

ROBERTA MEZZABARBA
**THE LONG SHADOW
OF A DREAM**



Roberta Mezzabarba

The Long Shadow Of A Dream

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

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The night that Greta thought of the opportunity to turn her life around, a strong and icy wind from the north was lashing the sea, she could still remember it. she made her mind up: she was going to run away. Thus begins "The long shadow of a dream", lives intertwining, pride, recurring stories, emotions and passions... destinies. Greta is a girl who decides to take her life in her hands but then realizes that she has never really broken away from her native land; she understands that a wound to be truly healed must be painfully cleaned up to get to the heart of the problem. You need to go to hell and back in order to see the sky again. Of course, nothing will ever be the same again, but this is the way to go if you want to live and not exist. These are the strengths of this novel, it is well-structured, and easy to read. A romantic novel which is not too romantic. It conceals countless ideas which are open to a number of interpretations, but which is above all the analysis of a man seen as a human being, at the mercy of an unpredictable life.

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This is a work of fantasy. Names, characters, places and events are imaginary or used in a fictitious key and any reference to people, living or dead, to facts or to truly existing places is purely random

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Roberta Mezzabarba

The long shadow

of a dream

Novel

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For my grandmother Giacinta

- now just a sweet memory -

who taught me not to give up.

Never

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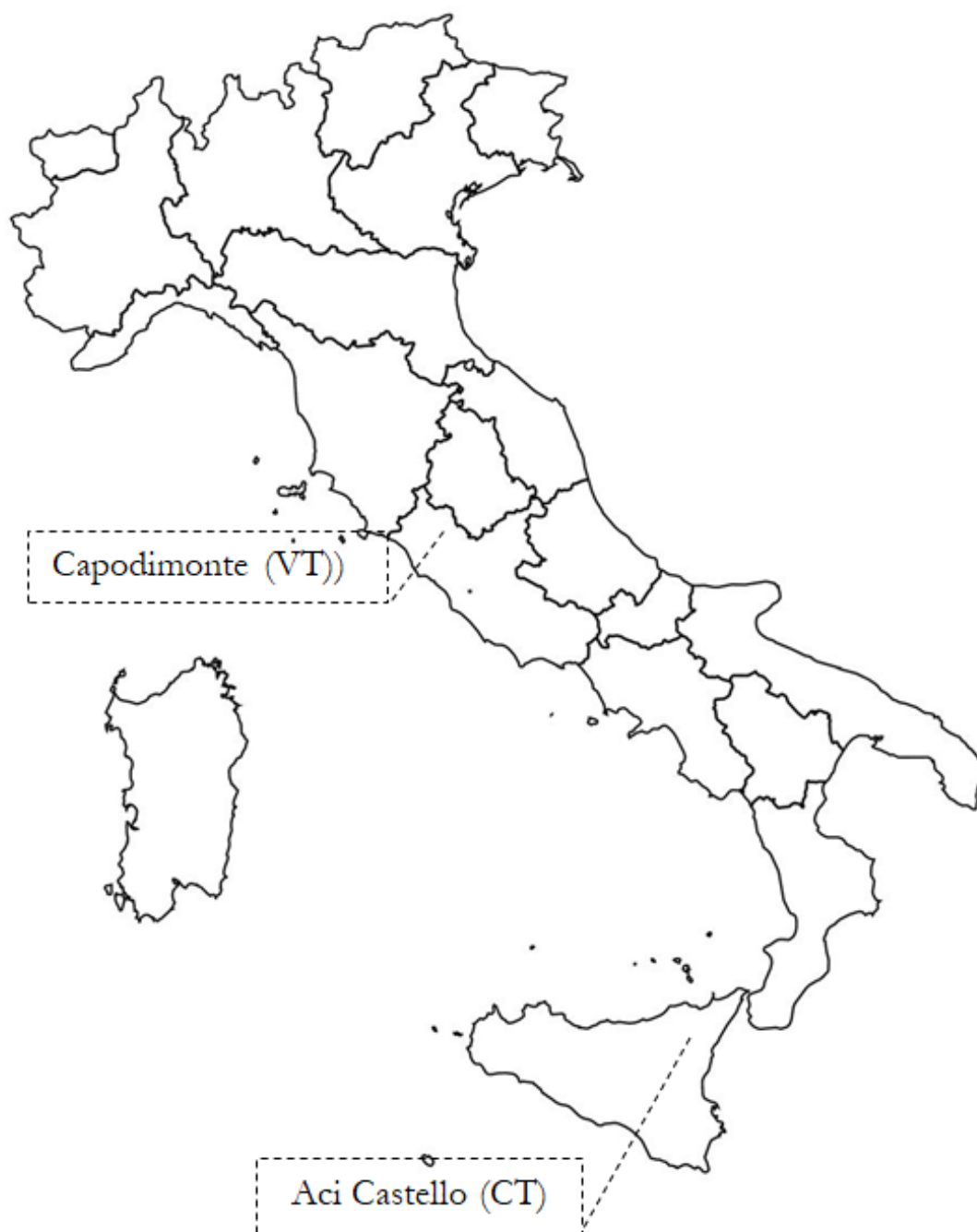
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The places of the novel



PREFACE

Greta could still remember that the night that she made the decision to turn her life around, the sea was lashed by a strong and icy wind from the north. She needed to get a grip of her life.

She had made her mind up: she was going to run away.

There were only waves in the darkness, looking like white and foamy tongues, trying to break up the calmness of that dark blue expanse of water. They were moving faster and faster as if willing to smack the dark rocks of that stony bay overhanging the water.

The thick vegetation was scattered on the shore and was fluttering like nymphs with green hair ruffled by a bothersome wind.

When Greta was a little girl, she used to hide in there so many times. It was in that heaven that she could make a strong and soothing connection with her wilder side. She felt so far away from the rest of the world that was around her, yet the pain was so strong that she could not feel anything else.

She was probably detached from the rest of the world since she was a child, detached from what people felt it was right... and now, after such a long time, she was more and more convinced that she should have kept her distance from what was around her. Too often if we are too close to someone or too open, that can make us weak and helpless to judge and fight against what causes us harm.

When she was a little girl, she liked to fantasize, her look was lost in the dark blue colour of the sea: she dreamed of being a princess locked up by a wicked witch. She held on only because she was waiting for her prince to come and rescue her on his white horse.

It was probably chasing that dream, which had become really exasperating, that had deeply changed her life.

Now that she was alone again, really alone, she bitterly realised that. Now that she did not even have the strength to put together the pieces of her life, debris that were gathering around her, moments which were lost forever. The shadow that had blocked off the sun was right in front of her.

The long shadow of a dream.

PART ONE

“Why man boast of sensibilities superior
to those apparent in the brute?
It only renders them more necessary beings.
If our impulses were confined to hunger,
thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free;
but now we are moved by every wind that blows
and a chance word or scene that
that word may convey to us.”
(Mary Shelley)

1.

Greta was sitting on the steps leading to the Duomo but it was getting late now. She would stay there forever to admire the double-arched windows of the Papal Palace, especially at sunset, when the red sun would make their fine design look even thinner. At first glance, they might have looked like valuable intaglio carvings, done by delicate hands of skilled embroiderers, but actually they were the fruit of the work of strong and meticulous mighty arms and experienced fingers of stonecutters from Viterbo who with their expertise, were able to master the apparent hardness of the *peperino*¹ stone giving it the shape they wanted.

Everything was magic in those moments.

Greta had been working in Viterbo for the last five years as the secretary of a notary public. She loved that adoptive town, the little streets of the old part of the town paved with *sampietrini*², the fountains in every square, *profferli*³. She loved the peaceful atmosphere that you would get in the countryside areas which were not too far from the town. Despite it all, as a real Sicilian woman, she could not keep away from the water, the element that she loved the most and was essential for her life. After running away from Aci Castello, she had lived in Rome for a short period of time, where she worked in a fast food restaurant, then she went looking for a quieter place. She got a place in Capodimonte, a little town fairly close to Viterbo, on the Bolsena lake. That beautiful lake, with its two islands looking like two watchmen, had caught her attention from the first time, casting a spell on her right away.

