

Amin: the foreigner

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Presentation

The work, blending in skilful, measured doses, professional skills and experience with the interweaving of the characters' feelings (almost all are protagonists!) is not episodic, as it might seem 'ictu oculi'.

On closer inspection, it achieves an inseparable unity, beyond the vicissitudes of the various figures, in that the author's courageous, effective ideas, aimed at innovating the dramatic reality of certain aspects of the health structure in general and that of the former psychiatric hospitals in particular, come to constitute the catalysing element of the work. It becomes a novel, an authentic creation of the author, who undertook the undertaking as a true champion of serene human understanding.

This work is not, therefore, an autobiographical work 'tout court' but, on the strength of a robust multifaceted human character of suffering, love, forgiveness, redemption, it transcends the particular, the experience of the individual character or, if you like, of the main protagonist in whom the author recognises himself, to certainly draw on the Universal.

Like the author, so must every reader, every person of goodwill, recognise themselves in this work and, through this experience, aim at the True, the Beautiful, the Good, becoming better. And perhaps more hopeful and optimistic!

After all, there is so much need for goodwill and optimism in today's society, which is all too often dedicated to petty interests and filled with selfishness, hypocrisy, indifference and apathy. Finally, thanks also to the author for the smooth, enjoyable reading.

Dr Giacomo Longo

The

There was no doubt that this garden of the psychiatric hospital, like the others he had seen, was beautiful and tidy. This was what young Dr Andrea Lo Conte thought of as he walked along with his director

The large green park in which the various pavilions were located was truly lush, with tall, majestic palm trees and immense linden trees rich in green foliage. The little flowers of these, insignificant in shape and colour, were already beginning to spread a sweet scent of spring. On the contrary, the flowers of the agaves growing along the avenue were enormous but also disproportionate, so much so that they seemed to bend over the two doctors who walked slowly: one already advanced in years, with his limp and uncertain step, the other young, blond, agile and confident, who was forcing himself to slow down and keep up with his superior.

Young Dr Lo Conte already knew that this neat, beautiful and lush garden was just a façade. A fake façade like the plywood and wood ones used in films: with balconies, windows and flowerpots, all painted; or like the backdrops of stages that conceal, behind the glittering lights and marvellous shapes, as if they were great gardens and rich patrician villas, much more banal and grey realities, made of wooden planks, dust, peeling walls, rusty chains and ropes, made dark and grimy by the big sweaty hands that had handled them over the years.

Nevertheless, he liked to admire him as he walked with a brisk spirit and a slow pace, to humour the elderly director. He proceeded confident that he knew how to face this new challenge, as he had done in previous years with the others. Had he not passed unscathed through private cli-

nics, in which all possible diseases and all types of patients flowed, provided they were wealthy enough to pay the hefty fees? Clinics in which his few and shaky notions of medicine had been put to the test? Had the young doctor not known how to deal with psychiatric wards with their constant emergencies

The hospital director spoke with care and affection towards his guests, whom people hastily called 'crazy', but there was, at certain moments, a well-hidden tremor in his voice, combined with an underlying bitterness. Bitterness perhaps due to the fact that he, like his guests, felt marginalised, both by ordinary people and especially by the scientific world.

The old director was certainly aware that his was not a real hospital, where one could meet doctors, technicians and nurses, wearing white coats and looking cheerful and smiling. His was not a hospital crammed with state-of-the-art equipment, useful and often indispensable for examinations and therapies. No, a psychiatric hospital was something else: it was the admission of the insane, it was the place where society hid, without creating any ethical problems, men, women and children who were 'different' in appearance, behaviour and communication. Men, women and children who for some reason had created, or in the future might have created, problems for their families or for people who might have anything to do with them. In short, simply put, he was a dustbin of society and he was its manager and guardian.

"Knowing that you are very well prepared and good, I entrusted you with the ward with the most difficult and serious patients," he said. And it was not clear whether those words were a compliment, an affectionate irony, or a way of getting the new recruit to accept the worst of the wards without provoking an immediate reaction of rejection from the

young doctor. As Dr Andrea tried to work out which of the three hypotheses was the right one, not knowing what to say, he kept silent.

It was his habit to approach every new situation with this attitude: when faced with something new or particularly difficult, he would impose silence, to try to understand and evaluate. Silence broken, in this case, only by a polite "Good morning!" when he was met in the avenues by some older nurses and colleagues who, in addition to greeting their director with respect, also hinted at him with a greeting in which they hid their curiosity to get to know this new, unknown, young acquisition. Even the hospital sisters, who seemed to be gliding along the dusty road in their black, billowing gowns and with their heads also covered by the black veil, lifted their faces for a moment, offering a respectful "Good morning!".

On the long driveway lined with huge lime trees that they were now walking along, many windows of a long, brick-coloured building appeared. From those large, tall windows that opened like dark eyes on the side facade of the building, no sign of life came out, as if the interior was deserted. Only a few faint cries or moans could be heard, as if from afar.

Then something struck the young doctor's sensitive nostrils: it was a sharp, intense miasma emanating from those very windows. The young man remained motionless and perplexed for a moment, but again preferred to remain silent rather than ask where that intense stench of urine and human excrement emanated from. Nevertheless, inside him, something, like a fluttering of black bat wings moved for a moment, in alarm, but then quieted, as if waiting.

Around the corner, on the grey and peeling façade of the ward, a door, a sturdy iron door, also painted grey, ap-

peared in front of two doctors, and then, following a long ringing, finally the sound of the lock opening.

He was inside the department entrusted to him. That was to be his workplace, but also his 'unchallenged kingdom', the director reminded him, with a sketch of a smile that, this time he was sure, surely concealed a cruel irony.

"I think you'll want to see the patients I've entrusted to you," the director continued hurriedly, as if trying to get a weight off his shoulders, as he trotted unsteadily on shaky legs that no longer seemed to bear the weight bearing down on them. Preceded by the head nurse of the ward, he entered a long but narrow room, explaining:

"This is the living room where our and his patients stay during the day." Then he added: "In time you will get to know them."

While in front of them, the nurse with his stocky body, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt, tried to make his way through the bodies, with the director behind him, who followed unsteadily, looking for support on the large wooden tables and benches, Andrea's heart, in that long, narrow room whose end was not in sight, seemed to stop.

Gone was the initial boldness and confidence, gone was the determination to do for these patients as he had done for others in the past, all that remained was a mixture of horror that, step by step, invaded him, slapped him and struck him almost physically, harder and harder.

He felt all his senses battered and scrambled as never before, as never, not even in the most terrible nightmares of his childhood dreams, had he experienced. If his sense of smell, which was by the way very sensitive, was assaulted and offended by the whiffs of stench, in which the acrid smell of sweat from the countless bodies in the hall mingled with the nauseating stench of faeces, urine and still-living blood, his sight staggered and blurred by the shapeless mass

of half-naked bodies thrashing about, shouting between the benches but also above and below the tables, as in the narrow passage between the benches and the wall that they walked along.

Some of the bodies were covered in blood, partly crimson, partly black, because it was already clotted, gushing slowly from their heads, arms and legs, while distraught faces of anger, pain and fear looked on in puzzlement.

Other bodies, which it is difficult to define as men, almost totally absent, with their gaze lost in the void, crawled on the walls, like unusual ghosts of long-dead people who, agonised, endlessly wander the same places for months and years without ever finding peace.

His hearing, in turn, was greatly strained by what was going on in that long hall, which appeared tiny and narrow, however, due to the huge number of bodies present. Confusingly, he heard continuous murmurs, like a lullaby, as well as mutterings like distant thunder, alternating with lacrating cries and expletives, along with groans, broken phrases and obsessively repeated prayers.

If that was not enough, one had to walk. And if the chief nurse managed, with jostling and shouting, to make way for himself and the director, the young doctor, whose legs at times froze and paralysed, as if drained of all strength, lingered. As the sea water cut by the keel of the boat closes in behind the stern, so that human mass closed in, resuming its place.

As a result, poor Dr Andrea lagged further and further behind; confused and dazed, until the head nurse, retracing his steps, picked him up, as a good father would do with his children who linger in a forest, frightened by the noise of some wild animal or the slither of a snake or simply because of the stinging brambles.

That groping, that tearing forward, made that treacherous path, of which he could see no end, even longer, more impassable and exhausting. Not least because, almost at every step, eyes appeared before him, locked on deformed faces that seemed to come out of nowhere. Eyes that stared at him fixedly and perplexedly, as if wondering why someone, a stranger, dared to slip between them. An uninvited and certainly unwanted stranger in that cursed place.

It was only after long moments of bewilderment that he was able to notice some details of what he had initially perceived as a shapeless, distraught mass of humanity at its most degraded and suffering.

Only after some time did he begin to make out some details, such as that of an abnormally fat man, with an immense head and groin shaved clean, who was lying on one of the tables almost entirely covered with his flaccid flesh, while with a voice that sounded like a bellow he shouted, snickering, his face distorted, his sagging chest jiggling, immersed in a game that was almost endless masturbation

Only later did he begin to notice a young man, tanned and handsome in his total nudity, who sat on the bench, tapping his fingers on the table and then smoothing it smilingly, as if instead of wood he had been drumming on the sand, so that it had to be smoothed out to make it homogeneous again, so that he could once again imprint inscrutable marks on it.

Next to him stood a young man with raven-black hair, stained with a long streak of reddish blood that, starting from the top of his head, ran down - down to his throat. This young man, whose face was set in a smiling grin, had his face marked by a web of scars that covered his face like a tragic mask. Of them, the thickest and most obvious were just above the eyebrows, but many others were distributed irregularly on his forehead, cheeks, chin and mouth, which he

was now trying to defend with his hands to prevent the blood, oozing from his head torn open by a long red wound, from covering his lips.

Towards the end of the room, in a corner, he was finally surprised by a middle-aged man who, squatting down, was spitting on the floor, while with his fingers he seemed to be carefully and accurately drawing, by means of the saliva emitted on the floor that he constantly fed, the face of a woman, perhaps known to him in the past; perhaps desired and loved by him.

This man who was painting with his saliva did not seem to notice anything: neither the small group of workers passing by him, nor the horde of humanity shouting, shoving, swearing and begging. Nothing seemed to shake him in what seemed an important and delicate occupation.

Beside and around him, huddled together, frightened like little birds caught out of the nest, while a large flock of sparrowhawks fluttered and quivered around them, stood, holding hands, about fifteen people. People different from the others, not only because their faces, bewildered and childlike, made one think more of a group of children than of adults, but above all because, unlike the others, they wore their clothes with more dignity. By the way, these clothes, which was strange for that place, seemed to be quite new and clean.

Not a single word had escaped the lips of the small group of workers trudging between the tables and benches, as any sentence would have been absolutely useless: the clamour around them would have overwhelmed it.

They finally reached the end of the hall: there were no more tables and there were few bodies either.

The young doctor did not understand why the patients all crowded into that first part of the room when they could have gone further. He did not understand until he realised he

was walking on a wet and very slippery floor, while an even more intense stench hit his nostrils and enveloped him.

As he looked around, he noticed that almost in continuation with what the director had pompously called 'the sick room' were the bathrooms, which had certainly recently been renovated, as they were covered in pretty yellow tiles embellished with floral designs. Tiles were present both on the walls and on the floor. However, the washbasins had been almost completely destroyed or dismantled, so that water gushed unceasingly from the pipes and showers installed on the ceiling.

He also understood why they avoided going beyond the living room from the row of toilets that followed the washbasins, most of which were broken and lopsided, held up only by the pipes coming out of the wall. All were, however, overflowing with faeces, which spread around.

Only at this point did the director turn to him: "We have seen enough, we can go back," he told him. And this time his voice was pervaded by a clear tremor.

That they had enough, young Dr Andrea was perfectly convinced, as he tried to keep his breath up, hoping to soon find the exit and thus breathe freely, out of that infernal bedlam.

Fortunately, they made the long return journey by a different route, made up of immense rooms and corridors. The only thing noticeable in the rooms, but also in the corridors, were rows and rows of bunk beds which, long ago, must have been painted blue, whereas now, encrusted and corroded by rust, they appeared as if stained with congealed blood.

Above and below those beds were scattered pieces of yellowish foam rubber, partly altered by time and dirt and therefore darker. Some of these pieces of foam rubber lay on the floor, as if they were soft bedside rugs, others lay on the

head of the beds like filthy pillows. There were few beds in which the nurses, by joining together three or four large pieces, had managed to form mattresses or something resembling them.

Every four to five bunk beds stood piles of cloth from which nauseating smells exhaled. These piles must have been sheets, blankets and clothes waiting to be taken away to be washed.

As the small group walked faster and faster, as if wanting to get away from those unhealthy places as soon as possible, Dr Andrea noticed for a moment something that clashed with everything else. In a room smaller than the others, almost isolated from the rest of the complex, with a corrugated metal roof lower than the other roofs, betraying the haste and temporariness with which it had been built, there was a row of single beds, each with its own good mattress and pillow. And, strangest of all, each bed was covered with a white overcoat that, at least from a distance, looked quite clean.

Around these beds bustled a tall, sturdy, though not fat man, with jet-black hair framing a square face. As the small group passed by, he barely turned his gaze, winking with a smile, as if he were too busy working to waste his time on those passing the room. However, even of this anomaly, the young Dr Lo Conte, too dazed, too confused, did not have the strength to ask anything, nor did his companions bother to give any explanation.

On their way to the exit, the small group stopped in front of a huge room, filled to the ceiling with food, clothing and furnishings. In what must have been a large storeroom, a nun, plump and no longer young, greeted them with a tired smile, while next to her an elderly man in a jacket and trousers, well dressed compared to the other patients, was slicing loaves of fragrant bread on a wooden chopping board,

still warm. The man made slices, which he then placed in large baskets. He realised they were slices of bread ready to be distributed to the sick, guests of the ward.

While the elderly person was ignored, the nun was introduced by the director: "This is Sister Celestina, the ward nun; you will realise how valuable a nun is in these places. I hope you don't resent this well-deserving category."

Finally, right at the entrance to the department, in front of a dark red Formica door, one last stop to tell the young colleague:

"And this is your office, I wish you good work."

II

Andrea in the studio

After the director had left him in the doctor's office, Andrea had spent the rest of the morning as if in a trance: he didn't know exactly what to do and especially didn't know whether to do anything. In a cupboard he had found the medical records that the nurses bureaucratically called 'the files' and thus discovered that there were two hundred and thirty sick people to be examined, treated and in theory, but only in theory, to be discharged after their recovery, with the help of only four nurses per shift, without other colleagues, social workers, psychologists and other operators. Two hundred and thirty people of whom he knew nothing. Two hundred and thirty people who expected something from him - but what could they expect? In the ward he had just left of a famous private clinic in the capital, there were fifteen patients in his care and he had, at all times, the help of a bevy of nurses and a capable and good head nurse.

When he thought of this beautiful young nun, with her lively blue eyes, he was always amazed by her skills, which were expressed not only in preparing an excellent lemon tea every day, accompanied by chocolate biscuits, but, above all, in managing her patients.

A nun who, knowing the feminine soul very well and understanding the basic needs of psychiatric patients, when some young, but no longer young depressive was admitted to the ward, knew that women are very sensitive to three major and basic anti-depressants the hairdresser's where they can make themselves beautiful; the shops where they can look at items and, if possible, buy their 'little things'; and lastly, talking, so that they can exchange and communicate their worries, fears and anxieties, this young and beauti-

ful head nurse was able to use all these three miracle drugs in series.

Some of the patients, accompanied by a nurse, were sent to the hairdresser's, others were allowed to go shopping in the nearby shops, and the rest of the ladies were left in the ward, so that they could tell their sad stories to the young doctor, who was always willing to listen to their anxieties and heartaches.

Flipping through the pages of those 'files', time seemed to move madly back and forth over the years. The most recent entries, however, seemed to have frozen events, so repetitive and stereotyped were they; others, on the other hand, especially from the past, were richer in observations and notes written with good scientific accuracy by some doctor who was certainly more attentive and helpful than his last colleagues before him.

The latter, undaunted, at the beginning of each year noted in fine handwriting the reassuring phrase: 'Physical and psychic conditions unchanged'. Three hundred and sixty-five days had passed in that unhealthy place but nothing had happened to that schizophrenic, nothing had happened to that depressive, nothing had happened to the patient admitted for psychomotor agitation. Hours, days, months had passed and everything, according to the colleagues who had left the last notes on the 'files', had remained unchanged.

Reading these notes first astonishment and then anger invaded the young Dr Andrea's soul. It was not possible for a doctor to behave so sloppily, even working in the desperate conditions he had already noticed. Something more and better should and could have been done. Otherwise, better to throw in the towel and leave.

Already leaving as he now thought he would do. Because leaving, running away from that horror was the best

thing to do! This decision, like a refrain, he repeated to himself, every time he saw in his mind's eye all that was stirring behind the grey iron door of the living room that stood directly opposite his. If there were not the slightest conditions to operate, it was better to leave an impossible task to others, than to vegetate and write at the beginning of each year: 'Unchanged physical and mental conditions'. No this never!

Anger, helplessness and disappointment were the emotions stirring in his soul. He knew that asylums were sad places but under no circumstances could he have imagined what he had just seen

Now that the decision he had made was clear and final in his mind, he felt better. A few days to look for a way to return to the clinic in the capital he had left and then away... never to return to this place or places like it.

Franco: the foreigner

For Franco, that was the most beautiful moment of the day! That was the moment of memories that no one could tear from his mind and heart. That was the moment of nostalgia, which fortunately, after so many years, had now lost the power to lacerate his soul, but rather served almost to tenderly illuminate it, as did the stars and the moon that seemed to caress the dunes of the desert where he had been born and where he had spent the best years of his childhood.

