion, itâ##s hard to understand whatâ##s happening, blue and red lights in the night. A white cloak blends into the crowd, almost like a spectator, staying and watching the scene and not knowing whether to vanish or to give up to their own conscience.

An elderly mother, incredulous and desperate, is trying to take care of her own young daughter, while a life is ending.

*Four years and ninety days laterâ#;*

# Our small house

Tears are shooting stars, fallen from a most hidden universe also known as our soul.

We seldom cry with joy, more often with sadness, in any case always emanating a strong emotion from ourselves.

Sometimes Iâ##d do two opposite things at the same time, crying and feeling like laughing, unable to stop the tears even if I wanted to, the need to cry getting stronger and stronger. I wanted to explain to my childhood friends that nothing had happened, but in-between sobs I still felt like laughing.

Iâ##m Joe, the youngest of the family, and Iâ##m just four years old. Sitting on the balcony of the house, Iâ##m keenly observing the stars in the August sky, dressed in intensely luminous cobalt blue.

Here in the mountains, three thousand feet in the air, this kind of landscape is charming, the stars are so bright I could almost grab them with my hands. The full moonâ##s shine softly kissing the Sciliar(2), a light but constant breeze blowing under my nose, scented by mown field grass dried by the scorching sun of the day. A magical trail tasting like freedom and wilderness. I believe this scent has both a relaxing and regenerating effect, in my case even therapeutic.

Up on the left, the belfry rises with its big onion dome, the symbol of our town, its lights inviting me in the distance, the

country fair music diffusing in the darkness, mixing itself with the crickets and the cicadas call in the fields below.

I love the crickets chirp-chirp in the fields during summer evenings and especially nights, it makes me feel serene and peaceful. It's almost like an open-air concert, like nature telling us it lives in harmony, and so do we within it.

It's an indefinite sense of freedom and adventure that makes me wish I could sleep in the fields under the stars. But I'm afraid I'll still have to wait for this wish of mine to come true!

I hear mamma Barbara's feet coming, anticipated by the creaking of the dry, worn-out balcony wood!

Come inside, it's time to go to sleep.

All right, five more minutes, let's watch the moon and the stars together.

Come sit on my knees

and we tightly hug, my cheek onto her soft cheek.

Mamma Barbara is a sweet and caring mother, her cheeks are as soft as grandma's. She really loves children and has a special touch with them, she impersonates motherly love, it fits her to a t. When I'm in her arms I feel enveloped in a blanket in which I find all I need. A hug often works better than most words or medicines, it can shake you and give you a sense of inner calm, it's all a matter of your state of mind, of what your soul needs.

I live with my family in a small mountain farm at the feet of the Sciliar. We have various animals, cows, sheep, two horses, rabbits, chickens giving us what we need to live, and they are looked after mainly by our father, Karl. Here in Castelrotto, life flows regularly, in full symbiosis with nature dictating its rhythm to the days. In the morning the sun rises caressing the tops of the Sciliar and hiding behind them, finally revealing itself in all its glory above the whole valley. In the evening, sunsets last for quite a lot, until the sun goes to sleep behind the distant mountain chains standing out in the skies of Bolzano and Merano.

I also have a brother, Oswald, who is seven, and a sister, Waltraud, who is ten, she is the eldest. When my brother Oswald and my sister Waltraud come back from school and finish their homework we often play together, he is like my guardian brother, Waltraud looks after me like a second mum, she is of great help to mamma Barbara with the housework, just like Oswald is to papa Karl with the cattle in the stable.

## *2 TN: Italian name of the Schlern.*

To be fair I too lend them a hand, obviously it is nothing more than a game for me, I ask a lot of questions, I am very curious and fascinated by this rural world. Some days ago, while helping Oswald throwing hay from the barn to the stable below through the square hole which opens directly next to the trough, I fell into it, finding myself close to the cows munching their hay and looking bewildered at me.

In the summer months, like now in August, we spend entire

days in the fields gathering hay. I mostly have fun, running and jumping across the rows of hay like a prancing colt. I often play with small frogs, sometimes I even manage to catch them and carry them in our home garden, but they always find a way to escape. I really like going with Karl on the motorized lawnmower, imitating the noise and the gestures and enjoying the smell of petrol which is an orange mixture looking just like orange juice syrup. Mamma Barbara soon runs out of patience at my imitations:

â##How much more are you going to last with that â##nyu nyu,

nyu nyuâ##? Stop it please.â##

And Iâ##m sad Iâ##ve annoyed her, so I keep doing it quietly or I simply mime it.

Our small house is simple, somewhat old but itâ##s just like a fairy tale house, Hänsel and Gretel, that kind of stuff.

