

Around Three O'Clock
Andrej Longo



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Around Three O'Clock	7
Why Would A Poor Man Kill A Rich Man?	13
Not Enough Time to Spit in Somebody's Eye	19
But There Was Something Else I Wanted to Talk to You About	23
Haven't You Heard What's Going On?	29
50,000 Lire for a Blowjob	35
Maria Antonietta	41
The Happiest Day of My Life	51
I'll Take a Flying Leap	59
Pizzeria Tótore	65
What Do We Do Now?	71
Stop Looking at Me or I'll Shoot	77
We Can't Really See Our Way to a Loan Right Now	83
Anyway, It's Not Like Things Could Get Much Worse	91
Lets Call Her Hope	97
The King of Naples	103
Could Be I Get Back There First	109
I Raised My Hand to Wave Goodbye and I Didn't See Him After That	115
I Woke Up in a Puddle of Sweat	117

Around Three O'Clock

Around three o'clock, me, I was in the middle of jerking off. Thinking back on it now, I almost feel guilty. But not that day: That day I was having a fine old time. This was not your usual, get-it-over-with-quick toss, leaning over the toilet bowl or standing in front of the bathroom sink.

No, this was something else entirely.

From the bathroom window of my house you can see into Serena's apartment, straight across the way. I don't know if her name is really Serena. That's what I call her because it's the kind of name that suits her, I think.

Serena, at around three o'clock, was taking a shower.

She'd left the shower curtain open so I could watch.

She knows I watch her. She knows, but she pretends not to.

The first time it happened was six months ago, in March.

It was hot that night, because of the sirocco. I'd taken a shower, then I wrapped a towel around my waist and opened the bathroom window. From the window you could see all the lights of the city. I was leaning out, my arms on the windowsill, looking at the lights down by the railroad yard, when the window opened across the way.

It was her. She was all dolled up like she was getting ready to go out.

She was dressed in black and that red hair of hers was nearly glowing from the reflection of the lights from the pizzeria at the corner, the one that belongs to Tótore.

That was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on this girl with the red hair. It was the first time because, up until a few days before, an old woman lived in that house, all by herself. Every now and then I'd call out a hello to her, and the old lady would raise her hand. Never a smile, though. Just that hand in the air and nothing else. For three years. The old lady must be dead now or else she sold the house or something. Or maybe Serena was her niece or her daughter. How am I supposed to know?

Anyhow, she opened the window and, for a minute, we looked at each other. It's not like we were at it for long—two or three seconds at most. Her with her black dress, me with my towel wrapped around my hips. As normal as that.

We could of smiled at each other or said hello, and that would have been the end of it. But it wasn't like that. She stepped back from the window and went to stand in front of the bathroom mirror. She started putting on her lipstick. Telling it like I am, there was nothing strange about it, nothing special. She was putting on her lipstick and I was watching. End of story. But she knew I was looking at her, and I was convinced she liked having me look.

She put on her lipstick and she left the bathroom, without giving me another glance.

I realized that my dick was hard. I almost felt like laughing because I thought it was so stupid, a fantasy that had turned into some kind of movie in my head.

Anyway, I went into the bedroom and I stretched out on the bed, naked.

"Tonì, dinner's on the table," my wife shouted.

Then, when I didn't show up, she came into the bedroom. I was laying there in the dark.

"Tonì! You deaf?" she asked. She was still completely clueless.

"Turn on the light," I said.

Carmela turned on the light and got an eyeful of hard dick.

She stood there for a minute without saying anything, then she turned out the light and came over to the bed.

I didn't think about Serena anymore after that.

A week later, on a Monday morning, I was shaving. I had the bathroom window open again because the sirocco had decided to stick around like a permanent guest. All of a sudden, the window across the way opened, and there stood Serena in her nightgown. Actually, it wasn't exactly a nightgown. It was one of those short, white ones that are sexier than that. You could tell she'd just gotten out of bed.

A little while later this muscle-bound guy with a black mustache came in, all duded up, carrying a cup of coffee. The way he was acting, he had to be the husband. He put the coffee cup down on the edge of the sink and kissed her on the lips, groping her ass a little while he did it. From the way Serena was rubbing up against him, she must of liked it. But he was in a hurry. He said goodbye and left the bathroom. Serena drank the coffee and then, just like it was nothing, she stripped off that little nightgown or whatever it was she was wearing. I just stood there with my eyes glued to the window. And she, still acting like it didn't mean a thing, slipped into the shower. And I suddenly realized that it was already nine o'clock and I needed to get moving.

Anyway, from that day on it turned into a kind of sickness, and at least a couple of times a week Serena would let me watch. One time, she was spreading some kind of lotion all over her body, one time she was washing her privates on the bidet, one time she was getting undressed, and one time she was even fucking her husband—right there, in front of the open window.

Usually, I just stand there and watch, not doing anything. Then, if there's time, I go fuck Carmela.

Carmela, who isn't exactly stupid, figured something was up, because one day I'd come out of the bathroom with my

business all hard and the next day, nothing. The first few times she asked me some questions, but then she decided to leave it alone because she finds the whole thing kind of a turn on anyway.

And eventually September arrives. It was right around three o'clock. Serena was taking a shower with the curtain open, so I could see. She was rubbing a bar of soap across her front and then behind, all leisurely, which was pretty hot all by itself. Then she got out of the shower and dried off and then after that, still without putting her clothes back on, she sat down on a chair in front of the window and started putting oil on her legs. After a while she stopped and looked over to where I was standing. For the entire six months she had never done that, but now she was definitely looking.

At first I pretended I didn't notice, but she kept on looking. So then I looked back. Without taking her eyes off me, she spread her legs. She open them up just a little at a time until I could finally see the black hair between her thighs.

A minute passed: She sat there with her legs open and didn't do anything. Anything other than look, I mean. I took my shorts off so I was naked, too. Then she ran her tongue across her lips and started stroking herself between her legs. I had my hand on my dick and she had hers between her thighs. It went on like that for a few minutes.

The whole thing was just too damn hot.

Just when we were getting to the good part, I heard Carmela yelling: "Toni, come here, quick. Come see what's happening in America."

Right at the moment, I didn't give a tinker's damn about what was happening in America. All I cared about was not getting there too fast so I could enjoy what was going on a little longer.

"Toni, come quick!" Carmela was hollering.

In her fucking dreams.

One more minute, and then I was there.

Looking at Serena, I got the idea she was there, too.

After a bit I closed the window. I cleaned my dick with toilet paper, I drank a little water, got dressed, and left the bathroom.

Carmela was sitting in front of the television, looking terrified.

“Tonì, look what’s happening”

“What is it?” I said. I wasn’t quite back to myself yet.

“It’s the end of the world, Tonì, the end of the world,” and she made the sign of the cross.

I sat down next to her.

At first I didn’t understand what was going on, because it seemed more like a movie than something that was really happening. But they kept showing the airplanes as they crashed into the towers and two people throwing themselves into the air from the side of the building.

“It’s the end of the world,” Carmela said again.

The only thing in my head at that moment was this: While all those people were dying, I was jerking off.

Why Would A Poor Man Kill A Rich Man?

Ahmed and I were enjoying a healthy pot of mussels in spicy tomato sauce, and on top of that a bottle of Greco di Tufo—just what a meal like that calls for. Later on, we knocked back a limoncello and a cup of coffee. I was having myself a cigarette, at peace with God and the universe, and watching an episode of *Vesuvius Love*.

“What are you wasting your time watching that soap opera for?” Ahmed asked me. He had a sort of disgusted look on his face like a man who’s seen it all, and he was starting to roll himself a joint.

“No one ever smokes a joint in those TV soap operas, do they?” he asked while he rolled.

“What do you mean no one ever smokes a joint?” I said back. “In fact, in the very last episode Maria Antonietta had a joint with her husband after supper.”

“Right, but then she got sick and he had to take her to the hospital,” Ahmed corrected.

“Oh, so now I get it, gué. That means you watch, too,” I said.

“You’re kidding, right?” he answered. “You’re thinking of my sister. She wouldn’t miss an episode even if she was

dead, and every day when I get home she's not happy until she tells me all about it."

"What a pain in the ass," I said. "Excuse me for saying so, but wouldn't she of been better off staying in Africa?"

He lifted a hand, as if to say *you don't know what the hell you're talking about*.

"Anyway, this sister I keep hearing about, I've never even seen her. Are we sure she actually exists?" I said, just to screw with him a little.

"She exists, she exists," he said.

"All these times I had you over for supper and you never brought her even once."

"She had things to do, obviously," he answered.

"And who the hell does she think she is? She the queen of some fucking thing that she's always got such important business to attend to?"

Ahmed didn't say anything. He licked the rolling paper along the edge and zipped the joint closed with his fingers.

"Done?" I asked.

Ahmed still wasn't talking. He put the joint in his mouth, took the lighter off the table, and lit up.

"Give me a hit."

Ahmed took a couple of puffs, then he passed me the joint. I inhaled with my eyes closed: the smoke was good, with a little taste of nutmeg, and it went straight to my head. After another puff I handed the joint to Ahmed again and went back to watching TV.

Maria Antonietta had found out she was pregnant, but since she knew the father wasn't her husband, she didn't know what the hell to do. The baby's real father was screwing her right up until she got pregnant. Then he gave her her walking papers, and went off to play the two-timing Don Juan with some Polish waitress. And that's how Maria Antonietta found herself in the shit again.

The best thing about soap operas is that something's always happening, and I like guessing what's about to go down. I get it right nine times out of ten. If I could bet on

what was coming next in the soap operas instead of on horses, I'd be richer than Pavarotti. For example, right now I'm sure that it's going to end up that the husband falls back in love with her, and maybe the dumb bastard will even wind up taking care of the baby.

"What time is it?" Ahmed asked.

"It's early," I answered. "It's a little before three. We have all the time in the world."

They started showing some commercials.

Ahmed passed me the joint.

"Finish it," I said, and I got up. "I'm going to take a piss." I headed for the bathroom.

My head was spinning a little from the wine, the limoncello, and the joint. Not a lot, but some. I wanted to splash some water on my face because you have to be in your right mind if you're going to do what we had to do.

The bathroom door was locked.

"Serena, open the door," I said. "Open up, 'cuz I'm about to piss myself."

"Go in the kitchen. I don't feel good," she said, her voice sounding all sad.

"Yeah, you must of ate too many mussels," I said.

"Could be."

"You need anything?"

"No."

I went to the kitchen and pissed in the sink.

I let the water run to rinse out the sink, and then I splashed some on my face. I felt better right away.

Ahmed was rolling another joint. Well, to be exact, he had the rolling papers in his hand along with the tobacco and the shit, and he was moving his fingers. But he wasn't really rolling anything. He had his eyes glued to the TV screen and his mouth was hanging kind of open. Every now and then he licked his tongue across his lips. He does that when he's concentrating on something, and it kind of grosses me out because his tongue is all red and looks like it belongs to some kind of animal.

"What's up? You hooked on this soap opera now, too?" Ahmed ignored me, and kept right on staring at the TV.

"What's going on?"

On the TV they were showing this building that looked like it was about two thousand meters high. It was standing right next to another building that was exactly the same height, and smoke was bellowing out of it. I snapped that it was a news program, and they were talking about America, and an airplane had crashed into a high-rise there.

"That pilot totally plastered or what?" I said.

I sat down so I could hear better. The newscaster was saying nobody understood why it happened, maybe there was some kind of human error or even some kind of attack, but they knew for certain that more than three hundred people were dead.

"Fuck," I said.

While I was lighting a cigarette, another airplane flew across the TV screen and crashed right into the other building. A second later, you could see what looked like an explosion in the building that had been hit, and then black smoke started belching from inside.

"Is everybody drunk this morning?"

Ahmed didn't say anything and he wasn't moving a muscle.

According to the newscaster, nobody had any more doubts about it. It was an attack, and Muslims or Arabs were probably responsible.

"Looks like friends of yours," I said to Ahmed, just to have something to say.

"Could be," he said, his voice all serious.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because rich people are too rich and poor people are too poor," he said.

"Come on, Ahmed, that's bullshit. There've always been rich people and poor people. There've been rich people and poor people since from the start of time."

"Yeah, yeah," Ahmed said, but you could tell he didn't agree.

We sat there watching television, neither one of us saying anything.

“Gué, it’s almost four,” I said a while later.

An hour had passed like it was nothing.

“We need to get going,” I said, and I got to my feet.

I took the pistol out of the flowerpot where I’d stashed it, checked to make sure it was loaded, and stuck it in the waistband of my pants.

“Come on,” I said.

Ahmed got up, too. He was still holding the half-finished joint. He crushed it in his hand and threw it into a plate. He picked up his jeans jacket and slipped it on, checking to make sure his pistol was there where it was supposed to be.

“So, if I were to ask you, why would a poor man kill a rich man? I said to him as I reached for the motorcycle keys.

“Why?” he asked.

“So he could get rich, too, right?”

Ahmed gave me half a smile.

“Let’s go already,” he said, and we headed for the stairs.

Not Enough Time to Spit in Somebody's Eye

There comes a moment in every guy's life when he thinks he's screwed up the whole thing.

Sometimes, you're still in time to do something about it and get things back on track. And sometimes you don't even have enough time to spit in somebody's eye. That's the situation I was in, and the time it took to spit was exactly what I didn't have.

My father always used to tell me: "You're not cut out to be an artist. You were born to make pizza. You definitely got a pizza-maker's hands."

But I wanted to be an artist, and since my father was absolutely right, I let myself get mixed up in some pretty nasty business and now not even God up in his heaven could do anything about it.

Not even if he came down to earth just for my benefit. As soon as he realized what the situation was, he'd say, "Giò Giò, what the fuck have you gotten yourself into? Giò Giò, wouldn't it have been smarter just to make pizzas?"

There was some asshole at the stoplight and he wasn't moving. I punched the horn a couple of times, but since he was driving at about two kilometers an hour, I sped up

and passed him. When I pulled up alongside, I cursed him in the name of every saint I could think of. The guy just looked at me without saying anything, which got me so twisted that I felt like stopping the car and ripping his liver out for him, but then I decided to forget about it because what difference would it have made, anyway.

I'd wanted to fuck with everyone. I'd thought I was some kind of god and I'd wanted to fuck with the entire world, but now, instead, it's the other way around: they're fucking with me and I could squirm all I wanted to try to get out of it, but now it's too late and there's no way to fix shit.

It hadn't been enough for me to get mixed up with the Varriales and their fake contracts. It wasn't enough to be designing high-rises they were never going to build. No, that wasn't enough for me. I could of been enjoying the money I stole without bothering a single damn soul. I could of bought a little villa in Posillipo, with a glass door that lets you look out at the ocean, and I could of been eating a big mess of calamari on the terrace and listening to Pino Daniele songs. And every once in a while I could of brought home a whore or two just to feel like a normal man.

At least that would have been something.

But no. Not me. I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to build something that, when they put down the history of Naples in the books, they'd write that I was the architect who built it. I wanted glory.

And that's how I ruined everything.

"Tomorrow at five o'clock we're sending someone to shoot you." That's all Nicola said, and then he hung up.

It was only natural that they'd figure it out sooner or later. And now they had. I'd spent the whole night thinking that maybe I still had time to get away, that if I went to live somewhere on the other side of the Pyrenees, they'd have no fucking way to find me, or else I could go to the police and tell them everything I knew and you better believe they'd give me protection.

Sure, I could of done it, but I didn't feel like it much. I didn't feel like doing anything, was the truth. I didn't even feel like a cup of coffee.

It was a little before four o'clock. I had an hour left.

I turned on the radio so I could listen to some music, but instead of music they were talking about an attack in New York. I was about to change the station, and then I heard that the attack had caused the Manhattan towers to collapse. That made me a little curious, and I so I tried to figure out what was going on.

When I understood how things were going down, I felt sort of sad. I felt sad especially for the guy who designed the towers. Up until an hour ago, he thought they'd be there even after he was dead, standing up all straight and tall, that they'd be there, looking out on the world from way up high like those beautiful women dressed all in black who, when they pass, everybody steps back to give them room.

But now the towers weren't there anymore and everything he'd done was pointless. He was just like me: He'd designed buildings that didn't exist. Or another way to look at it: he was worse off than me, because he'd done at least one good thing in his life, but they'd yanked it right out from under him, and maybe now he didn't have enough time to do another one.

For a minute he was sure that glory had turned around and bent over just for him, and he was screwing glory, and while he was screwing glory he thought for sure he'd live forever.

But nosirree, it wasn't glory at all. It was just some ordinary slut who'd put on a pair of silk underwear to try to look like a lady.

What a con job.

Anyway, I'd screwed everything up.

At that very moment, I could of been making pizzas at Tótore and maybe some hot French tourist chick would be telling me that I made the best pizza in the world, and maybe she'd smile at me and I'd take her dancing in one

of the clubs along the waterfront, and while I was dancing, I'd pull her up against me and smell the perfume she'd dabbed on her neck, and I wouldn't have to be pretending to design high-rises that no one was ever going to build and I wouldn't have to be kissing the asses of the Varriales and all the other bastards like them.

