

From the author of *The Days of Abandonment*

# Elena Ferrante My Brilliant Friend

“Elena Ferrante will blow you away.”  
—Alice Sebold, author of *The Lovely Bones*



  
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First publication 2012 by Europa Editions

Translation by Ann Goldstein  
Original Title: *L'amica geniale*  
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Cover Art by Emanuele Ragnisco  
www.mekkanografici.com

ISBN 9781609458638

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**Elena Ferrante**

**MY BRILLIANT FRIEND**

*Translated from the Italian  
by Ann Goldstein*



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THE LORD: Therein thou'rt free, according to thy merits;  
The like of thee have never moved My hate.  
Of all the bold, denying Spirits,  
The waggish knave least trouble doth create.  
Man's active nature, flagging, seeks too soon the level,  
Unqualified repose he learns to crave;  
Whence, willingly, the comrade him I gave,  
Who works, excites, and must create, as Devil

J. W. GOETHE, *Faust*  
translation by Bayard Taylor

**The Cerullo family (the shoemaker's family):**

*Fernando Cerullo*, shoemaker.

*Nunzia Cerullo*, wife of Fernando and Lila's mother.

*Raffaella Cerullo*, called *Lina*, and by *Elena Lila*.

*Rino Cerullo*, Lila's older brother, also a shoemaker.

*Rino*, also the name of one of Lila's children. □

*Other children.*

**The Greco family (the porter's family):**

*Elena Greco*, called *Lenuccia* or *Lenù*. She is the oldest, and after her are *Peppe*, *Gianni*, and *Elisa*.

The father is a porter at the city hall.

The mother is a housewife.

**The Carracci family (Don Achille's family):**

*Don Achille Carracci*, the ogre of fairy tales. □

*Maria Carracci*, wife of Don Achille. □

*Stefano Carracci*, son of Don Achille, grocer in the family store.

*Pinuccia* and *Alfonso Carracci*, Don Achille's two other children.

**The Peluso family (the carpenter's family):**

*Alfredo Peluso*, carpenter.

*Giuseppina Peluso*, wife of Alfredo.

*Pasquale Peluso*, older son of Alfredo and Giuseppina, construction worker.

*Carmela Peluso*, who is also called *Carmen*, sister of Pasquale, salesclerk in a dry-goods store.

*Other children.*

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

*Melina*, a relative of Lila's mother, a mad widow.

*Melina's husband*, who unloaded crates at the fruit and vegetable market.

*Ada Cappuccio*, Melina's daughter.

*Antonio Cappuccio*, her brother, a mechanic.

*Other children.*

**The Sarratore family (the railroad worker poet's family):**

*Donato Sarratore*, conductor.

*Lidia Sarratore*, wife of Donato.

*Nino Sarratore*, the oldest of the five children of Donato and Lidia.

*Marisa Sarratore*, daughter of Donato and Lidia.

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

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

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*Nicola Scanno*, fruit and vegetable seller.

*Assunta Scanno*, wife of Nicola.

*Enzo Scanno*, son of Nicola and Assunta, also a fruit and vegetable seller.

*Other children.*

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

*Silvio Solara*, owner of the bar-pastry shop.

*Manuela Solara*, wife of Silvio.

*Marcello and Michele Solara*, sons of Silvio and Manuela.

**The Spagnuolo family (the baker's family):**

*Signor Spagnuolo*, pastry maker at the bar-pastry shop Solara.

*Rosa Spagnuolo*, wife of the pastry maker.

*Gigliola Spagnuolo*, daughter of the pastry maker.

*Other children.*

**Gino**, son of the pharmacist.

**The teachers:**

*Maestro Ferraro*, teacher and librarian.

*Maestra Oliviero*, teacher.

*Professor Gerace*, high school teacher.

*Professor Galiani*, high school teacher.

*Nella Incardo*, Maestra Oliviero's cousin, who lives on Ischia.

*Eliminating All the Traces*

This morning Rino telephoned. I thought he wanted money again and I was ready to say no. But that was not the reason for the phone call: his mother was gone.

“Since when?”

“Since two weeks ago.”

“And you’re calling me now?”

My tone must have seemed hostile, even though I wasn’t angry or offended; there was just a touch of sarcasm. He tried to respond but he did so in an awkward, muddled way, half in dialect, half in Italian. He said he was sure that his mother was wandering around Naples as usual.

