

Narratori < Feltrinelli

Gian Arturo Ferrari

Ragazzo italiano



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ITALIAN BOY

A selection of chapters translated by
Stanley Luczkiw

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rosaria.carpinelli@consulenzeditoriali.it

About the author



Gian Arturo Ferrari, after graduating in Classical Literature at Pavia University, led a double life for a little while. On one hand the life of the university professor, teaching History of scientific thinking from 1977 at Pavia University. On the other hand he began working in publishing, first with Edgardo Macorini at Mondadori, then for a decade with Paolo Boringhieri, at the homonymous publishing house. He then became non-fiction editor at Mondadori in 1984 and head of Rizzoli Libri in 1986. He went back to Mondadori in 1988 and in 1989 he resigned from University, choosing publishing as his only life. In the early 90s he's been head of Libri Mondadori and from 1997 to 2009 he's been general manager of Libri Mondadori division, including Einaudi, Electa, Sperling&Kupfer, Edumond and later on Piemme, besides Mondadori. From 2010 to 2014 he was head of Centro per il libro e la lettura (Center for the Book and Reading of the Ministry of Culture). In 2011 he created and curated the exhibition *1861-2011 L'Italia dei libri – La storia di un Paese fra le pagine*, for the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy. From 2015 to 2018 he has been the vice-president of Mondadori Libri. He is a regular contributor and a columnist for the *Corriere della Sera* and president of Collegio Ghislieri Foundation. In 2014 he published *Libro* with Bollati Boringhieri. *Ragazzo italiano* (2020) is his first novel.

About the novel

Ninni is a child of postwar Italy. His life traverses hardships recalling the industrial revolution in provincial Lombardy, the decline of rural civilization in Emilia, and the explosion of life in a Milan undergoing reconstruction. Through it all, Ninni learns about the pitfalls of emotions, suffering, and the pain hidden even in the closest bonds. As a boy, thanks to his grandmother, he discovers he can leverage the immense continent of experiences and emotions that books open wide before his eyes. Having become aware of himself and his wearying autonomy, the boy carves out, in the name of curiosity and the will to know, what promises to be his place in the world.

The story of *Ragazzo italiano* (*Italian Boy*) reflects the history of the whole country – the harshness, poverty, anxiety about the future – the story of a generation born of the war but determined to carry out projects and dreams beyond that tragedy. An Italy where school is the springboard for social advancement, and the future is crowded with expectations and promises. An Italy still alive in the deep memory of the country, in the familiar vicissitudes of many Italians. Ferrari gives it body and breath, without any self-indulgence, with a crystalline and austere style, often raw, and a timbre of courageous sincerity. Able to express the freshness of the protagonist and a multitude of flashing characters of the future.

“Once the ties with the nest were cut – eliminating, in practice, obligations and duties – Ninni, to his intimate amazement, discovered that other things were left and they existed. Indeed, *he* existed.”

Praise from international literary scouts

«It is beautifully written with verve, style and insight. The sense of place is strongly felt as are the characters.»

«In the coming-of-age story of an Italian boy we then see the history of the entire country, the post-war period, both rural and urban modernization, the story of a generation that came out of conflict but capable of projecting dreams and projects beyond that tragedy. A country where the school still has a role of social promotion and the future has something important in store for those who have skills and curiosity and know how to invest in themselves. A kind of Italy that I believe no longer exists, but that certainly resists in the deep memory of many Italians. Reviving it, with the delicacy of poetry and the precision of historical re-enactment, is another great merit of this book.»

«In this novel it is striking how brilliant the narrative is, the perfect construction of the characters, certainly of the protagonist, but also of the minor characters, always caught in a moment of truth that is not only functional to the progress of the story.»

Praise from the Italian press

«Novels walk on the legs of the characters and the characters of *Ragazzo italiano* strike you from their very first appearance on the scene.»

Paolo Di Stefano, *Corriere della Sera*

«Flashes of the Italian backdrop light up the story.»

Corrado Augias, *Il Venerdì*

PART ONE

The child

1.

Through the night they went, the boy and his grandmother, as gangly as two drunks. Nonna swayed back and forth with each step from the weight of the suitcase, holding the boy by the hand as he dangled from the other side. He was pretending to be a prisoner who wanted to escape, he was playing. “C’mon, Ninni” she kept repeating, even shifting into dialect, “let’s go, *andòm*.” Nonna wasn’t angry. In fact, she was happy to see him so lively. But she didn’t want to miss the train. “You’ll wind up slipping and breaking a leg.” There was ice on the sidewalk and if anything, it was Nonna who risked falling, with that suitcase on one side and that scoundrel on the other. “Don’t suck your scarf,” she told him. By breathing into the scarf that covered his nose and mouth, leaving only his eyes uncovered, the wool got wet and he liked to suck it.

On the right there was a straight wall that seemed to never end, but they gave it wide berth because the snow was too high there. Beyond the wall a row of smokestacks rose against the frozen sky. Factories, workshops. The stars looked like pin pricks from which solid light passed through. There was no sidewalk on the other side of the street, just a cement railing with the Zanegrade sign, and the tracks behind it. Farther down, in the dark, you could somewhat see and somewhat hear a big locomotive moving slowly, all wrapped up in its smoke and in that sort of bird screech its brakes made. There was an acrid smell, of bad things, an iron smell.

Good thing, we’re leaving, the child thought. He turned back. Babbo, his father, was gone, disappeared on his bicycle, with the newspapers under his jacket to keep the cold at bay, hat lowered over the forehead so you couldn’t see his eyes. He went away – good thing. Initially the idea was for Babbo to accompany them to the station on the road to the office and carry the suitcase. Although at first, because of the snow, he couldn’t hold the suitcase with one hand and steer the bicycle with the other, so he tried to rest the suitcase on a pedal and pull the handlebar. He was a proud man and tended to view every little setback as a humiliation. Especially in front of his mother-in-law.

“Just give me the suitcase,” Nonna said. They always addressed each other with the formal “*lei*” instead of “*tu*.” But the boy wondered why she said that. It was clear that Babbo would get angry. In the end, though, Nonna was right, it was also clear that they had to do something. Without the suitcase Babbo felt useless. “You’re almost there,” he said, stopping. “That’s the station.” “Alright,” Nonna replied with the tone of someone thinking, *a lot of help you are...* Babbo, standing on two feet, came up with, “I’ll go ahead and get the tickets.” A good idea that let him save face. “Thanks, but we already have them. I got them yesterday.” So much for that idea. “You could have told me that before.” But why? Why should she have said that before? By the look on her face you could see she was about to open her mouth. But then she just swallowed the words she didn’t say. She didn’t want to stay there and argue in the middle of the street, and above all she didn’t feel comfortable: she’d been a widow for as long as she could remember and she didn’t know how to deal with

men anymore. With that man in particular... “So have a good trip,” Babbo said, dryly. “Goodbye and ciao.” Then he left.

Except for Mamma, and even then only for arrivals and departures, he never kissed anyone, not even his son. Babbo wanted to seem like he’d won, but in the boy’s eyes he’d lost.

Too bad Mamma wasn’t coming. She was staying on. But maybe it was for the best. Maybe without Mamma, Nonna would be happier. Not because of Mamma, but because she could have Ninni all to herself. He and his Nonna alone, in Querciano, in the big house, during the winter, with snow and fire.

He started sucking his scarf and rocking back and forth. They were leaving.

[...]

5.

The peasants showed up the following morning. They heard that Nonna had returned and they wanted to settle accounts right away, since with Christmas and all the rest they'd gone two months without. And settling accounts, as far as Ninni could see, was what peasants liked most. Not that Nonna disliked it. He'd woken up in the snow's bright light, with a few flowers of frost on the window panes (their frozen breath, Nonna said), in the nice dry heat that the bed-warmer had left under the fluffy covers and no desire to go out and freeze to death. Even the water for washing my face, in jug under the basin, must have frozen. But when Rosina, the maid, had come up to tell Nonna that the peasants were waiting for her, he jumped out of bed and got dressed by himself, because he absolutely wanted to see the peasants.

They'd brought a nice of scent of hay into the big kitchen, sort of an echo of the stall, which was strikingly pleasant. Four of them were seated on one side of the kitchen table, each with a glass of wine in front of them, and Nonna on the other side. Nonna kept her notebooks in front of her, black covers with red trim, full of her perfect penmanship, flourishes and empty spaces. She wasn't a teacher by chance. She used a pen made of bone, which she dipped into a glass inkpot. The peasants pulled out little note pads all bent and dog-eared from their pockets with incomprehensible signs on them, though they understood them well, perfectly. They wrote with bits of copying pencils. Being sharecroppers, there were continual battles with Nonna – the *padrouna* – a long war for position. It was mainly about the phosphates, the chemical fertilizers. The sharecroppers always wanted more, while Nonna, who harbored well-founded suspicions about the money going to suppliers, tried to put up some resistance. But the sharecroppers, who were communists, insinuated that she was against science and progress. Nonna was sensitive about progress because, even though she was Catholic, she had come from a family steeped in the Risorgimento mindset.

