FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE DAYS OF ABANDONMENT*

Elena Ferrante

Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay

Book Three
of the Neapolitan Novels

"One of modern fiction's richest portraits of a friendship."—*NPR*

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editions

Europa Editions
214 West 29th St., Suite 1003
New York NY 10001
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www.europaeditions.com

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First publication 2014 by Europa Editions

Translation by Ann Goldstein
Original Title: *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*
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Cover Art by Emanuele Ragnisco
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ISBN 9781609452230

Elena Ferrante

THOSE WHO LEAVE AND THOSE WHO STAY

Translated from the Italian
by Ann Goldstein

Index of Characters and Notes on the Events of the Earlier Volumes

The Cerullo family (the shoemaker's family):

Fernando Cerullo, shoemaker, Lila's father. He wouldn't send his daughter beyond elementary schoo

Nunzia Cerullo, Lila's mother. Close to her daughter, but without sufficient authority to support h against her father.

Raffaella Cerullo, called Lina, or Lila. She was born in August, 1944, and is sixty-six when sh disappears from Naples without a trace. A brilliant student, at the age of ten she writes a story titl *The Blue Fairy.* She leaves school after getting her elementary-school diploma and learns to be shoemaker.She marries Stefano Carracci at a young age and successfully manages first the grocery store in the new neighborhood and then the shoe store in Piazza dei Martiri. During a vacation c Ischia she falls in love with Nino Sarratore, for whom she leaves her husband. After the shipwreck her relationship with Nino and the birth of her son Gennaro (also called Rino), Lila leaves Stefar definitively when she discovers that he is expecting a child with Ada Cappuccio. She moves with Enz Scanno to San Giovanni a Teduccio and begins working in the sausage factory belonging to Brur Soccavo.

Rino Cerullo, Lila's older brother, also a shoemaker. With his father, Fernando, and thanks to Lila ar to Stefano Carracci's money, he sets up the Cerullo shoe factory. He marries Stefano's sister, Pinucc Carracci, with whom he has a son, Ferdinando, called Dino. Lila's son bears his name, Rino.

Other children.

The Greco family (the porter's family):

Elena Greco, called Lenuccia or Lenù. Born in August, 1944, she is the author of the long story we a reading. Elena begins to write it when she learns that her childhood friend Lina Cerullo, whom she cal Lila, has disappeared. After elementary school, Elena continues to study, with increasing success; high school her abilities and Professor Galiani's protection allow her to survive unscathed a clash wi the religion teacher about the role of the Holy Spirit. At the invitation of Nino Sarratore, with who she has been secretly in love since childhood, and with valuable help from Lila, she writes an artic about this clash, which, in the end, is not published in the magazine Nino contributes to. Elena brilliant schoolwork is crowned by a degree from the Scuola Normale, in Pisa, where she meets ar becomes engaged to Pietro Airota, and by the publication of a novel in which she reimagines the life the neighborhood and her adolescent experiences on Ischia.

Peppe, *Gianni*, and *Elisa*, Elena's younger siblings.

The *father* is a porter at the city hall.

The *mother* is a housewife. Her limping gait haunts Elena.

The Carracci family (Don Achille's family):

Don Achille Carracci, the ogre of fairy tales, dealer in the black market, loan shark. He was murdered.

~~*Maria Carracci*, wife of Don Achille, mother of Stefano, Pinuccia, and Alfonso. She works in the~~ fami grocery store.

Stefano Carracci, son of Don Achille, husband of Lila. He manages the assets accumulated by his fath and over time becomes a successful shopkeeper, thanks to two profitable grocery stores and the sho store in Piazza dei Martiri, which he opens with the Solara brothers. Dissatisfied by his storm marriage to Lila, he initiates a relationship with Ada Cappuccio. He and Ada start living together whe she becomes pregnant and Lila moves to San Giovanni a Teduccio.

Pinuccia, daughter of Don Achille. She works in the family grocery store, and then in the shoe stor She is married to Lila's brother, Rino, and has a son with him, Ferdinando, called Dino.

Alfonso, son of Don Achille. He is Elena's schoolmate. He is the boyfriend of Marisa Sarratore ar becomes the manager of the shoe store in Piazza dei Martiri.

The Peluso family (the carpenter's family):

Alfredo Peluso, carpenter. Communist. Accused of killing Don Achille, he was convicted and sent prison, where he dies.

Giuseppina Peluso, wife of Alfredo. A worker in the tobacco factory, she is devoted to her children ar her imprisoned husband. After his death, she commits suicide.

Pasquale Peluso, older son of Alfredo and Giuseppina, construction worker, militant Communist. H was the first to become aware of Lila's beauty and to declare his love for her. He detests the Solaras. H was the boyfriend of Ada Cappuccio.

Carmela Peluso, also called *Carmen,* sister of Pasquale. She is a salesclerk in a notions store but is soo hired by Lila to work in Stefano's new grocery store. She was the girlfriend of Enzo Scanno for a lor time, but he leaves her without explanation at the end of his military service. She subsequent becomes engaged to the owner of the gas pump on the *stradone.*

Other children.

The Cappuccio family (the mad widow's family):

Melina, a relative of Nunzia Cerullo, a widow. She washes the stairs of the apartment buildings in th old neighborhood. She was the lover of Donato Sarratore, Nino's father. The Sarratores left th neighborhood because of that relationship, and Melina has nearly lost her mind.

Melina's *husband*, who unloaded crates in the fruit and vegetable market, and died in mysteriou circumstances.

Ada Cappuccio, Melina's daughter. As a girl she helped her mother wash the stairs. Thanks to Lila, sh is hired as a salesclerk in the Carraccis' grocery. She is the girlfriend of Pasquale Peluso, and becom the lover of Stefano Carracci: when she gets pregnant she goes to live with him. From the relationship a girl, Maria, is born.