Alone, outside the walls of the ward, with a blanket of stars on top and with the fire burning beside him, everything was possible, everything was enchanting. In those moments, the fire, under the large kettle that was to be used to heat the water of the only two working showers for the sick, in those moments, was more precious to him than the bread and pa-

sta that the nurses fed into the aluminium bowls, the fire was the most important thing.

This fire, at least in his eyes, was not under that huge black copper pot with a long, limestone-encrusted coil inside, immersed in boiling water, but rose free towards the sky, as if to cover, jealously, the glitter of the stars.

Every evening that fire crackled in front of his mud and thatch house, a few hundred metres from the great river. At other times, he imagined the fire waving softly in front of the tents, the same colour as the desert sand, while he and his companions sang one of the many dirges born in the silence of those places and handed down from father to son. The tongues of fire, when it was just lit, rose high, as if to chase and catch up with the moths and other nocturnal insects that flew around and above it, in the air.

That was his home and dreaming of that fire he found himself, at least for a few moments, inside his home!

It is difficult for those who live far from that strip of green land from which date palms rise high and majestic, seemingly protecting and caressing the crops of barley, wheat, lentils and other pulses, to understand what home is.

Home is not the tent that the wind whips in your face and blows away if there are no trees to tie it up or you don't have time to fold it. The house is not the four mud walls that resist intact until the first rains of autumn, when the water that comes from the west lashes them for a long time, forcing them to bend softly, as if they were the white hips of women squatting on the ground to cook. Water that, if it continues to pound hard, already melts those walls after a few days, so that they return to being lumpy mud, mixed with straw, that joins and blends with the soil from which they were born. Home is not even the straw mats woven by the women to cover the beaten earth floor. Home is not the wooden stools covered with dromedary skin that each fami-

ly carries with them on every journey, nor the earthenware crockery.

No. The real home to be proud of, the real home that welcomes you and whispers the sweetest words suited to your feeling, both when you are sad and suffering and when you rejoice and love, is that black vault dotted with stars to look at while lying down.

For Franco, but also for all the others who lived like him outside the cities, in the villages along the great river Nile, this was the real home to be proud of, as if it were the sultan's palace. For that house is the largest and tallest imaginable. Taller and more majestic than the Sphinx and the great pyramids, but it is also the most beautiful that anyone could wish for, as well as the richest; for underneath it beat an infinity of hearts, sometimes burning with passion and joy, at other times suffused with sadness and melancholy, but always full of warm, burning life.

Under that starry mantle, death does its black work as always, reaping young and old, human and animal, but life too does its black work as always: it makes people meet and fall in love; it makes beautiful flowers bloom; it makes tasty fruit grow, but above all it scatters like fertile seed on the black turf, little human beings, baby animals and chirping chicks. Some of these are beautiful, others decidedly ugly, but all are soft and sweet to look at and caress.

Inside that immense house his mother had given birth to him while clutching a piece of soft leather between her teeth. In that immense, luminous house, he had known and loved his woman. Inside that house his children had frolicked, chasing each other through the palm trees and the muddy streams that he and the others in the village dug when the river was in flood to bring the precious liquid to each plot, where they cultivated wheat and soya, onions and vegetables, vegetables and exquisite fruits.

These were the thoughts he always loved to bring to consciousness when the nurses would abruptly order him in the evening: "Franco, light the fire." These were the thoughts he loved to dwell on sometimes with joy, at other times with heartbreaking melancholy.

On that day, however, his thoughts turned to the large room where he worked and arranged the beds of his 'children', as he called the sick, some of whom had been entrusted to him by the nurses, while others he had taken in and adopted, prodded by their constant requests. From the hustle and bustle that the rare nurses on duty had created to try to put the premises in the best light, he had realised that the director, the head nurse and a young doctor were roaming the ward.

He did not expect much from this visit! It was not that he did not trust others, but too many years had passed in that place with almost nothing having changed, to continue to trust the people who roamed those huge grey rooms.

The proof was there, before his eyes, in that big black pot under which he kept putting wood to feed the fire that seemed to want to escape from the concrete hole in which he was confined, under the hearth that supported the boiler. The proof was in that coil inside the kettle, in which the water from the showers flowed. He knew from personal experience that this primitive instrument served only to heat the water to boiling point for one to two people, after which his other companions would have only barely lukewarm, if at all, cold water.

He also knew that soon the nurses on duty would come out to scold him for not being able to heat the water more. But what could he do more than put in wood and keep the fire going? An almost useless job!

Even what he did for his 'children' sometimes, in moments of despair, seemed almost useless to him. Could he

give them a home they no longer had and perhaps never had? Could he give them that father, that mother, that brother who had slowly or abruptly abandoned them to their fate, leaving them in that place? Could he give them the minimum of freedom that even pack animals are entitled to, like the donkeys and dromedaries that in his village grazed freely in the meadow, outside the cramped stables, used only when rare storms raged over the village? It was that 'almost' that gave him enthusiasm and strength.

He was perhaps not 'almost' dead.

Yet he was still there as alive as one can be in such an environment! Above all, he knew that he was important to them, to his 'children', not only because he managed to get them to sleep in a clean enough bed every day; not only because he fed those who could not eat on their own; not only because he cleaned them as much as he could. He confusingly knew that he was something more for them.

Then he admitted, with even greater melancholy that sometimes brought him to tears, that what he gave them was much less than what they gave him, when they called him 'daddy' or when they approached him for help with some task, or when they came, just as young children do towards their father to be protected, consoled and cuddled, when they suffered assaults and beatings from their older and more aggressive companions in misfortune. In all these cases he tried to understand whether they were the desperate ones in need of help and assistance or he was.

The arrogant voice of a nurse, whom he identified as Giovanni, brought him back to reality: "Franco, that's enough for us. We have finished with ours, now you take care of yours and then you all go to bed. Remember then to put out the fire, don't let us all burn!"

At home

Going home after duty hours, young Dr Andrea's tumult of thoughts and emotions had not diminished at all. He blamed himself for having accepted to take part in that competition, pushed and almost forced by his parents, who were eager to have their son back, and, above all, he disapproved of himself for having accepted the appointment as an assistant in a psychiatric hospital and, at the same time, for having resigned from a private clinic where he was more than happy, both financially and in terms of the affectionate welcome he felt from the staff and patients every time he crossed the ward door. And for what then? To be close to his parents, relatives and friends.

"Can one be so stupid?" he said to himself.

Entering the modest and anonymous house where he had lived during his university years at the end of the working day, both his mother and father anxiously pestered him with the questions he expected:

"How did it go? What did you do? How are the sick people? And how did the other colleagues receive you?"

This slew of questions he really did not feel like answering, so, citing a severe headache, he managed to lock himself in his room. Lying down with his clothes still on the bed, he could intensely smell the same stench as in the ward he had been assigned to, so he hurriedly undressed, threw all the clothes he felt were contaminated directly into the basket of dirty clothes to be washed, and plunged into the bathtub filled to the brim.

He felt the need to get that awful stench off him but, above all, he felt the need to think about how to resign and how to ask to be re-employed in the private clinic from which he had resigned and, all this, possibly without losing face.

He saw again the astonished face of the clinic director when he had announced his resignation. Now he understood what the expression on her face wanted to communicate to him: "You must be really dumb to leave a luxury clinic for a stinking asylum." However, he had not understood or had not wanted to understand that message!

Protected and safe in his home he wanted to relax, but unfortunately the tumult of his thoughts and anxiety prevented him from doing so. It was as if his body and mind had decided to punish him for his dabbling, tensing and contracting the muscles of his body spasmodically, especially those in his abdomen, determined to give him no respite and no breathing space.

"Can one be so stupid?" he repeated to himself over and over again, "to study so much to end up in a shithole like this!" Only during dinner did he manage to tell his parents that the mental hospital was bad. "But what do you mean ugly? All hospitals are ugly, you'll get used to it!" these were the obvious words of his alarmed mother.

She understood that the woman had no idea what he had seen within the walls of what should have been her ward and, at the same time, she clearly felt the alarm and fears that shook her fragile maternal soul. The son, after so many years away, first to specialise and then to work in a private clinic from which one can be fired at any time, had finally returned to their midst, to the same town, to their home, and this after winning a public competition, which allowed him to be permanently settled for life; so that he could now marry, have children and start a family without any worries. Both mother and father, looking at Andrea's closed and distraught face and noticing from his manner an impending decision, warned that all their plans risked vanishing into thin air: mere castles in the air built by apprehensive parents. There was the risk of having achieved nothing:

no child near; no marriage; no grandchildren to pamper; nothing at all. Their fate as lonely parents, with a distant son, living in an immense city, seemed sealed.

The night brought no comfort to Andrea. Thoughts chased each other like bolted horses in a narrow country lane running, kicking and attacking anything in their path.

Like flashes, the pretty nurses of the university ward appeared before his eyes, always ready to assist him as soon as they saw that he approached a patient, but also always willing to go out for a walk in the streets and squares of the eternal city. He saw the nurses he had left behind, always on the lookout for a smile and a word of support and, in contrast to them, the crude, stocky head nurse of the ward assigned to him who had no problem walking around without a gown or uniform that could make him recognisable as such, while he forced his way in, pushing this or that patient, despite his and the director's presence. The contrast was too much to even begin any confrontation. Mentally, he also cursed that sort of fat and claudicant director who mocked his prowess in order to saddle him with that horrendous ward, the worst, certainly impossible to manage.

It was difficult for him to sleep, it was difficult for him to even rest. Only during the morning, as the light began to filter through the lowered shutter, among the thousands of images that came to his eyes was that of that man who, quietly, as if he were at home, was putting up and arranging the white bedspreads, while a few metres away from him stood hundreds of bunk beds, peeling and filthy, only partly covered by those ridiculous pieces of foam rubber, resting on top of the rusty nets. That image intrigued and embarrassed him: "Who was that man? What was he doing in a place like that? And above all, how did he keep his little dormitory clean and tidy?"

After the alarm clock had uselessly done its duty with the ritual tune, as he tried to get up, following a sleepless night, he was reminded of his first traumatic contact with the world of psychic disorder or as his friends would say 'with the world of the insane'.

He saw that red, dishevelled being flailing convulsively in the bed of that small room in which he had been placed so as not to disturb the other patients.

Who knows why in his mind it was the colour red that prevailed over all that incredible scene. The red of the young woman's hair fanning out and closing with the convulsive movements of her head as it hit the pillow smeared with tears and saliva; the red of her armpits and pubic hair as she jerked as if in the throes of an orgasm; the dark red of her red face as she screamed and cursed; the red of her skin from which anger and fear oozed; the red of her eyes locked on terrifying images, which she was sure were fuelled and accentuated by those tight clamps that kept her nailed to the bars of her bed, shiny, spotlessly clean, yet frighteningly castrating her need to escape from who knows what horrific enemies.

In contrast to this red colour was the immaculate white of the walls of the room and the gowns of the crucifixes, nurses and doctors, all around that bed. Andrea still recalled with amazement and bewilderment their apparent calmness and composure, but also their detachment and self-control, as they witnessed that scene from the Sabbath of Hell.

There was no alarm in their faces as they consulted each other on what to do, no tension in their lips as they discussed the case, no trembling in their hands as they flipped through the pages of the patient's file or tried to put back the rickety bed, which, propelled by the woman's convulsive jerks, moved around the room as if it had a life of its own, banging sometimes on a wall, sometimes on a pillar. He saw

no tension in the attentive and professionally detached gaze. Nor did he see if anyone was trying to cover up that young body exposed naked to the gaze of all the clinic staff, using the white sheet that had slipped to the floor. Perhaps they knew, with granitic professional certainty, that it would have been an absolutely useless gesture, in that situation of severe psychomotor agitation, to attempt to cover that woman.

The only one upset seemed to be him, the young doctor Andrea, who had chosen, who knows why, to leave the city where he had just graduated in medicine, to go and specialise in the most famous and prestigious Italian university: that of Rome. He was shocked at the sight of that patient flailing about, naked, shouting and swearing, but he was equally bewildered by the behaviour of his elderly and surely illustrious colleagues, who did not even try to calm that woman down with words or some affectionate gesture.

It was only after they had left the room that the head nurse managed to draw the attention of Professor Ferlisi, the head of the department, to the intruder who was following them, with the puzzled and bewildered air of the young neophyte, still without a lab coat, in a blue shirt and grey trousers, who had asked to confer with him.

"Who are you? What do you want?" the professor abruptly apostrophised her.

"I am a newly graduated doctor, I asked the director to attend your neuropsychiatric clinic as a volunteer and he sent me to your department to talk to you and make myself available to you".

"Aren't you even specialised?"

"No, but I would like to enrol in your specialisation course"

"I get it, you're a rookie, nice purchase! Follow me along with the others, don't take any initiatives and don't do or say anything to the patients without my permission"

"Certainly, thank you.

And then, turning to the head nurse, almost angrily towards the woman in psychomotor agitation, he ordered: "For this girl we double the dosage of the therapy we have started. And now let's go to the other patients."

'The tour', as it was called, had not provided the young doctor with any particular surprises. The women, mostly young, each waited in their neat and tidy beds for the medical team, after scrutinising the pages of the file rather than their eyes or their words, to decide on the most suitable therapy for them: increasing or decreasing the dosage of psychotropic drugs, starting electroshock sessions, taking some particular test.

He sensed from their faces that some wished and hoped for discharge, others feared it more than anything, not wanting to return to their homes and families. Not a piece of clothing, a sheet of paper or a newspaper on the bedside tables, where instead only small bottles of water, all of the same brand and all placed in the same right-hand corner, with a white plastic cup on top, towered. Above the perfectly tidy and clean beds, the only different objects that gave a note of colour were the patients' dressing gowns, charmingly folded and all richly decorated with lace, ornaments, in different colours and shapes.

At the end of the tour, a young and attractive crucifix pupil, noticing Andrea's bewildered or perhaps clearly frightened face, accompanied him to the doctors' room, offering him, with a winking smile, the key to the locker where he could put his gown and effects: "This locker where you can put all your things is for you. Best wishes!"

"Wishes of what?" The image that dominated her eyes was certainly not the smiling and friendly one of the young pupil, nor that of the other women each lying in their own neat and clean bed, awaiting Professor Ferlisi's visit. The

one that dominated and overshadowed all the others was the red image in the last small room from which still, though muffled by distance, came screams, curses, threats, profanities and swear words, directed at imaginary enemies, born from the mind clouded by that woman's delusions and hallucinations.

Imprecations, screams and curses, sometimes muttered, other times shouted at the top of his voice even towards the ward staff, perceived as accomplices of his persecutors, as if the last strenuous defence of his life was at stake, which he felt was seriously threatened. At other times it was the sombre sound of his bedside banging on the walls of the room that upset the young doctor's fragile equilibrium even more.

He reflected on his more than likely mistake in his choice of specialisation. His father, proud of his son who was going to specialise at Italy's most prestigious university, had handed him a white envelope with money inside for all the necessities of a month, but he already thought he would spend it in a week, enjoying the sights of that beautiful city, and then return home and choose another specialisation. He did not want to deal with patients like that red-haired woman in the small room a second time

After three days during which he had kept well away from the offending room, he rang the ward door and saw her smiling and serene in front of him. "Good morning, have a seat" were the woman's only words of welcome.

That, he was later certain, was the trigger for his decision to stay at that university and then specialise in neuropsychiatry. The insane, even the very serious ones, like that red-haired woman, could be cured and they could even do it quickly. A lot could be done for their mental health and he would do it.

III

The tub

After a few days, even though it was evening, the young doctor was still in the doctor's office rummaging through old medical records. 'Dangerous to oneself and to others'; this was the classic, short sentence with which the diagnosis made by the doctors in the various cities of origin of the patients who had decided for the internment of those thousands of people inside the psychiatric hospital ended.

As he read through the various diagnoses that always ended with this sibylline phrase, the faces of those people imprinted in the time-faded photos seemed to be watching him, almost wondering what he was like and what he had come to do there.

Dangerous to himself and others' was that young swarthy man smiling and perhaps wondering why he was in that picture. 'Dangerous to self and others' was that blind man who kept his eyes turned upwards and his hands on his chest as if to protect himself. "Dangerous to self and others" was also that blond and very pretty child sullenly looking at the camera.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not initially notice the strange noise coming from the ward. It was as if something very heavy was rolling and crawling on the floor. There were then dark thuds that stopped for a few seconds, only to reappear immediately afterwards. He did not understand what could be causing them or where they could be coming from.

One necessarily had to get up to go and check. The corridors close to the source of those noises, lit by the white neon lamps overhead, were completely empty of nursing staff, a sign that the patients had all been put to bed and the

nurses had retired to their rooms to have dinner. Again that sound of something being dragged and then like something rolling.

Strange that no one had bothered and gone to check! The first long corridor to his left, occupied by bunk beds, which he had walked through, turned at right angles.

"Is it possible that someone is still up? But to do what?" he asked himself.

As he approached the room where he had seen that patient making the beds, the noise became more intense.

"What was going on?"

He was about to raise the alarm, calling loudly for the nurses when, as he approached the door of that dormitory, he was almost run over by something round, huge, rolling lopsidedly, propelled by at least five young in-patients who appeared strangely smiling and satisfied, despite the fact that they were already tired from the considerable fatigue they had endured.

He thus discovered that the noise came from a large, rustic tub, in reality a large barrel cut in half, roughly pushed, so that at times it would roll unbalanced for a few metres, at others it would get stuck or crash somewhere: now to the right, now to the left, to the great disappointment of those who were pushing it, trying with difficulty to steer it in the right direction.