It was getting late. It was time for Greta to go home. Before doing that, though, she needed to drop in at notary De Fusco, her employer, to collect some paperwork that she had to hand over to the owner of one of the two islands of the Bolsena lake, the Bisentina island. She was excited because the next day she was going to go to that island by boat. It had sparked interest in her since the first time she saw it; she was going to see for herself if what she heard about it was true.

Notary De Fusco was a plump man, in his sixties, with little hair and a blank look, he would take his job very seriously, but certainly he was not a cheerful person. "He was a good man," thought Greta "but he was afraid of his own shadow and that was maybe his bigger flaw".

Greta remembered when a few years back, browsing through a local newspaper looking for a job, in the ads section, she was amazed to see how short his message was "*Reliability and willingness to work. That's what I am looking for*".

He was just like this.

«Now Greta, that's the plan. Tomorrow morning you will meet up with Principe del Drago. I have already made arrangements with that fisherman and you will go in his boat. You will read the sales deed page by page to him, you will get him to sign them, you will give him a copy, and you will bring one copy back. Please be kind, but not obsequious, excessive mannerism is not good in such situations.»

He had been telling Greta this three or four times already, what to do and how to deal with these matters that she knew so well. He was visibly nervous because he wanted this deal to be successful: to him the fact that a big landowner as Principe del Drago had chosen him among all the notary public in the area to settle his real estate business, surely was a reason for pride, especially as regards to those colleagues who, as he used to say when he was in a friendly mood, would consider work only as a way to earn a living.

Greta got out of the front door of the big building where her office was, with a considerable pile of documents inside a black leather briefcase that the notary public had lent her for the occasion. The fresh air accompanied her to the bus stop, like a loyal friend would have done, ready to listen to what happened to her during the day which was just gone.

* * *

When she eventually got out of the bus, the sun had just gone down and was replaced by a light reddish colour that reflected shadows the colour of blood on the lake. It looked as if it was wounded by the wake left by some isolated boat of fishermen back from putting the nets down: the two islands stood out against the horizon so dark as the night.

The Strongholds of Capodimonte, which overlooked the lake from the small peninsula where there was the oldest part of the town, stood out with its magnificent polygonal shape. The wood all around the strongholds, with its fresh and shiny magnolias, palm trees and pink oleanders, was surely designed to virtually shorten the height of the big spurts that were supporting it, however it made the whole view of the strongholds far more beautiful, even from a distance. Greta set off home thinking about the first time she visited that big building: she remembered the courtyard with its doors, his windows, with the triple loggia designed by Sangallo, she remembered the upper apartments where you could get access to from a *cordona*⁴ which was probably used in the old times by horses too, she remembered long, straight and dark sets of stairs. There was not a soul in the old strongholds, and even if the bright colours of the lake were overflowing from every window and from every crevice, you could only feel sadness coming from the walls that once saw the prestige and the splendor of noble lineage which were now just experiencing years of solitude.

Despite her melancholic memories, Greta could only think about the day after, when she could go to the Bisentina Island at last; a tiny piece of land, yet so charming.

She kept looking at the lake, while going up the steep hill paved with grey *sampietrini*, leading to the upper part of the town, where she lived. Greta knew so well the steep and windy little lanes with stairs everywhere, little walls, arch buttresses with houses built with the local dark stone, with dark entrance halls or brightened up by the redness given by plain patchings with bricks. She knew the smell of thousands of vases and cooking pots stacked with herbs and flowers on the small windows, or left to beautify some small tabernacle at the corners of the houses. All of a sudden, resurfacing from that hydillic view, she felt someone approaching her whose shadow was getting longer beside hers.

«Good evening Greta, you are back really late tonight. You work too much.»

An open smile, surrounded by countless tiny wrinkles on a face burnt by the sun: this was Greta's neighbour, Giacomo, the old fisherman.

«Holy smoke, Giacomo, you gave me a start! I was wondering who that was at this time of the evening... My head is up in the clouds tonight, I can picture myself already sailing the lake.»

They walked ahead for some time, side by side, without saying a word, deep in their thoughts, Greta was holding tight in her right hand, her briefcase packed with papers, Giacomo had a basket full of early produce coming from his vegetable garden: tapered carrots, red and juicy tomatoes, yellow potatoes, pink and velvety peaches and eggs, still warm. On top of the vegetables, Giacomo had placed a bunch of flowers, artistically held together by a twisted twig: colourful zinnias, delicate asters and just blossomed gladiola. They got to the little square; Giacomo wanted to give Greta that basket with the vegetables, but the girl never wanted to take anything from him because she felt already very grateful to him to let a stranger rent his lovely little place for an extra nothing.

«I'd be glad if you accepted this... this basket, Greta. It is about time you try the vegetables I grow. I beg you, I live on my own and I am always left with too much of them. It is no bother to me, it would be a pleasure indeed.»

«Alright Giacomo, I accept your gift with great pleasure provided that you will come for dinner at my place tonight. I am sure that with all this bonanza, even a disaster in the kitchen like me will manage to make a mouthwatering meal.»

Greta was feeling a little sad over the last few days and sharing the dinner with that cheerful old man would do her good.

Greta got down to work in the kitchen, and in just over one hour the food was ready and the table was set for two: it felt strange to share the table with somebody else, after almost six years of loneliness. She came out of the door to call her neighbour.

She felt happy.

Giacomo was the grandfather she never had the chance to meet. He dressed up for the occasion, with a waistcoat underneath his blazer and he had even greased his hair.

They sat at the table and they both felt a little uneasy: Greta made a potato omelette, a tomato and carrot salad, and a peach salad. She also made sure she had a jug full of water with flowers in the middle of the table. Giacomo ate everything up: he hadn't shared the table with somebody in a very long time. He told Greta with tears in his eyes that his wife had died twenty years before of tuberculosis. "He must have been really close to his wife" thought Greta, while Giacomo was talking about her describing her good heart, staring somewhere in front of him.

For a moment the girl's thoughts went beyond time and space, taking her back to her beloved Sicily, rekindling in her the longing to go back there. Even though it was just a flash which sparkled in her black eyes, Giacomo did not miss it.

«You are not really happy, are you? I have seen you smiling so rarely... when you do, you look so beautiful.»

Greta looked down, she blushed and her chickbones turned red. It was true, she was not happy at all.

She could not get any peace within herself, not even in those quiet days: surely it would be easier not to think about what had happened, the best thing to do was to let time go by and hope to forget, to forget about everything and go back to the way she was, the girl who was going to University in Catania, the girl who did not even know who Alberto was.

There was no other solution.

Everything would pass, but how long would it take?

2.

The next morning Greta got up early and walked along the lakefront for almost two kilometres, until the time to get on the boat. It was June and the sun had just risen. It was already shining in between the leafy branches full of shoots of the ancient elms, with their gigantic trunks and foliage, lined up in pair as if to escort her on her way.

She was putting one foot in front of the other but her eyes could not stop looking at that island which she was going to visit shortly and seemed so wild.

In the peacefulness given by that rose-coloured sunrise, she thought of night before, she felt so happy spending some time with Giacomo. For a moment, thanks to that lovely old man, she remembered what it meant to share a roof with other people. She also felt homesick, and this feeling was so strong that she could still feel it in her bones. She was frightened even thinking about it, having to face what she had run away from, following a decision made on the spur of the moment.

* * *

At eight o'clock sharp Greta was already at the little port of Capodimonte. Standing on the pier, she was holding on to her black briefcase really tight, as if it was her only pass to have access to paradise. She was looking at the little boats moored at the pier. She was thinking that after her journey on the ferry leaving Sicily, she did not have the chance to sail. She got back to reality because she heard some steps behind her.

A long-limbed boy was walking in her direction, biting hard into an apple.

