

CHIARA CESETTI

MEMORIES OF OUR DAYS



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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Cesetti C.

Memories Of Our Days / C. Cesetti — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

The story of the Barrieri family, their four children and all the characters revolving around their lives, for better or for worse, go from the early years of 1900s to the post-second World War period. The first World War, the hard work at the land, the epidemics, the Fascist regime, fleeing abroad in exile, a society that changes violently or harshly at times, provide a frame for a series of events that show the reader an essential part of our history where the main characters will come out somehow changed. There are men who rebel with courage and determination sided by strong women who show one's best in hard times. It is *il sapore dei giorni* which does not leave anything the way it was. . Choral novel which is about the sequence of events happening in a family over three generations, from the early 1900s to the post-second World War. The first part of the book deals with the marriage of Giulia and Giovanni Barrieri. They have four children who have quite different personalities. Despite the historical events which affect them (the first World War, the Spanish flu epidemic, the onset of the Fascist regime), they grow up in a calm environment, under the watchful and concerned eye of a strong and loving mother, while the Fascist regime slowly permeates the daily life. The two European wars and Fascism frame the story of the Barrieri family and those around them, good or bad, from dr Marinucci to Lucio, a day laborer working for the family. People who have something to do with the Barrieri family will become a vital element in the events that concern them in a very difficult time like during the first half of the XXth century. A chapter in our history which is not well known, especially considering the geographical area where the protagonists carry on with their lives: Tuscia.

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Publisher: Tektime

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For Renato, Claudia, Leo

for their patience, love, and tenderness

“...you know that novels have always seduced me because they are like a bowl where you can pour in time, reality and fiction at the same time, *dialectics and poetry, ideas and feelings*. You know that it seduces me because in its mixture with reality and fiction, *dialectics, poetry, ideas and feelings*, it provides a truth which is more true than the real truth. A reinvented truth, universalized, in which each of us identify ourselves and recognize ourselves. A novel never exclude Man. No matter what story it tells, and where and when it is set, a novel tells about men.”

(Oriana Fallaci)

I wasn't there

I need to go back

Go back to the beginning

Flicking through opaque sheets one by one to get here, with you, now.

Giulia

1 Part one

1 Chapter 1

Giovanni e Giulia

-Thank God, it's over!

-What a night! What a night! What a night!-

The two women were moving about in a frenzy trying to tidy up all the things scattered in the kitchen. They stopped now and again for no reason, rubbing their hands on their aprons or removing from their eyes an invisible lock of hair.

-It is a miracle that it went well-

-No, it is not a miracle- Dr Marinucci's voice made them turn suddenly to the door –it's not a miracle Ada. It has been a long but not risky labour. Giulia had a hard time but she will recover soon and the baby is healthy and strong. And now please make me a good cup of coffee!- he said clapping his hands.

The doctor smiled and that released the tension quickly and for the first time Ada and Maria could start feeling the joy that the birth of a baby brings.

The first ray of sun peeped through the window.

Winter had been long, almost endless, but the day Antonio was born, there was a warm sun which let foresee a slow spring.

The stressful moments of the night just gone, gave way to the happiness for this joyful event. Quietness followed the commotion of earlier on, to show respect for the hard time that the mother had. Giulia was now asleep beside a baby with black hair and dark eyes.

The baby's slanty eyes were the same as his mother and the dark complexion like the father. His tiny lips were closed on an inexpressive and undefined face of someone who, totally helpless, has landed, without knowing it, to a place unknown to him. Giovanni was afraid to touch him.

Wrapped around in a swaddling blanket, covered up in of the many woollen blankets that the aunts had made for him -Hold him in your arms- Giulia said to him.

-No, no. It is so tiny- he replied, looking with apprehension at the little head which was dangling motionless. She was making a laugh of his fear; she managed to get a smile tickling the baby's chin.

She was quite petite, her well-proportioned body made her look taller than she actually was. Her face was not particularly beautiful, her thick eyebrows framed her bright hazel eyes in which you could see that the liveliness was hardly restrained by the effort made to think before speaking. You could get from her this sense of firmness in her beliefs which shielded her from the difficulties of every day life and, though still quite young, she had the ability to quietly get her place in every situation arising.

Giovanni was tall, almost sturdy, and was, as everybody said, a handsome man. So many people were astounded to hear that he asked Giulia to marry him just because they could not see inside his soul. He had met her in the house of a common relation and he saw in that little woman something that he would have never found in anyone else. Giulia, on the other hand, felt a strong attraction, which she hid very well when there were other people around, but it would feel her soul and sometimes, suddenly and unrestrained, was showing in the looks she would give him.

They got married a few months after they had met, on May 12th, 1906. In their wedding photo the bride was only slightly shorter than the husband because the photographer insisted on her to get up on a little stool.

They lived with Giovanni's family: his father and his two unmarried sisters, Ada and Maria, in the big house just outside the small town.

In the early days Giulia felt observed and judged: she had to undergo a daily test under the watchful eye of her new relations. She soon understood everybody's boundaries and struggled in silence to have her own space.

Day after day, among all the unspoken words which materialised in small silent gestures, the exchange of quick allusive glances and the daily worries, each of them changed their ways a little and the household could bear the presence of three women.

The sisters-in-law learnt soon enough that Giulia's unsaid words were much more meaningful and started to fear her judgements, without blaming her for anything, considering that she was never impolite to them. While the two sisters compared their sensations and express their dissatisfactions, Giulia never even mentioned her little daily worries to her husband. Giovanni was not aware of the minor underground conflicts taking place within the household walls and in the evening he could enjoy her warm presence without worries, more and more aware and almost shocked at the inner strength of his little woman.

A few months later, the old Antonio Barrieri died peacefully in his bed. His daughters found him dead one morning when, as usual, they went up to his bedroom to give him his breakfast.

The pain was alleviated knowing that the old man passed away without suffering, happy to know that he would have had a heir. He had passed on the farm to his son a few years before and things went on exactly the same after his death.

The house was big, one of the biggest in the small town, surrounded by land owned by the family. It was a two-storey house, the two small windows in the attic were always closed. Above the big hall door there was a balcony with a balustrade made of small grey columns, it overlooked the valley as far as the river that circumscribed the property. On the right-hand side, down below, there was a forest, where the cattle grazed in the wild: horses, cows, pigs that were bred and sold. The Barrieri family were farmers and they were trading cattle too.

The birth of little Antonio legitimised Giulia as unconditioned mistress of the house. The aunts were now ready to pass on the sceptre to the one who had given the family the precious fruit of her femininity. The gift of maternity that they could never have, acknowledged the undisputed superiority: they subdued to the little one who was asleep upstairs and to his mother as a consequence. On her part, the young woman never gave the impression of taking advantage of her condition, and quietly, over time, she arranged and managed the household according to her wish.

Over the following five years three more children were born: Clara, Agnese and Luciano; everybody's help was needed.

Clara was the image of her father. She had black and curly hair, her skin was amber and glowing, her eyes had an undefined dark green colour and her upright posture made her into a beautiful creature.

She showed self-control and stubbornness which discouraged any quarrel with her. Looking at her, her mother prayed to God she would always make the right choices, because she knew that nobody would have deflected her from anything she had set her mind on. Her mother too found it difficult to get deep down her soul. At times, during a discussion, she was concerned to see her isolate herself with her thoughts, leaving herself out of conversations on purpose and chase one of her secret feelings, she would then make an effort within herself to get back and take part in the conversation. It was almost as if she wanted to create an alibi towards the others, just to avoid being questioned about her silence.

One evening, she was just over three, they were all sitting around the table for dinner. The kitchen was well lit and heated by the fire which was blazing in the big fireplace. The room was connected to a large dark hall, at the end of which there were the hall door to the house and halfway through the corridor, the staircase leading to the bedrooms upstairs..everybody was around the table. The little girl was quiet as usual, she was sitting with her back to the hall. All of a sudden she let off a scream and got down from the chair.

-What's up? What's happening?- Giovanni took her immediately on his lap, frightened while she was screaming, clung to her father's neck.

-What did you see?-

They dashed to the hall. Everything was fine.

-There is nothing, look, there's nothing, you see?- The lit up room was empty.

Everyone was very busy around her trying to comfort her, to convince her that nothing had happened and nothing would have happened. She was quite stubborn and kept on shaking and crying, so upset from that shadow that had suddenly appeared in her soul. When she realised that there were too many people sharing her dismay, she wriggled out of her father's hug, went back to her seat and started eating leaving everybody in shock because without saying words that she did not know yet, with her quiet and composed attitude seemed to tell all of them - Please excuse me and don't worry about me, this is my business and I'll deal with that myself. Now please ignore me-

She was never in conflict with her mother. She understood her ways and did not like to get in conflict with her. She had taken from her mother, her apparent natural quietness and her emotional self-control, but also she was sure of her actions because they were well-thought-out knowing that she would take responsibility for the consequences. Their personalities were quite similar but she had never shown much closeness, as if she had received from her everything since her birth and there was nothing left to learn.

She was fascinated by her father, her eyes lit up with deep excitement when she saw him, delighted to sit on his knees or on his shoulders, she was so tall she could rule over the world.

-Claclà, come here- he used to say to her in the evening before sitting down at the table. While the women finished up making the dinner, in winter, beside the fireplace, among the familiar smells mixing together in the house at the end of the day, or in summer, under the porch where the smell from the countryside blended with the smells of the animals, Giovanni would put her astride his boots and she would fly around the place, his strong hands holding hers.

-Up you go!

They were rare moments when she was laughing loud. When they were about to stop playing, after flying around higher one last time, he would take her in his arms and she would rather breathless smell his work jacket deeply and the laughter would stay in her eyes for a long time.

Antonio would get in between them, even though he would not enjoy himself as much as her. Sometimes he felt as if he was almost an intruder and, feeling slightly uneasy, he would move away and go back to what he was doing before or just watch them enjoy themselves. Giovanni would walk

by him and pet his head or take his chin in between his fingers, saying -Hey, young man! Shaking him vigorously.

Antonio, Antonino, had a different temperament than his sister. He was leading a quieter childhood looking around more hesitantly, looking for comfort in the care given by his mother and his aunts. Even though Clara was two years younger, she would make their decisions when they were together and he was happy enough to stand by them, without making any fuss.

She was organising their games.

-You are the daddy now and you are riding home on your horse, I make the dinner. This is my garden and you come and see me.....-

Antonino followed the instructions, happy to enjoy her company without arguing. He was physically smaller than his sister, he had great big dark eyes sometimes a little scared which were looking around eager to get the family's approval. He was submissive and reserved, he did not raise barriers between his request for affection and the desire of the adults to give it to him. He let them love him without difficulty.

He really worshipped his mother, she felt exactly the same for him. When they were together, Giulia's eyes, usually rather stern, sparkled with infinite sweetness just for him.

He was never completely at his ease with his father. Although Giovanni was not a grouchy person, he was a little intimidated by his presence and he preferred to run into the women's arms in the household.

Three years after Clara's birth, the two twins were born: Agnese and Luciano.

The last months into the pregnancy were the toughest for Giulia: her belly was huge and that was one of the hottest and longest summers of the last years. Her legs were swollen all the time and she found it difficult to move. Ada and Maria tried to get her to rest as much as she could and were secretly happy to take her place, even as a mum. Although Giulia did not complain that much, everyone was concerned about her. Giovanni, especially over the last few days, used to come home mid-morning or during the afternoon to find out how she was. He would find her often lying down on the bed of their bedroom in semi-darkness, propped against two pillows to try and breath more easily.

The day of the delivery, on September 18th, dr Marinucci did not leave her for one second and followed her labour all night with concern.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the twins were finally born: tiny and purple, they were showing the signs of a distressful labour and seemed to be rather frail. The little girl started to cry quite loud and calmed down as soon as she was put to her mother's breasts, sucking her mother's milk with unexpected energy. The little boy, on the other hand, would get easily tired and his meals were long and tiring. As soon as it was the right time, the aunts started to make food for him, with milk, sugar and olive oil, in order to complement his diet and get his mother to have a rest, she was exhausted from a breast feeding that would go on for hours.

Once the first few months were over, Agnese turned into a strong and hungry little girl, very similar to her father as far as her strong body was concerned.