The four represented two family groups and, as such, two farms. The most respected was Rico, with his only son Mandein, aka Armandino, seated next him. Mandein also had only one child, somewhat of a rarity. It was a strange family, much intelligence and little strength; they always needed workers, day laborers, whom they paid themselves. Like the others, Rico took off his hat when he entered the house, but he kept his cloak, with some bits of straw, and flipped it around to cover himself because old as he was he always felt cold. That he was from another era could also be seen from the gold earrings he wore, which Ninni had always wanted to touch. Those of the second farm were brothers, Alfeo and Paride, fathers of large families, a little in awe in front of Nonna and secretly aware of not being as sharp as Rico and Mandein. For this reason they were more touchy. They were the ones who insisted on an issue that Ninni did not understand until, to Nonna's satisfaction, they needed the intervention or perhaps mediation of someone of higher standing, Uncle Alcide. He arrived immediately because he lived in the other half of the Vatican, as they called the house, together with his family, composed of three daughters and two sons,

without counting his daughter in Canada. His wife Gioconda – who was another sister of Pietro, Nonna’s late husband, and therefore Nonna’s sister-in-law – was no longer there. She had died the year before, apparently of cancer, but in reality because of the heartbreak from having her favorite son, Gualtiero, killed in a German internment camp a few days before the end of the war.

Uncle Alcide entered with the absorbed air he had kept up after the death of Gualtiero and his wife. He was a handsome man, naturally distinguished. On top of his diploma as an accountant, he had been an Alpini infantry captain and won a silver medal in the Great War. He presided over the communal cellar at the dairy cooperative that produced Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. But he was distinguished above all for the fact that he had never been a Fascist, always maintaining his position as a prominent Catholic and outlier with respect to the regime. All these factors gave him high degree of authority. And within just a few minutes, he unraveled the situation to everyone’s satisfaction, especially Nonna’s, who certainly liked to command, but who had a keen sense of her own limits.

In the end, having finished the accounts and poured more glasses of wine, Rosina served a bowl of minestrone maritata, with eggs and cheese rinds cooked inside. For the occasion the peasants all put their hats back on their heads and pulled them down nice and tight over their eyes because eating the minestrone with big spoonfuls and drinking the broth (with a terrible slurps, for which Nonna always scolded Ninni) was a private thing, very intimate, and everyone had to do it on his own, without any distractions.

Later, after Ninni had got on his motorbike – which meant riding the narrow high chair from when he was small, laid on its side, and pretending to be on two wheels, dressed, according to him, for a motorcycle, with long blue velour trousers and a blue racing bib and velour cap – Nonna took him on her knees, sitting in her chair near the window. Ninni looked with some uneasiness toward the other side of the big kitchen at the door which gave onto the drawing room. He was holed up right there, in that armchair – he was not well, coming down with the measles – and he looked right at that door when he realized that from the crack below filtered a brighter and brighter red, as if there were a big fire behind it. Then the door slowly opened and in that terrible light of embers he saw the devil. He never told anyone, but by asking a few questions here and there he realized that the grown-ups wouldn’t believe it, and anyway when the grown-ups were there you knew the devil wouldn’t enter. Now Nonna held him tight and there was absolutely no way the devil would attempt to open the door. Actually you couldn’t see anything of that red; outside the window everything was white and silent, the snow was falling with no wind.

Nonna was reading to him from the green cloth-bound book of Andersen’s fables, the one he liked best, “The Ugly Duckling.” Ninni knew how to read alone, or almost. But if Nonna was reading, he could see the duckling in front of him and still enjoy her embrace. There was no comparison either: even though within a few pages the duckling became a graceful swan – he was the luckier of the two. And happier.

[...]

9.

Until the autumn came and Ninni had to start school. Unfortunately, in Zanegrate. In the entrance hall Mamma couldn't get herself to leave, she kept holding him by the hand. He was a little ashamed of being treated like baby, but careful not to let go of her. When they had arrived in that shabby cavern with a wan gray light, as if in a shadow, with all those people talking loudly, it had not made a good impression on him. They, Ninni and Mamma, thought there would be signs or something, some person who knew where to go. It was the first day of school and they were a bit lost. But there was nothing and they couldn't understand anything, not even who the first-grade teacher was or where she could be found.

So Mamma had started to ask around, but either they didn't answer or they looked at her askance. Probably because of her broad pronunciation, which immediately let everyone know that she wasn't from there, from Zanegrate. But now they needed to hurry because the hall was emptying. Fortunately, a kind soul indicated the right teacher to her, Miss Colombani, whom she had assumed was a caretaker because she spoke dialect. She looked like she was made of two balls, one big and one small. Both very shiny. The big one because of a black satin apron that completely covered her, the little one – her head – because of her greasy hair, which was black as well, and topped by an even smaller ball, a bun. She basically looked like Tordella, the wife of the captain Cocoricò and mother of Bibì and Bibò from the *Corriere dei Piccoli* children's comics. "And this one here?" she said in dialect, pointing at Ninni. "Where does he come from?" She was as cordial as a crocodile. Mamma quickly sidestepped the generalities. Miss Colombani, the teacher, made a mark on a sheet of paper, looked at Ninni and said "Off!" as she pointed to the white collar on his black shirt. The school had told Mamma that all the children had to wear a black shirt, in case they stained it with ink. On her own initiative, Mamma had added the white collar, either because she had seen it in some magazine or because it seemed to her that it looked better, livening it up a little. "Right there is where it gets the dirtiest," Colombani said with a scornful tone, as if addressed to those who didn't understand something obvious. Before leaving, Mamma wanted to say something to the teacher, who ignored her and tottered off down a gray corridor, into the gray air, pulling her children behind her and shouting something at one of her colleagues.

Ninni was put in the fourth desk of the third quarter, as he learned how the rows of desks were called; the first quarter was the one near the door, the second in front of the teacher's desk, and the third on the other side. He wasn't very used to being with other children, at least not in Zanegrate. In Querciano everything was different. They didn't send him to pre-school because, in addition to the summer,

they even spent a good stretch of winter in Querciano, so Mamma could look after his sister who was three years younger than him. For the first time he was alone amid so many other children he didn't know. There was also that thing Mamma had wanted to say to the teacher. In the end he prudently kept quiet. But he looked around and tried to understand. The teacher spoke familiarly, in dialect, with a nice group of children. She called them by name, you could see that she had known them as toddlers. She put them in the first quarter. Another smaller group was placed in the second quarter, right in front of her desk – and herself. Then aloud: “Those who have bag lunch should go to the back, in the fifth and in the sixth row.” Bag lunch, as Agnesina, his deskmate, explained, meant that they didn't go home to eat. Even though it was her first day too, she already knew everything. They stayed at school because they were poor. Their mothers worked in the factories. Whereas the ones who were in the front desks were the sons of the industrialists, in other words the owners of the factories. But the biggest industrialists, Agnesina added, didn't send their children there, to public school, they sent them to the Jesuits.

Once the seats were distributed, they all stood up and the teacher had them say their prayers. They were the usual ones, which were also said at home, except for one that Ninni didn't know, but he moved his lips anyway, without making a sound, so as not to be different from his companions. Then the teacher began to teach them how to keep their hands, because it was not admissible, she said, that everyone just do with them as they pleased. Hands in the first position meant resting them on the desk with the palm down and the arms straight, one here and one there. Ready in the future to take up the pen. The second position had the hands still resting on the desk, but folded. The most important position for the hands, however, was the third, which meant hands behind your back, one on top of the other and your back resting on it. With their hands in third no one moved anymore and the class stood still, in order, with its beautiful black shirts all the same. They did various exercises, until the switch from “Hands in second!” to “Hands in third!” became very fast, almost instantaneous. They went on like this and then the bell rang. End of the first day of school.

10.

The thing that Mamma had tried in vain to tell the teacher – so she would be warned, not because she had to do anything special, just so she knew, without asking for favors, but at least to take it into account – was that Ninni unfortunately had a speech impediment. In short, he stuttered. It was a thorny issue, very thorny, especially because nobody knew who was to blame. Was it Ninni's fault, because he wasn't careful enough? Maybe if he had just put in more effort, he could have spoken well, maybe a little more slowly than the others, but well. Or maybe it was his own parents' fault, or his Nonna's, who hadn't been following him enough, hadn't given him enough care and attention? Unlikely, judging by how they doted on him. Or maybe it was exactly because of that: with so affection around he was able to let himself go, he didn't make the effort to speak well because he already had everything he wanted anyway.

For his part, he didn't know how or why it happened. When he thought about what to say, he didn't stutter. Not even when he said whatever he was thinking to himself, quietly. Everything came out smoothly. The problem was when he was talking to someone else. I mean, every time. It should also be said that he just loved to talk, a real chatterbox he was, and even though he knew what trouble he was getting into, he couldn't help himself. Provided, of course, the other was familiar enough for him not to be afraid. But to the point, what happened? He didn't really know how, but the fact is that he couldn't get straight through. It was as if he would trip up, then again and again. Always against the same syllable, the same sound, always against the same stone. Or it was like there was a step and he just couldn't get over it. But then he usually got over that little bump and it was a smooth ride downhill from there. Mamma or Nonna told him: "C'mon, you just have to be a little careful...." But then sometimes, fortunately not too often, though not so rarely, it wasn't just a step, it was as if there were a wall. Way too high to get over. He would bang into it, immediately try again, to see if he get through to the downhill side, but after two or three times he realized there was nothing doing, it wasn't happening. He was doomed to stay there pushing like a desperado with his mouth open and those horrible sounds issuing from it. A spasm, he thought he was dying.