Antonio Cappuccio, her brother, a mechanic. He is Elena's boyfriend and is very jealous of Nin Sarratore. The prospect of leaving for military service worries him deeply, but when Elena turns to th Solara brothers to help him avoid it, he is humiliated, so much so that he breaks off their relationshi During his military service he has a nervous breakdown and is discharged early; back in th neighborhood, driven by poverty, he goes to work for Michele Solara, who at a certain point sends hi to Germany on a long and mysterious job.

Other children.

The Sarratore family (the railway-worker poet's family):

Donato Sarratore, train conductor, poet, journalist. A great womanizer, he was the lover of Meli
Cappuccio. When Elena goes on vacation to Ischia, and is a guest in the same house where th
Sarratores are staying, she is compelled to leave in a hurry to escape Donato's sexual molestations. Th
following summer, however, Elena gives herself to him on the beach, driven by the suffering that th
relationship between Nino and Lila has caused her. To exorcise this degrading experience, Elena writ
about it in the book that is then published.

Lidia Sarratore, wife of Donato.

Nino Sarratore, the oldest of the five children of Donato and Lidia. He hates his father. He is a
extremely brilliant student and has a long secret affair with Lila. They live together briefly when Li
becomes pregnant.

Marisa Sarratore, sister of Nino. The girlfriend of Alfonso Carracci.

Pino, *Clelia*, and *Ciro Sarratore,* younger children of Donato and Lidia.

The Scanno family (the fruit-and-vegetable seller's family):

Nicola Scanno, fruit-and-vegetable seller, died of pneumonia.

Assunta Scanno, wife of Nicola, died of cancer.

Enzo Scanno, son of Nicola and Assunta, also a fruit-and-vegetable seller. Lila has felt a liking for hi
since childhood. Enzo was for a long time the boyfriend of Carmen Peluso, whom he leaves witho
explanation upon his return from military service. During his military service he started to stu
again, and he earns an engineering diploma. When Lila finally decides to leave Stefano, he tak
responsibility for her and her son, Gennaro, and the three of them go to live in San Giovanni
Teduccio.

Other children.

The Solara family (the family of the owner of the Solara bar-pastry shop):

Silvio Solara, owner of the bar-pastry shop, Monarchist-fascist and Camorrist tied to the illeg
trafficking in the neighborhood. He opposed the Cerullo shoe factory.

Manuela Solara, wife of Silvio, moneylender: her red book is much feared in the neighborhood.

Marcello and Michele Solara, sons of Silvio and Manuela. Braggarts, arrogant, they are neverthele
loved by the neighborhood girls, except Lila and Elena. Marcello is in love with Lila but she rejects hi
Michele, a little younger than Marcello, is colder, more intelligent, more violent. He is engaged
Gigliola, the daughter of the pastry maker, but over the years develops a morbid obsession with Lila.

The Spagnuolo family (the baker's family):

Signor Spagnuolo, pastry maker at the Solaras' bar-pastry shop.

Rosa Spagnuolo, wife of the pastry maker.

Gigliola Spagnuolo, daughter of the pastry maker, engaged to Michele Solara.

Other children.

The Airota family:

Guido Airota, professor of Greek literature.

Adele Airota, his wife. She works for the Milanese publishing house that publishes Elena's novel.

Mariarosa Airota, the older daughter, professor of art history in Milan.

Pietro Airota, university colleague of Elena's and her fiancé, destined for a brilliant academic career.

The teachers:

Maestro Ferraro, teacher and librarian.He gave both Lila and Elena prizes when they were young, because they were diligent readers.

Maestra Oliviero, teacher. She is the first to notice the potential of Lila and Elena. At the age of te Lila writes a story titled *The Blue Fairy.* Elena, who likes the story a lot, gives it to Maestra Oliviero t read. But the teacher, angry because Lila's parents wouldn't send their daughter beyond elementa school, never says anything about it. In fact, she stops concerning herself with Lila and concentrat only on the success of Elena. She dies after a long illness soon after Elena graduates from th university.

Professor Gerace, high-school teacher.

Professor Galiani, high-school teacher. She is a very cultured woman and a Communist. She immediately charmed by Elena's intelligence. She lends her books, protects her in the clash with th religion teacher, invites her to a party at her house given by her children. Their relations cool whe Nino, overwhelmed by his passion for Lila, leaves her daughter Nadia.

Other characters:

Gino, son of the pharmacist. Elena's first boyfriend.

Nella Incardo, the cousin of Maestra Oliviero. She lives in Barano, on Ischia, and rents rooms durin the summer to the Sarratore family. Elena stays with her for a vacation at the beach.

Armando, medical student, son of Professor Galiani.

Nadia, student, daughter of Professor Galiani, and girlfriend of Nino, who leaves her, sending her letter from Ischia when he falls in love with Lila.

Bruno Soccavo, friend of Nino Sarratore and son of a rich industrialist in San Giovanni a Teducci near Naples. He gives Lila a job in his family's sausage factory.

Franco Mari, student and Elena's boyfriend during her first years at the university.

Middle Time

1.

I saw Lila for the last time five years ago, in the winter of 2005. We were walking along the *stradone,* ear
in the morning and, as had been true for years now, were unable to feel at ease. I was the only o
talking, I remember: she was humming, she greeted people who didn't respond, the rare times s
interrupted me she uttered only exclamations, without any evident relation to what I was saying. T
many bad things, and some terrible, had happened over the years, and to regain our old intimacy w
would have had to speak our secret thoughts, but I didn't have the strength to find the words and sh
who perhaps had the strength, didn't have the desire, didn't see the use.

Yet I loved her, and when I came to Naples I always tried to see her, even though, I have to say, I w
a little afraid of her. She had changed a great deal. Age had had the better of us both by then, but whil
fought a tendency to gain weight she was permanently skin and bones. She had short hair that she c
herself; it was completely white, not by choice but from neglect. Her face was deeply lined, a
increasingly recalled her father's. She laughed nervously, almost a shriek, and spoke too loudly. S
was constantly gesturing, giving to each gesture such fierce determination that she seemed to want
slice in half the houses, the street, the passersby, me.