With a balcony opening onto the perfumed fields below, the house is placed close to a tiny church and a small crossroads of tight streets, which could be called the townâ##s centre or square.

For us children, itâ##s the courtyard where we meet and play with the gang, since almost all of the inhabited houses are there. Some of our neighbours even have seven or eight children, we must be about thirty kids in total.

The barn and the stable are five hundred yards from there, and nearby we also have a small vegetable garden with beautiful flowers and a lot of sunflowers cared for by mamma Barbara, I

obviously give her a hand, well, at least kind of. There's also a creek which is a hoot to splash around in, every time I pass it by I want to drink all that fresh water and dive headlong from the small wooden bridge.

We can even hear its sound when the windows are open, and it's a pleasing presence for the ears and the nose when I deeply breathe that fresh air at morning and at sundown.

And watching the thin mist lifting from the valley at the feet of the Sciliar when the sun is rising, like a theatre curtain at the beginning of a play.

A place like this offers an infinity of spaces for playing, arousing and developing your imagination and tickling creativity.

Like our belfry, which we consider some sort of headquarters: it has long been in disuse, but that isn't a problem for us. We can climb to the top and enjoy the view on our territory from there or we can hide in it when we need to.

We are quite poor, but we get by, producing milk and selling a couple of animals every now and then. But money is never enough to provide for everyone, so mamma Barbara supplements our income by fostering children of all ages at home for periods between a couple of weeks and some months, often during summer.

Children in need of temporary accommodation or of a summer stay, many of them with problems at home, in their family, or with no family at all. Here they all can find shelter and especially love, which is what they need the most, waiting for

their own situations to get better or to end up who knows where.

One could also imagine it as a parking lot, or a warehouse where lost parcels wait for a destination.

I remember a blond girl, Eva, who last year stayed with us for some time, she was so sweet, she had a problem with her hands. Her maternal grandmother had drinking issues, and once, sitting drunk in front of the stove, she had tried to warm Eva's hands by putting them on the piping-hot plate, burning her palms.

So last year they took her here in the mountains to recover and escape from that situation.

Poor thing, she was my playmate at that time, we used to go play in the square, I had my favourite car, a pale-yellow beetle, and she had her dolls.

One morning we were sitting on the ground playing in the courtyard, we looked at each other and at a certain point our faces got nearer and nearer and we gave each other a kiss, innocent but full of affection, I remember it so well, I must've fallen in love.

The day after I realized I'd left my beetle on the courtyard floor: a car had run over it and squashed it, turning it into a convertible.

Some days later the girl had to leave, a woman and a man had come to take her away, I got very sad, I remember I thought I've just got engaged, and she's already gone.

I hoped she'd come back one day, every day I'd go back and play with my beetle in that same spot, even if it was beaten-up it reminded me of the time we spent together.

Unfortunately, Iâ€™ve neither seen her nor heard from her since, I hope sheâ€™s all right now. Itâ€™d be nice to see her again one day, probably far away from here. You never know, so I kept hoping.

When one of our â€”siblings in adventureâ€” must leave to go back to their original family or somewhere else, itâ€™s usually a sad moment for us. The longer they stay, the more we bond, and especially for mamma Barbara itâ€™s hard to say goodbye to these unlucky children and let them go. She suffers a lot and she frequently cries, if it were for her she would keep everyone with her.

When that happens, I try to comfort her, it breaks my heart to see her cry, I can partly cheer her up, because we love each other. To be honest I must admit that even though itâ€™s kind of tragic, I still see it in a positive light, at least I can remain here with her and our family.

To make sure thatâ€™s true I often ask her:

â€”Isnâ€™t it true that I can stay here with you and the others forever? Iâ€™ll cheer you up whenever you need, and youâ€™ll do the same.â€”

She smiles melancholily, and replies:

â€”Yes darling, what are we going to do around here if you leave too?â€”

Sometimes itâ€™s also hard to share everything with the other kids, jealousies and envies spring up every now and then, but I think thatâ€™s normal, itâ€™s a way to learn the rules of living

together.

These places are so beautiful, I could never imagine having to leave someday. This thought really worries me, I often have a strange feeling, and when I think about it Iâ€™m afraid that, by mistake or just for a laugh, someone may come here and take me away, like in a nightmare.

But now Iâ€™m tired, Iâ€™ve got drowsy in mamma Barbaraâ€™s arms and Iâ€™ve fallen asleep on her knees and I no longer see the stars in the sky, Iâ€™ve taken them with me in my sleep together with mamma Barbaraâ€™s tender smile.

# Surprise visit

*The following morning*

Oswald got up early this morning, he and Karl must have gone to the fields to make hay, I could tell from his empty bed, we sleep in the same room.

Waltraud, now a young woman, sleeps in her own room instead.