«Morning Miss. I am Ernesto, and I am here to take you to the Bisentina island. If it is okay with you, I would like to leave straightaway.»

Just like old Giacomo, he had a tanned face, where two brownish/greenish eyes stood out.

Greta did not say a word. The boatman did not wait for her answer and was already on board of the little white speedboat and was busy with the ropes which kept it moored to the pier. Still standing on the pier, with her briefcase in her right hand, Greta was looking at the hands of the stranger, his strong arms, his sturdy shoulders. Ernesto turned around suddenly to look at her: the sun shining behind his back outlined his lean body. The girl could meet those eyes again: he was lending her a hand smiling, trying to help her inside the boat, as if to reassure her. Greta grabbed it and enjoyed the dry heat and the tight grip.

She was on board of a boat again.

She was looking under the keel of the little boat and she was amazed at the vegetation that was slowly fluttering under the water. It looked like an underwater forest, submerged under the depths of the lake. Ernesto noticed that she was very interested in that strange vegetation and rushed in giving her an explanation, even if she had not asked anything yet.

«There are many plants that proliferate in the waters of the lake. There are *graminaccio*, *scopuccia* and *pugnatella*⁵ which, just like some women, are thorny and fragile at the same time. Unfortunately today it is not possible to see *loglia* and *moracia* because they only grow in spring. *Loglia* comes out of the water to expose its little spikes to the sun, as a mother would do with her little ones. *Moracia* does the same with her leafy branches which have a blue green colour, and its flowers are red but it is a real miracle if you can find it.»

«I have never seen anything like it... do these plants only grow in shallow water?»

«Certainly not. I heard that *crepitaia* grows in the deepest seabeds, so much so that when fishermen like myself, find torn net threads, we understand that we have gone beyond the fishing area.»

The two youths were united by the water, which made them feel at their ease: they could understand each other talking about the water, it felt as if they had known each other for a long time. Ernesto was leering at Greta with her hair down that the wind was ruffling with its numerous fingers.

A light breeze was rippling the lake and the waves were crashing against the bow which sounded like gentle slaps.

Just a little offshore Greta could at last discover how big the lake was. She read on a book that the rings of hills was more than forty kilometres long. It was amazing how huge it was.

«Is it true that the Bolsena Lake is the biggest volcanic lake in Europe?» Greta was eager to know.

«Sure, it is true, but don't think that just one volcano could have such a big crater. Some scientists believe that, and it seems to be true, that at least three craters close together created all the dips and the winding in the area. Do you know that the deepest part of the lake is in between the two islands and that it is nearly one hundred and fifty metres deep? Higher than the dome of St Peter's» said Ernesto so seriously, proud of all his knowledge.

Greta was amazed at the great deal of things that that sun-tanned boy knew.

The waves that rippled the water of the lake broke down into a myriad of smaller waves which were crushed by the bow of the boat, which reminded Greta of the sound of hands clapping.

The island was getting closer and closer.

It was either the swinging of the boat on the water or the swinging of the waves or maybe the swinging of the trees on the shore that gave Greta the illusion that the island was coming nearer to the boat, as if to fulfil her longing to get to know it.

Sailing ahead Greta saw a majestic and picturesque cupola among the thick woodland. They arrived.

Ernesto drove the speedboat among a multitude of low bamboo sticks emerging from the water, which crakled with the boat sailing through them to get to a canal leading to the small harbour in the island: it was sheltered by a liberty style canopy which came from the International Exhibition in Turin back in 1911.

Greta was finally there.

Ernesto had already slipped out of the boat, fastening his moorings to the little pier. While helping Greta out of the boat, he made sure that she was okay after the journey. He said, smiling to her:

«Miss, when you want to go back, I will be here waiting for you.»

She had just set foot on the ground of the Bisentina island, and she could already feel the blood boiling in her veins: her memories of being an islander herself came back to her and made her feel alive and brand new.

To think of herself on a piece of land surrounded by water, gave her such a thrill.

All the trees were enjoying the scented breeze coming from the lake, a scent of crystal-clear water and resin. Her eyes could see bushes in bloom, colourful butterflies and cheerful birds chirping everywhere.

With all that going on in her head, Greta did not see a refined man, wearing a red livery who was probably waiting for her.

«You must be Miss Greta Capua, the secretary of Mr De Fusco. Follow me, please, the Prince is already waiting for you at the villa.»

Greta noticed that he sounded very distant but she justified him right away in her mind thinking that his master would not allow him to socialize with his guests.

Without even waiting for her acknowledgement, the butler set off on the grassy ground, with his shiny shoes, turning on the left. Once they went past the high bush of the bay tree, a vast Italian garden appeared to their sight: it was rectangular-shaped and was divided into three sections, each of them had a central part surrounded by box flower beds. Beyond the high hedge of the bay tree, there was a very green lawn, delimited by a little wood of alders and tall poplars. Further ahead Greta saw the monastery that had been turned into a villa without making too many changes to it. She read about its bare walls, small doors and windows in a few books at the municipal library in Viterbo. S.

Giacomo and Cristoforo Church was the main church of the island and was located next to the villa. It had a simple structure but was magnificent at the same time. A few art enthusiasts see a sobriety and temperance that Vignola then lost. The church had a latin-cross plan with three altars in the upper arms; where they joined together, an octagonal dome rose up, covered with lead slabs on the outside.

A group of old pine trees stood out in front of this majestic building and down below, in between the century-old trunks, the lake was shining in silence.

Greta turned around and saw a great big lawn sloping slightly, where people said that hares and pheasants poliferated. At that sight, she felt a strong urge to wander around the island, she felt the need to dream without searching for anything, nor to know anything about the history or the art on the island.

She just wanted to dream about her own island, without having to think of anything else.

However, the butler's slightly annoyed voice brought her back to reality, she seemed to be daydreaming the whole time. She was reminded of the papers that the Prince was to sign. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with air and forced herself to think about work , nothing else.

She was still thinking about that when a man in his forties was walking in her direction, after petting the big head on a gigantic St Bernard (his name was Gino, as she later found out). The man was wearing a blue blazer and a perfectly done tie with a snow white shirt. In the meantime, the butler headed back to the villa after taking another good look at her.

«Welcome Miss Capua, my humble dwelling is not worthy of your beauty.»

His voice was mellow, each of the words he said seemed to reproduce the notes of a sweet melody. The Prince Fieschi Ravaschieri del Drago was a real noble man, Greta was impressed right away, well before he raised his right hand gesturing a gentlemanly kiss on the hand.

She blushed.

«I am very happy to meet you, Prince, notary De Fusco sends his regards. I brought with me the sales deeds that we will read together. If you are happy with everything, you will sigh them. I will give you one copy and I will take one with me to be registered at the land registry office.»

Greta said the whole sentence without taking one single breath, looking in the eyes the man who was standing in front of her. He felt a little jealous of him because he owned an island: being able to have a place that she could call her own would be her biggest dream, can you just imagine if that was an island...

«It is a beautiful day today and I do not want to bring you inside the gloomy walls of my dwelling. I would like to go to the beach, where none of my butlers can disturb us.»

Greta nodded as if she was bewitched by the voice of that charmer.

The went past the weeping willows, the scented bay trees, the elms, the white poplars whose swaying branches were making a sound as far as the group of alders which followed the shore, almost plunging their roots into the water. Some of those trees were so bent over the lake as to nearly wet their branches and leaves. The silence was broken only by the frogs' rare and uneven croaking among the reeds.

In the shade of that paradise there was a round table made of stone and four small stools. They sat down.

* * *

The Prince put back his fountain pen after signing the papers that Greta was turning almost without looking, she knew them so well.

«Our duty is done now, don't you think that we deserve a tour of the island?»

Greta couldn't ask for anything better, and told the Prince that she had always been fascinated by the island since the very first time she arrived in Capodimonte.

The doors of that magnificent temple of nature and art were about to open right in front of Greta who realised that her dreams were about to come true.