That was the worst, more because of how powerless and paralyzed he felt than out of shame. He suffered because of it, sure, but he hardly cared. That's how he was and he knew it wasn't his fault. He despaired more over the fact that no one paid any attention to what he had to say, everyone with their mouths agape or giggling with embarrassment looking away from him in the face of his stammering. Even the many doctors consulted didn't know which tack to take: there seemed to be no cure – no pills, no injections, no suppositories. And since doctors don't like to deal with things they don't know and can't solve, they scowled and withdrew, trying to move on, making it clear that they were also a bit disgusted. Ninni knew, it always went like that with the grown-ups, they always made that face as if they had seen something

disgusting, but then nothing really happened. Since there were no solutions, there were no consequences either.

With other children it was different, but even here things went smoother than one might have expected. Of course, they looked at him perplexed, but the ones he was playing with didn't even notice after a while. Those he didn't know, taken one at a time, would look at him astonished as if he were some sort of freak, but they weren't malicious. If any problem arose it was when he had to face a group. There was invariably someone who wanted to be the boss in front of all the others, and he was the first to giggle, do an imitation, and call him names. It was nasty. This was why he avoided groups of children, because he knew from the outset he would lose.

But when it came to the problem of stuttering, the one who really frightened him was Babbo. Two or three times he let it slide, the next time he'd say, "So? Are we going to stop?" And he would bat his eyelids, a sure sign that it was getting worse. If it happened again, and it always happened again, he got really angry: "Enough is enough! Now stop it!" At that point, terrified, Ninni choked on his k-k-k. Then he could no longer make any sound, he gasped silently, like a fish thrown onto the beach. And there, almost inevitably, came the smack. He understood very well why Babbo reacted this way. Because he couldn't stand it. And he couldn't stand it because he thought that he, Ninni, was acting out to get everyone feeling sorry for him. He couldn't handle this complete lack of trust, so he would start crying. It wasn't just the pain and humiliation, more than anything it was feeling like a prisoner of such contempt, not being able to escape it. At this point Mamma, who had already begun to turn red, said to Babbo, in a louder tone: "Leave him alone! Don't you see he can't?" And then, to everyone's misfortune, either she hugged him and caressed his head or, worse still, she added: "Poor thing!" That's how the key scene began: Babbo, all red as well, started shouting, Mamma burst into tears and stood up, his shouts grew louder, and she would sort of convulse on the way to the bedroom. Between her bawling and sobbing you could hear: "Enough! Enough!" And then "Enough, I'm leaving!" And again, "I'm taking you away, come here and I'll take you away from here!" At one point Mamma seemed to be choking and gasping her last. Babbo was scared, Ninni was sure; he grabbed Mamma by the shoulders and shook her, but not with malice, the way he would shake a stuck alarm clock. Mamma calmed down after a while, but kept crying and slowly shaking her head no, but now with a flow of tears and with regular movements, without all the bawling noises. The key scene was over.

Ninni thought it was his fault, but that wasn't what made him sick, if he stuttered there was nothing he could do about it. Instead he clearly saw in those moments a very simple thing. Babbo didn't like him, he didn't like him at all. Babbo, he imagined, would have liked to have a completely different child. And it was not so much the stuttering in itself, or the idea of being defective. The point was that this was just a sign, but an unequivocal one, that he, Ninni, not only wasn't the child that Babbo wanted him to be, but that Ninni refused to be that child. He just wasn't right, and never could be.

[...]

Eventually the change came for real. Babbo stopped working in the textile machinery company, he had found a new, much better job in Milan. He didn't feel like going back and forth every day. Mamma didn't like the house in Zanegrade anymore, she wanted a comfortable, modern apartment. They had two children and next year – Ninni was in third grade – Lella would also be going to school. They decided to buy a house in Milan, where there was now starting to be plenty of availability, where they were building, clearing away the ruins from the bombardments. So they would go back, Babbo said, they would go away, Mamma said, to Milan. Ninni didn't understand the difference, but he was happy anyway. Goodbye Colombani, goodbye sirens, goodbye long faces, goodbye Cranetta Creek and all its colors. We were off.

Ninni was born in Zanegrade, but from the moment he learned that they were going to leave, he never thought about it again, it never crossed his mind, he felt no pain, no sense of loss. He left nothing behind, and there was nothing to lose. He had always only hoped to leave. And now, finally, there it was, the moment had arrived.

PART TWO

The Boy

[...]

5.

After a little while of living in Milan, they understood that it was only a slice of Milan. In that slice, which roughly included the places where you could walk, there was everything you needed. All that could be found not only in Querciano, but also in Zanegrate and even more, much more: the school, double or triple the size of Zanegrate's, the church, or rather two churches, the cinema, or more like three cinemas, the shops they needed and many other new ones, never seen before, for example one with "Housewares" on it, with such a variety of goods that needed to be explained.

And then, still within that slice, there was a vast territory, wild and unnamed, into which it was forbidden to penetrate. It extended from behind their house and behind the other similar houses, just built or still under construction, all the way to the distant railroad embankment, on which small trains passed like toys. That was the border, and beyond it the countryside began, another world. Mamma didn't set foot there and she didn't want any of the kids to do so either. She looked suspiciously at the expanse of uncultivated meadows, scrubland, ditches, mysterious mounds, stacks of half-rotten wood, stumps of walls, as if from one moment to the next some man with bad intentions might emerge. Or even a woman, although in the female version it was not at all clear what her bad intentions might be.

All the way down, butted up against the railroad embankment, that dark and uncertain stripe that Ninni had failed to distinguish in daylight turned out to be a deep gathering of shacks. So that was the region of those remote lights that in the dark had made him think of a Christmas crèche. Shacks, an expanse of shacks.

Mamma said that a lot of people came to Milan looking for a better life. They came just like that, on a whim, without knowing where to go. They hadn't thought about it before, like those who had searched, found and bought an apartment. Or maybe they didn't have the money to buy anything. But they came anyway and when they discovered that there were no houses for them, they just made do. They took scraps, much of it detritus from the war, stole scaffolding planks from construction sites, carried off pieces of fencing or sheet metal, cardboard, wire mesh, boxes, anything. And shacks were built. They were there in the mud, in the winter cold, they warmed up – so to speak – with stoves that always risked suffocating them; for light, when they couldn't sneak electric wires inside, they used candles and oil lamps; they washed and hung clothes in the middle of those sort of streets; where they took care of their bodily needs was unknown (in the meadows?) and it was certainly better not to know, as Mamma always said. A number of mice also scurried through the streets.

But the inhabitants didn't give up, they didn't go back to where they came from. Never. And they didn't even resign themselves to staying in the mud, they stood there as taut as hunting dogs, and as soon as a crack opened, they leapt out, they went everywhere, basements, warehouses, garages, utility rooms, store rooms, the ground

floors of bombed out ruins. And even when they took this first step, they gave themselves no peace, they stared ravenously, their eyes popping out of their heads, always ready to leap toward a better arrangement. Even just slightly, but better. Always leaping forward, always up, in the long ascent from the first shack to the coveted house or apartment.

The most desirable intermediate stage, both because it was relatively rare and very similar to a real apartment, was the minimal house. At the center of the wider avenues, especially on the outskirts, there were or had been transferred the prefabricated army barracks in which the occupying American troops had been lodged. Built American-style: solid, efficient, comfortable. Luxury barracks, with real windows and cute chimneys from which a substantial plume of smoke spewed out, evidently generated by powerful stoves. Once in the minimal houses, which looked like country homes from outside and gave the idea of small well-ordered villages, the upward push of migration tended to relax, a slum aristocracy was formed, more inclined to preserving what they had than conquering new goals. Many years would pass before the blessed possessors of minimal houses found definitive lodgings.

In those early days, most of those who flocked to Milan came from the mountains and the Po Valley. The main reason why they rushed into the big city was not pure and simple survival; many, certainly the majority, did not suffer hunger at home. Rather, they were convinced that if they toiled to the same degree, or perhaps even a little more, in Milan it would be possible to reap greater rewards. Above all they could live without being slaves of the earth, because there were many more things to do and a greater variety. They didn't want to be farmers anymore, better to be laborers in Milan than digging in the dirt at home.

The shacks weren't the only accommodations for the new arrivals. Some found a place in shelters, in reality large empty rooms where they camped precariously, but with a real roof over their heads. Those staying at the shelters came mostly from the south, also because they moved in large clans rather than in small family units. Whereas the shacks were the ideal habitat, so to speak, for small families coming down from the foothills of the Alps or from Polesine and Istria, the southern clans occupied tight, well-delimited areas within the shelters' halls and large rooms.

One of these shelters, a large and ancient deconsecrated church (which later, in the swing of history, would be reconsecrated) was right behind the school and three or four of Ninni's classmates lived there. The teacher, Mr. Poli, in applying his principles, did not bat an eyelid and treated them exactly like all the others. There were mothers, on the other hand, the mothers of children from normal houses, who raised objections on the grounds of personal cleanliness, the presence or absence of parasites, and, more generally, on sanitary conditions. But they had to limit themselves to whispers and allusions because Mr. Poli, who had been cautiously probed in this regard, immediately nipped the discussion in the bud, and as he walked out of school every day with the class, he would go steadily toward the gatherings of mothers full of anticipation and focus in on them from his inferior height, staring up into their eyes.