I stopped the car near the hydrofoil landing at Mergellina and I got out. I sat on the seawall and I lit a cigarette. The sun was nice and hot and the boats were coming in and out of the harbor. Some seagulls had started following behind the boats and every so often they'd fling themselves down into the boat wash to grab a fish.

I was about to get the end I deserved. The same pathetic end that always comes to wiseguys and pimps, and all I could do was smoke that cigarette and hope it'd be over soon, hope it'd be over so I could at least stop thinking about it.

But There Was Something Else I Wanted to Talk to You About

While I was waiting at the stop light on via Caracciolo, I looked down toward the ocean. There was no wind, and the water was calm. A hydrofoil was coming into the harbor, standing all upright and cocky on its stabilizer fins, like one of those guidos who doesn't have to explain himself to nobody. It was hot, and I started thinking about what I'd been doing only the week before, when I was on the beach on Ischia, not a thought in my head, the *Corriere dello Sport* and a Coca-Cola on my beach towel, when the only thing I had to wait for was to sweat a little longer before I jumped in the water.

Right at that very moment though, as far as I was concerned, I didn't give much of a fuck about the beach or about the *Corriere dello Sport*, or about anything else for that matter, and all I wanted was to get home as quick as I could and slam my head against the wall.

The light turned green and somebody immediately started honking his horn. I took off doing about two kilometers an hour until the guy behind me had his dick completely in

a knot and finally passed me. As he went by he cussed me out, and I was hoping he'd stop his car and decide to make something of it so I could at least let off a little steam. But the guy just sped up and nothing happened.

At the next signal I hit another red. In the car next to me, there was this dame of around forty. She was popping a pimple, watching herself in the rearview mirror, and she had on a white blouse and a yellow cotton skirt slit all up one side so that you could kind of almost see her panties. From where I was sitting, her legs looked a little fat, but I'd of banged her anyway, just to see what kind of faces she made while she was doing it. I'd of done it just to do something. Right after that I started thinking how life is really the shits, how it waits for the right moment and then it just sticks it to you, right up the ass, and you don't even get enough time to understand what the hell is happening.

Maybe if I drank a little limoncello I'd feel better. Didn't strike me as a bad idea: I'd drink half a bottle of limoncello and I wouldn't think about it anymore. I might even be able to get a nice, long sleep out of the deal.

There wasn't a parking place to be found anywhere, not even for pay, but since I didn't give much of a fuck about a fucking thing anymore, I double parked, picked the envelope up off the car seat, and went upstairs.

It was hot. While I was walking I broke into a sweat.

Tótore's dog started barking. The guy making pizzas gave it a kick, and the dog shut up.

I finally made it into the house. I took off my jacket and filled a glass with limoncello before I did anything else. I downed the whole thing in one swallow. After I drank it, the air seemed even hotter.

I put on my shorts and picked up the phone. I got settled on the couch and dialed my sister's number.

Maybe if I talked, I'd feel better. There were these little crumbs of dried bread under the backs of my thighs that were bugging me. I stood up and brushed the couch off with my hand, then I sat down again.

"Hello?"

It was my niece.

"It's Michele. Is Pina there?"

"Yeah...."

"You OK?"

"Yeah...."

"Everything going all right at school?"

"Yeah...."

"Lemme talk to Pina."

I heard her shout: "Ma! Uncle Michele's on the phone!"

Pina said something. You could hear in the background that the TV was on. A crumb was sticking me in the back of one knee.

"She says she can't come to the phone right now. She'll call you later."

"Tell her it's important."

She was shouting again: "He says it's important."

Pina said something. A minute later she came on the phone.

"Pina...."

I wasn't sure how to break it to her, but she started right in.

"You heard what happened?"

"No."

"Michè, they've started a war!"

My sister has always been a little prone to exaggeration, but this time she'd definitely gotten her crazy hat out of the closet.

"You don't say."

"I am saying. Turn on the TV and see if I'm making shit up."

You could tell she wanted to get back to watching TV. I really didn't know how to break it to her.

"Look, Pinù...."

"Go turn on the TV if you'd don't believe me."

"Pinù, I...."

"What's wrong?"

I couldn't do it.

"Nothing."

"So what did you call for?"

"Nothing, it's nothing."

"You sound strange. What's going on with you?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it."

"Whatever!"

"Be good."

I hung up. I went to refill my glass, and I started downing them one right after another. I thought I might get a buzz on and feel better, but all that happened was that I started feeling kind of sick to my stomach.

I picked up the envelope, opened it, and pulled out the X-ray films.

I held them up to the light, but I couldn't tell what I was looking at. All I could make out were a bunch of spots all over the place.

But that shitwad of a doctor, he'd seen a very special spot that left no room for doubt.

"So what's it say?" I asked him.

"Malignant carcinoma with widespread metastases."

"What does that mean?"

"What didn't you understand?"

"Nothing ... I mean, I don't know ... so, that's what it is?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"You shouldn't let this get you down."

"No, I was thinking I might break into a song."

I dialed Pepe's number. Maybe with him, I'd be able to talk things out.

"Hello?"

"It's Michele."

"Michè. I was just thinking about you."

"About me? Why's that?"

"Haven't you seen what's going on?"

"Where?"

"In America."

“Peppi, right at the moment America’s not so much at the top of my mind.”

“You don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

“We’re talking about an international tragedy here.”

“Yeah, OK, but there was something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“There are ten thousand people dead.”

“Ten thousand?”

“Michè, how can you not have heard about this? Go turn on the TV.”

“What am I supposed to be watching?”

“Just go turn on the news.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“We’ll be in touch again later on and we can talk about it.”

“About America?”

“What else do you want to talk about?”

I turned the TV on and I started watching, too. At first, I couldn’t figure out what was happening, so I had to concentrate a little more.

There was this attack in New York—one of those things where if somebody was to tell you about it, you wouldn’t believe a word and you’d think they’d been smoking dope and made the whole thing up. There were these planes that went slamming full tilt into the Manhattan towers. One of the towers had collapsed and the other one was burning. You saw people running away, some of them covered with ashes or else half-burned, some of them screaming and some of them crying, and you saw that smoke that seemed like a fog, all that dark terrifying smoke everywhere. And then they’d go back to showing the planes as they headed into the towers, and they slid into the buildings like a knife goes through butter. And if you changed the channel, that’s all anyone was talking about.

The limoncello started having its effect because I was getting a little sleepy. I turned down the TV and I held the

X-rays up again to look at them against the light. Then I set them on the floor and stretched out on the couch. On TV, an airplane was crashing into a tower, and I couldn't tell anymore if it was the same plane or a new one.

I closed my eyes, and I started thinking how life is really the shits, how it waits for the right moment and then it just sticks it to you, right up the ass, and you don't even get enough time to understand what the hell is happening, and sometimes, if you don't understand what's happening to you, it's actually better that way.

Haven't You Heard What's Going On?

“Do you understand?” Teresa was saying. “Don’t go in the water before four o’clock or else you’ll get a cramp and you’ll die.”

“I get it. Can I go now?” Guendalina said.

“Go, but you can forget about swimming before four o’clock.”

“Yes, sir!” and she was off.

“I’m serious!” Teresa shouted.

“I heard you!”

Guendalina closed the small wooden gate, got on her bike, and headed for the beach at Maristella.

“I’m going in the garden to get a little fresh air,” Teresa said.

“Okay,” I said.

“I’ll clear the table later,” she said.

“I’ll do it. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, leave it,” she said.

“It’s not like there’s all that much to do,” I said, “plus a little exercise after lunch will do me good.”

“If you want.” She went to stretch out on the chaise under the fig tree.

I took the plates into the kitchen, threw the mussel shells in the trash, and stacked the plates in the sink, one on top of each other. Then I brought in the glasses, the silverware, and the saucepan. I filled the saucepan halfway with water and put the silverware in it. I slid the bread back into the bag and shook the table cloth out over the sink.

I picked up the bag of trash and made sure it was closed up good and tight and I went out into the garden. Teresa had fallen asleep. Her mouth was slightly open and her hands were resting on her stomach. There was an unopened magazine on the grass, and an ant was crawling across the cover, dragging a dead fly behind it. I opened the gate quietly, crossed the street, and headed for the dumpster.

The dumpster was full, so I put the bag on the sidewalk, next to all the others, and I turned back toward the house. At that time of day, there's no one on the street. They're all at the beach or taking a nap after lunch. I'd thought I'd go out later and buy some mozzarella and a little prosciutto. And beer—I had to buy beer, too, and maybe some Gaeta olives.

Teresa was still sleeping.

I went back inside, picked up the *Corriere dello Sport*, and sat down on the couch. I put my feet up on the coffee table and started reading an article about the Naples soccer team. They'd just played a friendly with Boca Junior, and in the middle of the second half, a fight broke out between six or seven players. Good thing it was a friendly, or who knows what might have happened. They'd of probably ripped each other from limb to limb.

And then, because reading makes me sleepy, I gave up on the newspaper. I could of gone for a nice game of thousand-lire-a-point tressette with Ciruzzo's brother-in-law and the twins, but I didn't feel like playing outside underneath a beach umbrella the way they do. It's hot, it's uncomfortable, and it's too damn noisy.

To me, it's a good game when there's no one busting your balls and you've got a homemade lemon granita on the table and some nice, salty Sant'Antonio lupini beans to suck on.

I sat there, not doing anything, enjoying the silence.

Guendalina was at the beach with her boyfriend, Pasquale was at work and wouldn't be back before nine at the earliest, Maria was on her honeymoon on the other side of the world, and Teresa was sleeping.

A paradise. Since that trip we took to Mondragone twenty years ago, this was the first time that seemed like a real vacation. In fact, I was feeling so blessed by the Lord that I almost felt guilty about taking a nap. But an hour or so—surely I could allow myself that much. And then maybe later on, around five, I'd go down to the beach and have myself a swim. I could lie out for a while in the sun afterwards to dry off, shower off at the Fiordaliso beach club where Pasquale works, and sit for a while at the bar there and have a cup of coffee. And then I'd go buy mozzarella.

I was getting myself settled on the couch and, just as I was stretching out, I heard the cell phone start ringing. At first, I thought: Let it ring as long as it wants. They couldn't move me from here even if they promised to make me a saint. But then I thought, maybe Maria was calling to say hello or it might be the twins, getting together a game of tressette, and I got up to answer.

"Who is this?"

"Gaetano...."

It was Carmela, Teresa's niece. I recognized her voice.

There was something strange in the way she sounded, though, like when somebody has to deliver bad news and doesn't know where to start.

"Carmela, is that you?"

"Yes...."

The fact that she wasn't saying anything else was really starting to freak me out.

"What's wrong, Carmela?"

"Haven't you heard what's going on?"

I thought: Okay, so much for paradise. "What am I supposed to have heard?"

"How can you not know?"

"Did something happen to Tonino?"

"Tonino? What does Tonino have to do with anything?"

"So you're saying it doesn't have anything to do with Tonino?"

"No."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"I heard voices in the background as if she was checking with somebody else about what to do next. Then: "Let me talk to Teresa."

"Teresa is resting."

More voices in the background.

"Carmè, any chance you could tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"Do you have the TV turned on?"

"No."

"Go turn it on then."

"Why should I turn on the TV?"

"Just do me this one favor—go turn it on," she said, sounding like she was going to start crying any second. "Then we'll talk," and she hung up.

There were two possibilities: Either she'd gotten sunstroke, which would have explained the whole thing, or else I don't know what. Could be one of our relatives was dead and they'd announced it on TV. Okay, but if it was that, they'd hardly be talking about it all day like it was the president or something. They'd give the news and that would be that.

Meanwhile, I was having a hard time making up my mind to turn on the television. I was standing there with the remote in my hand, and I couldn't decide whether I wanted to turn it on.

Just then, Teresa came into the house.

"Hey," she said. "There were too many flies out there." She headed for the kitchen. "I'll get these plates washed up."

"You should rest a little longer."

"I'm not sleepy anymore."

"Me, either."

"You watching some TV?"

"Yes ... no."

She came to a stop in the kitchen doorway. "There's a Totò and Peppino movie on at 3:30," she said.

"Oh," I said.

"You want to watch?"

"What?"

"The Totò movie. Do you feel like it?"

My mouth was dry. "Sure, let's watch," I said after a minute. She came and sat down next to me.

"I'll do the dishes later," she said.

"Whenever," I said. "What channel is it on?"

"Three."

I pressed the button on the remote. The first thing you could see was a skyscraper with an airplane that was flying straight into it. Then they showed the skyscraper from the other side and the same plane was slamming into it again.

I thought maybe it was one of those real-TV documentaries. "This can't be it," I said. "Maybe it's Channel 2." I pressed the two, but they were showing the same thing.

"What is this?" Teresa asked.

We started listening more closely.

It was no TV documentary. This was real—an attack in America, in New York, with airplanes launched like missiles into the towers, and there were thousands of people dead.

Teresa wasn't saying anything. She was watching the television and moving her head slowly from right to left as it she was saying, *No, no, this isn't possible.*

I wasn't feeling so great myself, on account of what they were showing on the TV, but at the same time I was still thinking about Carmela's phone call and trying to figure out what she wanted. I was thinking, but I wasn't coming up with much.

But all of a sudden Teresa jumped out of her seat and started screaming like a nut case. "Holy Christ!"

I still didn't get it.

Teresa turned toward me. She had this crazy look in her eyes like she was about to start tearing her own hair out.

"Maria!" she shouted. "Maria!" She was grabbing me by the arm.

"Terè, what does our girl have to do with this disaster?"

"Maria's there! She's in New York!"

I had completely forgotten. She'd called us the night before to say she'd arrived in New York and that everything was okay. The next morning she was planning to take a tour of the city, and she wanted to go up to the top of the towers. She'd been obsessed with the towers even before she left. She said you could see all of America from up there. And now the towers were burning.

"Holy Christ," Teresa said again.

Shaking all over, she picked up the cell and started dialing Maria's number.

"It's not going through. It's not going through. It's not going through," she kept saying.

"No one's cell phone is working in New York. They said so on television."

Teresa started pacing up and down the room. "What should we do, Gaetà? What should we do?"

Every once in a while she stopped and tried the phone again. "It's not going through. It's not going through. It's not going through."

"All we can do is wait, Terè," I said, and my voice was trembling, too. "We just have to wait until she calls. Try to calm down. She'll call soon, you'll see."

Teresa wandered around the room a couple of more turns and then she came and sat next to me.

On the TV they kept showing the two planes as they went into the towers. Then, all of a sudden, one of the towers collapsed.

"Holy Christ!" Teresa screamed.

"Don't worry," I said. "She'll call soon, you'll see." I took her hand and I squeezed it in mine.

50,000 Lire for a Blowjob

I give blowjobs for 50,000 lire a pop. I'm not a whore. I've got nothing against whores, God knows. They do their job, and it's their fucking business. But I'm not a whore. Or maybe I am—however you want to look at it. I really don't give a crap either way.

When my brother found out, he wanted to skin me alive.

He thought I was spending my days watching soap operas on television, just watching my soap operas and having a grand old time.

Sure, at first I really was watching soap operas and I never missed an episode. When my brother got home I'd give him an earful about what was going on with Maria Antonietta and her husband, but I wasn't happy. Only an idiot like my brother could of thought I was happy. Or else he was forcing himself to believe I was happy or maybe he was just pretending because he didn't know what else to do.

I love my brother. If it wasn't for him, who knows what would have happened to me. When he left for Italy, I wanted to come along.

"Let me get settled first," he said. "Then I'll come back and get you."

"You won't be back," I told him.

"I'll be back. You'll see," he said.

"You won't be back," I said again.

But he did come back. It took him five years, but he came back. And he took me to Italy with him. I don't know why I wanted to go to Italy. It seemed like a cheerful country, and at least they didn't have a war.

So at the beginning I spent my days watching my soap operas. I'd cook his dinner and at night, when he got home, I'd tell him all about Maria Antonietta. I pretended to be happy and he pretended to believe me.

Then the thing with the plumber happened.

It happened about a year and a half ago, give or take, in May.

A pipe in the kitchen had started leaking and it needed to be replaced. The plumber said he could come over in the afternoon. Ahmed wanted to stay and wait for him.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll take care of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, come on. All I have to do is open the door."

"Okay," he said.

That left me by myself. When it got to be eleven thirty, I brushed on a little lipstick. Just, you know, for something different.

At noon on the dot the plumber arrived. He was seventeen and his name was Gennaro. He was a very handsome boy with a tan face and blue eyes.

From the way he was behaving, I could tell my brother had called to warn him. So Gennaro was doing his best to act casual, like nothing was wrong. The only thing was, he wouldn't look at me.

He got to work. Every once in a while I went into the kitchen to check on things: "Everything going okay?"

"Absolutely. Nothing to worry about."

"Would you like a cup of coffee, a beer, something else to drink?"

"No, no, thanks."

At one o'clock, he was done.

"What do I owe you?"

"Ahmed told me I should take care of it with him."

"Okay."