Mamma Barbara comes to wake me up, but I'm already awake and can't wait to get up, I don't know why but in summer as soon as I see a ray of light I've got to get up and go outside.

Normally I'm not a sleepyhead, I toss and turn before getting up, just like our football teams when they try to stall the game at the end of the first half.

In my mind, I can see mamma Barbara's breakfast perfectly: a large, huge, white, crunchy, thickly sliced loaf of freshly baked bread, nice and soft, with butter and homemade jam, and obviously our cows' fresh milk with some Ovaltine.

It's a bright sunny day, the view's spectacular, the August sky as clear as it can be, maybe we're getting close to the end of the month, the first days of September are approaching.

Barbara cheerfully says to me:

Grandma's coming to see us today, I've waited until

now to

tell you, I wanted to make sure it was a surprise.â##

â##Really? Thatâ##s amazing, grandmaâ##s visiting from Bolzano, I

knew it was going to be a great day, I could tell when I peeked out of my eyes and saw the sunrays shine as far as the bedroom.â##

I wasnâ##t expecting that, itâ##s a real surprise, usually when grandma comes they tell me some days in advance, while this timeâ##!

About every fourteen days, often on a Sunday, but also during the week, on Tuesdays for example, our house and my heart are decked to their best, as soon as I finish breakfast I run to the bus stop to hug her as soon as I can.

If sheâ##s on time, she arrives at 10 in the morning, I always look forward to this moment. I see the bus arriving, I jump up and down impatiently, it gets closer to the stop, it stops, a friendly and intriguing noise, a whistle from the opening doors tgssschhhh and then they shut tgssschhhh toc.

The bus struggles a bit to start up again with a big smoke, suddenly grandmaâ##s silver hair appears and her sweet and charming smile wins me over as if it was a loverâ##s, itâ##s a childlike joy.

She always brings something for me, but she herself is the best present possible. When we return home, I help her carrying her bag and I fill her in with the latest news. We climb a mild slope,

and after the first bend we can already see our house. It's so beautiful to walk hand in hand on the dirt road while Mamma Barbara waves at us in the distance.

When I'm between them both and I hear them discuss or talk about me, about the pranks I pull with Oswald and the other kids, I feel like in a circle of sensations and pathos, coming to a close in that very moment I'm experiencing.

Grandma and mamma Barbara have become very close friends. Barbara always says every time grandma comes to visit us it's like a holiday for her too, she won't do anything for the whole day apart from spending time with me and her.

During the week there's a lot of work to do here between the house, the family and the stable, but at least for a day she can rest for a bit and take a break from the country life routine.

For grandma's arrival, Mamma Barbara always cooks some traditional Alto Adige dishes which are so good, as well as traditional desserts such as strudel. They talk for hours on end, they have so many things to share with each other, it's as if they are in a confessional. I believe having the chance to speak with a trustworthy and understanding friend such as grandma also works as a safety valve for mamma Barbara. After all, grandma has lived through both World Wars and seen it all. Her stories and anecdotes, which she describes with enjoyable intensity and emphasis, intrigue me too, I have a hunch I'll be hearing these tales again and again.

Looking at them with attention while they speak, I notice they

have the same soft cheeks and the same sweet smile, kind of hardened by their intense lives. Some faces are like books, you can almost read a person's impressions and characteristics without a word from them, but for a child it's better to hear adult people calmly talking all around them, it's like music.

It gives you a certain sense of security, it's like an invisible blanket wrapping you inside, it's like love, you unconsciously record the voices and the many undefinable sensations.

I feel like there's a strong bond with grandma, it's as if she's my guide, a channel between two worlds, the first is mamma Barbara's, the second is grandma Anna's, who for four years now has been coming up to see me every two weeks.

At my age of four I've never asked myself whose mother she was, if she's my paternal grandmother or if she certainly can't be my maternal grandmother, since Barbara's not her daughter.

Papa Karl has his own mother, she's already almost ninety and she lives near us in the town, she looks after the chickens and the many cats we have.

Our holiday slowly draws to a close and starts getting tinged with melancholy, as soon as evening arrives grandma must go back home to Bolzano.

I'd never want to hand her cloak, if only I could stop her from leaving:

Couldn't you just stay over for some more days?

I'd gladly stay here with you, but you know I have work

to

do in my fields and in my garden and my son is waiting for me too. Just wait and see, I'll be back soon, two weeks will fly by.

As I walk with her at the bus stop I receive her last advice and I tell her some of my wishes for our next encounter.

Now I give her a small kiss and I hug her long and hard, she slowly walks up the bus's steps while I follow her with my gaze, half amused, half blue. As if in slow motion, I enjoy every instant of her departure, then she sits next to the window and I wave her goodbye. The bus starts up with its usual black smoke, but now it's going downhill. I wait until I see the bus disappear between the hairpin turns and the tunnels, and I stay motionless, listening to the bus's rumble disappear in the distance.