Even the supreme authority, the school principal, was convinced that the issues of hygienic-sanitary integration were better addressed in practice. Considering that they had a wide range of applications and effectiveness, he prescribed two weekly sessions of ultraviolet rays for all the classes. They strengthened, toned, cleaned, and increased the number of red blood cells. They were a sure sign of modernity. It was not said openly, but it was believed that they also got the upper hand on those unpleasant parasites. What Ninni and his friends liked most were the blue glasses with rubber frames and suction, like those used by divers and welders. The kids absolutely had to wear them. Otherwise there was a risk of going blind.

It was also necessary to take off their sweaters and shirts, and in Milan, thank God, they no longer had to wear black shirts. There was also a debate about weather to take off their undershirts and go bare-chested. At first it was decided that we should keep them on. But then, when some species of peanut shell was discovered, some even with finger-thick wooly hair, the option of stripping bare-chested was taken. In this arrangement, with blue glasses, like a handful of extraterrestrials, one entered the room, completely empty, in the middle of which hung the mysterious lamp that produced ultraviolet rays and shone with an unnatural, somewhat sinister, blue light. Also because of the diving glasses, probably. The teachers spoiled the atmosphere. They wouldn't undress, but they put on their glasses and looked like they had entered the wrong room. After a few minutes, everyone, teachers and pupils, sensed or convinced themselves that there was something strange going on, as if the air had a different consistency and smell. With his nose turned up, a very modern teacher sniffed and said "it's ionized air." Everyone agreed, although no one knew exactly what he meant. Mr. Poli was the only one who didn't say anything, but upon closer inspection you could see the shadow of a smile.

[...]

11.

[...]

The summer camp, he discovered, was housed in a villa in the middle of a park and had a staircase, turrets and sculptural decorations. It must have belonged to some high nobility. It was raining when they arrived, a June drizzle fine and gray, the dormitories were on the first floor, in what must have been the ballroom. The frescoes on the ceiling were still visible, very high, while those on the walls had been covered with a coat of white. For hygienic reasons, they said, but it was actually to erase the past of wealth and luxury. The white had formed a compact crust that could be pried off with fingernails in large flakes. Generations and generations of visitors to the camp had been busy at night in this worthy recovery activity, so that just above the head end of all the cots along the wall there was a sort of painted frame. It was truly enigmatic, because there was no way to understand the entire subject. The camp counselors, haggard girls just out of university, told everyone to get into bed because they would turn off the light in a minute. For days Ninni feared this moment, sleeping alone in a place he didn't know. He was sure he would start crying. The fact that the cots didn't have pillows – to prevent pillow fights – did not improve his prospects. Instead, he was so tired that he fell asleep right away and for the rest of the nights he never thought about it again.

He had to admit that he didn't expect a sea like that. He thought of green expanses, gardens or even fields, which descended gently, then the beach began, then the water. Dunes, hedges, bushes, rocks, cliffs, small transparent coves, fish, starfish, shells. Even palm trees. Here instead there was a wall with a door, the wall of the villa's park, with a row of jagged bottle shards along the top. They came out through the door and the water was immediately there, in between was a narrow strip of little stones – a few meters. That was the beach. There they had to take off their uniform shirts and shorts, both ash-colored, and stand only in their black wool, knitted swimsuits which they had put on underneath. The wool itched. With their clothes folded, they lay down on the small stones, a quarter of an hour belly-up, a quarter of an hour belly-down, not longer because otherwise they would get a sunburn. Then came the swim, ten minutes in the water, rather cold, only up to the waist because the camp counselors, also with woolen bathing suits and long faces, did not want to risk the nuisance of someone ending up with their head under water, suffocating, or drowning ... for heaven's sake! Already, spending the summer in the company of little children wasn't an ideal situation for a twenty-year-old ... In the water you couldn't do anything except for making a few splashes, you had to keep still on your feet, and forget about fish, not even the shadow of one. Then another quarter of an hour belly-up and down to dry in the sun. Lying on his stomach in his wet bathing trunks, Ninni saw the wall on one side, the sea with its waves and little surf on the other, and at the bottom of the so-called beach the cranes of a shipyard with something red and black sticking out between them. Ninni liked to think it was the bow of a ship, but feared it was a shed.

After half an hour of that pale sun, the counselors would decide they were dry. But that wasn't the case, because the black wool had the property of being perennially wet, with the ability to attract all the sand that nestled between one stone and another. Which proved that after all, even though it was not quite the dazzling version of postcards, they did have a beach, or at least some sand. Considering there were no showers, not even for the counselors, the sea and beach always stayed with them, so to speak, in the sense that even once the trunks were off, you stayed salty, damp and vaguely covered with sand all day long. But since this was the general condition, nobody paid any attention to it.

They ate in the villa's basement, very poorly. Amidst the benches were dented aluminum pots, colossal women dipping their massive sausage arms into them and dredging out spoonfuls (forkfuls? shovelfuls?) of a shapeless mass of sopping spongy pasta, which was then slopped onto the plates. Onto those same plates, during the second round of pots, they ended up shoveling plain undressed tomatoes cut into pieces. Since there was nothing else, Ninni stuffed himself to the point that one night he got sick and vomited everything and for the next ten years he wouldn't touch another tomato.

In the afternoon, after a siesta that the counselors prolonged to the limit to get their own stuff done, it was time for the walk, within a couple of kilometers of the villa, and then time for playing games in the park. In a group, in theory, and coordinated by the teachers, but when the same teachers began to chat among themselves, or smoke on the sly, or dream of better vacations with real swimsuits, dances and young men with scooters (they never even thought about young men with cars because they were out of their league), in other words, when the surveillance got lax (“They’re locked in here, what could happen ...”), the kids would start playing normally, like in a big yard.

After dinner, Ninni headed for the former custodian’s house, which now served as an infirmary. To obviate his chronic constipation, which would certainly have been aggravated – Mamma said – with the sun and the heat of the sea, she had gotten a prescription for a particularly effective laxative from the malleable southern doctor, not from the brusque Dr. Ambrosetti who would certainly have told her where she could go. Ninni had to take a spoonful of it every night, which he did without the slightest difficulty, because although the medicine was very bitter, the bitterness was pleasant and tasty in the end. Spoon and laxative were administered by one of those kitchen ogres dressed as a nurse, wrapped for the occasion in a large white coat which, it must be said, transformed her by bestowing an air of benevolent authority.

As he returned to the villa alone, in the gathering darkness, Ninni felt that he was adapting to the soft and indolent rhythm of the camp. He seemed to understand, confusedly, that there were ways of life different from those to which he had been accustomed. He discovered a singularly empty daily life, devoid of duties, without obligations, apart from the elementary ones connected to survival. No school, no homework like in Milan, but also no visits or rituals like in Querciano.

A life also entirely bereft of emotional ties, from those with close family members, classmates, friends, acquaintances. For the first time in his life he was alone, completely alone. No one knew him and he didn’t know anyone. He had been afraid of leaving for camp, and he even wondered if he would last. Now that he was inside, he seemed to waver. Of course, he wasn’t looked after, cared for, helped or guided as he usually was. There was no warmth around him, that sort of cushion absorbing every impact. He missed it, he sometimes felt it acutely and suffered from it. On the other hand, nobody asked him for anything, and there was nothing he was obliged to do or commit himself to. Nor was it necessary to exhaust himself in the continual triangulation from Babbo to Mamma to Nonna.

Lying on the beach, walking, chatting at the table or before sleeping, he could say things that were unimportant, conventional and meanwhile think about what was inside him, his world. How to live on two separate floors, without the second, with its heaviness, its load of emotions, ever interfering with the first, as happened in normal life.

He seemed to be suspended in mid-air, in a kind of limbo, gray and immense, rippled by tiny waves, like the sea he watched as he lay on his stomach on the beach of small stones. Strange, perhaps a little disturbing, but not unpleasant. He had the impression that more or less the same thing happened to the other kids as well, those

isolated like himself. There were no occasions where he could show off. Everyone had good, or at least neutral, relationships with everyone else, they seemed to be mellow. Everyone had a moderate interest in his neighbor, everyone knew that in a few weeks they would never see each other again.

Compared to home life, individual choices were minimized. Everything, schedules, clothing, ways of occupying the day, descended from above. There was nothing to decide, nothing to choose. But at the same time the will, impositions and whims of any authority were excluded.

Once the ties with the nest were cut – eliminating, in practice, obligations and duties – once he had uniformed the uniformable, Ninni, to his intimate amazement, discovered that other things were left and they existed, many more things. Indeed, *he* existed. He discovered that he was not reduced to that dense network connecting him to the world, but was something different, something that perhaps had always existed, yet only now, in that suspended and empty reality which the camp had created, could he finally see it.

In the place where he should have been more alone and more at the mercy of extraneous forces, Ninni discovered that something new was growing within him. He was creating a space of his own, a small room where he could withdraw and look at what was happening around him without being immediately overwhelmed. Mamma wrote him a letter a week and he replied. Above all, she wanted to know practical things. If the laxative worked, what he was eating and how much. He thought about it, he pictured Mamma reading his letter and wrote that the laxative was wonderful and that he ate very well. He also listed the dishes she knew he liked. Having discovered his autonomy, he had also discovered how to lie. With good intentions, of course.