We had gone as far as the elementary school when a young man I didn't know overtook us, out
breath, and shouted to her that the body of a woman had been found in a flowerbed next to the churc
We hurried to the gardens, and Lila dragged me into the knot of curious bystanders, rudely opening
path. The woman was lying on one side; she was extraordinarily fat, and was wearing an unfashiona
dark-green raincoat. Lila recognized her immediately, but I did not: it was our childhood friend Giglio
Spagnuolo, the ex-wife of Michele Solara.

I hadn't seen her for several decades. Her beautiful face was ruined, and her ankles had becom
enormous. Her hair, once brown, was now fiery red, and long, the way she'd had it as a girl, but thi
and spread out on the loose dirt. One foot was shod in a worn, low-heeled shoe; the other was encas
in a gray wool stocking, with a hole at the big toe, and the shoe was a few feet beyond, as if she had lo
it kicking against some pain or fear. I burst into tears; Lila looked at me in annoyance.

Sitting on a bench nearby, we waited in silence until Gigliola was taken away. What had happened
her, how she had died, for the moment no one knew. We went to Lila's house, her parents' old, sma
apartment, where she now lived with her son Rino. We talked about our friend; Lila criticized her, t
life she had led, her pretensions, her betrayals. But now it was I who couldn't listen. I thought of th
face in profile on the dirt, of how thin the long hair was, of the whitish patches of skull. How many w
had been girls with us were no longer alive, had disappeared from the face of the earth because
illness, because their nervous systems had been unable to endure the sandpaper of torments, becau
their blood had been spilled. For a while we sat in the kitchen listlessly, neither of us decisive enough
clear the table. Then we went out again.

The sun of the fine winter day gave things a serene aspect. The old neighborhood, unlike us, h
remained the same. The low gray houses endured, the courtyard of our games, the dark mouths of t

tunnel, and the violence. But the landscape around it had changed. The greenish stretch of the pon
was no longer there, the old canning factory had vanished. In their place was the gleam of gla
skyscrapers, once signs of a radiant future that no one had ever believed in. I had registered th
changes, all of them, over the years, at times with curiosity, more often carelessly. As a child I ha
imagined that, beyond the neighborhood, Naples was full of marvels. The skyscraper at the centr
station, for example, had made a great impression, decades earlier, as it rose, story by story, th
skeleton of a building that seemed to us extremely tall, beside the ambitious railroad station. Ho
surprised I was when I passed through Piazza Garibaldi: look how high it is, I said to Lila, to Carmen,
Pasquale, to Ada, to Antonio, to all the companions of those days, as we made our way to the sea, to th
edges of the wealthy neighborhoods. At the top, I thought, live the angels, and surely they delight
the whole city. To climb up there, to ascend—how I would have liked that. It was *our* skyscraper, even
it was outside the neighborhood, a thing that we saw growing day by day. But the work had stoppe
When I came back from Pisa, the station skyscraper no longer seemed the symbol of a community th
was reviving but, rather, another nest of inefficiency.

During that period I was convinced that there was no great difference between the neighborho
and Naples, the malaise slid from one to the other without interruption. Whenever I returned I found
city that was spineless, that couldn't stand up to changes of season, heat, cold, and, especially, storm
Look how the station on Piazza Garibaldi was flooded, look how the Galleria opposite the museum ha
collapsed; there was a landslide, and the electricity didn't come back on. Lodged in my memory we
dark streets full of dangers, unregulated traffic, broken pavements, giant puddles. The clogged sewe
splattered, dribbled over. Lavas of water and sewage and garbage and bacteria spilled into the sea fro
the hills that were burdened with new, fragile structures, or eroded the world from below. People di
of carelessness, of corruption, of abuse, and yet, in every round of voting, gave their enthusiast
approval to the politicians who made their life unbearable. As soon as I got off the train, I move
cautiously in the places where I had grown up, always careful to speak in dialect, as if to indicate *I a
one of yours, don't hurt me*.

When I graduated from college, when, in a single burst, I wrote a story that in the space of a fe
months became, surprisingly, a book, the things of the world I came from seemed to me to deteriora
even further. In Pisa, in Milan, I felt good, at times even happy; upon every return to my own city
feared that some unexpected event would keep me from escaping, that the things I had gained wou
be taken away from me. I would be unable to reach Pietro, whom I was soon to marry; the tidy space
the publishing house would be barred to me; I would no longer enjoy the refinements of Adele, m
future mother-in-law, a mother as mine had never been. Already in the past the city had seemed to m
crowded, a crush from Piazza Garibaldi to Forcella, to Duchesca, to Lavinaio, to the Rettifilo. In the la
sixties the crush seemed to intensify, while impatience, aggressiveness spread without restraint. O
morning I ventured out to Via Mezzocannone, where some years earlier I had worked as a clerk in
bookstore. I went because I was curious to see the place where I had toiled, and also to see th
university, where I had never been. I wanted to compare it with the university in Pisa, the Normale
was even hoping I might run into the children of Professor Galiani—Armando, Nadia—and boast
what I had accomplished. But the street, the university buildings had distressed me. They we
teeming with students from Naples and the province and the whole South, well-dressed, noisy, se
confident youths, and others, rough yet inferior. They thronged the entrances, the classrooms, stoo
in long, often quarrelsome lines in front of the secretaries. Without warning, three or four starte
hitting each other a few steps from me, as if the mere sight of one another were sufficient for a
explosion of insults and blows, a fury of boys shouting their craving for blood in a dialect that I myse

had difficulty understanding. I left in a hurry, as if something threatening had touched me in a plac
that I had imagined safe, inhabited only by good reasons.

