

This summer my mother has made up her mind. And no one's gonna change it. She's staying in Naples to study for the State Exam. In the insane heat, the debris and everything.

The simple thought of it makes her throw up. She's locked herself in the bedroom, closed the blinds. She is in the dark, submerged in books. She smokes, and throws up. She studies, and cries.

She doesn't budge. Her uncle in Rome got her a recommendation for a job, but she's like so desperate.

She's no dummy to lock herself in her room either. It's total mayhem outside. Plaster dust from the construction, heaps of tiles, stacks of frosted glass, the floor with pipes jutting out all over the place. And all the furniture and stuff covered in sticky white dust.

We've lived under these conditions for months. As soon as the workers finish the kitchen, they start on the bathroom. When that's done they move on to the entresol. But then my mother realizes she don't like it so the guys have to start all over, all.

The floor is driving her nuts. She's had them change the tiles four times in the bathroom. My mother has the exact sequence in her head, she does. But no one else gets it, not my dad, not the workers. Even our next-door neighbor chimed in once.

Just when someone finally seems to get it, they screw up the color. So of course they have to start the whole job again. Rip it up, lay it down, wasting tons of tiles in the process. It's like she hates those floors. It's like she hates the house and everyone in. Maybe that's why she wants to be by herself.

At least dad could escort us visit grandma in the country. No one says a word about Procida. It'd be too bad, her back home throwing up while the rest of us swim in the Mediterranean.

The road to my grandma's is all uphill hairpin turns. If you stuck your head out the window you'd see plunging ravines, with some houses, a couple of skinny cows, some fields.

Due to the balding tires on our Renault 4, it feels like we're about to fall down the ravine at every turn. Grandma's house is on one of the hairpin turns.

Once there was an accident on that road. The car got totaled and almost drove into our dining room. It rammed through the fence out front, smashed the glass front door. The driver was catapulted into a sitting position on one of the dining room chairs. We offered him toasted bread and figs. We didn't ask him to pay for the damage. It wasn't appropriate, he had all that blood running out of his forehead.

At night, when you're trying to fall asleep, the lights of the cars arrive like lasers through the slats in the shutters and swirl in the middle of the room. It's like being in a disco.

Since the house is right on the curve, it's also very noisy. So my sister Manu and I stay out all day. The local pigs and chickens are fun, they just don't have to

be slaughtered. There are even a few fruit trees, figs mostly. You get in big trouble too if you eat them, because we have to save them to make jam. Every September grandma fills a hundred jars of the stuff. God forbid something happens and you need supplies. By November the jam is coming out our ears. No one can even look at those jars. By December they're moldy and they get thrown out. We might as well eat them off the tree, we may better. But what do I know.

Manu is the scaredy cat and never makes a decision. She follows me and does whatever I do. For example when we visit the farmer's children next door, Petrillo and Addolorata, we act really obnoxious. We're visiting from the city with our car. They've never even set foot in a car. To humiliate them even more we smoke and breathe out garlic bread leaves in their faces. We act so sophisticated. That is, I act sophisticated and Manu copies me. Except she doesn't inhale.

A few days later Aunt Mariella arrives, and joy squeezes from grandma's every pore. She hugs her tight and weeps as she reminds her that no one ever visits her anymore.

Mariella is my mother's sister and the second of Grandma Jolanda's three daughters. The one everyone knows is having an affair with my dad, but no one says anything to her. To either of them.

Even Petrillo and Addolorata know. I can tell because of the hand gestures Petrillo makes when he sees them walk by together. Up and down with his right palm, a whistle accompanying.

I bet even the youngest cousins, Ivan and Alessandro, know. They are the five- and three-year-old that came with her.

I'm kind of embarrassed. Especially because of Petrillo, who knows a lot. He says the likes of this has never been seen in Castel Giorgio.

But I ignore him. I tell myself these mountain peasants are totally backward anyway. They haven't even heard of the sexual revolution, free love and stuff like that. Which my parents on the other hand are always going on about in Naples.

Uncle Bruno, as usual, didn't make the trip this summer either. He doesn't take vacations so he can pay off the mortgage. Lucky for him there's a swimming pool near his house. My uncle's hobby is

to compete in swim meets. The backstroke is his specialty. He wins, too. But except for some fake silver trophies they don't give him a dime, so he still has to work his ass off at the bank.

This summer the two lovebirds really hit the jackpot. They act all romantic. They hold hands. They look at each other all gooey every other minute like they're gonna give each other a Hershey chocolate kiss.

Once in a while I space out and think they're my real parents. My father doesn't even look at my mother. Forget about kissing her.

Anyway Aunt Mariella is much more beautiful than my mother. She's got those huge tits. Not like my mother's, which are small and saggy with hairs around the nipples.

Aunt Mariella has long blonde hair. Everyone else in the house is typical Mediterranean except for my sister who, God knows why, has ash blonde hair.

My aunt also gives me her partially used make-up. Lipstick remnants, stuff like that.

At one point I was so identified with her I even grew some blonde hair from the middle of my head.

One day my mother starts in on me.

“I want you to call me every day at five pm sharp!” she barks at me over the phone.

She knows grandma doesn't have a phone. That you have to go to the bar, buy tokens, and they give you a hard time. Not to mention the line. There's only one public phone for the whole village.

“Ma....you know it's far away.... Why don't you ask Tommaso?” I try to complain.

“Tommaso, give me a break! He can't even remember his own name, let alone find the public phone! Anyway he has to practice,” she ends triumphantly. Always ready with a comeback when it's a matter of mama's darling boy.

He has to practice. No matter what happens, he's off somewhere, plunking on his violin. He might as well not exist. It's like living with a ghost that eats, goes to the bathroom and plays violin. Out of tune chords, out of tune chords and more out of tune chords. If you fainted right in front of him he wouldn't even look up. On top of all the torture, even on vacation, you can't ask him for a single favor, because he has to practice.

Maybe I'll be a violinist too. That way they'll get off my case. On the other hand there's my mother, crying and barfing. And my aunt who is so nice and so blonde.

"Don't be so selfish!" my mother screams into the receiver.

My mother is really good at guilt tripping everyone. And I am a prime target. I suffer guilt trips like some people get ringworm: I get attacked from the inside. I get a cramp deep in my tummy, right down near my tailbone. Like something terrible is gonna happen any minute. And it's my fault. As if we're all about to drown this second unless I do something. The feeling is like I have to piss and shit at the same time.

So she's suckered me into it. Every day I ask my father for money, get in line to buy tokens, get in another line to make the call...

"Where have you been? Why didn't you call sooner? You know how worried I get! Who knows what could happen to you near those ravines! Don't you remember how little Alfredo ended up?" she

shouts into the receiver when I'm like five minutes late.

“Are you kids eating right? Don't stay up late, I'm warning you! And don't you dare hide your brother's violin again!” she acts all concerned. But I know where all this is heading.

“What about Aunt Mariella?” She finally got around to it. How strange, she actually waited three days.

“Uhm...she's good.... She seems to be doing fine,” I say, my voice a little shaky.

“What does she do all day? Doesn't she get bored with just that one little bar in the piazza?” she tries to dig deeper.

“What bar? No... we stay home...she bakes us cookies...” I try to shake her off the trail.

Not true. Not true at all.

The more she puts on the pressure, the more the lies spill out of my mouth. I'm not doing it on purpose. It only happens when I feel cornered.

In fact, grandma takes care of all the cooking. Potatoes and pasta with butter. Potatoes and pasta with butter. Like clockwork.

My aunt in the kitchen? Not gonna happen. All she thinks about is putting on makeup and combing her long blonde hair. She tries her pretty dresses on in front of the mirror and she likes what she sees. They fit a little tight, because she's so full-figured. That's what my father tells her. The village bar has a jukebox, so at night they slow dance to Gino Paoli, waxing nostalgic over the amazing time they had in the 60s, even though we are well into the 80s.

"What about dad, how's he doing?" she tries again the next day.

"Uhm.... He's good....he's working on his book...." I say, hoping to conjure a studious image in her mind.

Where do I get this stuff? The lie about the book I stole from him. He's been writing it now for five years. No one's ever read a page. Even if you did, you wouldn't understand a word. It's philosophy, so he can write whatever he wants, even if it's bullshit. No one's gonna contradict him, because no one wants to look ignorant.

"So you haven't noticed anything at all?" my mother investigates, getting deeper into the specifics.

“You mean Grandma’s arthritis?” I try and change the subject.

“You’d tell me honey, wouldn’t you?” she whines. After all she’s stuck in Naples and we’re having a great time at her expense.

“Tell you what? I don’t know what you mean. Ma, there’s a huge line. Let’s talk tomorrow”, I worm my way out of it.

And feel profoundly guilty.

And all the more so, since Aunt Mariella just gave me one of her cute little outfits. It’s just too small for her. My mother on the other hand freaks out if I so much as ask to borrow a pair of ratty stockings with holes in them.

And dad? He actually smiles now and then. He buys us black cherry ice cream without a fuss. And if we stain our shirts he doesn’t even get mad. It’s been weeks since his voice has hit that shrill tenor note. When he gets pissed off, forget La Traviata. But now on the whole he seems happy. A different person.

Me, on the other hand, every day at ten to five, I start getting my cramps.

“You would tell me, wouldn’t you? They way you told me that one time,” my mother whines, refreshing my memory.

She’s referring to her hairy-legged friend, Tiziana. They used to go to feminist demonstrations together.

My father went to the feminist demonstrations too, to show he was really hip. But like all repressed males who jerk off in the bathroom, he had to stay on the sidelines. However, instead of watching me, Manu and my mother, who had even gone to the hairdresser, my father couldn’t keep his eyes off Tiziana.

“Tiziana really should shave her legs. I mean everyone is staring at her, even dad”, I pointed out to my mother with fake naivete.

God forbid I said it.

They let loose not just Greek, but also Turkish and Moroccan tragedies. It was out of this world. Jealous scenes you would expect from a female Mario Merola. Which of course ended with my father beating the shit out of her.

He broke a piece of wood from a bookshelf he was building over her head, and that was the end of it.

Me and Manu had to call Aunt Rosalba. She's a secretary at a pharmaceutical company, so she knows about medical stuff. We took my mother to the hospital. While she was getting twelve stitches in the head she gave her name and address. And when they asked her how it happened, she said she bumped into a closet. Otherwise dad would have gone to jail. And then what would we do?

So this summer, I decide to keep my mouth shut. I want to take it easy. No more stitches on my conscience.

Back on the phone, she cries more and more pitifully. And today, Aunt Mariella didn't give me the time of day.

So I let it slip.

"Yeah, it seems like... I mean they do smile at each other a lot..." I plant the seed of suspicion.

"Hello? Mom? Can you hear me?" I say into the dial tone.

She hung up without a word. It was enough. The perfect bait. She knows how to raise hell with that kind of information. In fact, it seems like that's all she ever waits for.

She's here in a few hours. And we all look on at another huge scene. The umpteenth hand-to-hand combat.

"Even Sandra saw you", she throws me into the mix every once in a while.

I act like nothing happened. I take advantage of the situation to steal a few figs from the tree. In retrospect, I regret it, but it really is their problem.

My father restrains himself in the presence of my aunt and my grandmother. He looks down at my mother like an intellectual looking down at the ignorant mob of peasants below. And he rolls his eyes, to show the others she's nuts. He even smiles a little, shaking his head from left to right as if to say, "Who needs to listen to this lunatic?"

As soon as we set foot in the Renault 4 on our way back to Naples, his face, as usual, starts to morph. It becomes deformed. His screams ricochet off the windshield, he turns purple. His neck veins pop out and his eyes get bloodshot.

The three of us in the back seat know that as soon as the Renault 4 is parked outside our building, he's

gonna grab her by the hair and slam her into a wall. So, we're all hoping that the trip lasts a very long time.

Except now he's threatening to crash the car unless she stops accusing him. So, on second thought, maybe we better get home as soon as possible.

Of course, the more he tells her to stop, the more my mother goes ballistic on him. She reminds him of all his past affairs. Her friends, Tiziana, his students.

He presses the accelerator and yells: "I'm gonna kill myself! I'm gonna kill myself!"

The fact remains that if he kills himself, he'll kill the rest of us in the backseat too.

Not to mention my mother up front.

We almost throw up as he speeds around a turn, only to swallow it back up he brakes. And that's how we go down the hill: speeding up, slowing down, throwing up, swallowing it down.

After a few hours, by some miracle, we make it home to Naples alive. Dad is so drained from all that braking and accelerating that he has no energy left to hit her. Luckily he goes straight to bed.

My mother cries by his side all night. I can hear her on the other side of the wall. She keeps bombarding him with rhetorical questions about Aunt

Mariella, and keeps answering them herself. Whether Aunt Mariella is a better lover than she is (I bet she isn't!), whether my youngest cousin Alessandro is his son (I'm sure he is!). That kind of stuff.

Slowly her yells became a lament, continuous, slow, until they taper off. Like my tape recorder when it runs out of juice.

“Look what you’ve done to me...how can I show up at my exams like this....traitor!...” mumbles my mother, fading out.

And then I get it. She did it this summer too. She’s avoided her State Exams for the third time.

I love the daily grind of winter, because when my parents are busy there’s fewer fireworks.

My mother leaves at dawn to work as a substitute teacher on the nearby islands and all over the Campania region. And every two or three days my father gives in to the force of gravity, rolls down Mezzocannone hill, and shows up at his department at the University. Not that it matters, cuz the University doesn’t check on anyone. He pretends to teach Hobbes and Karl Mark, while secretly preparing

his students for the Revolution. Which, according to him, is imminent.

It's been imminent for about ten years now.

The thing that keeps them both the busiest, however, is Politics.

Along with the four or five students that joined the Party just to score better grades, they crouch in the middle of all the exposed plumbing and the plaster and mess around with the printer, churning out leaflets with their political party and civil disobedience group symbols. There's a fierce-looking fist with a distorted hammer and sickle. It looks like the face of a screaming monster.

The kid's job is to collate. We have to take one leaflet from each pile and put them all together. And staple them. Over and over again. For hours and hours.

The students print far into the night, and they're only too happy to sleep over. Sometimes they camp out for days on end. They make spaghetti in our kitchen without asking permission.

I'm quite happy with all the madness. When there are people around, my mom and my dad aren't at each other's throats as much.

Sometimes they go out at night to put up their posters all over the city while ripping down all the posters of the opposition parties.

Or else they go out at dawn to sell food on the so-called red market: meat and Parmesan cheese at wholesale prices.

Di Paolo, the butcher downstairs, hates my father and his Comrades, who undermine his business with their prices. But he doesn't say anything, or else they'll break his windows again.

Whenever this night-time action goes on, the next day at school I'm completely out of it. I dream of recess, so I can stuff my face with the Nutella or Simmenthal sandwich they'll give us. At the school we go to they hand out food for free.

All the slum and alley mothers send their seven-eight-nine children there, so they won't have to cook for them. A sea of hungry children, who couldn't care less about class, waiting for recess so they can eat.

My parents and their Comrades were the ones who brought free meals to the school, under the guise of Politics.

They say it's the only Proletarian school in Naples and that soon, after the Revolution, there will be many more.

They sent us there even though, except for a couple of days before the 27th, we actually did have enough food at home. They said they send us there because contact with Proletarian children will help us understand the Revolution better.

My best friend at school is Assunta, aka Susy, and she lives with three aunts. They are short and fat. And widowed. I spend the night as often as I can. That way they're out of my hair.

On a night that I slept over, I went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. I opened a cabinet and I noticed that instead of plates and glasses on the shelves, they had soap and tooth brushes.

I looked around and realized they didn't have a bathroom.

And so I thought that those three little old women must be either Proletarians or dirt poor. What difference did it really make. I wondered if they peed in the sink. And how did they manage to climb up there, being so short.

Recently, what I've been doing the most at school is explaining the meaning of certain words to our teacher. She wants us to call her Miss or Miss De Stasio. She comes from a town called Vomero and doesn't speak the Neapolitan dialect. I'm the only one in the class who knows both languages and so I translate. She mostly has a problem with the curse words.

It's a little weird when you have to explain the meaning of terms like "cunt" or "blow job" to your teacher. She asks me about them because she often finds them linked to her own name on the bathroom walls. And it's up to me to break it to her just what her students think of her. It's hard because she's from Vomero, which means quick to cry.

Once during recess, while my classmates were throwing plates of pasta at a distant wall to see who could make the biggest splash, I found her crying in a corner. I asked her if she wanted me to translate any curse words. She looked at me gratefully and shaking her head no, confessed she had another problem.

She looked around to make sure no one was listening and whispered in my ear that she was late with her period.

Though the feeling of her nose, which was greasy with tears and sweat, pressing against my ear lobe grossed me out, her confession nailed me to the spot. I wanted to extricate myself, mop my ear lobe. But it seemed mean-spirited somehow.

Anyway, deep down her confession made me feel important.

My classmates looked at me with respect, since she was whispering in my ear not theirs. So I endured the greasy feeling.

Miss De Stasio knew I was an expert on the subject.

In spite of the fact I was only 11, she knew my parents are representatives of the Sexual revolution, of free sex, that everyone is free to walk around naked and stuff like that. That my parents bought me illustrated books about sex at the age of five. And that it hadn't taken me long to learn all about the science of procreation: the penis, the vagina, the ovaries etcetera.

My teacher was happy to vent with me because some of the sex-related things I talked about, even she didn't know.

She said she couldn't afford a kid, because she was supporting her mother. And that her fiancé (that scoundrel!) had split. Walking down the exit stairs, I suggested she join the feminist party and by the time I gave her the address - I'd been there once with my mother - we'd reached her bus stop. She invited me home to Vomero so she could keep venting. I sent Manu home and jumped on the 29 bus with her.

While her mother defrosted some leftovers, Miss De Stasio, still crying, showed me the calendar with the little red dot marking the date her period was due. I didn't know what else to tell her except maybe next time she should take the pill. I even told her what brand my mother uses.

Miss De Stasio's mother slid a deflated spinach soufflé in front of me and gave me dirty looks.

My classmates respect me a lot because I'm friends with the teacher. While we're in school, that is. Outside it's a different story.

To begin with, I speak a different language and I wear real child-sized coats and hats, not oversized hand me downs like theirs. So every day, when the bell rings, my sister Manu and I have to run the gauntlet.

Usually there are 10 to 12 of them. All boys. Against just two of us girls.

And they don't give a shit. No pity at all.

On a good day they'll just steal something from our book bags. They throw all our stuff into the mud on the street and pick out whatever they like. Or else they'll take a hat, a glove. Or both gloves, sliding them off in unison, one taking the left, and one the right.

Once when they were really worked up, they took my sister's coat. She had to go home without it, in December, and it was freezing.

They chased us all the time, into lobbies, between parked cars, into courtyards, all the way to our front door.

Our only chance to catch our breath is under the balcony of the Lunatic. That's her nickname but her real name is Concetta.

Concetta talks to her canaries on her first floor balcony, in her robe. Whenever any kid walk by she

asks them what they want for Christmas, even if it's the middle of August.

And when the kids yell back, a motorbike, or a down jacket, she tosses down a Rossana candy and yells, "Here's your motorbike! Here's your down jacket!"

And the kids scramble to devour the candy.

There's one kid in the gang, Tonino, who's kind of stubborn. He knows, like the rest of them do, that it's just a piece of candy, not a bike or anything even close. Still, I've seen him a couple of times squeeze that candy hard between his fingers and close his eyes mumbling something. When he opens his eyes it's still the same damn candy. Disappointed and hungry, he wolfs it down.

If things are going badly, during the chase they give us these snap slaps. Usually they aim at our heads. Renato, the gang leader, gives the go ahead by delivering a few run by blows. He snaps index and forefinger together really hard on our skulls. It's like they're pulling something that got stuck in our hair.

Once he gets going the others follow suit. Ciro, Tonino, Salvatore... By now I know them by touch.

Trying to escape, I go over their names. I've worked it out that if I call them by their names as I beg them to stop, they really like it and so they give me a few seconds' break. I bet no one calls them by their names at home, with those seven-eight-nine siblings running around. Every morning their moms throw some change at them and while the kids dig for the coins between the cobblestones they yell *No wanna see your face till nite! Me gotta wash a floors!*

So the kids need to come up with something to pass the time. Especially in the afternoons when school's out.

So they pick on us.

"No Ciiiiiro!" I scream today.

"Stop Salvatooooore!" my sister begs.

Of course, if you get their name wrong, they get even more pissed off and all hell breaks loose.

"Renato, enough! Why are you always picking on us, huh?" I ask the one who I figured out was the leader.

I look him straight in the eye and paralyze him with my point blank question. Usually I just scream, so my question takes him by surprise.

Renato, like I said before, is very proud that I know his name. He stops the others with one gesture of his hand like a boss. And looks at me like I'm speaking Greek. Not only does he not understand Italian, he doesn't understand my question.

But since he's the leader and can't lose face, he decides to answer me anyway. He turns around and huddles with the gang. A few minutes now. Nothing happened. They don't break their huddle. My sister and I know that leaving is not an option. If we move without their permission, they gonna beat the shit out of us worse than before.

Finally, Renato extricates himself and glaring down at the cobblestones he says *It's because we love you.*

We're suspended for half a minute. We all hold our breaths like we're under water. They've been chasing us since the execution and they do it because they love us?

What do you mean you love us? You're always beating us up!

I explain out loud.

Renato turns to his group again for another interminable breathless moment and says, “Well, yeah.”

It seems like nothing left to say. The exchange has been illogical and risky. But something has irrevocably changed after all these years of violent chasing. And maybe Renato is starting to regret it. Like it was saying too much. Like revealing his feelings to us.

Raising our bags like shields, Manu and I are already in fight or flight mode. Just as Renato raises his hand to give the attack signal, I get a brilliant idea.