"I'm going to go then."

"You're all sweaty. Have something to drink."

"Maybe some water."

"Sure you wouldn't like a beer?"

"Well, maybe," he said.

I headed for the fridge, but since the bag with all his tools was still on the floor, I couldn't get the wheelchair past.

He came charging over: "I'm really sorry. Lemme get that."

"Don't worry about it."

"I can get my own beer, if you want."

"Go sit down," I said gruffly.

He went and sat on the couch, a little sheepish.

I brought him the beer.

He sat on the couch and drank his beer, with me in front of him in the wheelchair. He was trying to look anywhere else, but you could tell from a kilometer off that he was embarrassed.

"So how'd it happen?" he asked finally, not looking me in the eye.

"What?" I said. I was acting all nonchalant, just to embarrass him that much more.

He looked at me: "Your legs," he said. "How'd you lose your legs?"

"A mine," I answered.

"In Africa?"

"No, downtown in Piazza Dante," I said dryly.

He started laughing, and so did I. Then he got serious again.

"It's too bad," he said.

"What's too bad."

"You're so pretty."

"Don't screw with me," I said.

"I mean it," he said.

"You're trying to fuck with me."

"I'm not. You're very pretty. For real."

"You're trying to fuck with me," I repeated.

"Says who?"

"Then let me suck your dick," I said.

His beer went down the wrong pipe and he started to cough.

"Well?" I asked.

"Don't kid around," he said when he'd stopped coughing.

"Who's kidding?"

"Miss...."

"Call me Mary."

"I like Alima better."

"Then call me Alima."

"Alima, don't push it."

"Are you scared?"

"Who're you calling scared?"

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Gennaro stood up. Even through his pants you could tell his dick was already hard. I pulled his zipper down and I took him in my mouth.

When he was about to leave he said, "Can I come back?"

"If you want to come back, you have to pay," I said.

He chewed on his thumbnail and thought about it for a while, then he asked, "How much?"

"Fifty thousand lire."

"I'll let you know," he said.

Gennaro came back two or three more times. Then he asked if he could bring a friend.

"Bring anyone you want, as long as they pay," I said.

And so that's how, little by little, I built up a clientele.

When Ahmed found out, he said, "I'm going to kill you."

He's got quite a bark, but he wasn't scaring me, even though I know he goes around shooting people.

"Why would you want to kill me?"

"I didn't bring you to Italy so you could be a whore."

"What am I supposed to do? Watch soap operas all day long?"

"You could go out and find a job."

"Come on, Ahmed, what kind of job do you think I'd get? Ballerina?"

"You don't have to be a whore."

"But I'm perfectly happy being a whore. It makes me feel like I'm doing something important, can't you understand that?"

"Giving blowjobs makes you feel important?"

"Yes."

"You're nuts."

"So what if I am?"

"I don't understand you anymore," he said.

But there wasn't anything to understand.

We didn't talk about it after that. The only thing is that now my brother makes sure to let me know ahead of time when he's going out and what time he'll be back, and that way he doesn't find me with clients in the house. And at night I still tell him all about Maria Antonietta. Every once in a while I miss an episode and then I have to make something up, but in the end it's all the same anyway.

Yesterday I had an important client, a politician, I think, or some kind of business man. I'm not sure. He wears these flowered boxer shorts with a designer label, and his underwear alone must cost a trunkload of money. While I was sucking his dick I was watching my soap opera on television.

Maria Antonietta had gotten pregnant, but the baby wasn't her husband's. The real father had been banging her right up until the point when she ended up pregnant, and then he pretty much forgot about her. Maria Antonietta was in love with the baby's father and she didn't know what to do. Sometimes she thought about having an abortion, sometimes she wanted to shoot herself, and sometimes she wanted to tell her husband the truth. And in the meantime, she cried.

Then they interrupted the episode because of the attack and they started showing the towers and all the rest of it.

After he'd gotten off, the politician started watching television.

"I'll be damned," he said.

He wanted to keep watching, so we negotiated a new deal: he'd pay me double so he could watch TV for a while.

I watched some, too.

"It's such a terrible thing to happen," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"This attack. It's terrible. They could start a war over this."

"Where I come from, there's been a war for twenty years."

"It's not the same thing," he said.

"What do you know about it?"

"What I mean is that this is a real war," he said.

"My legs were real, too," I said.

He didn't say anything after that.

Maria Antonietta

“You’re a little depressed,” said this shrink I went to see, a professor no less.

“No, Signor Professò, I’m not depressed, no. I just feel like I’m about to go out of my mind if I don’t do something. One of these mornings I could very easily end up taking a flying leap off some building, or else leave the gas turned on and blow up the whole apartment complex. See? I’m such a wreck that I completely forgot that I don’t live in an apartment complex. Maria Antonietta lives in an apartment complex, but I’m not Maria Antonietta. I’m Lucia Ruopolo, the actress who plays Maria Antonietta, and I live in a cottage near Licola. It’s true I’m a little cut off from the world there, but that just means I’ll go out of my mind all that much sooner.”

He gave me these pills to take. Let’s hope they work.

I used to live in Rione Traiano, in a seventy-meter-square apartment in the public-housing projects with my mother, four brothers, and my idiot sister. When I was thirteen, I decided I wanted to become an actress. I felt like I had it in my blood, and if I became an actress I’d be good at it. But not a stage actress or even a movie actress, *nossignore*. I wanted to be the kind of actress who works in soap operas on television. The kind who plays a character not for a week

or a month like some kind of whore—I wanted to play a character for two or three years, ten if that's how things turned out, or maybe even for the rest of my life.

“So you’ve turned into an idiot, too, Lucietta?” my mother used to ask me.

I was pretty normal in other respects, aside from this obsession with becoming an actress. I did my chores around the house and then, when I was a little older, I started cleaning other people’s houses so I could scrape together some money. Whenever I had free time, though, I’d watch my soaps. Then I’d lock myself in the bathroom with my idiot sister. She’d sit on the bidet and I’d run through all the lines, the gestures, the facial expressions, just like I’d seen on TV. My idiot sister laughed and said I was real good.

Seven years ago, they held auditions at Fuorigrotta to find Maria Antonietta, the heroine of this new soap opera they were going to film in Naples.

As soon as I got there, I could see that half of Naples had turned out.

“Oh sure, you’re exactly what they’re looking for!” my older brother said. I thought he was right, but I still wanted to try.

At the audition I noticed that all the other girls had gone out of their way to dress special—some were wearing miniskirts, some had stockings in all different colors, some had put on high heels, and there were others wearing these slinky little dresses that, if I was a straight man, would have made me horny immediately. “Maybe I should of dressed a little more slutty,” I thought. But I was already there, and whatever was going to happen was going to happen.

After four hours in line, I finally got my turn.

“Next!” shouted the blonde at the door, and I stepped right up.

The blonde had me go inside.

In the studio was a room, more-or-less a normal room, with some spotlights and television cameras pushed off

to one side, and a desk with some chairs. Two men and a woman were sitting there. One of the men was a little guy of about forty. His hairline was receding and he was wearing eyeglasses with round lenses. But the other guy was quite a hunk of man—young, tall, nice build. He was dressed all in black. He had one of those silk scarf-looking sort of things around his neck like a tie, and you could hear him laugh all the way outside. He was really a handsome man.

The woman, on the other hand, had a face like some kind of fish, a perch maybe, because she had these big, bulging eyes. As soon as I saw her, that's what I thought of: a perch.

"Sit there," said the blonde who'd told me to come in, and I went where she told me, right in front of the other three. They were sitting there, talking among themselves, drinking whatever it was they were drinking, and every now and then fish-face would write something down.

"Can you bring us coffee for three, Rosaria?" asked the one dressed in black, and the blonde hustled out.

"What's your name?" fish-face asked.

"Lucia Ruoppolo."

Fish-face wrote down my name.

"Age?"

"Twenty-one in June. I'm a Gemini."

Fish-face made an amused little smile and the other two laughed, especially the guy in black.

"Tell us something about yourself," he said.

"I finished school four years ago, and now I work cleaning people's houses to help out my family. I live with my mom, my two brothers who are still left at home, and my idiot sister."

The guy dressed in black started laughing along with fish-face. But the other one—the one with the glasses—he seemed to sit up and take some interest as soon as he heard about the idiot sister.

So then the blonde comes in with the coffee.

"Put it here," the guy in black says. The blonde put the coffee down and scrambled.

I was starting to get an idea of how things worked. The guy in black was in charge, but if the one with the glasses said something, the guy in black almost always stopped to listen. Fish-face was sort of a secretary. She was trying to act like she was in charge, too, but she wasn't in charge of shit, and if the guy in black got his jockeys in a bundle over anything, all he had to do was say the word and she'd be right there to untwist them. The blonde, in the meanwhile, was some kind of low-level assistant. The assistant would of liked to have fish-face's job, but for now she was a go-fer and she was keeping her mouth shut. From the way they looked at each other, I could tell the blonde had already put out for the guy in black, but she was still a go-fer.

"Why did you come to the audition today?" asked the guy in black.

"Well, Signor Professò, sir," I said, "with all due respect, that's a pretty stupid question. I'm here 'cuz I wanna be Maria Antonietta, obviously."

The guy dressed in black burst out laughing and fish-face wrote something down, laughing all the while. But not glasses-guy. He was staring at me with a serious look on his face.

"Have you had any experience as an actress?" said the guy in black.

"No sir," I answered. "Sometimes I lock myself in the bathroom with my sister and I do impressions of the actresses in the soaps, though."

The one in black started laughing again.

"The idiot sister?" he asked.

"One sister is all I've got, Professò."

He and fish-face broke up laughing all over again, loud enough so you could of heard them all the way to Piazza Vittorio. But glasses-guy wasn't laughing. In fact, he got up all of a sudden and came over to stand next to me, and he

gave me a good once-over. And then, all serious, he says, "It's her!"

The one in black quit laughing and looked at glasses-guy, a curious expression on his face.

"She's not pretty, she's not flashy, but she's likeable. She's quick, she's naïve, she's spontaneous. She already talks like Maria Antonietta. She moves like her, she thinks like her, she responds like her. Take a good look at her, Tony, take a real good look. This girl is definitely Maria Antonietta.

I've been Maria Antonietta for seven years now.

At first, before my nervous breakdown, it was like some kind of fairy tale: There were parties, fancy dinners, people stopping me on the street to ask for my autograph.

With the money I was earning, I got my whole family squared away, and my idiot sister, even if she was an idiot, got her certificate that shows she finished grade school.

It seemed like a fairy tale and I was the fairy princess.

At eight in the morning, I was already on the set. We filmed until two o'clock. We'd eat in the canteen at the television studio and then we'd go back to shooting until six. There were people to do my makeup, people to deal with my wardrobe changes. It was "ma'am" this and "ma'am" that. I felt like I was queen of the universe. Then I'd go home and study my part for the next day. I was studying hard so I could learn it by memory. It was important to me to look like a professional.

I played this kinda whacked chick who sold dope to help out her family. At home, they were a bunch of hard-luck cases, but somehow or other I managed to save every one of them. Then, right around the 150th episode, when things were starting to go seriously wrong for Maria, I met Ciro. Ciro was a cop. He saved me, and we fell in love.

When we got to Episode 300, Ciro and I got married. We wanted a baby, but a baby wouldn't come. We couldn't tell if it was my fault or Ciro's fault or the scriptwriter's fault, but the baby wasn't happening. Ciro started drinking. The

episodes kept piling up, and *Ciro's* drinking was right in step with them.

At a certain point, I started to feel neglected, and I met Fernando. Fernando was definitely a good for nothing, but he kept my blood on a low boil. For me, Fernando said, he was ready to begin a new life. He swore, if I left my husband, that he'd start his life over with me. When we got to Episode 428, Fernando and me, we had ourselves a seriously hot fuck.

For a while, it really looked like he had changed. But then he had this sister whose honor he had to defend, and he went back to being a gangster. *Ciro*, all this while, was still drinking, and by then we weren't even talking to each other anymore. Another sixty episodes and Fernando wound up getting me pregnant. Or, if it wasn't Fernando, then it was actually the director who got me pregnant, but since I wasn't completely sure he was the father, I didn't say anything about it to the director. But I did tell Fernando. I also told him I was ready to leave my husband, as long as Fernando and I could start living together. Fernando gave me this long explanation that I didn't completely understand, but the nut of it was that he needed time to take care of some business. Then, at Episode 501, I saw him putting his hand on some Polish waitress's ass.

I was getting a clue that something wasn't quite right. I poured my heart out to him, and he told me it'd be better if I went back to *Ciro*, for my own good. I felt like some kind of abandoned animal. I cried. I didn't know what to do. The first thing I thought of was that I ought to shoot myself with *Ciro's* pistol. Then I remembered that there was a baby in the middle of all this mess, and I decided I would go off and live on my own. And after that, I wasn't seeing anything very clearly anymore, but who would have believed it: *Ciro* stopped drinking, and one night he swore to me that he was ready to start his life over again with me.

We ended up screwing that night like we hadn't done for three or four hundred episodes. He doesn't know

anything about the baby, and I don't know if I should tell him or if we'd be better off if I kept my mouth shut. All the same, I'm pretty sure he'd find out on his own even if I didn't tell him. On the other hand, if I tell him, he's certainly capable of getting all hot-headed and shooting Fernando with his police pistol and ending up in jail. This idea about how sooner or later someone's going to wind up firing Ciro's gun isn't just some wild hair of mine: it's a mathematical thing, some kind of law, even. If there's a gun, sooner or later someone's going to shoot it. I don't know who's going to get shot, but sooner or later someone will. The scriptwriter explained the whole thing to me.

And so we went on like that all the way to Episode 533. I was in my fourth month, and I had a nervous breakdown. Seven years of spending all night long studying the crap I had to say the next day, and then all day long actually saying the crap I'd spent the whole night before studying. It would have been enough to give my idiot sister a breakdown.

The other day, toward the end of our lunch break, the whole thing about the attacks happened.

People stopped wherever they happened to be to watch TV.

I was in Editing Studio 7 with the assistant director and the scriptwriter. The scriptwriter is the guy with the glasses at the audition who said "It's her!"

We started talking about what was going on. How crazy things are in the world, how tragic it was for those people on the airplane, how horrible their relatives must feel, stuff like that. Me, all of a sudden, I felt like vomiting. I don't know if it was because of what I was seeing on television or because I was pregnant. I ran into the bathroom and threw up. When I got back, the scriptwriter was there by himself. We watched TV a little, and I was still feeling nauseous. I was about to head for the bathroom again when the scriptwriter put his hand on my thigh.

"All I do is think about you from morning to night," he said. Which, among other things, is exactly the phrase that

Fernando used during Episode 409. But the idea that the scriptwriter was getting worked up over me all this time had never entered the farthest reaches of my mind.

The scriptwriter tried to kiss me. Meanwhile, the first tower collapsed. My head was spinning, and I wasn't feeling all that hot.

"Maria Antonietta, I'm crazy about you," the scriptwriter said. I thought about saying that my real name is Lucia, but I let it drop.

I didn't know exactly what to do, and then I got an idea.

"Listen, Leo," I said, "I'm crazy about you, too, but I just don't feel ready."

"Oh come on," he said, "what kind of bullshit is this?"

"It's the truth," I said. "I'm very confused."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you're the only person who can help me. Help me, and I'll be yours forever."

I was talking just like Maria Antonietta.

"I'd do anything for you," he said.

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Then kill me."

"Did somebody kick you in the head?"

"You aren't getting it. I don't mean in real life. I mean in the soap opera."

"Ah," he goes. "And why do you want to die?"

"My life is hell, Leo. I need things to be simpler."

"So why don't you just leave?"

"You know as well as I do why I don't leave. According to my contract, I can't quit. If I do, I'll have to fork over so much dough that I'd end up living in the street. But if I died ... that's a whole other ball game."

"Right," he said, all thoughtful.

I realized he'd already starting thinking of ways to kill me.

Meanwhile, the second tower collapsed.

"If you want, I could kill myself," I suggested.

“No need for that,” he said. “I’ve already got something in mind ... some kind of attack by the mafia.... I need to think this through.”

My stomach ache was starting to back down a little. I got up. “Please try to hurry, my love.”

“Okay,” he said.

Before I left, I kissed him on the mouth.

For the first time in seven years, I was starting to feel like a normal woman again. All I had to do was figure out what to do about Fernando, the baby, and Ciro. And then there’d be the scriptwriter to think about, obviously, but by now, I mean, it seemed like the worst was already behind me.

The Happiest Day of My Life

Back in my village, people call me “The General.” They call me that because of this thing that happened toward the end of the war.

The Nazis were on the retreat, and every so often, as they pulled back, they’d grab someone just for spite. So when they passed through our village, they picked up seven of our young guys and took them prisoner. They were planning to execute them the next day.

These seven boys—I knew each and every one of them. One of them, we were playmates when we were kids. Another guy, I’d worked with, and Salvatore and I had done the whole Greek countryside together two or three years before. The only reason I didn’t get swept up with the others is that, on the morning when the Nazis were making their way through our town, I was out hunting quail.