With that clumsy noise still in my ears I head home full of hope for her next visit, and at any rate happy since I'm running back to mamma Barbara.

Happy times always pass the fastest, as soon as you start enjoying them they're already over. When I open the garden gate the smell of tomatoes freshly watered by mamma Barbara envelops me. The sunflowers are all turned towards the end of the valley, where the sun's already set, all of them looking towards Bolzano as if they were also following grandma's homecoming.

In the kitchen the cakes' smell is still hovering and tickling my appetite, the toy grandma brought me is on the table, I pick

it up carefully and take it to my room. Iâ€™m hungry and the soupâ€™s already on the table and we eat supper together.

The following days pass by tranquilly, the usual routine, until the weekend, Saturday that is.

Some people have come to visit us, an elegant lady, Giuseppina, accompanied by two equally elegant men. They must be mamma Barbaraâ€™s friends, even though it doesnâ€™t look like she knows them, the encounterâ€™s very informal.

Anyway, theyâ€™re nice and pleasant, especially one of the two men whoâ€™s very cheerful and tells lots of jokes, it must be his thing. The ladyâ€™s brought me a beautiful present, a battery locomotive that is now running fast across the living room, itâ€™s got a light on the front making a sound like uhhhhuuuuuuu uhhhhuuuuuu.

Itâ€™s as if itâ€™s mad with joy, when it touches an obstacle it turns around and carries on regardless, I like it, Iâ€™m so fascinated by this toy that I almost canâ€™t stop listening to its sound.

Theyâ€™re drinking coffee with mamma Barbara, and theyâ€™re talking, about me as well, after all Iâ€™m the youngest in the family. The lady often smiles at me and I smile back, sheâ€™s kind of mysterious, itâ€™s almost like at some point her eyes are going to reveal a secret to me.

When these nice hours in the company of our guests are over, itâ€™s time to say goodbye to them, the lady almost starts to cry, maybe itâ€™s because she felt nice here with us.

She's sorry to leave, as lots of people have been time and time again around here. When they've left, Mamma Barbara hugs me tight and kisses me on the forehead, she's also happy they've come to visit us.

You know, I'm always happy when someone pays us a visit

us and I can offer them something good and we can have some company. That lady already came once, you know, with her brother and a friend.

I couldn't remember them obviously, I must have been too young, so Barbara takes out some photographs in which we are together, the elegant lady is holding me in her arms. In another picture I'm sitting on a small red pedal tractor, with a little red coat and a white woollen hat.

Then she shows me some more photographs, in which I'm walking with a smartly dressed gentleman, we're going hand in hand on a dirt road in the middle of the fields.

I know that place, it's near home, on the hill full of walnut trees and the wild pears that taste sour when you eat them, like wood. If they aren't ripe and they have no red cheeks they're impossible to eat.

In another picture I'm in the middle of the field, I'm picking flowers with a nice lady, she's smartly dressed, her hair styled.

Barbara explains to me that:

This lady's name's Miriam, she's come to visit

you with her

husband Remo. You picked flowers for her and then you brought some for me too, do you remember?

Yes, vaguely, but I can't remember much.

On the border of the photograph there's a date, July 1973, they'd come to celebrate my birthday, I was only three then, now I'm four already.

It was summer, it's clear from the brightness and the light emanating from the photograph, typical of the month of July, and also from the fields full of grass and in bloom.

In yet another photo I'm sitting on a bench under a walnut tree as I'm taking a picture with a toy camera of the photographer, who must've been either Miriam or Remo.

I must say I feel lucky, the older I get the more the people who pay us visits bring me presents, even though I don't know any of them apart from grandma Anna.

There was only this one time, I remember it was last year, when grandma and a man had come to visit us in his car, a beige Fiat 127. I didn't know who the man was, his clothes were nice, he was kind of thin, they wanted to take me for a ride with them. I didn't want to, I refused to get in the car, it was too hot, it felt like an oven, I was afraid they would take me away. I started puking and crying and who knows what else, poor grandma. She was sitting on the front seat and she was keeping me in her arms, so she had to endure all the eventual consequences. She tried to cheer me up but who knows what she must've thought, the

man bought me a toy rifle to make me feel better.

Luckily it was a toy, otherwise I could well have gone on a killing spree, then they sat me down on the back seat, at least there was some more space, the heat made it all sticky.

I always remember the black plastic seat's sunburned smell, I was in my shorts and I was sweating, whenever I tried to stand up I could feel the seat's lining pasted on my back, as if they'd glued me onto it.