“Stooopp!” I command like a Nazi freezing his boss gesture in mid-air.

The gang is running out of patience. I have to act fast.

“You’re all invited to our house for tea and cookies!” I say as quickly as I can, like these are my last words before being put to death.

Renato looks at in an odd way and turns to the gang again. They look at us very suspiciously. I bet they don’t even know what tea and cookies is. Maybe just the cookies. But they have the nerve to accept.

We depart in disciplined order. Me and Manu up front and the boys in the rear. We don't say a word until we get back to our house. They were finally about to see the place that provided all those children's hats and book bags. God knows what they imagined our home was like. Maybe a store or a coat factory.

For the first time ever, we all walk together. Manu looks at me proudly, as usual. But she's also a little panicked. I know what she's humming. What if we get home and there are no cookies? It's possible considering the way things go our house.

With that familiar gotta pee gotta poop feeling, I run into Di Paola's deli.

"A box of Oro Saiwa. I'll pay for them tomorrow," I say.

And Di Paola, despite his past political confrontations with my parents, hands them over. I will never know why.

Upstairs, my parents luckily were asleep. Nothing worse than bringing guests home to find them snarling at each other. I sat them down in the kitchen, all ten of them.

Me and Manu move the lunch leftovers to the side. We get the bright orange enameled cups our grandparents brought us from Russia. They stare at them like gold. I put the water on to boil and throw in a few bags of something. I'm not sure it's tea. The boys do their best to sit in the cramped quarters. Some are back to back on the same chair. And they wait silently, shocked that we're serving them. They keep avoiding eye contact.

They're so overwhelmed at seeing a real house, even if it's a construction zone, that they don't even look at each other.

They dunk their cookies in the tea. Now I recognize it. It's the one my father drinks for his constipation.

Without saying a word, on their way out one of them brazenly checks our bedroom out. There's My Little Oven, the African-American Cabbage Patch Kid, the open case with my brother's violin in it, Barbie's House. Normal beds with sheets and everything. We even have curtains hanging in the windows, though they're stained with plaster. And we don't all eat and sleep in the same room like they do

at home. We actually have a couple of different rooms.

They also gawk at the printer in the middle of our exposed plumbing. Maybe they think my father is a publisher and that he printed all the books that are laid in vertical and horizontal piles throughout the house.

“You can come back tomorrow and we can play with Barbie’s House,” I offer democratically at the door.

But they slink away without saying goodbye, eyes to the ground as they disappear down the stairwell.

At school the next day, I see them pointing at me near the exit. They whisper into each other’s ears and make grossed out faces.

Then Susy, always the go-between, comes up to me and asks, all freaked out, “Sandra, is it true you have dead mice lying around all over the floor at your house?”

But when school’s out there’s a truce. Manu and I skip home like we’re about 10 pounds lighter.

We’ve got Barbie’s House on the brain. We inherited it from a half blind second cousin who grew

out of it. I order Tommaso to play with us and shut up, because he has to be Big Jim. For once, he steps up and puts his precious violin by. He knows that when it comes to Barbie's House he better do as he's told or there will be hell to pay. Manu and I might even rip a couple of pages out of his score.

When you play with Barbie's House there are no excuses. You have to act like a pro.

Unfortunately, this afternoon they're not sleeping. They're screaming. Of course, it's all about Aunt Mariella with a few passing remarks about Tiziana, the feminist friend. When they're at it like this, pell-mell, without a specific argument, things can take off pretty quick.

As we play, we're forced to raise our voices. And everything comes out wrong. It's less realistic.

The House came with a few outfits. But the ballerina one just won't fit.

On the other side of the wall, someone is getting beaten up. Tommaso starts to leave.

"Yo! Where do you think you're going? Who's gonna be the fiancé if you take off?" I stop him in his tracks with a yell.

"I'll be the fiancé!" Manu blurts out.

“You’re too small AND you’re a GIRL!” I silence her.

They know they must obey me in all things Barbie. Tommaso turns back, whining. I’m younger than him by a couple of years, but about certain things I’ve got a lot to say. If his mind wanders even for a second, I’ll crush him with something mean. I’ve figured out that it works. After that he does whatever I tell him.

Things like, “Shut up. You don’t even have a single hair in your armpits. Look how many I have!” I yell lifting one of his arms.

Manu on the other hand is never a problem. She’s become convinced that the decisions of her elders are always right. If not, she gets beaten up.

As a matter of fact, they beat her up much more than they did us.

It’s easy. She’s so little.

Usually, my mother locks the door to the kitchen, lays her on the table, pulls down her panties and spanks her with the carpet beater.

I try to open the door. I’m not exactly crying or yelling, or I’d lose face. But there’s not a whole lot I can do. So I just wait for it to be over.

When the harpy opens the door and disappears into the bedroom, I go in and help her get dressed. But she lies on the table crying for another half hour.

And that's how Manu learned. You follow orders from an older person, no questions asked.

“Let's pretend Barbie is a famous ballet dancer and you've made a date with her!” I order Tommaso, who's not paying attention at all.

Manu's job is to push the car and accompany it with a *brooom broom* sound effect. Also to pull the elevator cord when Barbie needs to go from the first to the second floor.

If only they would calm down in the next room.

When they get going like this sometimes you have to intervene. Get in there and try to split them.

Asshole! Bitch! they yell back and forth on the other side of the wall.

And in here *Broooooommmmm*. *Your car is ready, Mrs. Barbie*, says Manu.

“I told you her name is Carla Fracci! How many times do I have to repeat myself?” I start to get irritated for no good reason.

“Your car is ready, Mrs. Carla Fracci!” she tries again.

“And she’s a Miss not a Mrs. you don’t just marry the first jerk that walks by”, I impart a life lesson.

But they haven’t calmed down. The sounds of the beating have become more rhythmic.

“Help! He’s killing me. He’s strangling me with a belt!” my mother tries to shout as she chokes. Tommaso starts to snivel. He’s the weakest of us. Manu, instead, looks into my eyes and knows that she has to keep moving the car.

“I’m going to kiiiiill you!” we hear loud and clear. And with us, all our neighbors.

Tommaso can’t take it anymore and takes off running.

“Wimp!” I yell as he disappears.

Manu watches me carefully. She’s expecting directives. Try not to look at her. To downplay what’s going on. Only Carla Fracci exists. Her rendezvous with her new fiancé is the only thing that matters.

She’s arrived. She’s like a goddess, a supernatural being, with her unwavering smile and white teeth. She’s on top of the world and nothing can bring her down. Not even the screams from the other room.

Manu grabs Big Jim and I let her. I reward her for her show of loyalty. She’s very happy. Now she can

express herself with real words and not just monosyllabic sounds.

Daddy! No! Don't kill her! We hear Tommaso begging tearfully.

“Finally! I’ve been waiting for hours!” Manu says in an unlikely male voice from behind Ken.

“You know I’m very busy. They took so many pictures of me for the paper,” I say posing like a model.

“Can I offer you a papertif, ma’am?” Manu asks aristocratically.

“Aperitif, you retard!” I correct her.

“Can I offer you an aperitif, ma’am?” she tries again.

“No, thank you, I’m on a diet. You know I have to dance every night”, I continue acting really sophisticated.

“Heeelllp!!! Call the police! He’s gone insane!” she persists from the other side of the wall.

As if we didn’t already know. The whole building knows. And has for several years.

My hands are shaking a little, but I’m handling it well.

Manu, however, is no longer looking at me. She drops Ken and takes off.

“Mommy! Mommy!!” she cries frantically as she runs away.

My turn to do both voices, yet again.

“You know what? I’ve been thinking. It’s too soon for us to get married. I’ve got my career to think of,” says Carla Fracci.

“But I love you,” stammers Ken.

“Come now, my dear Count, don’t be silly.” *Is love so important after all?* she replies with infinite scorn.

Suddenly I get a brilliant idea. I get the tape recorder down from the shelf. I slip out into the hallway and park myself in front of their bedroom. I stick the microphone into the crack of the door and I record everything at the highest levels. The beatings, the screams. All the usual shit.

For a while now I’ve been recording everything with this long, thin, black contraption.

My parents used to use it to tape Political meetings. They locked themselves for hours on end in the room with the printing press, smoking and talking about the Proletariat and stuff like that. They

recorded the conversations for the Comrades who couldn't make it. At some point they maybe figured it out that the Comrades who didn't come didn't care about their speeches, otherwise they would have showed up. And that no one listened to the tapes. So they abandoned the tape recorder on the shoe shelf, with the tape still in it:

“Unemployed, students, workers... it's time to bring this to an end.... to face the facts... to organize....”

I rewound it all the way and pressed REC. I've got much more important things to immortalize.

And I started roaming around the house, recording....

When I pee. The ambulance whining outside. The slimy carrot juice coming out of the juicer. Brrrr... trrrrr... Brrrrr... trrrrr... brrrrr.

I have no idea why but replicating those sounds so exactly, so truthfully, is a huge turn on to me. It's like magic.

Maybe it's because it makes me feel like I'm making things happen, out there, in the world. Like I can decide when the coffee spurts out of the coffee maker, when to make the musicians play their

bagpipes out in the courtyard, when these two should attack each other.

To make sure I don't forget anything I make a list in my diary, the red one with the fake lock:

- 1) water drops in the sink
 - 2) washing machine
 - 3) drill
 - 4) steamer
 - 5) Bernacca's weather report.
- All the way to number 44.

I have another list with all the things I already recorded. I always was an organized person.

And that afternoon the stroke of genius, number 25: a thrashing.

As the tape rolls I lock my diary with the fake secret key, which everyone knows doesn't lock anything.

Suddenly my father tears himself away and comes hurtling through the door. He's so overwrought he doesn't notice me at his feet with the tape recorder. He leaves swearing he'll never come back, as usual. I grab the tape recorder and as soon as I'm safely locked in the bathroom I rewind it all the way.

It came out really clear: “I’m going to kiiiilll you! Asshole!!! You’ve stolen the best years of my life!!!”

This I don’t get at all. How can you steal someone’s years? It’s not like you can take them and carry them off somewhere. I think life belongs to whoever is living it. But I’m too young to think about these things, so I move on.

Four hours later my mother is still in bed crying. And while my sister watches *Charlie’s Angels* I put the tape deck in my mother’s room. I push PLAY and run away closing the door.

I’ll kiiiiilll you! Bastard!!!! You’ve stolen the best years of my life, I hear on the other side of the wall.

I’ve barely made it to my bed, where I’m laughing my head off, when I hear her slamming out of her room. She bursts in clutching the tape recorder.

She slams it against the yellow Formica table and it shatters into two-three thousand pieces. Batteries and tiny screws fly everywhere. I scream at her not to do it. That I neeeded that taaaaape recooorder.

Nothing. No way. She says she paid for it and she can destroy it whenever she wants to. She screams at me that *you can’t make any fun of people about these issues*. No way. And to drive her point home, she

smacks me in the face. I'm already weeping over the lost tape recorder, so I don't even feel her right hook. Satisfied, she disappears and I mourn over all the sounds I have yet to record. I open the clasp of my diary without turning the key and I read them all:

12) flush

13) garlic frying in pan

14) shower

15) burps.

I'm eleven. I'll be twelve in a couple of months. I'm a reasonable girl. That's what my grandma tells me. Can make it. Have to.

I sit beside Manu who's still watching *Charlie's Angels* and I say *You coming with me?*

"Where?" she replies with her eyes glued to the screen, like maybe she finally gonna see Charlie's face.

"I'm running away to Procida", I say out of nowhere.

Manu doesn't even bother turn off the TV. Taking a swim is much more tempting to her than seeing Charlie. Even if it's fall and we'll freeze our asses off.

We go around the house getting our stuff together. We take two plaid blankets and throw our dresses in. Our favorites. We even grab some pots from the kitchen. You never know. We wrap the blankets and feel like laughing when everything spills out the sides. But we hold it, because my mother's taking a nap and if she wakes up we're in deep shit. She'll be well rested. Which means she'll be that much worse. We tie it all up with string, making two hobo bags.

As a first stop we can go to Susy's house, who lives right next door with her three aunts. The short ones who always wear black. We can stay there while we check the ferry schedule. Bonus: every time I go over they're really nice to me. They may be poor and without a bathroom, but when they have guests they treat them like kings. It's not like our house where you have to cook your own food or even cook for everyone else. They just can't wait to make you one of their delicious meals. Especially for their Susy's little friends. She's always so quiet. They're hoping that if her friends are around she'll start talking.

But when I go over to their house to play, I never talk to her. That's exactly what I love about that house. The silence.

The aunts whisper together over what to make us for dinner, while we play in silence in the living room/bedroom. They're so happy to cook for their guests that sometimes they overdo it.

One time they made a sublime pasta with chickpeas, sprigs of rosemary and whole garlic cloves. I ate three plates, slept over and threw it all up. But it wasn't bad at all, because they took such good care of me. They got really busy. They got up diligently without a word, acting like everything was under control. They donned their flowered robes. One of them had rollers in her hair. One cleaned, another boiled water with lemon peels. They were like three fat little soldiers.

"I'm not coming", Manu awakens me from my daydream of the good old times. She's glued to Charley's Angels again.

"What do mean, you're not coming?" I say turning off the TV.

“I don’t wanna run away from home. I want to stay here and play with My Little Oven,” she says bringing the Angels back to life.

“Gonna bring it with us. C’mon, before she wakes up”, I try again.

“Yeah, and where are we gonna plug it in?” she says astutely.

“God you’re such a wimp... You said you were coming...” I appeal to her sense of honor.

“It’s too cold to sleep on the street”, she responds pragmatically.

“But we have blankets and anyway we’re staying at Susy’s tonight,” I grovel.

“I don’t want to go to Susy’s. I don’t like her. She never says anything”, she concludes enraptured by the back of Charlie’s head, still praying he’ll turn around.

“Fine. I get it. Too bad.” *See ya*, I say definitively, dropping her hobo bag scornfully on the floor.

Like an Angel in action, I slither along the walls until I make it outside the building. Freedom.

The air seems perfumed to me in spite of the exhaust from a Fiat 127 and the bleach the janitor is using to douse the courtyard. I gaze nostalgically at the

contraband merchandise. Di Paola's Deli. And I think: Goodbye forever!

The huddle of Tonino, Ciro and Renato parts as I walk by. Renato smokes and looks knowingly at my hobo bag. This is the last time you'll ever see me, I say with a look. From tomorrow on you'll have to chase someone else. And I know he understands.

The three aunts roll out the red carpet for me. For a second I actually think maybe I should stay there forever.

I've barely opened the hobo bag to show Susy the pans when the buzzer goes off and my brute of a father appears at the door.

"Didn't you say you were never coming back?" I would have liked to ask him, but he doesn't give me a chance to open mouth. He's serious this time. He drags me all the way home by my hair, all the way past the fire station. The firemen stare at us in their flame retardant outfits and their helmets and don't move a finger.

Even Ciro, Tonino and Renato without breaking their huddle, look on laughing like crazy. Pride is no longer an issue here. I feel my hair dragging my body.

At any moment my scalp will rip off if I don't walk fast enough. Maybe that's what my father wants. To scalp me and show it to his students passing it off as a Fascist's. My usual bowel cramp starts up. The feeling that something terrible is going to happen and it's all gonna be my fault. Especially on the way up the stairs. But I'm so busy trying to take the stairs two at a time to ease the strain on my head that I even forget about the cramp. Unfortunately, once in a while I miss a step and my knee slams into the edge and I feel the pain all the way up to my ears.

Once we get upstairs he starts kicking me. I curl up in a corner trying to cover my head with my hands. He keeps going, leaning on the wall for ease. This is no fun, but still I'm really happy he's let go of my hair.

"Your mother is already busting my balls. Now I have to deal with you too?" the Professor of Philosophy asks rhetorically.

I don't feel anything on a physical level. Luckily something on the olfactory level is distracting me. Something is burning. Between the bars of my fingers I see that little snitch Manu removing a black and deformed cake from My Little Oven. Whenever I'm

not around she screws up the cooking times. And then I remember I left my hobo bag at Susy's.

He's kicking me so hard the walls and floor dance.

Then through my hair I see my father's feet stop. But my head keeps banging against the wall. And the floor. Maybe he hit me so hard the blows are still rebounding around the room, like an echo.

Lowering my arm shield, I see my father towering above me. He's looking around as if something's about to crash on his head.

The walls and the floor keep buckling, harder than before. I sit up and think that my father must have knocked something loose in my head. And that from now on the world will dance.

Then I get a better look at my father and I'm positive he's seeing the world the same way I am, because he's spinning around trying to figure out what's going on.

Maybe it's a sign from above. As if God, seeing my father kicking me in the head, now wanted to thrash him in person. It's like he saying *I heard that not only do you beat your wife and children, you're a godless Marxist. I'll show you I exist, and how!*

As though to confirm my hypothesis, the complete works of Marx and Engels falls on his head giving him a big bump.

Around us, all things dance. The floor tiles are cracking open, books are flying off the bookshelves and the lamps walk sideways off the tables and smash on the ground. The furniture slides away from the walls and tumbles into the middle of the room opening its drawers and doors, generously heaving out everything that was inside. And everything turns in a massive circular wave.

My sister staggers towards us holding the pan from My Little Oven. And my brother finally stops destroying our ears with his out of tune chords and rushes in covering his violin with his body.

“It’s a bomb! It’s the Revolution!” my father shouts happily, his eyes all lit up.

“It’s an earthquake, *strunz’* !” my mother says scampering out of bed in her underwear, throwing a home design magazine in the air. My mother always reverts to a pure Neapolitan dialect when she panics or is really angry.

Bawling, with her burnt cake in her hand, Manu attaches herself to my mother's legs. My mother pushes her roughly into a doorway. My brother and I follow suit under a doorway across from her. At that moment, I even feel sort of sorry for my brother. He dropped the violin and, not daring to leave the doorway to rescue it, he had to watch impotently as a dried up plant fell right on top of it and smashed it to pieces.

“Nooooo!” he tries to scream with the last breath in his body. But the cry gets stuck in his throat, and no one hears it.

No one hears my parents' screams either, because a terrifying roar is blotting out the world.

My brother is crying, but that too is muffled by the sound waves surging from the bowels of the earth.

It's like a rude monster burping gigantically from the center of the world. And like the burp will end in a wave of vomit that will drown us all. Like a river that will suck everybody into the ocean and drown us all in the wreckage and the mud of human remains. Just like Pompei.

I can see it already, me and my brother frozen hand in hand, as 21st century tourists come to take pictures.

We're all going to die and for a couple of days there will be some peace and quiet around here.

Then they will build a new city and fill it with people that don't yell and don't beat each other up. Probably they'll get them from the North. They're so orderly, quiet, hardworking up there. You probably won't have to ask them twice, in spite of their racist prejudices. This sun and sea, these airy palazzi with spacious rooms, without a single Neapolitan inside, would be an ideal place to live for anyone in the world.

It's like God got tired of all the madness and thought there's no way to fix it. Better start everything from scratch. Like my mother with her tiles.

While I fantasize, things seem to have taken a certain direction. Our house is on the top floor of a building that even at a standstill looks like it's about to collapse any minute. Let alone during an earthquake. My mother and father look at each other and yell at each other in play back while waiting for a plan to materialize.

The piles of books are jogging across the shelves and fanning open, the framed poster of a grinning Fidel Castro detaches itself from the wall and shatters on the floor, never losing its smile.

Finally my parents come to a decision.

They gather us up and push us out of the apartment. Down the heaving and surging stairs.

Because all the other tenants are doing the same thing, getting down the stairs is practically impossible. That's all like a body to body traffic jam. Everyone's pushing everyone else, jamming themselves into any space humanely possible so they can be the first to get out into the open air. And God forbid you look down into the stairwell. It's like the lobby is about to swallow the entire staircase.

Everyone is screaming that it's an earthquake. In case anyone was still wondering. The lone exception is my father, who is still muttering something about a bomb.

Everything is in motion, so you can't even hold onto the railing. It's like all 353 steps are getting sucked into the center to become an undulating spiral staircase leading inexorably into the bowels of the earth. With all the tenants getting crushed in its gears.

But everyone keeps throwing themselves into the stairwell anyway, for fear of being left upstairs. One thing has been universally understood: the higher up you are, the more unstable you will be.

Our fellow tenants stream out of their apartments, careen into us wildly. No one can control the direction they're going in. You keep hitting walls or neighbors. Flying down the stairs practically airborne, we try uselessly to negotiate a turn and smash head first into a wall. The electricity's out, so the farther down we go, the thicker the darkness.

We make it to the front door, which is made of steel, glass and Plexiglas. Someone is already heaving a box of my mother's tiles into it, as the electrical buzzer is on the blink. My mother keeps quiet about the tiles for once, because she too wants to get out of here alive.

Another tenant, as though just making a discovery, screams that we will all die in here unless we break the door down. The tenant who's using the box as a ram looks at her with heavy sarcasm as he continues battering the door. There are people out there who love to tell you what to do when you're already doing it. Just to show they're smarter than you.

Finally, we are able to squeeze through an opening of twisted steel and broken glass.

Stairwell B is also emptying out into the lobby. We all converge and spray out into the street.

Colliding into one another, we all flow into the alley, and, following the force of gravity, the entire alleyful of people streams downhill as the world shakes.

A panicked mob can release an incredible amount of energy, especially if they're Neapolitans. It grabs you by the stomach, like my bowel cramps except a million times worse. We all run, panic-stricken, as if we absolutely must get to the sea asap, even though it's dark and the water is freezing. We feel blindly that once in the water, the earth won't be able to swallow us whole. And most importantly, nothing will fall on our heads.

People are going berserk in their pajamas and slippers, rollers still in their hair.