Giulia, on her part, after the first days when she was exhausted, was happy to feel free from that burden that would give her little freedom. Despite all the things that had to be done, in a short period of time, she was happy again and rediscovered the happiness to look after the family. The aunts were vital to run the household now. Each of them seemed to have found their role in the inner workings of the family, letting every hidden tension go.

The doctor advised against new pregnancies and there was no more talk of pregnancies between the two spouses.

1 Chapter II

May 1915

Giulia got up really early, like every morning, well before dawn. She loved going around the house quietly, wearing her nightdress, with her hair up in a messy braid. She enjoyed those few moments of solitude, standing still in front of the window overlooking the long tree-lined avenue, in the light that was just starting to peep through and promised the may sun. She was sorting out her thoughts before locking them in a secret drawer. She did not know if she would have had the time to let them out during her working day.

She was quite careful not to wake anybody up, with fine gestures, she lit up the fire on the burner beside the big fireplace and started to heat up the milk for everybody.

-Already up?-

Giovanni's voice was like a whisper, it did not catch her by surprise. She was waiting for him. It was the same every morning. The words were always the same, his way of greeting her with that pinch of tenderness and gratitude that would not show in any other way.

Giulia smiled slightly. She would reply without turning around

-Where are you going today, to the field beyond the woods?

-That's right, we need to start the hay mowing.

-Will you be back for lunch or will you stay there until this evening?-

-I'll stay there, I told the men to start the mowing and I don't want to leave them -

-I'll make you something to eat then...-

Her words just whispered and her careful gestures not to break the intimate atmosphere of those rare moments: she took a pan from the pan hanger on the wall, the eggs from the wicker basket on the shelf and she cooked a yellow omelette. She cut two large slices from the loaf of bread which was kept in the cupboard and filled it with the omelette, she wrapped them around a white serviette and she placed them in the mess tin. The smell spread out in the kitchen blending with the smell of heated milk and the day was starting off .

-Good morning...- Maria went into the room, she was already dressed and her hair was done, she was ready for her working day. She was a tall and thin woman, her hair was dark and straight, up in a bun sitting at the back of her head. She was well over 40s and was hiding her femininity wearing home garments which were loose and comfortable. She was as quiet as her father used to be but was not as strong-willed as he was. Her gestures and elusive looks showed her shyness which precluded her from having her own family life. She had quite a few chances to get married. A young man from the village had showed his interest for her a few times but she did not want to hear about him and everything just faded away. Anyhow it was hard to know what was really in her mind. when Giovanni was thinking about her, he was convinced that she had been secretly in love with someone who could not marry her and this secret and unacknowledged love had always stayed with her, without never fading away. She had led her youth giving up her fight for her happiness, she was convinced that she had made the right choice, she was happy to lead her sheltered life within the family.

Giovanni was leaning against the closed window and was looking in the distance, beyond the borders of the woods where the sun was going to rise soon. The sky was bright and greenish, with long and thin clouds which were slightly darker.

-The weather looks good today- he said without expecting any reply from anyone.

-Are you going to the field beyond the woods?- Maria asked.

-Yes, I am starting the hay making-

-It's time now, it's nearly the end of May...-

-We are actually late...it has rained quite a bit this season..

-Nobody has started yet-

-How can people start with this kind of weather- Giovanni said walking to the door .

Giulia followed him through the corridor holding the mess tin with his lunch. Before parting, sheltered from the others, they exchanged a mutual look of understanding. She went upstairs and

heard Giovanni in the garage fastened the buggy to the horse. A few minutes after, she heard the horse trotting and the creaking of the gravel under the wheels.

It was nearly noon when a familiar person appeared at the bottom of the long path. He was almost running, waving his arms about to get the attention and shouting very loudly- Giovanni, Giovanni...Giulia...-

It was Rodolfo, uncle Rudi, Giulia's brother. Beloved uncle Rudi. His nieces and nephews doted on him and it was a great joy to see him. He was a real chatterbox, and his boisterous games were great fun for them. Antonino in particular was happy when he was around because when the two of them were alone in the buggy and far from the watchful look of the women, he would gently whip the horse to get it to trot slightly faster. The buggy would jolt on the road and the child would be happy with that forbidden escape. They would stop under the big mulberry tree at the edge of the ploughed field. Standing there he would cry 'Giddy up, giddy up', Rudi lashed the branches of the tree with his whip. Small dark fruit showed down from the tree over their heads, unfailingly staining their clothing. Antonino knew that his uncle would make sure he was not scolded and enjoyed the freedom of it all to the full.

That was not his usual behaviour: he shouted from a distance, he waved his hat and looked out of breath. Giulia rushed outside with her heart in her throat. He was her only brother, a few years younger than her, he was so outgoing that everything would be forgiven to him, even when he needed help on account of his superficial behaviour. He started off university in Rome, he was doing Law. He did not actually study really, but he enjoyed light-heartedly the two years that his family had granted him. Considering that he did not sit any exam, he came back and now was working in one of the Town Hall offices settling for a low income that was never enough for his needs. After his parents' death, he lived in the paternal house in the centre of the small town; however he would always turn to Giulia for help. She could never rebuke him enough, aware and often secretly amused by those odd purchases, frivolous at times, but he could not help himself.

-Life is just one, dear Giovanni- he would cheerfully say to his brother-in-law- You wouldn't think you are immortal, would you?-

Nobody could disagree with him and every time they saw him coming, they all felt amusingly curious.

He got to the house door out of breath, waving a newspaper.

- ...Giovanni...Is Giovanni here...?- he cried.

-Thank God, he is not her for him- Giulia thought.

-What's happening, can you tell me what's happening?-she could eventually ask, breathless after all the distress she felt.

Rudi sat on one of the chairs in the porch and placed the newspaper in front of her eyes with a radiant smile that made his face glow.

-We are at war! We are at war starting from tonight!

Giulia took a glimpse of the title quickly: 'Italy declared war against Austria-Hungary. People, the die is cast: we must win!'

-Rudi, what does it mean?-

-It means that Italy has finally declared war against Austria and we are going to get our lands back -

-Does it mean that you must go to war?- Giulia asked turning pale. She had to lean against her brother's shoulder because all of a sudden everything around her lost its colour and her legs could not support her any longer.

-Europe has been fighting for months, it was about time that we did our bit. This war will be short, you'll see, short and victorious.

-Uncle Rudi!- Antonino's joyful voice made them turn to the door while the child was running towards him. Rudi stood up, took him in his arms and started to jump around, singing.

-We'll win, we'll win, we are at war and we'll win...- a cloud of white dust at the bottom of the road showed that Giovanni was coming home too in a hurry in his horse-drawn buggy.

1 Chapter III

1917

The war that according to Rudi would have been brief had been going on for the last two years, it wasn't brief, neither easy, nor victorious. It was not anymore the exciting adventure that many people had faced with enthusiasm at first, but it was a different campaign every time, painful and hard, which was fought with unknown and deadly weapons against which you did not need to sharpen your sabres. Many young men volunteered to go to war, many others had been called back to duty and women were taking care of the work in the land, even the most strenuous ones. During the summer well before dawn you could see groups of women from the nearest village, with their heads covered up with white scarves to protect their faces from the unforgiving sun rays and they worked all day in the sun, scything the wheat and arrange the bundles in long rows.

The lunch break was a relief. When the heat in the Maremma would become unbearable, they stopped working and the break, even if it was short, was a relief. They would sit on the ground or on the sheaves, and they would eat their food which was distributed. Many of them would hide the bread in the big pockets of their aprons because in the evenings, at home, their younger children were hungry, if the other ones were slightly older and working already. Once the season ended, the fields were left so you could see groups of women and children were picking the fallen spikes of wheat off the ground with their sacks tied across their shoulders.

The more spikes, the more wheat, the more flour, the more bread.

Bread.

Bread for them and for their children and for the old people who did not work anymore.

The bread that men did not bring home because they were stuck in the Karst Plateau.

That was in winter, once the olive harvesting was over. First they were picking from the trees for the owner then, if the owner allowed them to, they were picking olives for themselves off the ground, to get a couple of litres of the precious olive oil.

When the war broke out, Rudi joined the army, but Giovanni stayed at home. He was thirty-five and his position as the head of the family spared him from joining in the war. In the last two years the financial situation of the Barriero family had improved indeed. The army required great quantities of horses and food and he doubled his livestock. Many pieces of land were fallow because nobody was working them so they were up for sale and Giovanni bought them without making the most of the situation because he was happy to help people if he could, he did not take advantage of people's misfortunes. At home, in some parts of the year, when the work in the land had stopped and people did not know what to live on, there were women coming and going offering the most diverse things they could do, bringing a basket full of chicory or wild fruit as a present, hoping to get something in return.

Giulia, Maria and Ada knew those women, they knew their stories and they would always send them back home with food to eat for their dinner. Before accepting what they offered, many of them would say that they had come over in case there were some things to do but their eyes would say thank you before getting the gift in their hands because the words that went with that were not words of pity and would not demean them:

-You've just come at the right time, I've just prepared this- they said handing the packet over- Take it, please, I've just made too much of it and it would rot..

-Giving without humiliating- Giovanni stressed that – because humiliation is worse than poverty- The three of them had learnt that.

That morning Ada woke up with her usual headache. It would happen often and when that occurred, the best way to look after it was to stay in bed, in the darkness, in peace and quiet for a few hours until the pain would alleviate and only then she would manage to get up, still daze and pale.

Dr Marinucci, the elderly family doctor, always felt that the cause for this was her nervousness. –It’s anxiety, it is not a serious condition. Ada is a strong and healthy woman. She should have got married...-

She did not leave the house and stayed with her father and her older sister instead. She was only two years younger than Maria and she looked less resigned. Compared to her thinness, Ada’s body looked almost plump, more feminine, with her large breasts in a corset which made her waist thinner and highlighted her round hips.

She moved around the house with quite some energy which was too much at times as if she was jerking, showing an agitation out of control and some kind of permanent unhappiness. In these days she could work for hours without feeling tired, she cleaned the house from top to bottom, she washed curtains and covers, she rubbed out old stains frantically. She was extremely generous. In a burst of affection she would take the kids’ breath away when she would hold them in her arms against her soft bosom and would smother them with kisses. Antonino couldn’t stop laughing, Clara tried to escape from that torture and the little ones, Agnese e Luciano, were mesmerized, laughing and crying, not too sure if that little pain was worth putting up with.

The first of November was dull day and the sun was just a dull light behind a cloud that was slightly fairer than the others. Maria was still in bed and Ada, once over the worse part, was not sure whether to get up or not. The house was unusually quiet got her to do downstairs. Antonino and Clara were at school and you could not hear the voices of the little ones.

She got up and got dressed. The fire was already on in the kitchen to warm up the air. Giovanni was in his work clothes and was sitting with his arms resting on the table in front of the open newspaper. Giulia was sitting in front of him, she was pale. Her face which was usually stern but not worried, was furrowed by a line on her forehead showing deep concern. Her blank eyes were following a far away thought . Maria was moving about quietly, busy making something to eat for the children, who were sitting on the ground and were talking in a low voice, feeling the worry in the room. Ada, stood at the door, and felt that unusual atmosphere.

-What happened?-

-How are you, Ada, are you feeling better?- Giulia asked, fighting hard to come out of her thoughts.

-Yes, I am feeling better. What happened?-

-things are not looking so good....- said Giovanni

-Which things....-

-The war.... The news about the war is not good.... Rudi wrote a letter...-

-Rudi?...what does he say...? Where did he write from...? how is he...?- Ada rested her hands clenched in a fist on her stomach and her voice was now panicky.

-He wrote from the warzone-, Giulia answered, thinking now about the current situation and looked as if she was in control again –He says he has fought in Caporetto and now he is at a field hospital...at least up until ten days ago when the letter was written...here, read it..-

Ada took the pieces of papers in her hands and saw that Rudi’s handwriting, usually with big characters, looked unsteady and crooked. She started to read silently, quickly:

‘ Dear Giulia and dear all,

As you can see I am able to write so please don’t worry about me.