Every year, in other words, it seemed to me worse. In that season of rains, the city had cracked y again, an entire building had buckled onto one side, like a person who, sitting in an old chair, leans o the worm-eaten arm and it gives way. Dead, wounded. And shouts, blows, cherry bombs. The ci seemed to harbor in its guts a fury that couldn't get out and therefore eroded it from the inside, erupted in pustules on the surface, swollen with venom against everyone, children, adults, old peopl visitors from other cities, Americans from NATO, tourists of every nationality, the Neapolitar themselves. How could one endure in that place of disorder and danger, on the outskirts, in the cente on the hills, at the foot of Vesuvius? What a brutal impression San Giovanni a Teduccio had left on m and the journey to get there. How brutal the factory where Lila was working, and Lila herself—Lila wi her small child, Lila who lived in a run-down building with Enzo, although they didn't sleep togethe She had said that he wanted to study computers, and that she was trying to help him. I still rememb her voice, as it tried to erase San Giovanni, the salami, the odor of the factory, her situation, by citir with false expertise abbreviations like: Cybernetics Center of the State University of Milan, Sovi Center for the Application of Computer Science to the Social Sciences. She wanted to make me belie that a center of that type would soon be established even in Naples. I had thought: in Milan mayb certainly in the Soviet Union, but here no, here it is the folly of your uncontrollable mind, into whic you are dragging even poor, devoted Enzo. Leave, instead. Get away for good, far from the life we' lived since birth. Settle in well-organized lands where everything really is possible. I had fled, in fac Only to discover, in the decades to come, that I had been wrong, that it was a chain with larger ar larger links: the neighborhood was connected to the city, the city to Italy, Italy to Europe, Europe the whole planet. And this is how I see it today: it's not the neighborhood that's sick, it's not Naple it's the entire earth, it's the universe, or universes. And shrewdness means hiding and hiding fro oneself the true state of things.

I talked about it with Lila that afternoon, in the winter of 2005, emphatically and as if to mal amends. I wanted to acknowledge openly that she had understood everything since she was a gi without ever leaving Naples. But I was almost immediately ashamed, I heard in my words the irritab pessimism of someone who is getting old, a tone I knew she detested.

In fact, in a nervous grimace of a smile that showed her old teeth, she said: "Are you playing th know-it-all, the moralizer? What do you intend to do? You want to write about us? You want to wri about me?"

"No."

"Tell the truth."

"It would be too complicated."

"You've thought about it, though, you're thinking about it."

"A little, yes."

"Let me be, Lenù. Let us all be. We ought to disappear, we deserve nothing, neither Gigliola nor m no one."

"That's not true."

She had an ugly expression of discontent, and she scrutinized me, her pupils hardly visible, her li half parted.

"All right," she said, "write, if you want, write about Gigliola, about whoever you want. But about n no, don't you dare, promise."

"I won't write about anyone, not even you."

"Careful, I've got my eye on you."
"Yes?"
"I'll come look in your computer, I'll read your files, I'll erase them."
"Come on."
"You think I'm not capable of it?"
"I know you're capable. But I can protect myself."
She laughed in her old mean way.
"Not from me."

2.

I have never forgotten those three words; it was the last thing she said to me: *Not from me*. For weel now I've been writing at a good pace, without wasting time rereading. If Lila is still alive—I imagine as sip my coffee and look out at the Po, bumping against the piers of the Principessa Isabella bridge—sh won't be able to resist, she'll come and poke around in my computer, she'll read, and, cantankerous o woman that she is, she'll get angry at my disobedience, she'll want to interfere, correct, add, she forget her craving to disappear. Then I wash the cup, go back to the desk to write, starting from th cold spring evening in Milan, more than forty years ago, in the bookstore, when the man with the thic eyeglasses spoke derisively about me and my book in front of everyone, and I replied in confusio shaking. Until suddenly Nino Sarratore stood up and, almost unrecognizable with his unruly blac beard, harshly attacked the man who had attacked me. Right then my whole self began to silent shout his name—how long had it been since I'd seen him: four, five years—and although I was ice-co with tension I felt myself blushing.

As soon as Nino stopped talking, the man, with a slight gesture, asked to respond. It was clear th he was offended, but I was too agitated by violent emotions to immediately understand why. I w aware, naturally, that Nino's words had shifted the conversation from literature to politics, and in a aggressive, almost disrespectful way. Yet at the moment I gave that little importance; I couldr forgive myself for my failure to stand up to the challenge, for having been ineffectual in front of sophisticated audience. And yet I was clever. In high school I had reacted to my disadvantages b trying to become like Professor Galiani, I had adopted her tones and her language. In Pisa that model a woman hadn't been enough; I had had to deal with highly experienced people. Franco, Pietro, all th best students, and of course the renowned teachers at the Normale expressed themselves in a comple manner: they wrote with deliberate artifice, they had an ability to classify, a logical lucidity, th Professor Galiani didn't possess. But I had trained myself to be like them. And often I succeeded: seemed to me that I had mastered words to the point of sweeping away forever the contradictions being in the world, the surge of emotions, and breathless speech. In short, I now knew a method speaking and writing that—by means of a refined vocabulary, stately and thoughtful pacing, determined arrangement of arguments, and a formal orderliness that wasn't supposed to fail—soug to annihilate the interlocutor to the point where he lost the will to object. But that evening thing didn't go as they should have. First, Adele and her friends, whom I imagined as very sophisticate readers, and then the man with the thick eyeglasses intimidated me. I had become again the eager litt girl from the poor neighborhood of Naples, the daughter of the porter with the dialect cadence of th South, amazed at having ended up in that place, playing the part of the cultured young writer. So I ha lost confidence and expressed myself in an unconvincing, disjointed manner. Not to mention Nino. H appearance had taken away any self-control, and the very quality of his speech on my behalf ha confirmed to me that I had abruptly lost my abilities. We came from backgrounds that were not ve different, we had both worked hard to acquire that language. And yet not only had he used it naturall

turning it easily against the speaker, but, at times, when it seemed to him necessary, he had even dare
to i~~nsert disorder into that polished Italian with a bold nonchalance that rapidly managed to ma~~ke th
professorial tones of the other man sound out of date and perhaps a little ridiculous. As a result, wher
saw that the man wished to speak again, I thought: he's really angry, and if he said bad things about m
book before, now he'll say something even worse to humiliate Nino, who defended it.