Mothers sob, embracing children they thought were lost forever. And though they kicked them out of the house that very same morning, they were now overjoyed to see them again.

My family and I run holding hands five across, taking up the width of the alley. Like a feminist demonstration. If one of us were to let go, he or she would barrel off like a missile, almost impossible to recapture.

A ledge falls off a building and crushes a Fiat Uno, setting the car alarm off. Someone says there's a person crushed inside. Other sirens blast like crazy, joining in the visceral roar coming from the bowels of the earth. The volume of decibels is overwhelming.

The crowd curses and swears in Neapolitan dialect or in Italian, depending on their panic levels.

Suddenly the ground stops swaying.

But since we're still in full flight we don't notice. Our up and down running motion seems like the undulation from the quake. Fear keeps us running and shoving. As if pushing other people out of the way gave you a better chance to save yourself.

Still in their robes, the patients from the psychiatric hospital are blaming *San Gennaro*.

One bald guy with a bandaged hand swears he'll never do it again. I'm not sure what he's referring to.

While my family drags me along, I lose a shoe. My mother's still in her underwear. A well-dressed

man ogles her thighs and asks lasciviously, “Hey *signo*, ain’t you ashamed to run around naked like that?”

Me and Manu burst out laughing. My mother shoots us a dirty look. As we’re not even worth being lectured because we’re too young and retarded to understand.

Another man kneels in the middle of the running mob and almost gets trampled. He raises his hands to the sky.

The streetlights are out and the darkness is filled screams and car alarms. It’s like a nightmare.

My father does everything he can to keep us linked together. The three of us kids are in the middle, my mother and father on the outside.

Now we are running down the hill past the fire station.

The trucks are motionless and the firemen are nowhere to be seen. Still linked, we coast downhill by inertia. The more we run, the more we pick up speed, the more it seems impossible to stop.

Someone tries to break through our chain from behind, but soon realizes that it’s not going to happen and detours around my mother. Finally we hit level

ground and our bodies start to slow down. And little by little we come to a complete stop.

Civilians huddle in the middle of the piazzas. The key is to stay in wide open spaces. Away from buildings and things that can fall on your head. Of course these are also the coldest spots, especially at night.

Then come the radios voices: 7 degrees on the Richter scale, buckling and undulating movements, epicenters, wounded, a few casualties, no, many casualties.

Here and there, children cry from the cold. They shiver under a streetlamp that lights up intermittently, spurting out leftover electricity.

Someone else shares a candy bar. I'm not hungry. My gut is too wound up with fear. The epicenter, from what I understand, is the biggest problem. You have to stay away from it. Escape North. The number of casualties is growing. In Naples and in the province.

The province. Now I understand what it means. All the little villages scattered around Naples. Where my grandmother lives on a hairpin turn, and where my parents are now deciding to take refuge.

My father tells us to wait here in the piazza while he goes for the Renault 4. Hopefully it starts and hasn't been crushed by masonry. My brother asks him to retrieve his broken violin. My mother asks him to at least lock our front door. Then she changes her mind and yells at him not to go upstairs, there could be another tremor and he could be swallowed up.

My father disappears around the corner and we take a seat on a wall along with other earthquake victims. Although they're strangers, they talk to us like we're close family. They complain, and tell us the details of when they felt the first tremor. Where they were, what they were doing. Then when it's our turn, they interrupt us and start telling their story to someone else.

No one dares to stir from the flowerbeds and benches in the middle of the piazza. We cling to each other like a bunch of shipwrecks on a raft, with the bronze statue of Giambattista Vico as our captain.

A woman gives my mother a shawl to cover her thighs. She wears it like a skirt and she looks like a barefoot gypsy beggar.

Some search the crowd for relatives. Others sob. After about a half hour my father shows up in the car, safe and sound.

As we escape the city we hit terrible traffic jams, especially at the tolls. The five of us have never sat in the car so quietly. We are drained. We have screamed and run so much that we have nothing left to say. We're still asking ourselves what it was. And what more is to come.

Everything is uncertain. Where to go. What to do. Everything is to be decided at the last minute.

In the cars next to us, packed to the seams with stuff, people are still crying or screaming or both. One lady curses as she knits.

Finally we make it to my grandmother's hill, which is sunk in total darkness. This time though, it seems like there are fewer turns and we don't get car sick. Even the thud of the garbage container my father accidentally sends over the edge of the ravine doesn't do anything to us. We're just too overwhelmed with fear and uncertainty.

When we arrive we see my grandmother, in candlelight at the window, waiting for someone to come and give her some news.

When she sees the car, she comes tearing out, crying, and almost suffocates us in her arms. She wails that we didn't let her know what was going on. I would like to remind her she doesn't have a phone, but the immensity of the tragedy dwarfs the smallness of such small details.

In the wavering candlelight we move the dining room table to the wall and replace it with some mattresses on the floor.

Of course, between the tears and the fear of tremors, no one feels much like sleeping.

My grandmother hasn't had enough of the undulating earth and rocks back and forth the whole night in her rocking chair. She asks herself where her other two daughters of hers, Mariella and Rosalba, have finally ended up.

As if in answer to her question Aunt Mariella's car pulls up at the gate. She appears at the front door with our two cousins, one asleep in of the arms of her husband, the Swimmer, the other clinging to her skirt.

They left their headlights on and from within the house, their silhouettes look like ghosts.

We all hug, even the two sisters who're used to lay with the same man. In these moments of great tragedy such small things don't matter. My aunt and her family pile mattresses on the kitchen floor, and little by little we all fall asleep.

Two days have gone by. Rosalba, the youngest sister who works at the State Pharmacy, shows up with her Betrothed, whom our grandmother had yet to meet.

They don't have kids so they get to sleep in the bathroom.

Sitting around the table in the dining room, we all stare at the ceiling fixture. Every once in a while it lights up. The electricity comes and goes. The candles go off and on too. It's like a magic ritual. Or an Indian ceremony.

There is talk of leaving. Of going to Rome or some other city. The radio continues to send out dire news. More tremors on the way. Two hundred, no, two hundred and fifty dead. They're still digging them out of the rubble.

It's strange to see the whole family together. It never happens, not even at Christmas. Rosalba's Betrothed has gone over well with our grandmother and both the sisters. Maybe because in moments of tragedy everyone seems so much nicer. It's when nothing is going on that you start bitching about other people. It's a way of killing time.

Grandma is the happiest. To have all three of her daughters with her almost never happens anymore.

Maybe she's the one responsible for all these tremors.

To be honest, I'm having a blast. Me and Manu imitate the crazies from the psych ward: "It was *San Gennaro!* I'll never do it again!"

We laugh, but mostly on the sly. We've understood that they'd get mad at us. They might even smack us one. The other kids, our brother and our two cousins, are boys and they don't get it at all. So we keep behind closed doors, cracking up.

Sometimes we go and steal stuff out of the fridge. You have to be real smooth about it, because there's not a lot of food. Grandma says it reminds her of the war. And she proudly pulls out her famous fig jam. The few stores that stayed open were practically

assaulted. Emptied. And here at Castel Giorgio there aren't that many stores to begin with.

The chickens are traumatized by the tremors so they lay fewer eggs. We could slaughter the rabbits and the pigs, but no one feels like it under the circumstances. We stock up on sugar and flour. We barter with the farmers: a set of dinner plates, a vanity mirror. As though the tremors were going to go on forever, like a curse or a dictatorship. As though it was the end of the world.

Most of all we are told to stay away from the pantry and the fridge. Because there's barely enough to go around. They try to guilt trip us, but we don't care. We steal something every day.

This time we've got our sights on a mozzarella. It's floating in a bowl of water. It's beautiful, so juicy. My grandmother got it at the dairy, out the back door, since it's closed to the public. The others are all in the dining room, staring at the ceiling fixture, wailing and feeling sorry for themselves. We on the other hand have only one thing on our minds: that mozzarella. I think it might even be the buffalo milk kind, which is the best. We're not even that hungry. It's just that we're obsessed.

We sneak into the pitch-black kitchen. Slowly we open the fridge.

“Agghhh,” screams a female voice in the dark.

She was startled by the neon light of the fridge. Which now picks her out as she rushes to get dressed. It’s my aunt Mariella, with her buttons undone and her hair all messy.

Girls, what are you doing in here? Go on, go play in the other room, says a male voice.

It sounds like our father. We get a better look. It’s him. Gonna give no explanation. He pushes us out and closes the door. We burst out laughing. What else can we do.

Not even the earthquake can stop those two, I whisper to my sister as we run into the storage room.

This time we turn the light on to make sure we’re not disturbing anyone.

“What do you think they were doing?” my sister asks.

I just have to repeat Petrillo’s gesture. Up and down with the palm of the right hand, accompanied by a whistle.

Undulating and rocking movements! I exclaim. We burst out laughing, trying to hold it in. I realize

Manu's pocket is dripping. Good girl. She did it. And she even forgot about it. I grab the prize. It's one of those totally to die for buffalo mozzarellas. And it's all ours. Yum!

The tremors die out after a few days so to kill time my mother starts nagging my father again. Especially at night. She's bitching and prying about Aunt Mariella, who is sleeping right next door with her family, well within earshot. My mother keeps us awake all night with her bawling and her accusations. She couldn't care less who hears it, whether it be grandma, or our other auntie in the bathroom with the Betrothed. The sooner he learns what kind of family he's marrying into the better.

"Why didn't you marry her? Huh? She's prettier than I am", my mother pants.

My father hides his head in the pillows and tries to sleep. He'd rather hold back and not beat her up in front of strangers, it would make him look mean-spirited.

My mother persists rhetorically: "Why didn't you marry her? Who forced you to live out this jail sentence with me?"

Tommaso and Manu snore away on their mattresses. I just can't. My mother's staccato yells proliferate throughout the house, all the way to the kitchen where my aunt is sleeping, into the bedroom where grandma is sleeping, and into the bathroom where the other sister is sleeping. I'm mortified that they can hear even only the end of her sentences. Particularly the Betrothed, who plays no part in this.

Worst of all, in the morning when we all wake up and roll up our mattresses so we can eat breakfast, neither grandma, nor the Swimmer, nor aunt Mariella say anything. As if no one had heard my mother sobbing all night. Only Aunt Rosalba seems ill at ease. Maybe she's worried the Betrothed might have second thoughts.

The tremblings by now must be pretty gone, but my mother refuses even to talk about going back Naples.

What are you, nuts? "Going back to our neighborhood, where all the buildings are falling apart? When an earthquake that strong hits, sooner or later another one comes along!" my mother yells at my father during breaks from the Aunt Mariella topic.

We're not allowed next door to Petrillo and Addolorata's because my mother doesn't want us to stray too far. God forbid another tremor hits. So we have to play at home. Except we have no toys.

We take a lot of baths. Hot ones, with a lot of bubble bath. We roll up Aunt Rosalba's mattresses and get in head to toe.

We like to soak for hours. We pretend we're high society ladies, shopping while our husbands wait outside the boutique. In real life, our family is waiting for us to come and eat lunch. But we don't care. All those bubbles. The steam. Manu, as usual, shows me a lot of respect. I see her head peeping out of the bubbles. She looks like a boy with her little blonde helmet. I put on the voice of an upper crust lady from Posillipo. I act like a real snob. Manu is impressed. She would love to be like me some day. I can feel her adoration.

"I really don't like this dress. The color is too dark", I say pretending to smoke a toothbrush.

"I don't understand why one must feel obligated to buy something one doesn't even like. My husband would have a fit. What do you think?" I ramble on, trying to blow her mind.

Manu tries to come up with something, but she's spellbound. I can act like a real woman sometimes and she is speechless whenever I do. How can she be so divine? she seems to be thinking. All those moves. Those hips emerging from the bubbles. They don't seem like little girl hips at all.

"You see, my husband wants me always dressed to a T. If not, he gets furious," I continue wiggling my hips above the surface of the water. Swaying left and right.

Someone comes in to wash their hands. For safety we're not supposed to lock ourselves in. We have standing orders. God forbid another tremor comes.

It's our uncle, the swimming champ. I keep up the act, just to keep Manu on her toes. I know what she's thinking: if she can do it in front of grown-ups she must be a grown up herself. Our uncle smiles. He comes closer.

"Are you girls playing a game?" he asks, as if he can't tell.

"Of course not. This is for real. Let me try that feather boa", I say motioning to a towel.

The Swimmer laughs and Manu follows suit. But why is he locking the door? He hands me the towel.

Here you are! says the Swimmer pretending to be a salesman. The strong muscular hand keeps going and slips under the bubbles. It slides down. Over my body.

“What are you doing?” *I don’t want...* I fade out.

“Don’t make such a fuss! They’re just a couple of little buttons!” he exclaims touching my breast.

I freeze. I especially don’t want to lose face in front of Manu. So I keep quiet, hoping he’ll shut up and hurry up.

With his other hand he reaches for his pants. He’s wearing a very faded pair of jeans. There’s a bulge there and he massages it. Manu is petrified. Whatever happens, I can’t look like I’m not in control of the situation. I’m an adult, a real woman. I have to act like nothing’s happening.

Our uncle’s tongue sags out of his mouth, which has some spit at the corners. Under water his fingers keeps sliding down. It’s not my body he’s touching. This body belongs to the woman who is shopping in the boutique. Even when his fingers reach that place and go inside, I don’t feel a thing.

Pretend nothing is happening. Keep smiling at Manu. Her eyes are fixed on mine. They ask me why

the lady shopper has gone so quiet. I stop looking at her. I'm hypnotized by the Swimmer's tongue. And by his hand massaging his jeans, where a wet patch has appeared. His face is purple. But the tongue goes back in. His eyes are blank, as if nothing has happened. So my eyes are blank too. He turns the key and leaves without a backward glance. As if he had never come in in the first place.

Manu starts moving her eyes and her face again.

I keep acting like nothing happened. Nothing happened at all. I come back to life too but I don't feel like playing shopping ladies any more.

Anyway the water has cooled off.

I get dressed in silence as Manu hands me the talcum powder. She doesn't understand why I'm so quiet. I can hear my mother and father's voices on the other side of the glass door. I blow-dry my hair while I listen to them saying we leave tonight. That way there will be fewer refugees on the highway. My hair has never felt this long and this wet. It feels as if I will never be able to dry it. And it's full of knots. I have to yank

them out, hurting my scalp. I have to push hard and break them to make them disappear.

I hear my father explain to Grandma that we're going to Rome to stay with a Comrade from Politics. They just called him from the public pay phone.

My mother adds that we can't stay out of school and sit around doing nothing. School is the most important thing. In Rome the schools are open while in Naples they're still closed and who knows for how long. So we'll finish the school year there. God knows there could be another tremor in Naples. She adds that tremors never make it to Rome and even when they do they're much weaker.

We've rounded up various jars of fig jam, some sheets, and some old clothes grandma gave us.

Aunt Mariella and her family are doing the same. They're going to Verona, where the Swimmer asked to be transferred. His bank has a branch there.

We collect our stuff as Grandma weeps. Luckily everyone gathers around Grandma and fusses over her. If not, I might find myself face to face with the Swimmer and I wouldn't know what the hell to say to him.

Aunt Rosalba and the Betrothed are going to stay for a while with Grandma and wait for things to settle down in Naples. They already set a date for the wedding at city hall. He owns a house in the Vomero and it would be a shame to give it up.

When it's time to say goodbye to the Swimmer there's a lot of relatives to kiss, so we get it over with quickly.

In the Renault 4 heading towards Rome that night, all I could think of was the Swimmer's hand.

The headlights of the cars shine in my eyes as I try to remember its consistency. I feel cold from the drafts from the side window that doesn't close all the way. I massage the area between my shoulders and elbow, where I always feel the coldest, and I think about that hand. I think that it's as if I hadn't really felt it. It's not so much the hand in itself that pisses me off. It's the man. His attitude like he can do whatever he wants, just because he's older. And I'm a kid and I have to keep my mouth shut. Grownups always listen much more to other grownups than they do to kids. So a kid knows before he even opens his mouth that he better have something important to say.

They'll barely listen anyway. You might even end up making a total ass out of yourself. They could say you made it all up and that what you have to say is all bullshit and it doesn't count at all.

I reconstruct the consistency of that hand from the time when I was five and he taught me to swim. I wasn't angry then. Quite the opposite. I felt his hand under my stomach holding me up as I paddled. Then a wave came and knocked me around and I thought I was going to drown. But the hand always reappeared and took hold of me among the waves. And I was safe. In spite of all my thrashing, there was no way I could have kept myself afloat without it.

I do remember that slightly calloused hand from when I was five. But the one from a few hours ago didn't even seem like a hand to me. It seemed like a piece of toxic waste from the construction site at our house in Naples. A piece of trash he picked up off the ground or found in the garbage and rubbed all over my body. As if he had first sat me on a chair in the middle of a room filled with other grownups, all of them strangers.

Since I am naked, everyone finds out that instead of breasts I have two pimples, two blisters. And that

it's no use me pretending to be a grownup because they've seen what's under my clothes. They found out there's nothing there. And they laugh at me.

By the time we get to Cassino the fog thins out and you can see the other cars. They even turn off their headlights and I think of all the things I left behind at home in Naples and which must now be all covered in rubble: Barbie's House, My African-American Cabbage Patch Kid, My First Oven, my red diary with the fake lock. I remember the hobo bag filled with all my favorite clothes that I left at Susy's.

It even had my toothbrush in it. Five days now I ain't no brushing my teeth. Who knows how many cavities are rotting them out. What worries me the most you must know anyway is not having pajamas or any clean underwear.

We go through the tollbooth at Frosinone and my siblings sleep curled on top of each other. Up front my mother is out cold, her head back and her mouth slightly open, snoring. I don't feel like sleeping at all. I remember the only other time I went to Rome I didn't like it much. We went with our parents who

had a Political meeting in a basement. Luckily, we found some boxes the tenants had filled with junk. Listening to the voices of the Comrades emerging from the cigarette smoke and talking about the Revolution, we pretended we too were committing a proletarian expropriation. We opened a couple of boxes and took cups and glasses out. We played at ladies having tea and cookies. The latter we had to invent, of course.

We barely finished swallowing our imaginary tea when someone started shouting out on the street. We all poured out along with the Comrades and we saw a column of black smoke and flames. Someone screamed it was a car. That some Fascists had set it on fire. Another Comrade, holding a newspaper and crying, said they've killed Comrade Pistolini or Pastorini, I don't remember. And that the car was only a warning. That after Pistolini, the Fascists would come for the rest of us.

Luckily the car didn't belong to any of the Comrades. It belonged to some guy who lived in one of the buildings. He came screaming downstairs and said he had nothing to do with this man, Pastorini.

That he'd been watching the soccer game on TV. Coming closer to the column of smoke and flames in his slippers, he started to cry and said he couldn't care less about Politics and they should go have their meetings somewhere else. Who was going to pay him back for his Fiat Mirafiori? One Comrade, leaving the scene, yelled at him that *it was happening to him exactly because he didn't give a shit about Politics*. It was his fault being so noncommittal.

That if he had joined a party, maybe the opposing party would have been afraid to burn his car. And that if they did, he could take revenge by setting someone else's car on fire. His enemies' car. Some Fascist's car. Then his wife came downstairs too. They hugged each other in the black smoke and wept, saying they would never be able to afford another Mirafiori.

In the car, at the Anagni tollbooth, I can clearly see the motels, the guardrails, the parking lots emerging from the fog, and I think that Rome really grosses me out. And that Politics and all political parties are a major disaster. But that anyway, my car would never get burned. I only like mopeds and I would never buy me a car.

I've decided that I believe in God it's my sister declaring it out of the blue as she's like waking up.

"If he does then I'll go to Heaven, if he doesn't I've got nothing to lose," she whispers into my ear so they can't hear her.

I don't so much as glance at her. I've got my own problems. No way am I going to start thinking about God too. Since I don't give her any juice she suggests to the two sitting in front that we stop at a motel for breakfast. They don't give her any juice either.

She and I never talked about what happened in the bathroom. I don't know if she understood it since I don't understand it either. And I don't want to talk about it, because I don't want to lose face. Especially in her eyes, cuz I'm the boss.

Convince myself that it meant nothing. Maybe it was a grownup thing and it means I'm finally a grownup too. The only thing that has changed concerning my uncle the Swimmer is that whenever we mention them moving to Verona I call him The Shithead. Manu doesn't really know why, but since I started calling him that she picks it up too, no questions asked.

We drive by Colleferro, Monte Porzio. And the day begins.

We get to Rome at dawn. With our Renault 4 we slowly drive by the huge suburban building blocks as though we were an aquarium shark about to pounce on one of the retarded smaller fish. Even my parents have been quiet for the whole trip.

It's not so easy finding the Comrade who is supposed to put us up because all the buildings look the same, cement with grey and blue stripes. The only thing that changes are the numbers on the front doors. Every once in a while there's a big red tube with an elevator inside it. Just to relieve the monotony and show the hipsters who live downtown that you can have a good time in the white trash suburbs too.

Finally we locate the building and park the car.

The Comrade's name is Nunzio and he works in the state-run tobacco factory of *Monopoli*. We wake him up by crowding into his tiny two-room apartment. All five of us, at five o'clock in the morning.

Lucky all we have with us are the jars of fig jam, because that house is so small we barely fit in it ourselves.

In the bedroom his fiancé, Gabriella, is still sleeping. She works at the tobacco factory too, but she's from Rome not Naples. She wakes up yawning with a pasty mouth and greets us like we've been friends forever. When she speaks I'm dazed. It's the first time I've heard such a strange a language. It's neither Italian nor Neapolitan. She draws out all her syllables. Maybe it's because she just woke up. Her hair is strange too. I've never seen hair quite so red. She has long earrings with beads that she wears to bed. It's as if she came from another country. Like, South America maybe. Later I learned that in Rome people who dress like this have a name. They're called hippies.