I am at a field hospital ...because during an operation my shoulder was injured, luckily it is not serious. What I experienced with my fellow soldiers over the last few months is virtually nothing compared to what has happened over the last few days. I hope you have received my previous letters. If so, you are aware of the situation we have endured for months: the barricades are our home, these

dugouts where mud gets as far as your knees, and you can only get out of them to go and fight the enemy who is not too far from you. It is cold in there, very cold. I can say it to you: I am scared. I am scared when I can get some sleep for a little while and I am woken up by the blast of the bombs nearby, I am scared when we have to advance and my riflemen look at me with their ashen eyes, without expression, almost indifferent to their destinies, fear when Tornieri, my fellow soldier, collapses beside me with his stomach opened up and you can see inside and begs me to help him, not with the words because he has no more, but with his eyes. I look at him crying, he knows there is nothing I can do to help him and I have to leave him there because we have to go. So I go but I can't see anything because of the tears in my eyes and I pray, for a quick moment, I pray for Tornieri, whom I was talking to just a moment before, to die quickly. I pray for his death, he is so young and far away from his home which I got to know thanks to what he recounted, without anybody around him. No, no, it does not have to be like this! I turn back then just in time to hold his hand, soiled with mud and blood. He looks as if he is smiling at me and he passes away near me without even a sob: just a little sigh and he is gone forever.

I am scared because I don't know what tomorrow would be like and I am horrified that it is going to be like today, or even worse.

On the night of October 24th, we are in the barricade on Livek gap, waiting for the enemies to attack. It is the middle of the night, it is raining heavily and there is a thick fog everywhere. Around two in the morning there is the first blast, and then it goes on for hours on end. The cannons are fired so often that at dawn the land is covered in deep holes which were so near one another that the soldiers jump into them to get some shelter during their advance. They are given the order to defend the post and that's what has to be done, whereas the holes they jump into to get some shelter are full of dead bodies and men all deformed in the attempt to breathe, due to gas asphyxiation.

The night never ends. We advance for a few metres and when the position seems to be consolidated, here come the enemies, ready for an attack. I gather up my men, there are so few of them that I think it is pointless to resist, yet we just fight, we just keep at it without thinking, then we withdraw again, and again on the dead bodies of our fellow soldiers. All of a sudden I cannot remember anything about this living hell, apart from a sensation of heat that runs from my shoulder down to my arm and an almost pleasant vertigo that doesn't make me hear the blasts and feel the fear.

I was in hospital then when I was informed about what happened to our army and I heard about this withdrawal that neutralized our long-standing efforts.

I am feeling better and you are not to worry about me.

This war now does not even scare me anymore. This defeat has made me aware that now, after so much suffering, we need to fight harder for our country not to neutralize the sacrifices made by many fellow soldiers. I hope it finishes soon so that I can come back to you all, but I have to do my full duty first.

Give the kids a kiss from me. A hug to you all.

Your Rudi.'

Maria raised her eyes from the letter and looked at Giovanni in dismay.

-Is Rudi injured? ...Are we losing the war?-

They were getting the news only from the newspaper that Giovanni would buy when there was something particularly important, and that day all over the front page there were public announcements about the retreat of our army and about general Cadorna being replaced by Diaz for the High Command .

-I think so- he answered, looking worried- Things are worse than we would have expected.

Those words were said at last and were taken in in silence, as if to voice what everybody thought. Now every daily chore felt like a burden to carry and a relief at the same time, a way to get going and shake off that sense of oppression caused by endless hours.

1 Chapter IV

Agnese and Luciano

The twins, that was how they were called by the family, had turned five. To everyone they were 'the twins', not just because they were twins, but because they were connected by a knot that did not untie when they were born.

-The twins didn't eat- the twins have a temperature- check where the twins are...- nobody ever called them by their names. The age difference with the older brothers had turned them into a little world of its own. Especially when the older siblings started going to school, they would be all day together, complementing each other so much that at times they would isolate themselves and people would forget about them. They would rarely argue and it was difficult that they would quarrel over swapping toys or roles that they were taking up.

-You do this- No, you do it- That's fine, I'll do it-

Or

-I play with this now... And I'll play with this, then we swap...- They would have accepted any compromise in order to be with each other. That wasn't because they did not have any other friend, considering that they lived a little bit further out in the small town. The farmers would often bring their children with them and even though they were a little shy, they would be in the house with them, but above all because the two of them would easily communicate, even without using words, without too many explanations. It was all quite simple.

Agnese was the chubbier of the two of them. She had been that way since their birth and growing up she would keep her build. She was a cheerful but not boisterous little girl, her big dark eyes would brighten up when she smiled, almost hidden by her chubby cheeks if she was laughing whole-heartedly. She loved to play not so much with her doll but with the doll that used to be Clara's, because it belonged to her older sister who had given it up without regretting it. For her birthday her father brought back her a pram from the town fair, the image of her own pram when she was smaller. Now mum was looking after her baby girl taking her out for a walk in the porch, wrapped up in a little yellow quilt that auntie Maria had made for her. While she was walking around, she felt that everything was perfect: a home, a mum, a baby and daddy that was waiting for them.

Luciano was always daddy. He would ride back home on his wooden horse, to eat at a table where dainties made with mud, small stones and little pieces of paper were served, to say that everything tasted so good and to go back to work, on horseback, trotting or at a gallop according to the situation. A role that turned out to be rather marginal in the daily running of their house, where the most demanding tasks were carried out by the house mistress. While she was cleaning, cooking, going for walks, he had some free time to fill in, so he would say -What can I do now?- he asked.- -You work the land- and he would start digging lightly with a stick. After a little while, the farmer would get bored and would go back home saying that it was time to draw. So straight away they would drop the kitchen with the pots on the fire and the poor doll was left on her own in the middle of the porch.

The time they spent doing their drawings would fly by, especially for him. While they were at it, it was Agnese's turn to ask -What now?- Without raising his eyes off the paper, lying down on the ground or kneeling down on a chair which was too low near the table, Luciano would give her some instructions and some advice.

He was a tall child, quite thin, and was told to look like his auntie Maria. His build was exactly the opposite of his sister's and his dark and straight hair was cut quite short at the back of his head, he had some sort of a lock in the front that would stick up on top of his head and fall down onto his forehead. His face was not as cheerful as his sister's. He did not have a frown but he always looked very interested in everything that was around him and his own way to understand what was going on keeping a distant attitude. There were times whereby he seemed to be totally dependent

on Agnese, and other times when the little one would rely on her brother, and this naturally well-balanced relationship made them both confident and for their age, quite independent.

There was also another child they could often play with, Andrea, Lucia's son.

Lucia was a young woman who the Barrieri family knew so well. She was just over her twenties but she started working in their farm at the age of six or seven with her father. Her mother died when she was giving birth so father and daughter have been both orphans since then, lost in a world that had not been very kind to them and did not look too promising for the future either. Lucia had not really been reared in her own home but in the neighbours' who looked after her in turns, feeling sorry for her living conditions of extreme poverty and neglect. Her father was a good man, simple, a hard-working man, born in a world where working hard could just guarantee to make ends meet. He would get up at dawn and come back home when the sun had gone down; in the evening he could not do all the tasks usually carried out by a wife who wasn't actually there. Their home was on the ground floor, there was a long corridor that was getting some light only from the front door and the double bed was at the bottom, a curtain would separate it from the rest. Winter nights were very long and cold and the fireplace was often off. When darkness fell, rather than lighting up a candle, they would go to bed, so their meal was just one and they would feel the hunger in the morning. The mattress was made with dry leaves which would creak every time they moved about in the bed. Lucia's little body, wrapped around her father's, was still, crushed under the heavy cover and there she would feel finally at home. As soon as she was old enough, she went to the land with him. She never went to school and nobody ever came looking for her. The Barrieri family was the first family she worked for and she stayed with them ever since, growing in the fields year after year.

The first time she went into the big house she was about five. She was due to get the water to bring to the men who were working nearby. She had always seen that house from outside, it was a two-storey house, with the curtains at the windows and the big front door. It looked like a castle to her. There was not anything as beautiful in the small town. She was a bit scared getting near it, holding the jug covered with broomcorn to keep the water cool. She was still, not too sure whether to push the half-closed door open or bang that big iron ring which ended with the head of a lion. A tall and austere woman came out of the semi-darkness of the corridor and saw her right in front of her after opening the door wide.

-What are you doing here?-

The woman bent forward to her, she put a hand on her head. She was smiling and from a close distance her face was not as stern as it appeared earlier on. Lucia's heart was throbbing like a crazy horse up until a little while before, but she calmed herself down a little at that touch. She held out the jug keeping her eyes down, and she managed to say:

-Here is the water...-

Maria felt a surge of tenderness looking at that scared little thing.

-What's your name?-

-Lucia...- she kept her head down and her words were almost whispered

-Come in- she told her while she was pushing her gently in the hallway

-Lucia and?-

The little girl was silent.

-What is your mummy's name?- The little girl still kept her head down and did not answer. Maria was taking her to the kitchen keeping her hand on her shoulder. She could feel all her bones through her apron

-What about your daddy, what is your daddy's name?-

-Adolfo...-

She realised that she was the daughter of that man named Adolfo who had lost his wife too soon and that that little girl had only experienced poverty and loneliness growing up.

She filled the jug with water.

-Are you sure that you can carry it? It's heavy...-

-Yes...yes...-her voice could hardly be heard

-Would you like to eat an apple?-

Almost touching her chest with her chin, the little girl shook her head.

-Put it in your pocket then, you can eat it later- so she slipped it into the pocket of her long apron.

-Take two indeed, you can give one to whoever you want-

She took her to the door and she saw her go away nearly running, as if she was free from a burden, despite the jug resting on her hip.

Everything had been so new and exciting that day that Lucia did not even look at the kitchen she had gone into. As soon as she was on her own, the blood started to throb in her veins quickly and her face got some colour while a feeling of joy would take over her. While she was running, she felt the two apples banging against her legs and she was holding on to them with her free hand in order not to lose them. She got home out of breath, she left the jug near her father without saying a word and she stepped away. She took one apple, she rubbed it with her sleeve to make it glossy and precious and she started to eat it with small bites as if it was Paris's golden apple.

After that day, Lucia herself would offer to do small jobs around the big house and little by little she started to look up when people were talking to her. Later on the Barrieri family themselves would call her if they needed some help.

Then she got married and she had Andrea. Everything could be different. However the war, on the first year right away, after getting a postcard that Giulia read for her, took that hope away from her forever. She was on her own again, working to make a living, for herself and that child that would keep her close to life. The Barrieri family would treat Andrea always with affection. While his mum was working in the house or in the fields, the child was often in their house and would enjoy his afternoon snack with the twins, consisting of big slices of bread with jam.

1 Chapter V

Antonino and Clara

Despite the pregnancies, Giulia did not put on weight and her tiny and well-shaped body, which was still young-looking, with an increased maturity and gracefulness in her ways which would make her more beautiful to Giovanni's eyes. What he loved most about her, apart from her appearance, was her mannerism and her words, almost a dignity that was never tedious or detached but a natural ability to fully understand the situations and know exactly when it was okay to speak or be quiet. They were the qualities that he had first picked up off her which now that he knew her better, they would make her extra special. He trusted her judgement and in the evening, when at last they were on their own in their bedroom, he would talk for a long time about the work he did during the day, she would listen carefully to him and Giovanni was grateful to be able to share a burden. Giulia had a secret part that was hidden deep down and would show up only through some of her deep and distant looks that would look away with a sudden flash from something she couldn't really see, as if just for a few seconds she had picked thoughts from a remote and intimate place which were impossible to explain to other people. At first that imperceptible startle almost frightened Giovanni, then he was jealous of it because he realised that he could not access a place buried deep down her soul, which was distant and unattainable. He had stopped asking 'What are you thinking about?' waiting for that startle to go as suddenly as it had come about, something he felt painfully left out from, it was a brief moment of loneliness fully compensated by the way Giulia would be right after that.

That side to her personality that would have been so prone to anxiety, had been fixed up by Giovanni's vitality and liveliness. In those times when the love a wife had for her husband showed in the dedication and obedience to a man, Giulia felt for him a very strong physical attraction which let her discover the juvenile and repressed passionate nature of her body. At the beginning of their engagement, when she saw him coming from a distance, she felt her legs shaking nervously and she

was trying very hard to keep herself under control, leaving her speechless. She almost felt uneasy thinking about him, being aware that this new feeling was out of her control and would make her more fragile. After the wedding, their nights together were soon free of all embarrassment. Happy to enjoy each other without reserve, they would keep an unconfessed secret from the family during the day, hidden behind the stern expression of her face and slightly more visible in Giovanni's gestures and looks.