Behind it, shouting loudly, encouraging the volunteers on duty, who were trying their best in their pushing and pulling efforts, were a flock of mostly young patients, whom he recognised as being the same ones who were holding each other like frightened birds at the end of their stay, but who on this occasion not only did not appear afraid at all, but were clearly enthusiastic about what they were doing and how their work or play was being carried out. Once again the tub crashed with great clatter first into a wall and imme-

diately afterwards into a door, scratching and denting it somewhat.

However, the various traverses they encountered along the way did not seem to deter the strange little group at all; on the contrary, they all seemed clearly amused by the great noise they were making, so much so that they clapped their hands whenever a sudden obstacle - a bed, a chair, a door - blocked or slowed them down.

In order to understand what was going on, but also to ask for an explanation of this strange gathering, Andrew, assuming an authoritative tone, asked in a loud voice what they were doing and where they thought they were going with that immense tub, receiving only broad smiles and uncertain indications of an undefined place that must have been far beyond the corridor they were in at the time. Still insisting, he only received a dumbfounded look, as if to say: "Can it be that you are so dumb that you don't understand?"

Annoyed, perplexed and very angry at the unresponsive and unconscious nurses who still didn't deign to intervene, he couldn't do anything but stand in line with the others, praying in his heart that someone wouldn't get hurt too badly.

It was only when they rounded the last corner of a subsequent corridor that Andrea understood, or rather seemed to understand, what the destination of that immense tub was: the toilets. In these rooms, while the water from the torn or malfunctioning pipes came out and splashed from all sides, the tub was finally placed, with a long ovation, under the showerhead of one of the two still intact showers, from which a jet of lukewarm water came out.

Despite the commotion the group had caused, still none of the nurses had deigned to intervene. Also absent was the strange individual who prepared the beds and who seemed to be their leader.

The feat in which the whole group had collaborated, some pushing, some just shouting to encourage others, did not seem to have ended there. Helped by the others, in a confused and clumsy manner, four of the patients at the end of the line, who had only participated virtually in the operation, began to undress completely, waving their arms in coldness or perhaps embarrassment, while those in front, who were apparently in charge of the operation, very seriously and with great composure lifted them by weight and slipped them one by one into the tub.

The shouts of joy and incitement increased in pitch as all four were somehow placed in the large vessel. Standing upright, to maintain their precarious balance, they held each other forming a circle, while their backs and bottoms were shamefully turned to their companions around them

At this point each of those present felt obliged to participate in washing their companions. Holding in one hand a piece of yellowish cloth, like a sponge, and in the other a few flakes of soap, they all undertook to scrub the shoulders, buttocks and backs of their four companions who, in turn, were enjoying themselves as much as or more than them, being caressed, groped and scrubbed.

Andrea was increasingly amazed and perplexed. Every now and then someone in the group would turn their gaze on him, not quite sure whether to check his reaction or to invite him to participate in that game or cleaning operation that was. Andrea didn't really seem in a position to share their enthusiasm and joy.

Apart from the risk of an accidental fall on that floor, made slippery by the soapy water, the sight of those naked bodies that everyone enjoyed touching as a game, without feeling any embarrassment, did not seem to him at all appropriate to a place of care. He was therefore distinctly inclined to put an end to or at least put in order that filthy way

of washing. However, every time he tried to intervene with gentleness but also with determination, he was systematically turned away, as if judged incapable of understanding what was going on, or deemed inadequate to operate well

When the first four were well washed and groomed, after a final round in the tub, which predictably splashed more water on top of the already abundant water on the ground, they were helped down.

Drying and dressing was a much easier task. The doctor noticed that those in charge of this task were using a sheet full of rips and holes to dry their comrades, while, to complete the task, they had placed on two chairs, in bulk, two piles of apparently clean clothes. Of these, one consisted of a pile of blue trousers of rough cotton, the other of jackets, of the same colour

As far as Andrea could understand, the choice of clothing by the workers did not follow any rules, as the four of them and those who followed afterwards were all dressed in a pair of trousers and a jacket, without taking into account the size of each one. Therefore, at the end of the operation, some were forced to hold up their oversized trousers with one hand, to prevent them from slipping on the floor, while others had to tighten their unbuttoned trousers at the front, to prevent them from opening. In the end, it seemed that everyone could only use their right hand, while their left hand, which was busy holding up or tightening the trousers, seemed to be missing

Andrea's anger and disdain towards the nurses grew as the operations came to an end. Could it be that still no one showed up? Could it be that those poor people were left alone to wash and dress themselves? Was it possible that they had no shirt or vest to wear under their jackets and pants under their trousers? And was it ever conceivable that there was no one able to choose clothes for each of them, at least

close to their size? All these operations were the specific responsibility of nurses. What kind of hospital was that? And what kind of careless, unconscious staff was it? The next day he would have groomed them properly, by golly!

The conclusion of the operation could not have been more disastrous. The four or five sturdiest of the group did nothing more than empty the dirty water into the middle of the toilets, which was added to the other water coming out of the various broken pipes, as well as the faeces and urine scattered everywhere on the floor but also on the walls

The operation of getting the tub back into the room by that group of rowdies seemed to happen faster to him. Maybe the synchrony of the volunteers pushing or rolling the tub had improved, or maybe everyone seemed to have had enough fun and wanted, at this point, tired but happy and satisfied, to go to sleep in their beds

Only on the way back did he see the strange character he had seen the day before appear, as if from nowhere. He only glanced at his doctor in passing, while very calmly and with a beautiful smile on his face he turned to his companions to ask them, in a whisper, for information.

Some of the bystanders answered him with a grunt and a few mangled words, others, unable to do any better, used eloquent gestures to tell how the events had unfolded. The sequel was brief: the tub was left in a corner of the ward and everyone lay down on their beds with all the clothes they had on. Therefore, while the coldest ones got under the sheets, the others lay down directly on the overcoat. The chatter continued for a few minutes and then nothing more. Everyone slept peacefully like little angels.

IV

In the morning

After what he had witnessed, going home to sleep also seemed an impossible task. He could never have imagined behaviour similar to what he had witnessed. He thought about giving the nurses a good scolding the next morning and, at the same time, he was really curious as to how they would defend themselves.

He could certainly not fire them, as he was only a rookie assistant, but he would certainly report to the director on what was going on in that department, so as to force him to take appropriate action. There was no doubt that he was in a 'madhouse', but that in no way justified certain behaviour and absences.

The next morning, right on time, he presented himself at the ward. He had forced himself to operate as calmly as possible, but his voice, with which he asked for the head nurse who opened the solid iron door for him, was still trembling with suppressed anger. He told the chief nurse, in great detail, everything he had witnessed the night before, noting the absence of the staff, whose main duty should have been to assist and help the disabled patients with their cleaning.

The man, still dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt, looked at him with respect, but also with benevolent understanding, as if to say: "I understand and justify you because you do not know these places, but you will soon learn to your cost and then you will not make such stupid speeches", he answered him saying: "You know, doctor, for some years now, that sick man you met, Franco, has been keeping a group of morons with him, whom he takes care of himself, washing them, feeding them, putting them to bed. The direc-

tor knows about it and has recommended that we let him do it.' Then he added: "On the other hand, we nurses are always few and we cannot keep up with all the sick.

Taken aback by the mention to the director that he knew everything, indeed he himself had consented to that kind of conduct, he did not know what to reply except: "Please call this man, so I can talk to him and also give me his medical records.

Flipping through it, he immediately noticed that there was something strange. In beautiful calligraphy, right on the cover it said: Amin Dali, but inside was a photo of a much younger man, who was undoubtedly this Franco.

"But then his name is not Franco?" "No, doctor, he calls himself that, but his real name is the one written on the chart; he is not even Italian, he is Egyptian. He is supposed to suffer from epileptic seizures, but since I have been in this ward, he has never had any, and I assure you that he does not take any treatment" the head nurse pointed out to him.

Andrea's bewilderment and confusion increased more and more. A group of sick people is completely in the care of a stranger, who goes by a different name from his real name; this man is supposed to suffer from epilepsy, but he never has any seizures, despite the fact that he does not take any specific therapy. One is astounded. "But why does he do this? Who makes him take care of these ... how many are there? Sixteen patients" "We don't know," replied the nurse, "some say he does it to take sexual advantage of the little ones."

"What?" shouted Andrea at this point, jumping up and punching the table. "Is there also this risk? Are you all crazy in this place? You keep a man who calls himself something other than his real name; he's supposed to be epileptic but never has a seizure; you entrust sixteen sick people to this

man and there's also the possibility that he will sexually abuse them?' 'I've never seen such a thing. However I will get to the bottom of this. Call me this Franco, please.'

While waiting for the strange individual to come, Andrea began to check the data in the file. The man had been hospitalised nine years earlier. In the admission certificate, handwritten by a doctor he did not know, was his real name, 'Amin Dali' and the diagnosis: 'Suffering from epilepsy and psychomotor agitation' with the usual corollary: 'Being dangerous to himself and others, admission to the psychiatric hospital is required'. There was only an electroencephalogram taken on his admission to hospital, from which there were only the very general and unclear notes of 'Mild bioelectric alterations'.

In the psychic examination, the patient was described as a calm, reliable, good worker, with no major mental disorders, and then, punctually, at the beginning of each year, the usual sentence: 'Physical and psychic condition unchanged'.

When this strange individual appeared before him, he immediately noticed the square face, the high and broad forehead, the thick eyebrows and the coal-black eyes and hair, although the skin was only slightly darker than that of an average Sicilian. He also noticed that, although he was not fat, he possessed a robust and strong build, but above all, he once again observed that smile on his face, which never seemed to leave him.

Standing before him, he exuded the serenity, confidence and reliability noted nine years earlier by his colleague who had admitted him to the hospital. Characteristics that the latter had diligently noted. So much for "psychomotor agitation!"

He decided, therefore, to avoid, at least for the time being, mentioning the suspicions of sexual abuse of the pa-

tients in his care. He preferred only to ask why he had arranged the patients' toilets in that way. He: "You know doctor, it is not an easy task. I have to wash the children without them catching pneumonia from the cold water and without them getting scalded from the boiling water. So I thought of getting Luigi, the carpenter, to give me a saw and with it I cut an old barrel, partly devoured by moths, that I found in a hospital cellar. I removed the ruined part and built a tub, not so big that it could not be transported, nor so small, for what we needed. We normally keep it in a corner of the room where we sleep and it is used to put the clothes and linen that the nun gives us. Once a week, we roll it to the toilet where we fill it with lukewarm water. The children like this.

He added: "I have to keep the fire burning under the pot, so the others take care of washing, drying and dressing them." The man spoke in fairly good Italian, with only a distinct foreign accent, and the reasoning didn't make a wrinkle, but he kept calling them 'children', when they were not children at all. All of them were definitely teenagers or of age, otherwise they would not have been able to stay in that ward, others were grown men if not clearly elderly. Of course, many of them were mentally deficient, could not speak, behaved 'like children', but why did he use that term for everyone? For Andrea it was a mystery added to the others.

At this point, the next question he asked him was inevitable: "Look, you were hospitalised nine years ago for epilepsy, but you have never had any seizures in the hospital, my colleagues in the past have noted that you do not have any mental disorder that would justify hospitalisation. Why doesn't he ask for discharge and go home? He must have a home!"

Andrea, looking at the face of the man in front of him, still standing, who had turned dark and pensive, losing at least for the moment that strange smile and confidence that

distinguished him, had already guessed the answer: "I have no home, and so I prefer to stay here." "Yeah, stay here, to help the patients or to take advantage of them?" thought the doctor. It was impossible for him to dissolve this dilemma now, but he would do it at the cost of ... Of course, at the cost of giving up leaving that place. 'What an idiot I keep being,' he brooded to himself.

He knew at that moment that he had changed his decision to resign and leave that hospital, but it was not fully clear to him why this change of plan had occurred. To have seen mentally deficient people dragging a tub and taking a bath? To find out what the man who still, motionless, stood before him was hiding? He suspected in his heart that this man was responsible for that change of programme, but he could not guess the real reason

Back home he communicated, with a sad and angry face, his decision to his mother. The latter, noticing in her son the inner turmoil that seemed to gnaw at him as much and more than before, did not know whether to be happy or not. She decided in any case to be generous and altruistic. Please, Andrea" she told him in a faint voice, as when as a child she consoled him for his father's reproaches or bad marks at school, caressing his head resting on her lap, "life is yours, you know that your father and I want you in Messina, but if you do not feel up to it, go back to Rome. We don't want you to sacrifice yourself because of us.' "It's not for you that I'm doing this," replied the son, "I've decided just like that."

To avoid any further discussion he left the house. He felt the need for a long walk to try and relax. As he had done on similar occasions, he needed to immerse himself in nature, to regain the peace and inner balance that seemed lost since he had returned to his city.

In this he was lucky. A few metres from his cottage was the beach, still almost deserted at that time, and then the sea. It was enough to cross the road to get there. The street was lined with cars that drove slowly, almost with the same desire to relax as their drivers who, on the seafront, wanted to enjoy the magnificent panorama of the Strait and Calabria, but also to enjoy the sound of the waves gently crashing on the shore.

Unusually for the habits of his city, the car drivers let him pass the road without accompanying him with their honking horns. Sitting close to the shore, he felt that the sand had already cooled so much that his hands felt damp as they sank into it. This uncomfortable feeling contributed to his even greater anger towards the nurses, the director, himself and, above all, towards that mysterious man in his ward.

"What a hypocrite, that man," he said to himself, "pretending to help those poor wretches in order to take advantage of some of them." Who then? Many of that group were quite young. Certainly younger than Franco who looked to be at least forty; but handsome they were not! The illness and the stay in that institution had left indelible marks on their bodies and faces: many were thin, almost gaunt due to insufficient food; some had clear deformities of the bones and conspicuous scars on their faces and bodies, as a result of who knows what clashes with other patients. So what attraction did he ever find in those people?

Salvatore

At that moment, Franco's thoughts were somehow connected to those of his doctor. However, his emotions were very different as he recalled the meeting he had had with Dr Lo Conte. Although he had realised that the latter had called him to reproach him for the way he handled his 'children', unlike the others who had preceded him, he had

read in his eyes a great deal of determination and a sincere, intense interest in the hospitalised patients.

This pleased and reassured him. However, he feared what the nurses would say about him. He had long been aware of their suspicions and accusations. More than once they had reprimanded him, and even beaten him, for finding him hugging one of his 'children'.

The last time was because of Salvatore. She had met him almost a year before. On his 'file' it was written that he suffered from mental retardation and severe behavioural disorders. The boy did not speak, he could barely say mum, dad, and a few other monosyllables, however, through gestures he was able to communicate his needs very well.

He was only fifteen years old, but already the nurses in the children's ward, where he had been since he was eight, had noticed all the signs of sexual maturity in him, and this had convinced them of the need to request his transfer to some adolescent and adult ward. It had not been difficult to achieve this, as the director did not want to be accused by them or their unions of leaving a sexually mature person with children.

On the other hand, the nurses, exasperated by the abandoned condition of the ward: without effective guidance from the medical staff, which was practically absent, and without any psychologist or other educational and rehabilitation staff, they were waiting for nothing more than his denial, to unload on him all their frustration, which would turn into anger, for a job that was as onerous as it was painful

And so Salvatore, with the approval of the director, had been accompanied in the early afternoon to the 'dirty ward' and entrusted to the nurses. The latter, on receiving him, had done nothing more than open the iron door of the living room and put him in with the others. The following day, the doctor would make some notes on the file

However, they had not foreseen the reaction of the boy who, upon entering the living room, reacted first with anxiety and then with terror at the sight of that degraded humanity. Salvatore, left behind by the nursing staff, looked around in vain for a secluded place to hide, so as to feel a little safer and more secure. Unfortunately, there always seemed to be something or someone who managed to scare him off or chase him away in a bad way, with a scream or a shove.

He was terrified by the large number of sick people, physically much larger than himself. He was frightened by the constant presence of many completely naked people uttering disjointed phrases and moving in a disorderly and convulsive manner. He was horrified by the screams, blood, swearing and curses that seemed to come from everywhere. As he futilely tried to find a place isolated and protected enough, he felt anguish growing within him and this anguish caused him to shake convulsively. Biting his hands, through physical pain, he tried to better control and partly cushion his terror.

He did not understand why he had been taken to that place, which was much uglier, dirtier and smellier than the one he had known for several years. But it was one thought above all that caused a total, albeit momentary, upheaval in his mind: "How would his mother have found him in that unknown place?" In that place there were no chairs, where mothers, fathers and grandfathers would sit when they came to visit their children and grandchildren, just as there were no tables, where they spread out the tablecloths and put the best things imaginable on them.

Giovanna, his mother, who came almost every week to visit him, would place the tablecloth printed with many small roses on the wooden table with the white formica-covered top on this she would place the plate with the still-

warm spaghetti with sauce, which she poured from a plastic holder, but also the meatballs, which he liked so much.

The good things that Mum brought seemed never-ending. From the large wicker basket that she placed beside him, there would also come out, as if by magic, some soft white sandwiches stuffed with mortadella; a slice of cake; oranges or apricots and then, before leaving, she would also slip into his pocket many small sweets of various colours and flavours, all for him.

He could no more do without his mother and the kiss she gave him, her eyes moist with tears, when she arrived and when she left, than he could do without spaghetti, sandwiches, oranges and sweets. Almost unintentionally, along with the tears, there gushed from his throat, clenched like a vise because of the despair that had completely engulfed and shaken him, a high-pitched, lacerating cry that seemed to go on forever.