While Gabriella makes breakfast Nunzio shows us the little living room where we can camp out. There's a double pullout couch and Nunzio has some pieces of foam we can use as mattresses. Us kids have to sleep on the floor again.

And this is how we crash landed into their lives. As usual, at night my parents shout and beat each other up. My brother and sister try to sleep, but I can't. It's not so much the decibels, which I'm used to, but the shame I feel that Nunzio and his fiancée are listening. It's worse than at Grandma's. It's OK to wash your dirty laundry in front of family. But when strangers are forced to listen in... And they're putting you up...

My dad yells at my mother that she's an asshole for bringing us to Rome just because she's afraid of tremors when in fact the earthquake is over. My mother screams that he's free to go back to Naples and die, but that she will not let her own flesh and blood end up under a pile of rubble. Since the yelling goes on forever, Nunzio knocks on the door and asks if he and his fiancée can help. So they get into a group therapy. This is something of Comrades, them doing a lot. Did it in Naples too, with other couples who were fighting, or with students who wanted to make the Revolution, or spur their bourgeois parents.

They all make themselves comfortable on the pullout couch. In the end they blame it all on the Masters and on Society and finally they calm down.

Nunzio and Gabriella go back to their room and the rest of us can go to sleep.

As I get drowsy I go over their theories and I wonder how the State or the Capitalists are responsible for the earthquakes. Maybe I was already half asleep when they said it and I missed something.

When Nunzio comes home at night, once in a while he brings a free pack of *Monopoli* cigarettes for my mother. She smokes about two packs a day stressing about the tremors that could hit Rome any second. I'm not sure why, but Nunzio is really nice to my parents. Maybe he's nostalgic for the Political meetings and the group therapy they used to have at our apartment in Naples among the rubble. Maybe this is why he invited us to stay at his house. This way he can remember the good old days. Even though there's only the four of them at their nightly meetings, he puts a lot of energy into them. But after about a half an hour, his eyes start drooping and he hits the sack. He's got to get up at dawn to go work in the tobacco factory.

Naples is shut down because of the earthquake. In Rome everything works normally. And earthquake victims are very popular.

They gave you priority when you apply for school or a job. I guess the entire Government can't be made up of Fascists if they even thought of the poor earthquake victims. But I don't say so to my parents, in case they shove me into one of their group therapy sessions. They've already tried a few times. And it's really embarrassing.

I ask myself where the people who make up the State are physically located. In which building. I think for sure they must be here in Rome, since it's the capital. Who are they are, really? It could be the talking heads reading us the news on TV. Or the people who are going to interrogate my mother when she takes her State Exams.

My mother takes advantage of the earthquake aid and immediately tries to enroll us in a good school in the imperial center of the city. School is no joke. She's a teacher, her father taught in Castel Giorgio and her uncle teaches here in Rome. When it comes to Education, she knows all there is to know. Her uncle

has made a list of the best schools in the best neighborhoods. The downside is that she drags us along on these expeditions to see if there's any room for us at a particular school. If the principal tries to object she starts to whine and complain that we have no money, no roof over our heads. *Look how run down they are*, she exhorts the principal, pointing at us.

Meaning to us two we gotta assume hangdog expressions.

Finally she made it. She got me and my sister into the De Ferraris middle school. With the same methods, she got my brother into the Santa Sofia Conservatory, and she landed herself a substitute teaching job at an experimental high school.

There's definitely no experimental high schools in Naples. Experimental means they run experiments like they do on animals, except they do it on students. For example, they make them go eight hours without talking. Or stand on a chair on one foot for four hours. That kind of thing.

My father's not doing any work here in Rome, except as usual pretending to write his philosophy book. But he's making himself useful chauffeuring us

around the capital in the Renault 4, since we live very far away in the suburbs and the schools are all downtown.

We have Naples plates, so we have to be especially careful not to break any traffic laws. Even the ones no one cares about in Naples, or worse: if you don't break them, people get pissed off.

If you do that kind of stuff here in Rome, though, some Roman, seeing your Naples plates, will take it upon himself to jump out of his car all pissed off and bang on the hood of our car. Which is what's happening in front of me right now.

The Roman shouts at my father in Roman dialect: You nigger piece of shit, you try and pull another U turn on this street and I'll pop you in the mouth!

Yelling in this vein, the Roman has formed the shape of a gun with his thumb and index finger and is shoving it into my father's mouth. Dad can turn purple when he yells at us or at my mother. But with strangers he takes on this suave, modulated voice. He uses University professor words to show them he will not lower himself to their Neanderthal levels of intimidation. After a while the Roman takes off

smashing his fist even harder into the hood, leaving a dent.

Tonight, probably because my father is stressed out after the road incident with the Roman, the guerrilla war resumes. Nunzio and his fiancée go sleep at her parents' house, my parents sleep in their bed and we sleep on the pullout couch. But their yells jolt us awake in the middle of the night. They take advantage of the fact that Nunzio's not here to go ballistic. My father doesn't even bother to put on his pajamas. He grabs a bread knife, climbs naked onto my mother and holds it to her throat. He says he wants to kill her. That *It's her fault we're in this situation*. That *We don't have enough money to rent an apartment in Rome*. That our home in Naples was a terrible drain *Because of all the renovations she wanted*. That he has a job in Naples and he wants to go back and who gives a shit about the tremors. My mother, from beneath the crazed beast, cries out that she's terrified of the tremors. That *Who knows how many died just in our neighborhood* and the hell she's going back there.

That he can ask for a transfer or a divorce. My father says she's ruined his life. He drops the knife, grabs a hammer and throws it at her. Luckily it misses. But it lands on Nunzio's shiny new parquet floor and gets stuck like a quivering dart. And while they're still going at it and my sister and brother try to break them up, I remove the dart from the parquet and think about the moment when Nunzio discovers that hole.

The next day I try to hide the hole by putting a chair leg on top of it. But when Nunzio comes in he sits on that chair, the leg moves and he notices the damage. He asks me what happened and he's just so mortified. He gets down on his hands and knees and touches the hole to see if he can patch it up. I don't feel like telling him my father made it when he threw a hammer at my mother, so I tell him that my mother accidentally dropped a pan.

Nunzio can't care less how it happened. He's just upset because he spent all his savings on his home and he loves the way it looks. He did the work himself, following instructions out of *Do-it-yourself*

magazine. He still has all the issues, neatly bound, on a shelf.

Anyway whenever I tell a lie I think the person must see right through me, because I stutter and pant. And the familiar bowel cramp makes me sweat.

That night when I told my dad I thought it was not nice of us to wreck Nunzio's apartment, especially since we're camping out at his house, he just looked me up and down as if to say that since I hadn't read Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud *The Complete Works* I couldn't possibly understand the real tragedy of our situation. He said that things like parquet floors are small-minded bourgeois preoccupations.

Then as if nothing had happened the night before, he and my mother start bitching about Gabriella, who doesn't want us to touch her stuff in the bathroom. Her henna shampoos, her creams. When you join a leftist political group and especially an extreme left group, everything belongs to everyone. If you don't want to share you're nothing but a dirty Capitalist.

Sometimes I think about Miss De Stasio, and her mother who used to heat me up spinach soufflés. I

think about Susy, about Renato, and I wonder where they are now, if they've left Naples, or if they're living in the rubble, staring at light fixtures.

When my father stops taking us to school so he can commute to Naples, I suddenly stop thinking about Naples and all its inhabitants. Because taking the bus to school and discovering all those new places in Rome by myself fills my mind completely.

I can't feel even a little nostalgic, because Rome is so crammed with new things to do. Curiosity cures anything, even depression. And Rome is so big there is always something going on.

It was like running away from home every day.

To get to school by 8:30am we have to catch the 786 bus every morning at 6:30am. Sometimes it's still dark. It took over an hour to reach the center of town.

At a certain point of the itinerary my brother has to transfer to another bus to the Conservatory. They bought him a new even more-shrill Japanese violin. Manu and I keep going to the end of the line. Our school, thank God, is right across the street. If I manage to get a seat I'm all set, because in that hour and a half I can get my homework done. I can never

finish it in Nunzio's apartment, which is always in a state of siege. The return trip is more of a trek because you have to withstand the hunger cramps for an hour, an hour and half. My mother never cooks for us, and anyway she often gets home after we do. So in addition to that hour and half on the bus, you have to add at least a half hour for the water to boil and the pasta to cook.

The biggest difference from Naples is my classmates. They are much better dressed. And instead of smacking me on the head, they touch my ass. I almost prefer getting beaten up considering how much this pisses me off. They pretend to forget their open hand on my chair and when I sit on it, I feel something wiggle like an animal. The girls are different too. Susy and I were putting my Aunt's lipstick on by the time we were eleven, including in the morning before class. In Rome, especially here in the center of the city, they dress like nuns, with their hair all combed down. But secretly, I bet they've already French kissed. The way I dress is much sexier than all of them put together. It's not that I like to be touched, but I like it when they look at me.

Since I left all my clothes in Naples, I always wear this burgundy V-neck sweater that belongs to my mother. It's too big for me so the V reaches down really far. And even if, as the Shithead said, I only have two little buttons, the guys in my class are checking them out all the time.

Sometime I even sleep in the burgundy sweater because at night I'm always so cold, especially in the spot between my arms and my shoulders. When it starts to stink under the armpits I give it a quick wash in the bathroom sink with shampoo or bubble bath and I dry it on the heater overnight, so I can put it on again right away the next day.

I even got a pair of corduroys that are really tight in the ass in the same color as the sweater. I have to lie on the ground to get into them. My sister pulls the sides of the fly together as I zip up, sucking in my stomach as much as I can.

I never take these off either. Mostly because I don't have anything else to change into. The fabric is getting worn in the knees and the inner thighs, making pink, faded horizontal lines. It's not a big deal. Worn clothes make you look experienced, which means people respect you a lot more.

It's sort of becoming my look. And the boys in my class are all drooling over me.

There's this one kid who gets in my way all the time. His name is Matteo something or another. He must have a total crush on me. He looks at me like a whipped dog and he doesn't dare talk to me. He just follows me a few paces behind, in total adoration. The more he stares at me like that the more I tell him I can't stand him.

"You're all bones! You don't have any muscles! Don't you get it, you don't have a chance!" I tell him once on the way out of the class. I have to push him away because I could feel him breathing down my neck.

He shakes all over when I talk to him. But he's so ecstatic that I pushed him, because I gave him some of my attention.

He sits on the wall outside school smoking Kim cigarettes, trying to look cool, to grab my attention. But I know he's not inhaling. It's so obvious. He blows the smoke randomly out his nose and mouth. He doesn't have a clue. And his handshakes like a

leaf. Especially when I give him dirty looks just to humiliate him.

My retard of a sister actually talks to him and one day she even accepts a piece of paper from him. Later she tells me it's his phone number. I ask her in a really loud voice why she bothered to take it and that he could die waiting for me to give him a call for all I cared. But he was stubborn. He didn't let up.

I never speak to him or his friends. I don't talk to the girls in my class either. They're so uptight, and besides I don't even know what to say to them. They don't have a clue about tremors, or men who molest you, or lipstick or mascara.

Sometimes I think what's the point of going to school if you're not going to talk to anyone.

So, in general I'm starting to like Rome as a place, but not so much the people in it.

There's only one girl I'd really like to talk to, but she's not in my school. I see her in the morning from the bus. She's on her way downtown too, except on a moped.

She's about my age maybe a little older, and lucky her, she's got her own moped. It's red and has gears.

She looks totally cool when she drives with her hair up and a bunch of scarves around her neck blowing everywhere. Sometimes she even wears a scarf tied around her thigh, which is so hip. She's tall and athletic. You can tell through her pants. One day I would like to be like her. Maybe, if I exercise I can get muscles like that. As far as height goes there's nothing I can really do, end of story.

She dresses all hippie like Gabriella. She has patches on the seat of her jeans, a bunch of rings on all her fingers including the index, and a row of earrings going all the way up her ear.

When I see her shooting by I think she must be really brave to get her ears pierced so many times and that if we were friends she would give me a ride on her moped. And maybe she'd even let me drive it sometimes. One rainy morning I see her getting on the bus. Pluck my courage up because who knows when she'll take the bus again. OK, I gonna go over and talk to her. I'm kind of ashamed of my Neapolitan accent, but it's a once in a lifetime opportunity. I strike up a conversation about a beautiful ring on her index finger. It's a brown stone with a spiral groove carved into it. I ask her where she

got it because I want to buy one too, though there is no way in hell I can afford it. She answers kind of snobbishly that her brother brought it from India and that you can't find this stuff like this anywhere in Rome.

But I think she likes me because she starts asking me questions, like where do I come from with that ridiculous accent and stuff like that.

A few days later at the bus stop, she even asks me if I want a ride to Rome on her moped. Unfortunately I'm with the ball and chain, my sister, so I have to say no. But from the bus, I see her waving at me as she zooms by. I think that she respects me a whole lot and that by now we're friends.

Another few days go by and we exchange numbers. Her name is Raffaella. She and her older brother, Stefano, who also has a moped, a green one, go to a humanities school called G. Leopardi that's a few blocks away from ours. She's in 6th grade and her brother's a freshman.

And a few days after that, Raffaella comes to hang out on her moped outside my school. The fact that I have

a friend like her totally blows the minds of the girls in my class. With the moped, the earrings running up her ear, the scarves around her neck and around her thigh, she was the epitome of cool.

We form a little gang, all three of us, with my sister. We pick up a slice of pizza at a nearby pizzeria that smells of fried oil and we sit on the moped eating and waiting for my sister's classmates to go by, their eyes bugging out with envy. To rub it in a little more, we hang out until they all gotta go home.

In Naples everyone gets their own individual pizza. In Rome, they cut pieces off one big one, and it tastes different. First of all there's no basil, and then the mozzarella doesn't seem like mozzarella, but like melted industrial cheese. Definitely not fresh.

Whatever.

Manu and I wolf it down anyway, or else we'll never make it home alive, while Raffaella drinks one of her cans of Slim Fast. Raffaella is an Aerobics champion and she has to stay thin. Once in a while she goes to Riccione to compete. She can't let herself gain weight, or she won't be able to jump high enough. She talks so much about this Aerobics stuff that she convinces me to sign up. The gym is right

between her house and Nunzio's place. It's one of those modern ones with huge open spaces. Nothing to do with the cramped airless gyms downtown. It has long strips of neon light on the ceiling and even a sauna and a steam room. The gyms in town probably don't even know what a steam room is.

I talked my mother into it by arguing that going to the gym keeps you healthy. Of course Manu started to whine that she wants to come too.

To avoid any possibility of my mother not allowing either of us to go, I took her aside and whispered threateningly in her ear that if she didn't shut up me and Raffaella were not letting her sit on the moped and eat pizza with us anymore. Manu stopped whining. She knows what's good for her.

My mother coughed up the cash for a set of ten classes and then we'll see how we go. Raffaella knew the people so they waived the membership fee. Otherwise it would have been another twenty-five bucks.

The class is made up of about thirty females of all ages, shapes and sizes. The more athletic and energetic ones are in the front row with Raffaella. The more washed up and lethargic ones are towards the

back. The farther back you go, the fatter and sweatier they are.

After spending three or four classes in the third to fourth row where I couldn't see shit, I decided it wasn't fair that just because you weren't the top of the class you had to miss everything that was going on up front. So I joined Raffaella in the front row. Of course, the other front row girls didn't like it that I dared to butt in. I was new, and I was clumsy.

That's probably why, in the fifth lesson, I had the feeling miss four-eyes in the front row was kicking me accidentally on purpose.

You can't just shove your way into the front row when you're this new. It takes months. Lots of hard work. Besides, if you're in the front row and you screw up, all the girls in the back give you the dirtiest looks.

Another thing the front row doesn't like is when I come in late and change in the classroom and not in the locker room. I leave my jacket and sweatpants up front next to the teacher. This drives them nuts, because my pile of stuff obstructs their view of themselves in the mirror so they can't admire their flexing muscles.

I don't just go to the gym to spend time with Raffaella. I also go because I'm learning a whole bunch of stuff. Women's stuff. Especially when I get there early and I change in the locker room. Or afterwards, when I have to take a shower, or else the world will notice I didn't.

I listen to the overweight second, third and fourth rows, who all have cellulite, talking about potential boyfriends or their diets. They are always the most depressed. This is how I get the scoop on a lot of things.

The front row girls, who are skinnier and have much fewer problems, almost never talk. They're always running off to meet their boy-friends, or they have husbands waiting for them on motorcycles outside. They have a life. They come to the gym to work out, not to waste time yakking away.

Except for Raffaella. She is the only front row girl who lets us in on her secrets. The mysteries of Being Thin. She enlightens us on meal substitutes, weight loss pills, energy bars, powders, cans.

Food supplements, vitamin complexes.

Raffaella has tried every brand.

There's the legendary Herbalife: like almost impossible to find, she explains, slipping metal hairpins into her hair.

You have to be part of a very select group. It's a kind of masonic lodge. *It's something classified, top secret, unregulated, shrouded in mystery,* Raffaella continues poking her scalp with a hairpin and grimacing in pain.

Zit Girl from the third row challenges her saying that anything unregulated has got to be bad for you.

So Raffaella explains scientifically that what's bad is to eat regular food that's filled with sugar which gives you diabetes, and with cholesterol which gives you high cholesterol. She ends up convincing them and they all write the number down.

I tried that number once. Just for fun. I mean let's face it, there is no way my mother was gonna shell out the 40 bucks to buy Herbalife.

“When kids are starving to death all over the Third World! And right down the street from our house in Naples! No way!”

I dialed the number anyway.

“Hello? I heard you were distributing...”

“Stop! Don’t say the name out loud. Please!” the phone voice cuts me off right away.

“Let’s meet in a public place. We have to talk face to face,” it continues mysteriously.

The distributor comes all the way out to the suburbs to persuade me. He has a moustache and a Vespa and he’s totally gung ho.

“It’s an incredible compound! Not only will you lose weight, you will become successful. You’ll get lots of dates. You’ll get better grades at school. It’s scientifically proven. We have evidence. We have before and after pictures. Your general health will improve. You’ll have much more energy. And above all, you’ll become part of a network that can come in handy. We Herbalifists understand each other. We have the same needs, dreams...” et cetera.

After a half hour of this monologue I have to cut him off. Even if I were desperate to buy it, I couldn’t. I was broke. I thanked him for coming all this way and I took his business card with his number and the company logo, and I told him I would have to think about it. The distributor didn’t seem disappointed at all. He shook my hand hard, his eyes all radiant. He jumped on his Vespa, confident that I would call him

one day. It really seemed like he was doing it as a labor of love. The kind you do without caring about the money at all.

Today, however, we're discussing Slim Fast. The redhead from the second row brings it up, and Raffaella enlightens us.

It comes in so many forms. Powder, bars, cans. And it's everywhere. Supermarkets, pharmacies, highway motels. It's so easy to find, no one really believes it works anymore. *There's no mystery, no magic in it*, comments Raffaella shoving pieces of metal into her hair.

Slim Fast is so available that people buy it without researching it first. They think it's enough to take it any old way and they'll lose weight, adds the redhead, immersing her feet in the swamp of the showers with a grossed-outlook.

A girl from the fourth row confirms this. She kind of used it as a condiment on her risotto. Then she complained that she wasn't losing lose weight.

You have to research it. Read the labels. It says so right on the label: Meal Sub-sti-tute. You can't cheat.

You can't eat anything else, Raffaella lectures us. She's finally done perforating her cranium,

The directions are clear: two tablespoons of powder, twice a day. Period. That's all. End of story. Absolutely nothing else. Until dinner. Even then you can't stuff your face, the redhead shouts from the showers. She didn't hear Raffaella so she's repeating everything twice.

Some people make it through the entire day on the powder then start binging as soon as the sun goes down. That is absolutely not the way to go, continues the redhead from the shower. But no one is listening to her.

Raffaella and the others start a long debate about flavors. There's chocolate, strawberry and vanilla. Chocolate is the classic.

At this point I allow myself to speak up. "My mother says people who eat chocolate suffer from Peter Pan complex. They never want to grow up."

Everyone acts like they didn't hear me. After a long silence a lispng voice pipes up from behind one of the lockers. It's Zit Girl, saving my ass.

"One time I dreamed I was swimming in a pool of Nestle chocolate milk. Another time I was in a

wivew of Nutella. Maybe I'm one of those people who nevw want to gwow up", she says tweezing an ingrown out of her chin.

Redhead dries her sagging breasts while she tells Zit Girl maybe her parents gave her not enough love, creating an affection deficit. She gave actor/director Nanni Moretti as an example. His parents didn't love him. That's why he's so obsessed with SacherTorte and named his production house after it. Since him, of course, chocolate has become political: chocolate-flavored Slim Fast, rightly like nougat or SacherTorte, are now kind of ideological choices. He's so hip, so auto-ironic. If chocolate gives him a high, I'll go for it too.

It's really cool to be auto-ironic, exclaims a girl with Pippi Longstocking pigtails as she slips into her Adidas sneakers with red stripes.

Especially when you don't want to change one bit, adds a perennially pissed off forty-something. You can tell she's bitter and wishes she'd done a lot more with her life.

If you go with vanilla the consequences could be serious, Raffaella jumps back into the fray not wanting to lose her leadership position.

Whoever picks strawberry is insane. The color is just too weird. It obviously has chemicals that won't break down in your body. The average consumer as well as the environmentalists could get up in arms, retorts the grumpy fortysomething.

They could launch an endless number of discussions about color additives, about the deadly effects of E-120, and about the artificial world we navigate in, concludes the fortysome-thing on her way out the door.