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing while the krauts kill them,” I said when I got back from hunting. I’d shot more than thirty quail that day.

“You trying to be some kind of hero?” someone said.

"I just want to save our friends," I said. "If I pull it off, terrific. If I don't, then at least I tried."

"And what's your plan?" said one old guy. "You gonna use your quails?"

They all had a good laugh over that.

I mulled things over for a minute, then I said, "Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

The Germans had made camp in a deserted town about twenty kilometers from ours. I covered those twenty kilometers on my bike with nearly fifty kilos of gear on my back—twenty quail, and then everything else.

When I got to where the Nazis were, I put on a Fascist uniform that I'd brought along with me, and then I went out to introduce myself.

"*Wer ist?*" said the guy on sentry duty, sticking his tommy gun in my face.

"*Heil Hitler,*" I said, holding my arm out all stiff in front of me like the way the Romans do.

"*Heil Hitler,*" said the guy guarding the camp.

I got along all right in German, so I showed him the quail and explained that they were a tribute from the Fascist command to the invincible Nazi forces passing through our area. As soon as he understood what I was talking about, the guard calmed down and he took me to the Kommandant, an SS garrison officer who only had one eye. Just looking at him was terrifying.

"*Heil Hitler!*" I said, trying not to crap myself the whole time.

I retold the story about the tribute from the Fascist command. Luckily, the Kommandant was one of those people who like to eat, because as soon as he got a look at the quail—well, if he looked at them any harder, pretty soon he'd have been seeing out of the fake eye, too.

He thanked me, but without making a big deal out of it because he was still a Nazi, after all. And so then, before I left, acting as casual as I could, I asked him if he knew how to cook them.

The Kommandant scratched his head, and it was obvious that he hadn't thought about that yet. He had someone call the cook.

The cook came. He looked at the quail and he said he'd never seen such small chickens in his life. The Kommandant told him they were quail, not chickens. "*Jawohl!*" the cook said, but then he told the Kommandant he was still thinking about cooking them like chickens.

The Kommandant looked at me.

I put a sad look on my face, and I even shook my head and held out my arms, as if to say, *If that's how you want to waste one of God's great gifts, I won't stop you.*

The Kommandant caught on that I was disappointed. Who knows, maybe he was even thinking that the war was going pretty badly for them and could be he'd never get another chance to have a meal like that in his whole life, and he asked me if I could show the cook how the quails were supposed to be prepared.

I asked the cook if by any chance he had tomatoes, black olives, garlic, and peppers, though I was already sure he didn't. And of course the cook said that all they had were canned tomatoes, potatoes, and regular black pepper.

I shook my head and I pretended to think things over. The Kommandant was looking at me hopefully. After I thought for a while, I said I might be able to do something for them, as long as they could give me about a half-hour.

The Kommandant said, "*Bitte*, all the time you want," and I left.

A half-hour later I was back with the garlic, the tomatoes, the black olives, and the peppers, which I'd hidden earlier in a tree a short distance away. I had them take me to the kitchen, I asked for an apron, and I started cooking.

At nine thirty I was sitting next to the Kommandant who was eating those quail like he'd have been about ready to give me a blow job if they tasted any better. We ate and we drank and then we sat back to have a cigarette.

The Kommandant was a little bit drunk, but I was sharp as a cricket. It was getting late, and the Kommandant asked me whether there was anything he could do to return the favor.

That's just what I'd been waiting for.

I made like I was thinking again and, still talking in German, I told him that yes, maybe there might be something he could do for me.

"*Bitte*," he said, "*sagen Sie*, let's hear it."

I told him I'd heard they'd captured some partisans that morning. He got a little suspicious, but he said, yes, and they were going to shoot them at dawn. I said that was exactly the end they deserved, but one of those stinking bastards, a certain Salvatore Cozzolino, had murdered my father the month before. If it could be arranged, I wanted to kill him myself, exactly the way he'd killed my father.

Well, that impressed the Kommandant all right, and all the rest of them were nodding "*ja*."

"Very well," he said.

And then he asked me how my father had been killed.

"He slit his throat," I answered, trying to make the most horrible face I could manage.

The Kommandant stood up, all solemn. He said I was a great man, and he pulled a knife out of his boot that had a blade on it so sharp it would cut you if you so much as looked at it wrong.

"Do me the honor of using this," he said, and he gave me the knife.

"*Danke schön*," I said, snapping my heels together. I took the knife and a second later I was right on top of him. I held the knife on him as I dragged him into a corner of the room, and I said that if anyone moved I'd cut his throat.

The Kommandant was such a bastard that I didn't think he'd do it, but he told the others to stay where they were. And then, literally foaming at the mouth on account of how furious he was, he asked me what I wanted.

"Those seven guys you picked up this morning," I answered. "You give me those seven guys, I'll let you live. If not, you and me can die along with the seven of them. You decide."

"You're out of your mind," the Kommandant said.

"A little," I answered, "but quail the way I cook them? Nobody else knows how to do that."

"*Scheiße*," he said, like he was really saying *Go fuck yourself*.

In the end, it worked. I still don't know how, but it worked. It took all night to get things straightened out, but it worked.

The guys went back to our village and the Kommandant kept on heading north with his men.

And I came back home like some kind of hero.

From that very day, everyone's called me "The General."

I'm seventy-eight now, and they still call me "The General," and in the last sixty years I guess I've seen just about everything. I won't tell you my whole story or else we'll be here all night.

Anyway, I've done what I needed to do without having to drop my pants and bend over too much for anyone. If I'd been any good at bending over for other people, by now I could have had a palace with gold doors instead of a house in the country, but I'm glad for the way things turned out.

Thanks to the Lord above, I've still got my health, and I can grow my beans and my tomatoes in my own soil and eat them with Ninuccia and our friends on summer evenings under the pergola. Every now and then I have myself a nice glass of red wine, I go hunting when it's quail season, and I smoke a cigar or two whenever I feel the urge.

One day, Stella told me she wanted to get married.

"Stella, baby girl," I said, "are you sure?" Why don't you wait a while?"

"Oh come on, Dad."

Stella is the only child I have. When it comes to her Angelo, she hasn't got a brain left in her head, but Angelo

really loves her, and so I told her that I didn't have any objections. "But I'm just curious," I said. "If I said I didn't agree, what would you have done?"

"I'd have gotten married anyway, of course."

Just like her father.

I arranged the entire thing myself.

We had the reception outdoors, at our place in the country. There were two or three hundred guests, a band with four musicians playing the mandolin, the guitar, and the tammorra. There was enough food to bust a gut on, and I even cooked quail with tomatoes and olives, but only for a few of our closest friends, who knew about what happened with the Nazis.

As I was eating, the thought came to me that it was the happiest day of my life, not because I hadn't had wonderful days before, but because my daughter getting married made me feel like life was going to go on, even though I'd be dead one day.

I started getting a little choked up, so I told Ninuccia that I was going to take a walk and that I'd be back in time for the second course.

"Are you okay," she asked.

"I just need to digest," I told her.

I took my walk out on our property. It was hot, and I started sweating a little, so afterward I went back in through the house so I could splash some water on my face and change my shirt. After I'd changed, I started back out to where we had the tables set up.

But as I walked through the living room, I saw that the TV was on. That old Carosone song from way back, "Maruzzella," was coming from outside, and you could hear our guests laughing. I was distracted by the music, and so it took me a few minutes to understand what was happening on TV. Then I went over to close the sliding glass door, and I turned the volume up a little.

And that's how I found out about the attack on New York.

I sat there, listening, for more than half an hour. Then Ninuccia came in and she said, "The quail's ready. Why don't you come to the table?"

"On my way," I said, and I turned off the television.

Outside they were all singing together. When they finished, Stella made a toast and kissed her husband. Everybody clapped and they raised their glasses again.

I didn't say anything to Ninuccia about the attack. I didn't say anything to anyone. But no matter how much I tried, I couldn't make myself eat. I thought about those people in the tower who suddenly realized there was no hope for them, and so they took a leap off the side of the building and into thin air. I thought about the firefighters who were climbing up the stairs to see if they could save anyone, and then the tower collapsed while they were still climbing. And I was thinking about the people on the airplane who knew they were going to die and couldn't do anything about it, and so later on their families found their goodbye messages on their answering machines.

"You're sad because your daughter's getting married," one of Ninuccia's cousins said to me.

"Says who?" I answered, and I forced myself to smile.

Then they started playing a tarantella, and Stella wanted to dance with me. We danced, and I remembered this was the happiest day of my life. I tried to push the towers in flames and all the rest of it from out of my head. But I couldn't.

"Try to be happy," I said to Stella as the music was coming to an end.

"Aye aye, general," she said, and I kissed her softly on the forehead.

I'll Take a Flying Leap

Some days are destined to be screwed up even before they've really gotten started. They're born screwed up, you might say, and that's all there is to it. You can't do anything about it. All you can do is try to get through it the best you can. If you don't, you only make things worse.

The trouble is, when you get out of bed in the morning, you still have no idea—you get up, you open the window, you see the sun and the blue sky, you feel the nice, cool breeze on your face, and you say, “Concè, it's a beautiful day.”

I had this little, tiny pinpoint of something just kind of stuck there at the back of my neck, but it was nothing really. I hardly even noticed it.

By eight a.m., we were already out of bed.

We got the kids ready and we took them to their grandma and grandpa's house.

We'd been wanting to go to the beach at Licola, me and Concè, by ourselves, like a couple of lovebirds the way we used to do when we were teenagers. I'd taken a day off from work so we could celebrate five years of marriage. We'd go for a swim, and we'd stretch out in the sun, and when it got to be around noon we'd have ourselves a nice plate of spaghetti and clams at the gypsy's place.

I call her the gypsy because she lives in a camper.

She lives there and she cooks there, too, in the camper. Outside, she sets up chairs and some small plastic tables, and she puts up an awning so the sun doesn't beat directly down on you. In the busy season she even brings one of her grandsons over to wait on the tables. During the summer, you usually find her at Licola, near the beach, because business is better. When October rolls around, she moves back into town, to Pozzuoli or Monte di Procida.

Anyway, we left the kids with their grandparents and we were on our way to the beach in the Panda, just like we were the king and queen of something or other.

"Feel like a sweet roll or some coffee?" I asked as we were driving along the waterfront.

"No, no," she said, "I don't want to put on any weight."

"What are you talking about, put on weight? You practically kill me, you're such a bombshell," and I reached over and squeezed her thigh.

Concetta smiled.

Right then, okay, now that I think about it, that might have been a sign, but at the time it looked like a normal smile, nothing mysterious about it. How can I have been so far off the mark?

Usually, in fact, I'm pretty sharp. I listen, I watch what's going on around me, I figure things out.

We had coffee anyway. I bought the newspaper. She bought some cigarettes.

"Let's take our picture," I said as we were heading back to the Panda.

"How do you mean, take a picture," she asked.

"In the photo booth," I said. "So we can remember this day."

"Francè, let's not make a big deal out of it," she said.

"Oh come on, it'll be fun."

I grabbed her by the hand and headed us over to the photo booth. We went in and I sat on the swivel chair. I had Concetta sit on my right leg. Then we closed the curtain.

"Big smile," I said, before I put in the 5,000-lire bill.
"Come on, now."

"Francè," she said.

I put my arm around her and I pulled her up close.
"Smile," I said.

An hour later we were happily sprawled in the sun, two of God's favorite children.

I was reading the newspaper. She was looking out over the ocean, and every once in a while she'd smoke a cigarette. When it got too hot, she went and had a swim. I watched her as she was getting in the water. She looked like some kind of photomodel, like one of those girls who pose half-nude in the calendars.

"Yeah, right," she said later, when I told her what I'd been thinking.

"Ten times better," I said.

She laughed and stretched out in the sun.

Then, at one o'clock, we had our spaghetti and clams at the gypsy's camper.

"This is really heaven, huh, Concè?" I said.

"Yeah," she answered.

"You remember the first time we came here? Do you?"

"How could I forget?"

"Let's toast to us," I said. "Come on."

And we raised our glasses.

After we'd eaten our desert and had an after-lunch amaro, we got back in the car and headed for home.

"Feel like listening to a little music?" I asked.

"Sure, we can hear some music."

I turned on the radio and started searching through the stations. By accident, I hit on a song by 99 Posse that we'd danced to on our first date.

"Hear that?" I said, "they're even playing our song."

We were driving through the center of town. I was so happy that I started singing along to the chorus, which goes *curre curre guagliò curre curre guagliò*. I was still singing

when, all of a sudden, they interrupted the song and they started talking about an airplane that had ended up flying into a tower in New York. I was so shocked that I pulled the car over next to the sidewalk so I could hear better.

"My god, do you realize what's happening, Concè?"

She didn't say anything.

"Those poor people," I said after we'd listened a little more. "That's an ugly way to go."

"Francè," she said, "I'm leaving you."

For a minute we just sat there like that, not doing anything: I didn't talk and she wasn't moving a muscle. I wasn't sure I heard her right, so I was waiting to see if she'd say it again, but she just sat there, all quiet and still.

On the radio, they were still talking about the towers.

"Sorry, Concè," I said, forcing myself to sound casual. "What were you saying? I mean, it's just that there was the radio in the background and I didn't catch it."

"I'm leaving you," she said.

She got out of the car.

I sat there for another two or three seconds, and then I got out right behind her.

"Concè, wait."

She acted like she hadn't heard. She was walking down the road at a pretty good clip and her clogs were making a lot of noise on the sidewalk. I was afraid people would notice the noise and turn around and overhear all our business.

I caught up with her and I took her by the arm, but slowly and carefully, just enough to say, hold on a minute, can we talk about this, can you explain? But she yanked her arm back like it bugged her to have me touch her, and that was when I knew—right when she yanked her arm back like that—there was nothing else to do, that whatever had happened, it was already too late.

"Concè...."

She whirled around, her eyes red from crying. "Don't ask me anything, Francè, please. Don't ask me anything."

"But if I did something wrong, or you aren't happy, tell me so I can understand."

"Leave me alone. I'm an animal. I'm a monster. Please, just leave me alone."

And she started walking again.

I was about to go after her, but she turned back to face me. "Leave me alone," she said. "Leave me alone or I'll take a flying leap right off the top of his wall, I swear I will," and she moved toward the cement barrier that looks out over the rocks and the shore down below.

"Okay," I said. "But what about the kids? Just tell me what I'm supposed to do about them."

"You deal with the kids."

She looked at me for a minute longer, then she turned and started walking away again. I followed her with my eyes until she disappeared inside the Cumana metro station.

I was tempted to go after her, but by then I'd figured out there wasn't any point and I let her go.

On my way back to the Panda I reached into my pocket to take out the car keys and I found the pictures from the photo booth. In the pictures, we were smiling, her and me both. I had my arm around her and she was leaning her head against my cheek.

We looked just like Romeo and Juliet.

I put the pictures back in my pocket, got into the car, and went home. The whole way they were saying that there were two airlines that had hit the towers, that it was an attack, and that one of the towers had collapsed.

In the meantime, that little pinprick in the back of my neck had turned into a nail, and that nail wasn't coming out any time soon. Concetta had taken off, and in her place there was a nail stuck in my head. The world was falling apart and that's what I had left—that nail and nothing else. Nobody'd bothered to clue me in about anything, like I was the biggest, most pathetic loser on the face of the planet.

Pizzeria Tótore

“Did you get an eyeful of that one?” the Striker said. At the Pizzeria, we call him the Striker because as soon as he spots a girl, he makes his move.

“Big deal,” I go.

“That girl there—her, I’d like to fuck on the kitchen counter with all the tablecloths and shit piled up next to us.”

“You need to take a cold shower, Enzù. That’s Agostino’s wife. If he so much as catches you looking at her, he’ll cut your dick off.”

“I’ll fuck Agostino, too.”

“Is that margherita ready, or are we waiting for Christmas?” said Luigi. He’s one of the waiters and he’s a real dumb shit.

“Luì, why haven’t you dropped dead yet?” Enzo answered

“At your age, you’ll be the first to go,” Luigi said.

“Always such a gentleman,” I said. “Here, take your margherita and stop busting our balls.”

Luigi disappeared with the margherita.

“Three marinaras and a margherita,” Tótore said.

“Coming right up,” Enzo said.

He pulled out the balls of pizza dough with the pallet and started rolling them flat. My job was to finish shaping

them into circles and top them. While he was finishing the pizzas off with oil and basil, I'd get the paddle. He'd slide them onto the paddle, one by one, and I'd stick them in the oven.

"That's one girl I would really like to fuck," the Striker said as he slid the margherita onto the paddle.

"You're going to wreck yourself," I said.

"Don't tell me you can't see she's practically in heat. You can tell from a kilometer off that she wants it."

"And of course she wants it with you."

"Care to place a little wager on the subject?"

"Whadda you wanna bet?"

"A beer tomorrow at Palommella, after we close up."

"A beer at Palommella, you're on."