But the man seemed to be gripped by something else: he did not return to my book; he didn't brin
me into it at all. He focused instead on certain formulas that Nino had used incidentally but ha
repeated several times: things like *baronial arrogance, anti-authoritarian literature*. I understood on
then that what had made him angry was the political turn of the discussion. He hadn't liked th
vocabulary, and he emphasized this by inserting a sudden sarcastic falsetto into his deep voice (*And
pride in knowledge is today characterized as pretension, and so literature, too, has become anti-authoritarian?*
Then he began to play subtly with the word *authority*, thank God, he said, a barrier against th
uncultured youths who make random pronouncements on everything by resorting to the nonsense
who knows what student-run course at the state university. And he spoke at length on that subjec
addressing the audience, never Nino or me directly. In his conclusion, however, he focused first on th
old critic who was sitting next to me and then directly on Adele, who was perhaps his true polemic
objective from the beginning. I have no argument with the young people, he said, briefly, but wi
those educated adults who, out of self-interest, are always ready to ride the latest fashion in stupidit
Here at last he was silent, and he prepared to leave with quiet but energetic "Excuse me"s, "May I"
"thank you"s.

The audience rose to let him pass, hostile and yet deferential. It was utterly clear to me by now th
he was an important man, so important that even Adele answered his dark nod of greeting with
cordial *Thank you, goodbye*. Maybe for that reason Nino surprised everyone a little when, in a
imperative and at the same time joking tone, evidence that he was aware who he was dealing with, h
called him by the title of professor—*Professor, where are you going, don't run off*—and then, thanks to th
agility of his long legs, cut off his path, confronted him, spoke to him in that new language of his tha
couldn't really hear from where I was, couldn't really understand, but that must be like steel cables in
hot sun. The man listened without moving, showing no signs of impatience, and then he made
gesture with his hand that meant move aside, and headed toward the door.

3.

I left the table in a daze, struggling to take in the fact that Nino was really there, in Milan, in th room. And yet he was, already he was coming toward me, smiling, but at a restrained, unhurried pac We shook hands, his was hot, mine cold, and we said how glad we were to see each other after so lon To know that finally the worst of the evening was over and that now he was before me, real, assuag my bad mood but not my agitation. I introduced him to the critic who had generously praised my boo saying that he was a friend from Naples, that we had gone to high school together. The professo although he, too, had received some jabs from Nino, was polite, praised the way he had treated th man, and spoke of Naples with fondness, addressing him as if he were a gifted student who was to encouraged. Nino explained that he had lived in Milan for some years, his field was econom geography, he belonged—and he smiled—to the most wretched category in the academic pyramid, th is to say lecturer. He said it sweetly, without the almost sullen tones he had had as a boy, and it seem to me that he wore a lighter armor than that which had fascinated me in high school, as if he had sh any excess weight in order to be able to joust more rapidly and with elegance. I noted with relief th he wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

Meanwhile some of Adele's friends had come over to have their books signed, which made n nervous: it was the first time I had done this. I hesitated: I didn't want to lose sight of Nino even for instant, but I also wanted to mitigate the impression I must have made of a clumsy girl. So I left hi with the old professor—his name was Tarratano—and greeted my readers politely. I intended to do th quickly, but the books were new, with an odor of ink, so different from the dog-eared, ill-smelli books that Lila and I took out from the library in the neighborhood, and I didn't feel like marring the carelessly with the pen. I displayed my best handwriting, from the time of Maestra Oliviero, I invent elaborate dedications that caused some impatience in the women who were waiting. My heart w pounding as I wrote, with an eye on Nino. I trembled at the idea that he would leave.

He didn't. Now Adele had gone up to him and Tarratano, and Nino spoke to her confidently and y with deference. I remembered when he used to talk to Professor Galiani in the corridors of the hig school, and it took me a while to consolidate in my mind the brilliant high school student of then wi the young man of now. I vehemently discarded, on the other hand, as a pointless deviation that h made all of us suffer, the university student of Ischia, the lover of my married friend, the helple youth who hid in the bathroom of the shop on Piazza dei Martiri and who was the father of Gennaro child he had never seen. Certainly Lila's irruption had thrown him off, but—it now seemed obvious— was just a digression. However intense that experience must have been, however deep the marks it h left, it was over now. Nino had found himself again, and I was pleased. I thought: I have to tell Lila tha saw him, that he's well. Then I changed my mind: no, I won't tell her.

When I finished the dedications, the room was empty. Adele took me gently by the hand, she prais the way I had spoken of my book and the way I had responded to the terrible intrusion—so she called —of the man with the thick eyeglasses. Since I denied having done well (I knew perfectly well that

wasn’t true), she asked Nino and Tarratano to give their opinion, and both were profuse wi compliments. Nino went so far as to say, looking at me seriously: *You don’t know what that girl was like high school, extremely intelligent, cultivated, very courageous, very beautiful*. And while I felt my fa burning, he began to tell with exaggerated courtesy the story of my clash with the religion teach years earlier. Adele laughed frequently as she listened. In our family, she said, we understood Elena virtues right away, and then she said she had made a reservation for dinner at a place nearby. I w alarmed, I said in embarrassment that I was tired and not hungry, I would happily take a short wa with Nino before going to bed. I knew it was rude, the dinner was meant to celebrate me and than Tarratano for his work on behalf of my book, but I couldn’t stop myself. Adele looked at me for moment with a sardonic expression, she replied that naturally my friend was invited, and add mysteriously, as if to compensate for the sacrifice I was making: I have a nice surprise in store for yo I looked at Nino anxiously: would he accept the invitation? He said he didn’t want to be a bother, b looked at his watch, he accepted.