“Even at night?”

“You know how she is.”

“I do, but does two weeks of absence seem normal?”

“Yes. You haven’t seen her for a while, Elena, she’s gotten worse: she’s never sleepy, she comes in and goes out, does what she likes.”

Anyway, in the end he had started to get worried. He had asked everyone, made the rounds of the hospitals: he had even gone to the police. Nothing, his mother wasn’t anywhere. What a good son: a large man, forty years old, who hadn’t worked in his life, just a small-time crook and spendthrift. I could imagine how carefully he had done his searching. Not at all. He had no brain, and in his heart he had only himself.

“She’s not with you?” he asked suddenly.

His mother? Here in Turin? He knew the situation perfectly well, he was speaking only to speak. Yes, he liked to travel, he had come to my house at least a dozen times, without being invited. His mother, whom I would have welcomed with pleasure, had never left Naples in her life. I answered:

“No, she’s not with me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Rino, please, I told you she’s not here.”

“Then where has she gone?”

He began to cry and I let him act out his desperation, sobs that began fake and became real. When he stopped I said:

“Please, for once behave as she would like: don’t look for her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. It’s pointless. Learn to stand on your own two feet and don’t call me again, either.”

I hung up.



Rino's mother is named Raffaella Cerullo, but everyone has always called her Lina. Not me, I've never used either her first name or her last. To me, for more than sixty years, she's been Lila. If I were to call her Lina or Raffaella, suddenly, like that, she would think our friendship was over.

It's been at least three decades since she told me that she wanted to disappear without leaving a trace, and I'm the only one who knows what she means. She never had in mind any sort of flight, change of identity, the dream of making a new life somewhere else. And she never thought of suicide, repulsed by the idea that Rino would have anything to do with her body, and be forced to attend to the details. She meant something different: she wanted to vanish; she wanted every one of her cells to disappear, nothing of her ever to be found. And since I know her well, or at least I think I know her well, I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world.

Days passed. I looked at my e-mail, at my regular mail, but not with any hope. I often wrote to her and she almost never responded: this was her habit. She preferred the telephone or long nights of talking when I went to Naples.

I opened my drawers, the metal boxes where I keep all kinds of things. Not much there. I've thrown away a lot of stuff, especially anything that had to do with her, and she knows it. I discovered that I have nothing of hers, not a picture, not a note, not a little gift. I was surprised myself. Is it possible that in all those years she left me nothing of herself, or, worse, that I didn't want to keep anything of her? No, it is.

This time I telephoned Rino; I did it unwillingly. He didn't answer on the house phone or on his cell phone. He called me in the evening, when it was convenient. He spoke in the tone of voice he uses to arouse pity.

"I saw that you called. Do you have any news?"

"No. Do you?"

"Nothing."

He rambled incoherently. He wanted to go on TV, on the show that looks for missing persons, make an appeal, ask his mamma's forgiveness for everything, beg her to return.

I listened patiently, then asked him: "Did you look in her closet?"

"What for?"

Naturally the most obvious thing would never occur to him.

"Go and look."

He went, and he realized that there was nothing there, not one of his mother's dresses, summer or winter, only old hangers. I sent him to search the whole house. Her shoes were gone. The few books were gone. All the photographs: gone. The movies: gone. Her computer had disappeared, including the old-fashioned diskettes and everything, everything to do with her experience as an electronics wizard who had begun to operate computers in the late sixties, in the days of punch cards. Rino was astonished and said to him:

"Take as much time as you want, but then call and tell me if you've found even a single hairpin that belongs to her."

He called the next day, greatly agitated.

"There's nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"No. She cut herself out of all the photographs of the two of us, even those from when I was little."

"You looked carefully?"

"Everywhere."

"Even in the cellar?"

"I told you, everywhere. And the box with her papers is gone: I don't know, old birth certificate, telephone bills, receipts. What does it mean? Did someone steal everything? What are they looking for? What do they want from my mother and me?"

I reassured him, I told him to calm down. It was unlikely that anyone wanted anything, especially

from him.

“Can I come and stay with you for a while?”

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“No.”

“Please, I can’t sleep.”

“That’s your problem, Rino, I don’t know what to do about it.”