* * *

Ernesto was lying on the pier while waiting. He had a blade of grass in between his lips which left a tangy taste in his mouth.

He was thinking about Greta. Strange girl.

She looks so introvert at first but she is so chatty when there is water around. She is eager to get news and information, like a child, but extremely beautiful despite her flamboyant simplicity.

Her eyes were so dark, as black as the night, as deep as the lake.

3.

Greta and the Prince moved away from the little table that was used to settle the last details of the notary's deeds and went back to the villa. It was shaded and scented by the fragrant smell of the linden trees, pine trees, mimosas, would waft in the air, it was time for lunch. The Prince insisted on Greta to have lunch with him. In the afternoon, they would go for a tour of the island as promised.

The girl was torn: from one hand she wanted to see the island so much, thinking that such an opportunity would have hardly come by again in her whole life, from the other hand she feared she would not make a good impression of herself accepting an invitation for lunch from a complete stranger. However, making a good impression had never been her strongest point.

She accepted the invitation.

The Prince went into the villa to attend to something. While waiting for him, she saw some branches of a shrub called "*Christ's thorn*" sticking out of the roof of the villa: they climbed from the door of what once was the dining hall as far as the top of the villa, to enjoy the view that must have been magnificent from that height.

On that little island there were all kinds of flowers, Greta noticed that the roses had withered unfortunately. Probably they would have been everywhere in May, with their colourful and scented corollas, gathered in bushes, lined up as hedges, climbing on walls, on tree trunks or pergolas. The person who planted them in such a large quantity surely thought that the wind could carry their scent as far as the shores in Capodimonte or Marta.

Greta wandered around the villa and reached the ruins of the sixteenth-century cloister: the five arcades on each side of the quadrangular plan, were covered too by a beautiful blanket of wisteria, jasmine and honeysuckle. Not too far, next to the pine trees and the cedar trees, stood out probably the most popular tree of the island: a huge plane tree, tall, rugged, old and knobby. Even though it was supported up by sticks, his branches were stretching out over the shore as if to provide it with a cool shade as a good father would do. That old tree had lived for four centuries, four centuries of silent and incomprehensible conversations with the lake, its only and immortal friend.

Looking at the lake reminded Greta of Ernesto who was waiting for her with his little white speedboat moored at the island pier, to take her back ashore. She should tell him about the change of plans right away, apologise to him and possibly ask the Prince to invite him for lunch too. It was very impolite of her to forget completely about that boy who had been really kind and eager to tell her all about the Lake and the islands.

She was disappointed that he could not join them in the tour of the island scheduled for the afternoon to see all those wonders hidden by all the vegetation. She felt she owed that boy something after taking her there, letting her live that dream.

The Prince was coming out of his dwelling again and Greta walked towards him with her face all red due to the heat of the midday sun, and she asked him:

«Prince, I would like to go down to the pier to let my boatman know that I will stay until the afternoon. I would love to invite him to have lunch with us, if you don't mind, he has been so kind to me.»

In saying these words Greta was wondering why she was so interested in that young fisherman...

«Certainly. I will send Gastone down straightaway to tell the fisherman. I am sure that there will be a seat for him at the table of the servants. Now if you could please follow me, I have arranged for a table to be set for us in the shade of the great plane tree.»

The Prince did not like to be contradicted so Greta did not show her disappointment for the fact that Ernesto could not sit at their table but was sent to be with the servants of the island.

A few minutes after that, Ernesto was climbing back the shore from the little harbour leading to the villa: as soon as he got to the open space where Greta and the Prince were already sitting at

their table, he headed for the two of them but the butler, was quick to explain that he was not invited to sit at the table of the Prince but he was to eat with the servants of the island.

«Well, I go back to my boat if his majesty the Prince Fieschi Ravaschieri del Drago does not want me at his table. My question is though: what is the reason why he called me here? Did he want me to eat his leftovers? No, thank you. Thank you so much, but I prefer by far to stay in my boat and wait in the shade of his trees which don't take any offence to provide some shade to an honest worker.»

Ernesto spoke quite loud so that his words could reach the table where Greta and the owner of the island were sitting. Therefore he headed back the same way he had just come up a few minutes before, gazing at the girl and meeting her eyes which were looking intensely at him, even if from afar.

While going from the sunny open space to the shade of the grassy lane leading to the pier, he felt a quiver running through his whole body. He was happy to see Greta showing disappointment for the Prince: he was convinced that if it was for her, the three of them would have sat at that table.

* * *

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. A few cicadas were chirruping, whereas Greta and the Prince had already gone for the tour of the island. The Prince started off by saying that Cardinal Farnese, who later became Pope Pius III, after the construction of St. James and St. Christopher's Church on the Bisentina island, granted the worshippers who visited the island's religious halls, the same indulgence that were granted to those visiting churches in Rome or in its whereabouts. This particular indulgence, hunting that was quite widespread at the time on the island and the charm of uncontaminated nature, made this little piece of land quite famous under the rule of the Farnese family, so much so that these noble men chose it to house their family sepulchres, to enjoy the peace and the beauty of the place. While talking, they got to the big rock that makes up the sharpest westerly tip of the Bisentina island: this tiny piece of land was surrounded by a little temple built in honor of S. Caterina, known as *la Rocchina*⁶. The Prince recounted that several men dug with a pickaxe the underlying cliff to make a wide enough passage, which is quite picturesque, for those who sail around the island with their boats. On the right-hand side, the bare walls of the cliff were overlooking the lake, whereas the top was covered with a great amount of trees on the left-hand side that descended into the lake rushing like an avalanche.

«It is said that *la Rocchina* was given this name because it was built on the ruins of a small fortress, or because it was located right opposite *la Strongholds* in Capodimonte, or because its plan was similar to the one that *la Strongholds* has. This little temple is tiny but so perfect, it is unique in its simplicity.»

The Prince clearly loved that little oratorio; Greta found it adorable too. They came down the *Rocchina* promontory, then Greta followed the Prince climbing up, this time, the steep path leading to Mount Tabor where they came across Mount Calvary oratory⁷, also known as the Crucifix. It had the forest in the front and the cliff at the back, bare, dark, with patches of lichens, rust coloured moss whose redness seemed to deliberately clash with the emerald green water covered up by its shadow, cast in the afternoon sun. The little Crucifix Church was just a plain cell with a gabled roof which extended over, in the front part, to make up some kind of a vestibule supported by a big arch.

«You see, Miss Capua, below the Crucifix, the cliff goes straight down, going a little inwards indeed, you can still see the marks of the chisels used to get the stone for the construction of *la Rocchina* that we have just seen and of the main church, the one next to the villa. You just need to go a little further, towards the more northerly tip of the island, to find huge pieces of rock which came off the declivous cliff spontaneously, which rolled down the sloped back of the island and stopped at some level, almost by some miracle.»

Greta was looking towards the water from the top of that cliff and was scared that the rock she was standing on could collapse into the water, mixed with the pleasure she got from getting to know all those details, gave her such a big thrill that she nearly forgot what happened over their lunch with Ernesto, who was furious and reproached the Prince for letting the butler invite him to sit at the table

with the other servants. They went on with their tour to find the chapel of Pope Gregory. Up further they got to Mount Tabor oratory, also known as Transfiguration.

* * *

«This little temple,» explained the Prince to Greta «bore this name in memory of Mount Tabor in Galilee where the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ took place, which is actually the theme of the fresco painted inside the cell. Mount Tabor oratorio was built in the highest part of the island and it connects with two little temples which we have not seen yet. The way to get to them goes down from one end and goes up from the other. I read in some document that it was possible to have the third part of your sins forgiven if you visited this little temple on July 11th and on August 6th. It is such a shame that today is not one of those dates, don't you think?»

The Prince was glad that Greta appreciated all his explanations which he was quite happy to share, sometimes maybe too scholarly and boring, but she did not seem to mind too much, she was so eager to learn, to know, to see for herself what she had read on dusty books written by people dead and buried.