The little trip had shaken me a little, perhaps because grandma usually came alone, while that time she'd arrived with that man in his car. Ringing like an alarm bell, I had the feeling they'd come to take me away, it would have been an awful shock.

Yet, later that afternoon we'd come back home to Barbara instead, I got off the car with my rifle in hand, then we said goodbye to grandma and the man. When I saw them leave in the beige Fiat 127, I felt nostalgic, I was sorry I had puked in the car and cried so much, after all they'd just come for a visit. In the end I was happy, but the doubt they were trying to take me away was still present in me.

In a short time, I met many different new people, always good and kind to me and Barbara, they must really like me, even though I don't know them at all.

When you're little, adults always think that many things go unnoticed or stay apparently insignificant, but actually a child is like a sponge, it absorbs everything, sometimes even

subconsciously. All the perceived information and intuitions get pieced together, adding up to a mosaic which is almost never going to be truly completed.

# What you don't expect!

Playing in the town with the other kids, I often realize I'm somewhat too protected, as if I was living in a surreal world. Oswald and Waltraud seem more at home, they're more accepted by the others, I feel a bit different, like a beloved guest.

A couple of days ago, while we were in the street discussing rules on how to play or setting down a plan, I and Oswald mentioned Barbara, our mum.

One of the others randomly pops up and almost mockingly says:

What are you talking about, she's not your mother.

At first I didn't register that sentence, I thought he was joking. Maybe he didn't mean to be nasty, children often unwillingly say the truth, he may have simply wanted to correct me.

I pretended to play along, as if I already knew, as if it had always been clear to me. Oswald got annoyed and after a while we went back home, it was late for dinner as well, the sun had long set.

Sometimes, when I'm sad and feeling down, and to be honest that doesn't happen very often, but when it does I become even more sensitive and insecure.

So I look for mamma Barbara's affection, and trying not to be too direct, I ask her:

â##You love me mum, right? Youâ##re my only mother, I donâ##t

have any other mums, do I? I want to stay with you whatever happens.â##

â##Yes, I love you too sweetheart, we all love you here, donâ##t

worry, I wonâ##t send you away for sure.â##

To me Barbara is my mum, sheâ##s even more than a mum, all my family here, my places, all the kids that have shared this â##familyâ## of ours with me. Now theyâ##ve all left, Iâ##ve been here forever, with Oswald and Waltraud, I hope Iâ##ll be able to remain here for a very long time.

I now live with the fact that probably Iâ##m not Karl and Barbaraâ##s natural son, they could have adopted me, or I may have been left in their care like the others, who knows?

And who knows where my natural parents are, who they areâ##! Actually, I donâ##t want to know, this is my family, end of the story.

I perceived hints every now and then, Iâ##m lost in a crowd of questions but I donâ##t lose heart, I try to behave as if nothing happened. All my familyâ##s love helps me not to think about it.

Almost every Sunday we all go on the Alpe di Siusi1 with Karlâ##s car, a yellow Opel Kadett, it looks like a flan, even more so when the engine bonnetâ##s warm and it really feels like itâ##s just out of the oven.

The Alpe di Siusi is beautiful, I like the Haflinger horses with

their white mane, and seeing the cows and horses in the wild gives me a sense of freedom. Horses are my favourite animals, with their melancholy eyes. It feels good to see them having fun on the mountain in the summer, after all it's sort of their holiday.

Here it's full of nice cabins and huts, fields and hills, endless rises and slopes, we can see the Sciliar's Santner peak, we're about five thousand feet above sea level.

We go on long walks from one cabin to another. Karl often meets people he knows and friends with whom he stops to chat.

I, Waltraud and mamma Barbara sit on the grass for an afternoon snack, Oswald smells the cheese and the salamis and joins us.

What surprises me about the Alpe di Siusi are the many bends you need to go through to get here, but in the end the prize is worth it. You get on the plateau and it looks like there's a green carpet everywhere, with a thin, healthy air, you feel like you could fly.

*3 TN: Italian name of the Seiser Alm.*

Back home from our trip, after a whole day in the outdoors, a quick dinner and then to bed, at least for me. Karl and Barbara watch some TV, Oswald and Waltraud finish their school homework. Luckily I don't have to go to school yet, I wouldn't like to stay closed in a room for hours with an artificial light on my head. But in a couple of year it'll be my turn as well.

In the night a loud siren wakes us up, and I don't mean

a fish woman, wooooooooooooo wooooooooooooo wooooooooooooo, it goes on and on, it must be 2 in the morning.

Itâ##s the firefightersâ## siren, we all go on the balcony to see if we can find anything in the dark of the night.

Thereâ##s an acrid smell in the air, a fine soot is floating in the air, dancing and settling right in front of us, on the balconyâ##s railings.