Giulia was aware that Clara had taken after her a lot, she could sense those thoughts that she managed to keep under control since she was younger. She could sense them running wild deep down her as a teenager who was finding it difficult to restrain them and would confine herself in an inexplicable, almost hostile silence. When she realised that Clara favoured her father, she was relieved because she had tacitly empowered him to keep an intimate contact with their daughter's soul, keeping for herself the place of a careful observer. This was secretly acknowledged and shared by Giovanni, even if it had never rationally come up, and it was a great joy, because along with him Clara was able to let herself go to childish games without feeling the need to hide from him those anxieties that he had learnt to understand and respect in Giulia. His closeness was a relief to Clara's anxieties, she did not feel as if someone was watching her like with her mother, nor partially misunderstood like with her aunties. It could only be Clara, in the simplicity of her moments of silence and the depth of her thoughts.

Antonino's calmness was indeed Giulia's happiness. He was sociable and loving, letting all the maternal instinct out of the women of the family. It was easy to coddle and kiss him till he could not breathe anymore. He would not run away from the arms which were holding him and he would laugh like Clara only when she was playing with her daddy. Giulia would leave everything she was doing for Antonino, every hidden thought which would have upset the tranquillity of those moments spent together. She would watch him play with his sister and she felt he was no longer weaker, but peacefully aware of her sister's greater strength, happy enough about his role. She loved him so much for this, and she would go near him for a quick pet which would make Clara suspicious; however, he would reciprocate her with a grateful look.

Growing up, Antonino kept the calmness that he had always distinguished him and showed a deep love for the country life.

He had always been a helpful boy. During the summer holidays and during the days off he helped in the land. He would get up early, before dawn, happy enough to share the first few moments of quietness in the house with his father, almost looking for an undisturbed complicity. When he was still a young boy, he was interested in the land and in the turns of the cattle to be brought to the fields. Growing up he stopped playing with Clara who was more and more often in her bedroom to read, reluctant to do that housework that her aunties had tried in vain to teach her.

Antonino loved especially the horses that the Barrieri family were breeding in the wild, in the woods. At the time of their taming, the team of horses was brought in the open countryside and locked in a pen, he wouldn't miss it for the world. Weeks before, he had started to beg his father to make him skip school to be there. Giovanni happily agreed to, pleased he had this passion, but he didn't show it because –... school comes first ...but just for this time...- and deep down he was happy for the double treat his son was getting: a day off school and to see the horses being tamed.

The horses were usually tamed in May. Mornings were still fresh, bright, their brightness would remind of summer. The men were riding the horses, holding a long wooden rod and a big rope across their shoulder, they were wearing sturdy boots and wide leather thigh pads. As soon as the sun was coming out, they headed towards the woods in a line, quiet and ready to tackle a day which was different from the others, determined to take up the challenge which would certainly test their abilities and the outcome was always good. It was a challenge against the foal, still wild, and the dexterity of man, to show to oneself and the others. It was almost a celebration.

Antonino could not sleep the night before, he was anxious and alert to the sounds in the house, concerned that someone could forget about him. He was ready well before dawn. He would come down in the kitchen with his stomach tightening due to his excitement and could not eat anything. Giulia would make the lunch for her men to take with them and put in something extra for him... to eat in a little while- she said to him.

She saw her son glowing with happiness thinking about that day and she was delighted for him. Antonino was full of energy early in the day, which were almost the last hours of the night, dying to go out. With his eyes he was urging his father to be quick, to get up from the table, not to waste any more time. When Giovanni, once he had finished, had just moved the chair away from the table, he was already out the door. He was ahead of him in every movement he made. Giulia smiled looking at him and before they went off, she could not hold back the last words

-Be careful...- a piece of advice aimed at the son which would imply thousands more to the father -Please, make sure he is safe, if he rides a horse, please get him to ride the calmest, don't let him ride on his own...- and many more that she would have liked to add to the list but that it was not necessary to say. She knew that Giovanni did not like to listen to them, as if he was an irresponsible father who would jeopardise their son's life. One look would settle it all.

She heard them getting the buddy ready and she could then see them going off together in the darkness which was just starting to brighten up. She heard Giovanni spur the horse under his breath and the familiar sound of the horse trotting on the gravel of the driveway. She would see from behind the window the two of them sitting next to each other on the tiny seat, as far as they disappeared in the early morning light. She would stay there for a few more minutes even when they could not be seen anymore and only the echo of those sounds would be heard, holding back a sense of satisfaction all over her, which was difficult to part from in order to start the day waiting for them to come back.

The men were all ready in the field and were waiting to leave all together. Giovanni and Antonino were following them with the buggy. As soon as his soon was old enough, he would prepare the horse for him -... the oldest, the calmest horse- as Giulia wished, and the boy would head towards the woods with the others.

A few years had gone from that first time, but to Antonino each time was the first time. When he was riding the horse, which over time had been replaced with a fast and sturdy crossbreed, he always had the feeling he could rule the world. He could feel the animal's tight and powerful muscles under the tight grip of his thighs, so much so that when the horse was trotting lightly, he could feel the restrained strength. His body was taking in the vitality of the horse which was carrying on with great ability the orders just given with the light movement of the reins. There was not much talking done in the early hours of the morning, only the necessary words that could not be replaced by the gestures. Along the way that from the field would lead to the woods, the horse did not need to be guided, it would ride first, with the others right behind him, in a single line, keeping a pace of who is not in a haste and does not know where to go. The horseman would caracole over him, covered up by the black and heavy cowboy's cape and would enjoy the fresh air and the colours of the dawn. The open field would lead to the woods, the lane became narrow and rough among the bushes of strawberry tree, myrtle and rosemary. The lower branches of the trees would touch lightly the men who were trying to push them away or bending down over the neck of the animal. Scattered in several directions, they were gathering the wild horses and were leading them to where they had started off. The taming would have started off there.

The young foals followed an older horse which they would see as their guide. They were riding along the way encouraged and guided by the screams of the cowboy. The air was filled with the neighs and the voices and the horses would come out in small teams from the bushes, disoriented, scared by the recalls and the steady touch of the stick, jumping around a leader from which they were looking for safety, with their big wet restless eyes and their beautiful heads shaking nervously their manes. As soon as they came out of the woods the men would push them into a single team. Whistling and using

their voices they guided them inside a big pen and the foals sensed that that fence would imprison them and give them a different life, where their freedom and playing with fellow horses would be over, where the woods ended to give way to the countryside. At that stage the cowboys would start their game and one by one the foals were directed towards a smaller pen and the taming would start.

When Antonino was a child, he used to perch on the fence and look in ecstasy at the young animal which was made to run all around in a circle. The men would throw the ropes around the foal's neck which was pawing the ground, scared and furious at the same time, till the strength failed it. Exhausted, with its eyes nearly popping out of its head and its fur shiny with the sweat, it was giving into men's ability and gave up to their will. In those moments Antonino felt a vague sense of sadness, as if that wild being had lost its virginity, forced to leave behind that part of uncontaminated nature that was in it, to get into a world made up of rules it was not destined to originally.

That day would stay in the child's mind for a long time. Once back home, he would be so excited telling his mother and his aunts all about the marvellous things he saw. Giulia smiled, happy to see him so enthusiastic, Clara could not understand why he was so excited and the twin's opinion about the matter was not at all requested.

1 Chapter VI

Rudi is in hospital

Rudi did not know how he got to the hospital. He found himself in a bed, with his shoulder all bandaged up and in pain, surrounded by other wounded soldiers.

The first impression he had when he managed to open his eyes was a feeling of sickness that was coming up to his throat from his stomach, causing him the feeling to vomit without being actually able to do it. He could not make out what was around him. He could hear every sound as if it was far away and annoying, rejected by his mind which was still under the effect of ether. Then he could hear the moans and groans of the people around him. He dreamt of being in the barricade where the mud which was stuck to their shoes would make every movement quite heavy and it was hard to move the arms too. Every movement caused an excruciating pain and the awful smell off the dead bodies which had been lying there for days, with their rotting faces and the bodies all over the place over which you would stumble at every step, gripped his stomach - God, let me out of here, let me get out of this living hell alive- he thought. His heavy eyelids were trying to open in the light of a different situation which they could not get used to. The eyes wide open were still, blank and could only see what the mind remembered. He would sink again in his terrible memories and could feel the pain in his shoulder which was becoming unbearable.

He woke up completely, covered in sweat, exhausted with the pain and his visions. He felt a cool hand on his forehead and could not say a word for a few minutes, terrified at the idea that that was his dream and it could vanish in a moment, making him go back to the terrible reality of earlier on. He slowly came around and asked without opening his eyes

-Where am I?-

-In hospital-

A man's voice answered the question

-Why am I here?-

-You are on holidays-

Rudi did not pick up his sarcasm

-Am I sick?-

-Of course you are sick. The air at the front was bad for you so they sent you on a bonus trip.

Our commanders look bad but they are nice people-

He opened his eyes

-I am thirsty-

-Wait- he answered. He snapped his fingers and said loudly

-Waitress- he said- A glass of champagne for the gentleman, please..-

A Red Cross nurse came near. Rudi started to regain awareness of the place where he had woken up. He saw the face of the girl getting closer to his and heard the words of a young woman

-How are you feeling? How can I help you?-

Before he could reply, the man beside him answered on his behalf

-The gentleman urgently needs to have a stiff drink. He asked for some best quality champagne. Quick before he gets up and walks off without paying the bill -

-Lucky you, you are always in a joking mood- the young woman answered smiling

-I am thirsty – repeated Rudi. The Red Cross nurse walked away to fetch a glass of water.

When he managed to take a good look around he saw he was in a long and narrow room, a big corridor where there were roughly arranged some beds, three or four stretchers and various mattresses on the floor. On each of them there was a wounded person. Some people were sleeping, some were moaning in an frightening half-sleep made of fear and grief, some were coughing real badly, some were awake and were looking around with their eyes open wide but they could not really see anything of what was around them.

-Welcome among the living-

The voice of the young man was not playful anymore. He went really close to Rudi who could now see him and was staring at him in silence, unwilling to believe that the nightmares he had earlier on were over.

-My name is Fosco Frizmajer- he said stretching his big and sturdy hand.

He was a tall and skinny young man, with a uniform in tatters which would look all over the place, and despite his thinness, it would dangle everywhere, it had always been too short. His bony hands were tapered with long fingers and rounded fingernails which were carefully cut. The wrists that were coming out of his shirt sleeves were bony but sturdy, as well as his shoulders which were leaning over a bit, were still strong looking though. His hair was long, blond and straight, it would fall all over his forehead which was too high and framed his face which was brightened by his lively and attentive eyes which life had not tamed yet, despite the roughness of the years of war. He was walking leaning against a crutch and the effort to get the support off one leg would make his shoulders even more bent over.

Rudi looked at him without greeting him back.

Frizmajer said laughing, while waving his hand quickly in front of his eyes

- Are you with us? Shall I come back later?-

Rudi smiled at last.

Fosco had been wounded to one knee during a battle against the Austro- Hungarians- A battle almost among relatives- he said, considering that his grandfather was born in Vienna and had moved to Milan when he was very young. He was a war correspondent for a newspaper based on a city and what would anger him was that he got a bullet even though he had never fired a bullet.

-Bloody Yugoslavians, they don't even know how to shoot, otherwise they would have killed somebody who was more dangerous than me. This way, they got rid of a pen, not a bayonet!-

In the big room it was impossible to have a rest during the day and at night. New wounded people kept on coming from the battlefield. The young Red Cross nurses worked non-stop along with the two doctors who took turns to perform operations with makeshift means. Most of the soldiers who were taken into hospital were very young boys, mutilated by bombs or in the grip of terror that they could not control.

Someone would shout -Mommy- mommy- till he had some voice left. Then the shouting was replaced by a sigh, a death rattle. His cry for help was supposed to go far but instead it was collected by those young women who stroke their faces and would gently keep their hands in theirs, saying words that their mothers would have said. To reach the point that the death rattle would stop and the

convulsive grip of their fingers would loosen up in the last hope to have been touched by the tender hand of their mum.