I hung up and when he called back I didn’t answer. I sat down at my desk.

Lila is overdoing it as usual, I thought.

She was expanding the concept of trace out of all proportion. She wanted not only to disappear herself, now, at the age of sixty-six, but also to eliminate the entire life that she had left behind.

I was really angry.

We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write—all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory.

*The Story of Don Achille*

My friendship with Lila began the day we decided to go up the dark stairs that led, step after step, flight after flight, to the door of Don Achille's apartment.

I remember the violet light of the courtyard, the smells of a warm spring evening. The mothers were making dinner, it was time to go home, but we delayed, challenging each other, without ever saying a word, testing our courage. For some time, in school and outside of it, that was what we had been doing. Lila would thrust her hand and then her whole arm into the black mouth of a manhole, and I, in turn, immediately did the same, my heart pounding, hoping that the cockroaches wouldn't run over my skin, that the rats wouldn't bite me. Lila climbed up to Signora Spagnuolo's ground-floor window, and hanging from the iron bar that the clothesline was attached to, swung back and forth, then lowered herself down to the sidewalk, and I immediately did the same, although I was afraid of falling and hurting myself. Lila stuck into her skin the rusted safety pin that she had found on the street somewhere but kept in her pocket like the gift of a fairy godmother; I watched the metal point as it dug a whitish tunnel into her palm, and then, when she pulled it out and handed it to me, I did the same.

At some point she gave me one of her firm looks, eyes narrowed, and headed toward the building where Don Achille lived. I was frozen with fear. Don Achille was the ogre of fairy tales, I was absolutely forbidden to go near him, speak to him, look at him, spy on him, I was to act as if neither he nor his family existed. Regarding him there was, in my house but not only mine, a fear and a hatred whose origin I didn't know. The way my father talked about him, I imagined a huge man, covered with purple boils, violent in spite of the "don," which to me suggested a calm authority. He was a being created out of some unidentifiable material, iron, glass, nettles, but alive, alive, the hot breath streaming from his nose and mouth. I thought that if I merely saw him from a distance he would drive something sharp and burning into my eyes. So if I was mad enough to approach the door of his house he would kill me.

I waited to see if Lila would have second thoughts and turn back. I knew what she wanted to do, I had hoped that she would forget about it, but in vain. The street lamps were not yet lighted, nor were the lights on the stairs. From the apartments came irritable voices. To follow Lila I had to leave the bluish light of the courtyard and enter the black of the doorway. When I finally made up my mind, I saw nothing at first, there was only an odor of old junk and DDT. Then I got used to the darkness and found Lila sitting on the first step of the first flight of stairs. She got up and we began to climb.

We kept to the side where the wall was, she two steps ahead, I two steps behind, torn between shortening the distance or letting it increase. I can still feel my shoulder inching along the flaking wall and the idea that the steps were very high, higher than those in the building where I lived. I was trembling. Every footfall, every voice was Don Achille creeping up behind us or coming down toward us with a long knife, the kind used for slicing open a chicken breast. There was an odor of sautéed garlic. Maria, Don Achille's wife, would put me in the pan of boiling oil, the children would eat me, Lila would suck my head the way my father did with mullets.

We stopped often, and each time I hoped that Lila would decide to turn back. I was all sweaty, I don't know about her. Every so often she looked up, but I couldn't tell at what, all that was visible was the gray areas of the big windows at every landing. Suddenly the lights came on, but they were fairly dusty, leaving broad zones of shadow, full of dangers. We waited to see if it was Don Achille who had

turned the switch, but we heard nothing, neither footsteps nor the opening or closing of a door. The Lila continued on, and I followed.

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She thought that what we were doing was just and necessary; I had forgotten every good reason, and certainly was there only because she was. We climbed slowly toward the greatest of our terrors of that time, we went to expose ourselves to fear and interrogate it.

At the fourth flight Lila did something unexpected. She stopped to wait for me, and when I reached her she gave me her hand. This gesture changed everything between us forever.