Zit Girl says the problem is not just choosing a flavor, but also what to do when you go out to eat. She tells us a real life experience.

"I would wike a cup wif a tea spoon and some hot water," she asked the waiter.

The waiter and all her friends at the table rolled their eyes and acted like they didn't understand a word she said.

"Whad'ya mean hot water? You want a tea!" The waiter said dismissively, like his time was money.

No, wook, I don't want tea...

They all gave her dirty looks so she gave in and pulled out the Slim Fast. She was embarrassed about it so for a split second she thought of lying.

“It’s medicine fow my, my...”

But she realized it was pointless. No one would believe her. Better to tell the truth and nothing but the truth I swear to God.

“It’s a meal weplacement, OK?” Zit Girl blurted out.

“Can’t just do that ma’am... you gotta order something”, says the waiter.

“Awwight wook, bwing me a cup of tea and keep the bag”, Zit Girl tries to defend herself.

“I still gotta charge you for the tea,” says the victorious waiter.

”God, are you still obsessed with losing weight?” a friend taunts her, stuffing her face with fettuccini with cream and mushrooms.

“It’s hawd enough giving up fettuccini and mushrooms without being cwiticized as well”, Zit Girl says.

Raffaella gives her a lot advice. She suggests being ready with a lot of comebacks. When opening the packet and mixing the contents, keep your moves fast and smooth. Keep chatting and don’t leave any empty spaces for annoying questions. Invent small

incidents to distract everyone's attention. Bring up the last movie you saw.

Raffaella really understands this meal replacement thing. She's very highly respected in the locker room, because you can see the results. Her super fit body is the living proof of her theories.

So I learn something at every class, but the Aerobics part of it is starting to bother me. Between the front row girls always giving me dirty looks and Raffaella who totally ignores me when she gets into her routine, by the sixth class I'm fed up... Besides, it takes a lot out of you, jumping up and down for an hour.

If it weren't for the four classes I've paid in advance... Of course, if I'm gasping for breath now that I'm only eleven I can just imagine how out of shape I'll be when I'm thirty or forty. *Exercise is good for you.*

But I hate it.

I can always come up with a good excuse not to go.

I'll go after I finish my homework. I swear. Then when six, seven rolls around and it's dark outside I get

second thoughts: I might get sick walking home in the cold all sweaty after class...

Or else I guilt trip myself about money. My sneakers are imitation Supergas with Coca Cola written on the side. They have really thin soles and whenever I jump it feels like I'm going to slip a disc. They're not cut out for Aerobics. Even Raffaella said so. I've already spent a lot of money on the class. No way will I spend even more on sneakers!

Then there's the old homework excuse. That's an excellent one too: exercise drains my brain.

As if the history dates I've just memorized could evaporate along with my sweat. And I have an exam tomorrow. Anyway when I grow up I want to be an intellectual. Who cares if I have the body of an athlete?

To avoid going to the gym, I mentally go over the pictures of writers in my Italian literature book. And of the philosophers on the covers of my father's books. To see if any of them were muscular types. Leopardi, Manzoni, Karl Marx, and the Romantic poets: they all confirm my theory. Every one of them

was totally out of shape. I'm positive they wouldn't have gone to the gym if you paid them.

Then there's the diet excuse. Especially crucial since I've gotten to squeeze into my burgundy corduroys, and since Raffaella's been instructing me about calories and saturated fats.

I've had the distinct sensation that the more I work out the bigger I get. Maybe it's because I've been eating more as a reflex. I go to the gym to lose weight and I get fatter? No way can I let this happen. Besides, lactic acid upsets my stomach. My thigh muscles expand threatening to burst my corduroys at the seams. This would be particularly damaging on a visual level. God forbid it comes to pass.

Then there's the time, space and distance excuse. Not metaphorically or philosophically speaking. But literally the fifteen minutes it takes me to get there. Exposed to the elements. It's a bitch. Especially when it rains and I can never find an umbrella.

One day Raffaella realized I wasn't coming to class anymore and she lent me a pair of her old Aerobics sneakers. The kind with an air bubble on the heel to absorb the shocks. She guilt tripped me that if I didn't lose weight, like hell was I going to pick

up guys. She even explained that being from Naples, I have Poor People's Body. It's a condition caused by not having enough food for centuries on end. Unlike Rich People's Bodies, which have always been well fed. Rich People have no fear of suddenly being deprived, so their bodies can afford not to store any fat cells for future famines.

So I went back to jumping up and down.

It's in the seventh class, in the second row, copying the movements of the girl in front of me, that I feel my head detach from my body. I look on at myself from the outside and I feel incredibly light. I levitate. And I dream of losing weight. Of zipping my fly up without having to lie on the floor. I feel a little out breath. But this time I stay strong. I'm not quitting half way through class like last time. I'm trying to act cool, but the front row girls give me dirty looks anyway. Nothing can stop me now.

See? I tell myself looking at the stained and spotted mirror. It's not the end of the world. If you happen to slow down, just speed up again. That's all. Don't think about it. It's all in your mind. Keep the rhythm. Focus. Pretend you're light as a feather. I

could go on like this for hours. The music pushes us on. I jump higher. The big boss up front keeps smiling at me. He's cute. But then I remember how Raffaella said Aerobics teachers don't like women. They're homosexuals. So I let that one go.

He's smiling at me to encourage me, I think to myself.

To let me know I'm doing a great job. The other times he didn't look at me once.

I'm breathing hard. If I risk a scissor kick I'm sure I'll pass out, I think staring at the miles-long legs of the woman in front of me.

But the inner reserves of mankind are inexhaustible, I tell myself.

My legs are scissor kicking by themselves.

Without me even telling them to.

They're kicking by osmosis. They're copying Raffaella's legs. Like small animals. They're no longer my legs. They are independent beings. And my arms? So easy. So light. The less I think about them, the more they move. They're flapping like butterflies.

Oh yeah. This time I'm really flying.

Afterwards a few of us hang out in the locker room for some girl talk.

We're all fully dressed and our hair is blow-dried. But the conversation got so interesting we all made ourselves comfortable. The forty-something even lights a cigarette.

We're in the middle of a very heated discussion: scales.

Raffaella says there are different kinds. Electrical, mechanical, heavy, travel size. Some have a crystal cover: translucent and very chic. Others are white plastic, with grams: very high-tech.

"Some insane people have professional gym scales in their houses. They look like the scales at the post office", says Zit Girl.

"But they all serve the same function: to make you look like shit", says Raffaella trying to make us laugh.

"Scales are no joke. You can't cheat. Except, yesterday I was depressed..." Raffaella says mocking some hypothetical sloth.

"Never, ever, try to justify yourself. The scale doesn't care about that crap. You can't appeal to its

emotions. It measures your weight coldly. It simply observes”, continues the redhead.

“It brings to light that which therapy tends to repress, to mystify”, says the grumpy forty-something, dragging about half inch off her cigarette.

“These days you can’t even take a break when you’re on vacation. Now they’ve got portable ones. And they’re cheap,” says the redhead rubbing excess blush off her cheek with her spit.

They have theories on this, says Raffaella stealing mascara from the redhead’s makeup kit and putting a third layer on her lashes.

“Heard you should weigh yourself every morning on an empty stomach. This method can be sort of encouraging if you’re very disciplined. But if you gave in to temptation, it could be a real bummer. Not a very great way to start the day,” says Raffaella poking herself in the eye with the mascara and tearing up a little.

“I also heard you should weigh yourself once a week, like Thursday or Wednesday. A long time away from Saturday night”, Raffaella continues wiping the black make-up from her eye with a piece of toilet

paper and redrawing the line around her mouth a little wider to create the illusion of plump lips.

“But this method can cause schizophrenia. After you weigh in on Thursday, you let yourself be tempted by the odd pastry, a couple of cookies and the list goes on, until Tuesday morning you decide to make up for it, so you starve for a couple of days. Just mineral water, tea, sugarless drinks”, continues Raffaella, stealing some cover-up from the redhead and blotting her now irritated undereye circles.

“The weekly method is fatal because it creates a break, an irreparable schism: the Before and After the weigh-in”, Fortysomething shares from personal experience.

“Even your friends struggle to recognize you. After the weigh-in it’s all about going out, being available for even the most insignificant get-together involving food. Before the weigh-in, on the other hand, there is total social isolation. You don’t answer the phone. You search the silence for spiritual guidance. You read Buddhist self-help books. You immerse yourself in Tibetan medicine”, concludes the fortysomething putting out her third cigarette authoritatively.

“But one wawely hoves the scale. You twy to hide it undew the cabinet ow behind the doow”, Zit Girl says sadly. As she walks out of the locker room hitting the light switch, I notice she has a fat ass too. “It doesn’t bwing up pweasant memowies. It dehudes our aspiwations. It destwoys our dweams of being at the beach in a bathing suit.”

Thanks to Raffaella and Aerobics I’m traveling lighter, both physically and mentally. I don’t think about the Swimmer anymore and I’m really starting to like Rome. Especially the fountains in which, if you’re careful not to get caught, you can dip your feet. The music stores with three floors, the palazzo courtyards in the center of town, the latest fashions at Benetton and Fiorucci.

So much has been happening that I even forgot my birthday. Of course, no one else remembered either.

After all that diet and exercise, Raffaella and I finally started dating. If not it would have been a waste of hard work. We’re not going out with the boys in my class, who, as Raffaella says, are retards. We’re going out with the older ones from the high school.

Better yet, with freshmen at her brother Stefano's school. He's our go between.

For the most part they invite us to the movies. Although we have to pay for our own tickets. We bring Manu along so there's more of us. We make her wear high heels and lipstick so she'll look older.

Raffaella got herself a pair of tight corduroys and her brother's friends are always complimenting her on her body.

Tonight we're getting ready at Nunzio's, because Raffaella's mother will have an epileptic fit if she finds anything out of place.

Nunzio has given up. He and his fiancée have moved into her parents' house. They left us their house and they charge us a minimal symbolic Comrades' rent.

My mother's hanging out with the feminists until late tonight, so getting ready is a blast.

My brother's in the kitchen screeching on his violin. Raffaella, Manu and I hunt for the right combo like Harrison Ford looking for the Lost Ark.

The bedroom closet still has some of Nunzio and Gabriella's clothes in it, so we try everything on over and over again. But nothing works. Those two are still way too stuck in the seventies.

We've added our things to Gabriella and Nunzio's, so the closet is stuffed to the gills. Bursting. It's the only one in the house. When we finish trying everything on I lay on the ground, disappointed, and jam the doors closed with my feet as Raffaella tries to turn the key in the lock.

It's not that I'm unhappy with that clothes overflow. The more you have the more combinations you can come up with.

Except tonight we're just not satisfied. And so we make our minds up. Raffaella's mother is a ticket collector in a theater. She has to dress up or she'll get fired.

She's out of the house every night except Monday when all theaters are closed. She's got outfits by the dozen. She's collected them over the years. She will definitely freak out if she finds out, so we can't leave any clues. We have to be extra careful. We wait for night to fall then Raffaella and I head over there.

Manu stays at Nunzio's because this mission is not for little girls.

We go through the hallway and up the stairs without turning the light on. We have to be quick. We open the front door really quietly so her father won't hear us above the noise of the TV.

There are dozens of outfits. I've never seen so much loot.

"Take that suitcase. No! Not that one. It's too small! Get the other one!" Raffaella orders in a whisper.

They're all the same! I protest rummaging through a chest.

In the end we decide on some oversized plastic trash bags. We stuff them and jam them somehow into the elevator.

A few minutes later we're cruising into the night on her moped. I hold one huge bag on either side like weights, and Raffaella she's balancing one on the handlebars. We are so high on ourselves the wheels practically levitate off the cobblestones.

Back at Nunzio's, we start from scratch. Except this time we have quality merchandise. Raffaella gets to go first, because it's her mother's stuff. Then it's my

turn. We alternate continuously. Like an assembly line. Now we're dealing with her mother's stuff, we don't mess around. We're totally engrossed. In the mirror, we become virtual realities. The clothes are speaking through us.

Manu doesn't even get to come close. This stuff is hot. God forbid it tears. And even when we let her try something on, the outfit falls apart because she looks like a baby.

"Hey, what do you think of this?" she asks me wearing a Luisa Spagnoli cloak.

Needs to be taken in, I say dismissively with my hand in one of the bags.

No way are we ever going back to her mother's Lebanese seamstress. She got to us with her tale of woe as a refugee or whatever. And she fleeced us anyway. We had to leave a Versace jacket hostage.

Tonight we're not bullshitting around, I tell myself pulling out an Armani suit.

Kenzo suits, Fendi pants emerge. All prime quality stuff. A little dated maybe, but in perfect shape. Raffaella's mom is a real pro.

Finally Raffaella finds peace, in the form of a blouse that fits her perfectly. She can tone it down with her corduroys.

But what about me? I'm not satisfied yet. Maybe I'm overloaded. My head is spinning from all these options.

In a final push I make it happen and emerge from the jumble with an outfit. Gucci on top, Anna Mode on the bottom.

Then I have second thoughts. I put my burgundy corduroys back on to match Raffaella. Manu grabs the Anna Mode skirt and wears it like a dress, with a belt. We're on top of the world. Ready for anything.

We look around and it's like a scene from *Desperately Seeking Susan*. A disaster area. A formless mass of fabrics and colors. It's a war zone, a Beirut.

"Where are we going to stash all this stuff?" Raffaella says anxiously.

When we get back tonight we're gonna have to strip and get it all back to her mother's. But right now we're running late so we decide to leave everything the

way it is and worry about it later. Anyway her mom's gonna get pissed off no matter what.

Waiting for Raffaella to give herself a final blow dry, I could have sworn I saw an Armani suit get up and get itself a glass of water.

When we ride on the moped, Manu usually sits on the edge of the saddle up front and I hang on for dear life from the back.

Speeding towards Rome, Raffaella and I get nervous because we're on our way to pick up older boys, who don't really pay that much attention to us. To relieve the tension we pick on my sister. We tell her that at the next bump the saddle is going to stab her and she's going to lose her virginity. Then no guy will ever marry her.

My sister whines, but she's so thrilled to part of an older group that she acts like a sport. She doesn't need to be told that it's not every day a ten - almost eleven- year old like her gets to go out with a twelve and a thirteen year old. On a moped.

Sometimes we are so on edge about having to see the fifteen year olds that we stop in some random street and steal plates off the parked cars. Just to let

off some steam. To get rid of that imploding bowel feeling I always get.

So we stop the moped in the dead of the night and start raiding. Just to stay in shape. If we can outrun the car owners, like hell we can't pick up a fifteen year old. It's a test of courage.

I was the one who let Raffaella in on the plates thing. I saw Petrillo do it in the country. You pop them off with a knife. Like clams off a rock.

In a week we can fill a whole department store bag. Manu and I hide them under the pull out couch.

We can rake in about fifteen in one sitting. Raffaella says it's kind of infantile, but then she can't resist and ends up harvesting the most.

Before leaving, we each take a knife from the kitchen. The problem is trying to figure out where to put them.

I never gonna leave home without my beloved skintight corduroys. The pockets don't even have room for my mascara, let alone a knife. So we dump everything in Raffaella's shoulder bag. It's leather, and it has writing all over it. Manu and I both hope to get the same one someday. Maybe we can share one.

We usually put the plates in her bag too. So Raffaella ends up with bruises on her shoulder from dragging it along all night.

We also take the knives as self-defense against dirty old men. If any guy tries to lay a hand on us while we're busy collecting plates we can just stab him in the stomach. Too bad I didn't have it with me that time in the bathtub.

Some plates are worth more than others. Like baseball cards. Mercedes-Benz are worth a lot. Especially the star that goes up front.

Once while we were prying one loose we saw a naked couple doing dirty things in the car.

The interior lights turned on and we saw everything. Then the guy saw us. He opened the door and the alarm went off and she put her bra back on as he jumped out, struggling into his underwear. He chased us down the deserted street tripping in his boxers.

Raffaella was pushing the moped trying to jumpstart it. We almost got ran over by a car that came from around the corner. Manu got on the front while I jumped on the back like in a Western. The guy fell on the concrete scraping his knee and

probably his dick too, begging us in vain for his Mercedes star.

Tonight, though, everything goes according to plan. We stretch our muscles and our guts by stealing about a dozen plates and jump back on the moped. Whenever I clutch Raffaella on the moped, at every jolt my pants dig into my stomach causing acute appendicitis-like pain. I keep my mouth shut or else I'll look like a fatso, especially since Raffaella never complains about anything.

My shoes aren't exactly the most comfortable either. I never know where to put them on this damn machine. You can accidentally jam them onto the starting pedal making the worse noise.

Generally we borrow my mother's shoes. She's a feminist so she doesn't dress very sexy. So we have to make do. Moccasins, or espadrilles at best. The key is for them to have high heels.

Finally we make it to the high school. We sit on the steps, waiting for Raffaella's brother to tell us what the plan is.

Luckily, because of our high heels, they think we're fifteen too. And no one says anything. Or else Raffaella's poor brother would get tortured.

Where did these toddlers come from? You're still hanging out with your little sister? That kind of thing.

We never tell anyone how old we really are and act really bitchy with everyone. This way we've got them convinced that we're in high school. God forbid they ever find out I'm still in middle school and Manu a year behind me.

Someone rolls a joint, someone else pops a pill.

I play it cool, but drugs freak me out.

Someone offers me a pill. Raffaella and I have no choice but to take it. We can't look like losers. But first we break it in half. She's scared too but she doesn't show it. When I'm about to swallow, very casually I throw it between a couple of parked cars. Then I pretend I'm as high as Raffaella, who did pop. I sing and dance by myself in a corner mimicking her in the other corner. I even pretend I don't care if people watch, when in fact I care a lot.

I have to stay really focused or else they'll figure it out that I'm faking. Like the time someone passed me a joint and they asked me what I thought of that pot. I

pretended to inhale and acted like a connoisseur. I said it was good stuff, it tasted like African.

They all burst out laughing and told me it was English Breakfast tea. After a couple of these fuck ups, I can't hope for much attention from these fifteen year olds. But I haven't given up yet.

To stay on their good side I keep quiet and follow orders. Tonight, for example, I agreed to be the counterweight.

The fifteen year olds say they're giving me a ride home on their moped but really it's because they can do a wheelie much easier when there's a girl as ballast on the back.

Especially when they've popped a pill or got high, with a girl in back they can get much more of a vertical rise.

They give me rides, not because they like me or because they're trying to pick me up, but because they can race better.

Manu and I are perfect for them. We live in the suburbs, so there's a long way to go.

Sometimes they go by the Olympic Avenue, which is nice and wide, and besides doing wheelies they can also race each other.

The drivers on all the other mopeds start racing us whether or not they know us.

All the winner has to do is give the loser a dirty look at the end of the race, and the other guy's night is ruined.

The only moment of relief is when we stop for fresh croissants from the all-night bakery. If we're lucky the three of us, Raffaella, Manu and I, get to run into each other. We can act bitchy. It's easier when we're all together.

But if you end up there alone with a fifteen year old driver, possibly one who just got beaten, there's not a whole lot you can do.

Mostly because he ignores you and doesn't even bother to buy you a croissant.

My best bet is not to utter a word. Because if you let out a giggle or a couple of open vowels they could find out that you're a) not fifteen and b) from the South.

Speaking of vowels, mine all come out backwards: the open ones are closed and vice versa.

There are some words in particular that I must at all costs avoid saying out loud: science, take, salsa, ashtray. If not I wouldn't survive a day.

Between us three, Raffaella is the boss. Not only because she's from Rome and we're from Naples, so the less we talk the less we get harassed, but because she's taller and more athletic. This is why a couple of the fifteen year olds check her out.

A friend of her brother's already felt up her breasts.

His name is Gianfranco, he has straight red hair and of course Manu and I like him too.

It happened at the movies when we went to see a Roberto Benigni film. Manu and I turned around and saw Raffaella next to Gianfranco with her face beet red. She ran to the bathroom to pull herself together. We were right behind her, dying to get the scoop.

She gives it to us as she puts her hair up with bobby pins: He put his hands here... I had butterflies in my stomach...

Manu and I hang onto her every word ecstatically.

Sometimes, when she feels like it, she'll even talk to us about her period. Which she is already getting, and me and Manu are not.

Manu says she's been having a weird discharge. I'm sure she's making it up, but I pretend I'm having

them too or else I'll look like a loser. When we're getting ready to go out we can talk about periods and discharge for hours.

"I have to change my underwear every day otherwise they get sticky", Manu gets into the specifics.

"If only you knew what a pain it is to wear pads... especially on a moped..." Raffaella complains.

Sometimes Manu uses the discharge excuse to wear a pad too. She's not used to it, so she walks around all bowlegged.

Whenever she has something really juicy to tell us, Raffaella leaves the moped at home and comes to pick us up at school on foot. She takes the bus with us just so she can punctuate all the details with hand gestures.

It seems that Gianfranco has given her a little tongue action. She demonstrates by using her right index finger as his tongue and her left index and thumb in a circle as her mouth. She sticks her right index into the circle and twirls it around, ignoring the dirty looks from all the ladies on the bus.

To hide the fact that we're always talking about Gianfranco, because God forbid someone on the bus recognizes us, we call our object of desire Henna. The more we talk about him the more we fall in love.

He's got a lot of real fifteen year old women following him around. Every night he French kisses one of them and takes her home.

I don't know why, but once in a while he even notices me and Manu. Tonight he even passes us a joint. At this point we have to inhale. Raffaella is drooling, because he's letting her rest her head on his shoulder. And while he's asking me my name, which blows my mind, I see that scarecrow Matteo coming closer. Of course a Kim cigarette dangles from his thin lips, and he's pretending to inhale.