The Pizzeria Tótore is famous from one end of Naples to the other and it's been here for more than a hundred years. It's on two floors with ten or fifteen wooden tables. The walls are covered with photos of all the celebrities in Naples who've come here to eat: Totò, Raffaele Viviani, Eduardo de Filippo, Massimo Troisi, Maradona. Not one of them's missing. Even the Americans and the Germans come to visit Tótore, and lately even the Japanese. They come, they eat their pizza, they say it's something special, they take pictures, and then they go back to Japan.

At Pizzeria Tótore we only make two kinds of pizza: margherita and marinara.

If a customer asks for some other kind of pizza—let's say a capricciosa—Antonio Tótore gets a serious look on his face and he says, "Here, we only make pizza. For the items you're requesting, you have to go to the place across the street." Which is also a pizzeria, but it's more modern and the pizza makes you puke.

Enzo and I have worked together for twenty years. We started out when we were just boys. First in Naples, where we learned how to make pizza. Then we moved around a lot from place to place to see where we could earn the

most money: Milan, Rimini, the Emerald Coast, Rome. Sometimes we work in Naples so we can be close to our families.

Enzo's married and he's got two daughters, a couple of twin sixteen-year-old girls who are exactly like him. I have three boys. Actually, Sandro, the eldest, is already eighteen and he's headed in a very bad direction in his life. Even for as many thousands of times as I've mentioned it him, he's doesn't want to learn the trade. To tell the truth, he doesn't have much interest in work of any kind. Well, never mind. Let's just hope he figures it out in time. The other two are good kids, though. They go to school. Sometimes I bring them into the pizzeria to teach them a thing or two. When they finish school, I'll hire them on here to work with me. That way, maybe the rest of us can get out of this place and I can have a little fun at Mariella.

"Three margheritas," Tótore said. "Cooked well done."

We started working on the margheritas.

"Look how she's crossing her legs, that slut," Enzo said.

"Enzù, let it go already."

"Did you see how she looked at me just now?"

In fact, she had been looking our way.

"You're going to end up in a world of hurt," I said.

"That one there," he says, "that one there I'm going to fuck."

Later that night, the last customers had finally left. We turned off the oven, put all the pizza stuff in the fridge, and started cleaning the counters.

"Goodnight," said Luigi, on his way out.

"Kiss my ass goodnight," Enzo said back.

"Don't you ever think of anything new to say?" Luigi asked with that superior tone of his, like he was some kind of prince and we were his servants.

"Drop dead," said Enzo.

Luigi ignored him. "Goodnight, Biagio."

"Night," I said.

A little later, when we'd almost finished up, Tótore left, too. "The keys are on the table," he said.

"Be good," said Enzo.

All we had to do was change and then we'd be done and could get out of there, too.

"We ended up staying until two a.m. again tonight," I said.

"What the fuck do we care?" Enzo said.

The rolling shutter outside was only halfway down, so we didn't see her right away.

"Excuse me. Are you still open?"

It was Agostino's wife.

"She came back because she wants to screw," said Enzo under his breath.

"Please, come in," Enzo told her. "Is there something we can do for you?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but I've put my cell phone down somewhere. I wanted to check if maybe I left it here."

"Of course, look around all you like. It's no trouble at all."

Agostino's wife started searching the restaurant. She didn't find anything.

"She's pretending she can't find it because you're here."

"Then I'll get going."

"Naw, don't worry about it."

The Striker came out from behind the counter and went over to the woman. "Maybe the waiters took it into the kitchen when they cleared the table."

"Ah...", she says. "Could we go look?"

"I'll show you the way," Enzo said, and he headed for the kitchen with her right behind him.

Two minutes later they still hadn't come back.

Quietly, I went toward the entrance to the kitchen and I peeked inside from behind the door. She was propped up against the counter, her hands on the marble surface, and Enzo was leaning against her from behind, moving.

"Way to go, Enzuccio," I thought. "You just won yourself a beer at Palommella." And I walked away just as quietly.

"You saw?" said Enzuccio the next day. "You saw that I fucked her?"

"I saw, I saw."

"Didn't I say I was going to fuck her? Did I say so or didn't I?"

"No question about it, you said so."

"You could tell from a kilometer off that she wanted it."

"I don't know how you do it," I said.

"What it takes is art, my friend, and I am definitely an artist." We had a good laugh over that.

It was six in the evening and we had to open up in an hour. Luigi showed up, looking more like something the cat dragged in than he usually did. "Did you guys hear about what happened in America?"

"What the fuck do we care about America?" Enzo said.

"What happened in America, Lui," I asked.

"It was an attack. They killed more than five thousand people."

"You should drop dead, too, while you're at it," Enzo said.

"Peasants," said Luigi, and he left to change clothes.

"You know anything about this?" I asked Enzo.

"Nah," he goes. "Did you get yeast?"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it."

"So what are you waiting for? Let's get moving."

We were working on the pizza dough when my son, Sandro, came in. He usually never comes into the pizzeria, so I was surprised, but at the same time I was glad to see him. "Gué, you here to get a pizza?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Give us ten minutes to open up," I said.

He didn't answer. I thought he looked kind of nervous.

He looked around the place, then he came up to the counter. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"You Enzuccio?" he asked Enzo.

"Yeah. You're Biagio's son?"

Sandro didn't answer. Instead he pulled one hand out of his pocket. He was holding a gun.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted.

"This is from Agostino," Sandro said, and he fired three times.

Enzuccio fell to the ground, but so slowly, with a sad smile on his face.

"We'll have to get that beer another time," he said on his way down.

"What the fuck have you done, Sandro? What the fuck have you done?" I screamed.

"I'm sorry, dad," he said.

And he ran out of the pizzeria.

What Do We Do Now?

“So what’s going on with your husband?” Consuelo asked as we were finishing our pizza inside the shop.

“He’s an asshole,” I said.

“Have you guys been arguing again?”

“I threw him out of the house.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Hey, look, Consuè, he’s gambled away everything we own, he even gambled his severance pay, and now he wants us to hock our wedding rings. Does that seem normal to you?”

“My god, that’s brutal.”

“One of these days he’s gonna run out of things to bet and he’ll throw me in the pot. He’d do it, too.”

“Can’t you do something?”

“I could shoot him, how about that?”

“Don’t talk stupid, Rosa.”

“I’ll shoot him, and get him out of my hair once and for all.”

“No, come on, don’t joke about things like that.”

“Okay, then you tell me what I oughta do.”

“Take Robertino and go stay with your mother.”

“And what’ll that solve?”

"At least you'd feel better."

"When I'm six feet underground, that's when I'll feel better."

"Come on."

"Let's stop talking about this or I'm going to choke to death on this pizza."

We sat without talking for a few minutes.

"You still seeing that guy?" I asked.

"I'm seeing him, I'm seeing him," Consuelo said, smiling.

"You really flipped for him, huh?"

"Ah," she said, all dreamy-eyed.

"When do you guys see each other?"

"Whenever he can get away: in the afternoons, sometimes in the evening when he says he's got some work dinner he has to attend.... Like that, when he can."

"Is he handsome?"

"Not handsome exactly. But he's charming, Rosa. He's a real gentleman."

"What about the wife?"

"He says he wants to leave her."

"That's what they all say."

"No, no. He really wants to leave her."

I let it go.

"Saturday he's taking me to Capri," Consuelo said.

"Oh?"

"He's going to a convention and he's taking me with him."

"You know I've never been to Capri?"

"You're kidding."

"We're right next door and I've never even been. Funny, isn't it?"

"So then why don't you take Robertino and run off to Capri one of these weekends?"

"Yeah, I really ought to do just that."

"You know, just to take your mind off things."

I shrugged my shoulders, then I looked at my watch. It was showing three o'clock.

"Let's open up or we'll never hear the end of it from that bitch." I got up and tossed the wrapping paper from the pizza to the garbage. Then I washed my hands and rolled up the metal shutter over the front door.

Signora Tótore was outside waiting for us.

"See?" I said to Consuelo under my breath. "She's already here."

"Good afternoon, Signora Tótore."

"I thought maybe you weren't planning to open today."

"It's three o'clock, right on the dot," I said.

"Okay, okay," she said, and came into the shop.

She took off her jacket and sat down.

"So what shall we do today?" I asked.

"Give me a shampoo and some of that red rinse."

I started getting things ready.

"And please," she said, "hurry it up because I've got somewhere I need to be."

"No problem."

"I have to meet my husband at the movies."

"Oh, that's nice, and what are you going to see?"

"I don't know. He always chooses the movie."

"Oh."

"I know we're going to the Metropolitan, though, but what they're showing I really couldn't say."

"Well, one film is as good as another," Consuelo said.

"Precisely."

I started putting the shampoo on her head.

Since there weren't any clients, Consuelo didn't have anything to do. She asked Signora Tótore if she could turn on the television.

"Go right ahead," she answered.

"That way we can look at the soap opera," Consuelo said.

On TV, though, instead of showing the soap opera they were talking about an attack in America with airplanes that had crashed into two towers. It was a blood bath.

"Mammamia," Consuelo said, "are you seeing this?"

"They're all crazy," Signora Tótore said.

I stopped for a minute to watch.

"Hurry up, Rosa," Signora Tótore said. "Hurry it up or I'll be late."

"Sorry," I said, and I went back to lathering up her hair.

While I was lathering her up, though, I kept watching the TV. I saw those poor bastards who'd gotten trapped at the top and couldn't get out. And some of them, out of pure desperation, were jumping off the side of the building. Then Consuelo turned it off.

"This is too awful," she said.

I finished doing Signora Tótore's hair. She looked at herself in the mirror and said it was fine. Then, as she was on her way out, she stopped in the doorway.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said.

The two of us just stood there with our mouths shut, waiting to hear what she had to say. She touched a button on her jacket, then she put on an apologetic face. "I can't keep the both of you anymore," she said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"That one of you is going to have to go."

"Why? It seems to me we've got plenty of customers."

"I can't keep both of you," she said again.

"So who are you letting go?" Consuelo asked.

"The two of you decide," Signora Tótore said. "You can let me know tomorrow." And she left.

"She's such a twat," Consuelo said. "They could keep both of us, but since she's a twat and only cares about how much money she's making, she's decided one of us has to go."

I sat down and tried to think about what we could do, but nothing much was coming to me. It seemed like the whole world was crumbling around me, it was crumbling here, it was crumbling in America—it was just plain crumbling. It was like there'd been an earthquake.

"What do we do now?" Consuelo said.

I picked up the remote control and I turned the TV back on. I turned the volume down. They were still showing the thing about the towers.

"Maybe it'd be better if you stayed," Consuelo said. "You've got Robertino to take care of, and Luca's left...."

"I threw him out," I corrected her.

"You've got Robertino to take care of and you threw Luca out of the house, what are you going to do if you don't have a job?"

"What about you?" I said. "How are you going to get along, you and your mom? You planning to starve?"

"All right then," Consuelo said. "Maybe I'll get him to help me, I'll ask him to find me a job somewhere. He certainly knows enough people."

"You sure he'll help you?"

"Why shouldn't he? He wants to leave his wife for me."

"Right, right," I said.

"What are you saying?" Consuelo asked. "You don't think he'll leave her?"

"He'll leave her, of course he'll leave her. Don't worry."

We watched TV for a while without saying anything.

"I can't watch this anymore," Consuelo said at a certain point, and she got up.

I kept on watching: I watched, and I felt like I was actually there, like it was my house that had collapsed and somewhere in that rubble was someone I knew. My son, or else Luca, or else it was just me and I hadn't figured it out yet. All the while, Consuelo was talking on her cell. I didn't snap to it at first because I was watching the TV and thinking about my own problems but a little later on, when I heard her say, "you're a worthless, worthless man," I realized she was talking to him.

When she hung up, she sat down on one of the armchairs and started sobbing like a fountain. Exactly what we needed.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He's such a worthless man, just ... worthless," she answered, and then she started crying again, only harder this time.

I turned off the TV and I went over to her.

"What is it?"

"He said he can't take me to Capri on Saturday after all, that he's having some problems now and he doesn't know when we'll be able to see each other. He said he'd see what he could do about the job, but it didn't look all that promising and I shouldn't count on it too much."

Didn't I tell you it was gonna turn out like this? That's what I was thinking, but I didn't say anything.

"What are we going to do now, Rosa, what are we going to do?"

The only thing that was coming to mind was that I oughta stick a couple of fingers in a light socket, and presto, no more problems. But then I got an image of the firemen climbing up the stairs inside the towers, and I thought that the one who really ought to be sticking her fingers in the light socket was that Tótore woman and not me.

"What do we do now?" Consuelo said again.

"We're going to have a shampoo and set," I said.

"A shampoo? What are you talking about?"

"A nice, warm shampoo," I said. First I'll do you so you can calm down a little, and then you do me, 'cuz I could use a chance to unwind, too.

"And what if you-know-who comes back?"

"She said she was going to the movies, didn't she?"

I filled the shampoo sink with hot water.

"You're truly out of your mind," Consuelo said.

"Give me a break. We can at least give ourselves the satisfaction of a shampoo, can't we?"

"Okay," she said, "whatever you say."

While I was rinsing her hair, we joked a little about Signora Tótore and that got us laughing. Then, all of a sudden, still laughing, Consuelo said, "Know what we should do?"

"What?"

"We'll move in together in the same house, you and me and Robertino. Each of us'll work a week at a time. And in the meantime, we'll see who finds another job, whaddaya think?"

"See? I told you a shampoo would do you good," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "I really needed that."

Stop Looking at Me or I'll Shoot

For crissake, Commissà, sir, I dint do nothing. How many times I gotta say it? I dint do nothing. You gotta hear that. Lemme go home, please. My mom's waiting for me. And what about my dad? What am I spose to tell him when I get home? This shit is wrong! He's got a bad heart, for crying out loud."

"Calm down, Cocozza. Calm down before I shove your head in the toilet bowl and make you calm you down."

"And how you expect me to calm down exactly?"

"You want a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"How about some coffee."

"A glass of water, if I can ask. Thanks."

"Caruso!" the Commissioner shouted. Caruso came in.

"Yes, sir, Commissà."

"A glass of water and a cup of coffee."

"Right away." Caruso scrambled.

"What time is it?" Cocozza asked.

"Three."

"Lemme make a phone call, just one phone call to my house so my mother don't worry."

"Not possible."

"I'm asking you on my knees, Commissà, on my knees: Just one freakin' phone call."

"Get up, Cocozza, don't be an asshole."

"Ima stay right here 'til you let me use the phone."

The Commissioner sighed. "I told you it can't be done. End of story."

Cocozza sat down again. Caruso came back in. "Coffee and water, Commissà."

"Put it on the table. That's all for now."

"Yes, sir."

Caruso left. The Commissioner drank his coffee. He lit a cigarette.

"You understand, right, Cocozza, that you're in the shit up to your neck? You understand that right now you're swimming in shit? And if you don't start talking, you're eventually going to drown in all that shit. All that's clear to you, isn't it?"

"No way that ain't clear," the young man answered.

"So talk then, for Christ's sake, talk!"

"Commissà, sir, I already told you everything I know."

"And as far as you can tell, do I look like I'm falling for your story about how somebody stole your gun?"

"Don't look like it."

"So now what?" Cocozza said. He let his head fall into his hands. "Okay," he said, "I'll tell you."

"It's about time," the Commissioner said.

"Yesterday in the afternoon we were at my house, me, Gennaro, and Merit."

"First and last names," the Commissioner said.

"Gennaro Forte and Carmine Impronta. We call him Merit because he smokes fifty or sixty Merits a day."

"Go on."

"We spent the whole time watching TV—that thing about the attack with the airplanes."

"The attack on Manhattan," the Commissioner said.

"Yeah, the towers and all that. Anyway, we was watching

television and smoking some dope while we watched. And it got to be around eight o'clock. By then we were bored to shit with watching TV and so we bounced."

"To go where?"

"No plans. We just wanted to screw around a little, have some laughs."

"What about your father's gun?"

"My dad keeps his gun in a drawer. He bought it two years ago after someone stuck him up in his truck. When he's home, he leaves it in the drawer under the sheets."

"Why did you guys take it with you?"

"We always take it when we go out, just in case we get a chance to show off a little, you know, fool around and act tough."

"Keep going."

"We were goin' for pizza at Totóre's place, but the police were there for a robbery or some shit and so we went to get sandwiches and beer at Palommella instead. Merit drank three. He was all worked up, maybe 'cuz his wife is pregnant and she's gonna have that baby any day now."

"So this guy, Merit, is he your age or is he older?"

"He's a year older."

"So he's eighteen?"

"Yeah, eighteen. So Gennaro says, 'Whadda you guys wanna to do?' And I say, 'Why we don't go visit that African bitch with no legs and get a blowjob?' But we couldn't 'cuz she don't work when her brother's at home. So Merit goes, 'Let's go fuck someone out of a scooter.' So we headed up to Vomero to see if we could find one."

"Why'd you go all the way up there?"

"Because they're clueless bitches in that neighborhood, and it's easier because it ain't nothin' but a bunch of rich-ass pussies who shit themselves the first thing anything happens."