That was the other side to the barricade, here the war could be just suspended or could end for good.

A few days went by and Rudi started to feel better. The pain in his shoulder was not so bad and he started to get up and walk, even if he was quite weak still. Fosco was recovering, but his knee was not okay. If he tried to bend it, he would get shooting pains that would make him stop. The pain was so bad that he furrowed his forehead and squinted his eyes till they became slanted, hissing with rage -Bloody Yugoslavians- lighting up a cigarette.

He smoked often, standing, leaning against his crutch. Holding the cigarette between his fingers, he would look laid-back again, pushing away the bitterness and the worry into a hidden corner of his look which was not completely invisible. He always had some cigarettes which he would offer to those who asked to take two drags.

Sitting on the same bed, Fosco and Rudi had the time to get to know each other. Rudi told him about himself, his town, his nieces and nephews showing how much you miss all that is important to you and that you take for granted. Fosco listened with the curiosity of a person who finds out about the peaceful life in the suburbs and was asking about Giulia and Giovanni, Ada and Maria as if he knew them. Then he told him about his life as a journalist, about his family who was so different, about his travels following his father who was an ambassador. Rudi listened to what his friend had to say with the curiosity of someone who opens a window onto a completely different view. The world around them was not there anymore at least for the time they were having their conversations. The war, the suffering, the terror that they could see in their friends' eyes were pushed away by the stories they were telling which would bring them back in time, when all of this was not there. They spoke about women, how they had met them, about those ones they felt they had loved at least for a little while and about those they had made love to. Now more than ever the body of a woman, her smooth and warm skin would have fulfilled their senses. They would have recovered right after making love to her. Then, at the first moment of silence in between their thoughts and their words, reality stroke again and the smell of those bodies, the groans which were all around them would come back to life and were dragging them down forcefully to send them back to real life.

1 Chapter VII

Rudi goes back home

Two weeks after, Rudi came out of hospital with a month's leave. Fosco was discharged from hospital and tried to convince him to go to his house in Milan. The suggestion was tempting but he just wanted to go back to the peacefulness of his home, he felt as if going back he could get rid of the anxieties that were pressing down on his chest and be able to breathe again with a light heart as he used to. They agreed that before the end of the leave he would have spent a few days in Milan.

Fosco's knee was still painning him. Before leaving, he gave all his cigarettes to the boys there and leaning on his crutch, still limping, said goodbye to the younger Red Cross nurses kissing them one by one on the cheeks. Making the most of the fact that they were so close and that they were letting themselves loose, he held them tight and rested his lips on theirs, making them shocked and amused.

-This will help you remember me. Once the war is over, please come and see me in Milan- Bending his head slightly he let go of their hands, held in a grip that was more friendly than a simple farewell – See you soon-he whispered staring at them straight in the eyes

On the doorstep, he turned back lifting his crutch up high and said to everyone - Memento audere semper!- Many of them did not understand, those who were in a position to do it, said goodbye politely and Rudi laughed at that wish which sounded out of place.

A few days after, he was discharged from hospital too. He kept his leave in his pocket and over his good shoulder he had his haversack with the few things he owned. He got as far as Verona on

a military truck S.P.A. 8000 carrying ammunition which went back and forth from the front to the back roads. There he boarded to Orte. He tried to keep the bandaged arm as steady as possible, but all the jolts of the truck were giving him pain on his wound. The young driver was driving on the rough roads full of potholes very fast. Despite his continuous requests not to drive so fast, he would slow down per a couple of kilometres then, without realising it, he would go back to the same pace as before. More than once Rudi cursed and was afraid to faint because of the pain. The train journey seemed to him so quiet indeed.

He arrived on a morning of freezing rain, he put a cap on his head to protect him from the heavy rain and waited for half an hour for the bus to Viterbo. While sitting on the wooden bench at the station, he felt the cold get into his bones. The bus was nearly empty and with him there was an elderly woman dressed in black, her face was bony and expressionless, her sunken eyes were hiding behind a mesh of wrinkles. Her arm was inside a big head scarf held at the four corners, from which you could see the leaves of a cauliflower and a pungent smell of cheese. She sat in front of him, keeping her eyes down, deep in God knows what thoughts. Rudi got thinking about her and was wondering who that big bundle was for: a son who was living in another town? ... no... she wouldn't have looked so sad ...maybe someone she was going to ask for a favour ...or maybe for someone who could get that son away for a long time to come back home, ...or maybe for a doctor from the city to whom she could not pay the fee with cash...

From the window she could see the countryside running along the side of the road. The dark lands soaked with water and the bare trees reminded of the late autumn. In the village people were picking olives and that rain would stop their work for days. For the first time in almost three years he realised that he was not thinking about his life, his grief, his fear. He was aware he was happy for the simple fact that he had forgotten about his soaked and cold body, his fellow soldiers groaning and the smell of ether which would cover the smell of death. He looked at the dark woods that were going fast under his eyes, he recognised the damp smell of the cold wood and he took back that part of himself that was suffocated by the enthusiasm of the youth, then by the suffering, now he felt he was discovering for the first time.

He had written a letter to Giovanni to let him know that he was coming home. When he got off in Viterbo he saw him there waiting for him. He did not recognise him, he was wrapped up in a long black capote and was wearing a wide hat over his head to shelter him from the rain. He crossed his eyes and smiled at him. He saw him just then. Giovanni did not recognise him either. He went over to him just because he realised that he was the only military to get off the bus. He saw standing in front of him a young man who was thin and pale who was looking around almost fearfully, tired and a bit awkward, whose look had lost the shine of the youth. Only after staring at him more carefully he saw his faint smile showing the traits of the confident boy who had left years ago. They got close and finally hugged, Giovanni's sturdy body, with a little extra weight put on over the last few years, and Rudi's skinny one.

-Here you are at last!- he exclaimed joyfully, hiding his impressions

-Yes, at home, at last-

-They are all waiting for you, they can't wait to see you. They have been waiting for days..-

-I am the same, the last part of the journey was never ending...-

-You look tired... -

-Yes, I'm tired. The journey was so long-

-The buggy is right outside the station. Here, put the capote on, it's cold today. Giulia has made something to eat for you. She thought that probably you haven't eaten all day-

Giulia.

Rudi smiled thinking about Giulia, so reliable and trustworthy, her pragmatism would show up in every situation. It was true, he hadn't eaten for many hours and had not realised that up until that moment, he was so used to the hardship at the barricade. The smell that was coming out of the

container got him suddenly hungry and while sitting on the buggy beside his brother-in-law, the first thing he did was to open the metal container and start eating.

The journey would last almost two hours. On the dirt road the stones would jolt the buggy and Rudi could not hide his pain .

-How are you?- Giovanni asked him, concerned about his suffering face

-Don't worry, it's okay, I'll be fine once we get home-

The two horses were all wet with the rain and the sweat and trotted without being told where to head to. They knew the way because they did it so many times when they used to go to fairs and coming back was always happier than leaving, especially because when the weather was bad, they wished to enjoy the heat of the stable.

Giovanni wanted to ask him many questions but he realised that he was tired so he kept his questions to a minimum. Rudi himself, as soon as he was told that the family members were okay, much preferred the quietness.

They got there at lunchtime.

Antonino was the first one to see the buggy coming into the driveway. He had been going back and forth between the door and the kitchen window so many times that everybody was annoyed with that. He insisted that his father would bring him with him but Giovanni was not happy and he had to find something to do before their arrival at the house.

The women had been working hard since the early morning to cook the best food they could. Giulia was concealing her distress and her worry behind a busy quietness which would get her to check the pots on the fire, even though there was no need to, and look repeatedly at the window, even though she was well aware that it was far too early for them to arrive.

-Here they are, here they are!- Antonino's voice was full of joy and everybody rushed towards the front door.

The children were outside in a flash and were jumping around the buggy before it would stop completely. Ada and Maria came out on the patio and Giulia stood at the door, as if she wanted to make sure that it was really him before running to him.

-Calm down, calm down- Giovanni was trying to calm them down and to protect Rudi from their enthusiasm.

-Be careful, your uncle is injured, be careful...-

Rudi bent over and was enjoying all their hugs, trying to shield his aching shoulder.

-Antonino, you are a man now...Clara...come here, give me a kiss...and you two are grown men.

When all the excitement quietened down, he managed eventually to say hello to Ada and Maria.

Giulia went over to him and was staring at him without saying a word. It did not take long to notice that her brother's happiness was troubled by a trace of distress, which was rooted deep down to dispel his light heartedness. Rudi was extremely thin and he looked like a suffering young man. You could see a sincere joy in him but it was temporary, as if he left somewhere far the roots of lightness,

-Giulia!- he freed himself from all the arms that were around him and went over to her and they hugged without speaking.

The days he spent at home went by quickly, pampered by the adults with their loving care and by the children with their love. Despite a hot bath, a big dinner and the long-forgotten lovely smell of freshly washed bed sheets, he could not get rid of the heavy tiredness the first night. With his eyes closed, in the dark silence of his room, he tried to enjoy that peace but the void was soon filled by blasts and screams, groans and mud, till when the rotten face of one of his wounded fellow soldiers would give him a start, and he felt that he was falling into a well. All in a sweat, he opened his eyes wide and was clinging on to the bed covers in the attempt to stop that disastrous descent, his shoulder aching while trying to get something to hold on to. He was panting anxiously and was trying to calm down his heartbeat, hoping not to have shouted or woken anybody up.

At dawn he heard the first quiet sounds of the home. The light peeping through the windows helped him chase away the visions of the night before and he eventually managed to fall asleep. When he woke up, the older boys were already back from school and everybody was waiting for him for to have lunch.

Day after day he was getting back his strength and his natural colour was coming back. Giulia watched him carefully when he was looking at her, eager to knock down that unintentional wall which was painfully dividing her from him, looking for a crack that could let her in his troubled soul. Rudi felt that look trying to get into his silence and could painfully understand her concern. He pretended not to notice anything till when he managed to shake it off and take part in everyday life, letting her hope that sooner or later everything would be fine and it was just a matter of time.

His young body helped him recover soon and from his face seemed to have disappeared all the traces of his deep distress. After three weeks he told them that he was going to leave in advance because he wanted to spend a few days with one of his friends, before heading back to the battalion headquarters.

1 Chapter VIII

Rudi and Fosco in Milan

Fosco was waiting for him at the central station in Milan. Rudi was standing on the running board of the train and saw a lanky person towering over the crowd who was quickly looking at the carriage windows.

-Fosco!- he shouted his name, waving his hand.

His friend turned around and lifted his stick to greet him, smiling.

He was still limping.

-Old pirate, I thought you were not coming anymore. I am happy that you are here. How are you? How is everyone back home?-

-Yes, thank you...how are you? When are you going to get rid of this piece of wood? Or maybe it is a distinguishing feature...I bet it makes you look more interesting-

- For sure, all the beautiful girls in Milan are after me, especially those who are married!-

- Is there anyone left for me?-

- Don't worry, I'll spare someone for you-

They walked to the way out patting each other on the shoulders and laughing together like those people who have been waiting a long time to meet up, while the cold night on December 1st was slowing lit up by the lampposts along the road.

Fosco lived on his own. The house was located in the old part of the city and it was a small flat with three rooms, with books and magazines all over the place, it was a holy mess which perfectly matched the owner. Despite his objections, he insisted on giving him his bedroom: he was happy enough to sleep on the couch in the study where he would often fall asleep and spend the whole night there.

-How long can you stay?- he asked

-A few days, I'll have to be back to the Headquarters in a week-

-I am not going back...- he said solemnly- my leg is still hurting...I don't think it will ever be the same...bloody Yugoslavians!- This statement was customary now and had the power to chase away the saddest thoughts and put a smile back on his face.

-It's late, let's go out for dinner. There is a lovely place down here. I 'm a right disaster in the kitchen-

The kitchen area was in fact dreary; Rudi did not turn his nose up at a good meal and was quite happy to go.