After a quick stop, they set off on their walk and they saw the fifth oratorio, the chapel of Mount Olive grove, also known as Prayer in the Vegetable Garden or Christ praying in the vegetable garden.

«Can you see these dilapidated walls, above that man made clearing which are embedded in the *tufos* rock on three sides? That is the oratorio dedicated to St. Francis. It was probably built on *Grottascura*⁹ rocky cove to make an obvious connection to the spot on Mount Verna where St. Francis received stigmata. Time back here in *Grottascura*, there was a real cave, which then collapsed, where fishermen sheltered from the deceitful southerly winds. It is really gorgeous, isn't it?»

To the west of the island, there was the Promontory of the Gypsy, also known as Promontory of Lion because it was close to a rock spur on the lake, where a westward lion's face was carved. Among formidable groups of oak trees and beech trees, they found the last oratorio, in honor of St. Concordia.

The tour was coming to an end.

The Prince was watching Greta who was eager to take everything in with her dark eyes, fascinated by each and every grain of soil she was walking on. The journey back to the villa was still quite long so the Prince decided to play games with Greta's imagination, telling her quite a peculiar story.

«A guy by the name of Mery, better known as a famous French writer of the first half of the nineteenth century, invented a story set, I wonder why, right on the Bisentina island. I am going to tell you about it now.»

Her interlocutor paused, smiling, before going on with his story. Greta felt she was being watched, as if the Prince wanted to see her reaction to his words.

«Once upon a time there was a Count of Bolsena who was quite ambitious. He used to gather the adherents of a sect on the Bisentina island, and using magic and sorcery, was trying to find out the secret of immortality. A guy by the name of Viterbese lived in the island too. He stated that a few years from then he would have been able to reveal that secret the Count of Bolsena cared for more than anything else in the world. The story goes that one day the Viterbese took two children, a little boy of five, and a little girl of three, and he locked them up in two different wonderful gardens on the Bisentina island. These children grew up without anyone around apart from the man and the woman who respectively brought them up and took care of all their needs, without saying a word. One day the two youths met: they did not know how to speak but they managed to understand each other. They fell in love and did what Adam and Eve did in identical circumstances. The Viterbese found out that they had sinned, he killed them and then killed himself after having told the adherents of his sect that whoever had drunk their blood, mixed with wine, would have received the gift of immortality. The Count of Bolsena, longing to become immortal, drank some of it but he was intoxicated and died.»

* * *

The sky was changing its colour, going from a clear light blue colour in the afternoon to a rose colour. Ernesto was looking at Capodimonte in the distance, recognizing its contour.

He was waiting.

He was waiting for Greta. Like in a dream, she came down the grassy lane with the sun turning red at her back, with her right hand clenched to her black leather briefcase, the butler was escorting her, holding his usual upright posture, meticulous and unemotional. Ernesto thought how drab the life of that man was.

«Now, Miss Capua, safe journey back to mainland. Goodbye.»

«Farewell Gastone» whispered Greta and she turned around to see the island at dusk.

Ernesto jumped into the boat and quietly helped Greta get a seat on the speedboat. He felt her dark eyes searching for God knows what. He could feel them gazing through his blonde curls like long slender fingers, among the creases of his shirt burned by the sun: he could feel her routing in his thoughts as if she could catch one and was frantically looking for it.

He started off the engine, and the tension almost vanished: only then he could look up at Greta. He could not find the words to describe the expression on her face nor could he ever see the same expression on anyone else's face. She looked happy but at the same time the pain was visible in her eyes with invisible and painful tears rolling down her face: hidden memories. She was looking at him but seemed to look beyond him, through his human dimension, in order to find one that was completely unknown to him.

Suddenly Ernesto remembered the rose that he had picked, probably it was the last one on the island of the spring blooming. It had a dark red colour which turned almost black in some veinings.

He showed it to Greta.

«It's for you, Greta. The last scarlet rose of the year... its colour is as dark as your eyes, its scent is as exciting as your laughs.»

Ernesto stopped. He wanted to say many more words.

Silence filled the air when Greta reached out to take the flower. She brought it to her nostrils and looked up at Ernesto.

«I'll nurture it, like one of the most beautiful memories of this magic day where I rediscovered a lot of things about me, which I thought they were lost.»

Greta's heart was heavy.

They had already sailed away from the island which was getting smaller and smaller down to the size Greta was used to see it. She knew that from that day on, she would not look at it with the same eyes.

Never again.

4.

Giacomo was on his doorstep when Greta came back from her tour to the Bisentina island.

A look was enough for the old fisherman to understand that for the girl that day meant more than a simple job appointment: she was strolling, sniffing a rose that she had in her hand, as if she was getting rid of all the energy given to her by her thoughts.

As a matter of fact, she was thinking: she was thinking about Ernesto and about the words he had used to say goodbye to her:

«If you like, I can take you to the Martana island one of these days. We won't be able to have the speedboat for the day but I am sure that you won't regret it.»

She did not give an answer to that invitation nor did he expect to have one.

He was an intelligent young man. Greta felt strange emotions inside, locked in the darkest corner of her soul for years now, however the strangest thing in all these feelings was that she did not feel any dislike for Ernesto, as she usually would feel for all the other boys who showed some interest in her, after Alberto.

Looking in Giacomo's direction, Greta quickly waved at him, as if to say that she did not feel like getting into any conversation that evening. She went into her house, walking listlessly. Time went slowly during the pitch dark night and the dawn when Greta kept asking herself so many questions. She was tossing and turning in her bed haunted by many questions: *“Was it fair to let a stranger get so close to her? What was happening to her? Was it dangerous if she let herself go?”*

All she could feel, as a matter of fact, was a strong desire to see that fisherman again.

The sun was already high in the sky when Greta got up tired from her bed. The dark boats of the fishermen were already sailing on the silver lake, Ernesto was probably with them.

The bus Greta used every morning to go to work, that morning, was lit up by the dazzling sunlight, on and off, while riding fast the deserted streets and still half asleep from the night before. Greta was slowly getting back to reality, but she was left with a burden on her heart. Touring the island reawakened in her the desire to go back to her beloved Sicily, a thorny desire which scared her a little, but she could not repress it. Such a long time had gone by since she left, and too many times she had pretended to have no connections with that island and its inhabitants. How could she even think that her grandmother, the only person left of his family, could accept her after six years?

After all, over that period of time, none of the two bothered to look for the one other, apart from a couple of times, but with such a coldness which made them two strangers more than grandmother and granddaughter.

Probably that longing would disappear, as it happened before. Greta longed to feel that quiver which she felt when walking on an island, she strongly felt that urge.

She was going to visit Isola Martana with Ernesto.

She had made her decision.

* * *

The Notary De Fusco was enthusiastic about the job that Greta did. Although he managed to conceal the sense of satisfaction he felt to have closed that business deal in such a splendid manner, he had words of praise for Greta.

«Greta, you are really a worthy colleague. You know how to do your job and above all you are very good at dealing with people. I am really happy to have you by my side. Now we can treat ourselves to a toast for the success of our work; in the meantime, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear something about the Bisentina island. I heard it's an enchanting place.»

Off they went to the most prestigious Coffee shop in the small town, where the entire upper class from Viterbo goes there. They sat at a table with a long yellow tablecloth. She thought that the Notary looked really different, almost cheerful. With great pleasure, Greta told the man who

was sitting in front of her, in great detail, about her short time on that island that looked so wild compared to mainland but it kept , virtually hidden from prying eyes by the thick vegetation, a suggestiveness and a beauty which are both quite rare. She told him about the monastery which was turned into a villa, about the church housing the Farnese family tombs, about the Prince's sincere nobility, about his kindness. She recounted about the tour to find out the seven small oratory's, spread out in the roughness of that small piece of land, about the daunting cliffs overhanging the water and the centuries-old trees. Greta was speaking with great emphasis about her impressions on the island to the notary who was listening with great interest. While she was talking, she was thinking that that man should go to the island himself because it is not possible to fully recount some things. Greta was told by Prince Giovanni that the island is owned by his family since 1912, when the wife of Duke Enzo Fieschi Ravaschieri of Roccapidemonte, Princess Beatrice Spada Potenziani, bought it. The Duke Enzo, who inspired the character of Andrea Sperelli in "*Il Piacere*" written by D'Annunzio, as soon as he had purchased the island, he got two sentences engraved on the monuments already existent, in memory of the great poet. The first one is on the door of the former monastery, which was turned then into a villa, says "Maybe one day I will bring my spirit there *away from the storm to find peace*" the second one was placed on the boundary wall of the seclusion area "*Oh longed green solitude far from bustling mankind*".