Perhaps to seek help, or perhaps to ask to be taken back to the place he knew, he also began to bang his fists on the table next to him, ever louder and more violently. For a few minutes, no one noticed him, but then another sick person, perhaps disturbed and annoyed by his loud shouting and banging on the table, began to push him towards the wall, at first softly and then increasingly loudly and violently. He heard, along with his own desperate shouting, the dull sound of his body and head hitting the wall. He remembered nothing else. Enveloped as if by a soft, black veil, he fainted without feeling anything more.

When he awoke, he found himself lying in an unfamiliar bed. The room, not too large, resembled that of the children's ward from which he had come. In order not to be noticed, he tried as far as possible to remain motionless and with his eyes closed. In his sleep he thought back to his mother but also to his father, who unfortunately rarely came to

visit him. Unwittingly, he remembered the crucial days in which his life had totally changed.

Ever since he was three years old, he had known numerous doctors to whom his parents took him for examinations and tests. The doctors would ask him a thousand questions, invite him to play with cubes and cards, but then, turning to Mum and Dad, they would shake their heads with sad eyes and politely ask him to leave the room

For a few minutes he would stay in the company of some young lady, also in a white coat, who would make him laugh and joke, while his parents stayed in the company of the doctors. When Dad and Mum left the room, however, they were always much more frowning and sad than when they entered. He did not understand why. Sometimes Mum would stare at him, as if she wanted to tell him something, and then hug him tightly, crying; at other times, without even looking him in the eye, she would tug him back, as if she had committed a mischief and was angry with him.

After a short time, the torment of kindergarten began. On the day he started attending it, as his mother helped him put on a white, starched pinafore with a blue ribbon, which smelt new, he could not understand why she was particularly affectionate towards him. She seemed to want to eat him up with kisses as she adjusted, as best she could, his stockings, the collar and sleeves of the pinafore and repeated, continuously, to the point of exasperation, a sequence of recommendations: "Salvuccio, please be nice to the teachers, don't hit the other children." "Salvuccio, please do everything the teachers ask you to do." "Salvo, remember, when you have to pee, tell the teacher. Don't pee in your pants." "Salvuccio, I put a napkin, a butter sandwich and an apple in your basket for you to snack on. Eat everything!" "Salvo, do you know you look good in this pinafore? Take care, don't

worry, mummy will run a few little errands and come get you."

But he did not like school. He could not stay for so long without the reassuring and attentive presence of his mother. He felt an emptiness inside, as if his heart were being torn out, every time she gave him trembling, final recommendations, the strongest kisses on his face and forehead. Above all, he hated the yellowish, slightly peeling door of his classroom, which seemed to swallow him up and make him disappear forever!

Whenever this happened he would cry, sometimes softly, almost afraid of being discovered by teachers and classmates as weak as a sissy, but at other times he could not hold back his anger and would shout loudly as tears rolled down his cheeks. When he shouted, he did not want anyone to come near him, and if a child or a teacher politely handed him a toy or a pencil, to distract him, he would throw them at them, bite his hands and try to scratch his face.

After about a month of that martyrdom, his parents no longer took him to that hateful place. Following the advice of various professors who had visited and observed him, they began to consider the possibility of placing him in a psycho-pedagogical medical centre where, they said, they would teach him a thousand things: how to speak, how to undress and dress himself, how to stop peeing on himself, and then who knows, in the future, perhaps they would also be able to teach him to read and write, at least his name.

In short, the various specialists he consulted were all in agreement that this place would serve to stimulate his intellectual capacities so as to help him become greater and more mature in everything. This facility was, they said, the right place for him.

A few months passed before he made up his mind. He was happy to no longer go to school and stay at home with his mother, his younger brother and all his toys. In the evenings, however, something troubled him. He could hear, as he curled up in his cot, clutching his teddy bear tightly to ward off bad dreams, that his parents were arguing, raising their voices as they talked about him. The phrases they repeated most often were: "What are we going to do?" "We can't pretend nothing is happening!" "We have to do something!"

He did not understand the meaning of those phrases, although he was sure they referred to him. But what more did his parents have to do? He was serene and happy with them. His mum, dad and grandparents were loving and kind, seemed to understand him in everything and made him feel secure. He did not need anything else. What they gave him was more than enough to make him feel good. And then there was his little brother to make him laugh, to play with, and there were the toy cars and building blocks to play with. Surely he had everything he needed!

However, according to the doctors, these things were not enough, he had to do many exercises to get better and these exercises could only be done in that place they called the 'Centre'.

He did not understand why his people were bickering. If that place was so useful, he would have attended it with pleasure! Even when talking to his grandparents and uncles, when the word 'Centre' was whispered, it provoked new clashes and heated arguments every time. One grandfather against the other, Dad against Mum. Even the uncles wanted to have their say and everyone was squabbling. Salvatore did not understand, but waited confidently. He was certain that they would make the best choice, because he knew that everyone, each in his own way, loved him dearly.

The days and months passed. Salvatore still remembered that period as one of the happiest in his life. Apart from the heated discussions in the evenings between his loved ones, everything seemed to be going well. He now understood much better the speeches the grown-ups made, and the words he could pronounce had also increased, to the great joy of his mother and father and grandparents, who repeated to everyone, their eyes gleaming with joy, every new word he could pronounce, as if each one was a great achievement. He also no longer peed in bed, and this too was hailed by all as a great, memorable achievement

However, the doctors to whom mum and dad reported their son's improvements were not at all enthusiastic about this; they shook their heads, as if to say that it was difficult to make certain parents understand and accept what was really useful and necessary for their children. Then, those men in white, with an attitude always serious and composed, kept repeating that he would acquire much more in a medical psycho-pedagogical centre, where he would have the support of many specialists: psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, psychomotricists, etc.

The list of specialists who were supposed to take care of Salvatore was long, but this did not seem to convince his parents and other relatives who, perplexed, wavered until the day the painful decision was made: "Let's put him in this blessed centre," they heard them say, almost in unison.

The paperwork involved was longer and more difficult than his family had imagined. It seemed that every parent who had a problem child at home yearned to enrol him in one of these precious services. Some sought the support of some monsignor known to the parish priest, some asked a 'friendly' politician always looking for votes for this special favour, and others preferred to ask for help even from some 'man of honour', present in their territory, who would lend

themselves to favouring anyone who asked for their intervention, in order to demonstrate their power.

This difficulty in being accepted in a psychopedagogical medical centre seemed to give reason to those who, like his father and paternal grandparents, were most in favour of this decision. Salvatore often heard them repeat that: "If so many parents are trying hard to place their child in those centres, they must be really useful and valuable for all children with similar problems." At that time, another phrase they repeated among themselves and with all those, friends and neighbours, with whom they spoke, as if to obtain from each of them an acceptance and support for the decision they had made, was: "What we are doing will certainly be good for Salvuccio."

It was summer when the long-awaited day arrived. He, like the others, was excited about this event. He was repeating to himself what everyone was confidently saying: "He would speak beautifully, perhaps better than his little brother with whom everyone was making comparisons; he would dress himself, so that his mother would no longer puff impatiently every morning; and maybe he would even learn to read and write!

He did not understand, however, why his mother had been filling a large valise with all his things for several days, but he was happy about it. When he had gone to kindergarten, Mama Giovanna had only put a butter sandwich, a napkin, an apple and Pippi, the teddy bear he was fond of, inside the basket. Instead, luckily, this time, Mummy did not finish putting all his clothes, jackets, knickers, T-shirts and also many of his toys and puppets into the basket. Perhaps she had realised that he was happier if he could have her things. "Good mommy!" she thought.

However, the woman's face betrayed the torment she was experiencing. "How come she makes this dark face, if

this place is so important and precious to her child whom she loves so much?" thought Salvatore.

He was amazed by another oddity: in Dad's car, not only his parents but also his grandparents and Aunt Nannina wanted to get into it to accompany him, even though they were choking to death. They, too, were not finished cuddling and smooching him on the way.

He discovered that this Centre, which everyone was talking about, was in a place outside the city. For him, who loved nature, flowers and plants, this was an added bonus on top of all the others. He was convinced that the place would certainly be more beautiful than the anonymous and sad place in his kindergarten, which he hoped to have abandoned for good. Dad had to look at the map of the area several times to find out where to go and where to turn.

Finally they entered a small, unpaved road that ran through a pine forest from which a delicious perfume emanated. After passing through a large and beautiful solid iron gate, the child realised that the Centre was right in the middle of a grove of immense trees: pines, firs and eucalyptus trees alternated and stretched as far as the eye could see.

Along the large entrance avenue to both the right and left, marble statues and busts were placed on columns, which seemed to welcome visitors. Some were clearly copies of ancient statues, the busts on the other hand portrayed certainly important people, who seemed to scrutinise and watch with their attentive eyes every visitor who entered the park. Perhaps they represented the former owners of the villa or the illustrious doctors who had worked there.

Right next to the house, around and on either side of a large fountain, stood several richly flowered flower beds that made the place enchanting and magical. Added to this was the mass of purplish-red flowers of an immense bougainvillea climbing up and around a large solid wooden

doorway. The flowering shoots of the rich creeper, reaching up to the first floor, framed a large balcony and then cascaded down, like a purple waterfall, almost to the front door.

This truly large and majestic building was much more beautiful than the anonymous flat block where the child lived. Even the other windows were as if framed by the greenery and dazzling colours of other creepers, especially wisteria, which softened and decorated every opening with their foliage and flowers descending in clusters. The sight of this princely villa and so many plants and flowers, many of which were unknown to him, heartened him even more.

The child was also pleasantly surprised and laughed heartily when his dad, after fruitlessly searching for the electric bell, had to use a large iron clapper, in the shape of a lion's head, to get it to open. It made a loud and majestic noise, just as loud and majestic was the whole place, which looked a bit like the drawing of the fairy castle in the big book that Mama Jeanne read to him every evening.

A girl came to open the door, whom he described inwardly as 'very sweet and very gracious' and who, after warmly greeting the adults with a bow of her head, took him in her arms, cuddling him and pampering him with a thousand nice nicknames.

"We have been expecting you," he said, "I am Dr Mary Giuffrida. You can take a seat in the director's room. As she said these words she pointed to the guests at one of the majestic, massive doors that stood right next to the entrance."

"This is our Salvuccio. Uh, how big you are. You're almost bigger than daddy!

And then placing it on the ground: "Come, do you want to run with me to go and play?"

Salvatore, enchanted by this girl who seemed to envelop him in tenderness, warmth and joy, did not let himself

be repeated twice and ran with her down the wide, immense corridor with its pink marble floor and walls, over which large doors with richly decorated wooden jambs opened.

As the echoes of her voice and her little shoes echoed across the floor, at the end of this long ride Mary led Salvo into a room in which all the toys in the world seemed to have been collected: there were constructions of all sizes: from small ones to large ones, the latter to be used with both hands. In addition, perfectly functioning toy cars, trucks and bulldozers were resting in plain sight on the massive wooden shelves; but also a few rifles, many balls, puppets and many dolls.

All these games only filled his heart with enthusiasm and heightened his confidence in that enchanted place. So he sat down on the ground and began to play with himself. Before long, however, looking shyly at her from behind, he invited that enchanting young lady to join in his games.

Given the size and sumptuousness of the centre's premises, the director's office, into which Salvatore's parents were admitted by a diligent and gracious secretary, was no less impressive. This was a large rectangular room which, at first glance, was more reminiscent of a small museum room than a doctor's office. In it, small vases and other Greek and Roman artefacts were gathered on alabaster columns at the sides, while paintings from various eras and ancient parchments made a fine display on the walls.

Both the paintings and the scrolls and other works of art seemed to welcome and guide the guests towards a huge dark mahogany desk at the end of the room. This desk astonished the guests as it was not only exquisitely decorated, but also had small columns at the four corners, while some cherubs and golden angels harmoniously embraced in the centre. A large Persian carpet covered much of the floor and served to harmonise the whole.

Salvatore's parents, dazzled by so much splendour, shyly and awkwardly approached the man who sat in a sumptuous armchair upholstered in dark leather, surmounted by numerous scrolls hanging on the wall. These attested, for those who still had any doubts, to the great and profound scientific culture of the man sitting in that armchair.

The director greeted them with a warm smile: "Please take a seat. The secretary told me that you are the parents of that child who was so highly recommended to me by Mr Lamberti. My team will analyse and study his case, doing everything humanly possible to improve his intellectual condition, which they tell me is very deficient, and also his behavioural problems, which unfortunately are often associated with intellectual deficits. I recommend to you, however, to stick to the rules of our centre. Keep in mind that visits are only allowed once a week, if possible on Sundays, and only for no more than one hour. If you really want, you can take your child home for a fortnight during the summer period. In the event that you have difficulty keeping him or her and managing him or her well at home, the child can stay here with us and continue to receive the most important and basic therapies for his or her harmonious development, even in the summer.'

Salvatore's father interrupted him only to say: "But can you assure us that you will have improvements?"

"We don't guarantee anything," replied the director somewhat annoyed, "but believe me, improvements will be there, as long as you are not too nagging and lax."

The interview was very brief. It seemed that the director already knew everything about Salvatore's past and had foreseen everything for his sake

When, after taking leave of the director, the parents entered the playroom to say goodbye to their son, seeing him enjoying himself, perfectly at ease, in the company of

Dr Mary, they breathed a sigh of relief that dispelled any further doubts about their troubled decision. Even the child, thanks to the immediate emotional bond he had established with the young pedagogue, seemed to have accepted that grandiose, splendid institution very well.

It was only during lunchtime that little Salvuccio had any misgivings, when he was introduced by the young pedagogue into a room where there were also many other children with various pathologies, some certainly more serious than his own. Hearing some crying loudly, others shouting, scolded by the assistants as they were being fed, a little frightened he clung even closer to what he now considered his friend, jumping on her lap. From time to time he asked about his mum and dad, but the sweet words and kisses Mary gave him in abundance managed to reassure him.

Salvatore had forced himself to banish all fears from his soul, as he had realised that his parents would love and appreciate him more if he gained more independence and skills. However, it was very difficult for him to face his fears during the night, after his friend Mary had taken leave of him.

The girl had told him she was going home, but reassured him that she would return the next day when he woke up. Another woman who did not look at all like Mary had taken her place: fat, old and always angry, even before switching off the lights in the dormitory, she had scolded, with her gnarled hands at her sides, some crying children, threatening to beat them up if they disturbed her during the night with their shrieks

He noticed that one of them, who must have been, by the way, older than him, moved with difficulty and in a strange, jerky manner. This child's face also seemed to deform into an ugly grimace when he tried to speak, but failed. Both during the first evening and afterwards, that ugly, fat

woman, when chatting with some of her other colleagues, referred to him as 'that new retard'. Could it be that she did not know his name? He offered to tell her his name.

Luckily he slept most of the night. He was awakened, as he expected, by the kiss of his friend Mary, who took to cuddling and joking with him, tickling his neck and tummy as he laughed ecstatically, thinking in his heart that not even his mummy and daddy played so much and so well with him.

"Today, Salvuccio, if you want, we will go and play in the garden," she promised him as he, who was struggling to wake up at such an early hour, clung to her neck. After breakfast he kept his promise.

Running between the flowerbeds in that flowery park, playing with the girl who lingered to be caught by her good-smelling skirt, was a wonderful feeling that he often, even in later years, liked to remember when he wanted to chase away the too sad and painful emotions.

Only after playing chase did they start, sometimes alone, sometimes together with some other children, what they called 'the therapies'. Some were terribly boring, others were fun. It was easy for him to realise that the most fun therapies were the ones carried out with the nicest therapists, while on the contrary, the most boring ones were carried out by the most unfriendly and obnoxious people, who huffed and looked at their watches all the time.

His mother, father and grandparents did not come to see him until three days later. Seeing him calm and not very eager to go home and hearing from the director that he had adapted wonderfully to the environment, they were even more reassured.

For Salvatore, the weeks passed fairly peacefully, except for the nights when Mrs Nina, the nurse he had inwardly referred to as 'the fat, mean one', was on duty. Fortunately

ly, it was a small, ugly interlude, abundantly compensated for by the affection his friend Mary gave her in abundance.

Mary

Maria Chiara: this was the real name of the doctor, who had gladly accepted to be called Mary by her friends and colleagues. She had just graduated in pedagogy when she started working at that psycho-pedagogical medical centre outside the city. Her father, a well-known lawyer at the Messina Bar, had accepted neither that type of study nor that job well.

His one and only beautiful daughter could have quietly and dignifiedly used her lively and alert mind for something much more interesting and dignified, such as lawyering or the judiciary, rather than dealing with retarded, deformed or otherwise 'seriously brain-damaged' children, as he often called them. He judged his daughter's work as sad, ugly and perhaps even dangerous, since he had to conduct it together with brats of various ages whom he, in his imagination, saw as 'deformed, aggressive and violent little monsters' ready to harm his little girl.

His disappointment was great, but also his bewilderment at the inability of young people to understand and then choose the activity best suited to their possibilities and social status. He hoped that at least he would be able to carry out his activity in a professional and dignified manner in his own private facility and not in a centre dependent on others.

Among other things, he knew of that centre where his daughter had found work and doubted a lot about the moral and professional correctness of those who ran it. "But unfortunately," he said to himself, "young people today think and act without any criteria."

In spite of her father's disappointment, Mary loved her job, especially because it allowed her to be close to defenceless puppies like the last one to arrive: Salvuccio. What

would become of them and how would they cope with life, far from the family, swallowed up by the rigid rules of the institution, without someone who could understand and listen to them?

When she thought of this last child, her heart warmed with tenderness and beat faster than ever before. She was as if in love with this little one: she immensely liked his beautiful, bewildered but always attentive eyes to the world around him, loved his face framed by rich, curly hair of a very light brown.