[...]

There was no warning, no omen. Everything seemed to be on the usual track, all normal. A bit dazed by the heat, a little sweaty, but normal. Babbo had arrived in early August and after a few good days – holidays, the different pace of life – the mood returned to the usual blackish gray. Short sentences, taut face, and long silences at the table. Mamma and Nonna did their utmost, especially when it came to the daily menu, which was very different from the usual one. They would have bottles of ice-cold mineral water sent from the bar near their house, make meatloaf with boiled egg and raw ham fillings, stewed cutlets, rabbit cacciatore, dessert at every meal (unheard of!), custard and rice cakes. Maybe they overdid it. In any case, it was all useless, the situation worsened with monosyllables and grunts. Babbo didn't know where to turn his head: after reading the newspaper, he faced the bottomless void of the whole day. It was very hot and humid, there were many flies in the house and they settled everywhere, even the cats went to lie down on the tiles of the little room, looking for refreshment.

A midday like the others, all sitting at the table, Mamma saying wearily: "Come on Ninni, finish up, let's clear the table ..." because he was fiddling with his fruit. And suddenly, from under the slightly lowered head, from under the eyebrows, from under the mustache came Babbo's voice, not irritated but cold: "Well ... isn't it time to finish with this Ninni? Enough now. That's enough." Roused from their slight torpor, everyone stopped to look at him. Everyone suddenly awake. What did he mean? No one understood. "I mean," he continued as if answering that silent question, "I mean the boy ..." He didn't look at him, didn't even turn toward him, "He can't go on with these nicknames. It's ridiculous." Silence. No one had ever thought about it, no one knew what to do, no one knew how to respond. "Enough, it's time to put an end to it, you can't face life by calling yourself Ninni." Ninni, who was still Ninni, looked at him paralyzed, his ears turning red. "But really," Mamma uttered, "many people have names like that as adults ... Like Mimmi, the vet's son, who's in college, they still call him Mimmi. And Titti, too, who's married ..." "Because they're country people and here we think we're who knows what ... the aristocracy of Querciano ... please." He slowly raised his eyes, fixing them on Nonna, so that there could be no doubts about what he meant and who he was really speaking to. She didn't utter a word, she wanted to come off as superior, but in reality she was afraid. She sensed that if she reacted an ugly scene would break out, and she feared that in the end she would come out the loser, in the sense that Ninni would somehow be taken from her.

Whereas Mamma jumped in courageously between them, as she always did. "Excuse me, but what does aristocracy have to do with it?" She wanted to go on but he interrupted her. "I'll tell you what it has to do with it ..." still staring at Nonna. Mamma went on with her point: "I'm just saying that there's nothing wrong with being called Ninni and many people do fine with those names." "Not in Milan," Babbo immediately retorted. "Not in Milan and not at work. Especially not at work."

With this work gambit he gained ground, his opponents – the mute, Nonna and Mamma, the one talking – had been caught off balance. He immediately took advantage of it. “You have no idea ... the humiliations ... let alone Ninni in a factory ... if he were the engineer Rossi’s son (the owner) maybe ... but him (always as if he weren’t there, as if he didn’t exist), Ninni ... on top of the stuttering ... forget about it.” He stopped for a moment, just enough to make sure there were no objections, there were none. “Look, I’m only doing it for his own good,” now he was on a roll, “to keep him covered. In the workplace people can be evil and cruel, more than you can imagine ... if only you knew.” “So I can’t call you Ninni anymore?” Lella suddenly intervened. She enjoyed a sort of immunity and knew it. In fact, Babbo looked at her, didn’t answer, but smiled a little.

“Sorry, but how do you expect ...” Mamma had recovered, even though she had abandoned her main line of resistance and was falling back to a secondary line, “How on earth do you expect to change the name of a person just like that, out of the blue? I don’t know, I’ve never heard of such a thing, never. And what, pray tell, should this child here do in your opinion? Go around saying I’m not that person anymore, I’m someone else?” “What child? He’s no longer a child, he’s a boy ... in no time he’ll be finished with middle school, and soon he’ll be an adult and have to move through the world of adults ... There might be some difficulty in changing the name, but it will be only the first of the many, many difficulties he’ll have to face ... And the sooner he starts, the better ... And what will it take? Once all of us here, his closest relatives, stop calling him Ninni, you’ll see that the others will adapt immediately, too. No one cares about the name,” he said, blatantly contradicting himself, but by now he’d already won. “After a while no one will even notice.” He stopped one last time. “I never want to hear Ninni again, ever. I’m not joking.” And nobody doubted him on that last point.

Ninni, or rather the ex-Ninni, had his heart in his throat, he could hardly breathe, he was stunned. As if he’d been punched the face. He didn’t pay attention to the arguments, he didn’t follow the reasoning. He clearly saw the meaning. What he believed was the meaning. In his long war with Babbo he was now totally defeated. He was literally annihilated. Babbo was taking his name away, erasing it. He looked at Nonna, the other loser. Much of the operation was done to take her baby away, her Ninni. Her cheekbones were flushed, her mouth tight. The former Ninni knew precisely what she thought, which was, apart from everything else, that she was powerless. He could do absolutely nothing. He was with her more than ever, and the division of roles he had sensed for the first time many years earlier in the mountains, that time of the stones thrown at the bus, was confirmed. At that moment Mamma, who had once again let herself be overcome, said: “Then what should we call him?” Always him, always the third person. “What?” Babbo answered immediately. “What are you saying? What should we call him? We’ll call him by his name. His real name.”

[...]

Two fundamental and connected discoveries occurred in the first year of middle school. Both were framed by Querciano. The first had to do with the obligatory afternoon nap, roughly between two and four, in Nonna's room. This stretch of time, not only empty and sleepless, but also paralyzed, given that Nonna categorically forbade any movement, was filled only with reveries, whose stimulus and predominant subject were the decorations on the ceiling. A local painter, gifted and imaginative, had painted floral motifs resting on the slender structures of a sort of bamboo, an imaginary pergola with glimpses of a landscape in the corners. From the old shutters of closed windows shafts of light filtered in and struck this or that detail, creating unexpected perspectives and associations, with stimulating effects on the imagination. However, it was a short-term relief compared to the length of the nap, which left plenty of free time in search of alternative solutions.

The idea was to intercept a shaft of light where it was produced, in the shutter's precarious gap. Stealthily, when it seemed to him that Nonna was finally asleep, he could climb onto the wide window sill, sit down – the wall was very thick – and read there in the light that filtered through. It was a decisive discovery. In the silence of the room, from the big bed, came Nonna's light snoring, and from the square came the echo of the horses' hooves on the pavement, as the long time and wide space of all that was locked up in the books opened up.

The second and parallel discovery was that in the recesses of the Vatican were hidden deposits of books, some vaster than others. What mattered, though, was the fact that some were more unattended than others. There were no books in view, on display. Neither in the kitchenette, of course, nor in the big kitchen, where much else was done, nor in the little room, where in reality almost no one ever went. But interesting explorations could be made in the attics. A large steamer trunk – probably dating back to the ocean crossings to and from Argentina – had been reused to collect all of Mamma's school books, all very orderly, as well as some of Nonna's below them. It was clear, in fact, that the latter were the fruit of a carefully chosen criteria, keeping the actual texts and eliminating the manuals. And then there were Leopardi's *Canti*, in a beautiful late nineteenth-century edition, and *Orlando Furioso*, several comedies by Goldoni, *The Hundred Years* by Rovani, Carducci's *Barbarian Odes*, the *Castelvecchio Canti* by Pascoli and, of course, *The Divine Comedy* and *The Betrothed*.

The readings in the shady heat of the early afternoon began precisely from this small library of classics, which he hid in his Nonna's room immediately after lunch, behind a curtain or under the big bed, to be able to then resume them as soon as he slipped away from the sheets. He began with those volumes for the simple reason that they were the most beautiful – bound, with the titles printed in gold on the red or dark green canvas, sometimes even on finer fabrics, which looked like silk. It gave more satisfaction to read from more important books, for adults.

However, in the long run, the aesthetic drive toward the classics, or rather toward the volumes that housed them, began to run out. Poetry was fine, one or two

poems, but he was interested in stories with a head and a tail. Among the stories, *Orlando Furioso* was too complicated, he couldn't keep up with it, those of *The Betrothed* and *The Hundred Years* were too slow, long, boring. Maybe there was a reason they were at the bottom of the trunk. He passed to the upper layers, to Mamma's manuals. And here, nothing but stories, innumerable stories, contained in books that, for greater clarity were called History. Books much larger and more detailed than his own school books, because these were the history books from which the teachers learned to teach. He liked Roman history very much because it was complicated, ramified, but it seemed to him that it fit better than any other history into his concept of story, with more of a head and a tail than any other.

He discovered that the beauty of the books also consisted in the fact that, once read, they could be retold. At the end of the midday lunch, the girls, Isotta and Violetta, came to the kitchen and they chatted about everything, gossip, novelty, extraordinary events, what they had read. And when it came to talking about what they had read, he fit right in, talking about his freshest knowledge – news, in some sense – of Roman history. The stories themselves were compelling, even cruel (which, he realized, came in handy as he related), and he was generally recognized as a good storyteller: the audience, often joined by Rosina, followed closely. He realized that when he was the one who took the initiative, who wanted to tell the story, he stammered much less.