On her part, the princess Beatrice, looked after the island so much that it was restored to its former splendors of the years where the Farnese family considered it the most precious jewel of their dukedom. It is said that in order to eradicate the annoying mosquitoes that proliferated on the Bisentina island, he got the *coregone*¹⁰ imported from northern Europe, which is a species of fish that settled down very well in the Bolsena Lake.

«What about the sailing? How did it go? Did the fisherman who took you behave well?» asked the notary, considering that Greta had not said a word about him.

«It went well, very well...» Greta gave her answer visibly embarrassed.

«We need to drop over to him the money we owe him for ferrying you to the island... if it is not a problem for you. You looked upset when I mentioned his name. Did he by any chance behave improperly with you?»

At times, in some expressions, he was like the father she never had.

«Of course not! I will be delighted to give him the due compensation for his work.»

It was just impossible to hide the slightest thing from that man, he was so sensitive and sharp in grasping other people's feelings.

Yet he was not married. Who knows why?

* * *

Back home in the afternoon, Greta went to the lakefront where the fishermen were fixing the nets and chatting away in small groups, in the cool shade of the big elm trees.

Ernesto was away from the others fixing a big net in the shape of a cone: he was turning his thoughts over in his mind, his hair dishevelled, he was looking down and at times would look up as if looking for something beyond the shade that was protecting him, looking towards the lake.

The water was flowing in the heat and blinding light of the month of July which made him shine like a giant pool of a blue colour. Only some bluish stripes were rippling its surface, stretching as far as the two islands which were standing on the clear surface like weightless multicoloured clouds. The water was flowing calmly while the bells in Capodimonte were striking slowing and gently, the bells from Marta, were striking clearly and loud and you could hear other far away bells echoing in the still air.

Greta's arrival caused some commotion among the fishermen which abruptly stirred Ernesto.

At the very same moment when he looked up to see what was going on, Greta was looking at him.

Their looks were so passionate.

He could not move while she walked past the fishermen who were looking at her.

«I brought you the money for your work. Notary De Fusco is very grateful to you to have taken me to the Bisentina island, and I am very grateful to you for the patience you showed in waiting for me when I went on the tour of the island in the afternoon.»

Greta was talking slowly, her voice was soft and deep. Everyone there was listening to her.

Ernesto took the envelope that Greta was handing over to him, without saying a word, almost frozen with the unexpected emotion rather unhopd for to see her again.

The girl was leaving and had already turned around. All the fishermen, disappointed with how trivial their conversation was, had already got back to their activities.

It was then that Greta, following her wishes, turned around and looked right into Ernesto's eyes and said:

«I'll go with you to the Martana island tomorrow.»

5.

After that quick encounter on the beach with Greta, Ernesto got back quietly to his work, finished fixing the net and disappeared.

Some of the fishermen who were there when they had their strange conversation, were talking about him at the bar, making fun of him.

«That guy, Ernesto, is a real dork. He could not utter a word with that girl. Imagine, she went looking for him, right where he was, on the beach.»

Everybody knew that no woman was allowed in there, only the most daring wives would venture to that place.

«He looked bewitched, did you see him? If I were him, I would have invited her somewhere for sure.»

«What do you know? He has already brought her somewhere... I was told that they spent a whole day on the Bisentina island...»

People were talking as usual, gossiping about the unfortunate people who happened to be the subjects of their conversations.

Ernesto however did not listen to them. He could not have, he was miles away from what was around him. He was far away from that meaningless talk, far away from his mates who did not hear for sure Greta whispering those few words which gave him long quivers. He was happy but could not explain the shadow that clouded Greta's look.

The next day Ernesto did not go to pull in the nets he had cast the night before with his father, as usual, but stayed at home to polish his boat he was going to use to take Greta to the Martana island. That day he was going to be the prince to take her around the island.

The morning went by so slowly, like drops falling one after the other, with the awareness that there will be a great joy at the end of it. He was really fascinated by that girl who appeared to be so hard on the surface but deep down she was quite a sweet person. He had seen her sometime's before taking her to the Bisentina island, getting out of the bus coming from the town or getting some shopping but she was always serious looking and on her own, but he did not know what to make out of her.

He did not understand her desperate call, shouted out so quietly. He did not understand much of it until there was only water around them, everything had become clear. She was quite different from the others. She was different from the women he had met, very few indeed, but they were always so silly...

All he wanted was to get lost in the depth of those eyes and swim in those dark skies, with some scattered stars to light them up, far away looks. He'd like that but he realised that there was some hostility in her, she seems to hide fear of some kind.

But fear of what? Or better... of whom?

* * *

The sun was burning up in the sky: it was high and so powerful; it could give life to nature and at the same time destroy it with its dazzling heat.

The grey pier was hot and virtually burnt and it was from there that Greta saw Ernesto already in his boat, dark-coloured, with a flat bottom, its squared off stern and a mast with a snow white sail hoisted up.

They were near the water again.

Ernesto, with the aid of the oars, managed to come out of the little harbour in Capodimonte, then he released the sail. Past the little peninsula where the centre of the town was, Greta saw in front of her, beyond the water gently rippled by the afternoon breeze, the town of Montefiascone, perched on a little hill, towered by the big dome of S. Margherita's church: she was looking around.

Her eyes were looking at the lake coast, lingering on Bolsena first, to continue then towards Gradoli and Grotte di Castro where the sky, in the distance, seemed to be covered with clouds which were white and fluffy like whipped cream, which were thinning out as far as Valentano, which seemed to pierce the blue sky with its two towers.

Greta felt embarrassed.

She was embarrassed with that silence that she wished was full of thousand words.

Ernesto spoke first.

«You know, Greta, today my father went back home after his fishing and he was furious: the current must have pushed the nets towards *Fittura*, and they tore while he was trying to pull them in. It was quite a bad morning.»

«*Fittura*?» Greta asked listening to her voice which was as if it was coming from someone else.

«We call *Fittura* some sort of a fence under water. I heard that it is made of a lot of wooden poles cut to size with the saw and stuck into the bottom of the lake with a mallet. Some scholars presumed that they could be what was left of a lake village. However this theory did not prove right because looking at *Fittura* more carefully, you could see that it was built on just one line and at the edge of a landslide. It is plausible then to think that it was conceived and built to support a bank.»

«To support a bank under water? What was that for? How could they use a mallet being so deep?»

That sense of uneasiness that there was between the two of them had disappeared quickly without leaving any trace.

«For sure when *Fittura* was built, the level of the lake was by far lower than the current one and then I think that *Fittura*, like many other things that are and will remain at the bottom of the lake, should be wrapped around an aura of mystery.»

The boat was getting closer to the Martana island. The water was quite rough and Ernesto focused on the oars and on the movements associated with that.

Unlike the Bisentina island, the Martana island did not have a little harbour but you could have access to it through a little beach with some dark and coarse sand. Greta was esthetic looking at all the overflowing vegetation coming from everywhere while Ernesto secured the boat to one of the many trees which were all around the shore.