I kinda have this overwhelming fear that he's going to ruin my magic moment. Gianfranco's already turned to someone else, since, shockingly, I didn't answer him right away. He invited the three of us to sleep over at his house because his parents are in the country. Matteo sits on the steps looking like a whipped dog.

God knows who told him that Manu and I hang out in front of the school at night. As we trot after Henna like short-winded poodles, taking three steps to every one of his, out of the corner of my eye I see Matteo following us. I shoot him a dirty Joan Collins *Dynasty* look and he understands that he better stay outside the door.

Up in his apartment, Gianfranco gives us a tour and I'm much more relaxed knowing that the loser downstairs can't come up.

Gianfranco proudly shows us the tent he pitched on the terrace propping it up in the flower pots and I see that worm Matteo looking up like he's expecting some divine sign.

Gianfranco explains that he sleeps in his A-frame tent to be independent from his family, and I'm praying that Matteo doesn't start buzzing the intercom downstairs.

It's not until Gianfranco zips the three of us up in the tent that I finally feel safe.

Maybe it's because of the security of finding myself so close to that hunk that all my worries melted away. I check out Manu and Raffaella and I can tell they're happy as clams too. Especially because it's a

one person tent and we have to lie really close together.

He's stripped down to his underwear. He's got the really fitted kind with writing on the waistband. The kind that shows everything.

Raffaella took over over his entire right side right away. She clings to him like a starfish, and even puts her leg over his.

She acts like it's not the first time she's slept with a man, but Manu and I know that of course it is. If she says anything out of line we gonna cream her.

He starts telling a ghost story.

This way Manu and I, screaming our heads off, have an excuse to grab him, except we have to share his left side.

With Henna there's enough to go around, so we can't complain.

One of us grabs a forearm muscle, another a bicep. If you're lucky you get a whole pec to yourself.

In the presence of all this bounty I totally forget about that scrawny wimp stalking me downstairs.

Gianfranco plays volleyball and has really long, hard muscles.

“The he goes into the completely dark room and what does he see?” he whispers thinking he’s scaring us.

Of course we’re not listening. We just wait for the right moment to scream so we have an excuse to throw our arms around his neck. He’s even wearing aftershave. Musk, I think. Matteo’s not even growing a beard yet. No way in hell is he wearing any aftershave.

Gianfranco thinks he’s scaring us with his little stories. Sometimes we get distracted looking at his mouth or running our hands through his red hair so we scream when we’re not supposed to. He looks at us strangely and thinking we didn’t get it, he starts retelling the whole story from the beginning.

We’re ecstatic. This way we can molest him all over again. Deep down we don’t want those vampires to ever stop sucking blood out of their victims’ necks, and we wish Gianfranco would never finish telling his story.

But then the sun starts to come up and we have to disappear, just like his vampires. Otherwise my mother’s gonna find out and when are we supposed to hear the end of it.

We head downstairs and as I'm getting on the moped, I notice that Matteo's still there sitting on a stoop, his teeth chattering from the cold. He must be especially retarded. He stares at me without moving an inch. I have no idea why he bothered to follow us if he doesn't even have the guts to come talk to me.

On the way home, Raffaella speeds madly out of pure joy. She shouts that Henna even put his hand down her underwear. Just to keep her happy I don't contradict her, but I'm pretty sure she's lying. And that Henna checked me out much more than her. Up front, Manu couldn't care less who touched who, terrified as she is by the speed we're driving.

As she's been doing all the time recently, Raffaella sleeps over. She loves to sleep on our foam mattresses and to keep talking until morning. Since my father spends more and more time in Naples, we have plenty of room at the house.

I doubt my mother realizes that Raffaella's even there, since she's out the door at dawn. Raffaella says that sleeping on the ground like that reminds her of the girl scouts and that she likes to stay at our house because her parents are old and conservative.

She likes my parents because they're young and Communist. Even when my father's back in town and they yell and beat each other up, it doesn't bother her because at least something's happening. Whereas her parents just watch TV.

Raffaella is the first person with whom I haven't been ashamed of them screaming on the other side of the wall.

The next day I fill my history book with his name: Gianfranco... Gianfranco... Henna... Henna...

I even graffiti it on the wall outside school. I hope Matteo sees it and falls apart.

Manu and I know deep down that if Henna ever picks one of us to be his girlfriend, it's gonna be Raffaella. I mean, he's already French kissed her. But we never talk about it because we don't want to jinx it. Instead we look for signs, or we make them up, that he's looking at us more than her.

Out of respect, Manu says that he looks more at me than at her. I appreciate her loyalty and I give her the biggest slice of pizza.

A few days later, unfortunately, Manu and I come to suspect that Henna and Raffaella have been up to no good.

He asked her back to his place alone. Manu and I sit silently, pretending to inhale the joints that are being passed around in front of the high school, while inside we're falling apart as we watch them walk away.

After a half hour, Raffaella comes back by herself and starts putting a bunch of hairpins in her hair. She doesn't tell us a thing.

We get home way past midnight.

She doesn't say a word for the entire trip. She's also driving painfully slow. That's how we know something's up.

When we stop to steal some plates at our usual spot, the strip under the highway where all the cars are parked side by side, she doesn't grab a single one.

Manu and I make a killing while Raffaella loafes around the moped. She's so quiet.

In the dark, all we hear is the shuffling of my mother's oversized moccasins on her feet.

Back home she doesn't want to sleep over on our foam mattresses. She leaves without even saying goodbye.

When we get home we find our mother, Nunzio, Gabriella and her brother, Massimo, all in the big bed in the middle of a group therapy session. Massimo has a curly, unkempt beard and keeps playing guitar while the others talk. He's 25 and plays those melancholy ballads they all love which always talk about someone who died because of Politics.

Manu and I go into the kitchen for hot milk and cookies. We get to hear everything because we leave the door open.

Every now and then Massimo stops whining on his guitar and talks about his problems. He says he wants to get his degree, but there are so many students in his department that they keep postponing the due date for his final thesis. Since he wants to specialize in restoration, my mother nails him on the subject of tiles. He explains he wants to renovate the outside of buildings not the inside. He mentions historic buildings, Renaissance courtyards, but my mother keeps going on about apartments. She thinks about renovations even when she doesn't have an apartment to work on. She buys the trades. Now she's jotting him a sketch of her ideal bathroom with her ideal

succession of tiles and asking his opinion. But Massimo goes back to strumming his guitar.

Then they move on to couples on the rocks.

So poor Nunzio not only gave us his house in exchange for a purely symbolic rent, he also has to listen to my mother's problems because if he doesn't he's not a Comrade but an egoist. Possibly even a Fascist.

My mother holds up her own life as an example and says that marriage is really the pits. Nunzio says he agrees and that he will never marry Gabriella. That he doesn't believe in pieces of paper. That it's a bourgeois thing. That word, bourgeois, comes out of their mouths almost like vomit. Like puss spewing out of a popped zit.

I go sit with my hot milk and cookies on the floor next to the bed and I notice how Gabriella, when Nunzio said that about never marrying her, looked kind of sad. But she doesn't want to let on. She might seem old fashioned.

I would like to ask her what's the deal with men that touch you or put their fingers or other parts of their body inside you and then you get sad.

And if when the man that does it to you when you're eleven is fifteen like Henna or over thirty like the Swimmer, is that normal or not really. But it seems too personal a question, so I keep my mouth shut and keep dunking my cookies. I don't really want to bring it up in front of Massimo cuz I don't know him that well. So I wait for them to finish their discussion.

They've moved on from politics and the Revolution onto Oedipus, Freud and the fact that unconsciously we all want to make love with our parents.

I picture my mother having sex with her father, or my father with his mother and it really grosses me out. I just can't get my head around that.

Let alone when my mother says I've got that Oedipus disease and it means I have to make love with my father.

So I'm forced to picture it and for days I'm so grossed out I can't even talk to him on the phone.

Finally Nunzio, Gabriella, and Massimo give up psychoanalyzing each other and take off. I slip into bed next to my mother who's reading a feminist or a

psychoanalyst book, which is the same thing really. She seems subdued after all that therapy.

Lying down is the perfect position for a talk since I can avoid unnecessary eye contact. Something I'm always a little afraid of with her.

When a grownup touches your body that's not a good thing right? I start keeping it really general.

My mother keeps reading and mumbles a few words like: It depends... Touching is normal... you have to release your sexual impulses... express yourself... if not you can become repressed...

It's like she's reading to me from her book at random.

She wasn't giving me the attention I wanted, so I let it all out: Uncle Bruno touched me in the bathtub.

But even that doesn't stop her reading. She mutters: With those tremors we were all really confused... it's all your asshole of a father's fault.

Maybe she meant that if my father hadn't had an affair with Aunt Mariella then I wouldn't have gotten molested by the Swimmer.

Doesn't help at all, like I don't know why.

All men are pigs anyway. I had a neighbor when I was fourteen... forget about touching. That guy did

everything else to me too, she adds putting the book on the night table and turning off the light.

The words *everything else* resound in my head.

The penis, the vagina, the down and dirty, I think as I get out of the big bed and my feet touch the freezing floor.

Anyway no matter what I tell my mother, she always has a worse experience to relate. She's always suffered more than you have, for sure.

I crawl into the pullout couch, my morale at an all time low.

I lean my head on the pillow and continue brooding in the dark. That thing, that always makes me sad whenever I think about it, doesn't make her sad at all. The same thing happened to her, but much worse. And she's not complaining about it. Instead she expresses her sexual impulses, which I guess is the right thing to do.

The problem is when someone's expressing themselves on you. When, let's say, you're doing your own thing and not even remotely thinking about expressing yourself at that moment. And let's say that person that is expressing themselves on you is twenty

years older than you and also a family member. That really sucks.

The next morning I don't see Raffaella fly by on her moped. I don't see her the morning after that either. Or the next day.

It's impossible.

I carefully scan all the cars from my perch on the bus. I check out every moped weaving through traffic like a champion skier flying down a slalom.

But none of the skiers is Raffaella.

As soon as school's out I check out the two or three parked mopeds waiting outside.

But Raffaella is not sitting on any of them.

Manu and I are so upset by her sudden disappearance that we don't even stop for a slice. We just get on the bus, worried. We double and triple-check all the mopeds we've already seen on the way out, in the hope that hers will reappear.

I don't even bother to do my homework on the bus any more. I'm just too busy looking out for her. To school and back with hunger cramps in my stomach, I'm nailed to my seat staring out the window for an hour, hour and a half.

The moped drivers give me dirty looks. They think I'm hitting on them.

After a few days on the *Look out!* I am still so upset she disappeared that I go look for her at Aerobics class. My class card is used up. And like hell is my mother buying me a new one.

"I've never been able to afford a gym in my entire life and I'm 35!" I can hear her now.

Buy Raffaella has vanished from Aerobics too.

I ask Zit Girl. She doesn't know a thing.

The redhead says she hasn't seen her for a week.

In silence, I walk back.

On the way home on the shiny concrete with the orange neon lights I think that every time a man touches you you're in deep shit.

The massive gray blue buildings filled with families eating dinner go by.

And for the first time in a very long time I think about Naples and the Neapolitans. I think about Miss De Stasio and I even miss Renato's beatings. At least those guys beat the shit out of you but they don't sexually molest you.

It's really sad that I can't go out with Raffaella anymore and that she's not sleeping over any more. At the least we could have put on Gabriella's henna while talking about Henna. It's so much easier with two people. When you're by yourself you end up leaving red stains all over the towels and the shower curtain. And Nunzio's gonna be pissed as hell.

When we don't have people over my mother cries a lot. She cries because my father's away. When he's around she cries because he beats her up. When he leaves she cries because he doesn't give her enough money and he doesn't care about us enough.

That's why she became a feminist.

A lot of women turn feminist after some man beats them up. For years they shut up and take it. Then all of a sudden they wake up and smell the coffee and they decide that all the men in the world are assholes.

Especially since we've moved to Rome, her feminist convictions have gotten noticeably stronger. She goes to a Club with a bunch of upper crust women and sits around their swank living rooms surrounded by feminist artwork. If you're a man you can't get within a 100 feet. There are upper crust

feminists, who got married and divorced and use their alimony to bankroll feminist photography shows, and then there are normal feminists like my mother.

The upper crust ones love rescuing and listening to the normal ones, who are only inferior because they have less money. They dabble in psychoanalysis even though they're not licensed. Their diagnosis is that my mother passively submits to her husband because she was beaten by her father as a child. As if she deserved it, as if she couldn't live without it.

The key is for my mother to leave before dinner. Cuz the upper crust feminist poets are on their way over to listen to classical music. And there won't be any room for the normal feminists.

Even if my mother can't live without getting beaten up, I sure as hell could. I bet my sister could too.

Maybe Raffaella's pissed off at me. But if so she would have to be pissed off at the entire Aerobics class, because she hasn't talked to any of them either.

And so I have to call her house.

I didn't want to because her mother scares me. Most mothers do. I'm positive she knows I was the one who stole her clothes. And so my voice is shaky.

"Hello?" I say, praying her brother will answer.

"Yes? Who's calling?" responds the ticket collector.

"It's... I'm looking for Raffaella... It's Sandra..." I answer fearfully.

"Raffaella is in Rimini doing a workshop. She'll be back in two weeks. And then she'll be off to Salso Maggiore for another one," she says.

"But what about school? She's not going back, then" I utter with the last breath in my body.

"You know she really wants to qualify for the regional championship. She doesn't care about school that much. You know if she teaches aerobics she'll start making her own money. High school diplomas aren't worth anything these days..." she explains before hanging up.

I'm so depressed. Mostly because I can't figure out why she didn't bother to call. Why she just split without a word.

Still I envy her for doing Aerobics all the time and not having to go to school any more. No homework, no exams.

I forgot to ask her mother for her number in Rimini or in Salso Maggiore.

Without Raffaella, Rome sucks. It's a dump. Manu and I hardly ever go out. Without her one thing is for sure. We can't go hang out outside the high school and act cool.

We've tried to pick up some of the losers from our class. But it's not the same at all.

We don't so much as look at Matteo. His job in life is to suffer. Especially since he followed me that night and freaked me out.

We flirt with the other kids just to keep busy. Also because it's easy. By now, thanks to Matteo, we have the reputation of hanging out with high school kids.

The teachers try to ignore us, rub us out. They hate us, with our Southern accent in that upper crust school.

They more they hate us, the more sexy we act.

Black nail polish, red hennaed hair, my mother's high heeled shoes. Take no prisoners. Manu's a bit self-conscious, but she has to do whatever I do. She also has to carry my school bag. If she doesn't I'll cream her.

Every once in a while she tries to object. Says I should carry my own book bag. If she says it more than once, I yell. I might even slap her around a bit. Best if in front of her classmates. That way she'll think twice the next time.

The principal with her piss-yellow hair definitely hates us. Not to speak of her secretary, Miss Buonocore.

During recess, when we spray the losers with water from the water fountain or we slap them around a bit, they sick the janitor on us. He's Nazi with a paddle. He threatens to beat our thighs with it if we don't cut it out right away.

They all kind of hate us, except the boys, who in spite of the fact we're always slapping them around, keep trying to go out with us. When they ask us to go the movies, we pretend to think about it for half the day. We always say no. We just want them to suffer.

Besides, they're just too young for us to be seen with them in public. God forbid we run into Henna or anyone from the high school.

On Mondays our Italian lit teacher makes us read *The Betrothed* for five hours straight. I don't follow the plot and daydream about Aunt Rosalba's fiancé and when they're getting married.

It's Chinese torture: the teacher assigns everyone a character and the most goody-two-shoes get to read the descriptions. She never assigns me anything. She doesn't trust me. My heavily Southern accent would ruin the Northern ambiance of the story. But I don't lose faith. While they drone on in an unintelligible Northern dialect I write my classmates nasty anonymous notes. Especially to those that confessed they want to come hang out with the high school kids. Or that begged me to show them how to put on mascara or lip liner.

The notes generally go along the lines of: Dear Piece of Shit... those guys will never look at you... don't even think about it... they only like babes... and I launch it.

Today, just for fun, I even write Matteo one: *Don't you dare follow me around or I'll beat the shit out of you, you don't even know how to French kiss...*

The thing I miss the most since Raffaella disappeared is having someone to talk to about French kissing and going to second base. No one gets that kind of stuff around here.

Only Raffaella knows more than me on these topics. This is why I respect her so much. And that's also why I'm so upset she's gone.

After *The Betrothed*, just to relax, on the way out of school I tell Manu she's not going home. We're staying in town and we're trying on clothes.

We stop by Benetton, but not very often. It's really snooty and the salesgirls are always breathing down your neck. Petrolio has the latest grunge look. All the clothes are black and ripped up and they come from England. The place is huge with pounding music and flashing lights. It's so insane in there even the salesgirls get dizzy so we basically have the place to ourselves.

But the hottest place of all is Fiorucci. It's sexy and fashionable. If you buy something they put it in a bag with the little angels on it and if you save it and bring it to school you are hot shit. It's kind of punk too. Perfect for girls like us.

"I wonder if angels in heaven are all newborns like these", says Manu almost getting hit by a car as she crosses the street looking up at the store sign.

"There is no heaven you retard," I yell grabbing her from under the wheels of the oncoming traffic.

"And give me a break with this God stuff! We still have all of Fiorucci to check out," I nip the discussion in the bud, devouring the window display with my eyes.

"If he does exist you're in deep shit," says Manu, when, so help me God, I actually see Matteo, that squid, clearly reflected in the window in the middle of all the mannequins.

Hey, I do know how to French kiss, wanna try?

I hear from behind me.

I don't even bother to turn around. I wither him with my look and burst into a Family Adams laugh that stops him in his tracks. The whipped dog look creeps back into his face. I see him slip into a café.

“Why don’t you go and say something to him?” says Manu.

“What, are you nuts? What if someone sees me talking to him?” I say.

“Poor guy... he’s been following us for the past two hours...” she says blithely.

“You saw him and you didn’t say anything?”

“I’ll go,” she says.

Manu heads over to talk to the loser while I head into the store and start to investigate a rack of vinyl and faux leather pants. Two minutes later I see the two of them through the store window.

“He’s inviting us to the movies, *I’m Getting A Yacht*, wanna go?” she says all excited.

“Is he paying for the tickets?” I say still examining the pants.

Manu nods her head yes looking for a sign of approval in my eyes.

I head towards the exit without a word, but from the slow way I walk Manu understands it’s a done deal. I mean, who wants to go home anyway. And even if anyone from the high school is there, they won’t see me in the dark theater.

The film stars Johnny Dorelli, who is short and bald but somehow manages to pick up gorgeous blondes with legs a mile long, all of them taller than he is. They're always foreign. Maybe he gets to pick them up because he has a yacht. The story is really lame. But I do crack up when, once when he's trying to get a blonde's attention, he ends up in the slimy water near the docks.

Matteo who is sitting on my right looks at me all happy that thanks to him, I'm having a good time. I immediately stop laughing and give him a dirty look. I don't want him to get too high on himself.

Then to show I'm totally independent, at intermission I buy three mushy candy bars with my own money, i.e. the change from yesterday's grocery shopping. And I dump one each on the two of them even though they haven't asked me for one. I don't want it to look like I need money or anything else.

Outside, around eleven, with Matteo tagging along, we walk by the high school to see if maybe Raffaella has reappeared. No luck. But we catch sight of Henna's unmistakable head of hair and for fear of being seen with the scarecrow we run off.

I don't understand what's got into her, but every once in a while Manu actually talks to the whipped dog. She asks him where he lives and if he has to take a bus to get home. He says yes, but he's getting a moped soon. I'm sure he's saying that just to impress me so I don't bother to listen. I couldn't care less about him.

We get to the bus stop but the last one just left.

So we have to walk home. Matteo follows us for a while.

"Did you like the movie?" the whipped dog dares to ask me, his voice trembling.

"It really sucked," I say. "And that midget... How can anyone believe he could hook up with those babes," I drive the point home.

Nonetheless, he's happy that I answered him not once, but, yes, unbelievably, twice. Let's hope he keeps his mouth shut in class.

After a while he turns off saying goodbye and Manu and I keep going for two and a half hours and 22 uprooted plates.

We come home to find my mother still up, smoking Nunzio's cigarettes in the kitchen.

She ambushes me: “Where have you been? Huh? And where’s the change from the groceries?” she yells, shaking me and delivering a nicotine flavored slap.

“Do you think you can do whatever you want? That you can come and go like this was some kind of hotel?”

Manu takes off to bed. She knows the drill. It’s the fate of all leaders: the weak follow orders, until a force majeure, i.e. my mother, intervenes and they have to abandon ship.

“Everything around you is mine,” she screams, rhythmically poking her index finger into my forehead, so I almost fall backward.

“Everything you do is thanks to me! You better not take me for granted!” she keep spitting out her favorite phrases.

“And don’t try to weasel out of this. I know you! Better than you know yourself! I made you! If you’re so smart, it’s because I’m smart!” she trots out another favorite.

She keeps emphasizing the word “I”.

When she says that word it's also the only time she stops drilling her finger into my forehead and points it proudly at her own chest instead.

"Hey! Look me in the eye when I'm talking to you!" she goes on gripping me harder.

Talking? She's screaming like a Fury. Besides I'm afraid to look her in the eyes, I've told her that a hundred times.

"If you don't look me in the eye it means you're a coward and I'm right!" she screams keeping the emphasis on *I*.

But I'm tired and I don't feel like getting one of poor Nunzio's lamps broken.

"You don't know what to say, huh? You're at a loss for words, huh!? That's because you know I'm right!" she grills me at random.

I still haven't figured out what question I'm supposed to answer. Or what it is that she's right about, for that matter. My father hasn't beaten her up for a good month now, so she's rampant. I'm tired and I just want to go to sleep.

"Yes...yes..." I say vaguely.