"So you been up there before, looking for trouble?"

"No, Commissà, it happened once or twice before, but it ain't like we ever really stole anything. We take a scooter

and we go for a ride, and then we just leave it somewhere. It's just for fun, is all."

"I see. So you went up to Vomero."

"Yeah, we went up to Vomero. We had another beer and then we started looking around. By then it was about eleven. We were walking down this small street over by Piazza Arenella, and we seen these two guys and a girl with a scooter. They was just talking. We go up to them and Merit takes out the gun."

"How come he was the one holding the gun?"

"Because he's just, like, more confident that way, and plus he gets this look on his face that really scares people."

"So he's the boss?"

"No, he ain't no boss. It's just that he scares people with the way his face looks."

"So then what?"

"We go over to them and Merit says, we're taking the scooter. The girl started crying and one of the guys was trying to get her to calm down. Merit was fucking around with them. He grabbed the girl's ass and he slapped the guy who was trying to get her to stop crying. The guy took it and dint say nothing. Merit told them they could get lost, so those two ran off. But the other guy stayed put and dint move."

"So Merit goes, 'What's your deal? You ain't scared?'"

And the guy stares Merit right in the eye and goes, 'No.'

So Merit says, 'Don't look at me,' but the guy kept on staring at him. And Merit goes, 'If you don't stop looking at me, I'll shoot your ass,' but the guy dint quit. Merit's face was getting uglier and uglier and I was started to freak 'cuz I thought, whoa, he's gonna shoot the guy for real. I grabbed him by the arm and I go, 'We already got the scooter and we should just bounce.'

"But he goes, 'Hold on,' and he slaps the guy a couple of times in the face and tells him again that if he doesn't stop looking at him, he's going to shoot him."

"I go, 'Let's jam, Merit, forget this pussy,' but he wasn't trying to hear me. He stuck the gun up in the guy's forehead

and he goes, 'If you keep looking at me, I'll shoot you, I swear on the Madonna that I will.'

"So shoot then,' the guy says.

"You think I'm talking shit?' Merit goes. 'I'll shoot you for real.'

"So the guy says, 'Shoot already.'

"I turned my head and I heard the shot. When I looked up again, the guy was laying on the ground and he wasn't moving. Merit had blood all over his face."

"I told him I'd shoot his ass,' he goes. 'You heard me warn him, right?'

"And Gennaro goes, 'You warned him, dude.'"

"Merit threw the gun in a dumpster. He got the scooter running and we took off. And that's the whole story, Commissà."

The Commissioner walked a complete circuit of the periphery of the room. Coccozza didn't say anything more. Then the Commissioner sat down, and this time he was the one holding his head in his hands.

"So now can I go home, Commissà?" Coccozza said.

"Caruso!" the Commissioner shouted.

Caruso came back in. "Right here, sir."

"Get this guy out of here."

Caruso went over to Coccozza. "Come on," he said.

"Commissà, where'm I going now?"

Caruso took him by the arm and made him get to his feet.

"Why you ain't let me go home, Commissà, I dint do nothing."

"Come on," Caruso said again.

"Commissà, my mom is waiting for me, for shit's sake."

As Caruso was pulling him toward the door, the boy started to cry. "And what about my dad, what Ima tell him when I get home?"

Caruso and Coccozza left. Down the hall, you could still hear the boy's voice. He was shouting by now: "My dad

has a heart condition, yo. He gots a bad heart! Lemme go home, Commissà.”

The voice moved farther and farther away until you couldn't hear anything anymore.

A minute later, Caruso came back.

“You know something, Caruso?”

“What's that, sir?”

“Those planes should of crashed here, not in America,” the Commissioner said.

“Go home and get some rest, Commissà,” Caruso said, “you look tired.

“Yeah,” the Commissioner said, “you're right. Tired is exactly what I am.”

We Can't Really See Our Way to a Loan Right Now

The guy at the bank didn't even want to waste his time talking to me.

You could tell he remembered me from when I been in to ask for a loan last July. Like they were about to give me a fucking loan.

"Look, Mr. Esposito," he said, all the while talking to someone else on the phone. "There's really no point in waiting. I think I've already told you that we can't give you a loan."

"Right, right," I said, "I know."

He had this look on his face like he wanted to say, "So why don't you get lost then?" He kept on talking on the phone. Meanwhile, he was looking at my shoes, all crusty with plaster, and at the white stains on my pants. I hadn't changed clothes on purpose and I'd come back to this particular bank on purpose, because more than anything else I was looking for some satisfaction.

"As I've already explained," the loan officer said after he'd finished his phone call, "we can't really see our way to a loan right now."

I go, "You already told me that," and I sat down right in front of him.

"Well, then?" he asked.

"Yesterday my wife came in to talk about the long-distance adoptions that you do."

"Ah," he said, "Signora Antonella is your wife?"

"She's pretty good-looking, wouldn't you say?" I asked with a big smile. The guy got all flustered.

"Yes, she is," he said.

"You probably thought my wife would be a dog, huh?"

He turned as red as a San Marzano tomato: "Of course not. What's that got to do with anything. It's just that..."

"You weren't expecting it."

"Exactly," the loan officer said.

"Because you thought she'd be a dog," I repeated.

The loan officer turned red again.

"You'll have to forgive me," he said.

"No big deal," I said.

He pulled out the material for the long-distance adoptions and started talking about how they worked and all that. You could adopt a baby from Brazil or Africa or even from Palestine or some other country where everyone was starving to death.

The loan officer explained that adopting a baby in a foreign country meant that for 100,000 lire a month the association could guarantee each one of the children enough to eat and the possibility of an education. The association would keep records on how they were progressing and I'd be able to follow the child's progress for the whole time of the adoption. The long-distance adoptions lasted, on average, for about ten years. Then he asked if I had any preference for the nationality of the baby that I wanted to adopt.

"Doesn't matter," I said.

"So," he said, "that means we could choose a baby from..."

"From every country," I said.

The loan officer looked at me like he didn't understand what I was saying.

"How many different countries can you adopt children from?" I asked.

"There must be about thirty of them," he said.

"Excellent," I said. "So we'll adopt about thirty of them and that way nobody has to go away unhappy."

The loan officer gave me a slightly embarrassed smile, as if he wasn't sure whether I was crazy or screwing around.

"Listen, Mr. Esposito," he said, trying to sound all important. "We're working here."

"You listen, Mr. Mario," I said with a polite smile. I'd read his name off the tag that he was wearing on his jacket. "Since you're smelling a little sweaty right now, and since smelling your sweat is making me sick to my stomach, why don't you call the director?"

The poor guy didn't know what to do at that point—if he ought to get mad or if he should call the director or maybe just security.

He raised his voice a little and everyone turned to look our way. Another employee came over and also one of the security guards, but at exactly that precise moment the director appeared. He must have heard some kind of commotion going on, even from inside his office.

"Is there some kind of problem," he asked the loan officer.

The guy from the security service looked like he was just about ready to jump on top of me.

"He'd like to adopt thirty children long distance," the loan officer said, just like he was saying that I was crazy.

The director didn't bat an eyelash.

"That's a lovely thing, what you're thinking about doing," he said, "but we're talking about three million lire every month in expenses, Mr. Esposito, and your account...."

"Never mind about my account," I said.

I picked up the briefcase and I set in on the table. The security guy put his hand on his gun, but the director waved his hand at him to tell him to back off.

I opened the briefcase and they all stood there with their mouths hanging open.

"I'll pay the first two years in advance," I said. "That way I won't waste any of your time."

They were still standing there with their mouths open. I got up. "If you all don't mind, I need to go now. At the yard they only give us a half-hour for lunch."

I left feeling great, the way you do when you're playing pool, and let's say you're trying to sink the number four ball, and you hit the five a bank shot so that it ricochets two or three times off the table and then smacks the four and sends it right into the pocket.

Back in July, things had been different. In July, I was in deep shit and I didn't think there was going to be any way out of it. The baby pretty much had one foot in the grave, and Antonella wanted to jump out of a window. As for me, I was thinking that I might as well just light the gas and buona notte. There was no way the 400,000,000 lire we needed for Nicolò's operation was going to come together. The pocket change we'd been managing to put aside had to go to one frigging thing or another, and we already owed 3,000,000 lire to some piece of shit from the neighborhood who'd given us a loan. The bank wasn't looking to lend us so much as ten cents, and even if I worked from morning to night—even if I'd wanted to work all night long—there was no way I could come up with more than a couple of million a month.

So what else was there to do but turn on the gas? I could try pulling off a robbery or dealing a little heroin, but robberies weren't really my style, and I wasn't interested in learning anything, now or ever, about how you went about dealing heroin.

But watching your son dying right before your eyes and not doing anything is damned hard.

I left the bank and I started wandering around, completely clueless about what to do. I walked the entire way down via dei Tribunali and wound up at Piazza Duomo without even realizing what I was doing. The church was open, so I went in. I only go to church at Christmas, but not because

I'm a believer or because my conscience is bothering me. The only reason I go is to look at the crèches and nativity scenes or else to sit quietly and have a look at the colorful ceilings. Sometimes I go by myself, sometimes with Nicolò and Antonella.

I sat down in the silent church, my mind a blank. Then I went over to the statue of San Gennaro, all decorated with his cape and his robes in bright colors and little notes and cards stuck here and there from people who'd asked him for some kind of favor and maybe things went okay for them in the end.

"I guess we might as well try this, too," I thought to myself.

I told the saint loud and clear that I didn't believe in him, but even if I didn't believe in him, I liked him. If he could do something, great. If not, thanks just the same.

I went back home.

When I got there, Nicolò was worse than ever and let's not even talk about Antonella.

"So?" she asked.

I spread my arms and shook my head.

She went to bed without eating so much as a bite. I had a piece of cheese and tossed back two or three glasses of red wine.

Since it was hot and I wasn't sleepy, taking out the garbage gave me a good excuse to go downstairs to get a little air.

I sat down on a bench and lit up a cigarette. While I was smoking I heard someone shouting in any alley next to where I was. I got up and went to see what was going on.

There were three guys standing around another guy, smaller than them, who had a scooter. One of the three had a gun in his hand.

"If you don't quit looking at me, I'll shoot you," he said.

"You already got my scooter, what else do you want?" said the smaller kid.

"You want to bet I won't shoot you?" said the one with the gun.

"Forget it, already," said one of his friends.

"I want to shoot him first," the guy said, and he stuck the pistol up against the boy's forehead.

I didn't think, I just started moving. Maybe if I hadn't drunk that wine or if everything had been going great at home, I wouldn't have done it, but anyway it happened like it happened.

It only took a second. The guy with the gun turned toward me, but the bag of trash hit him right in the face. The gun fell out of his hand and he and the other two took off. They didn't even get the kid's scooter.

After that, the boy thanked me and asked me if there was anything he could do for me.

"Forget about it," I said.

He was dressed in pretty fancy clothes and even if he was barely fifteen he almost seemed like a grownup. He asked me where I lived. I told him, just to make him happy. He thanked me one more time and then he left.

A week passed. A really shitty week.

One night I get back home and Antonella says, "This came for you."

It was a brown envelope, sort of fat, like the kind advertising comes in, but there wasn't anything written on the outside. I turned it over in my hands, then I opened it. Inside there were some lotto tickets. To be specific, there were a hundred lottery tickets of two thousand lire each. Each ticket was for a three-number draw, and each one came from a different betting office.

In all, someone had put two hundred thousand lire on three-number draws all over Naples. The tickets were for the drawing they'd done the night before.

"So what's it mean?" asked Antonella.

"Well, I guess we'll see," I said.

We turned on the television to check the drawing and that's when we nearly dropped dead of a stroke. Our tickets had won.

We checked two or three times: it was really our numbers. After we added everything up, we realized it came to nine hundred million lire.

If that didn't kill us, nothing will.

The next day, I started making my rounds of the lottery offices. I was still thinking it was some kind of mistake or else it was a joke or who knows what. But it wasn't. I went in and they paid me: each lottery office gave me nine million.

Two weeks later, we left for Lyon.

The operation went great. Nicolò got better, we paid off our debts, and we put the rest of the money in the bank.

We were feeling pretty flush, like some kind of prince and princess, but something was still missing. What it was, we couldn't figure out.

Then on the eleventh of September we saw on the television about the attacks. Antonella and me spent the whole day watching television.

When it got to be night time, Antonella said she thought she'd figured something out.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"About the money....," she said.

"I'm right with you," I said. "What's fair is fair."

So that's how we got the idea about the children and the long-distance adoptions. Partly the idea came to us because Nicolò had been saved, and partly because Antonella kept thinking about those kids who came home after the attacks only to find nobody there waiting for them. Sure, America will worry about its own kids, but what about the ones just about rotting from hunger who've got no one to worry about them?

After I left the bank I went back to work at the yard. When I finished my shift, I took the 118 and stopped by the Duomo.

San Gennaro was still there, with his colored robes and that sweet look on his face, but a little bit like someone who's got something up his sleeve, like one of the street kids you see around Naples.

"If you deserve the credit for this, then thanks," I said, "and if not, thanks just the same."

I told him goodbye and went back to catch the 118.

I was hungry as a motherfucker, but even if there was a lot of traffic, and even if we were doing a meter about every ten minutes, and even if I got home late and my chicken cacciatore and baked potatoes were all cold, I really didn't have a single thing to complain about.

Anyway, It's Not Like Things Could Get Much Worse

Me, if I could, I'd take a Kalashnikov and I'd shoot every last person I know. Plus a couple of hand grenades and a bazooka. That'd be the end of them going around acting like a bunch of hot shits and that'd be the last anyone heard of them busting everybody else's balls. But since I can't do that, I came all the way up here to the top floor of the Hotel Riviera. I never seen Naples like this. In fact, looking across the city from up here, it seems like a different place all together: the ocean, the Castel dell'Ovo, the Maschio Angioino, the Capodimonte museum, the cars that look like so many ants and the people ... them you can't even see.

Seems like a different place all together.

"So, ma'am. How'd you get this idea in your head, anyway?" This fireman was sticking his head through the window and that's what he says to me.

"And what fucking difference does it make to you, *sir*?"

"Personally, none. But this is my job, and I'm trying to do it the best I can."

"Mister, you are wasting your time."

"So you definitely made up your mind?"

"You can take that all the way to the bank."

"What happened? Love affair go wrong?"

"I really seem that dizzy to you?"

"No, no. I don't mean that."

"That I'd throw myself off the top of a building because some man let me down?"

"Okay," he said, "then I'm wrong."

"In my case, it's my whole life that's let me down."

"Sounds rough."

"And if life has let you down...." I nodded toward the street below.

"Sure."

"How about you just leave me alone, then? It's better all the way around."

"Ma'am, if you could just explain to me first why you want to jump."

"Damn, you're stubborn."

"I know."

"Why so pushy?"

"Because, ma'am. If you really wanted to jump, you'd of done it already."

"No, sir. You got that all wrong. I do really want to jump. I just can't work up the nerve."

"That the only reason?"

"Plus, when you look at things from up here they seem different. The shit is still the same shit, but you get a nice feeling sitting up here and I wanted to enjoy it a little while before I jump. You understand?"

"No."

"Forget it."

He didn't talk for a while, then he pulled out a pack of Marlboros.

"Cigarette?"

"No, I gotta jump soon anyway."

"Smoke a cigarette, ma'am, and then you can jump."

I smiled and took a cigarette.

"Need a light?"

"I got a lighter, thanks."

I sat down with my legs hanging out in space and I lit the cigarette. He started smoking, too.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Samantha."

"That's exotic," he said.

"It's perfect for a whore like me," I answered.

"Oh," he said. "So that's it."

"That's what?"

"No, I just mean: that's why."

"What do you know about anything?"

"You have to explain it to me better, then."

"You're interested even if I am a whore, Mr. Fireman?"

"You're still a person."

Life is definitely strange. For twenty years you meet nothing but lowlifes and scumbags and then, just when you've finally decided to end it all, a decent person comes along.

"Okay," I said. "Before I die I guess I better tell the story to someone."

"Sounds like a good idea," he said.

"First off, I'm not a woman."

"What do you mean you're not a woman?"

"Oh come on. You don't get it, for real?"

"No."

"I'm trans. I'm trans even though I didn't choose to be one. But, really, that's not the problem, either.

"When I was five or six, I was a regular boy, it was just that I had this real smooth skin and big, soft eyes and these long legs like a girl. So they started giving me hormones and pills and shit so I'd start growing breasts, and my mother made me play with dolls, and she used to put makeup on my face and tell me I was the prettiest little girl of all.

"At five or six you can say anything you want to a kid, he'll believe you. You can tell him about the boogeyman, Santa Claus or little green men from outer space, and he's gonna think they exist. So if you tell a little boy he's really a little girl, it's not like he knows any different.

"Why'd they do it? For the money, of course. Because then, when you're twelve, thirteen, you can start turning tricks.

"They get you to think that's normal, too. And the men are hot for you. Mister, you'd never believe how much they want it. We got more customers than a regular whore, we got lines all the way down the street waiting for us and the money's coming in like it was raining cash. You find that hard to believe? You shouldn't. It happens. People raise hens because they lay eggs and they raise us like we are so we can do what we do.