It was her fault. Not too long before—ten days, a month, who can say, we knew nothing about time in those days—she had treacherously taken my doll and thrown her down into a cellar. Now we were climbing toward fear; then we had felt obliged to descend, quickly, into the unknown. Up or down, it seemed to us that we were always going toward something terrible that had existed before us yet had always been waiting for us, just for us. When you haven't been in the world long, it's hard to comprehend what disasters are at the origin of a sense of disaster: maybe you don't even feel the need to. Adults, waiting for tomorrow, move in a present behind which is yesterday or the day before yesterday or at most last week: they don't want to think about the rest. Children don't know the meaning of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, or even of tomorrow, everything is this, now: the street is this, the doorway is this, the stairs are this, this is Mamma, this is Papa, this is the day, this is the night. I was small and really my doll knew more than I did. I talked to her, she talked to me. She had a plastic face and plastic hair and plastic eyes. She wore a blue dress that my mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness, and she was beautiful. Lila's doll, on the other hand, had a cloth body of a yellowish color, filled with sawdust, and she seemed to me ugly and grimy. The two spied on each other, they sized each other up, they were ready to flee into our arms if a storm burst, if there was thunder, if someone bigger and stronger, with sharp teeth, wanted to snatch them away.

We played in the courtyard but as if we weren't playing together. Lila sat on the ground, on one side of a small barred basement window, I on the other. We liked that place, especially because behind the bars was a metal grating and, against the grating, on the cement ledge between the bars, we could arrange the things that belonged to Tina, my doll, and those of Nu, Lila's doll. There we put rocks, bottle tops, little flowers, nails, splinters of glass. I overheard what Lila said to Nu and repeated it in a low voice to Tina, slightly modified. If she took a bottle top and put it on her doll's head, like a hat, I said to mine, in dialect, Tina, put on your queen's crown or you'll catch cold. If Nu played hopscotch on Lila's arms, I soon afterward made Tina do the same. Still, it never happened that we decided on a game and began playing together. Even that place we chose without explicit agreement. Lila sat down there and I strolled around, pretending to go somewhere else. Then, as if I'd given it no thought, I, too, settled next to the cellar window, but on the opposite side.

The thing that attracted us most was the cold air that came from the cellar, a breath that refreshed us in spring and summer. And then we liked the bars with their spiderwebs, the darkness, and the tight mesh of the grating that, reddish with rust, curled up both on my side and on Lila's, creating two parallel holes through which we could drop rocks into obscurity and hear the sound when they hit the bottom. It was all beautiful and frightening then. Through those openings the darkness might suddenly seize the dolls, who sometimes were safe in our arms, but more often were placed deliberately next to the twisted grating and thus exposed to the cellar's cold breath, to its threatening noises, rustling, squeaking, scraping.

Nu and Tina weren't happy. The terrors that we tasted every day were theirs. We didn't trust the light on the stones, on the buildings, on the scrubland beyond the neighborhood, on the people inside and outside their houses. We imagined the dark corners, the feelings repressed but always close to exploding. And to those shadowy mouths, the caverns that opened beyond them under the building

we attributed everything that frightened us in the light of day. Don Achille, for example, was not only in his apartment on the top floor but also down below, a spider among spiders, a rat among rats, a shape that assumed all shapes. I imagined him with his mouth open because of his long animal fangs, his body of glazed stone and poisonous grasses, always ready to pick up in an enormous black bag anything we dropped through the torn corners of the grate. That bag was a fundamental feature of Don Achille, he always had it, even at home, and into it he put material both living and dead.

Lila knew that I had that fear, my doll talked about it out loud. And so, on the day we exchanged our dolls for the first time—with no discussion, only looks and gestures—as soon as she had Tina, she pushed her through the grate and let her fall into the darkness.



Lila appeared in my life in first grade and immediately impressed me because she was very bad. In that class we were all a little bad, but only when the teacher, Maestra Oliviero, couldn't see us. Lila, on the other hand, was always bad. Once she tore up some blotting paper into little pieces, dipped the pieces one by one in the inkwell, and then fished them out with her pen and threw them at us. I was hit twice in the hair and once on my white collar. The teacher yelled, as she knew how to do, in a voice like a needle, long and pointed, which terrorized us, and ordered her to go and stand behind the blackboard in punishment. Lila didn't obey and didn't even seem frightened; she just kept throwing around pieces of inky paper. So Maestra Oliviero, a heavy woman who seemed very old to us, though she could not have been much over forty, came down from the desk, threatening her. The teacher stumbled, wasn't clear on what, lost her balance, and fell, striking her face against the corner of a desk. She lay on the floor as if dead.