4.

We left the bookstore. Adele, tactfully, went ahead with Tarratano, Nino and I followed. But immediately found that I didn’t know what to say to him, I was afraid that every word would be wron He made sure there were no silences. He praised my book again, he went on to speak with great respe of the Airotas (he called them “the most civilized of the families who count for something in Italy”), l said he knew Mariarosa (“She’s always on the front lines: two weeks ago we had a big argument”), l congratulated me because he had learned from Adele that I was engaged to Pietro, whose book o Bacchic rites he seemed to know, amazing me; but he spoke with respect especially of the fathe Professor Guido Airota, “a truly exceptional man.” I was a little annoyed that he already knew of m engagement, and it made me uneasy that the praise of my book had served as an introduction to the f more insistent praise of Pietro’s entire family, Pietro’s book. I interrupted him, I asked him abo himself, but he was vague, with only a few allusions to a small volume coming out that he called borin but obligatory. I pressed him, I asked if he had had a hard time during his early days in Milan. H answered with a few generic remarks about the problems of coming from the South without a cent your pocket. Then out of the blue he asked me:

“Are you living in Naples again?”

“For now, yes.”

“In the neighborhood?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve broken conclusively with my father, and I don’t see anyone in my family.”

“Too bad.”

“It’s better that way. I’m just sorry not to have any news of Lina.”

For a moment I thought I’d been wrong, that Lila had never gone out of his life, that he had come the bookstore not for me but only to find out about her. Then I said to myself: if he had really wanted find out about Lila, in so many years he would have found a way, and I reacted violently, in the shar tone of someone who wants to end the subject quickly:

“She left her husband and lives with someone else.”

“Did she have a boy or a girl?”

“A boy.”

He made a grimace of displeasure and said: “Lina is brave, even too brave. But she doesn’t know ho to submit to reality, she’s incapable of accepting others and herself. Loving her was a difficu experience.”

“In what sense?”

“She doesn’t know what dedication is.”

“Maybe you’re exaggerating.”

“No, she’s really made badly: in her mind and in everything, even when it comes to sex.”

Those last words—*even when it comes to sex*—struck me more than the others. So Nino’s judgment o

his relationship with Lila was negative? So he had just said to me, disturbingly, that that opinio
~~included even the sexual arena? I stared for some seconds at the dark outlines of Adele and her~~ frien
walking ahead of us. The disturbance became anxiety, I sensed that *even when it comes to sex* was
preamble, that he wished to become still more explicit. Years earlier, Stefano, after his marriage, ha
confided in me, had told me about his problems with Lila, but he had done so without ever mentionin
sex—no one in the neighborhood would have in speaking of the woman he loved. It was unthinkabl
for example, that Pasquale would talk to me about Ada's sexuality, or, worse, that Antonio would spea
to Carmen or Gigliola about my sexuality. Boys might talk among themselves—and in a vulgar wa
when they didn't like us girls or no longer liked us—but among boys and girls no. I guessed instead th
Nino, the new Nino, considered it completely normal to discuss with me his sexual relations with m
friend. I was embarrassed, I pulled back. Of this, too, I thought, I must never speak to Lila, an
meanwhile I said with feigned indifference: water under the bridge, let's not be sad, let's go back
you, what are you working on, what are your prospects at the university, where do you live, b
yourself? But I certainly overdid it; he must have felt that I had made a quick escape. He smile
ironically, and was about to answer. But we had arrived at the restaurant, and we went in.

5.

Adele assigned us places: I was next to Nino and opposite Tarratano, she next to Tarratano ar opposite Nino. We ordered, and meanwhile the conversation had shifted to the man with the thic glasses, a professor of Italian literature—I learned—a Christian Democrat, and a regular contributor the *Corriere della Sera*. Adele and her friend now lost all restraint. Outside of the bookstore ritual, the couldn't say enough bad things about the man, and they congratulated Nino for the way he ha confronted and routed him. They especially enjoyed recalling what Nino had said as the man w leaving the room, remarks they had heard and I hadn't. They asked him what his exact words were, ar Nino retreated, saying that he didn't remember. But then the words emerged, maybe reinvented fo the occasion, something like: *In order to safeguard authority in all of its manifestations, you susper democracy*. And from there the three of them took off, talking, with increasing ardor, about the secr services, about Greece, about torture in the Greek prisons, about Vietnam, about the unexpecte uprising of the student movement not only in Italy but in Europe and the world, about an article in *Ponte* by Professor Airota—which Nino said that he agreed with, word for word—about the conditions research and teaching in the universities.

"I'll tell my daughter that you liked it," Adele said. "Mariarosa thought it was terrible."

"Mariarosa gets passionate only about what the world can't give."

"Very good, that really is what she's like."

I knew nothing of that article by my future father-in-law. The subject made me uneasy, and listened in silence. First my exams, then my thesis, then the book and its rapid publication ha absorbed much of my time. I was informed about world events only superficially, and I had picked u almost nothing about students, demonstrations, clashes, the wounded, arrests, blood. Since I was no outside the university, all I really knew about that chaos was Pietro's grumblings, his complaints abo what he called literally "the Pisan nonsense." As a result I felt around me a scene with confusin features: features that, however, my companions seemed able to decipher with great precision, Nin even more than the others. I sat beside him, I listened, I touched his arm with mine, a contact merely fabrics which nevertheless agitated me. He had kept his fondness for figures: he was giving a list numbers, of students enrolled in the university, a crowd by now, and of the capacity of the building of the hours the tenured professors actually worked, and how many of them, rather than doin research and teaching, sat in parliament or on administrative committees or devoted themselves lucrative consulting jobs and private practice. Adele agreed, and so did her friend; occasionally the interrupted, mentioning people I had never heard of. I felt excluded. The celebration for my book w no longer at the top of their thoughts, my mother-in-law seemed to have forgotten even the surpri she had announced for me. I said that I had to get up for a moment; Adele nodded absently, Nin continued to speak passionately. Tarratano must have thought that I was getting bored and sa kindly, almost in a whisper:

"Hurry back, I'd like to hear your opinion."