The fire is close, very close, too close, we can feel the heatwave. Looking left, we see the extremely tall flames rising almost to the sky, mercilessly and glowingly burning down the wood, I can hear the beams creaking and cracking like bones.

Itâ##s our barn thatâ##s getting incinerated, the firefightersâ## wailing sirens and flashing lights come to our aid, roads all around the valley get coloured in blue, yellow and red.

Itâ##s almost like a pinball, or a club with multicoloured lights, our greatest concern is to save the cattle in the adjacent stable from the flames.

The stable and the animals are how we earn our bread, theyâ##re how we make a living, without them weâ##re finished.

Luckily it starts to rain hard, itâ##s like a divine help from heaven, at least people are not in danger.

I get so anxious looking at all those blue lights come to help us, I get emotional, I look at our faces and I canâ##t hold my tears.

At first glance, it could look like a spectacle in nature, like the eruption of a volcano in the deepest of the night. I, Barbara and Waltraud stay at home, Karl and Oswald go with the firefighters

to see the state of what's left and examine what's happened.

After a few hours, the fire's put out, but there's a persistent, unforgettable smell penetrating into the house, even though we made sure to shut everything. Poor Karl, after so many sacrifices it must be sad for him to see part of his work go up in smoke in less than an hour. They've come back inside in the morning, so they can rest a little and recover from the shock, luckily I managed to fall asleep again for a few hours.

It's morning now, it's not raining anymore, there's a little sunshine trying to cheer us up, showing us all that's left of our barn.

In the afternoon mamma Barbara asks me to bring Karl and Oswald some newspapers and food. They're busy on the disaster site with some professionals.

I'd prefer not to go because I'm a little scared after all that fire in the night, what if it's still there, what if it starts again when I arrive.

But on the other hand my sense of adventure incites me to go see for myself what happened, if the cows and the sheep are still in one piece or if they've been roasted as in a country fair.

As I cautiously get nearer, Oswald comes towards me, I give him the newspapers and the food, he must be hungry.

I still haven't understood what the newspapers are for, actually they don't look like newspapers, they're more like magazines I think.

I look up towards the roof which doesn't exist anymore,

there's nothing left but the skeleton of the larger wooden beams, pitch-black and eaten-up, looking like a coal structure made by an eccentric and misunderstood artist.

Waterdrops are still hanging here and there, undecided whether to fall to their doom or not, as if afraid of heights. The acrid smell of varnished, burnt, wet wood's still very much present in the air, it's a smell I'll remember forever.

This has certainly been the most shocking event of my short life, it's waken us in the middle of the night. Days go slowly by, I don't know what they've decided to do, whether they want to build a new barn, or if they have another solution. Next time grandma comes I'll surely have something to talk about.

It's been two weeks already since grandma Anna's last visit, but now she's probably slightly postponed her next trip because of the fire.

Days and weeks pass, but no news from grandma yet, and this worries me, so I ask mamma Barbara:

“When will grandma come? She hasn't come in a long while.”

“I really don't know, I haven't heard from her yet, we happened to have a chat some time ago, but she couldn't tell me when she was going to come.”

“I hope nothing bad happened in the meanwhile.”

“As soon as I hear something I'll let you know, don't worry,

she must've been busy with the fields, the crop.”

The kids that were with us in the summer have all left, as usual theyâ##ve only stayed for two or three weeks at most, Oswald and Waltraud are at school from morning till early afternoon. Karlâ##s busy the whole day with the stable, in the afternoon he takes a nap for a few hours on the sofa.

So in the morning itâ##s always just me and Barbara, either at home or, when sheâ##s got work to do, in the garden. The sunflowersâ## heads are down now, the seeds are all ripe in their circles, embedded within the pale-yellow petals.

I often go play outside in the morning, sometimes I go snooping around our house. One of our neighbours has a beautiful garden, where I enjoy going for walks and smelling the scents of the various plants and flowers that grow there.

The owner lets me in whenever I like, the entrance is a black wrought-iron gate, full of strange ornaments, spirals, roses and other flowers.

A narrow pathway marked by thousands of white pebbles leads me around, there are iron arcs all along the way, covered by vines and big roses of many different colours, red, pink, white, yellow. As I pass by them they give off an inebriating scent, itâ##s like a journey across various fragrances, there are also exotic plants and palms.

On the sides, every now and then, I encounter tiny statues, cheerful dwarves, chalk fawns, little fountains and water features. I feel like in a fairy tale, I wish I could stay here forever, I sit on a bench swinging my legs for a bit, and I think again about the

possible reasons why grandma hasn't come yet.

Usually, Saturday's the day Barbara gives me a full bath, in a plastic tub on the kitchen table.