What happened right afterward I don't remember, I remember only the dark bundle of the teacher's motionless body, and Lila staring at her with a serious expression.

I have in my mind so many incidents of this type. We lived in a world in which children and adults were often wounded, blood flowed from the wounds, they festered, and sometimes people died. One of the daughters of Signora Assunta, the fruit and vegetable seller, had stepped on a nail and died of tetanus. Signora Spagnuolo's youngest child had died of croup. A cousin of mine, at the age of twenty, had gone one morning to move some rubble and that night was dead, crushed, the blood pouring out of his ears and mouth. My mother's father had been killed when he fell from a scaffolding at a building site. The father of Signor Peluso was missing an arm, the lathe had caught him unawares. The sister, Giuseppina, Signor Peluso's wife, had died of tuberculosis at twenty-two. The oldest son of Don Achille—I had never seen him, and yet I seemed to remember him—had gone to war and died twice: drowned in the Pacific Ocean, then eaten by sharks. The entire Melchiorre family had died clinging to each other, screaming with fear, in a bombardment. Old Signorina Clorinda had died inhaling gas instead of fresh air. Giannino, who was in fourth grade when we were in first, had died one day because he had run across a bomb and touched it. Luigina, with whom we had played in the courtyard, or maybe not, she was only a name, had died of typhus. Our world was like that, full of words that killed: croup, tetanus, typhus, gas, war, lathe, rubble, work, bombardment, bomb, tuberculosis, infection. With these words and those years I bring back the many fears that accompanied me all my life.

You could also die of things that seemed normal. You could die, for example, if you were sweating and then drank cold water from the tap without first bathing your wrists: you'd break out in red spots, you'd start coughing, and be unable to breathe. You could die if you ate black cherries and didn't spit out the pits. You could die if you chewed American gum and inadvertently swallowed it. You could die if you banged your temple. The temple, in particular, was a fragile place, we were all careful about it. Being hit with a stone could do it, and throwing stones was the norm. When we left school a gang of boys from the countryside, led by a kid called Enzo or Enzuccio, who was one of the children of Assunta, the fruit and vegetable seller, began to throw rocks at us. They were angry because we were smarter than them. When the rocks came at us we ran away, except Lila, who kept walking at her regular pace and sometimes even stopped. She was very good at studying the trajectory of the stones and dodging

them with an easy move that today I would call elegant. She had an older brother and maybe she had learned from him, I don't know, I also had brothers, but they were younger than me and from them I had learned nothing. Still, when I realized that she had stayed behind, I stopped to wait for her, even though I was scared.

Already then there was something that kept me from abandoning her. I didn't know her well; we had never spoken to each other, although we were constantly competing, in class and outside it. But in a confused way I felt that if I ran away with the others I would leave with her something of mine that she would never give back.

At first I stayed hidden, around a corner, and leaned out to see if Lila was coming. Then, since she wouldn't budge, I forced myself to rejoin her; I handed her stones, and even threw some myself. But I did it without conviction: I did many things in my life without conviction; I always felt slightly detached from my own actions. Lila, on the other hand, had, from a young age—I can't say not precisely if it was so at six or seven, or when we went together up the stairs that led to Don Achille's door and were eight, almost nine—the characteristic of absolute determination. Whether she was gripping the tricolor shaft of the pen or a stone or the handrail on the dark stairs, she communicated the idea that whatever came next—thrust the pen with a precise motion into the wood of the desk, dispense the inky bullets, strike the boys from the countryside, climb the stairs to Don Achille's door—she would do without hesitation.

The gang came from the railroad embankment, stocking up on rocks from the trackbed. Enzo, the leader, was a dangerous child, with very short blond hair and pale eyes; he was at least three years older than us, and had repeated a year. He threw small, sharp-edged rocks with great accuracy, and Lila waited for his throws to demonstrate how she evaded them, making him still angrier, and he responded with throws that were just as dangerous. Once we hit him in the right calf, and I say we because I had handed Lila a flat stone with jagged edges. The stone slid over Enzo's skin like a razor, leaving a red stain that immediately gushed blood. The child looked at his wounded leg. I have his face before my eyes: between thumb and index finger he held the rock that he was about to throw, his arm was raised to throw it, and yet he stopped, bewildered. The boys under his command also looked incredulously at the blood. Lila, however, manifested not the least satisfaction in the outcome of the throw and bent over to pick up another stone. I grabbed her by the arm; it was the first contact between us, an abrupt, frightened contact. I felt that the gang would get more ferocious and I wanted to retreat. But there wasn't time. Enzo, in spite of his bleeding calf, came out of his stupor and threw the rock in his hand. I was still holding on to Lila when the rock hit her in the head and knocked her away from me. A second later she was lying on the sidewalk with a gash in her forehead.