A green lawn surrounded by myriads of large poplars and centuries-old olive trees gave them a nice welcome. In silence Ernesto led Greta to the cliff. Immediately to the right, as soon as the slope began, their eyes glimpsed at the few remains of the Church of the Magdalene: a few pieces were enough to show Greta the beauty that the church must have once had before being destroyed and lying on the ground of the island. Going further uphill, they suddenly passed from the grassy path dotted with large plants of prickly pears and giant agaves to a series of steps carved into the rock, unequal, corroded, broken: that was called the Staircase of the Strongholds. They continued to climb one after the other, talking softly to each other, until they saw a furrow in front of them, almost a wound in the living rock where one day, explained Ernesto, the drawbridge used to be lowered.

«I heard people saying that the first set of walls that enclosed the mountain was supposed to be here. Today only a few square stones are left. Probably the missing pieces were used to make new buildings, including probably the church of the Madonna del Monte, in Marta.»

They walked along, without stopping, beyond the gash of the drawbridge. The broken up steps alternated with the unstable ground. Greta lost her balance, perhaps she put her foot in the wrong place or because of her constantly turning to look around. Ernesto was ready to grab her before she fell. They remained motionless for a few moments, without breathing, then without saying a word he took her hand in his, and they continued walking one beside the other, as if falling together could be somehow more pleasant. Greta followed Ernesto, staring at the strong hand gently holding hers: she imagined that he was carrying her to safety, but she could not understand from what. They continued

going uphill as far as a small hollow in the boulder on their right: the vegetation completely enveloped the arch dug into the rock as if to hide it from prying eyes.

«Greta, this is the entrance to a tunnel that goes down to the shores of the lake.»

In saying this, Ernesto began to make his way among the luxuriant plants that were hanging from the ceiling like so many arms outstretched towards them. He lit a torch to shed some light in the darkness a little, allowing Greta to see the worn out steps where she was putting her feet. The entrance to the tunnel was high and wide, however as it was going down into the bowels of the island it became increasingly narrow and tortuous. They were going down, hands in hands, but when they got down to the bottom, on the verge of going out, on account of the broken steps, and the rocks, which had fallen from the ceiling and the thick vegetation that grew on the site, they were forced to stop a few meters before reaching the lake. The water glistened in the holes, through the crevices of that blocked passage, with their iridescent flicker.

«We made all this effort to only be able to look through the rubble that prevents us from reaching the lake.»

Greta was annoyed and disappointed.

Ernesto let go of her hand, placed the torch he had held in his left hand until then on the ground, and turned to Greta, turning his back on the shimmer of the lake.

She was beautiful. The reflections of the water were playing on her face, among her red cheeks and the dark eyes made almost shining by those flashes. It all seemed so natural to him. He brought his lips to Greta's small and fleshy ones and kissed her. It tasted of rose petals.

She was shocked, but did not withdraw from that unexpected contact: she felt Ernesto's hands caressing her cheeks, her neck, going down on her shoulders and sliding down to her hands, loose along her hips, then, while he was holding them, he saw tears on her face that she quickly managed to dry with the palm of one hand.

The spell was broken, the mystery was dispelled. Greta was once again caught in her feelings.

Ernesto looked at her. He looked at those tearful eyes without finding the strength to ask her what was wrong ...

«I didn't mean to scare you, Greta, sorry, but he was stronger than me... you're so beautiful.»

«No, Ernesto, it's not your fault... it's me... » Greta kept her eyes down « ... I am wrong.»

«Why do you say this? You are a very sweet girl, why are you making these far-fetched accusations?

«No, you would never understand ... let's forget everything and go back to the sunlight. Let's pretend that nothing happened.»

Greta was pleading with Ernesto to stifle that feeling that had now got hold of him. Even if he wanted to, now it would be useless and painful to forget everything.

«I'm sorry, but I can't, I wouldn't be able to. I'd rather you asked me to stop breathing. Greta don't run away, let me ... let me love you ... we are so similar ... don't deprive yourself of what we both want .»

In saying this Ernesto had gently lifted the girl's face.

«I can't, I don't want you to suffer for me, Ernesto.

Try to understand me! »

Greta's voice had become a whisper.

Meanwhile, the sun, reflecting on the lake, continued its flashing games which lit up the cave.

«Do you feel what I feel too? Don't you? »

Greta did not reply, she was just staring at Ernesto's eyes which were desperately searching for positive hint.

«Greta ... do you love me? »

At those words something seemed to stir up the girl. She was sobbing her heart out. He freed her hands from Ernesto's to cover up her face again flooded with tears.

«Greta... »

«Of course I love you ... Yes, Ernesto, I love you.»

This time she brought her face closer to that of the boy: she looked at him for a moment straight in the eyes, then kissed him gently wetting his face with her salty tears.

They hugged.

They remained in each other's arms for an indefinable length of time: Greta felt Ernesto's arms squeezing her deeply against his chest. She heard the distant noise caused by the breaking of the barriers that had kept her so long in that state of proud and stubborn solitude, without doctrines, with nothing to believe in or trust. She felt pain and joy together, she felt a feeling of lightness and at the same time she felt her heart heavy, like a thousand pounds of lead.

* * *

They got back.

After crossing a short field dotted with thistles almost everywhere and sparse olive trees, they reached the top of the mountain that dominated the island, where the second set of walls was located. They found on a large boulder, squared by arms and chisels God knows how long before, what remained of the tower, the fortress, the monastery and the church of S. Stefano. Everything seemed so desolate among those stones covered by those weeds that tried to hide even the last remains of those settlements, but at the same time everything was marvellous: the grey rubble stood out against the dark and gorgeous blue colour of the lake. Some of those pieces leaned over the precipice seventy meters high on the surface of the water, so much so that it seemed that they would slip down that bristling and frightening cliff to disappear in a splash under the deep water.

«You know, Ernesto» Greta broke that silence only broken by the sound of the waters below «I would like to die, now, at this precise moment, falling into the blue waters of the lake, as one of these boulders could do: I am so happy, and I am afraid that everything will change. All the beautiful things in life go by so quickly. I wish everything would remain like this. Forever. Forever .»

Ernesto looked at her: she had such a tiny figure, almost hard to see in the sunlight.

«I don't want you to say these things, not even as a joke. Maybe it's the island that inspires it to you. But don't listen to it. Do you know the story of Amalasunta, queen of the Goths?»

As soon as Ernesto had finished pronouncing those words, a cloud like those ones that were in the sky when they went ashore, covered the sun and blocked it out, as they did with a large stretch of water. In a flash, the island looked like that tragic place because of what happened, which Greta still did not know. A story of legends, tortures, struggles, killings.

«In 526, Theodoric, king of the Goths, who ruled over Italy for thirty-three years, died without leaving a direct heir. He had three daughters from his wedding. The eldest girl Amalasunta was married to a Visigoth. She had a child, Atalarico, who was supposed to take charge of the kingdom because, according to the Gothic law, a kingdom could not be inherited by a woman. In the year when Theodoric died, Atalarico was still a child, and Amalasunta took over the kingdom in place of the boy for almost eight years; then one day Atalarico, who was still not ready to rule a kingdom, died. Amalasunta, then in order not to lose the kingdom she loved so much, offered herself as a bride to the son of one of her father's sisters: Teodato.

He would have come to the throne anyway, but he accepted Amalasunta as a bride anyway, to calm the hearts of the many people who sided with the woman. Teodato was a ruthless man, who cared for nothing else but to make sure he had a peaceful life by surrounding himself with wealth and ease, without worrying about the well-being of his people. Teodato always pretended: he probably would have liked to get rid of Amalasunta as soon as he got married to her, but he thought that it was safer to commit the crime far from the places where she was loved and cared for. So he deceived her and brought her to Tuscany, with the excuse of seeing their possessions, and then went to Rome where she could have expressed the faith that she had always believed in. But Amalasunta never got to Rome: in fact, on a stretch of the road that was going around Lake Bolsena, she was taken out from

the cart that was carrying her, and pushed into a boat that took her to the Martana island, where it is said that she was exiled and then eventually died. Teodato let her live for a short time. It was too dangerous to postpone her killing, not so much because she could ask for help from the Romans, but as for the many Goths who despised Teodato and would think of her with pity being left in a lost island . The way Amalasunta was killed is not very clear, but the legend tells that she was thrown from the top of the cliff on which we are standing now.»