Today's Monday, and it's morning, I know we don't have to go anywhere in particular. I leave the fairy garden, I try to shut the gate but the handle doesn't work well.

Maybe it's because the owner has put too much varnish on it, so it gets stuck a little and can't go all the way, so I simply push it back against the frame and leave it unlocked.

I've even managed not to get dirty, I've only gone for a walk and I've sat on the clean bench for a while, so I don't even need to wash.

I call Barbara to tell her I've arrived:

Mum, I'm coming, is lunch ready?

I can't hear her reply, I enter by the gate, I close it calmly, it too doesn't shut too well, it's a little rusty. I open the front door and I get in, I take off my shoes, mamma Barbara comes towards me from the kitchen, she kneels down and hugs me.

She takes me in her arms and kisses me again and again:

I know you love me, but is something wrong?

I'm just happy to hug you, I'll always love you.

It has kind of taken me by surprise, I've gone out in the courtyard to play for a while, I could feel in her hug that something was off.

In her cheeks I can see a concern for something sad and melancholy, she can hardly hold her tears, she smiles at me:

Now, let's eat something, then we'll get dressed.

You must

go with Karl, he'll drive you to a place.

And where is that, I want to stay here, I don't have to go anywhere, are we driving to the ice-cream shop?

Yes, you could get an ice-cream, but I don't know about later.

I don't eat much and neither does she, we aren't hungry anymore, she clears the table and gets the bath tub.

Things are getting serious, it's not even Saturday, I'm not dirty, and she's preparing the tub on the table for a bath.

I'm scared, it's fishy to put it mildly, I try to act normal and say to her:

Mum, I'm going out to play again, I'm not hungry anymore.

Everything starts looking misty and blurry, no, it's not raining outside, it's raining on my face, big, warm teardrops as big as peanuts.

I can hardly speak among sobs, she replies:

No, you can't go out now, you'll be late, I've got to wash you and dress you up now, Karl's going to take you to Bolzano.

We hug tightly without letting go, her tears are wetting my shoulders, they're getting soaked with a mother's love.

Sitting in the yellow tub, Barbara scrubs my shoulders with a sponge. She takes it on my face and on my eyes too, to clear the

tears away, she manages to smile at me, her every move over me is a caress saying goodbye.

I can't understand what's in store for me yet, but I'm sure it's nothing good, I think that sad moment I never wanted to face has finally arrived.

I must leave what for me is my family, my whole world.

It's clear to me that, like the other small children, I've been here in their foster care for almost five years, and now the time has come to go to Bolzano or who knows where.

We leave home with a bag that Karl puts on the backseat, the bag's not too big and this makes me hope I'll be back soon, it's a slight chance but I gladly cling on it. We say goodbye to mum among tears, when I get in the car, I can't look at our little house anymore.

I spend the entire trip to Bolzano harbouring the wish I can stay away only for the day and come back home with Karl in the evening.

During the trip, both I and Karl stay mostly silent, some sparse words every now and then, he's not a chatterer but I know he too isn't in the mood to talk much.

When I manage to catch some breath, I ask him some explanations:

Where are we going in Bolzano? Are we going to grandma's place?

We're going to Bolzano, you'll have to stay there

now, your

father's waiting for you.

I'm quietly thinking: my father? I thought you were my father, Karl, if Barbara is my mother, oh but she's not, is she?

We arrive in a small town near Bolzano, we go down a lateral lane, Karl parks his yellow Opel Kadett on the left of the lane.

He tells me to wait in the car, he's going to ring the house bell which can be glimpsed among the branches of a tall fir.

I think to myself that it would be a good occasion to run away back home, but that wouldn't be fair to Karl, I could never do that.

I understand that this is the last time I'll see him too if he's going to drive away leaving me with strangers.

The nostalgia is smarting already, it feels like a lump in my throat, I'd really like to run, I could open the car door and hide in the boot, so that Karl, unable to find me, would take me back home with him.

There he is, he leaves through the gate and gets back in the car: There's no-one home, a gardener has told me they're all in

the fields, let's go check there.

We go through the fields, there's plenty of trees full of yellow and red apples, so, so many, but I don't really care about them now.

We turn to the left, we slowly proceed on a road full of holes and mud, we stop the Opel Kadett. Karl takes my bag from the

backseat, I don't want to get out, I'm frightened.

Karl says hello to a man, grandma's smile appears behind him, she hugs me and strokes me.

Hi grandma, finally we see each other, you haven't come

around lately, did you have work to do?

Yes darling, I couldn't come to see you, but I knew we would meet here now.

Thank God she's here, at least I have someone I can stay with, I don't know any of these people.

Karl comes closer and says goodbye, he's a mountain man and he doesn't show many emotions, but even if he's hiding it, I know he's sorry he must leave me here and go back home alone.