"When you finally figure things out, it's too late because by then you can't tell anymore what you really are: a woman, a man, some other breed entirely, you got no idea.

"But I'm saying, a girl, once she gets to be eighteen, she could figure out on her own what she'd do if she had a little money, or at least decide what she wants to do with her life: be a whore or a hairdresser, or maybe start studying and get her a diploma, am I right?

"Nosiree. No chance in hell of that. No chance because that douchebag of a mother who brought you into this world and who's a bigger whore than you are, she sold you out. So now you belong to some piece-a-shit boss who doesn't give a fuck about you and uses you however and whenever he feels like.

"Just like some laying chicken.

"But I was sick and tired of being a chicken, so I ran off to Rome 'cuz I thought I'd find some way to get myself out of this prison camp. But they found me and they took me back to Naples again, and the next mistake I make, it's bye-bye Samantha."

The fireman was looking at me sort of pop-eyed, because you could tell he'd never heard nothing like this in his whole life.

"But, ma'am, can't you go to the police?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, the police. And you got no idea what the police are like, right?" I said.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

"So I'm going to jump and then I won't have to worry about it no more," I said, and I stood up.

"No, no, it can't end like this," he said. "It's not right."

"What are you gonna do," I said, "that's life." I was getting ready to jump but then the fireman climbed out onto the ledge with me.

He goes, "If you jump, then I'm going to jump, too."

I could tell he wasn't joking around, but what I couldn't figure out was how he got such a messed-up idea in his head.

"What's wrong with you?" I said. "You lose your mind?"

"Maybe."

"You got a wife, haven't you, sir?"

"She left me this morning."

"But you got kids, right?"

"Two."

"Then go back inside and stop acting like you're on crack."

"You have to come back in, too," he said.

It's getting so a girl can't even kill herself in peace these days, you know?

"What's your name?"

"Francesco."

"Francesco, now you listen up, okay? If I jump it doesn't have nothing in the world to do with you."

"I know that. But if you jump, ma'am, so help me I'm jumping, too."

"Sure you are," I said.

"Sure I am."

This guy was really going to do it.

I could of let him, I could of decided I didn't give a flying fuck who decided to jump off a ledge right next to me. Who was this guy sposed to be, anyway? It's not like I knew him.

But in my whole life, he was the only kind person I ever met.

Maybe he was doing it because his wife left him, maybe his brain was fried from the heat, or maybe it had something

to do with all those firemen who died in America trying to save people and he felt he needed to play the hero a little. You try and figure it out.

In the end, I decided to let it slide.

Anyway, If I wanted, I could jump the next day. What difference did it make to me? None, that's what. But for him to jump—that wasn't right. He'd go home that evening, take a shower, hug his kids, and forget all this madness.

When we were both back inside, he goes, "Thank you, ma'am, for not jumping."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

I said it like that because I wanted to say something nice, but then I started thinking that maybe the thing with the fireman was some kind of sign, that if I looked hard enough, there might still be a chance.

Maybe all I had to do was buy me a train ticket to Paris or Madrid.

I'd get on the train and my life would change.

I could try, like I was giving myself some kind of gift, yeah, exactly like I was giving myself permission to have a dream. My whole life, I been giving other people their dreams, who knows, for once maybe things might could even go the other way.

Lets Call Her Hope

Dont you worry, its all under control. Ten minutes and we there.

Vomero, Arenella, then Camaldoli.

Ten minutes. Or not even.

Howm I speedin? Ime barely doin 140, me.

I should slow down? No problem.

Okay, ime doin 120. Feel better?

Gué, gué, you really wanna stop right here?

Aw, whats wrong with this shitstain now?

Keep goin, come on, keep goin. Come on, bella, were almost there.

Oh hell no. This piece a crap decides to wait until were on the goddamn freeway to fall apart?

Naw, she aint even listenin.

You got your cell?

How come it aint got no signal? What piece a shit kinda cell phone you buy yourself, Rafaeli?

My one? The credits all used up and I forgot to refill it.

Gimme a sec and Ill try on the other side of that curve. Maybe I can catch a signal there.

No luck. Its not pickin up nothin over there, neither.

Well, theres no signal nowhere, Rafaeli.

Oh, so now its gotta be my fault theres not no signal and the cell dont work?

No, no, whaddaya talkin about? Whose gettin upset?

You dont feel so hot? I know, bella, I know. We gotta be a little patient.

Know what Ima do? Ima get out and stop a car so somebody can bring us to the hospital.

Those bastards not about to stop even if I shot at em.

Whaddaya mean? Was I standin in the middle of the freakin freeway, or wasnt I?

I hitch my skirt up 'n everythin, I sure did.

But it still wasnt nobody about to stop, and if I dint get out the street theyd of run me over.

Rafaeli, how you doin?

I know, bella, I know. But we gonna figure somethin out.

No, ime not worried, me.

Look, Rafaeli, we on the freeway bypass, it aint like its the freakin Sahara.

Okay, okay. Sorry ime stressin you out. Its jus how I do.

Whatever. I gotta shitty personality, suit yourself.

Holy shit Rafaeli, you all pale. You want some water?

Its hot out today. Drink a little water.

Here you go. Its nice n cold, come on now. Drink some, drink some, n then you feel better.

You feel better for real? I tole you if you drank some water, itd pick you up.

Okay, know what? Ima go have a look and see if I can figure out whats busted.

I know, I know. Daddy was the mechanic. Before they cart his ass off to jail, he was anyway.

You dont gotta do nothin, Rafaeli, I got it all under control.

So? So everythin looks how its pose to, I guess.

Yeah, yeah, I checked all that. The wires, the gas pump, the radiator water.

The oil to, yep.

Rafaeli, if I knew what was broke I wouldnt of got out to check in the first place, am I right?

Lemme try again, could be shell start.

Yeah, shell start now, jus you wait and see.

Hang in there, girl, come on. Start.

Dont be a bitch, now, turn over.

Nothin, shes not even tryin.

How you feelin?

Dammit, dammit to hell and back.

Hold on, I jus thought a somethin. I must of really got my head screwed on all wrong today if I dint think of this before. I could send a SMS with my cell.

I use up all the credit, thats undoubtful, but I gotta offer for fifty free SMS.

Okay. All done. I sent it to Filomena. Shell come runnin quick as she reads it.

Send one to nonno? Okeydokey, one for nonno to.

And one to Monica? You got it. One of them bound to see it, for sure.

In the meantime, Ima go knock on the door of that house down there.

Maybe somebody be home.

Yeah, yeah, Ill be careful. Dont you worry.

Wait here.

There wasnt nobody home, Rafaeli.

I even bang on the windows, you bet I did.

I was screamin at the top a my lungs, whaddya mean you aint hear me?

Aw, what do I know? Maybe it aint nobody that lives there.

Of course ime all sweaty. I run the whole way back.

How was I gone a hour? I was gone two or three minutes, tops.

Look, I was movin so fast I even busted my heel.

I know, I know already. A little patience wouldnt hurt.
Anybody call back on the cell?

Not even nonno?

Where the fuck everybody at?

At the beach? At three oclock? Since when your nonno still at the beach at three?

Thats what ime sayin. So why iddnt nobody pickin up the phone?

And Monica? That girl bring her cell phone with her even when she take a crap.

Your water broke? Whaddaya talkin about?

Hang on, lemme push the seat back.

There you go. Any better?

Its hot? No shit, its hot.

Hold on, lemme put a towel over the windshield for you. That sun is really fierce.

There you go. That better?

For sure. Drinka water comin up.

Rafaeli, mamas baby, you all sweaty. How you feelin?

Lemme wipe off some of that sweat.

There. Thats a little better, iddnit?

Contractions? You sure?

Of course you ought to know, but maybe your shook up is all.

Put your legs like this, youll be more comfortable that way.

Hes comin, Rafaeli, hes comin. Well, whatd you think? Thats where you came out of to, you know.

What the fuck you honkin at, you son of a bitch?

Hang on. Ill put some newspaper over the windshield.

No, I dont give a fuck, but who knows what it look like from the outside.

No, you not gonna die, Rafaeli, dont talk shit.

You feel like you gonna die? Push, push, damn it, and dont think about nothin else.

Thats the cell! Someone sent a SMS to the cell.

Its nonno.

Why the hell he iddnt call? Dont tell me he use up his phone card to.

Ime readin it, damn, gimme a sec.

He says its been some kind of attack in America and its more than a thousand people dead.

How the hell ime sponse to know, Rafaeli, thats what he wrote.

Maybe he iddnt understand. Lemme try writin him again so he get it.

Never mind? OK OK, whatever you want.

Sure your OK? Your all pale.

And now whose that bangin at the fuckin door?

Oh for chrissake, its the cops!

Rafaeli, lemme get out and talk to them. Maybe they can bring us to the hospital.

No, Mr. Officer, no. It iddnt like that. My daughters in the middle of havin a baby, and you talkin about hookers?

Because are car completely conked out.

You sayin its my fault are car broke down on the bypass?

Yes, I have my fuckin license. Sorry, officer, excuse me. My bad. Its jus that my girls in there, about half dead.

No, ime not tryin to make no jackass out of you, officer. Go take a look, you dont bleeve me. Go look.

Now you see what I mean?

Well, cant you bring her to the hospital?

No, true, not on that motorcycle you cant.

But cant you call nobody?

How the hell do I know, officer. Call a doctor, call a nambulance, call whoever you want but call somebody!

There callin us a nambulance now, Rafaeli.

How come you dont need it no more? Whatta you mean?

Oh sweet St. Jerome in the desert, it sure is!

Oh lordy, what a screamer! You hearin all that howlin?

No, no, its a good sign when they scream like that.

Bloods normal, Rafaeli, dont get all freaked out.

This thing here? Thats the unbiblical cord.

No, its not gonna stay stuck in you. The doctorll cut it, quick as he come.

Thats the way, jus breathe and cry.

Jesus, you all pale, Rafaeli, you sure you feel ok?

I set the baby down here on my jacket, dont you worry.

Hold on, lemme look.

Its a girl.

Yeah, okay, you wanted a boy, but a girls good to, iddnit?

Thats what ime sayin. Girls got a better head on there shoulders, plus there more affectionate.

Yeah, Rafaeli, I know. She might turn out to be some kinda slag anyway.

To soon to tell, yes maam.

What we gonna call her? I dunno. Thats up to you.

Margarita? She some kind of pizza, that girl, that you wanna call her Margarita?

Liberty? One a your Auntie Titinas girls was name Liberty and they wound up givin her twenty years.

Samantha? You give her a name like Samantha, she grow up a slut for sure.

Hope iddnt bad.

Yeah, could be a sign a good things comin.

No, its not nasty. It aint to original, but its not nasty.

Aw, listen at that! You hear how she screechin? You hear Hope?

And now whats the matter? Dont tell me you cryin to, Rafaeli?

Gué, why you doin that for, bella?

You love me, and thats why you cryin like that?

I love you, Rafaeli, yes maam I do. I love you. I love you to.

The King of Naples

I'm handsome as an actor and strong as a bull and there ain't no place in Naples where their legs don't turn to Jello when they hear my name. I got protection money coming in from the Quartieri Spagnoli all the way to the Vomero. Even the cops pay me off, and if this was the 1500s, they'd make me King of Naples, no two ways about it. They hate me and they respect me 'cuz I'm the strongest. If somebody disrespects me, all I gotta do is raise my hand and an hour later he's dead, 'cuz Agostino is the closest thing they got to a god, and if you got the balls just to say my name, you take a chance on ending up in a world of hurt.

I bought everything there is to buy: fancy houses, private beaches, speedboats, soccer players, politicians. I got myself a leopard to put in the living room just to make an impression and I got a swimming pool full of piranhas where every now and then I toss some asshole who's pissing me off. But I still feel like a piece of shit. I feel like a piece of shit 'cuz, even with everything I got, my dick won't stand up straight. My wife is laughing in my face. The whole city craps its pants if someone so much as whispers my name and she's laughing in my face. I could always kill her, but I know that wouldn't fix anything. I'll kill her later, I was

thinking, after I fuck her, then I can kill her for sure, but what sense does it make to do it before? It's a question of principle.

I went to Paris to visit me a bunch of high-class doctors. They said there wasn't nothing wrong, it's just some kind of psychological block, just they don't know what the block is.

"Maybe you like men," one of the doctors goes.

No, I ain't no fag. If I was a fag, that would at least take care of the problem, but I like my wife just fine. It's just that even if I like her, my dick still ain't gettin' hard. Meanwhile, she's laughing in my face, and every once in a while she goes out like a whore with other guys. Obviously, I get someone to cap their asses 'cuz they gotta pay if they diss me like that, but the problem ain't really going away.

And it's not like I had to pay for my wife, not by a long shot. My wife fell in love with me when she was still a girl. She use to see me going by on my motorcycle in the neighborhood and she thought I was her knight in shining armor, and she got obsessed with this idea that she was gonna marry me. As soon as she grew up she was convinced she was gonna marry me.

So when she turned eighteen, Amalia came and told me that's what she wanted. She was a knockout, Amalia was, and she had this ass that was like some friggin' museum sculpture and a smile like a movie actress.

So I married her.

She was still a virgin.

The first night I got everything fixed up better than something out of the Arabian Nights. We had red silk sheets, these scented candles that give off a really nice light, a canopy bed that looked like it belonged to a prince or something, and mirrors over the bed so I could watch while I fucked her. From the window you could see the rocks of the Faraglioni sticking up just off the coast, and I'd picked a night with a full moon for the wedding 'cuz I knew that would go over pretty nice. Down below, under

the window, I had the best singer in Naples serenadin' her on the piano, and I gave Amalia this lingerie outfit that not even the French royalty ever seen anything like that. It was all made out of this transparent lace that tied up in the back and it made her even more smokin' than she already is. It was supposed to be one of those nights that only come along once in your life, a night you remember all the way until the day you die. I felt like a champ, God's gift. I was living larger than a maharajah.

That's when my dick decided to punk me.

It had never happened to me before in my life, but it had to happen that night of all nights.

It was like in that film with Eduardo di Filippo, when that stuffed-shirt duke passes by and Eduardo blows him a raspberry, and the guy just stands there lookin' like a douchebag. That's how I felt.

I thought it was just one of those things, too much wine, tired after the wedding reception, who knows, maybe I was even a little emotional. But it happened again the next night, and the night after that, and the night after that. There was no use. My dick wasn't pay no attention to what I wanted him to do. In fact, it seemed like he was getting a kick out of fuckin' with me, since he knew he was at least one I wouldn't shoot. I went with a couple other girls to see if it was some kind of, like, genetic thing, and I didn't have any problem with them. Just with Amalia it wasn't happening. It's not like I wasn't putting my mind to it, but not even St. Jude coulda helped me.

And she started laughing in my face. At first, I thought I ought to do her, and especially later on, when she was whoring around right and left, but I really wanted to fuck her first, at least once, for crissake.

I tried eating oysters and sea food 'cuz they say they're, like, aphrodisiacs, and I tried these creams that they advertise on TV. I tried coke, Viagra, I tried everything there is to try, but there wasn't nothing to do. All Amalia had to do was get close, and my dick would wilt.

So that's why in the end I had to do it. It was something I couldn't resist. I had to do it even if I hadn't ever fucked her. I had to do it 'cuz people were starting to talk and I couldn't risk losing respect. If I lost respect that was it. I could have all the panthers and all the swimming pools full of piranhas I wanted and kill ten people a day.

But I did it with my own hands, at least I did that much.

I decided the other night, the night after the towers blew up in America. She came back home after fucking some pizzaiolo at Tótore's place. She was all happy and had this look on her face like she didn't give a shit about nothing. I spent the whole day watching what was going on with the towers in New York, and afterwards I started feeling like America, that I couldn't just stand there and not do something, that if I didn't do something I'd lose my power and then people would be lookin' to get a piece of my ass.

Without saying a word, I just started choking her.

Maybe if she'd asked me for some mercy I'd of changed my mind and stopped, but the idea never even came into her head. She was just laughing at me with that actress smile on her face that makes her look even more beautiful.

I was squeezing real slow, waiting for her to do something, give me a look, say something—anything—but she just kept on laughing, not scared or nothin' and not saying she was sorry or begging me to stop, as if it didn't have nothing to do with her. So I kept squeezing, and I felt stronger, like I was finally fucking her at last.

Now people are more scared of me than they were before. They hear my name and they start saying their prayers, and they pay their protection money without so much as a peep, thanking me 'cuz I let 'em go on living and don't shoot their sorry asses. But I still feel like a piece of shit, even if now I fuck all the women I want, even if I bought myself another panther and everyone treats me like I was the King of Naples. Anyway I already know there's nothing I can do about it. I gotta carry this torment with me for the

rest of my life, I gotta keep it inside me. I could become mayor, president of the country, Emperor of Italy, this shit that's eating my guts out won't give me no peace. It's like my shadow that follows me down the street, like the face that's in the mirror every morning. Even if I'm serious, that face keeps smiling, like it's having too much fun jerking me around, like it's sayin' "Agostì, you're such a piece of shit!"