Salvatore's constant desire for play and cuddles and his enthusiasm for every new discovery had, without her realising it and much more than she could ever have expected, stimulated her dormant maternal instinct. That child's face and eyes had been for her like the warm breath of spring creeping through the countryside, among the bare branches of the trees, still full of the dampness and squalor of winter, to deliver to each plant and shrub, still wrapped in sleep, its sweet, warm message, so as to urge them on to renewed vigour.

The risk, she knew, was to get caught up in this instinct and allow her heart to give in to a particular feeling and bond. She feared letting herself give in to an affection that would lead her to neglect or underestimate her professional commitments to the other guests at the centre. That is why, with great effort, she tried to give each child the same attention as Salvatore. However, he was aware that he did not fully succeed. She knew that her eyes and arms, when Salvuccio was with her, often betrayed her.

Her colleagues and other staff at the centre had also become aware of this disturbance. Especially the older ones had started to make allusions to this special bond of hers. At a later stage, the allusions had turned into explicit, clear, acid accusations of favouring, who knows why, the latest

child. Accusations to which he tried to respond by modifying his behaviour as much as possible.

Salvatore, unaware of this chatter, was only aware of his friend's constant mood swings. At times she was very affectionate with him, while at other times she seemed to want to push him away even physically, as if trying to escape his friendship and his insatiable desire for hugs and kisses.

It was autumn and already the flowers in the flower beds had become scarcer, while even the bougainvillea had almost lost all of them, creating a large purplish-red carpet on the ground, when the director called her "for important communications", as the secretary told her:

Have a seat, Doctor. Were you working? I am sorry to have disturbed you. In the meantime, I must compliment you on how you devote yourself to our children. I know that you are very well liked by all of them. Especially I've been told about your special relationship with that new little retard, what's his name?"

Salvatore Sorrenti" suggested the doctor.

"Yeah, little Sorrenti," continued the director. And then with some embarrassment: "Unfortunately I have to give you bad news: for economic reasons we are forced to deprive ourselves of your collaboration. The fees the province pays us are getting smaller and smaller, and we can no longer afford the necessary expenses. However, I am sure that you, with your excellent human and professional qualities, will have no difficulty in finding new employment. In any case, should the economic situation change, we will give you due consideration.

She was fired. She understood this immediately and accepted it. It was more difficult to accept what this dismissal meant for her, not in financial terms, as her parents would not let her lack anything, but in emotional and affec-

tive terms. She felt that leaving that place would be a disaster for her and the children she cared for.

With each one of them she had established a solid and important emotional relationship: she knew every wrinkle of their souls, certainly more than their parents who, by visiting them as a rule no more than once a week and for only an hour, had gradually but inexorably lost much of their children's intimate life. Intimate lives that they, on the other hand, had increasingly intertwined with her. Abandoning them at that time was painful for her but would certainly have been a calamity for the little ones in her care.

He could not help but express these misgivings.

"Excuse me, director, but how will the children I look after do? And Salvuccio, who has only been here a few months?"

"Don't worry about that. The children you looked after will be distributed to your two other colleagues, who will look after them with the same care and attention you have given them so far. Little Sorrenti, your protégé, will also benefit by bonding with other figures, as he will be able to expand his psychological and emotional space,' the director replied dryly.

He realised that there was nothing more to add except: "Good morning."

Saying goodbye to the director was certainly easier than having to say goodbye to what he called 'his children'.

He did not know when and how to do it. She didn't want to leave them crying, as she surely would have done at that moment. Since she still had a few days before she was forced to leave, she thought of organising a rich, pleasant little party for them. With smiling eyes but a torn soul, she communicated this decision to the whole group of younger children she was looking after.

They were happy about this, also because she had glossed over her dismissal. The little big lie she had told them was that she had to attend a course so that she would become better, so she would come to the centre a little less, but that they would continue to see each other and be together anyway.

To ensure that 'Mary's big party', as the children were already calling it, went off without a hitch, every little one worked hard. Cutting and gluing the coloured tissue paper to make the decorations were the tasks to which they devoted the most time, while the kitchen staff and cooks provided the cakes and other goodies.

Finally the day of Mary's 'big party' arrived. Everything was ready. The colourful garlands had been spread high up, from one wall to the other in the playroom. On a banner placed on the wall opposite the door were greetings and good wishes for Mary. Under the garlands, right in the middle of the room, two small tables had been set up for food. A small amplifier with many records, placed on the side of the door, had the task of adding to the party atmosphere.

Greetings were always reserved in a cheerful and light-hearted manner only for the end of the evening. Hardly any of the children had fully understood the true meaning of that celebration, so when their doctor greeted them one by one with two big kisses on their cheeks, no one, least of all Salvatore, realised that something very important was about to change in their lives.

Only in the following days did the stark reality become apparent. Mary was gone, and with her were gone her kisses, her cuddles, her games and above all the joy and love that she distributed with full force. The two colleagues who had taken charge of the whole group of little ones had agreed to add these to those they were already following:

"Because the director's orders are not to be questioned," but they were not at all happy about it.

The large number of children overloaded them with work, and it was also difficult for them to manage little ones who had already established a strong emotional bond with the dismissed colleague. Their annoyance was also accentuated by the not too hidden thought that the reason for the dismissal was not so much the economic problem as Mary's behaviour that had been talked about for some time. Behaviour considered by the other workers to be too exclusive and affectionate towards Salvatore.

Therefore, the latter, who was already referred to as a clingy and boring child in the discourse of the staff, had now, after what had happened, also become in the eyes of everyone a 'trouble child' to be kept physically and affectively away from.

Little Salvatore was immediately aware of this, and from then on, he lacked not only the boundless love he felt from his friend Mary, but also the minimum of attention and affection that the pedagogues lavished on all the guests at the centre. Added to this was the detachment he felt increasingly evident from his family, who continued to visit him once a week, as the director had instructed, but seemed to be in an ever greater hurry to return home, sometimes for one reason, sometimes for another.

It soon became apparent that the child's psychological condition was worsening. He felt the increasingly rare visits from his friend Mary as a betrayal, visits that ceased altogether after a few months, while he clearly felt the hostility present in the behaviour of the staff to whom he was assigned.

For almost a year, Salvatore shut himself up in an emotional autism, isolating himself from both his classmates and adults, while in the following years, the suffering he

suffered turned into increasingly irritable, grumpy, negativistic, aggressive and destructive behaviour and attitudes.

Over time, the meetings requested by the director from Salvatore's family became increasingly frequent and painful. Every time the parents went to the centre to find their son, they were almost afraid of being noticed by the director who systematically sought them out to tell them something worse:

"Your son is becoming more and more capricious, stubborn and insolent."

"He does not sleep at night and wakes everyone up screaming. He says he has fears. But I assure you they are all whims. Sometimes they are forced to punish him severely."

"The day before yesterday he beat up a classmate just because he did not immediately give him the toy car he was playing with."

"Yesterday he threw a book at the teachers and knocked over his work table."

"The assistants were forced to lock him in a darkened room because he had bitten one of them."

The child had just turned eight years old when the director called his parents on the phone to inform them that he had been forced to admit their son to a hospital where he would be better supervised because, during a nervous breakdown, he had attacked the nursing staff and had thrown an ornament at a stained glass window, shattering it into a thousand pieces, with the risk of hurting other children and some of the staff.

So it had been that for him, like for so many others, the words on a prescription pad of 'Dangerous person to self and others' had been sufficient for the doors of the psychiatric hospital to open.

As Salvatore remembered these things, because of the pain he felt in his head and all over his body, but also because of the fears that had returned to his mind, he began to cry again, at first softly and then louder and louder. Her crying was reminiscent of that of the puppies when they complain about the prolonged absence of their mother and call her to do her duty of nursing, warming and protecting them. The puppies, after a while, if their mother is not solicitous to care for them, yelp louder and louder, desperate, fearing that they have lost her forever, so abandoned, they fear they will die.

Unfortunately Salvatore's mother was not there. There was only a man in front of his bed, patiently placing some laundry in a large container. The latter, fearing the recurrence of another crisis, immediately left his work and ran to him. Sitting on the boy's bed and using affectionate words, smiles and hugs, he tried to console him.

Those smiles, those hugs and those words had the desired effect after a while. The boy, having calmed down, responded by clinging tightly to the man who, despite being so big and strong, had managed to give him that shred of security and protection that he had not been able to have for a long time.

It was at that very moment, as he was holding tightly to that man with the black but good eyes, that the two nurses entered. The latter, not having seen the newly admitted man in the living room, had gone to look for him. Discovering the two of them hugging each other, they shouted at the man and threatened him once again, to put 'zip ties' on him and tie him permanently to the bed, should they find him in such a situation again.

Unfortunately, their intervention had once again upset and frightened Salvatore, who had turned away and started crying loudly again, with no one to console him.

The first interventions

Once he had made the painful decision to stay and work at that hospital, Dr Lo Conte felt the need to do everything he could for those patients. But what to do? Where to start? What was the most important thing? His clinical mentality, formed in university lecture halls, gave him precise indications: before operating, one must know the people one is going to operate on. Therefore the first thing to do should have been to visit, one by one, all the patients, so as to know their precise psychic, medical, social and family conditions. Yes, but how does one visit and then get to know two hundred and thirty people in depth, as his lecturers had taught him?

In the private clinic he had just left, he only had to take care of fifteen female patients, so his task was not that difficult: he only had to thoroughly examine each new case that presented itself and devote the rest of his time to the other patients. But here? Months would pass before he examined them all! And all the others?

How is it possible to assess their physical and psychological condition on a daily basis, so as to give the most appropriate therapeutic indications for each one, if at the same time it was necessary to examine so many patients in depth? And then, how to deal with the newly admitted? And again, how could one think of treating their physical and psychic problems and at the same time leave them and bleeding, crammed into that living room? And finally, how could one accept letting them sleep in those makeshift beds, made of pieces of foam rubber smeared with excrement?

Seen from all angles, the problems facing him seemed absolutely unsolvable. Action had to be taken on several fronts, but he understood very well that with his own forces

and those of the few nurses he had at his disposal, very little could be done.

Having found no strategy that gave him any chance of success, he thought he would start by examining individual patients.

To the head nurse who diligently assisted him when he was in the ward, he asked for a Leonardo to come to his office.

As he waited, he began to read this man's medical history. A history described very briefly in the yellowed pages of the folder. The year of admission had been 1945. The diagnosis was: 'Confusional state and psychomotor agitation'. As it was the year 1975, it was exactly 30 years since this gentleman had been hospitalised.

From his few notes, he realised that he had spent those thirty years essentially in three departments. His first destination had been 'men's observation', where he had stayed for less than a week. From this ward, since it had not been possible to discharge him quickly due to the persistence of dissociative symptoms and psychomotor agitation, his former colleagues had decided to transfer him to the "agitated ward", where he had remained for twenty-two years. Since a psychic deterioration had occurred that forced the patient to urinate and defecate where he was at the time: whether it was his bed, the living room or the corridor, he had been in the current 'sweat ward' for eight years.

From this patient and others with the same characteristics as his, Dr Andrea began to understand the philosophy and practice that moved the destinies of the men and women who made up the population of that hospital. Everyone, except children, even if only for a day or a few hours, was admitted to the 'observation ward' which could only accommodate a small number of patients, no more than forty. In this ward, psychiatric treatment was carried out quite pro-

perly, so if you were lucky enough to improve quickly you were discharged and returned home. Otherwise, and this happened frequently, in order to make room for the newcomers, a transfer to one of the large wards was ready, where, due to the large number of patients, it was impossible to be followed up individually, even if only by treatment with psychotropic drugs.

Therefore, from then on, the likelihood of discharge and thus reintegration into society became minimal, while the worsening and chronicisation of the psychic condition was almost certain. If, as was often the case, after the acute phase, psychic deterioration set in: with incontinence, a tendency to tear clothes, to strip naked or to destroy furnishings, the last resort was the 'filthy ward', from which one only left to be transferred to the mortuary.

In the 'filthy ward' therefore, all mentally retarded or severely mentally deteriorated male patients who tended to soil themselves or destroy their clothes or furnishings came together. He realised at that moment that if the psychiatric hospital was society's dustbin, the ward entrusted to him was the hospital's dustbin. The prospect for him and his work was even more disturbing!

Time passed slowly but still the patient did not arrive. When he was finally brought into the office and made to lie on the examination couch, Andrea, who had expected a thankless task, due to the poor hygiene of in-patients, immediately noticed that this man, compared to those he had seen in the living room, was discreetly dressed, appeared quite clean and, strangely enough, was also wearing a vest and pants. The patient sat down on the examination couch without any resistance.

Nevertheless, all attempts to establish any kind of contact, if not a real conversation, were frustrated by his complete silence. The man, locked in his impenetrable shell, did

not seem at all curious or frightened to find himself in that situation. Nevertheless, throughout the visit, he remained completely silent.

His only interest seemed to be a piece of string that he twirled restlessly in his hands, sometimes nodding, sometimes muttering incomprehensible words. Even during the doctor's cursory examination of his body, he showed no hint of rebellion or rejection. The chief nurse confirmed that this patient was also considered by his colleagues to be a very quiet person, but also totally absent and passive

After this, throughout the morning, he visited three other patients. The second one that appeared before him was an elderly man, completely blind, admitted for alleged epileptic seizures. This man, unlike the first, was perfectly lucid and liked to talk about his family and his past. He recounted that he had worked for many years as a municipal guard and had had to leave his office because of his blindness. He was a widower with two children, a boy and a girl.

The latter, after the death of his wife, had admitted him to that hospital. One of them, especially the male son, came to visit him from time to time. Also in his file, as in Franco's, from the rare notes, although he had no specific therapy, it did not appear that he had ever had any epileptic seizures.

The third patient, very young, with a stocky, chubby body, classic almond-shaped eyes and chubby hands, was a Down's syndrome subject who was mentally retarded. As he lived in Franco's group, he was accompanied for the visit by the latter who presented him as a child who was well off, who dressed himself and even helped others to dress or eat.

The doctor was then invited to examine a fourth patient, who was presented by the head nurse as a boy who could not be brought into the office as he was bedridden.

These two words: 'boy and restraint' triggered an image in his mind of another boy, also restrained in bed

He did not even know his name. He only remembered that that morning, the director of the private psychiatric clinic where he was replacing a colleague who was absent due to illness, had asked him to perform the usual electroshock therapy sessions. Having already performed this type of therapy in the university clinic where he was studying, which was then the clinic where Professors Bini and Cerletti had invented and experimented such therapy, he felt he was well prepared and also available.

He had found that in some difficult psychic situations this therapeutic practice had proved to be quite effective. In order to carry it out, the patient was taken in his or her own bed to the small room dedicated to what was called sleep therapy by the doctors and the nurses. As the patients did not notice anything, as they were put to sleep before the actual electroshock, they looked forward to the 'sleep therapy' sessions with pleasure, because of the pleasant feeling of relaxation they experienced when they woke up, and did not object to it in the slightest. Therefore Andrea agreed to carry it out, certain that he was doing the right thing.

The surprise was considerable. He immediately noticed that there was an unusual, intense agitation in the ward. He saw the nurses running from one side to the other as if looking for someone they could not find or who was escaping. He soon realised that they were frantically searching for numerous patients who, recalcitrant, absolutely did not want to be taken to the ward where they were to be electroshocked, and so fled hither and thither, hiding under beds, in cupboards or in the stairwells.

This general stampede and playing hide-and-seek made him very suspicious. There was something wrong with

this practice: "why were these people running away and the patients of the university clinic not?" he asked himself.

One of them, a boy barely in his teens, was the last and most difficult to catch. The very young patient, running from one side of the rooms to the other, jumping over beds and tables, slipping like an eel from the hands of his pursuers, systematically managed to escape the attempts to stop him. However, the nurses did not give up at all, until, at the end of a long corridor, a window barred by large bars put an end to his escape attempts, allowing the enraged pursuers to pin him down, drag him and tie him tightly in a bed.

Of the little boy who screamed with the others, begging and pleading not to be electrocuted, he remembered with great sorrow two images that were indelibly fixed in his mind: one was that of his arms clutching uselessly at the bars of the high window that had put an end to his attempts to escape, and the other was that of his face distorted with terror as he screamed, banging his head left and right, after being tightly and violently tied on his cot.

Dr. Lo Conte, who had watched in astonishment, anger and disbelief the scenes of the chase and above all had read the terror in the eyes of the patients, each one contained in a bed waiting for the electroshock discharge, did not know what to do. He absolutely did not want to take part in that unworthy way of carrying out the therapy; on the other hand, how could he give up his task after so much effort and sacrifice on the part of the staff who had worked for at least a good half an hour to search, chase and then contain all those patients

Fortunately, after a few minutes he was freed from this distressing dilemma by the news that the anaesthetist, for some reason of his own, could not come to the clinic that day, so each of the patients was freed from the clamps and returned to their favourite corner.

Andrea, as soon as he knew he was free from this task, rushed to the director to express his disgust at what he had witnessed and to propose a more correct way of acting, but the latter explained to him with an impatient attitude that the method of electroshock treatment, i.e. placing all the patients, tightly bound, in a single room, was born of the anaesthetist's need to perform this task as quickly as possible; but also, thought Andrea, sure that he was not wrong, from the clinic's need to pay the specialist as little as possible!

After this and other painful experiences, knowing that there was a boy in his ward who was restrained in bed, immediately triggered in the doctor a rebellion against anyone who, for whatever reason, dared to exercise violence towards patients, especially young ones. He neither accepted nor tolerated the practice of restraint, except in rare cases of true emergency. He therefore hurriedly got up from the squeaky old wooden chair in the office to visit the boy in his bed, ready to put up a fight to have him untied

Mario, this was the name of the boy, barely 16 years old, had been admitted to that ward two years earlier, coming from the children's ward, where he was already systematically bedridden, as he exhibited, among other disorders, clear self-harming behaviour

"Is it possible that you cannot fit him in with the others?" asked the chief nurse.