The family-run restaurant was quite close to the house, just at the corner of the road. It was a small restaurant with a lovely family atmosphere. They sat at a table beside the wall. Rudi watched

the pictures on the walls: sketches, caricatures, inscriptions, there were so many of them that they nearly covered the whole wall.

-Painters leave them there to pay for their bills- Fosco explained- Totò, the owner, does not mind that, he says that sooner or later some of them will be famous and he'll make up for the others with his painting-

-Totò is great!-

-He is nice, but he is from Naples and knows very well what is doing. Do you like the meat? It's quite a lovely dish-

Totò went up the two steps that divided up the kitchen from the dining hall and showed up at the door.

-Good morning sir- he said to Fosco. His friendly manners well matched his stocky body. His round head and virtually without neck was straight up and alert, framed by hair which was a bit long, black and curly. His eyes were big and dark, and were able to take a quick general look of the whole dining hall and had stopped on them. It was true that you could see that he was a smart business dealer that people appreciate because he was not doing it behind the scene but it was openly showed.

Fosco replied in a tone that was equally friendly.

-Good morning Totò, I have a friend with me today. I'll get the usual, for two, and red wine, the good one, though!-

-In your dreams!- the innkeeper replied laughing and went back down below.

He sat down keeping his stiff leg over the stick which was across the room. He did not eat very much but he drank quite a lot indeed, he spoke the whole evening about going back to work at the newsroom and he hoped to work as a reporter again. He said that he was trying to write what he saw and experienced. He wanted to put them together with the articles he sent when he was at the front to try and make a book out of it.

They spent the four days that Rudi was in Milan sightseeing. His friend would show him areas that people did not know of, which reminded him of personal memories, tragic or funny events. He was a good speaker, witty and lively who would easily draw people's attention and curiosity. Rudi was in line with his apparently easy-going picture of the world. He realised that if you look just a little beyond that façade to see in him a true wish to know and analyse the events, an ability to commit oneself to the fullest leaving behind all personal needs.

They spoke about the latest news about the war, the horrifying things they saw and Fosco passionately reiterated the reasons that led him to support the non-intervention in a undertaking that cost a lot of sacrifices.

They split up at the station. Fosco looked more peaceful, as if in those four days he could relieve his mind from visions and words which had been long restrained. As for Rudi, he was aware to have discovered a territory unknown to him up to now and to know now who the right guide was to get to know it.

1 Chapter IX

1918

Back at his battalion, Rudi was engaged on the sidelines, no more at the front. The war there did not look so frightening.

After that terrible day on October 24th, 1917 when the Austro-German broke through the Italian armies and invaded Friuli, several events had taken place. On November 9th Marshal Cadorna had given his place to General Armando Diaz. What was mostly worrying about the war was the situation in Russia, where on November 8th the Bolshevik got the power and now they were preparing to ask for the armistice to keep an eye on the internal situation. This was a huge problem for the Coalition which following Brest-Litovsk peace agreement on March 3rd, 1918, the Russian army was not part of its army anymore.

People feared the worst. Boys born in 1919 were called in to go to war. Boys who were born in December of that year were not 18 yet.

The new Italian headquarters tried to organise themselves fast. At the front, the troops tried to hold on courageously against the enemies.

The last determining offensive started on Mount Grappa on October 24th, 1918 and on November 3rd the victorious Italian army was in Trento. At six o'clock in the afternoon the armistice was signed at Villa Giusti.

On November 4th, the Italians got the news from the newspapers:

'The Italian army is in Trento and Trieste.

Supreme Command, November 3rd (7pm)

Our troops have occupied Trento and have landed in Trieste. The Italian flag is flapping on the Castello del Buon Consiglio and on the Torre di San Giusto. Sections of the cavalry have reached Udine. Signed A. Diaz.'

That Monday the Italians read or got someone to read it for them over and over again the war bulletin no. 1278 released by the Supreme Command:

-The war against Austria Hungary, led by HM the King- Supreme Commander- the Italian army was outnumbered and was not endowed with many means, started on May 24th, 1915 and with firm faith and tenacious courage led a continuous and harsh resistance for 41 months, it was won.

The huge battle engaged on last October, 24th, which involved 51 Italian divisions, three British divisions, two French divisions, one Czechoslovakian division and one American regiment against 73 Austro-Hungarian divisions is over.

The quick long awaited advance on behalf of the 29th army corps in Trento, blocking the roads for retreat to the enemy troops of Trentino blown over in the west by the 7th army troops and in the east by the 1st, 6th and 4th army troops, caused yesterday the complete destruction of the enemy front.

From river Brenta to river Torre the overpowering effort of the 12th, 8th and 10th army and the cavalry divisions push the fleeing enemy back.

In the S.A.R. plain the Duke of Aosta rapidly advances leading his undefeated 3rd army eager to go back to the positions which they had already victoriously conquered which were never lost.

The Austro-Hungarian army is defeated: they suffered heavy losses during the tenacious resistance during the first days of battle and during the chasing; they lost huge amounts of materials of any kind and almost all their warehouses and deposits; so far he left in our hands about 300 thousand prisoners and all the commanding officers and no less than 5 thousand cannons.

What was left of one of the most powerful armies in the worlds are getting back up the valleys that they had previously descended with proud confidence all scattered and without any hope.

Signed A. Diaz -

It was the end of a nightmare.

Giovanni had dashed back home from the village after buying the newspaper and now, surrounded by the women and sitting at the kitchen table, he was reading the latest news aloud, his voice was cracking up from time to time.

Maria was nervously rubbing her apron and said in a soft voice – Thank God, at last it is all over!- Ada was keeping her hands on her chest, as if she was trying to keep her heart which was beating so fast that she could not speak.

Giulia, standing behind Giovanni, was reading quietly with eager eyes the lines that he was reading loud, eager to get to the bottom of the page

-Rudi is coming back home, everybody is coming home- she was repeating to herself. The last letter dated back two months earlier and had he had reassured her about his health condition. She could have hugged him again and go back to the everyday life.

Giovanni finished reading and his eyes were wet.

-I'll go to the village. People are organising a parade to celebrate the victory. I'll bring the kids with me.-

-Only Antonino e Clara, not the little ones- Giulia said worried.

-It is a memorable day, people will remember it forever. Why you don't want them to come? The whole village will be there...-

-That's why- she reiterated – they could get lost

-I'll be happy to come- Ada said, the lump in her throat was loosening up and was giving way to an anxiety that she could only get rid of by doing something.

-What about you?- Giovanni asked the others.

-I'd rather stay at home- Giulia replied.

-So do I- Maria added.

They got ready and they got on the buggy. The children felt the excitement in the air and were waving little paper flags that the twins had coloured, crammed on the seat, one on top of the other. They headed off all excited to the village full of the joys of spring, where everyone was celebrating in the streets and the local marching band was playing the royal march, which now was the National anthem.

They got there just on time to see the parade arriving. Clara and Antonino jumped off the buggy and ran under the makeshift stage, where the authorities could praise in turns the great deeds of the Italian troops. The marching band would play national anthems in between the various speeches. Everybody clapped their hands when they heard the pretentious sound of the words Nation and Italy.

To be free to run round among the crowds would excite the little ones who were chasing one another boisterously making the most of the general leeway. The old veterans were waving the flags and women were hugging happily. Agnese and Luciano would have liked to follow their siblings but Ada's hands held them tight. She would often stumble when one would pull from one side and the other from the other side. That would go on until with a tug she would put an end to all that. Giovanni had moved away and was involved in a heated conversation in the middle of the square with a group of men.

When the parade broke down in a shouting crowd, Ada went over to him and asked him to go home. She felt tired and the November stinging and damp air convinced her to go back home despite the celebrations were still going on, worried that the little ones could get sick.

They went back home despite the children were complaining and unhappy to go home, the day should have been endless for them.

Ada was complaining about a bad headache and said that she would go to bed while everyone else had a load of things to do.

The following morning she did not get up, her headache was worse and she also had a little temperature. They forbid the children to go into her room, making sure they would not make too much noise. They were used to be told – Don't make too much noise, auntie Ada is not well- so they decided to do quieter activities on that day.

Over the next few days her health condition got worse. The temperature was higher and she was complaining of pains in her joints. She had shivers and no cover would keep her warm.

They sent for the doctor. After visiting her, dr Marinucci went downstairs to the kitchen and was visibly concerned.

-Giovanni , I am sorry, but I fear that she has the Spanish flu- he said sorrowful- I thought that the epidemic was nearly gone, that the worse was over, but there are still some sick people in the village and I really believe that Ada is one of these-

Everybody feared this news and they were speechless.

-The Spanish flu? Are you sure doctor?-

-I fear so. I saw too many of these cases-

-What can we do?- Giovanni asked with a sigh.

-Give her quinine morning and night. Hopefully it won't be as infective as it was at the beginning-

-What about the children? – Giulia asked.

- It is pointless to take them somewhere else. The chance to get infected is everywhere. Try to keep them far from their aunt and often ventilate the rooms. There's nothing else that you can do. I'll come back tomorrow to see her again-

Giovanni took the doctor to the door, leaving the women in their silence.

-You know it better than me- he said to him when they were on the doorstep- don't keep your hopes high. I have recently seen very young and extremely healthy people die in a few days. That is the last tragic consequence of the war. This is probably the war we fought at home. Come on, I'll see you tomorrow.-

They shook hands. Giovanni was sick with worry. Dr Marinucci saw him and his children being born, he was an old doctor who had carried out his job with dignity, and suffered with the limited means that medicine would offer at the time. In those few words he could sense the tiredness and the despondency of a person who can't cope anymore with all the pains and sufferings he had been experiencing over the years plus he was getting older and everything was becoming too much and was pushing him to retire.

The epidemic had been terrible and had infected children, young people and old people. The death toll was huge and in the village there were no more coffins to bury them. The dead bodies were brought to the graveyard on a cart and buried underground. It had been like a horrible axe on the population already tired down by years of war. Whole families had been destroyed. Only a few weeks before, two very young sisters had died within a few days' time; the mother's grieving, among many other people's, had particularly upset the whole village.

Giovanni's mind was crossed by these thoughts and their burden seemed to drop on his shoulders all of a sudden. He fought with himself to try and keep them at bay and get back a little hope to let him give reassurance to the others once back in the house.

1 Chapter X

Ada

The next few days the women were going back and forth to nurse the patient.

Ada's condition was getting worse. The very high fever did not give her a break and in a short while her prosperous body had become so thin that it was hard to recognise it. Lucia had been called in to help with the family chores. She looked after the little ones taking them outside even if the days were now quite cold. Antonino and Clara were aware of what was going on and were just carrying on quietly, the twins were quick to shake off the sadness that they could feel within the house walls. Once they were out, they would play happily without any worry. Lucia used to bring Andrea along when she got some work at the Barrieri's because she did not have anyone to leave him with so they three of them would play happily together. In the evening, all the time spent playing in the open air would make them more tired than usual and they were sent to bed very early.

During the night the women would take turns to look after the sick woman. They tried to alleviate her suffering placing some damp cloths on her forehead. The temperature was so high and in the last few days her rasping breathing seemed to fill the whole house.

Ada's death left a great void as usually unexpected death do and everything felt really unbelievable. What happened, unexpected and tragic at the same time, got the adults to live with the thought of how life was precarious. This feeling along with the tiredness and bewilderment, would make them feel out of energy. Giovanni was walking around the house and could not decide when to get back to work, Maria seemed to have aged, within those few days, quiet and skinny in her black dress.

Giulia was in control of the situation and was hiding behind a painful and efficient silence. When she realised that there was nothing they could do, she had immediately changed her attitude. Without wasting time in commiserations, she organised the family life to try and cope better in those stormy days. She would talk very little and she would be there day and night for the sick woman tirelessly. Maria and the rest would follow her instructions, like sailors who, in dangerous situations, see their captain as the only person to put their full trust in and not someone who just give orders.