Could Be I Get Back There First

“So I hope it’s not gonna be another three years before you come visit me again,” Andrea said.

“No, no. I’ll be back in five or six months,” I answered.

“You’re just saying that.”

“Why? I’m here now, aren’t I?”

He nodded, and then he said, “Could be I get back there first.”

“You thinking of taking a trip to Naples?”

“No, if I come back, it’ll be for good.”

“And you’re telling me this now, at the airport, when I’m about to take off?”

“It’s just something I’m thinking about. These three days we’ve spent together—well, it’s made me a little homesick for Naples.”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you, Andrea, how much I’d like that.”

“Know what I was thinking? That maybe I’d set something up on Ischia and open a pizzeria there. What do you think?”

“What should I think? It’s not a bad idea at all.”

"I'll work here another two or three years, enough time to save up some money, and then I'll pack up the wife and kids and come back to Naples. But I want the pizzeria to be on Ischia. I want to have a place right on the ocean and live like a maharajah!"

"I'd come and work with you, that's for sure."

"Definitely," Andrea said. "If you want, we could even go into business together."

"I'm in. When you're ready to go, all you have to do is give a whistle and we'll get things figured out."

The loudspeaker was announcing the flight for Los Angeles.

"Gué, I have to get going, Geppino," Andrea said.

"We haven't even had a cup of coffee."

"We'll get coffee in Naples. The stuff they make here is swill anyway."

We hugged and he started off toward Gate 6.

"Let me know!" I shouted.

He raised his hand to say goodbye.

A minute later they announced that the flight for Naples was about to leave. I started back toward the international terminal.

The plane passed right by the Statue of Liberty, and then it flew out over the ocean. The stewardess made a pass through the aisle with her cart and I took a Coca-Cola and a ham sandwich. The sky was blue and there wasn't a cloud in sight. After I ate, I decided to watch a Sylvester Stallone flick. I fell asleep before it was over.

And I had a dream: I was back in Ischia, dressed like a guy in a pizzeria. I was standing outside the restaurant I'd opened with Andrea, having a smoke. The sun was shining and one of those Caremar ferries was just coming into the port. I went back inside the pizzeria and fired up the oven. Andrea was setting out the balls of dough for the pizza crusts, but the dough was already starting to rise.

I said, "Looks like you put in too much yeast."

"Says who?" Andrea said.

But in the meantime the balls of dough kept getting bigger and bigger and I couldn't believe that Andrea hadn't noticed he'd used too much yeast. And then one of the balls exploded.

"See?" I said. "Too much yeast." Andrea had hurt his hand.

"Yeah," he said, "there was too much yeast."

"Are you okay?"

"It's nothing," he said.

But a drop of blood fell from his hand and landed on the balls of pizza dough, and they all turned red.

I woke up feeling sort of upset. It was just a stupid fucking dream that didn't mean anything, but somehow it left me kind of depressed. It seemed like maybe we'd never get the chance to open up that pizzeria after all.

Outside the sun was still shining and all around it was nothing but blue.

I looked out the window to check whether you could see the ocean, but it didn't seem like it.

I took a little walk to stretch my legs. Then I went to have a cigarette in the smoking section.

While I was smoking I saw these three guys playing cards. I realized there were playing tressette, and I went over to them.

"You guys need a fourth?" I asked.

"Why not?" one of them said.

They were from Torre del Greco, about seventeen kilometers down the coast from Naples. I started playing cards with them. When we landed in Naples, it hardly seemed like a minute had gone by.

We got off the plane and said goodbye.

It was about one in the morning.

While I was waiting for my bags, I noticed they'd canceled all the departures. I thought that was strange, but I figured there must be some kind of strike. I went out to get a cab.

I was a little tired because of jet lag and because of the flight. I wanted to take a shower and get into bed.

"Mind if I smoke?" I asked the cab driver.

"Smoke, smoke," he says.

I lit up a cigarette and looked out the window. There was nothing on the street but a few cars and a transvestite or two. I was thinking I'd pick up a pizza to take back to the house, but when we passed by Pizzeria Tótore, they were already closed.

We had to stop in an alley because a garbage truck was in the way, emptying the dumpsters. While we were stopped I saw an open shop where they were just putting bread into the oven. The smell of baking was coming all the way out to the cab.

"Hang on a sec," I told the taxi guy. "I want to buy some bread.

The cab driver pulled over and I got out.

"Want me to get some for you?" I asked.

"No, thanks," he said.

After I bought my bread, we took off again. For a while neither one of us said anything.

"Where you coming from tonight?" he asked as we were heading up Corso Vittorio Emanuele.

I didn't feel much like talking, but I didn't want to be a jerk.

"From New York," I told him.

I could see that he got this weird look on his face and that he was staring at me through the rear-view mirror.

"New York?" he said.

"Something strange about that?" I asked.

"No," he said.

When we got to my house, I paid and got out.

He rolled down his window and said, "You know what happened in New York, don't you?"

"No," I said, "what happened."

"You don't know about the attacks?"

"What attacks?"

So he started telling me all about the two hijacked airplanes that crashed into the towers and the one that

crashed into the Pentagon and the fourth one that ended up in the woods.

“I didn’t know,” I said. “What time did it happen?”

“It was around three o’clock. In America it was a little before nine in the morning.”

The first thing I thought was that Andrea had been due to leave about a half hour later. As I thought about it, I realized my hands were shaking.

“You feeling all right?” the cab driver asked.

“Sure, sure. I’m fine,” I said. “I’m fine, nothing to worry about.”

I Raised My Hand to Wave Goodbye and I Didn't See Him After That

As I was going toward Gate 6, I heard Geppino shout, "Let me know!"

I raised my hand to wave goodbye, and then I passed through the metal detector, and I didn't see him after that.

As I was boarding the plane I thought some more about the idea of opening a pizzeria on Ischia. More and more, it really seemed like a plan. I already knew the spot where I wanted it to be: facing the ocean on the east coast of the island, with the Castello Aragonese on its little spit of land, right offshore. During high season in the summer, the kids could play in the piazza because they keep the cars out. And if they felt like going for a swim, they'd have the nice, clean ocean right below the pizzeria. There's even a bar with a covered pergola, next to the wharf, and if you want you can sit under the pergola in the fresh air and drink your coffee there.

They have an open-air market every Sunday, and Lucy would definitely want to go see that because she's crazy about those little outdoor markets. And then around

eleven, the boat comes in with fresh fish, and you just pick what looks good: an anchovy or two, a couple of octopus, maybe some sole, and then we could cook the fish in the pizza oven, when we're closed for lunch, and we could all eat together on the terrace.

But in the winter, you're only open in the evening, so there'd be time for us to do a little fishing ourselves, just to see what we could catch, or else play tressette with Geppino at the bar on the wharf. Lucy could ride her bike anywhere, and the kids could walk to school, not like in Los Angeles or Naples where it takes you an hour to drive there and an hour to drive back. If the weather turns bad and a southwester kicks up, then you hear the wind whistling from the bedroom and you can stand at the window, smoking a cigarette, and watching the waves as they try to climb up into the piazza.

To me, it seemed like a great life, and I almost wished those two or three years would pass faster so I'd be able to enjoy it as soon as possible.

My seat was in the back of the airplane. It was nine thirty.

I Woke Up in a Puddle of Sweat

I looked up from my newspaper because someone was screaming.

What I saw was a sheep with blood all over its neck. Well, that was a little upsetting. Any idea what it's like to see a totally white sheep turn red all of a sudden? You better believe it's upsetting.

Seven or eight of these gangster-looking guys dressed in weird, black-and-white striped T-shirts and short pants, who you couldn't figure out why anyone had let them get on the plane, were running back and forth like nutjobs, screaming "Move it! Move it! Move your asses!"

You could tell by their faces that they were from Naples, but something wasn't right. For instance, one of them was holding a baba in his hand, and he was saying that it was a bomb, and that if we didn't get moving he'd take a bite out of the baba and blow the whole bunch of us to kingdom come. Another one of them was holding a whip, and he was snapping it in the air so that it made this nasty fucking sound like when someone scrapes a fork on his plate. It was the kind of sound that gives a person gooseflesh.

"What did you guys kill my sheep for?" asked the guy who owned the poor thing as they were shoving him along.

"Keep walking, asshole. Get back there with the rest of them," said one of the tough guys with the black-and-white T-shirts.

When they'd gotten everyone moved to the pack, two of them went into the cockpit. A minute later we heard a voice telling us to stay calm, that we were turning back to Naples and that everything was going to be fine.

Everything was fine, my ass. If everything was fine, I was the freaking King of Naples.

One of the passengers—a tall guy around thirty, all tan and handsome, with a sort of squashed-in nose like the kind that boxers get, and wearing a tank top that had a picture of Vesuvius on the front—lay down on the floor and called someone on his cell phone.

He talked for a minute or two. While he was talking, we were all sitting there not making any noise, trying to pick something up from his conversation, but he was talking super-quiet so the guys with the black-and-white T-shirts wouldn't figure out what he was doing, and the only thing we could make out was that he was on the phone with his mother.

When he hung up his cell, he looked like he'd lost every bit of his tan.

"Well," somebody said, "so what's going on?"

The guy with the boxer's face said that he found out from his mother that the tough guys had hijacked two other airplanes.

"And what are they doing with them?" someone else asked.

The flown the first one into the Maschio Angioino. The Maschio Angioino had collapsed and at the absolute bare minimum there were two or three thousand people dead. They'd crashed the other plane into the Castel dell'Ovo. There were another five hundred dead there. On TV they'd been talking about our plane, too, but all they were saying

was that they'd lost contact with it and that no one knew where it was.

For a minute nobody said anything.

The plan made a wide turn and reversed course.

Some old lady who was a hundred if she was a day started crying.

Nobody was saying it, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that these guys were planning to crash our plane, too, some place or other. We didn't know where and we didn't know why, but we were going to end up just like the others, and you could take that to the bank.

"I don't want to die!" the old lady said.

"Give me a break, lady," someone said. "You're the last one here who has something to complain about."

The old lady shut up.

"We gotta do sum'thin," said the guy with the face like a boxer.

"If they'd just explain to us exactly what they wanted," said a guy in a jacket and tie. He was about fifty and had an accent that said he was from Milan.

"Yeah, let's tear 'em a new asshole," said the boxer, "one by one."

"What are we waiting for," said a guy with a gut that went on for miles. "I don't wanna sit here dickin' around all day."

We went back and forth for a while. Some were in and some weren't, but in the end there were eight of us who were ready for whatever happened.

We picked up anything we could get our hands on—one guy had a butter knife, someone else had a tray. One guy even had his wife's high heel shoe.

The guy with the sheep they'd killed pulled out a bottle of red wine.

"Damn," I said. "That's a Per 'e Palummo."

"I make it myself on Ischia."

"I might be opening up a pizzeria on Ischia," I said, "me and a friend."

"Congratulations," he said.

"You guys can come eat there whenever you want."

"Sounds good. Thanks."

The eight of us who'd decided to go passed the bottle around. We all took a swig.

Then we stood up.

The guys with the striped T-shirts, meanwhile, had started a game of tressette. Four of them were playing. The other two were standing around watching, and every once in a while they'd make some comment. As soon as they saw us coming down the aisle, they shouted at us to go back and sit down so they could finish playing tressette. They threatened us with the baba bomb and with the whip, but there was no turning back.

How it went down was just like the back alley brawls we used to get into when we were kids: once the thing actually kicks off, you're not afraid anymore. Before you are, but once you're in it the fear goes and it's balls to the wall, and all you want to do is try to land as many punches as possible.

The guy with the enormous gut got hit with the whip and he went down. The Milanese took one right in the eye and immediately turned into a pussy. But the boxer, on the other hand.... The boxer was a sight to behold, the way he was throwing haymakers: a right, a left, upper cuts, and hooks—even a head butt right in the mouth of one of the bad guys who was having a hard time deciding to go down. As for the others, it was kicks and punches any which way they could, and the ones left sitting in the back of the plane were cheering so loud it was practically like being in a stadium.

Anyway, when it was all over none of them was in any shape to fuck with anyone anymore, and we could get into the cockpit.

Inside, there was flour everywhere. The pilot of the plane, the real one, was sitting on the floor of the cockpit with his head inside a sack of flour, his hands dangling at his

sides. As for the co-pilot, they'd stuck him in the pizza oven and they hadn't even noticed they were overcooking him.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" said one of the gangster-looking guys. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The other one stood up with a knife in his hand, but he didn't have enough time to say "amen" before the boxer busted him a good one on the point of his chin.

The guy stood there for a second, then he dropped like a shot, flat on his face.

There was just one left.

He made like he was going to get up, but I was too fast. I grabbed him by the head, I took a deep breath, and then I jerked his head backwards with one clean, swift movement. You could hear a sound like the one tree branches make when they break, and he didn't move after that.

While all of this was going on, the plane, in the meantime, had been veering to the right and then to the left, and finally it started to go down. The boxer grabbed the control stick and started pulling, but nothing happened.

The plane was still going down. In fact, it was falling faster all the time.

The boxer gave the controls another yank, but nothing happened that time either.

"Come on, now. Don't be a faggot," the boxer said, and he gave it a third try. No go.

The plane was falling so fast that we were knocked to the floor of the cockpit. The boxer managed to keep his grip on the controls with one hand, and with the other he was pounding them with his fist, these terrifying Herculean blows, and with every punch he'd shout, "Stop, you bitch, stop!"

But the plane wasn't in any mood for stopping.

I felt all the air go out of me.

I thought about how I was never going to open up that pizzeria with Andrea, and I found myself hoping that the

plane would crash into the ocean. If it crashed into the ocean, then at least there was a chance we might make it. Maybe that wasn't true, maybe it didn't make any difference one way or the other, but falling into water seemed better to me. It seemed like it might hurt less.

I woke up in a puddle of sweat.

I'd fallen asleep with the television on.

On TV they were still talking about the attack in America.

I got up and drank down a gulp of water. I felt like I was about to keel over dead from the heat, so I opened the window. Out there, it was still the middle of night.

Off to one side, in the distance, you could see the lights in the harbor. If you looked the other way, you could see lights around the train station and the reddish reflections off the illuminated sign at Pizzeria Tótore.

I lit up a cigarette.

While I was having my smoke, I started thinking, and I was thinking and thinking but it was pretty much the same as not thinking at all, like all my thoughts were just spiraling around on themselves and weren't actually going to land anywhere, because if they ever did, who knows what might happen.

Then, in the middle of all that, the window across the way opened up. In the dark I could see the old lady who lives in the apartment across from ours.

I called out hello to her, and the old lady answered by raising her hand. I was half-convinced she actually even smiled. I'm not totally certain, but it sure seemed like it. Up until that day, the old lady had never smiled even once. She'd just raise her hand and that was it. But this time, she'd given me a smile.

Who knows what that was about.

Books by Andrej Longo

Italian

Prima o Poi Tornerò, Guida (1992)

Più o Meno alle Tre, Meridiano Zero (2002)

Adelante, Rizzoli (2003)

Dieci, Adelphi (2007)

Chi Ha Ucciso Sarah?, Adelphi (2009)

Lu Campo di Girasoli, Adelphi (2011)

L'Altra Madre, Adelphi (2016)

English

Ten, Harvill Secker (2011; Howard Curtis, trans.)

Also from FourCats Press

What We Lost In The Fire & Other Stories (Wendell Ricketts)

Even as they blur distinctions between fiction and memoir, the daring, challenging stories in *What We Lost in the Fire* stretch and expand notions of queer lives—and of queer writing.

How to Read a Photograph: Frame and Focus (Carolyn

Whitson) — A vocabulary and a procedure for training the eye to see photographs but also to understanding how photographs have trained our eyes to see the world.

Blue, Too: More Writing by (for or about) Working Class

Queers — Twenty writers speak meaningfully—in short fiction, memoir, performance pieces, and prose poems—about queers in and from the working class.

The Book of Singloids (Stefano Tartarotti, Roberto Corda &

Roberto Frangi) — A comic strip about nerdiness, friendship, sex, love ... and other maladies of the human condition.

Cher Upon A Midnight Clear (Matteo B. Bianchi) — How do

adults know when something is for boys and when it's for girls? For eight-year-old Luca, it's a mystery, but who does a child turn to when he can't even count on Santa Claus?

Twenty Cigarettes in Nasiriyah: A Memoir (Francesco

Trento & Aureliano Amadei) — The November 2003 suicide bombing of an Italian military base in Iraq left twenty-eight dead and scores wounded. Amadei, gravely injured in the attack, reflects upon the circumstances that took him to Iraq and on his role as a reluctant “Hero of Nasiriyah.”

Heterosexual & Homosexual Identities: The Normalization of Sexual Relationships (John P. DeCecco & Michael G.

Shively) — A sweeping critique of writing on sexual identity and the processes that have contributed to the toxication and detoxication of “homosexual identity.”