Blood. In general it came from wounds only after horrible curses and disgusting obscenities had been exchanged. That was the standard procedure. My father, though he seemed to me a good man, hurled continuous insults and threats if someone didn't deserve, as he said, to be on the face of the earth. He especially had it in for Don Achille. He always had something to accuse him of, and sometimes I put my hands over my ears in order not to be too disturbed by his brutal words. When he spoke of him to my mother he called him "your cousin" but my mother denied that blood tie (there was a very distant relationship) and added to the insults. Their anger frightened me, I was frightened above all by the thought that Don Achille might have ears so sensitive that he could hear insults even from far away. I was afraid that he might come and murder them.

The sworn enemy of Don Achille, however, was not my father but Signor Peluso, a very good carpenter who was always broke, because he gambled away everything he earned in the back room of the Bar Solara. Peluso was the father of our classmate Carmela, of Pasquale, who was older, and of two others, children poorer than us, with whom Lila and I sometimes played, and who in school and outside always tried to steal our things, a pen, an eraser, the *cotognata*, so that they went home covered with bruises because we'd hit them.

The times we saw him, Signor Peluso seemed to us the image of despair. On the one hand he lost everything gambling and on the other he was criticized in public because he was no longer able to feed his family. For obscure reasons he attributed his ruin to Don Achille. He charged him with having taken, by stealth, as if his shadowy body were a magnet, all the tools for his carpentry work, which made the shop useless. He accused him of having taken the shop itself, and transforming it into a grocery store. For years I imagined the pliers, the saw, the tongs, the hammer, the vise, and thousands and thousands of nails sucked up like a swarm of metal into the matter that made up Don Achille. For years I saw his body—a coarse body, heavy with a mixture of materials—emitting in a swarm salami, provolone, mortadella, lard, and prosciutto.

These things had happened in the dark ages. Don Achille had supposedly revealed himself in all his monstrous nature before we were born. *Before*. Lila often used that formulation. But she didn't seem to care as much about what had happened before us—events that were in general obscure, and about which the adults either were silent or spoke with great reticence—as about the fact that there really had been a before. It was this which at the time left her puzzled and occasionally even made her nervous. When we became friends she spoke so much of that absurd thing—*before us*—that she ended up passing on her nervousness to me. It was the long, very long, period when we didn't exist, the period when Don Achille had showed himself to everyone for what he was: an evil being of uncertain animal-mineral physiognomy, who—it seemed—sucked blood from others while never losing any of himself, maybe it wasn't even possible to scratch him.

We were in second grade, perhaps, and still hadn't spoken to each other, when the rumor spread that right in front of the Church of the Holy Family, right after Mass, Signor Peluso had started screaming furiously at Don Achille. Don Achille had left his older son Stefano, his daughter Pinuccia, Alfonso, who was our age, and his wife, and, appearing for a moment in his most hair-raising form, had hurled himself at Peluso, picked him up, thrown him against a tree in the public gardens, and left him there.

barely conscious, with blood coming out of innumerable wounds in his head and everywhere, and the poor man able to say merely: help.

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I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence. Every sort of thing happened, at home and outside, every day, but I don't recall having ever thought that the life we had there was particularly bad. Life was like that, that's all, we grew up with the duty to make it difficult for others before they made it difficult for us. Of course, I would have liked the nice manners that the teacher and the priest preached, but I felt that those ways were not suited to our neighborhood, even if you were a girl. The women fought among themselves more than the men, they pulled each other's hair, they hurt each other. To cause pain was a disease. As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night, they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embankment, from the stinking grasses called *fetienti*, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs. They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end.