"I don't have opinions," I said with a half smile.

~~He smiled in turn: "A writer always invents one."~~

"Maybe I'm not a writer."

"Yes, you are."

I went to the bathroom. Nino had always had the capacity, as soon as he opened his mouth, demonstrate to me my backwardness. I have to start studying, I thought, how could I let myself go li this? Of course, if I want I can fake some expertise and some enthusiasm. But I can't go on like that, I' learned too many things that don't count and very few that do. At the end of my affair with Franco had lost the little curiosity about the world that he had instilled in me. And my engagement to Piet hadn't helped, what didn't interest him lost interest for me. How different Pietro is from his father, h sister, his mother. And how different he is from Nino. If it had been up to him, I wouldn't ever ha written my novel. He was almost irritated by it, as an infraction of the academic rules. Or maybe I' exaggerating, it's just my problem. I'm so limited, I can only concentrate on one thing at a tim excluding everything else. But now I'll change. Right after this boring dinner I'll drag Nino with me, I make him walk all night, I'll ask him what books I should read, what films I should see, what music should listen to. And I'll take him by the arm, I'll say: I'm cold. Confused intentions, incomple proposals. I hid from myself the anxiety I felt, I said to myself only: It might be the only chance w have, tomorrow I'm leaving, I won't see him again.

Meanwhile I gazed angrily into the mirror. My face looked tired, small pimples on my chin and da circles under my eyes announced my period. I'm ugly, short, my bust is too big. I should hav understood long ago that he never liked me, it was no coincidence that he preferred Lila. But with wh result? *She's made badly even when it comes to sex*, he said. I was wrong to avoid the subject. I should hav acted curious, let him continue. If he talks about it again I'll be more open-minded, I'll say: what does mean that a girl is made badly when it comes to sex? I'm asking you, I'll explain laughing, so that I ca correct myself, if it seems necessary. Assuming that one can correct it, who knows. I remembered wi disgust what had happened with his father on the beach at the Maronti. I thought of making love wi Franco on the little bed in his room in Pisa—had I done something wrong that he had noticed but ha tactfully not mentioned to me? And if that very evening, let's say, I had gone to bed with Nino, woul make more mistakes, so that he would think: she's made badly, like Lila, and would he speak of behind my back to his girlfriends at the university, maybe even to Mariarosa?

I realized the offensiveness of those words; I should have rebuked him. From that mistaken sex should have said to him, from an experience of which you now express a negative opinion, came child, little Gennaro, who is very intelligent: it's not nice for you to talk like that, you can't reduce th question to who is made badly and who is made well. Lila ruined herself for you. And I made up m mind: when I get rid of Adele and her friend, when he walks me to the hotel, I'll return to the subje and tell him.

I came out of the bathroom. I went back to the dining room and discovered that during my absen the situation had changed. As soon as my mother-in-law saw me, she waved and said happily, h cheeks alight: the surprise finally got here. The surprise was Pietro, he was sitting next to her.

6.

My fiancé jumped up, he embraced me. I had never told him anything about Nino. I had said a fe words about Antonio, and had told him something about my relationship with Franco, which, beside was well known in the student world of Pisa. Nino, however, I had never mentioned. It was a story th hurt me, it had painful moments that I was ashamed of. To tell it meant to confess that I had love forever a person as I would never love him. And to give it an order, a sense, involved talking about Li about Ischia, maybe even going so far as to admit that the episode of sex with an older man, as appeared in my book, was inspired by a true experience at the Maronti, by a decision that I had made a desperate girl and which now, after so much time had passed, seemed to me repugnant. My ow business, therefore. I had held on to my secrets. If Pietro had known, he would have easily understoo why I was greeting him without pleasure.

He sat down again at the head of the table, between his mother and Nino. He ate a steak, drank som wine, but he looked at me in alarm, aware of my unhappiness. Certainly he felt at fault because h hadn't arrived in time and had missed an important event in my life, because his neglect could b interpreted as a sign that he didn't love me, because he had left me among strangers without th comfort of his affection. It would have been difficult to tell him that my dark face, my muteness, cou be explained *precisely* by the fact that he hadn't remained completely absent, that he had intrud between me and Nino.

Nino, meanwhile, was making me even more unhappy. He was sitting next to me but didn't address word to me. He seemed happy about Pietro's arrival. He poured wine for him, offered him cigarett lighted one, and now they were both smoking, lips compressed, and talking about the difficult journe by car from Pisa to Milan, and the pleasure of driving. It struck me how different they were: Nino thi lanky, his voice high and cordial; Pietro thick-set, with the comical tangle of hair over his lar forehead, his broad cheeks scraped by the razor, his voice always low. They seemed pleased to hav met, which was unusual for Pietro, who was generally reserved. Nino pressed him, showing a re interest in his studies (*I read an article somewhere in which you compare milk and honey to wine and eve form of drunkenness*), and urging him to talk about them, so that my fiancé, who tended not to talk abo his subject, gave in, he corrected good-humoredly, he opened up. But just when Pietro was starting gain confidence, Adele interrupted.

"Enough talk," she said to her son. "What about the surprise for Elena?"