"Unfortunately that is not possible, doctor," the man replied very politely.

"We have to try," replied Andrea, almost running.

Mario was in a bed that had, fortunately for him, not only a full mattress but also a pillow and a blanket. He was locked in bed in the usual way: two 'clamps' tied his wrists, which had turned red and swollen, to the side bars of the bed; his legs were locked in the same way. As was the legal

requirement for restrained patients, a nurse sitting at his side monitored him on sight.

He had read that the boy did not present any mental retardation, nor had delusions, hallucinations or other psychotic symptoms ever occurred. His admission had been motivated by 'severe behavioural disorders at home and at school'. In order to understand more about his inner world, but also to begin to establish a relationship, Andrea thought of asking him some very general questions:

"Your name is Mario, right?" "How long have you been in hospital?" "How old are you?" "How do you feel?" "What would you like to have?"

The boy, with his tense and angry face turned towards the opposite side of the doctor, at first did not seem to listen to what the latter was saying to him; only after the last question, shouting, did he forcefully and determinedly ask: "Give me a cigarette.

Taking advantage of this request, Andrea made his proposal:

"If you behave and don't hurt yourself, I'll give you not one but three cigarettes. Are you in?" "All right" agreed the boy.

Andrea, in his heart, even though he did not smoke and was against smoking, was willing to give him not three cigarettes, but three whole packets of cigarettes, as long as he did not see him tied up like Christ on the cross.

Very well, let's do this, I'll untie your arm in the meantime and you keep quiet while the nurse goes to get cigarettes". The boy did not answer.

"Let's try untying just one arm," the doctor ordered.

"I assure you that this boy is dangerous," replied the nurse.

And again the doctor: "I know, but we are here... Let's try."

With great circumspection the head nurse began to untie his right arm. He had only just loosened a bandage when Mario, with incredible, sudden impetus and force, not only managed to completely untie his arm, but shouting violently began to storm his own face with his fists, so that after only a few seconds, blood was already oozing copiously from his nose and lacerated lips. Moreover, as the nurse tried hard to push his hands away from his face, he managed to scratch the latter's arms as he angrily spat at him

It was evident that this intervention had been not only unnecessary but also detrimental to both the patient and the nurse. This indisputable truth only deepened the frustration of Andrea, whose face had suddenly whitened. Not knowing where to put his hands, which were trembling nervously, he shoved them into the pockets of his gown, clenching his fists tightly.

He was angry with himself because it was clear that he still had a lot to learn. There, it was as if the contents of all the textbooks he had studied were completely useless, indeed, misleading.

He also thought that the phrase one read about psychiatric hospitals, which were usually referred to as 'citadels of madness', was only half true. For rather than a citadel, it seemed to be a world apart, with its own rules and laws. At this point, he expected on his way out that the sun, in that place, would rise in the west and set in the east!

Contrite towards the head nurse who had been injured and was standing next to him, he could only mutter as an apology a simple: "I'm sorry."

At the same time he appreciated the composure and self-control the man had shown on this occasion. The lack of the white coat seemed to him at this point to be of no importance. On the contrary, the fact that he had noticed it, so as to express within himself a negative judgement from this

lack, only added a further demerit to his abilities. In this case, to his ability to judge people by their clothing and not by their qualities.

Since he had made it his business to first examine the physical and psychological condition of individual patients, when he entered the ward he locked himself in his office together with the head nurse and avoided walking around. He was well aware that this behaviour of his was also a convenient excuse for not feeling the horror present on the other side of the grey door in front of his

Nevertheless, the living conditions of his patients became brutal for him within the practice itself. One day the head nurse begged him, also on behalf of his other colleagues, to slow down his commitment to visit four to five patients every day, on the grounds that this created excessive stress and fatigue in them. "What kind of request is this?" he thought. "How, I work to visit patients and they get stressed and tired!" Another strange thing added to the others. However, he only asked: "How come?"

You know, doctor, when you ask us to visit a patient, we first have to wash him or her and that is already a big problem because the showers often don't work, then we have to make the one you have already visited undress and put those clothes on the other one, and that is not always easy, because some are not used to having clothes on and you have to fight and overcome their resistance, but even the one whose clothes we take off sometimes doesn't want to and resists

The doctor did not know what to say to these arguments. He had, until then, evaded those realities: the lack of decent clothes and especially the almost total absence of underwear.

"Who provides the clothes and linen?" he asked.

"The nun," replied the nurse, "it is she who gives us all the clothes."

"Let's go to the nun" was Andrea's immediate request.

It was from the first day of service that he had not entered the huge room where Sister Celestina was staying in the company of that old man, well-dressed and very clean in his bourgeois habit, whom he had noticed cutting bread.

Again the nun greeted him with a tired smile, saying: "Good morning, doctor, what do you need?"

"Sister, I have noticed that many sick people are naked and many of them are not wearing any underwear: can you provide these clothes to the nurses so that they can dress the patients?"

And the nun pointed upwards: "Some linen is on the shelves, we use it mainly for talks with relatives, but not so much to dress everyone." In truth, a lot of clothes, shirts, underwear and a small supply of blankets were arranged on the large wooden shelves.

"You give him everything you have, I meanwhile ask for more clothes, more underwear and more blankets," Andrea ordered.

"All right doctor, but ask for a lot, because a lot of stuff gets lost in the laundry," the nun suggested.

It was a good feeling that he felt a few minutes later, seeing the four nurses on duty, their arms full of never-used linen, leaving the nun's room for the living room. And it was even nicer, so that he was partly reconciled with himself when, opening the door of that infamous room, he noticed that a good number of patients were already dressed and looked even cleaner.

This feeling, however, was very short-lived. Already after a few days, the image of the patients had returned exactly as before: many of them were again naked, badly dressed and dirty. It was like rewinding a piece of film and

seeing the previous scene again. In addition, she had to endure the nun's grumbling as she no longer had any clothes or underwear for the patients to wear during their interviews and had to face the protests and reproaches of relatives, scandalised by the way their sons, husbands, fathers, brothers were treated.

At this point his hope was placed in the thousand items of linen he had requested, accompanying this request with a peppery letter in which he described the pitiful conditions in which his patients were living. He expected a negative reaction from the director, but instead, the latter, with great sensitivity, immediately countersigned his request and forwarded it to the bursar's office, asking them to urgently provide for the purchase.

Goliath

That huge quantity of new linen arrived in a large van after just over a month. Given the time of bureaucracy, the time that had elapsed after his request had been quite short. That feeling of satisfaction and joy that he had experienced the first time, after managing to get a small number of sick people dressed, was multiplied a hundredfold this time. It was good to see almost all the patients wearing underwear and clothes. If 'the clothes don't make the monk, it certainly helps the monk'.

That shapeless mass of exposed flesh, naked and smelly, was now beginning to take on a new look and a new dignity. Those bodies were finally becoming people again, badly suffering of course, but people nonetheless. This pleasant feeling also stemmed from the fact that, due to the fine weather, the patients were now no longer cooped up in the so-called living room, but circulated freely in the large inner courtyard.

In this large space, surrounded by the walls of the dormitories that took light and air from it through high windows, an orderly series of benches and tables had been built, all made of solid and indestructible reinforced concrete.

Since the courtyard floor was also made of concrete, no trees or tufts of grass were present or would ever grow there. In return, cleaning, by sprinkling water on the concrete surfaces, was facilitated and kept the place sufficiently clean. The sick used to stay in that courtyard when the weather was good.

Some lay on the tables as if to sleep or sunbathe; others sat on the benches immersed in their gloomy and melancholic thoughts; still others ran all around the courtyard,

shouting and prancing barefoot, as if to chase away the monstrous ideas that haunted them.

When it came time for lunch or dinner, the nurses distributed the food by pouring it into an aluminium cup placed directly on the concrete table. To avoid any risk of aggression and injury, the only cutlery allowed for bringing the food to the mouth was a spoon. Therefore when meat was fed in the form of steak or schnitzel, it had to be bitten off before being chewed and swallowed. This had created emergency situations more than once.

In one of these Andrea was called in urgently to render immediate aid to a patient who the nurses reported was stuck under the table and appeared lifeless. The doctor rushed immediately. He found an enormously fat man lying and partly actually wedged between the table and the concrete seat. Motionless and with a purple face, he seemed lifeless. A piece of meat was sticking out of his clenched mouth. Using the handle of a spoon Andrea noticed that the mouth and perhaps also the throat was full of as yet unchewed meat. Only when with force he managed to pull it all out did the big man finally manage to breathe as his face cleared up again.

Andrea also noticed with not too much astonishment, given his previous experiences, how the therapy with psychotropic drugs was administered: the nun would go out into the courtyard with a cup full of pills of various shapes and colours, which she would distribute, at her discretion, by putting them directly into the mouths of the sick. The latter swallowed the drugs using water administered by a nurse who held an aluminium cup in one hand and a jug in the other.

He had also noticed that the dishes, at the end of individual meals, were collected by the nurses in large baskets and taken to a separate place to be washed. "But by whom?"

wondered Andrea. Certainly not by the nurses, who immediately left that room, adjacent to the toilets, from which there was a great noise of water. Therefore he guessed that that task had certainly been given as 'occupational therapy' to some patient.

In fact, there were many patients who, given the chronic lack of staff, were lending themselves to a variety of functions: helping the nurses in collecting dirty linen from the beds and taking it to the laundry; going to the kitchen to fetch food; washing their companions, etc. Therefore, the curiosity to know the person or persons who took care of that delicate function of washing dishes was great in him.

This curiosity of his was soon satisfied. Walking down the corridor leading to the toilets, following the crunching sound of the water as it became more and more intense, he found himself in front of a door with its two wings completely wide open. As he looked out he saw a short, thin, almost skeletal old man with a red nose and spirited eyes. This old man, who had a bald head with only a few rare tufts of white hair at his temples, was busily engaged in cleaning dishes.

Apparently the sprightly old man had made this boring occupation fun by using singing and dancing. Indeed, to drown out the noise of the water he sang old ditties at the top of his lungs; he pranced and danced apparently happily, with bare legs and feet, here and there in the room following the rhythm of the music.

As there were two large concrete tubs in one wall of the room, in which cold water constantly flowed, the old man took the dirty dishes one by one from the basket deposited by the nurses and, before plunging them into one of the tubs, cleaned them from the remains by throwing the leftovers into the centre of the room, where there was a drain for the water, which he had completely opened.

This cleaning technique surprised Andrea: the manhole, given the considerable amount of material flowing into it, must necessarily have been clogged long ago. How come this was not happening?

The solution to his question came shortly afterwards. From the open manhole, at first timidly, as if to get used to the intense light of the room and also perhaps to test the terrain, and then more and more shamelessly and indifferently, a host of rats of various sizes began to emerge, which, after their initial hesitancy, seemed perfectly at home in the room.

Some of them were small, others were of considerable size and in different shades of colour, all of them, however, with great speed and efficiency, picked up with their little teeth and front paws the food that was so abundantly bestowed upon them, and then running and sometimes gliding over the water, carried it into the drain.

Once they disappeared down the hole, after a few seconds they were replaced by their friends or perhaps relatives, who waited patiently for their turn. The latter, in turn, would skilfully perform the same operation and disappear as if by magic down the drain. In this way, the drain always remained perfectly clean. Ultimately, the food offered to patients by the provincial administration also served to feed and maintain certainly more than one family of rodents.

This seemed to amuse the old man, who danced around the room, singing at the top of his lungs accompanied by the sound of aluminium cups banging against each other. His dance seemed to Andrea to be a clear invitation to his rodent friends to attend the party and the gargantuan lunch he organised three times a day in their honour.

That skinny, small, emaciated old man, Andrea later discovered, had a name that just didn't suit him: Goliath. His admission, which dated back over forty years, had been motivated by a simple, banal diagnosis: 'Chronic alcoholism'.

Admitted at the age of thirty-two, he had spent the rest of his life in that hospital. His relatives, contacted a couple of times, recommended and insistently begged the ward doctors not to discharge him. They feared that by starting to drink again, he would cause more problems and trouble for his family.

Goliath like all the other patients called 'workers' preferred not to join the others. As far as he was allowed, he tried to stay almost all day in that room, in which he was in the company of his little rodent friends. He would only reluctantly leave it at night to go to bed. Perhaps, Andrea thought maliciously, after his admission to that ward, he had chosen that job because on Sundays half a glass of wine was given to every in-patient. And since some of this precious nectar almost certainly remained in the glasses, Goliath had taken on the welcome task of preventing it from being wasted by throwing it away

Andrea avoided talking to both the nurses and the director about what he had just seen, already knowing that it would be of no use. As the weeks went by, he became more and more convinced that the problems in his ward had to be solved with a different strategy, very different from what could have been used in any other hospital; but which one?

More than four months had passed since he had started that strange job of his. He had found that he was using his education and skills as a doctor and psychiatrist to a minimum, as almost all his energy and time was absorbed in researching how to make the people entrusted to him live a little better. There was little left to occupy himself with anything else. However, since the results were always very poor, he had the distinct feeling that all his efforts were spent in vain, or almost in vain.

What he called 'the institutional monster' always seemed to get the better of him. Indeed, he succeeded, without any effort at all, in rendering in vain his and the nurses' labours and desperate attempts to improve the conditions of the people entrusted to their care. The most glaring demonstration was there, clearly visible, both in the dormitories and in the infamous living room: despite having received thousands of clothes, sheets, blankets, crosspieces and mattresses from the bursar's office, day after day, the degradation in the beds and in the way the patients presented themselves was evident.

Without needing to count them, the number of beds in which something essential for a minimum of hygiene and comfort was missing was increasing by the day: in some there were no sheets, in others no blankets, and in others even the new mattresses seemed to have vanished, to be replaced again by smelly pieces of foam rubber. Not to mention the clothes; there were already a dozen or so patients walking around almost completely naked in the ward.

Andrea, exhausted by tension and fatigue, felt oppressed by a sense of depression and failure for what he considered to be a futile daily effort.

Strangely enough, only the patients entrusted to that stranger, Franco, always had a suit and a decent bed to sleep in. That individual's hands looked like those of a magician who can make anything he needs pop out of nothing, without any effort. On the contrary, his hands and those of the nurses seemed to make disappear or render useless everything that they managed to procure with immense effort, made up of letters, phone calls and pleas to the director and the bursar's office.

Luisa arrived precisely in one of his increasingly frequent moments of discouragement and disappointment. Andrea was going round and round the mountain of patient files on his desk, more to distract himself from the dark thoughts that assailed and scrambled his mind than anything else, when he was told by the head nurse that a girl was visiting who wanted to 'confer' with him. Andrea marvelled each time at the nursing staff's use of bureaucratic terms.

This girl, Andrea immediately noticed, was not at all conspicuous: much shorter than him, she wore a dress that was so plain and banal in colour and size as to appear old-fashioned. A pair of myopic glasses stood out over her eyes, making her even more anonymous and insignificant. She introduced herself as a recent graduate in social work, eager to engage in voluntary work.

Although few men would turn to look at her when they saw her passing in any street or square of the city, for Andrea that girl immediately assumed the role of an angel descended from heaven. A cherub in a skirt, with shy but certainly intelligent and attentive eyes, with whom to discuss and share at least some of the thousand problems that beset him daily.

Like a torrent in flood, he immediately presented her with some ideas, which she almost immediately followed up with precise requests:

"We are sending a letter to all relatives of patients to invite them for an interview, so as to try to reconnect with the family network that for many patients has been completely broken for years";

"We try to ask voluntary associations for some discarded clothes, to be used for patients, in exchange for the few horrible blue uniforms they are forced to wear";

"We prepare a card in which we enter the essential data of each patient, so that they can be released from anonymity more easily";

"We study the best strategy to get the best ones to discharge, in the shortest possible time";

"one could also try to get patients out of the ward so as to recover them from the degradation in which they live on a daily basis";

"We divide the patients into small groups managed either by another patient or by a nurse, so that they can be cared for better and individually"

Who knows by what magic, the fact that he had someone next to him to whom he could expound and with whom he could share his thoughts and ideas for change, made these more easily implementable. Luisa looked at him with attentive eyes, without contradicting him, but in her heart she thought that many of the young doctor's intentions would be difficult if not impossible to implement.

Yet the young doctor's eagerness managed to galvanise her too, so much so that she immediately set to work and at the same time proposed other possible interventions. Finally, after much study, she could try her hand at an activity that, although free, seemed fascinating and full of much promise. She was happy about this.

While she was already looking through old folders for addresses and phone numbers, so as to start calling some of the many relatives who had disappeared from the lives of their loved ones, she also wondered, but only for a moment, whether her enthusiasm for the job was in any way influenced by the presence of that young doctor, with the blond hair and lively, sweet eyes that had made such a deep impression on her.

She had already noticed that he wore his surplice in an unkempt manner, given the usual male disregard for clothing, but even this made him appear more interesting in her eyes, so much so that she had to restrain herself from the impulse to better arrange, with her own hands, that blessed white surplice that was a little lopsided. She had observed, however, that the tension, which she considered excessive, towards his institutional task was evident in that young man.

To the attraction she felt towards this man she immediately answered 'no', as if to chase away a disturbing thought, as it was evident that in this young man's commitment to his work seemed to devour all his energies, so much so that he did not notice her femininity at all. She recognised that she was not beautiful but she could already feel a certain irritation growing within her at the way he looked at her, or rather did not look at her, as his beautiful, pensive eyes constantly went beyond her body and person.

He clearly felt that he was, at least at that moment, a tool for him, as a pen, pencil or typewriter can be. A useful and welcome tool certainly, but still a tool to be used for his projects for the benefit of the patients. He understood that it was the thought for them that dominated and filled, to the point of overwhelming, his mind and soul, so that there was no room for other emotions and feelings.