Lila was deeply affected by what had happened to Melina Cappuccio, a relative of her mother's. And so was I too. Melina lived in the same building as my family, we on the second floor, she on the third. She was only a little over thirty and had six children, but to us she seemed an old woman. Her husband was the same age; he unloaded crates at the fruit and vegetable market. I recall him as short and broad, but handsome, with a proud face. One night he came out of the house as usual and died, perhaps murdered, perhaps of weariness. The funeral was very bitter; the whole neighborhood went, including my parents, and Lila's parents. Then time passed and something happened to Melina. On the outside she remained the same, a gaunt woman with a large nose, her hair already gray, a shrill voice that one night called her children from the window, by name, the syllables drawn out by an angry despair: Aaaa, Miii-chè. At first she was much helped by Donato Sarratore, who lived in the apartment right above hers, on the fourth and top floor. Donato was diligent in his attendance at the Church of the Holy Family and as a good Christian he did a lot for her, collecting money, used clothes, and shoes, settling Antonio, the oldest son, in the auto-repair shop of Gorresio, an acquaintance of his. Melina was so grateful that her gratitude became, in her desolate woman's heart, love, passion. It wasn't clear if Donato Sarratore was ever aware of it. He was a friendly man but very serious—home, church, and job. He worked on a train crew for the state railroad, and had a decent salary on which he supported his wife Lidia, and five children; the oldest was called Nino. When he wasn't traveling on the Naples-Paola route he devoted himself to fixing this or that in the house, he did the shopping, took the youngest child out in the carriage. These things were very unusual in the neighborhood. It occurred to no one that Donato was generous in that way to lighten the burdens of his wife. No: all the neighborhood men, not even the father in the lead, considered him a womanish man, even more so because he wrote poems and read them willingly to anyone. It didn't occur even to Melina. The widow preferred to think that, because of his gentle spirit, he was put upon by his wife, and so she decided to do battle against Lidia Sarratore to free him and let him join her permanently. The war that followed at first seemed funny; it was discussed in my house and elsewhere with malicious laughter. Lidia would hang out the sheets fresh from the laundry and Melina climbed up on the windowsill and dirtied them with a reed whose tip she

had charred in the fire; Lidia passed under her windows and she spit on her head or emptied buckets of dirty water on her; Lidia made noise during the day walking above her, with her unruly children, and she banged the floor mop against the ceiling all night. Sarratore tried by every means to make peace but he was too sensitive, too polite. As their vindictiveness increased, the two women began to insult each other if they met on the street or the stairs: harsh, fierce sounds. It was then that they began to frighten me. One of the many terrible scenes of my childhood begins with the shouts of Melina and Lidia, with the insults they hurl from the windows and then on the stairs; it continues with my mother rushing to our door, opening it, and looking out, followed by us children; and ends with the image, for me still unbearable, of the two neighbors rolling down the stairs, entwined, and Melina's head hitting the floor of the landing, a few inches from my shoes, like a white melon that has slipped from your hand.

It's hard to say why at the time we children took the part of Lidia Sarratore. Maybe because she had regular features and blond hair. Or because Donato was hers and we had understood that Melina wanted to take him away from her. Or because Melina's children were ragged and dirty, while Lidia's were washed, well groomed, and the oldest, Nino, who was a few years older than us, was handsome and we liked him. Lila alone favored Melina, but she never explained why. She said only, once, that Lidia Sarratore ended up murdered she deserved it, and I thought that it was partly because she was mean in her heart and partly because she and Melina were distant relatives.

One day we were coming home from school, four or five girls. With us was Marisa Sarratore, who usually joined us not because we liked her but because we hoped that, through her, we might meet her older brother, that is to say Nino. It was she who first noticed Melina. The woman was walking slowly from one side of the *stradone*, the wide avenue that ran through the neighborhood, to the other, carrying a paper bag in one hand from which, with the other, she was taking something and eating it. Marisa pointed to her, calling her "the whore," without rancor, but because she was repeating the phrase that her mother used at home. Lila, although she was shorter and very thin, immediately slapped her so hard that she knocked her down: ruthless, as she usually was on occasions of violence, no yelling before or after, no word of warning, cold and determined, not even widening her eyes.