He's so good, he wouldn't hurt a fly, he's always so calm, it breaks my heart to see him start up the car and drive off.

I shy away the whole day, always keeping aside and close to grandma. Sitting on the ground, I watch her picking carrots, aubergines and tomatoes.

This distracts me a little bit and makes me feel less abandoned next to her, the man who has greeted us is grandma's son, he's the owner of the beige Fiat 127. Now I remember, I recognize the car next to the cabin, this must mean mister Remo is my father.

I don't really believe it, I already have Karl, now Remo too, two fathers, I don't know! Everybody's busy here,

picking apples, apricots, plums, grandmaâ€™s picking many vegetables and thereâ€™s Remoâ€™s partner as well.

Sheâ€™s Miriam, the beautiful woman with the nice hair who had come to see me with Remo for my third birthday, when they brought me a toy camera. The photos Barbara showed me, where Iâ€™m picking flowers for her and for Miriam.

Evening comes, the sunâ€™s been set for some time now, I feel a cool breeze on my legs, Iâ€™m still in my shorts, and Iâ€™m dirty with soil. How I wish I could take a bath in Barbaraâ€™s tub, I already miss it so much. I think Iâ€™ll have to stay here for a while, if that man, Remo, really is my father, then thatâ€™s exactly what this all means. Iâ€™ll never return to Barbara and my family again. Tonight, when everyoneâ€™s asleep, Iâ€™ll convince grandma to take me somewhere else or Iâ€™ll run away alone, Iâ€™m not sure yet.

We go back to my father and grandmaâ€™s home with the beige Fiat 127, and I come to think about the day they came to take me for a quick trip. I knew something was off that day, I could feel it, and here I am again in the same car where I puked.

This time it looks nicer though, I donâ€™t know, itâ€™s kind of endearing, itâ€™s like me, what with that beige colour, the metal bumpers, the poor, black plastic cover torn here and there.

We arrive at the house, we enter in a large courtyard surrounded by rose beds, there is also a vineyard with a table and two benches under the arbour.

I want to cry and I feel like puking, but I canâ€™t, I practically

haven't eaten anything, someone's holding me with my face in his shoulders. I cry so hard my head hurts, I hide in the shoulders of my carrier. Sometimes I take a peek with my wet eye at who's around us and where we are.

I see other curious children trying to cheer me up, some adults pass by to caress me.

We mount some light-coloured marble stairs, we stop on the first floor in front of a brown door, we have arrived, we enter in a small flat, quite cosy, but I really can't appreciate that now.

At least we eat something with grandma, then we quickly brush our teeth and we go to sleep, I stay with grandma in a double bed. This gives me a little relief, it's the first time we sleep together, if I end up remaining here I'd live in the same house as grandma, that's the only good aspect of this new situation for the moment.

I fall asleep almost immediately, hand in hand with grandma on that big, large, tall bed, I'd like to talk and tell her so many things but I'm too tired, today's been a very hard, stressful and difficult day for me. From now on, this is going to be my new family, a new arrangement I must get used to and adapt to, bit by bit.

# Portobello

In the following weeks I start meeting other kids, some older, some younger. Our floor neighbours' children are Martin and Klaus, their parents are farmers working in the fields and growing apples.

It's in my destiny to be close to farmers' families, grandma's patch of land is not very large but in a sense we also are small farmers.

There are six houses in this street, each with at least two children, it's quite a numerous group altogether. When we gather in the courtyard we are about twenty. The place we always meet is under the lamppost dominating half of the street, along a low brown porphyry wall, absorbing so much heat in the hot summer days that in the evening, after dinner, it's still warm. On the asphalted ground, the flying ants hover around us attracted by the light.

The lamppost is a strategic choice, we can all see it from our own houses, so all it takes is peeping out of the window for a second or hear the others' voices to know someone's around.

But now that days are getting shorter, it gets dark sooner, in the evening is also cooler and we spend more time at home. Remo's wife, Miriam that is, is good at cooking lunch, and grandma often takes pleasure in baking pies and strudel.

What I prefer the most though are dinners, when we prepare omelettes with delicious jams made from the plums and apricots of our field, I can't resist. I can eat three, four, once I even got to six in a row. I also like rice with milk, powdered cinnamon and cocoa. Out of the dishes made by grandma, the Pepa, an ancient specialty of the Val di Non, is my absolute favourite.

A dough is poured in a baking pan and put in an oven for about half an hour, it's really funny to check it swell from the little oven window. Slowly, it gets bigger and brown-toned. The humps rise like mountains lightly covered with a chocolate snow, they remind me of the mountains around Barbara's house and the days on the Alpe di Siusi. The heat emanating from the window warms my face, it's like a caress trying to ease the melancholy I have inside.

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