The most glaring proof of this was in their first meeting: he had pestered her with an enormous amount of work

that she would have to do quickly and free of charge, without any delicate thought towards him, such as offering her a hot coffee or tea with biscuits that, after hours spent at the typewriter, would partly fill the hole he felt growing in his stomach.

Fortunately, at least in part, this was remedied by the head nurse who, while she was still immersed in her work, came over to her with an affectionate smile, as if he had known her all her life, and handed her an excellent black coffee, asking if she, like Dr Lo Conte, was hoping for a medal for valour for her tireless work. Although she felt embarrassed by what must have been a compliment, she managed to thank him with a shy smile, while Dr Andrea, disregarding the nurse's joking remark, continued to sip his hot coffee thoughtlessly, talking to her undaunted about some other ward problem they would have to face together

Andrea, on his way home that evening, thought of all he could have done with the help of that social worker - "what was her name?" Luisa, he had been told. The thought that this woman could ever interest him either sexually or romantically did not even occur to him.

His relationship with women was, according to his friends, peculiar: often, even though he sensed in them a clear interest in him, he did not care or take advantage of them, pretending not to notice anything.

His friends told him that the Lord does not always do things well. For example, he does not give food to those who have teeth, to offer it, instead, abundantly to those who have no teeth at all. Andrew, to tell the truth, did not feel that he was a man 'without teeth', but, being very selective in his choices, he only wanted to indulge in amorous feelings with a woman who had specific qualities. And this woman, unfortunately, he had not yet found, despite the urging of his friends and his mother.

He thought back that evening to the mockery of his colleagues for the failed adventure with a lady who had chosen him with the clear intention of cheating on her husband. Of this young woman he did not even remember her name. Instead, he remembered that she had been admitted to the neurology department as she was suffering from an early form of plaque sclerosis.

The woman had been entrusted to him by the chief physician so that he could perform the small tasks for her that were the prerogative of residents: collecting and writing her medical history, checking her blood pressure and pulse rate every morning, and carrying out the simplest of therapies. He had already been at the university clinic for a few months and felt proud of the attention he was able to give to the patients entrusted to him, as he was able to listen well to their pains and torments.

He had not the slightest suspicion that he had aroused any interest in that young, beautiful woman, who stood in the bed opposite the front door of the main ward. This patient had, for a few days, agreed to talk about her problems; meekly she had undergone the series of clinical examinations that the consultant had requested for her; willingly, without batting an eyelid, she took the prescribed treatment.

Nothing was foreboding about the message, the young resident could not tell whether it was amorous or just of intense sexual desire, which she sent him one morning while he was looking after her. The woman, shaking his hand and looking him firmly in the eyes, sent him an unequivocal message: 'I like you'. This upset him so much that, without delay, he tried to get away that patient to attend to a lady in the next bed.

He did not imagine that this could happen. He felt in his conscience that he had always approached every patient, young or old, with the same correct and professionally irre-

proachable attitude, so that hand clasping his and that mischievous and inviting look he felt then and remembers now, as undeserved low blows.

That young woman was, among other things, married to a man who appeared to him to be desperate because of the pathology from which his young wife was suffering, so much so that, before returning to his village in Calabria, he had entrusted the woman to him with tears in his eyes. And what did this one do? She took advantage of the first opportunity to provoke him, without the slightest thought for her husband who was suffering for her!

In the days that followed, the gestures of interest increased considerably: every time Andrea, for whatever reason dictated by his profession, approached her, she manifested her desire for him in an increasingly brazen manner: sometimes she touched his arm, sometimes his leg. And she always stared at him with clear, insistent passion, so much so that Andrea was greatly afraid that the other patients and nurses might also have noticed such amorous advances.

Both during the day and especially in the evening, thinking about this woman he certainly felt his body ignite in a way that had seldom happened to him, but he also felt that this torment could not have any legitimate and dignified outlet for a doctor like him: certainly young, inexperienced even, but ethically very careful and responsible.

He then decided to unequivocally clarify the situation with the lady by telling her that he was her doctor, so there could be nothing between them outside of a professional relationship. The woman, after this clarification, seemed to resign herself. In fact, as if offended, she tried to be absolutely indifferent to his presence.

He happened to have to write the discharge therapy, but again she behaved in an exemplary manner. Andrea was pleased with himself, for how he had been able to deal with

this delicate situation. The fact that he had managed to resist, without giving in at all to the provocations of this young and beautiful patient, made him professionally very proud.

However, it did not end there. The day after the enterprising lady was discharged, while he was attending the ward rounds, a student crucifer called him, warning him that there was a phone call for him. On answering, he heard the woman tell him in a soft but quiet voice: "Hello, how are you? Now that I have been discharged, I am no longer your patient. If you want, I'll wait for you at my hotel."

When he later told his colleagues what had happened to him, namely that despite explicit offers of love, he had not gone to the hotel indicated by the lady, because he felt he could not betray the ethical principles of his profession, but also her husband, who had entrusted her to his care with great trust, they did not cease to torment him for his gullibility with easy jokes about him. One of these was precisely the one referring to bread and teeth!

Outside the department

Despite the fact that the young social worker had sent hundreds of letters and made as many phone calls, the family members who had come to contact her and the ward doctor were very few in number, and almost all of them were not only unhappy that the doctor was interested in them, but also, on the defensive, tried to fight hard not to be deprived of something that they considered fundamental to them: the perpetual hospitalisation of their brother, son, father or husband.

They perceived this perpetual hospitalisation as their sacrosanct right or achievement not to be missed. One of them, Leonardo's elderly father, who was then the first patient the doctor had examined, came staggering in, helping himself to a cane. The elderly man sat down, sighing audibly to show his tiredness, scrutinising Andrew with perplexity, and asked him:

"Are you Dr Tommasi?"

"No I am Dr Lo Conte, Dr Tommasi left this department ten years ago and has been dead for some years," Andrea answered him.

"Ah excuse me. I came to this place just after the war. I don't understand now what you want. What's the problem?"

"There is no problem," Andrea replied, "we just wanted to get to know the relatives of our patients and that is why we sent you the letter".

The doctor's answer did not convince the old man at all, who appeared increasingly suspicious and defensive.

"Tell me what you want because at noon I have to take the train back to Milazzo," the man added in an annoyed, hurried tone.

Andrea did not know what to reply, so the dialogue with that elderly parent was brief. The young doctor was almost immediately convinced that his son, who had been in his ward for decades, was no longer in anyone's heart; above all, he was not in the heart of that father, who found it really strange that someone, a doctor, would invite him to talk about his son's needs and problems.

When the infamous letter arrived at the home of the elderly blind man, who had also been visited in his first interviews, it shocked his two sons who, alarmed by this strange request for an interview, were preceded by a series of 'recommendations', not only from other medical colleagues, but also from some well-known politicians. Each of these felt obliged to phone him directly or the director so that he, like his predecessors, would not change the situation in any way: leaving the father in the psychiatric hospital ward and the children to freely enjoy his home.

The brother of the retarded young man with Down Syndrome, who was in Franco's group, also came. The latter, a young man of no more than thirty, was even more explicit in rejecting his brother. As Andrea began to explain the reason for the letter: to gradually bring all the family members closer to their loved ones, he interrupted him in a threatening manner, cutting off any further clarification: "Doctor, I'm telling you for the first and last time, the best place for my brother is here and not our house. And no one and nothing will ever change that.

Fortunately, not everyone reacted to the request for an interview like that father, those sons and that brother. Although only a few, some pity and love remained in the hearts of a few relatives. These not only felt the need to thank him, but each in his own way endeavoured to show his gratitude by offering him some modest gift. Among these few relatives, he was struck by the gesture of a mother of

a mentally retarded young man who, as a sign of gratitude, had come bearing two huge plastic bags as gifts for Andrea.

When she opened them at home, she realised that in those bags that mother had put a lot of fruit, some vegetables, some eggs and a piece of good cheese. It was not difficult to realise that in those two bags she had put not only everything that was available in the fridge at that moment, but she had also, and above all, put her love as a mother. The name of her very young son of just sixteen was Salvatore, whom the doctor knew on that occasion to be another of the patients of what he now called Franco's group.

Not only Luisa but also Andrea's parents and friends had noticed how that job had monopolised the young doctor's thoughts and life. They had all noticed his constant, incessant mulling over the best strategy to positively change the conditions of his ward and his patients, but they also sensed the constant frustration he felt and suffered from, for not having succeeded in his endeavour, if only marginally.

One of the many attempts that the doctor proposed to Luisa one morning, asking and expecting from her an opinion on the feasibility, was the opening of the ward towards the rest of the hospital. The idea he had been nurturing for some time was to think of the whole hospital with its tree-lined avenues and flowerbeds as a space in which patients could move freely, not just the courtyard or the totally inadequate living room. This was not a new idea in psychiatry. Before him, Prof. Basaglia had successfully implemented it in the psychiatric hospital in Trieste.

The observations and proposals of this distinguished psychiatrist had offered a new vision, both on the origin of mental illness and on how to treat and manage people suffering from this serious pathology. This distinguished clinician had noted how the way the mentally ill person was ma-

naged had considerable repercussions on their behaviour and the further development of the pathology.

Psychiatric patients worsened considerably when they were confined in confined spaces or when they were denied the most basic human rights, whereas they improved considerably when they were treated as persons, with all the rights attached to their very humanity.

However, most of his colleagues, especially the older ones, radically contested these ideas, judging them to be the result of political and social choices and not of a careful examination of medical reality. Only a few young psychiatrists had accepted them and made them their own, starting to test and experiment them in the field.

Apparently it was not difficult to plan and then implement the opening of the ward to the rest of the hospital. The doors were there and all the nurses, as well as their doctor, had in their pockets the special key that could open them. However, there were numerous obstacles to be overcome: first of all, it was necessary to obtain the authorisation of the director who, in turn, needed the political approval of the provincial administration on which the hospital depended, but above all, it was necessary to educate the nursing staff in a different way of seeing and handling the patients entrusted to them.

In the eyes of this staff, up to that point, patients were dangerous subjects to be constantly monitored; they were dirty individuals to be cleaned; they were human beings absolutely incapable and therefore in need of constant and careful guidance.

It was necessary to succeed in overturning these erroneous preconceptions in their eyes, replacing them with truer and more real ones, such as the evidence that only on a few rare occasions can the mentally ill become dangerous to themselves and others, and, above all, that the behaviour of

the mentally ill improves considerably when they are welcomed and treated with respect and love, as their inner serenity improves in these cases.

It was also necessary for the nursing staff to learn how to discover and bring to light in the patients entrusted to them the talents hidden or obnubilated by the severe suffering caused by the asylum institution.

After obtaining the director's approval and after numerous lectures, meetings and formal and informal discussions with the nurses, the day finally arrived when the order was posted to leave the ward doors open, so that every patient, if they felt like it, could leave freely. This order was displayed prominently on all the ward doors so that every nurse and every patient would be aware of it.

He knew Andrea that what he intended to do was also a challenge to most of the medical and nursing staff in the other wards of the hospital. Many of them were absolutely convinced that the patients would take advantage of this unusual freedom to escape or worse to attack anyone they encountered on their way. "Who can ever control this mass of people?" they said among themselves. "The hospital is big and the walls can easily be climbed over; they can escape and attack the townspeople," they added. "They are crazier than their patients who propose these things. Who will take responsibility for the assault of some innocent and unsuspecting visitor?"

The morning arrived on which it had been decided to open the ward doors. Many people had gathered in front of the front of the ward to witness the event: there was the director, who had found a comfortable bench to sit on for the occasion, together with the provincial councillor delegated for the psychiatric hospital; there were almost all the doctors, and there were also many nurses from the other wards on the dismounting shift, who had preferred to stay and see

what would happen, rather than return to their homes, despite having spent the whole night in hospital.

Some of these spectators were simply curious, others were clearly hostile and scandalised by 'these dangerous oddities'. A small group of nuns, who did not want to miss this event, had arranged themselves on the fringes of the onlookers and huddled close to each other, seeming to protect each other. Of course Andrea and social worker Luisa were also there, both very perplexed as to what they could expect but certainly, unlike many others, they were confident about the outcome of the experiment.

After the director's gesture of assent and Andrea's order, the head nurse with a firm and confident manner started to walk in and out of the ward, opening all the internal and especially the external doors. Everyone was visibly breathless.

What would have happened? Who would have run out first, happy to finally be able to move freely in that wonderful garden? Who would have tried to escape from that place of pain and violence by climbing over its walls? From which of the two hundred and thirty patients could any dangerous aggression be expected? By what means could they have harmed the large committee that had formed outside the ward door or the people who were hanging around the hospital at that hour of the morning: secretaries, suppliers, mechanics, electricians and many others?

Five minutes passed, then ten, finally half an hour, but nothing happened that had been hoped or feared. The patients who were inside the living room remained inside the living room, even though its doors were wide open. Only a few, as they approached, gave a fleeting glance outside the door, only to leave immediately, as if fearing the dangers that might come from the outside world.

No one expected to witness that kind of mutiny. Everyone, one way or another, was disappointed. The optimists were disappointed because they expected the patients to come out pushing each other, happy to finally be able to enjoy, outside the dreary and dirty walls of the ward, the longed-for freedom. The pessimists and catastrophists were disappointed because they did not have the opportunity to reaffirm the danger posed by the mentally ill when they were unexpectedly granted excessive freedom of movement.

No one knew at this point what to do. The councillor, always very busy, looked at the director as if to tell him of his haste, the latter looked at Andrea, who stared at the door, with less and less confidence that anything would happen. Only the head nurse, seeing the disappointment on the faces of the bystanders, had the happy idea of taking those closest to the door by the arm to lead them out one by one.

But even after this forced conviction, not everyone stayed in the garden. Many, at a leisurely pace, trying almost not to be noticed by the onlookers who were watching them perplexed, preferred to return within the protective walls of the ward. Not only that. Some of them even took the impudent initiative of closing the ward door in the faces of the waiting onlookers, as if to avoid being disturbed by all those onlookers outside.

At this point, no one could imagine what to expect from those strange individuals barricaded for no reason inside the ward. After a few minutes, however, something new happened. Slowly the ward door was first ajar and then thrown wide open by a tall, sturdy man with coal-black hair and eyes.

The latter, holding the hand of another limping patient, supported him and, smiling at him, encouraged him to get out. The limping patient, in turn, turning back did the same to the next one and so on.

In a few minutes, a long and very strange little train formed, mostly made up of very young patients who, holding hands, made gestures of invitation and support to the others who were still inside the ward, murmuring incomprehensible words and phrases to encourage them to leave. These young patients were alternated with distinctly elderly or disabled individuals who leaned on and were physically supported by the former.

In this way, with great circumspection, helping each other, all of Franco's 'children' came out. The latter, who had come out first and opened the queue, after nodding his head in respectful greeting to the director, smiling, led them, almost carelessly, as if he had made that gesture a thousand times, to the small villa next to the ward and placed them, one by one, on the stone benches around the hospital's statue of the Madonnina.

Luisa, visibly moved, noticed that the image of the virgin, shining in the morning sun from the top of her golden niche, seemed to welcome with great joy and love, opening her blue mantle, these unusual worshippers who stood at her feet, while the gentle breeze coming from the hill above made the leaves of the lime trees rustle and fall, next to and above these people, as if nature also welcomed them and wanted to somehow touch and caress them.

Both the director and the other spectators, who were as if enchanted by this strange and unusual scene for a psychiatric hospital, looked at each other, as if to understand the meaning of what was happening before their eyes. Then, as if to better reflect in private, saying goodbye to each other, they got up and left without saying a word.

Only Andrea remained, who had Luisa and the head nurse at his side. Although they too could not explain exactly what had happened, they were intimately pleased and satisfied. Only then did Andrea notice that Luisa, who had

positioned herself very close to him, was gripping his arm tightly with her hand, as if seeking protection and support from him. Turning around, embarrassed by this unexpected gesture, he instinctively smiled at her, while she, equally embarrassed, turned away and hastily re-entered the ward with an uncertain manner, at the same time wiping her glasses, too wet with tears, with a flap of her dress to see clearly where she was standing

Andrea, at this point, undecided on what to do, not wanting to enter the ward, thought better of sitting in the director's seat, as if he had the task of checking on the behaviour of all those who had dared to come out. As he watched them one by one chattering shyly but happily, he noticed a woman approaching the group sitting in front of the statue of Our Lady, carrying a basket.

As she looked closer she realised it was Salvatore's mother who had come to visit her son. The woman, acting as calmly as if she had been invited to one of the many picnics that took place in the beautiful pine forests surrounding the city, opened the basket, distributing to each person what she had brought for her son. The latter, in turn, not only did not protest, even though there were only a few sweets left for him, but happy with what had happened, stood up clapping his hands as he went to kiss and embrace first his mother and then Franco, calling the latter "Daddy!"

But it was not to end there. After a few minutes, other women approached the group contemplating the Madonnina statue for the first time. Andrea realised they were the seamstresses led by a nun. Each of them was carrying something from her own breakfast: some a fruit, some meatballs or a slice of meat, to offer them not only to the patients in Franco's group but also to all those who stood undecided in front of the ward door. Only on seeing this did Andrea, with a sigh of relief, get up to join Luisa

The Great Enterprise

Little Amin was no more than seven years old when his father, who had been employed for a few months as a labourer for the Aswan Dam, had given the four sons, whom he knew to be the most turbulent of the family, what they called 'the promise of the great undertaking'. He had simply promised that if they were good and helped and obeyed their mother, after a few months, on his return, he would make them climb with him to the top of the great pyramid.