In addition to the steamer trunk, in another attic there was a smaller one. This contained Mamma's reading from her childhood, the novels to put it simply. Many from Mondadori's Medusa line, the unforgettable *Rebecca* by Du Maurier, lots of small books with green cloth and Indian paper of the Romantica line, also from Mondadori. *The Charterhouse of Parma* was the preferred reading. Many red books from the Romantic world of Sonzogno, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* adventures by the Baroness Orczy, the novels of Rafael Sabatini, Zane Gray, Jack London, Kipling, Conrad. Roman history experienced an inevitable and unstoppable decline. The red books could be devoured in a couple of naps, a Mondadori Romantica could last up to a month, the right measure was a Medusa, a week, or a little less. You could also talk about the novels, the beautiful ones, but it wasn't the same as with history, the most important things – the atmosphere, approach and particular point of view – could not be recounted, you had to read them, there was nothing you could do about it. When recounted, novels lost what was best about them.

And yet, in the Vatican the biggest cache of books was without question in Uncle Alcide's study. After his death no one set foot in there any more, partly because of that recoiling one feels in front of what belonged to the deceased, and partly, above all, for the concrete reason that no one in that house read any more, they had all abandoned their studies and the only books that aroused the girls' greed were the Selezione digests. The central table of the study was occupied one month a year by Alcide's son, Romualdo, who had fought with the partisans. He would fill the table with measuring cups and scales, for gunpowder and pellets of different sizes, in order to manufacture shotgun cartridges on his own, destined to feed his all-consuming passion for hunting. As for the rest, the study remained empty and no one protested if

Ninni/Piero, without drawing too much attention, slipped inside and came out after half an hour with some book/prey. In reality most of the study's content was, for his purposes, unusable. Technical literature on the subject of law, agronomy, accounting, botany. Late nineteenth-century encyclopedic reviews. Collections of newspapers and magazines. Books about travel, flights, sea crossings, ascents and explorations. Abundant medical literature, the last vestige of Isotta's interrupted studies (although some anatomical illustrations presented ideas of certain interest ...). Finally, and above all, the school books of all that numerous progeny, mainly from those who had attended high school. And right here, in this last category, hid the treasure for which he had been unwittingly looking. This treasure was made up of anthologies. For middle school, for junior high school, and for the readings in parallel to the literary history texts for high school. They were very large volumes that easily exceeded a thousand pages. But they contained the very best that Italian literature, not infrequently springing from foreign sources, had produced in its centuries-long journey.

Many years later, at university, Ninni, definitively transmuted into Piero, would be educated to despise the anthologies. Texts had to be read in full, the fundamental thing was the overall architecture, and anatomical dissection of the most beautiful pages was a shame, retrograde even. Piero the university student would have docilely assented to condemning that old idea to the gallows, notwithstanding the fact that it had opened the doors of paradise to him. Like Saint Peter before him, he would disavow himself and the summer afternoons of his early adolescence well over three times. Afternoons in which he had discovered, certainly in bits and pieces, perhaps even in shreds, that immense chorus of very different voices, passing instantaneously from Cavalcanti's "Because I expect never to return" to Petrarch's "My ship, full of oblivion, sails"; from Boccaccio's "Andreuccio da Perugia" to Macchiavelli's "that food that is mine only and for which I was born"; from Torquato Tasso's "Regal bride, the season has come that invites wary lovers to dance" to Leopardi's "song I heard in the streets, fading away to die, little by little"; from the dialogue in *The Betrothed* between the count uncle and the provincial of the Capuchins to Fratta's kitchen in Ippolito Nievo and further to Pirandello's "Ciàula Discovers the Moon" and Montale's "sunflower crazed with light." But, while denying it, he would never forget the thrill of seeing the whole continent of literature emerge before his eyes, like a new Atlantis from the Ocean. And along with it, the other inseparable emotion of intuiting that this was his real home.

[...]

PART THREE

The Young Man

1.

But strictly speaking, what school were they going to now? The classical high school, the boys fresh out of middle school would say with an adult nonchalance, and in a certain sense they were entitled to say it. The junior high school was in that building, the principal was in that building, and you entered from that same door. But between them and the high school seniors, young men with one foot already in the university, it wasn't a question of distance, but of another world. And yet, it was true that they were starting to enter this other world. You could see it from various signs. First of all, from their clothes. With his entrance into the junior high school, Piero, too, was completely re-fitted from head to toe. And this time in loco, right there, on Corso Buenos Aires, the Broadway of Milan. The highlight was a jacket made of a fabric that was more prickly than hairy, a kind of tweed, robust and elegant, at least in its intentions. A billiard table green barely darkened by sparse black pin stripes. Light gray trousers, rigorously white shirts, and ties with designs. Office attire was not an absolute novelty, it was already practiced by the majority in middle school, but some deviations were still tolerated. Some pullovers worn casually by the most elegant, or short trousers from spring onwards, some sneakers, and the bizarre spirits, or with bizarre parents, who regularly showed off flannel mountain shirts with flashy checkers and leather trousers with laces, bibs and edelweiss. Tyrolean Lederhosen, to the German teacher's delight. Now, though, crossing that door, the fantasies came to an end and it all became serious. There was a rush to become adults, just as many many years later there would be a full-fledged effort to remain adolescents. Thus, the office uniform was a must, without exception.

But the most glaring indication of change, the sign of the new times was undoubtedly the constant and normal (normal ??) presence of girls. Before, in elementary and middle school, the most rigorous apartheid was in force. Males on one side, females on the other. And not in the sense of separate classes, but of separate schools. Side by side, practically identical, but totally separate. Buildings, administrations, principals, teachers, all separate. As a matter of course, young boys and girls met, they made acquaintances, shared neighborhoods, friendships, relatives, and visits intersected. But in private, on their own. In public, in the official school activities, there was no relationship, nothing. The familiar little girls, the same ones with whom they entertained themselves at home or on vacation, turned into an alien tribe, the impenetrable, inexplicable females. And with them there tended to be a bellicose relationship.

At the exit of the twin buildings, the most daring among the males brandished their briefcases and to the cry of "ninnies!" (the precise meaning of which was ignored by the boys) they raced to clash against the backpacks that the females used to carry on their shoulders. As primitive as it was, this courtship ritual had its own success, as proven by the little shouts and shoves of the alleged victims, while the girls who didn't get chased hid their disappointment behind looks of superiority. From this point of view the transition to high school resembled the transition from a tribe in New

Guinea to a living salon in eighteenth-century France. It was the entry into a society in which the female presence was dominant, determining the tone of relationships and constituting the touchstone, the goal of masculine valor. As they grew increasingly dominant and intrusive, the girls who entered as girls proceeded to leave as young women. Some very beautiful, too. The freshman boys were almost scared. When at the sound of the bell you rushed out (now you no longer went out class by class, but all together, with the indifferent freedom of adults), the new arrivals tended to remain united, like a small flock afraid of being overwhelmed, while next door, with the long strides of long legs, often with heels, passed the laughing senior-year beauties. They had few books, carelessly held by a strap, whereas the boys labored under the weight of massive folders with all sorts of pockets. These beautiful girls exchanged easygoing jokes as they peered out of the gate at the college boys, some with cars, who came to pick them up. Beings from another planet, gazelles, butterflies, elves. His classmates in comparison were chrysalises, struggling to break out of their cocoons, straddling the threshold between white socks and nylon stockings, also frightened at the idea of having to leave that sort of boarding school where they had lived until then.

As exaggerated as it was to say that they were in high school, perhaps it was just as exaggerated to speak, in their specific case, of a class. Twelve, there were a dozen in all, six males and six females, strung into a small room and carefully arranged, but by choice, males with males and females with females, in six benches. The teacher's desk with its towering dais, designed for a classroom of forty people, loomed over them like a Mesopotamian ziggurat. The teachers – they were all women – could have given everyone a slap in the head if they stretched a little. The class didn't go to school as normally understood, they rather enjoyed private lessons by teachers dedicated only to them. They were checked daily and quizzed every other day. They didn't know it, but made use of the intensive tutoring which not even the best English public schools were able to offer. A boon in some ways, a nightmare in others. The reasons for this extraordinary smallness were manifold.

The first undoubtedly depended on German as a foreign language. For understandable reasons, German culture did not enjoy great popularity at that time. Furthermore, the language had the deserved reputation of being much more difficult to learn and far less useful than the traditional French and victorious English. Basically, the German section wound up with those who chose the language for family reasons, or those who didn't have enough access to get in elsewhere, or, finally, those who were congenitally docile and willingly accepted whatever fate reserved for them. This was the case with Piero and his family.

The demographic data also mattered a lot. They were the children of war, more so than any of the other children. Conceived and born in the darkest years, when everything seemed to conspire against that opening into the future that every birth represents. And yet, Piero thought as he looked at his small class, they had come into the world in those nights and fogs, in that atrocious and desperate Europe. Children of the war, there was no doubt. But, as in Mamma's favorite English films, also children of grand, irrepressible loves. [...]