"What, are you making fun of me?" she redoubles her attack.

Surrender is just not enough for her. She wants blood, otherwise no one is getting any sleep tonight. She wallops me again. So I'm forced to grab her by the hair and yank her around a bit.

I end up holding a tuft of her bleached dried up hair. This way finally she can start crying and playing the victim.

"Gonna go throw myself on the subway tracks," she threatens opening the front door.

"Tell that to your father if he ever comes back from Naples," she says, disappearing out the door.

We hear the door slam, but we're already all under the covers.

In the middle of the night she wakes us up slamming the door again. She throws herself on her bed whining that life sucks and hers especially. Then just to make sure we're wide awake now that it's already 4:30am, the phone rings and she stops her whining to answer it.

Hello, I hear from the hallway.

Finally it's quiet so we can go back to sleep. But the silence stretches. It's making me nervous. I get up and move towards my mother in the dark hallway. I hear my grandma's yells echoing in the phone.

She must be really freaked out. For her to call at this hour from the phone booth on the edge of that hairpin turn, it's gotta be something really serious.

I strain my ears and start to figure out what's going on.

It seems my father showed up at her place with a handgun. He put it in her mouth and threatened that if she didn't convince her daughter, i.e. my mother, to stop screwing a certain named Massimo and come immediately back to Naples, he'd kill her and all her daughters. He added that all her daughters are whores since they sleep with every guy that walks by. And that she is a whore too since someone had to teach them. Grandma also said it was nighttime when he showed up and she screamed for help but he knew there was no one around and for a while she thought she was going to die. If not from a bullet in the head then from fear. He finally took off throwing her to the ground and saying she was coming to Rome to kill every single one of us. And that we better run for our lives.

My siblings get up from their foam mattresses and from the pullout couch and listen to the echo

emanating from the receiver as I my recap between bits of the conversation.

My mother calms Grandma down, while she still begs us to go into hiding.

I've figured out one thing, which is that my mother finally managed to cheat on my father. She's been threatening to for years. All I can think is, she could have picked someone better.

Then my mother hangs up and tells us to go to back to bed, that nothing happened. My brother starts to snivel and the two of us try and get some sleep, but without much success.

The next day when we come home from school I find my mother on the phone with Massimo explaining the situation to him and my brother practicing his off-key chords in the kitchen. Just to take our mind off things, Manu and I start polishing all our plates and dividing up the booty. Some are worth more, some less.

But with all that tension in the house and the fear that my father will show up any second, we can't agree on much.

She wants the star from the Merc and I tell her she's nuts, no way, I was the one who took it and I remember it clearly.

She doesn't give up though and tries to yank it out of my hands. We tug back and forth for a few seconds and I see red. I rip it out of her hand but I'm in a rage so I throw it at her. It hits her forehead and she starts to bleed. She screams that I'm a bully, that she'll never ever carry my book bag again, and then, maybe because she doesn't realize her forehead is bleeding, she jumps on me and tries to stab me with a Fiat 127 plate.

I get on top of her and start strangling her. Then maybe because her face turns purple and the blood is now truly gushing from her forehead, I decide to let her go, cursing like a fiend.

Manu runs to my mother, who ignores her and won't let go of the phone, so she runs to put her head under water in the bathroom sink. She cries and cries, because the blood won't stop.

I refuse to help her, because we've just fought and I don't want to lose face. But I'm a little concerned. Not knowing what to do, I turn on the TV. "Charley's

Angels is on!” I shout trying to make her come to me and not me to her.

But she keeps wailing.

“Oh my God it’s Charlie! No shit he’s turning around!” I shout, lying through my teeth.

She finally appears in the doorway, all excited. She’s got a wet towel wrapped around her head, which isn’t bleeding any more.

When my sister and I fight it means we’ve really been pushed to the edge. Because afterwards the protocol is we can’t talk for a few days. And if we don’t talk to each other, especially here in Rome, who are we going to talk to?

Then one day, Raffaella reappears outside school. It’s just like a mirage. Maybe it’s her doppelganger. I head over to the moped to make sure, and yes it’s really her. I’m in shock. I go over to her with a huge smile on my face, and I haven’t smiled for weeks.

But she gives me a warning look that says cool it. Like I’m supposed to come over without anyone noticing.

We sit down on the wall and order Manu to go buy us pizza. This time Raffaella breaks down. She's having a slice too. She even asks for one with sausage. She's really giving in to her cravings.

And so, finally, Raffaella tells me everything.

She's checking into hospital the next day cuz she has to get an operation cuz she got pregnant. She talked to Zit Girl's dad, who's a doctor, and he organized everything.

She's scared shitless though because eot only does she have to kill the baby that she's carrying in her stomach, but it's the first time she's ever been to a hospital. And the first time she's ever had surgery.

She asks me if I can skip school the next day and go with her. It's at six in the morning. And can I can sleep over at her house, because she's really really nervous.

We sleep head to toe in her twin-size bed. Her slightly smelly feet are restless in their worn green socks.

"I could already be this big..." she shouts at a certain point in the dark.

She raises a fist into the air. I see it because there's a little light from the TV seeping in from under the door.

She opens her fist and inside is her ring. The one with the tiger eye I like so much. Then she closes her fist back up. It's still in the air. I don't say anything.

I'm thinking some things, like: if you want, there's plenty of room at Nunzio's for you and a baby. But then I realize it's not because of lack of room.

I think if she had a baby to breastfeed she wouldn't have time to go to school, or to the gym, or to become an International Aerobics Champion. She would have to take care of it and change its diapers all day. She couldn't do anything else.

Anyway it seemed mean-spirited to say something about it after all these weeks she'd been away and God knows how much she must have agonized over it.

She brings her fist to her cheek, next to my feet. It's like I can hear that ring breathe from inside her hand. As if it's alive and its heart is beating.

We set the alarm clock for 4 a.m. just to be safe. At five of five we're at the hospital, which hasn't even opened yet. We got there by moped. I drove.

We didn't say a word for the whole trip, because who knows what the hell is going on.

They make her take her clothes off and lie down on a gurney with wheels. I don't know what to tell her so to be on the safe side I keep my mouth shut.

There are another five or six women doing the same thing, but they are much older.

A few of them even came with their husbands. The doctor has a beard and is very sweet. You can see that he's Zit Girl's dad because he's got zits too. I can see he's really treating Raffaella like a daughter when he tells the nurse to be careful with the anesthesia needle.

As she's drifting off, Raffaella asks the doctor not to tell anyone, not even his own daughter. Or else the whole Aerobics class will know and so will the entire neighborhood.

She tries to smile and to act cool. But I can tell she's scared shitless. The doctor doesn't have time to promise her he'll keep it quiet. Raffaella falls asleep with that fake smile on her face.

The doctor wants to operate on her first, before another patient that's already been under for a while. He stops smiling, slips on his mask and rubber gloves. They push Raffaella's gurney into the operating room and I sit down next to the hot drinks machine.

I spend a while checking the machine out and trying to picture how it works on the inside.

No one gives me the time of day.

It's only when they roll out her gurney and I jump up that a nurse comes over to tell me everything is OK.

I wait by Raffaella's bed a good half hour before she comes to.

Other women are sleeping or waking up on the other gurneys and there's always a husband or boyfriend by their side.

One even has tears rolling down his face. He seems more upset about the operation than his wife does.

When Raffaella opens her eyes she's not smiling at all.

She doesn't say a word. She looks down at herself but can't really lift her head because it hurts at every move.

The way she looks at me, it doesn't seem like her at all. As if they got the wrong gurney in the operation room and rolled out a different patient. After a while, she tells me she can't move and it hurts bad. But when the doctor shows up and asks how she is, the fake smile reappears on her face. Like everything is under control. The doctor says she can stay there all day and all day tomorrow if it's still hurting.

He goes away and her face twists in pain again.

Around one they bring something to eat on a tray and they even bring me a little aluminum container of boiled meat.

Around five Raffaella says she can't take it anymore and that she wants to get out of there. She struggles to sit up and gets dressed as though nothing happened. Her parents might get suspicious.

She gets up and her underwear is all stained with blood. She's full of cramps but she wants to leave anyway.

While we're waiting for the elevator and she leans against the wall, the doctor comes by and offers to drive us home.

Raffaella tries to smile and says we have a moped, but you can tell she can barely stay on her feet so he

insists. He says we can leave the moped locked up and pick it up tomorrow.

The doctor drops us off at Raffaella's place and tells her to rest and to eat only liquids for a few days and that he'll call to check up on her.

In Raffaella's apartment her parents are watching TV and they say something to us without moving from the couch.

Raffaella doesn't pay them any attention and jumps straight into bed.

She gets nauseous right away and asks me to help her go vomit in the bathroom.

I hold her head and try not to look so I won't throw up myself. I get a wet towel and hold it to her forehead. I tie it around her head Indian headdress style.

She crawls back under the covers and I clean up after her with toilet paper. Her mother will have a fit if she finds a mess.

There are vomit stains all over the toilet seat and as I clean I close my eyes and hold my breath, I am so grossed out.

After a couple of hours she says I can go and that she's feeling better.

She gives me the keys to the moped. She's definitely not gonna use it for of the next few days. She says she'll call if she needs anything and I better not call her at all.

As I leave the two keep watching TV. From the highs it sounds like the San Remo music festival. I don't bother to say goodbye. I walk to the hospital and unlock the moped.

I can already hear the yelling from Nunzio's stairwell and I bet the entire neighborhood can too. Unlock the door and there is my dad, holding a gun to my mother's neck. He finally made it to Rome. That's one thing off our minds at least. I have no desire to join the soap opera and I leave my siblings to try to separate them. The only thing I notice is a piece of gauze taped to my sister's forehead. She's trying to grab my father's gun-wielding arm.

I get into the pullout couch in the dark without taking my clothes off. I stick my head between two pillows but there's no way I can escape the sounds of slaughter. My mother says she can go to bed with

Massimo anytime she likes. That'll teach him a lesson. She's gonna do it at least as many times as he's slept with her sister or her friends or his students. In fact she's gonna call Massimo right now and tell him to come over.

While they scream I think I really wanna go back to Naples. At least there when my parents fought I could take off to Susy's.

Fucking hell! It's not loaded! I hear my father yell while the gun keeps going click, click, click.

I'm guessing right about now he threw it at her.

"Ahhhh!" my mother reacts. "Murderer!!!"

"You won't see me ever again! And you kids ain't gonna see me again either! That way you'll learn to listen to her!" threatens my father taking off and slamming the door.

In diminishing crescendo a la Mozart's Requiem, I hear my brother consoling my mother and her whining about her fate as usual. And I wonder whether he left the gun cuz I'd love to take a look at it.

The light comes on suddenly. I lift the pillow from my face and see my mother looking at me menacingly from the doorway.

“So you’re here, huh?” she asks. As if she can’t see for herself.

“You don’t care that your mother’s getting murdered by that bastard, huh?” she says coming towards me.

Even if I cared, what could I do? He’s already tried and failed so many times. I bet he totally knew the gun was not loaded.

She jumps on top of me and rips the blankets off.

Flying into a rage as she looks at my body as if all the horror of her life were pictured on my chest. “I told you a hundred times not to wear this sweater!!” she shouts spitting in my ear and pulling me off the couch.

God knows why she just noticed the burgundy sweater now when I’ve been wearing it for months now.

I fight back, but she’s stronger. She drags me off the bed wrenching my arm. I fall to my knees on the icy floor. She starts yanking the sweater off of me. In the kitchen, my brother goes back to practicing his off key chords. I let her do whatever she wants, but she keeps jerking my arm. The first blow comes down.

My sister just acts tough, so I'll feel really bad about the damage to her forehead.

"The fact is you have an Oedipus and Electra complex. Oedipus and Electra!" screams my mother wagging her index finger right and left. With her left hand she's finally managed to extract the sweater and throws it on a chair.

You're jealous of me! "That's why you wear my stuff. That's why you want that bastard to kill me. Say it! Admit it!" she screams in my ear as I lie half naked on the floor.

While she yells I look her all over. I analyze her tangled hair, the hump on her nose, the hairs I know she has around her saggy nipples, which I see every time she undresses in front of us, which is always.

Her face that is always angry. Her long feet with their bunions. I imagine an Electra like a gorgeous queen, with amazing clothes and jewelry, and I see how one could be jealous of her. But of my mother...

The third blow jolts me from my reverie about the queen and her necklaces and I lose it. I throw my jacket on without anything underneath and I leave the house slamming the door.

“Where do you think you’re goiing! If you leave you’re neeever coming back! Do you heeear me?” I hear her from the stairs and I think at least I have the moped.

I lean into the turns with my body and I think I’ll go to a movie downtown since I still have a little cash. Cars speed by and I see the plates on the parked ones. But I have no desire to stop and take them.

Feel like cruising down the Olympic Avenue even though it’s getting dark. I want to see what it’s like to speed, and not just be the ballast on the back.

There are some teenagers on mopeds but I don’t recognize any of them. I try to challenge one with an Ellesse down jacket but I can’t keep up and he doesn’t even glance at me.

The smell of greenery from the Villa Doria Pamphili park overflows into the metropolis with its cars and buildings. I think I even feel some tears welling up in my eyes.

But I continue to speed like hell. The faster I go, the faster ideas pile up and tangle in my head. I think that if a truck rams me and I die right now, at home they won’t notice it for days.

At the same time I think that all this sex stuff is totally fucked up and that I was lucky I didn't get knocked up from what the Swimmer did to me. I flash on my funeral, with Raffaella, my sister, the girls from the gym including the front row ones. All of them weeping. Then I go back to the sex stuff and I think that I never want to get pregnant ever in my life and that I don't want to get married or even have a boyfriend. That being touched grosses me out.

Then I fixate on the accident idea again and I think I'll just drive into a car. Not too hard. Just enough to get injured. So they'll take me to the hospital. A nice broken leg would be enough. To make them all feel guilty. Like hell do I want to die right now. I have too much to do. Like becoming an intellectual. Maybe I'll be an Aerobics champ too.

Then the fragrance of the trees distracts me and I stop thinking. I forget all about my plans and I slow down so I can smell the perfume better.

After a couple of hours I lock the moped in my street and by the dark windows I realize dead calm has descended upon the house.

I go up and Manu is doing her homework in front of the TV. She still has the gauze stuck to her forehead. My brother practices next to her, and strangely he is in tune tonight. My mother is locked in her room bitching on the phone to her aspiring architect lover about all the lurid details of her fucked up life.

I sit down next to Manu who hangs tough and doesn't say hello. To break the ice I ask if she wants to go for a ride on the moped. She stays bent over her notebook. She scribbles equations with a blue Bic and the results with a red Bic. Maybe she thinks I'm bullshitting her again. Like when the hell did I ever have a moped.

I would like to apologize for hurting her head, but it's so hard to be nice when you're in a war zone. To be nice you need peace and quiet. You can't live thinking someone might come at you from behind any second and knock you off your chair. Sweet talk just doesn't come out when you're constantly on the lookout.

I would like to tell her something. Anything at all. Even if it's not something sweet. Even just to cover up my mother's whining from the other room.

I get my school bag and try to do my homework. Garibaldi and his Thousand men. Who gives a fuck about the Thousand. Even more so, who can believe they all crammed into one boat out of Genova.

I close my book, take off my jacket and slip the burgundy sweater back on. It was still right where she left it.

I'm pregnant, I tell my sister, who finally drops the red Bic.

My brother pretends not to hear and heads off to practice in the kitchen. Manu looks at me without a word and I say, "What, you don't believe me?"

"You didn't even get your first period yet," she reasons scientifically.

"I'm not getting it because I'm pregnant, you retard!"

She doesn't have a comeback for that. She's looked at all those sex books they gave us at Christmas too. Even if she did just look at the pictures without reading a word.

She puts a hand on my stomach and asks:

"What does it feel like? Is it moving?"

As I give her the gory details I grab the bag of car plates from under the pullout couch and go into the kitchen.

I empty the plates into the garbage can. Manu watches meekly.

“Enough of this stupid stuff that just takes up space!” I issue a new order.

I know I’ve just grown about six feet in her eyes.

“I don’t want to have an abortion, it makes me sad,” I confide.

My brother keeps faking he hasn’t heard a word, but I can tell he’s terrified by the way his bow shakes as he draws it across the violin strings. The more the strings tremble the more gory details I come up with.

“Besides I don’t want to go to the hospital and get operated. The anesthesia would mess me up.”

“You have to tell Mom,” Manu interjects.

“Are you nuts? She’ll make me abort right away, she’s a total feminist,” I shut her up.

My brother stops sliding his bow across the strings. He stares at me.

You snitch on me I’ll kill you, I threaten them both with a look,

From their silence I know they know I'm not kidding.

I close the kitchen door behind me and furtively get a piece of foam from the mattresses on the floor.

In the bathroom I slip the foam inside my burgundy sweater. I stuff it into the top of my pants and fluff it up so it looks real.

Keep it on all day, including on the bus to school, just to see who gives a shit. I take it off only at night, in the dark so Manu won't notice. When I sweat it sticks to my skin and it gets uncomfortable, so I put it under my head and use it as a pillow.

The Mainoni cousins at the next desk next over give me dirty looks. They can see my profile, that's why they've noticed. But I don't say a thing. I want to see if they have the guts to talk to me to my face.

As we read that bore *The Betrothed* I catch my reflection in the window. With my red hair and the foam protruding from my stomach, I really look like another person. Even the expression in my eyes seems different. I feel like I'm seeing my mother, because I'm so pissed off.

Just as we're in the thick of the burning of all the Northern houses so everyone in them dies and God willing we can get this story over and done with, someone knocks on the door. Our collective torture is interrupted as the class stands up because the principal's secretary, Mrs. Buonocore, comes in. She whispers something in the teacher's ear.

They look over at me. Maybe because I'm the only one who hasn't stood up. OK the hell with it, here I am, happy now? I think as I uproot myself from my seat.

"Sandra, please go with Mrs. Buonocore. The principal wants you in her office," says the teacher.

All the squares in my class watch me gleefully because I'm probably about to get suspended or something.

I'm not scared at all. I know exactly what she's going to tell me. To ditch the foam and stop coming to school with my hair a fire engine red.

I'm delighted this came up right in the middle of *The Betrothed*. I couldn't take it any more anyway. Plus I have a math exam in an hour.

Or maybe she's gonna tell me not to wear my V-neck sweater anymore. She's just jealous because

she's such a dog. She would love to be as sexy as I am.

She has nicotine-yellow fingers. Not to mention her stinky breath. Every once in a while she gets a little mirror out of her purse and she fixes her bleached hair with the gray roots. A little henna wouldn't hurt. She puckers her deformed mouth with the thin lips and she likes what she sees. Satisfied, she puts her mirror back in her bag.

Walking down the stairs I think if she has anything to say about my high heels, I'll say my doctor told me to wear them. That they're good for my circulation.

I go into the headmaster's office defiantly like a Revolutionary. Some of that attitude must have been handed down to me in my genes. I've seen my father so many times resisting the police who were trying to disperse the crowd at demonstrations that it must have entered my blood without me noticing.

The minute they lay into me about the henna I'm gonna tell them everyone is free to style their hair the way they want. It's not like we're in the Middle Ages or under a Fascist regime.

She sees me and asks me to close the door and sit down. She's not pissed off at all. Actually she seems kind of sad. That kindly look is making me nervous. I do as I'm told but keep my pissed off attitude. That way she'll know not to mess with me.

She even asks her secretary, Mrs. Buonocore, to leave us alone. Most of the time she loves to humiliate me in front of her.

"We got a call from home," she says plaintively, breaking the overloaded silence.

She avoids my gaze, as if what she's about to tell me is so horrible she can't bear to say it while looking me in the eye.

My heart chills.

I think my father finally managed to kill my mother. He must have bought some bullets. Or maybe he did it with a bread knife. He broke in to Nunzio's apartment and found her in bed with the scruffy architect. But first he murdered my grandmother. He went over to Rosalba's and killed her and the Betrothed. Then he came to Rome and moved on to my mother and even my brother.

Or maybe my mother really did do it this time. She killed herself for real. She climbed up to the roof

of the blue-grey behemoth and threw herself down the red tube of the elevator shaft. And the neighbors came running.

Or maybe she really threw herself in front of the subway in front of Nunzio's house. All the commuters crowd onto the platform. The police struggle to remove the body trapped under the train. The commuters see chunks of cut up flesh on the rails. The skull is smashed to pieces. The hair is all bloody and matted. But they're all happy because they have a great excuse not to have to work all day.

Or maybe my mother is the one who bought the bullets and blew him away.

She waited for him behind the bedroom door. He came in from Naples, with his suitcase, and she put the muzzle of the gun to the back of his neck like one of Charlie's Angels. She pulled the trigger. A single shot. And his body pitched forward onto the bed.

Then in one of her depressive fits she blew herself away too. She shot herself in the mouth. She fell onto the bed too. They're lying there right now in a pool of blood between the sheets. A la Romeo and Juliet. Because deep down, they beat the shit out of

each other but they loved each other too. My brother came home from school first and went to practice in the kitchen. After a couple of hours he began to get a whiff of the dead bodies and went to investigate...

“Your grandmother has passed away,” the principal jolts me out of my nightmare.

“Where did she go?” I ask. Her words haven’t really sunk in.

”She died, the poor thing. But you have to be strong. Death is a part of life, blah, blah, blah...,” she drones on.

But I’m not listening. I’m just so ecstatic that not a single shot was fired. That there is no mangled corpse on the train tracks. No embarrassingly blood-drenched sheets to send to the cleaners.

I’m not shocked at all. Of course I know that people die. Especially old ones.

“You have to take a train with your sister. Your mother already left,” she explains, still with that plaintive note.