First I went to the aid of Marisa, who was crying, and helped her get up, then I turned to see what Lidia was doing. She had left the sidewalk and was going toward Melina, crossing the street without paying attention to the passing trucks. I saw in her, in her posture more than in her face, something that disturbed me and is still hard to define, so for now I'll put it like this: she was moving, cutting across the street, a small, dark, nervous figure, she was acting with her usual determination, she was firm. Firm in what her mother's relative was doing, firm in the pain, firm in silence as a statue is firm. Lidia's follower. One with Melina, who was holding in her palm the dark soft soap she had just bought in Don Carlo's cellar, and with her other hand was taking some and eating it.

The day Maestra Oliviero fell from the desk and hit her cheekbone against it, I, as I said, thought she was dead, dead on the job like my grandfather or Melina's husband, and it seemed to me that as a result Lila, too, would die because of the terrible punishment she would get. Instead, for a period I can't define—short, long—nothing happened. They simply disappeared, both of them, teacher and pupil, from our days and from memory.

But then everything was surprising. Maestra Oliviero returned to school alive and began to concern herself with Lila, not to punish her, as would have seemed to us natural, but to praise her.

This new phase began when Lila's mother, Signora Cerullo, was called to school. One morning the janitor knocked and announced her. Right afterward Nunzia Cerullo came in, unrecognizable. She, who, like the majority of the neighborhood women, lived untidily in slippers and shabby old dresses, appeared in her formal black dress (wedding, communion, christening, funeral), with a shiny black purse and low-heeled shoes that tortured her swollen feet, and handed the teacher two paper bags, one containing sugar and the other coffee.

The teacher accepted the gifts with pleasure and, looking at Lila, who was staring at the desk, spoke to her, and to the whole class, words whose general sense disoriented me. We were just learning the alphabet and the numbers from one to ten. I was the smartest in the class, I could recognize all the letters, I knew how to say one two three four and so on, I was constantly praised for my handwriting and won the tricolor cockades that the teacher sewed. Yet, surprisingly, Maestra Oliviero, although Lila had made her fall and sent her to the hospital, said that she was the best among us. True that she was the worst-behaved. True that she had done that terrible thing of shooting ink-soaked bits of blotting paper at us. True that if that girl had not acted in such a disruptive manner she, our teacher, would not have fallen and cut her cheek. True that she was compelled to punish her constantly with the wooden rod or by sending her to kneel on the hard floor behind the blackboard. But there was a fact that, as teacher and also as a person, filled her with joy, a marvelous fact that she had discovered a few days earlier, by chance.

Here she stopped, as if words were not enough, or as if she wished to teach Lila's mother and us that deeds almost always count more than words. She took a piece of chalk and wrote on the blackboard (now I don't remember what, I didn't yet know how to read: so I'm inventing the word) "sun." Then she asked Lila:

"Cerullo, what is written there?"

In the classroom a fascinated silence fell. Lila half smiled, almost a grimace, and flung herself sideways, against her deskmate, who was visibly irritated. Then she read in a sullen tone:

"Sun."

Nunzia Cerullo looked at the teacher, and her look was hesitant, almost fearful. The teacher at first seemed not to understand why her own enthusiasm was not reflected in the mother's eyes. But then she must have guessed that Nunzia didn't know how to read, or, anyway, that she wasn't sure the word "sun" really was written on the blackboard, and she frowned. Then, partly to clarify the situation and Signora Cerullo, partly to praise our classmate, she said to Lila:

"Good, 'sun' is what it says there."

Then she ordered her:

“Come, Cerullo, come to the blackboard.”

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Lila went unwillingly to the blackboard, the teacher handed her the chalk.

“Write,” she said to her, “‘chalk.’”

Lila, very concentrated, in shaky handwriting, placing the letters one a little higher, one a little lower, wrote: “chak.”

Oliviero added the “l” and Signora Cerullo, seeing the correction, said in despair to her daughter:

“You made a mistake.”

But the teacher immediately reassured her:

“No, no, no. Lila has to practice, yes, but she already knows how to read, she already knows how to write. Who taught her?”

Signora Cerullo, eyes lowered, said: “Not me.”

“But at your house or in the building is there someone who might have taught her?”

Nunzia shook her head no emphatically.

Then the teacher turned to Lila and with sincere admiration asked her in front of all of us, “Who taught you to read and write, Cerullo?”

Cerullo, that small dark-haired, dark-eyed child, in a dark smock with a red ribbon at the neck, and only six years old, answered, “Me.”



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