All hopes were placed on Rimini, you might be able to count on Rimini. In the sense that, strictly speaking, many people went to Rimini. It's true that in Cesena, where a certain degree of thinning out could be expected, because of Cesenatico and Cervia, there was no particular benefit. But the reverse reasoning was also valid. If they hadn't gotten off at Cesena, all the more reason they should get off at Rimini – assuming that sooner or later at least some of those sardines crushed in the train, covered with sweat, and suffocated in the heat had as their goal the Romagna Riviera and would get off. Quite simply, they were going to the sea, as was legitimate to expect, being Friday, August 4th, actually Saturday the 5th by now. But if, God forbid, all or almost all of them were returning home to the lands of their origins, where they would arrive the following morning, then there would be no hope. The prospect was a whole night standing up, in slimy contact with panting undershirts, crying babies, matrons with dyed hair and armored brassieres, and food wrapped in greasy paper. Slapped by the scorching wind that entered through the corridor's windows kept completely open in an illusion of coolness. Hell.

From where they were stuck, he and the whole family, you couldn't see or know their destiny, whether the train would empty or not once it arrived in Rimini. They were more or less at the wagon's midpoint, a position conquered inch by inch since they had gotten on, almost four hours earlier, in the station of the regional capital near Querciano. The train must have already been full at the start, in Milan. But how did it manage at each station to be miraculously enlarged? stretched? inflated? The fact is that all those who had wanted to get on had gotten on. Amid insults, curses, scratches, moans, cries, kicks, elbows, but finally they climbed aboard. They, the little family, under Babbo's guidance – go figure – had reached the middle of the wagon on the basis of the theory, completely off, as one could see, that this had to be the least crowded point since it was the farthest from either end, that is, from the doors through which people got on. Now, however, there was no more time for hypotheses and speculations, the train, despite the delays it had accumulated, especially in Bologna, was entering the Rimini station. The moment of truth, the verdict.

From the window he immediately saw that on the sidewalk, in addition to the carts of ice cream, newspapers, soft drinks, coffee, cigarettes, various kinds of comfort foods, a large number of aspiring travelers were stationed with their suitcases, agitated and shouting, absolutely intent on asserting the right conferred to them by the tickets in their possession. From the train, writhing and slithering as if escaping from a death grip, an almost equal number descended, the so-called vacationers on the Romagna beaches. It all broke even, whatever number of people got off, the same number got on, there was no more hope. This thought must have shrouded the heated minds of all the travelers like a shadow, not just Piero's, because a quarrel broke out at one end of the wagon, the one towards the head of the train, as the train was slowly leaving the station. Since there was nothing left to do but resign oneself, everyone gauged

how intolerable their condition was and took it out on their neighbors. Piero, from where he was, could not understand the specific origin of the dispute, he could only see a big purple man attacked by a very pale little man who in a low tone of voice shouted presumed insults at him in an incomprehensible language (or dialect?). The big man tried to retreat, but in doing so he produced in that compact and viscous mass of damned souls a tidal wave that reverberated to the other end of the wagon. Suddenly, from the compartment in front of Piero a rather fleshy woman – her flesh generously exposed – leaped out, abandoning her precious seat, and loudly laced into one of the two contenders, in terms that were still incomprehensible. A very dark soldier, glued to Piero, saw the opportunity and slipped into the place abandoned by the woman, who, however, with a single move literally grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulled him to his feet and shoved him back into the corridor from where he came. The soldier didn't take it to heart, with an ambiguous smile he said a few words that were still incomprehensible but in a normal tone of voice, the fleshy woman raised her hand to slap him, but she was sitting and he easily blocked her hand, always with that half smile.

Here, Piero thought, the bottom had been reached and there was no falling further. He was ashamed of being part of all that, but not with respect to the others, as he often was. Here there was no one who knew him. He was ashamed with respect to himself. This is me, he thought, not that contrived phony who goes on cultural field trips with Professor Fumagalli or gets involved in the politics of the high school student circle. This is me, in this smelly wagon, in the company of all these damned people, surrounded by this little family that wants to protect me, because I don't exist alone. This is my real place in the world. And to think that when this whole affair began it seemed like the opposite, a step forward on the path of emancipation, toward freedom, a new horizon.

The principal had sent for him, and from the irritated tone Piero immediately deduced that there was good news coming, given that the principal hated being thanked, hated all the fuss, the courtesies, anything that smacked even vaguely of servility. "So, my good man," the principal told him, "these gentlemen from the ministry are organizing trips abroad for students. It's called CIVIS, Center for Italian Voyage Instruction for Students, but it also means 'citizen' ... these gentlemen from the ministry have always like Latin ... you know how it is with the Romans ... " He raised his eyes skyward. "In any case, the trips are prizes for deserving students, ten days in Greece. You get to Brindisi and there you board. OK then? Tell me immediately because I'll have to give them your name." "Yes, definitely, thank you very much," he answered, turning the principal gloomy with all his gratitude. "You have to get to Brindisi on your own, then they take charge. There will be thirty of you, from all over Italy, plus two teachers to keep an eye on you, and guides in Greece and all the rest ... this is the program." He handed him a sheet. "Not bad," he concluded, soothed.

At home the announcement was well received, except that a week later he heard Mamma say to Babbo "... when we go to Brindisi ..." What does she mean "when we go," he thought, but he already understood. And in fact, inquisitively,

Mamma, without realizing the extent of what she was saying, confirmed it: “No, we’ll accompany you, you can’t just go down there alone.” “Excuse me,” he replied, “but all the others are going alone.” And how will I look if I get there chaperoned like on the first day of school, he had added mentally, without saying it, but they understood easily. “We’ll see what the others do, and in any case it’s their business. But surely you can’t make such a long journey by yourself.” “And who should accompany me?” “What do you mean who?” It was Babbo, for once in agreement with Mamma; him authoritarian, her always trying to help. “Everyone. We’ll all come.” They would stop in Brindisi and explore the seaside while he was in Greece, Babbo explained, then they would accompany him on the return journey. A well looked after little knave, he thought, what a humiliation! “And how do you plan on going, by car?” he asked, evincing the residual hope of seeing something on the road. “No, no, the highway only goes up to Bologna, after that, there’s still a very long stretch, busy, several overnight stops ... no, no, the train is infinitely better, we’ll take it in the evening and the next morning, without even realizing it, we’ll be there. Very convenient.”

Sure, Piero was now thinking, stuck in the corridor between suitcases and bundles with wild-eyed hobos breathing on him after having passed their flask of wine. Very convenient! That’s right. Anyway, there was nothing he could do about, so he had to resign himself. As the train sank deep into the night, the bodies started losing the aggressive tension that had sustained them up to that point, the heads began to look for any kind of support. Outside the windows a soft sea appeared at times, smooth as oil for the heat, dimly lit by a meager, feeble moon. Piero had never been to those lands, and from what little he saw it seemed sparser and emptier than those he knew. He, too, had fallen asleep. He didn’t know how, maybe standing on his feet like horses.

He regained full consciousness in the gray haze preceding the dawn. They must have been in Abruzzo by now, an emptier, more abandoned Italy. In the last few stops some people had gotten off, not that the car had emptied but the pressure had slackened. A couple of compartments beyond, even his family, all three, had found a place and, from what he could see, they were now sleeping, happily oblivious to his existence. In the compartment in front of him, the soldier had managed to creep up next to the fleshy woman and was now pawing at her. Expertly, one might have said, judging by her expression.

In Puglia the sun rose big and red right in front of the window. Now at each station a good number of travelers got off, there were seats for him, too, but he preferred to look out that strange countryside, those strange houses and strange people. It looked like a Christmas nativity scene, with the figurines dressed in light colors and the houses amid large green vegetable gardens. The vines here were not paired with elms, like in Emilia, in long festoons from tree to tree, instead they formed very high espaliers, real walls between the enormous and ancient olive trees, vegetal elephants. As the sun rose the heat increased, but it was a strong, determined, malign heat, not like the slurry sticky heat of the Po valley.

Almost everyone got off in Bari, even the fleshy woman and the dark soldier, even the big purple man and the cadaverous skinny one, leaving a trail of empty

paper and fiasco bottles drained of their wine. “Have you been up all night?” Lella asked, the only one who understood. “C’mon, sit down now...” Now that you’ve proven who you are, now that you exist, she wanted to say but didn’t. He sat down, there was plenty of space. He collapsed with a crash into a dreamless sleep.

[...]

Actually, Athens looked like a city in labor. In the technical sense of the term, a city that was giving birth. Everywhere you went you could see the old Athens of pergolas and low houses, in that curious style that the Greeks called neoclassical and that looked very much like the elementary schools and municipalities of many Italian towns. With a Turkish echo, too, something you couldn't say out loud because the Greeks would be offended. But this old Athens was giving birth to the new one, with its tall concrete and glass buildings, vast outdoor restaurants with expanses of tables and menus in four languages, hotels with room service, buses and guides. Athens the way Onassis wanted it, with its Olympic Airways and its immense hotels on the islands, Athens committed to chasing modernity in great leaps, to update itself, to leave behind the horrendous miseries of the civil war, which had ended not even ten years earlier. A city that strove spasmodically to become a capital of world tourism. All this, in effect, took away a bit of its charm. It made people regret the small town of taverns with four wooden tables, even if they had never seen it before, the town of alleys where rebetiko music was played, of dodgy hotels with lamps (these also Turkish ...) covered with cloth and only one toilet per floor. Despite the scorching heat, the city that was being born gave the impression of being cold. Even the Acropolis – they said it with such pleasure as they all shared a newfound brazenness – even the Acropolis turned out to be a disappointment. They had recently set up the powerful equipment for the *son et lumière* show – banks of colored reflectors, towers of loudspeakers – and the guides devoted more time to explaining how they worked, a great sign of modernity, than to the columns of the Parthenon.