The children reacted differently to the news about the death. Antonino cried for quite a while and lost in his suffering, he had sought shelter in his mummy and aunt's arms. He had never got into her room and he did not want to see when she was dead. Clara had kept aside. She did not ask for updates. She would look around quietly, then she would spend whole afternoons locked up in her room, forgotten by everybody and just get out when her brother would come in to her looking for company and consolation and they would go downstairs together to eat. When her father asked her if she wanted to say her last goodbye to her auntie, she said yes. They held hands and she went over to the bed where Ada's lifeless body was resting, dressed as she had seen her on special occasions, with the black shawl over her head that she wore in the church and the rosary beads in between her fingers. She looked at her for long and thought that she seemed to be made of wax, her thin nose and her plump body, always willing to give a warm hug, now still and cold. She felt the distance and Giovanni felt her little hand in his shaken by a nervous tremor. He put his arm around her shoulders and held her in the attempt to shelter her from that sorrow that for the first time, without any tears, was shaking her soul. She got her to leave the room holding her tight to her leg and she could not the warm smell that was comforting her greatly.

1 Chapter XI

Worries

There were not many people at the funeral. People were afraid to get infected and many people did not get back from the war. In the church there were especially the women who sat in the front seats, they were dressed in black with big dark head scarves which were covering their hair. Few men were standing at the bottom of the church, with their hats in their hands. Rudi arrived before the coffin was taken out of the house. He got the news when he was still at Fosco's where he had stopped a few days after the end of the war. He left right away and his friend did not want to leave him alone and went with him to Viterbo.

Giulia met him at the door.

-Rudi..you got back in time...-

Giulia...-

They held each other tight, in silence, and for a moment she thought that he was not the young man who left a few years before.

-I brought Fosco with me... I was in his house...the headquarters told me the news while I was there...I had given them his address...-

-Very good... we did not know how to contact you and...-

-Giovanni...-Rudi went over to his brother-in-law who was coming down the stairs of the bedrooms and their handshake was so meaningful that no words needed to be spoken.

-Are the children and Maria well?-

-Yes, they are fine – Giulia replied- They have already gone to the church. We did not want them to see-

- Good idea, much better this way...Sorry Giovanni, I have not introduced Fosco Frizmajer to you yet....

Slightly aside Fosco was watching the scene as a viewer waiting to be a part of. All wrapped up in his long black coat looked taller and thinner. The handshake with his bony hand while they were

being introduced seemed strong and sincere to Giovanni. Giulia sensed his enquiring look when he bend down to greet her.

In the church the nieces and nephews would have wanted to go to Rudi and Antonino smiled and a sudden joy went through his eyes. His auntie's look was quite enough to discourage him to do anything.

In the evening they all sat around the table. The children went straight to bed because they were exhausted with all the grief and the toil of a long day. The three men sat down to talk while Giulia and Maria tidied up the kitchen.

Fosco had been quiet during most of the dinner, almost sorry to have slipped in that private situation of family grieving. However, Rudi and Giovanni managed to involve him in their conversation and just then Giulia had stopped to analyse him. During the meal she felt a bit embarrassed every time she felt he was staring at each of them, unintentional violation of the family intimacy. She did not sense a superficial curiosity of a stranger but the desire to get down into each of them, almost as if he wanted to get a confirmation of a previous belief.

Maria had an ashen complexion and her black dress highlighted the paleness of her face. She shut herself away, isolated from the others, searching her sister-in-law with her eyes to get instructions as what needed to be done. Nothing that was being said forced its way through her pain.

-We'll go upstairs, if you don't mind- Giulia spoke for the two of them. Fosco stood up to greet them and everybody wished good night, after days of hard work.

As soon as the men were left alone in the big kitchen now quiet, the tone of their conversation changed, as if up to that moment they wanted to shelter the women from all their worries.

After a moment of silence, Giovanni said almost under his breath

-What do people say in Milan about this armistice?-

-Well... at the moment people are just enthusiastic about the end of the war- Rudi replied.

-Yes, that's right. At Villa Giusti a long nightmare has ended-

-We should get ready for big changes – Fosco said.

-What do you mean? What changes? Haven't we experienced enough of them? - Giovanni turned to the young man who suddenly looked more alert and austere.

-We won't be the same any longer. I am not talking about us who experienced the war in the barricades, but about the whole society-

-I was actually thinking we were liberating Trento and Trieste... - Rudi spoke softly

-Many other young men thought the same as you- Giovanni replied, almost as if he was trying to comfort him.

-Nobody, whether they wanted the war or not, would have ever thought that it was going to be so huge. That has never been one in history. Millions of dead people...millions...you know, millions of dead people and disabled people- Fosco seemed to be talking to himself- The United States which entered a European war with all their economic power...such different worlds that come close. I wonder what consequences there will be...-

-And what about what happened in Russia? What a great revolution we experienced!- Rudi added

-The truth is that not just three years went by, but a century...-

-This big upheaval will change the way people saw the world, it will change our lives ..maybe you are not so aware here in the village...for you life has stayed the same and the war has only brought sorrows, without changing things too much. In the cities however it was very different. Many women did men's jobs and we can't go back. This and much more will get our values and habits to change...-

Giovanni listened quietly. The two young men seemed to understand that that was only the beginning of a new world, new and full of unfamiliar situations. He felt almost old. Not so much old but he felt he was holding on to a time that was not going to be the same and would have easily got

out of his hands. He saw his children in an unknown future and, like every father, he was afraid he could not protect them as he would have wanted.

Rudi and Fosco left again after a few days. Rudi had now decided to move to Milano. Fosco would help him get a job for his newspaper.

1 Chapter XII

1919

Fosco's flat was small and always untidy. Plates and glasses would easily fill up suddenly the kitchen, which you could access climbing two steps. The desk was packed with pieces of papers, it was huge as compared to the rest of the furniture, it had been moved under the window of the sitting room and now the bed for the new guest had taken its place. Fosco insisted on giving him the only bedroom because he did not sleep that much

-You see, with all the mess that's around here, you are running the risk that during the night, in the darkness, I can fall on top of you. You are safer there. -

Rudi did not accept.

As a matter of fact, Fosco did sleep very little. During the hottest evenings he would look outside the window for hours smoking, watching the night life in Milan where now and again a drunkard would fall down to the ground quietly by a lamp post and tried hard to get back up mumbling meaningless sentences. Women with flashy clothes showing a low-cut neckline would pass by laughing far too merrily, wrapped around men of any age who would stop to hug them with lust and kiss them on the neck. To Fosco was enough a gesture, a word pronounced in the quietness of the night to be able to imagine the lives of unknown passers-by, follow their thoughts and their habits to the squalor of their houses or to the respectable routine of a bourgeois life.

The whispers of the city at night, mixed with the dampness, would get into the room and would fill it with a strange sadness which blended with the smoke of the cigarettes. That went on until the malaise that took over him was almost unbearable. He then closed the window to keep it outside.

Only at daybreak the city started to change. The doors of the house opened and closed quietly. Men and women would go out lazily to go to work, doing one another's chores which could not even thought of before the war. People who knew one another greeted with a nod of their heads, the others would pass by without looking at one another, still thinking about their bed and their sleep. Often that was the time when Fosco would go to bed, and then wake up a short time after, rested as if he had slept all night. Sometimes dawn would come all of a sudden, as by surprise, and he was busy writing.

Rudi got to know him and did have the intention to get him to change his habits. That's why they decided to bring another table in the bedroom so that it could be Fosco's new desk, where to spend his long sleepless nights.

Fosco did not have to insist too much to get his friend employed by the same newspaper. It was necessary to have young people willing to follow the fast events which were troubling the city. Rudi introduced himself as a young man suitable to follow the city news section. He was out and about with the new job. In the evening, when he got home they commented together on the daily events, more and more concerned about the feeling of distress which could be felt in the city

-Today I saw a group of women who were demonstrating outside a bakery. They were screaming that the bread can't be four times more expensive than a few months ago. The baker got scared and locked up the shop-

-Since the end of the war, life has become more difficult. After the peace, life has not gone back to normal as we hoped. Too much discontent, too many promised that have not been kept. I fear that this situation will lead to the worse-

-No matter where you go, there are groups of people who talk about wages going down, the cost of living has gone up enormously, new taxes on the way and those who are back from the front after a long time do not have a job anymore-

-We must expect many and new social changes, Rudi, many and new-

-Yesterday I went past the headquarters of that new movement.

-Which one?-

-The Italian fascist movement-

-Have you seen anything unusual?-

-No, but I had the impression that contrapositions between different movements will not fail to show up soon-

-If acceptable solutions for everyone are not found soon, if this discontentment is underestimated, I am afraid that there will be serious consequences to face-

In Milan, industry and agricultural workers along with retailers would get together more and more often to express their difficulties that the government seemed to ignore. Virtually every day there were riots which were more or less violent among groups of nationalist and socialist rioters. There were numerous parades and political meetings which easily ended up violently and the population, from the richest to the poorest, lived in a state of great distress, in the cities as well as all over Italy.

Fosco and Rudi got up early. The mid-April light was just about peeping through the windows. It was going to be a long and busy day. That morning a general strike was scheduled by the Socialist Party after the riots with the police occurred two days before. A worker died and a few others had got injured.

Fosco was standing beside the cooker making a very strong coffee, the first one of a long series.

-I am concerned- Rudi said – All it takes is for the wrong bunch of people to join the parade for everything to degenerate.-

-With what is going on daily in the city, it is really very worrying- Fosco replied tightening too much the coffee maker. He managed to find a bagful of real coffee, instead of that stuff that people had been using for years now. The morning preparation was very accurate, virtually meticulous. To They kept silent, deep in their thoughts, listening to the sound of the water that was starting to boil. Fosco accurately turned the coffee maker around. Rudi smiled at his great commitment. A lovely smell of coffee all over the kitchen.

-Do you think that the nationalists will give up their demonstration against the official one?

-I don't think so- Fosco replied – the parade was cancelled but I fear that not everybody is in agreement. I believe someone will demonstrate anyway. It won't be easy to keep under control the most riotous ones among the socialists-

More silence in the room. Staring at the empty cups, the two friends sat still deep in their thoughts.

Fosco was the first one to break his inner monologue

-Where is the newsroom sending you today? - he asked

-I'll be in the city centre keeping an eye on people's state of mind ... what about you? -

-I'm going to the Arena to a political meeting-

-Shall we meet up at the newsroom headquarters tonight? -

-We'll stay up till late tonight... -

-Yes, we'll stay up till late tonight- Rudi replied.

1 Chapter XIII

At the newsroom

What Fosco and Rudi feared was true.

Despite the speakers pleading to end the political meeting peacefully, an extremist fringe had headed off to the city centre.

Rudi was at Piazza del Duomo when the first nationalists arrived. They were mainly young students and army cadets who were getting agitated trying to understand what they could do. The police was keeping an eye on them trying to avoid aggressive actions. The group went ahead. Rudi

followed it all along the way. At Piazza Cavour other protesters joined in. The most rowdy people were shouting –To the Duomo , to the Duomo- and all the people were restless not knowing exactly what was going on.

One of his colleagues got scared by what was happening and warned him that a group of socialist protesters was about to get there too.

-They are coming, they are coming- he shouted all excited.

-Who?-

-The other ones, the other ones...-

-Where?-

-Over there, over there, from Via Mercanti...-

It was happening what Rudi feared. The police themselves, despite all their efforts, did not manage to break up the protesters. The clash was inevitable .

Truncheons, rocks and gunshots left several wounded and a dead person on the ground. Rudi was trying to keep at a distance without missing out the events.

At the end of the toughest clashes, the nationalists won but people were not satisfied and the bustling crowd headed off this time to the newsroom headquarters Rudi and Fosco worked for.

What happened inside and outside the newsroom headquarters was just horrible. Journalists found it difficult themselves to report what happened.

Only the day after the two young men realised the dreadful mess that they had made: they used the clubs and flammable liquids to destroy everything.

Back at home Giovanni read the news on the newspaper. Before breaking it to the family, he tried to get in touch with Rudi. That was the only way to reassure Giulia completely.

Rudi himself contacted him on a public phone. After reassuring him that he was fine, they agreed that he would have written a letter explaining all the events he had witnessed.

The series of news that referred daily to these kinds of events started to worry Giovanni.

In the village too there were some small groups of people with a different views that were expressing their dissatisfaction but the disagreements never went beyond the mere oral level. After Ada's death, the family life got its routine made of daily events related to work and some little worries. Violent riots like what happened in Milan did not predict anything good. The worries about the future for everyone added onto the distress of everyday life.