Ernesto finished his story, and Greta was lost in God knows what thoughts: she was thinking about Ernesto, about what he had said to her, she thought about Amalasunta, queen of the Goths, about the stories that were intertwined with those boulders scattered on the ground.

She was wondering how much history those stones could witness.

Surely they knew Amalasunta, and today they had seen Greta surrender for the second time in her life to the sweet and painful delights of her feelings.

6.

The day was coming to an end: the sun now low on the horizon was lighting up the clouds still high in the sky with colorful lights and the emotions going over the two of them like calm, unpredictable and devastating tides. Going down from the top of the mountain, through the stairs carved into the rock, Greta saw some specimens of prickly pear and told Ernesto how gigantic those plants were in Sicily, and what a beautiful scenery they create: in Greta's words there was nostalgia and affection for a land, her own, which she had not seen for nearly six years.

They quickly reached the small boat they had left on the shore, gently lapped by the lake's waters. Ernesto broke away from the shore of the island pushing with an oar to the ground: the lake was slightly rippled by a cool wind that crept annoyingly under their light clothes touching their skin, causing slight chills.

Although it was already late, they decided to go around the island by boat, before returning to the land. The dark cliffs, almost gloomy from which Ernesto kept a distance of fifty meters,

they were going down towards the water, one on top of the other, as if to give the feeling that in a few moments they could slip into the depths of the lake, disappearing as if they had never existed. They got to an easterly tip of the island, they found themselves in front of a block of stone that had slipped and remained out of the water in an almost vertical position.

It looked like a funeral stele.

The inlets carved, with dark shadows, the cliff that rose high in the sky, and with its semicircular shape reminded Greta of a gigantic ruined amphitheater, the only witness to a burnt crater of a volcano. The stones of the tower, and of the several settlements, scattered rubble, which seemed so huge and majestic before from a short distance, they were indeed so far away, on top of that jagged wall, which seemed frightening by the shadow of the night that advanced rapidly. Even Ernesto seemed so distant, from those moments, dripping with night dew. The thought of him was so unreal ... his words were only a faint echo brought by the dark wind of dusk.

Finally they came out of the fearful shadow that the island projected on the lake's waters making them gloomy, to find the sun, the last glimmer of a large orange, which had already coloured the whole sky with a red halo that reflected with vermilion waves on the surface of the lake, as far as the boat and the depth of their hearts.

The late hour and the strange light of the setting sun caused a sense of dismay in their hearts, as if the end was now near, as if the end of that journey could only represent a sad and painful farewell.

* * *

It was now almost dark when Greta, standing on the pier again, waited for Ernesto to finish mooring the boat. The lights came on one at a time, reflecting their glow on the slightly rippled surface of the lake.

She felt embarrassed like the first time she agreed to date Alberto, eight years earlier.

"Alberto".

The thought of him struck her like a slap in the face, reawakening her from her dreams: in a way that day betrayed, even without realizing it, the memory of that love that she had sworn would remain the only one. She had betrayed him by taking Ernesto's curly head in her arms.

This awareness came down on her like the shadow of an unexpected storm.

She was startled when Ernesto squeezed her waist with his strong, muscular and warm arm.

Her dark hair, disheveled by the wind, was moving about before her eyes: he moved it away to see once again that face that stirred so many feelings all together: he would have liked to be able to read in those dark eyes like a moonless night.

«Greta, it's all so strange ... tonight, now, it feels like a farewell, as if we are saying goodbye and never see each other again. The Martana island often causes melancholy in the heart of those who visit it, but tonight I am afraid of what I feel inside ... you are so sad, my love.»

«It's not the Martana islands' fault, it's not your fault... it's me, no matter where I am, I can only cause pain, even to a sweet person like you. There are days when I feel so different from the people around me, that I seem to be like one of those animals that are kept inside the cages, in a circus: a freakshow used to frighten children and to impress adults. I don't know what happens to me, even now, here with you.

I can't understand what I have inside: a hundred, a thousand voices murmur, shout out loud their opinion, their story and I am doomed not to understand anything. Just a lot of confusion, that's all I get. I would like so much that the relaxing sound of the sea that laps the shore or some rocks only at night, could stand above all this.»

Ernesto was speechless.

That girl attracted him so much, but at the same time it was as if she rejected him with all her difficulties, with all her problems that to a normal person could just sound as nonsense. He saw the desperation in the girl's mind, he saw it as light filtering through a crack, he felt it running down the skin like water, he breathed it in the air like incense in the churches, he wanted to escape it like the shadow of a terrible omen.

He held her in his arms.

He kissed her lips gently, then they hugged for a long time, motionless under the moon, an iridescent scythe barely visible in the blue sky surrounded by black clouds.

They said goodbye. From a distance, Ernesto stood watching Greta move forward until she was swallowed up by the shadows of the night, already wondering if that girl had really existed.

Greta got to the front of the door and she hesitated, she didn't want to go into her house: she didn't want to sleep, but above all she didn't want to be alone. Then she knocked lightly on Giacomo's door: she hoped with all her heart that he was still awake.

The door opened with a slight squeak, which echoed in the air of the square until it was completely filled: Giacomo appeared with his dark face, and his snow white eyebrows. They were furrowed, as if to ask Greta the question that his lips would have never afford to say: what was the reason she was there, at that time?

«Giacomo, I need to speak with you. This afternoon I was on the Martana island with that fisherman who had already taken me to the Bisentina island ...»

«You work too hard ... did you have to go now to the Martana island? I have to go and talk to that notary myself .»

The old man interrupted her, to play the situation down: he saw them coming back, he saw them on the pier, he saw the way they hugged. He had probably seen more than Greta herself could understand.

«No, it's not like that, I didn't go there for work, I wish that was the reason, I went with Ernesto to visit the island and ... oh my God, I made a holy mess, a really holy mess! My mother told me, I'm always the same. Giacomo, what should I do? You tell me, what should I do? »

« First of all, come in, and then we'll talk about it. Come on in.»

Greta would have liked to have a peaceful existence so much, perhaps with Ernesto, but she could not even think about it, at least until she managed to shake off the ghosts that constantly besieged her, at every step of her life. Giacomo was right, only that was her real problem.

Greta had already made up her mind. She would leave for Sicily the next morning.

She had a blank sheet of paper in front of her, where she had started writing a letter for Ernesto.

"Dear Ernesto

maybe you were right last night: the Martana island causes really strange thoughts in its visitors, and so it was.

Maybe I was just waiting for an excuse to cling on to, maybe I have been thinking about going back to Sicily for a long time. However, it does not matter how I got to that. I just have to go.

I will take with me the rose you picked on the Bisentina island, and all the things that I discovered and found together with you. I will take them with me in the hope that they will help me overcome all my fears and the ghosts that hide behind them. I will take them with me because one day they will bring me back to you, here, in your heaven...and if one day, near or far, I will come back ... it will be to stay.

I just wish you wouldn't forget me: it would be the greatest pain you could give me. Maybe remember me as a madwoman who ranted about her fears, and the shadows she said she felt inside, but never let other faces stick onto mine, suffocating it.

Sweet ferryman of my most beautiful thoughts, I say goodbye to you, and I will not hold you back any further.

I love you, and will love you forever.

Greta"

She wrote those words quickly, without thinking too much, and without thinking too much about what she was doing.

She should also have written a note for the notary De Fusco: she knew perfectly well that she was behaving once again as unconscious. She was nearly thirty years old, but she felt empty like a newborn baby: all her experiences, her emotions, her past had only passed by her leaving only some faded traces of pain and remorse. She wanted answers and wanted to give them. She knew only too well that only by closing a chapter and returning to a clean page would make it possible to start over.

She didn't know how long it would take to get rid of her dreams, from the fears that had grown inside her, to bleed the poison that was slowly flowing into her veins mixed with blood.

She was not even sure that she would succeed. But it was worth trying.

PART TWO

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