I looked at her uncertainly. There were other surprises? Wasn't it enough that Pietro had driven f hours without stopping, to arrive only in time for the dinner in my honor? I thought of my fiancé wi curiosity, he had a sulky expression that I knew and that he assumed when circumstances forced hi to speak about himself in public. He announced to me, but almost in a whisper, that he had become tenured professor, a very young tenured professor, with a position at Florence. Like that, by magic, his typical fashion. He never boasted of his brilliance, he was scarcely aware of his value as a scholar, kept silent about the struggles he had endured. And now, look, he mentioned that news casually, as

he had been forced to by his mother, as if for him it meant nothing. In fact, it meant remarkab prestige at a young age, it meant economic security, it meant leaving Pisa, it meant escaping a politic and cultural climate that for months, I don't know why, had exasperated him. It meant finally that the fall, or at the beginning of the next year, we would get married and I would leave Naples. No o mentioned this last thing, instead they all congratulated Pietro and me. Even Nino, who right afterwa looked at his watch, made some acerbic remarks on university careers, and exclaimed that he w sorry but he had to go.

We all got up. I didn't know what to do, I uselessly sought his gaze, as a great sorrow filled my hear End of the evening, missed opportunity, aborted desires. Out on the street I hoped that he would gi me a phone number, an address. He merely shook my hand and wished me all the best. From th moment it seemed to me that each of his gestures was deliberately cutting me off. As a kind of farew I gave him a half smile, waving my hand as if I were holding a pen. It was a plea, it meant: you kno where I live, write to me, please. But he had already turned his back.

7.

I thanked Adele and her friend for all the trouble they had taken for me and for my book. They bot praised Nino at length, sincerely, speaking to me as if it were I who had contributed to making him s likable, so intelligent. Pietro said nothing, he merely nodded a bit nervously when his mother told hi to return soon, they were both guests of Mariarosa. I said immediately: you don't have to come wi me, go with your mother. It didn't occur to anyone that I was serious, that I was unhappy and wou rather be alone.

All the way back I was impossible. I exclaimed that I didn't like Florence, and it wasn't true. exclaimed that I didn't want to write anymore, I wanted to teach, and it wasn't true. I exclaimed tha was tired, I was very sleepy, and it wasn't true. Not only that. When, suddenly, Pietro declared that h wanted to meet my parents, I yelled at him: you're crazy, forget my parents, you're not suitable f them and they aren't suitable for you. Then he was frightened, and asked:

"Do you not want to marry me anymore?"

I was about to say: *No, I don't want to*, but I restrained myself in time, I knew that that wasn't tru either. I said weakly, I'm sorry, I'm depressed, of course I want to marry you, and I took his hand interlaced my fingers in his. He was an intelligent man, extraordinarily cultured, and good. I loved hin I didn't mean to make him suffer. And yet, even as I was holding his hand, even as I was affirming tha wanted to marry him, I knew clearly that if he hadn't appeared that night at the restaurant I wou have tried to sleep with Nino.

I had a hard time admitting it to myself. Certainly it would have been an offense that Pietro didn deserve, and yet I would have committed it willingly and perhaps without remorse. I would have foun a way to draw Nino to me, with all the years that had passed, from elementary school to high schoo up to the time of Ischia and Piazza dei Martiri. I would have made love with him, even though I hadn liked that remark about Lila, and was distressed by it. I would have slept with him and to Pietro I wou have said nothing. Maybe I could have told Lila, but who knows when, maybe as an old woman, when imagined that nothing would matter anymore to her or to me. Time, as in all things, was decisive. Nin would last a single night, he would leave me in the morning. Even though I had known him forever, h was made of dreams, and holding on to him forever would have been impossible: he came fro childhood, he was constructed out of childish desires, he had no concreteness, he didn't face th future. Pietro, on the other hand, was of the present, massive, a boundary stone. He marked a land ne to me, a land of good reasons, governed by rules that originated in his family and endowed everythin with meaning. Grand ideals flourished, the cult of the reputation, matters of principle. Nothing in th sphere of the Airotas was perfunctory. Marriage, for example, was a contribution to a secular battl Pietro's parents had had only a civil wedding, and Pietro, although as far as I knew he had a va religious knowledge, would never get married in a church; rather, he would give me up. The same wer for baptism. Pietro hadn't been baptized, nor had Mariarosa, so any children that might come wouldn be baptized, either. Everything about him had that tendency, seemed always to be guided by a superi

order that, although its origin was not divine but came from his family, gave him, just the same, th
~~certainty of being on the side of truth and justice. As for sex, I don't know, he was wary. He kne~~
enough of my affair with Franco Mari to deduce that I wasn't a virgin, and yet he had never mentione
the subject, not even an accusatory phrase, a vulgar comment, a laugh. I didn't think he'd had oth
girlfriends; it was hard to imagine him with a prostitute, I was sure he hadn't spent even a minute
his life talking about women with other men. He hated salacious remarks. He hated gossip, raise
voices, parties, every form of waste. Although his circumstances were comfortable, he tended—in th
unlike his parents and his sister—to a sort of asceticism amid the abundance. And he had a conspicuou
sense of duty, he would never fail in his commitments to me, he would never betray me.

No, I did not want to lose him. Never mind if my nature, coarse in spite of the education I had ha
was far from his rigor, if I honestly didn't know how I would stand up to all that geometry. He gave m
the certainty that I was escaping the opportunistic malleability of my father and the crudeness of m
mother. So I forced myself to repress the thought of Nino, I took Pietro by the arm, I murmured, ye
let's get married as soon as possible, I want to leave home, I want to get a driver's license, I want
travel, I want to have a telephone, a television, I've never had anything. And he at that point becan
cheerful, he laughed, he said yes to everything I randomly asked for. A few steps from the hotel h
stopped, he whispered hoarsely: Can I sleep with you? That was the last surprise of the evening.
looked at him bewildered: I had been ready so many times to make love, he had always avoided it; bu
having him in the bed there, in Milan, in the hotel, after the traumatic discussion in the bookstor
after Nino, I didn't feel like it. I answered: We've waited so long, we can wait a little longer. I kissed hi
in a dark corner, I watched him from the hotel entrance as he walked away along Corso Garibaldi, an
every so often turned and waved timidly. His clumsy gait, his flat feet, the tangle of his hair moved me

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