Near the Erechtheum their group – the girls were not only very beautiful (some, a few) but also very modern as you could see from their clothing – came across four Greek soldiers, laughing cheerfully. They were looking for company, trying to pick up. Athletic, well-built and tanned in their starched American-style uniforms, they were a thousand miles away from the shepherds of Corfu, they were the new Greeks – modern, the Onassis Greeks. As they mumbled a bit of English, they learned that the group was Italian. They clearly made the soldiers very happy (or at least the female contingent did), and they were almost relieved. “*Tzao*,” they said, with their inability, common among Greeks, to pronounce the “ch” sound, “Greeks and Italians same face, same race.” They took up the Mussolinian motto with its underlying truth, in the sense that the relationship was immediately placed on an equal footing, which would not have been the case had they been Germans or English or French instead of Italian. Very cordial, the soldiers were full of advice, especially to the girls. They suggested restaurants, but when they learned that the group had fixed dinners included, they rejoiced and immediately went to propose dance clubs. But everyone in the group was too busy discovering each other, and the pleasure of being together was so great that there was no room for anyone else.

In the evening, which later turned into night, they went gladly into squalid places where they drank ouzo and thought it was excellent, exotic. They danced a

little and flirted a lot, but above all they chatted themselves breathless, happy not to have limits, obligations, constraints. (The two teachers, who were theoretically supposed to watch over them, were very young and participated equally in everything the group did.) On concrete dance floors, under sparse festoons of colored light bulbs, they behaved as if they were (convinced of it even) at one of Gatsby's parties, where "men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars." The atmosphere was like that, even though there was no champagne. During the day, vaguely numb, they got on and off the buses, they slept during journeys, and when they were obliged to they looked perplexedly at some ruins they were told had been submerged by "mass tourism," not realizing that they were part of it.

In Athens the only places to breathe an ancient air were the museums. Paradoxically, in a certain sense, it was because they were organized according to the criteria of anatomical theaters from late nineteenth century archeology. Illegible cards, hypertechnical terms, acronyms, five-digit identification numbers, arrangements by genre – fifty gryphons all in one case, twenty-five winged sphinxes, thirty-seven cup handles. And yet this positivist dryness, this total lack of pathos, made the remote, absolute beauty shine by contrast, isolating it in a cone of light, fixing it forever. The golden lions continued to flee from the tips of the Mycenaean daggers, the goddess of health inclined her head into an indecipherable smile, the dead caressed the hands of relatives on the Attic funerary stelae, the archaic korai smiled ambiguously in their adolescent bodies. Already in the mediocre preparation of the museum halls – yellow tiles persecuted them here, too – they were beginning to intuit what Greece was, but only a couple of days after they left Athens did they understand it. But they had to really get out of there, because even at Cape Sounion, which opened out onto the authentic Greek sea, the one that had taken the name of the suicidal King Aegeus in front of the black sails of his son Theseus – every place in Greece was full of stories, and everything echoed them – even at Cape Sounion there was too much noise, too many buses, too many cameras to immortalize the sunset.

They encountered Greece, the real one, where the paved roads ended, dust and stones, with the old women dressed in black selling raisins and dried figs, the stone hovels and the steep slopes of the terraced hills. The secret of Greece, as bitter as its smell, was in the almost unbearable contrast between what was seen and what it meant, between the minimal appearance and the maximum content. In Mycenae there was no one, empty, hot stones under a ruthless sun, a place for birds of prey. Only stones. But Piero and Lucrezia, imagined and recounted to each other the cold night when the sentry, crouched like a dog on the roof, had seen the fire on the horizon announcing the fall of Troy. He had trembled then, thinking of what would inevitably come to pass. And now they were standing in front of the plaster bathtub, beautiful, perfectly preserved, made yesterday it seemed, in which Agamemnon had been hacked to pieces by his wife Clytemnestra with an ax. Was that really the bathtub? Was it really Agamemnon? Was he really the one buried not far away with the golden mask now standing at the Athens museum? Schliemann, that crazy German who had married a beautiful seventeen-year-old Greek girl and made her

put on the jewels of Priam's treasure, was convinced. But it didn't matter, Lucrezia said, even if no one had been killed in the bathtub, even if the king in the great cylindrical tomb had been another, it didn't matter. Myth is always true, it is always truer than anything else.

In the long evenings and then, after dinner, advancing late into the night, very late, when finally a light breeze would stir the leaves and scatter the poor fragrances of Greece, it was inevitable that the barely noticeable flirtations just mentioned would result in falling in love. They were very young, free for the first time, they watched in amazement the miracle that transformed what they had studied and over which they had struggled into deep emotions, an inner reality. Even more, they discovered that this transmutation was not single, individual, isolated, but that it touched many of them. Many, despite the obvious differences, had an equal and enormous reserve of unexpressed emotions, kept inside, stored, concealed, which pressed tumultuously to come to light. And now it seemed to each of them that the ancient land was doing the miracle, they blossomed, opened up, understood the meaning of what they were, they let themselves be taken by a general feeling of friendship – so impetuous, so devoid of reservations and calculations – which they had never experienced before.

But above all there was this unspeakable, total experience of fusion with another being, like two metals welded together, that thing which, they now understood, was called love. They felt it for the first time, so deep and solid. Not just Piero and Lucrezia, but also all the other couples in embryo, and the feeling would last forever, and there would never be room for another in their future life. So wide, so deep, so complex. But they weren't stupid. They recognized in each other not only their high grades, but also a lust for learning, for the charge of unexpressed feelings that they could now manifest, an acute sense of reality, the ability to see it clearly and the determination to face it. They knew that in a few days they would be separated, probably forever. The bell jar under which they were temporarily living would be broken. How many times could Piero and Lucrezia meet in a year? Without autonomy, without money? Even to just communicate? They wouldn't say it to themselves, they didn't even want to think it, but they clearly understood that their lives would be taking different paths. Buried still deeper was an obscure, almost biological certainty that there would be other loves, not the perfect fusion, but other loves for sure.

They never talked about all this, didn't even say it to themselves, but it wasn't necessary. It was enough to look at each other. They were in a suspended state, like two tightrope walkers careful not to fall into the abyss of illusions on one side or that of cynicism on the other. As Horace had said, they tried to carve out and enclose a vast hope in a brief space. Very brief, in their case. Piero didn't want to miss out on any of it. He enjoyed the presence of Lucrezia, looked at her face framed in blond, her golden skin, her Bolognese softness that matched her character, her way of being. Above all he enjoyed that immediate and spontaneous harmony. They thought the same things at the same time, they reacted the same way, there would be no need to talk to each other if neither of them felt like it. They looked at each other and knew. They offered the ancient but still amazing spectacle of two very young people who

have discovered that abandon. They were careful not to exaggerate in public, which only resulted in their making the mutual attraction obvious, almost moving, even painful. In the Epidaurus theater's vertiginous geometry, Cherubini's *Medea*, sung by Callas, would be performed the following week. They found the temple of Asclepius more interesting, where pilgrims, sick and in search of healing, came to sleep inside, to "incubate." "Maybe," Lucrezia said, "we should also try ... we should spend the night in the sacred enclosure." "But why?" Piero asked, even though he already knew the answer. "To see if the god will set us free..." And stave off a future suffering as great as our happiness now, Piero thought, though he said nothing.

The last visit was Delphi, the place of destiny. The whole group had a melancholy feeling deep down, even though they vigorously denied it by joking and grappling with cultural references and trying to say intelligent things. They knew that despite the promises and the exchanged addresses, despite the oaths and mutual assurances, they would not see each other again. They knew that they had no autonomy, that they were stuck between an adult mind, an adult heart and the possibility of acting as a child, or slightly more. "We'll always be able to say that we were in the navel of the world together," Piero said to Lucrezia. He held her by the waist. "It's the most important place, the center of it all," she confirmed. "But the god here is Apollo," he replied, "an enigmatic and cruel god ... he strikes with his bow, without being seen, kills from afar." They both fell silent, they thought of the wrathful god – "like the night," Homer had said – coming down from the Olympian ridges with the arrows in his quiver rattling over his shoulder. "He hit us," Lucrezia said. "that's for sure ... he has good aim ... but ..." She stopped and looked at him. They were enveloped by the bitter odor of hot honey that rose from the earth, from the Greek land, just after sunset. "But he didn't kill us," she went on, "and I'm happy." The wind passed silently beneath them, on the olive trees that covered the narrow valley, the leaves turned, the whole mantle changed color, became silver. "I'm happy, very happy," she insisted. "And you?" "Me?" he said. "Me? This is the best thing that's ever happened to me." She looked at him with a small smile and then slowly gave him a light kiss on the cheek. "So then listen, we have today, tomorrow night we get on the ship and the day after we'll be sailing. Do we want to waste these three days?" By now it was almost dark. "Those Apollos can't be taken away from us."