I almost feel relieved. Much better to find out someone died of natural not man-inflicted causes.

“The janitor will drive you to the station. There’s a 12:15 train. Your father will meet you at the station

in Naples,” she gives me the final instructions. As she gets up she even runs her nicotine stained hand through my hair to comfort me.

All things considered it’s not too bad. I’m getting out of my math test and the rest of this crappy week. It’s the end of the quarter and the teachers are going ballistic.

Mrs. Buonocore goes to get Manu from class.

The janitor is waiting for us outside in a lobster red Fiat 500, the motor running. Normally he’s a total Nazi, but now he’s being really very nice too. I guess people have to die in order to get some TLC in life.

He parks outside Termini station and buys us tickets from the automatic ticket vendor and everything.

He gets us window seats and puts our book bags in the rack above our heads.

“You’re all set. Don’t worry...” he says handing us a bottle of water that he bought with his own money.

Who’s worrying? A sandwich cart comes by and the janitor even buys us a couple of ham sandwiches, again out of his own pocket. He waves us goodbye from the platform and the train takes off.

And I reconstruct the facts. I see my mother dashing to get her mama's boy out of music school. She grabs his arm and they bolt to the station with him whining the whole way that she's gonna make him drop his precious Japanese violin. Before jumping on the train she calls the principal and gives one of her earthquake victim performances, like she is the only person in this world that has terrible things happen to her. The principal takes pity and organizes everything.

I also think that it doesn't suck to be a principal ordering everyone around. In some ways that's an intellectual's job too. I might have to consider it when I'm grown up.

Then I remember Manu and I haven't said a word to each other yet.

We haven't talked much since the forehead incident. Partially it's also because all these things are happening inside my body and not in hers.

Grandma's dead, I say to break the ice.

"I get it. I'm not a retard," she says without bothering to turn around. She's busy watching a woman with glasses underlining everything in her book with a red Bic.

Neither of us feels like shedding a tear. I force myself to picture grandma when she used to cook us spaghetti with butter. Nothing. Not one teardrop.

For the rest of the trip, through all the tunnels and the ocean views that reappear after each tunnel, which most of the time when you're coming from the South you never even notice, I never came close to crying.

I have that cramp deep in my bowels. This time it's constant. It goes on and on. I can barely breathe. My whole body is stiff. I'm practically paralyzed. I'm terrified inside out.

The train stops at the Formia-Gaeta station and I have a sudden realization. I remember when we drove to Rome. All those toll booths. And I remember the Swimmer, who had just molested me and who gave me nightmares. So now I know where the cramps are coming from: the Shithead will be at the funeral, for sure.

Like hell is our father waiting for us at the station. We cram into the bus, without buying tickets, cuz what's the use when no one else ever does either, and we crawl home in the swaying jungle of sharp elbows and stinky armpits.

We get to our building and I'm blown away. It's like some kind of joke. It's like some other city, much further South. Like an African market maybe. Though I've never been to Africa.

The front and the stairs are all shored up with metal beams and wooden boards leaning on the building across the street. There are cables screwed to the middle of the alley. The huge holes in the walls have been patched up with gigantic sprays of concrete like huge gray spitballs.

It's like seeing an old man struggling on crutches, dragging an IV on metal rods.

I would never have recognized the building if it weren't for our name on our mailbox.

I had known, I wouldn't have come. Much better to remember it the way it was before.

The Plexiglas door is still destroyed, the metal railings still bent from when we all crowded through during the earthquake.

The stairwell is shored up with a network of different sized beams and boards like a super thick spider web going in all directions. You have to duck to get through. The tenants, however, seem to have

adjusted. They hang their laundry on the cables. Kids play horse on a fallen beam.

The apartment door is open. Not because someone forgot to close it. But because of the broken glass that is stuck under it. Going in we hear the sound of the typewriter and we're happy to at least find a human being inside.

The apartment is propped up by metal beams too. They run horizontally across the room. They're stuck to the wall by cement-filled holes. My mother's renovations are a joke compared to this.

Some of the floor is still ripped up, just the way we left it. At least now it matches the general WWII look.

We head towards the typing sound in the printing press room. On the way, we see that our old bedroom doesn't have any metal beams. I guess there were no holes in that wall. So all the stuff from the rest of the house is stored in there. Two huge piles reaching almost to the ceiling. Chairs, books, home renovation magazines, some pots and pans, clothes.

On the floor, looking kind of the worse for wear, like no one bothered to pile them up in a corner, we see all our toys. Barbie, My First Oven, my red diary

with the fake lock. They're all dusty and look like they've been stepped on. My sister bends over a headless Barbie and this time the tears do well up in her eyes. She dumps all the books out of her schoolbag and starts to pack it with the sad remains. A legless Big Jim, a set of plastic pots and pans, the headless Barbie and the missing head, which she finds under some clothes.

"Leave that stuff alone. Can't you see it's broken?" I say trying to pull her away.

"I can fix it! Leave me alone!" she yells, scooping more shredded toys into her bag.

I watch her try to fit My First Oven in there. I couldn't care less. It's all water under the bridge. It's like it was another life. Another house, another building, toys belonging to other children.

On the way out though, tossed in a corner I see Barbie's House, split down the middle. And I pause for a moment. If I could have picked one thing to take with me out of that pile of comic books, pillows, blankets and broken dolls, I would have picked that pink fluorescent house. It's not for nothing. It's a Mattel original. But then I remember I don't have any room so I only take my red diary with the fake lock.

After smacking my head on a metal beam, I finally reach my father in the printing press room.

He's bent over his typewriter on the floor. A bunch of scattered leaflets are stuck on the beams with wooden clothes pins. It reminds me of the movie where Totò and Peppino are making fake money.

My father shoots me a quick look and keeps pounding the typewriter. He says he can't make it to the funeral. He got some stuff like to finish this article against the City Council that pocketed the earthquake victim money. They left a lot of families homeless especially in the Vesuvio area near the volcano.

Everything is covered in white dust, hopelessly ruined: the couch, the table, the library with some its books fallen on the floor next to it.

I get my sister who in the meantime has filled up my bag up as well as hers and we leave this Beirut-like war zone forever.

In the alley I see Renato in the middle of a new gang of boys older than he is. They all have crew cuts slicked back with a lot of gel. You can tell that he's not the leader. It's a tall guy with his shirt knotted over his stomach and a cocky look. They watch us with an attitude like they're letting us go just this once, but

next time we better ask permission. Renato, to be on the safe side, pretends he doesn't know us.

We go back to the station where I vaguely remember you can get the bus to grandma's. Luckily on the way we run into a distant cousin. He's heading to the funeral too so he takes care of us.

"They found her sitting on the toilet half naked. She'd been dead for two days," he says.

That's so gross. Did he really have to go into the gory details? The more he rambles on about Grandma the more Manu and me stare out the window. All those sharp turns and corpse descriptions are making me want to throw up.

He explains that when it came time to dress her, she was frozen in a sitting position and it was really hard for them to straighten her arms and legs out.

Manu attempts to take her mind off the gory details by trying to reattach Barbie's head while I open my diary. I can't read it because I'm so nauseous.

Our cousin rambles on saying Thank God his mother, i.e. Grandma's cousin, stopped in on her every few days. She even brought her fresh lettuce from her garden.

Leaning out the window, I fill my nostrils with the damp, musky country air.

Our relentless cousin says that if one of her daughters, i.e. my mother, Aunt Mariella or Aunt Rosalba, had lived with her, this wouldn't have happened. That this thing of women going to work in the city has become an obsession. That it was only a small heart attack. That it had happened before and she'd always pulled through because of the medication. That if someone had been around to give her medication she wouldn't have died. I think to myself that it's mean-spirited of him to criticize our relatives who forgot about Grandma.

The more he bitches, the more my stomach churns. Little by little I stop listening and I focus on the cramps I've had since Rome. The idea of seeing the Swimmer again blots everything out. The rage, the tears, the vomit.

We get off the bus and walk along the side of the road towards the house as the distant cousin continues to babble.

I'm not listening, I'm not sure about Manu. I'm fixated on what I'm going to say to the Shithead when I see him.

We realize we're getting closer because the sides of the road are jammed with parked cars. Neapolitans and country folk both love funerals.

Even when we get there and I see the wreaths stacked up on the porch, I don't cry.

We drop our book bags in a corner and when we cross the dining room among all those faces distorted by weeping and mourning, I still don't feel a thing. I don't feel like crying at all. Manu follows me with the Barbie. She managed to reattach the head. She's not crying either.

I search through the crowd for the Swimmer's head and at the same time I hope I won't see it. So I won't have to talk to him.

I don't know if it's better to see him right away so I can get it over with. Or to hope he never made it from Verona. That he didn't make it in time.

That he couldn't get out of work at the bank because of mortgage payments were due.

The hallways are crowded with clusters of people clinging to the walls and crying. When I walk by they

detach themselves from the wall and collapse on me weeping since I'm a close relative.

Their faces are wet with sweat and tears. There is no air left in the house. There are just too many people breathing and crying. The oxygen has disappeared and the air is clammy, like a steam room or a sauna. The closer we get to the coffin the denser the clusters and the louder the weeping and wailing. The bodies are so packed I have to push my way past. While I'm being pushed, I worry that in the bedroom where the body and therefore the highest concentration of drama is, I might run into Aunt Mariella and the Swimmer.

Finally, I see the bed with the corpse on it. The Shithead is nowhere to be seen.

I relax a bit and I check out Grandma in her best dress. She even has all her jewelry on and a chain with a cross between her hands which rest, one inside the other, on her stomach.

It's true her legs do look a little bent.

My mother is on her knees next to the bed, weeping and hugging the body. My brother sits next to her holding his Japanese violin case. He's sad, but

he's not crying either. As usual we don't bother to say hello.

Next to my brother, Aunt Rosalba is in the arms of the Betrothed. She catches my eye and for a second stops crying and smiles at me. But I don't even acknowledge her. I keep scanning the room. Moving my head to the right and my eyes to the left. My head to the left and my eyes to the right. Like the sharks in the Aquarium. God forbid the Swimmer comes up behind me.

I'm ready to look away the second I make eye contact with him. But I don't see him anywhere.

On the other side of the bed the crowd opens like Jesus parting the tides and someone transports my full-figured Aunt weeping to the deathbed. Her two children cling to her. And I now know he must be around too. My mother embraces her sister from across the bed in spite of the fact that she was screwing her husband. They join in a tender embrace above the corpse.

I catch Petrillo's suspicious stare in a corner and I start to worry that some relative might notice the fact that I haven't shed a single tear. Just as I'm putting on a sad expression my heart stops: it's The Shithead.

He freezes me immediately with a knowing look. My sad expression disappears and is quickly replaced by a mask of terror.

With his calloused hands in his pockets and an indifferent look, he makes his way through the crowd. He's wearing a white shiny sailing jacket. The kind that makes people think you go sailing all the time when in fact you never set foot on a boat. And it's white, not blue like the vast majority. Meaning the Shithead is a total exhibitionist.

Luckily there are about fifty people between us. Fifty reasons to avoid talking to him. In fact I'm ready to chit-chat with all of them just so I won't have to talk to him. Fifty different topics of conversation.

To buy myself some time I throw myself onto a fat neighbor and pretend that I'm sobbing. In the dark recess of her huge chest I look at my burgundy sweater, which is sticky from all my relatives' tears. I smell the odor of tears and I remember sad things.

Like when my mother gets into bed with me, crying, and jams her cold feet between my thighs. In the dark. In that salty smell of tears.

And then, yes, I start to cry. Finally. Now they can't say anything. They have no idea, but I'm not

crying over a dead grandma. I cry over all the bad things speeding through my head at 100 miles an hour. One after the other, over and over. The earthquake, my father straddling my mother waving a knife, our apartment held together with beams. I have to say that I do feel better. All that liquid seems to take the edge off. Even that feeling like I have to piss goes away a little. I feel the heat of tears rise through my neck through my nose and I see that Manu too is going at it. No one can have anything to say now.

The problem is that the more I cry the more my relatives gather to comfort me. Between hugs, I see Petrillo and Addolorata finally looking at me with respect now that I'm weeping, and they keep to their corner.

Then suddenly next to their little heads I see a white blob weaving between the bodies. I wipe away the wet salty hair sticking to my face and I see him. It's definitely him and he's coming closer.

My ass contracts from fear and blood shoots out my nose. A spray. It stains the clothes of the fat neighbor who tries to clean herself off. Blood pounds in my head and bursts from my nostrils. I throw my head back trying to stem the flow with the burgundy

sweater sleeve and it feels like the blood in my temples is so strong it will come out my ears too. Out my mouth. And out of all the holes in my body.

The neighbor passes me a used handkerchief wet with tears. Someone else makes me sit down and lean my head against the wall.

I feel the blood go down my throat and come back up. I swallow. It's hot, sweetish and salty from the tears.

I'm happy because all this blood stopped the Swimmer in his tracks.

If he put his hands on me now he'd get them dirty. So he slows down.

He wants to act cool, like nothing happened in the bathroom. Come over, say hello, how are you, that kind of stuff.

Out of the corner of my eye I see him frozen in the middle of the room.

He seems undecided whether to keep coming and get blood stained, or to go back. Someone gives me another handkerchief and my mother tells the room that this happens to me all the time. The hell it does.

Look around for another huge breast to bury my face in if need be. But all I see is him. His white, shiny jacket. He looks at me with saggy flat eyes. His mouth with his tongue in it seems saggy too. Even though he's far enough away that I can't see details, I'm sure he has spit oozing out the sides of his mouth. All of a sudden I see him move decisively towards me.

Tears gush from my eyes as I watch the white stain ooze towards me.

If I were a grownup or a man I would have beat him up. I would have shouted: How dare you touch me that day in the bathroom?

I would have shouted it in front of all those people. I would have grabbed a knife the way my father does or grabbed him by his hair and dragged him through the crowd without giving a shit who was watching. And if anyone tried to say something I would have beat the shit out of them too.

No one understands how horrible it is to be touched there. It's like someone rifled through your drawers where you keep all your secret things. Your favorite toys, your diary. As if the Swimmer opened those drawers and made a huge mess. Then he

opened the pages of my diary with the fake lock and laughed at my list of sounds I wanted to record. As if he yelled to everyone: You know what this retard does? She tapes sounds! And everyone bursts out laughing.

It's as if he took all my toys, ripped out the pages of my diary and threw them on the floor and pissed on them.

That's what it felt like when he touched me in the bathroom when I was playing.

The magic of make believe became something heavy that made me lose the desire to play.

He comes closer. Closer. He keeps taking steps. He strides towards me. He's almost on top of me when I get up and I take off.

I make a run for it, pretending I don't see him because I have to keep tilting my head back.

I bore a hole through the crowd and he watches me go. I did it. I escaped.

Luckily he didn't try and grab me. He would have crushed me against him and felt the foam around my stomach. He would have asked: What's this?

I wouldn't have said anything because I would have been too ashamed and he would have touched me even more inside, laughing.

Because I would have felt like such a retard about the foam. And he would have had his fun one more time. And he would have put his thing inside me too probably. They way Gianfranco did to Raffaella and then she had to get an operation. Or Miss De Stasio's fiancé did to Miss de Stasio, making her cry.

I head straight outside to get some air. On the porch on the hairpin turn with all those wreaths I smell the exhaust from the passing cars. They slow down hoping to get a glimpse of the corpse or of some keening relative. I breathe in the exhaust from their mufflers and try to dam up the blood in my nose.

A distant cousin who's a little short-sighted, the one who gave me Barbie's House, trips over a wreath as she comes over to ask me to do my Carlo Verdone in Red White and Green imitation. I don't so she asks me if it's true that in Rome they all talk like this.

The hearse arrives. Two men dressed in black bring the coffin into the house and people start to

gather outside. There's gonna be a procession to the church.

The two guys come outside laden. They put the wreaths on top of the coffin and close the back door. On the ribbons I read: You will always be in our hearts. The Castel Giorgio Store Owners. Etc...

The hearse leaves. The crowd follows on foot. First the blood relatives, then the Shithead with his children and my siblings. After that the distant relatives and the close friends. Then the regular friends and the acquaintances. Then a couple of people from the village, who didn't even know my grandmother.

I stay with my short-sighted cousin among the distant relatives. This way I can keep behind the Shithead. I can keep an eye on him without him seeing me.

The procession shuffles along slowly two and three wide at the most. With all the cars parked on the side, the road with its hairpin curves is so narrow that when a car comes up the hill we have to walk Indian file.

So the procession becomes long and thin as it winds downhill. One of us could easily get pushed into the ravine.

During the procession people are so focused on their crying that there's no time for greetings and small talk.

And so I'm able to avoid The Shithead for another solid hour, hour and a half. The hearse crawls around the hairpin turns.

On the turns everyone cries a little less because if they get too distracted they might get hit by a car. No one is sure if it's better to look behind at the oncoming cars or to the side at the ravine into which you could fall so easily .

Now the Swimmer is two turns ahead.

I see him as I pretend to look around for my mother. I make my look fake indifferent and I see him watching me. I keep pretending to look for my mother and I escape him. But at each curve he seems a little closer. He's doing it on purpose. He just can't leave me alone.

I'm positive he wants to hug me so he can check how much my little buttons have grown. As soon as I

grow up and get rich I'm gonna get the operation to get big tits. That'll teach him.

If I focus on blocking out all the wailing and crying around me, I can hear my heartbeat and I realize that it's gotten noticeably faster. I take a deep breath to calm myself down.

And besides I shouldn't blow this out of proportion. What's the big deal about a couple of fingers inside me? Or on my chest which isn't even developed yet.

To distract myself I think what would happen if a tremor hits right now.

Everyone would start running away from the side of the road towards the mountain so they wouldn't be catapulted into the ravine. But then boulders would fall on their heads. They would fall on the hearse too. The driver would leap out and more boulders would flatten the coffin. By that time no one would be thinking about the corpse any more. The road would split and the earth would open up and someone would fall inside.

"You're so grown up *ragazzina!*" I hear right on my neck from behind.

I spin around and it's him.

He got to me, The Shithead. I got distracted and he nabbed me.

He pins me with an arm around my waist. He must be feeling the foam by now. What can I come up with? I feel his breath and his saggy mouth down my neck. In my hair. I spin around and try to detach from him. He grabs me around the front too, harder now. I can feel my burgundy sweater swishing against his slimy windbreaker.

I look up at his face. He looks at me with a little smile. As if he were proud. As if I've grown up because of him. As if my body belonged to him. And all my changes too. Like someone pruning a plant in their living room.

I want to speak, but I can only feel my breath and the heat of tears rising through my neck back to face. And my nose. The blood starts beating in my temples again. He lowers that saggy mouth towards my V neck.

He's trying to kiss me somewhere between my face and my neck. I feel his spit sticking to my skin. And I feel his eyes that have already pierced through all the layers. Through my coat and sweater. Through

the foam. Into that place which, until he stuck his fingers into it, I was the only one who had touched.

His body covers mine. His calloused hands hold me tight from behind. A blood leftover from my nose gets stuck to his white slippery jacket.

Then my near-sighted cousin trips and smacks into me. Together we trip into the Swimmer. Who finally, thanks to his slick jacket, detaches from my body. And now he tips over backwards. His right foot is on the edge of the road. The ground underneath him gives and his foot slips down into the ravine. The other foot follows. He falls. He reaches out to me with his calloused hand, while his heavy, muscular body slides. But I don't grab it. He'd only pull me down with him.

He falls spinning with his arms behind him. Like a huge white seagull flying in reverse. Or like he's swimming the backstroke in one of his races. But instead of in a pool, he's in the air. And instead of horizontally, he's doing it vertically, head first. Screaming into the ravine.

The procession stops and everyone gathers around me to see. Only the hearse with Grandma

keeps moving slowly. The driver hasn't noticed anything.

No one's thinking about Grandma anymore. They prefer a fresh kill. They all stare at the Swimmer's flight. His scream gets fainter and fainter.

Then the thud. And silence.

"Hey, you're gonna block the entire procession if you stop!" my cousin awakens me from my nightmare.

I turn around and behind me is a know of people. I start walking again, quickly to snap out of the nightmare. I see the Swimmer, who hasn't fallen at all, sneering at me.

And so I speed up towards him. Challenging him with my stare.

When I get to my sister, I yank her by the arm and turn her back the way we came. I know where to catch the bus to Naples.

That night, after the burial, there was a dinner for close relatives. Manu and I are the only ones who didn't make it. We were already on the train to Rome.

A few hours later, outside Termini station, there is that scarecrow Matteo perched like a bird on a black Fantic moped with gold lettering. I give my sister a dirty look and she looks back at me like she's the culprit who told him we were on our way.

"It's... so he could give us a ride," she mumbles guiltily.

"So where'd you get the wheels?" I ask the skinny bird referring to his moped as I keep walking coldly past him.

"My parents gave it to me for my birthday," squeaks the scarecrow trying to jumpstart it.

I turn around and toss him my book bag. He catches it as the moped comes to life. He's just so ecstatic that I talked to him.

Give her a ride, I want to walk, I order referring to Manu who has straddled the bike with her backpack crammed with toys. She's happy as a clam because it's the first time she's allowed to ride on the back and not up front.

Matteo ties my bag to the handlebars, but in the process the Fantic stalls.

And so we walk, me up front and Matteo in the back with Manu and all the bags.

To walk at the same speed as me, Matteo propels the dead bike with his feet.

It starts to rain, but we don't pick up the pace. I act like I don't mind a few drops. Then I rip the foam out from under my sweater and stuff it into a garbage can that is already overflowing with crushed cans. And I think, I don't know about Manu, but I'm never leaving Rome again, so help me God.

I also think, when these Romans get fixated on something, no one's gonna make them change their mind. And they'll even come on their moped to pick you up at the station.