Rudi's letter arrived. He wrote about the newsroom headquarters could carry on its work among many difficulties, about how worried he was about the events happening in the city where the Arditi* formation of the shock troops, led by Benito Mussolini, was becoming more and more popular..

*Note: Arditi was the name adopted by the Royal Italian Army elite special force of WW1

1 Chapter XIV

1925

Giulia up before dawn and was busy around the kitchen trying to be as quiet as possible. Everybody was still asleep. It was Sunday and there was no school for the children. They could stay in bed for a couple of hours.

School.

She was smiling thinking about how Antonino put up with it. In a few months' time he was going to sit his final diploma exam and his torture would be over. The high school years had been really hard for him, he carried out his duty only because he knew he had to and he did not dare to rebel against it but he would grab any chance he had to get away from it. She saw him coming down from his room with an angry face every time he had spent time just to do his homework and come back cheerful and full of energy from a day at the land, doing the heady jobs of the adults. She would have liked to lift him from that commitment forced on him by the family. Every time he would go

up the stairs, with a long face, with his books and copy books to lock himself into his room to study, she would find any excuse to go in and talk to him or bring him a piece of cake.

Clara seemed to be bothered by her rare intrusions. School had always been a pastime for her. She learnt quickly and she was able to carry out any task quickly and at the best of her abilities. Giulia went up with an excuse just to check on her, to see how she spent her time.

Every time she went into her room, she was reading the books that she borrowed from the school library and she would ask the same question every time:

-Clara, would you like anything?- and the same answer followed

-No, thank you, I'll be down in a minute.-

Their relationship had not improved. Giulia saw her grow up with the pride of a mother for her daughter who was more beautiful every day and with the worry that there was this invisible obstacle which did not let her and nobody else get in to get to the bottom of her thoughts. The relationship with her father was her favourite like when she was small but Giovanni's look had changed too. She was sixteen now and Clara was too big now for the complicity they had when she was a child. He wanted to protect her still, he would look at her when she was not looking and was overwhelmed by fear and jealousy for her. Antonino now would make her often laugh with his spontaneity. He had kept with her, and with everybody else, a cheerful and straightforward he relationship. Given the fact that he was older and stronger, when he was close to her, he would tease her with little punches and gentle pushes which would make her sway, and then he would whisper in her ear:

-Can you write the composition for me for tomorrow?-

-No, do it yourself!-

Being taller, he would hold her tight by her waist from behind and would lift her off the ground, begging her:

-Please, please, I beg you... -to the point that he would make her laugh, forcing her to give in to him.

Clara was very patient with the twins. Agnese and Luciano had kept their exclusive relationship growing up which would make them into a specific unit, but now Agnese, who was a teenager now, was often looking for her sister's company. She was happy when she could spare some of her time for her.

-Good morning Giulia-

Maria's voice, even though it was quite soft, gave her a start.

-Good morning. Already up?... You should have rested a little longer

.Is everybody asleep?

-It's Sunday today, there's no school-

-That's right, right...it's Sunday today...we have to make fresh pasta then...-

-Yes, we'll do it in a minute. Don't worry, there is still plenty of time.-

Maria was not the same anymore after Ada's death. Her lean body had slightly bent over as if the weight caused by that sorrow was too big for her shoulders. The expression of her face had changed most of all. She seemed to have lost those little convictions which had always kept her going and now she depended totally on Giulia for everything. She waited trustfully for Giulia's instructions, looking at her like a child looks at his teacher before starting a test, in order to start diligently to carry out the task she had been given, quietly. She answered the questions that she was asked, and would never express her own opinion or jump into the conversation of her own accord. Only Antonino with his little jokes and Agnese who would kiss her on the cheek from time to time and would call her auntie, were able to make her smile. Despite being much younger than her, Giulia considered her now like a daughter in need of continuous guidelines. It was just dawn when at the bottom of the driveway showed up a person wrapped up in a dark shawl. She was walking fast, almost running, holding the shawl around her waist with her crossed arms. Giulia stopped to look at her with apprehension because

she was not expecting anyone at that time of the morning and feared some bad news on the way. She got nearer and she saw that it was Lucia.

Since Ada died, Lucia was working there every morning. Giulia and Maria needed some help and Lucia had virtually grown up in their house, working in the fields or helping with little jobs. She was so tiny and yet she would work very hard, she was careful and helpful, always grateful to those who helped her overcome the continuous worry about the daily survival. She lived with her son Andrea, proud to have been able to give him a better life than hers. With great sacrifices, she got him to go to school until he was 14, when his peers, who often were completely illiterate, were forced since they were very young, to follow the adults to work in the fields, whether it was hot or cold. She raised him very well, he was serious and helpful. During his summer holidays he was the first one to go to the fields to work and if he noticed that she was more tired, she would hurry to finish off his task to go and help her, no matter if the August sun was very hot.

-Lucia is coming...so early...how come?-

Giulia was thinking loud while she was looking out the window. Maria looked out the window too and she felt distressed as she did for the slightest unexpected event, she followed her sister-in-law who had gone to open the door before Lucia had arrived.

-Good morning madam-

Giulia had told her many times not to call her with that epithet but she had realized that Lucia herself was more at her ease keeping up a respectful relationship

-How come you are here so early? Did anything happened?-

Lucia's lean and austere face was anxious and frightened. She took her by the arm and brought her quietly into the kitchen. She sat and felt that the two women were giving her inquisitive and worried looks

-Something happened tonight...- she said

-What?-

.-A very bad thing-

-Right, but what happened....- Giulia's mind went over every possible situation and stopped over a terrible thought

-No, no, madams, it is not Andrea, no...- she prayed almost speechless

-They broke into the doctor's house...-

-It's not Andrea, it's not Andrea- was the only thing she could think of, relieved by the biggest burden

-What doctor.. Marinucci?...-

-Yes, dr Marinucci-

-Who broke into the house, Lucia, ...please say something-

-Them... the fascists... they knocked down the door... they beat up the doctor and before going they set fire to his surgery-

Giovanni, alarmed by the unusual sounds, had come down and heard everything from the stairs

-What?- he said turning to Lucia even though he understood everything perfectly well Giulia answered- They got into Marinucci's...-

-How is the doctor? - he interrupted her

-I haven't seen him. Andrea with Cencio della Menna and Carlone went into his house to help him. They said that he had a split lip and was complaining.-

-I'll go to see him- Giovanni said, and he was out the house in a flash-

-Be careful, please.-

The words which were repeated many times did not even reach him.

When he got back, he was nearly lunchtime.

Giulia heard the buggy coming back before she could actually see it. She had been waiting all morning to hear that sound, carrying on with her daily routine, constantly looking at the window. The children could sense her tension but only Antonino had dared to ask for an explanation of the situation:

-Is there something wrong, mum?-

She told him what she knew

-I'll go to the village- it was his reaction.

-You are not going anywhere-

Her reply was authoritative and she would not accept any answer on his part. Antonino understood that if he had insisted, he would have only make that matter worse.

The horse trotting got them all to run out of the house. Andrea also came with Giovanni. The boy looked really scared whereas Giovanni looked worried.

-Well...how is dr Marinucci...what happened...?-

-Dr Marinucci is in bed. He got a great fright and he is in pain. He was attacked around two in the morning. He said he heard somebody knocking hard at the door, he got up thinking that someone was not well and he saw four men he did not know. They pushed him inside the house and started kicking and punching him, shouting:

-You are a bloody subversive, you are going to get it now- they left him on the ground, he was bewildered. He heard them going downstairs in his surgery. They smashed everything then they set fire to it and run away. Luckily enough, all the commotion woke Carlone up who lives nearby. He dashed over and managed to put the fire out, then he called Andrea and Cencio to get some help to put the doctor to bed.

-Why did they do it? Dr Marinucci is an old man who lives on his own and has always been good to everybody. Nobody hates him in the village-

He was so upset he could hardly speak and Giulia was speaking nervously crumpling her apron with her hands.

-Giulia, Giulia- Giovanni said with a tone of desperation in his voice – being good or bad does not mean anything anymore...I don't even know what is important anymore....do you get it?... What is considered important? –

Nobody could answer that question.

Over the next few days the doctor seemed to recover. He managed to get up and sit in the armchair beside the bed for a while. He was more and more withdrawn, he did not say anything, not a word to accuse his attackers nor to thank who had been by his side, his eyes staring down as to try and forget the world around him.

He passed away this way, in a disheartened silence that not even all the memories of his life could make it better.

It occurred that dr Marinucci was in touch with a long-standing school friend in Rome with whom he had a fraternal friendship. He was a high valued university professor who refused to join the political party and was not behind in showing his open criticism towards the new exceptional laws approved by the regime. He was now so close to his retirement so he was lifted from position so he left university but was still against the system. He had been threatened many times, he would let off all his anger and disappointment speaking with his old mate, in person or over the phone, but he did not realise that he was being monitored. That was dr Marinucci's fault: to share the ideas and the actions with whom dared to be against them.

Giovanni now knew that all the phone lines, all the public places were being tapped and that they had to be informed about all of the few private subscribers, who they were, how they behaved and what political party they were a member of.

The grief for the death of dr Marinucci, with whom they had shared many joys and concerns, was amplified by the concern. They had a phone now in the house. Giulia had insisted to get one - ...this way Rudi can contact us as he wishes from Milan-. What was considered a real technological

miracle was now considered as a danger, also because Rudi did not hide his clear opposition to the regime.

1 Chapter XV

In Milan

- From now on we must be more careful-

-More careful to what, Rudi, to what we write? To what we listen to? To how we speak? To what we think? – Fosco was talking angrily

-No ...no...I did not mean that...I was saying... watch our backs more carefully...-

-Actually don't you think that what happened could mark a turning point, which should encourage us to take actions in a different way, to take part more directly to the events and not just write about them? –

-Fosco, why don't you think that it is not enough? Isn't that already a way to fight? Isn't that too an action that we take?-

The two friends were sitting at the usual family-run restaurant and were talking under their breaths. They had chosen a table far from everyone, a small table for two close to the wall, as far as possible from the few customers. They were waiting for Totò to drop over the food. Fosco's face showed worry, his eyes were staring at the tablecloth. With his elbows on the table, he kept his hands together in front of his mouth and the words were coming out with difficulty, as a result of some thoughts long brewed in his mind.

-I don't know, Fosco, I don't know...- Rudi went on- I think you are right...probably it is not enough anymore just to state that you are against...maybe it is necessary to take actions against...-

-Rudi listen...- All of a sudden Fosco's face lit up and he bent his torso over to be closer to his friend. -Listen –he said again- Over the last few days we have seen a change in the society.... An improvement.... A degeneration .. for some people it is , for other people it isn't... I don't know, it depends...what I know anyway is that some people want to destroy what I think because they fear it and if they do, it is because in their worlds there is no space for everyone, but just for some people. What happened this morning at the newsroom headquarters make me scared for me, for you but the threat that is on us scares me the most because it doesn't give me any certainty about the future.-

Rudi was listening quietly with his arms crossed on the table and his hands in a fist. He saw Totò coming out of the kitchen and he gave him a quick smile.

-Here is your food, enjoy it-. The innkeeper's face, which was cheerful and friendly, dispersed Fosco's thoughts for a moment and he sat up on his chair and acknowledged the hot food with a - Thank you, Totò'-

They ate in silence for a few minutes, they poured some wine into their glasses, then Fosco went on talking:

-Did you get what I mean?-

-I got it and I know that you are right...I can see that the situation is getting worse every day... now those who are against are afraid to end up like Matteotti so many people leave....-

-That's what they want! Chasing us away, get us to be quiet! That skull we found this morning printed on the door of the newsroom means exactly this: be careful, you are being watched and your lives are not that worthy for us! They want our silence, the silence or the subservient assent of the press!-

-What else can we do other than keep on defending ourselves?-

-They won't let us do that, you'll see. It's too easy for them. How long do you think we can still go on? Shortly they will force us to be quiet as they have already done with the others and then the battle will be lost forever-

Rudi looked at his friend with apprehension and after a short hesitation, he said:

-What are you going to do?-

Fosco went quiet. He ate very little. He pushed the plate away to the middle of the table, he drank a sip of wine, keeping his eyes down

-I don't know, I don't know exactly yet. I need to think it over...I need to think it over...- he whispered.

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