Little Amin, after his father's departure, still felt with great nostalgia his strong arms clasp him to his chest as he said goodbye, before he disappeared behind the date palms surrounding the village, sitting on the truck as he was jostled left and right along the bumpy road with the other workers hired for the dam work.

It was not easy for him, the youngest of the family, to hold back his tears. The only balm he found to compensate, at least in part, for the pain of his parent's departure was this 'great feat', about which all his friends always spoke with pride.

Climbing the immense steps of the pyramid of Cheops and reaching the top meant, for every male in the village, facing not only the risk of peeling hands, legs, or worse, breaking a few bones, but also defying the punishment of the old deities, ever present in the popular mind. Deities who surely judged badly and would perhaps punish those who dared to violate something sacred with their feet, which by the way were usually very dirty.

It also meant making a mockery of the guardians, who during the day would shoo away strangers by shouting at them or threatening them with their sticks, while at night they would use rabid dogs to chase away those who dared

even approach the monuments. Fortunately, the village boys also knew that during the night, after a hot and tiring day, the men who protected the site from onlookers or looters often allowed themselves a restful sleep.

During those long months, as Mama was the supreme judge who would make this feat possible, through her unquestionable judgement on the goodness of their conduct, Amin, at many times during the day, would try to sweeten her, she would say 'bribe' her, by offering her many small gifts and services. Sometimes it was just a large hibiscus flower picked by climbing over the walls of the wealthy merchant's villa on the edge of her village.

The woman, accepting the gift with a grateful, bright smile, loved to put that big red flower coquettishly in her brown, curly hair when she was inside the house, while her eyes shone with pleasure and joy. At other times, Amin would try to convince his older brothers to weave bracelets or earrings for him, and then give them to his mother as gifts, made from the whitest, tenderest and most fragrant leaves of the palm trees all around the village.

When Allah assisted him, he could also find beautiful coloured stones with which his mother made necklaces to adorn herself at feasts and ceremonies. These stones he would find among the silt left at the edge of the bed of the great river, which would rip them from the mountains and drag them with its rushing current down to the valley.

Ever since his father had left, his favourite topic of discussion, both with his brothers and with his village friends who looked at him incredulously, was precisely this 'great feat' that he was going to do. No child of his age, they said, had ever climbed the great pyramid, which day and night was well guarded by guards, ready to batter with sticks and whips anyone who even tried to approach it without permission.

His two sisters, both older than him, would also have liked to be part of the enterprise, but their parents had categorically excluded them, so that they sulked at Amin, who, small as he was, just because he was a boy, would perhaps have been allowed to participate.

As the days went by, the child became more and more restless and, not yet able to read numbers well, constantly asked his mother when daddy would return. The woman, equally impatient with her husband's absence, during the first few days would stop chatting with the other women or look up as she kneaded the bread, which she put to bake over a large pan placed over the fire, to respond to her son with gentleness, but when, as the weeks went by, her restlessness about her man's prolonged absence had also increased, she began to respond to him in an increasingly rude, irritated and tired manner. So much so that little Amin gave up questioning her, preferring to ask her older brothers for news.

Finally the day came for the men to return to the village they had left almost three months ago. A company truck, perhaps the same one they had left in, full of workers shouting like obsessives, drove in at dusk between the lopsided palm-roofed cottages, trumpeting and raising a cloud of red dust that was slowly dragged towards the river banks.

As he crossed the only road that almost bisected the small agglomeration of simple mud and thatched houses from north to south, the clatter of scrap metal, combined with the joyful cries of the workers standing on the truck's bed, irritated the village roosters, who, strutting in their splendid plumage, went to reassure and protect the shy hens that ran here and there squawking in fear.

At the same time, the dromedaries and donkeys, too, seemed to want to tear the reins that bound them to the poles driven into the ground in order to escape that unusual din.

However, that shouting and clamour made all the human inhabitants happy, especially the women, old men and children who had been impatiently waiting for that day. The joyful cries of the men were soon joined by those of their women and children, who surrounded the truck almost to a halt, to prevent it from going further.

In the evening, parties were held in almost every house, but also in the tents that stood at the edge of the community. In Amin's house, although they did not drink alcohol, since they were all very observant of the dictates of the Koran, the mother and sisters, after the first hugs and greetings, ran around to buy what they needed to prepare a banquet that, given the event, they wanted to be sumptuous.

They competed with the other women in snatching from the rare shopkeepers' hands the meat, spices, flour, dates and whatever else they might need for the rich dinner they wanted to prepare for their men. The shopkeepers in their turn, not being able to calmly satisfy the many, too many requests coming from all those women who seemed mad with joy, were also shouting to control and rein in the energetic women who were pushing each other, trying to grab the best goods, while at the same time being careful not to let any of them leave without paying for the goods they had bought

That night, few were able to sleep. The doors of the houses and huts remained wide open. Both men and especially women and children, all excited, went from one end of the village to the other to invite, ask or bring something to friends and relatives or just to talk, comment and laugh together.

Amin was no exception. When he wasn't running around with his mates, he was jumping on his father's legs and in his arms like a cricket in the mood for acrobatics, so much so that his mother was forced to give him a resoun-

ding spanking in an unsuccessful attempt to get him to stop, so that her husband would devote some time to her too. Unsuccessful attempt, since the son, with the complicity of his father who had waited a long time for those moments of affectionate exchanges and play with the little one of the family, had monopolised the man's attention, so much so that he demanded to sit on his lap during the whole dinner

Throughout the long and stormy evening, the child had refrained from asking for the reward of his good deeds, but the next day, after waking up almost at lunchtime, he judged that the time had come to collect what was due. He therefore began pestering his father with a series of questions, the main one of which was evidently: "Dad, when are we going?"

To this main question were added and alternated many others: "Dad, what should we prepare? Can I bring a friend of mine? Dad, who is coming with us? Not the sisters, right? They are women! Dad, what time are we leaving? Dad, is it true we're going up to the top? You won't leave me below, will you?"

The older brothers were also eager to ask the same questions but preferred to keep silent to avoid annoying the parent, leaving that thankless task to Amin. Finally, the father, after recovering from the weariness of the journey, taking advantage of a moment when all the sons were around him, gave his answers: "Amin, I have already told you that we will go at night, when the overseers are asleep from the big one. We must therefore wait for a night full of stars and with a full moon, so that we have some light on the climb. Otherwise it would be too dangerous. Rest assured that the day before we leave I will tell you to prepare the ropes and everything you need.'

This answer was fully satisfactory for the other three sons, but certainly not for Amin, who had not foreseen that

it would also take a full moon and stars! He therefore had many more questions in store: "But Dad, when will there be a full moon? And why do we have to wait until there are also stars? And what about my friend Dabir? I can't leave him, he cares so much about this undertaking! You must talk to his father and convince him to let him come too!

What should we ask mummy to prepare if we get hungry while they are up there? Dad, my friends say that Pharaoh's gods will punish us for what we do if we don't wash our feet and hands properly. Is that true, Dad? I am not afraid of the guardians, if I see one I hide among the rocks. But you and the brothers who are tall and big, how will you do?'

In the days leading up to his departure, the poor father, who had already regretted his promise after Amin's persistent insistence, also had to endure the complaints of his wife, who, both during the day and especially at night, next to him in the straw bed, never ceased to complain about his permissive behaviour, especially towards little Amin, listing for the umpteenth time all the possible dangers that he and especially his children could face

Luckily it was summer and there was no risk of the sky being covered in clouds, so the day before the full moon, the father gave the family the news that the next day would be the day they were waiting for. Therefore, they had to be ready to face 'the great task'. The few villagers, who had been aware of this for some time, were divided between those who applauded and prepared for the same feat and those who bitterly criticised it, both for the dangers involved and for the bad example being set to their children by allowing them to take part in an action that was absolutely forbidden by law and contrary to the divine dictates that did not want the peace of the dead to be disturbed.

The departure was set for early in the morning, in order to arrive at the foot of the pyramid in the evening, so as to be prepared and ready for the climb. As means of transport in addition to their donkey, which had been taken away from their work in the fields for a few days, their father managed to borrow two sturdy dromedaries, one from their uncle who lived in the hut near their house and another belonging to the father of Amin's friend, who was coming with them.

At first light, a large part of the village of a few hundred souls had gathered in front of Amin's house to say goodbye and give final advice. Even the mother, who had initially, in protest, declared that she would not come out of her house to greet them, at the last moment, unable to resist, rushed towards her children and husband, to give last kisses and make further recommendations. The sisters for their part, who had been sulking for a few days, now chatted with their girlfriends, seemed happy and proud of what they were about to face the males of the family.

The small caravan arrived in Cairo at dusk, so that in the middle of the night they found themselves on the edge of the archaeological zone. They chose to camp in a fairly isolated area that Amin's father knew well, having left with teenage friends from there many years before to accomplish the same feat.

None of the passers-by or shopkeepers paid any attention to them so, after tying up and hiding their mounts in the bottom of a quarry, they took all the necessary equipment and began the march towards the pyramids. It was not difficult to pass through the fence, which in that out-of-the-way area was partly torn down. More difficult and tiring was walking on the sagging sand carrying ropes, pickaxes, food and all the other necessary tools. Above all, it was difficult not to get lost in the dim moonlight.

To avoid this, their father had ordered them to hold hands with each other, so that they could avoid getting lost and at the same time be able to help each other in case of need.

The silence was absolute as there were very few birds and nocturnal animals that had any interest in entering that area devoid of trees and poor in other forms of life. Only their footsteps on the soft sand caused a slight crunch. The very light wind coming from the west also seemed to favour the venture.

Finally they reached the first steps. The father and older sons climbed first, then helped the others to do the same. It was mainly little Amin and Dabir who slowed down the climb. The two almost had to be pulled up by force of arms by the bigger and stronger males, but they were certainly the most excited and happy of the group.

Although they spoke in whispers, their eyes, which gathered the light of the full moon, shone with joy as much as, and more than, the many stars that towered above them from the sky. As they climbed, the panorama, made up of the many yellowish lights of the city of Cairo that throbbed in the night, became more and more grandiose and splendid, so that even in the little ones the fear of the curse no longer gripped their souls.

"How can it be a bad thing what we do if, with each step that takes us higher and higher, we feel we are getting closer and closer to Allah?" they murmured among themselves. And they added: "On the other hand, we washed our feet and hands thoroughly, before our departure, as our friends in the village advised us. Pharaoh's gods will surely have appreciated this sign of respect!"

On each ledge on which they climbed, detours, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, were frequent, as they had to find boulders, partly eroded by time, that pro-

vided a good grip for their hands and feet. To this Amin and his friend, more agile and lively, made their contribution, going one way, one another, until they found the best spot to climb to the next ledge

In the meantime, the others could also get some rest. Only after several hours of strenuous effort did they reach the summit. Up there they could no longer run, not only that, but intimidated by the height they could not even jump for joy. Up there, one could only enjoy the silence as one admired the lights of the immense city stretching as far as eye could see, while the moon with its soft light seemed to caress the other pyramids and the sphinx and then cast its gentle glow over the dunes and the tiny houses of the guardians and workers.

They had managed not to turn on any lights, but in those moments they knew they were clearly visible even from afar. However, at that point, being discovered was of no importance. Sitting down, holding each other tightly, as if the wind that had risen in the meantime could snatch them from the top, they opened the bags of food their mothers had prepared for them. Never was food more delicious than this for Amin, for his friend and perhaps also for the others.

The descent was more complex than the ascent. Sometimes one hand was enough to support and help the little ones. At other times it was the father who descended first, so that Amin and Dabir could let themselves go, sliding on the boulders, in the strong arms of the man who took them in one by one. Already a few bleeding fingers were brought to their mouths to clean them by sucking blood from the wounds, but no one complained. Everyone, even the smallest, was ready for the next action.

Finally their feet touched the sand, which in the meantime had become very cold. The father, after scrutinising them one by one as if to check that no one was missing, ga-

ve the order to run, still holding hands, towards the partly demolished fence through which they had entered.

Everything seemed to have unfolded perfectly. The feet, without any shoes, ran as fast as the heart filled with joy and pride. From time to time, especially Amin and Dabir looked into each other's eyes to communicate their joyful victory. They had passed more than halfway and were already looking forward to resting on the backs of the animals when a first howl tore through the air, followed, after a few seconds, by an increasingly intense and angry barking.

If the overseers were asleep, at least one of their dogs must have been suffering from insomnia. This one, sensing the smell of their bodies, which had become stronger and more pregnant with sweat, felt compelled to raise the alarm to the other dogs and the guards, who also woke up and began to shout and scream at each other, wondering what was going on and where and who were the intruders that the animals had alerted.

The first thing they did to find them was to switch on the floodlights that the entire monument area. After that, the surveillance men were quick to scatter, some on one side and some on the other, in search of any saboteurs or intruders. Even the dogs, although not trained for this purpose, also began to collaborate in the search, barking louder and louder as they pulled the watchmen towards the source of the unusual human odours.

At this point, spurred on by the furious barking of the dogs, there was nothing left for the small group to do but run at breakneck speed, no longer holding hands in the hope of getting out of the enclosure before being caught.

Amin, who was initially in the centre of the group, began to run faster and faster, having only the dark figures ahead of him by a few steps as an indication. Suddenly, reeds and other bushes appeared in front of the child; he

thought it best to run towards them, so as to hide from the eyes of the pursuers.

He had barely taken a few steps into the vegetation when he felt himself falling down into a hole that had suddenly opened beneath his feet. He felt lost as he slid further and further down, barely held back by the branches and numerous plants that rose up to the top of what looked like a well, fortunately not too deep

He felt the pain in his arms, legs and face flayed by the branches in which he had become entangled, but what hurt him most was the thought that perhaps none of his people had noticed what had happened to him. There was therefore the risk of remaining in that well for who knows how long. His prediction turned out to be correct: no one in the group had noticed his disappearance.

Pursued by the howling of the dogs and the cries of the guards who had tracked down the fugitives and were trying to catch up with them, both her father and the rest of the group had thought only of running at breakneck speed towards the exit, without stopping to check if there were any absentees.

They did not make this check until after they had left the fence. It was only then that they noticed that little Amin was missing, while the latter's friend Dabir, who was very frightened and crying and insistently asked to have his distant mother by his side, was very much present. Poor Dabir could never have imagined such a dramatic and traumatic end to the enterprise in which he had so insistently asked to participate.

Both the children and Amin's father did not know what to do at this point: turning back would mean surrendering themselves into the arms of the guardians ready to have them arrested, for which, at least the adults would surely be sentenced to a very expensive fine if not to prison. The only

possible course of action was to wait for the guardians to return to their barracks, and then return to the site and retrace the same route, hoping that Amin was not already in their hands.

In the latter case, it was better to be prepared to offer those men a large reward for his release. When the group realised that the barking had ceased completely and the voices of the guards could no longer be heard, the father decided to go back into the enclosure, taking only his oldest son with him.

In the meantime, Amin, who had heard the dogs barking and the guards talking right next to the well into which he had fallen, was trying to realise what he could do when the time came, to get out of that damned hole. He realised that the pit must not even have been very deep if the reeds and other shrubs, in their search for light, had managed to emerge outside. Besides, it was almost dry.

From the bottom, even a few moonbeams could be glimpsed, illuminating the edge and the brushwood. He too, like his father and brother, realised that it was necessary to wait for everything to quieten down before attempting the ascent. Of course, it was not a good idea to shout for help. The guardians were waiting for nothing else. Everything had to be done in complete silence.

To deceive the wait he tried to find, by groping, a possible handhold or something that might facilitate his ascent. All he found was a piece of iron embedded in the wall. Perhaps that iron served as a step to inspect the shaft but, strangely enough, there were no others above it, so that hypothesis had to be discarded.

He realised that in order to ascend, it was necessary to use plants, hoping that they had a trunk strong enough to support his weight. Unfortunately, there was nothing else to do but test them at the right time. This came after about

twenty minutes: the time it took the guards to reach the fence and then turn back. He heard them pass by him as they chatted, asking each other who might have entered the fences.

The boy feared that the dogs, by barking, would discover his hiding place, but fortunately the stench of decaying vegetables that had settled over the years on the bottom of the well into which he had fallen, seemed to cover his smell well. On the other hand, the guards, having done their duty, were eager to go back to sleep and shouted at the dogs who continued to bark and whine

When he realised that the opportune moment had arrived, he thought of using that one iron step to climb up, and then getting help from the plants. As he put his full weight on that iron, he strangely felt that it gave way a little, as if it were a doorknob. This surprised him but he had neither time nor inclination to check his guess

He had to get out as soon as possible. His father and the others, who had certainly noticed his absence, were certainly waiting spasmodically for him. It was not at all difficult to climb. Ever since he was a child, but even now when he didn't go to school for some reason, which was often, all he did was climb the trees that lined the river.

He had just put his head out of the well when he saw shadows coming towards him. Recognising his father and older brother, he ran towards them, embracing them. The latter, enjoining silence, taking him by the hand almost in fear that he might disappear again, led him out of the enclosure.

Mario and Salvatore

Dr Andrea had foreseen that the opening of the ward would cause various problems: some of the 'guests' would escape from the hospital, some would annoy passers-by, some others would get hurt. He was therefore prepared to face all these unpleasant consequences of his reckless act.

However, the unusual situation that had arisen in the streets of the hospital was causing problems that he had not thought about at all. One of these was pointed out to him after a few days by the nun at the tailor's shop.

The woman, a young woman with considerable grit, entered the ward and then her room with a fighting stance, without even knocking, and presented herself to him with a confident and decisive attitude, protesting about what was happening in the avenues: "Doctor, I, like any good Christian, do not want the sick to be sacrificed by being locked up in the wards, but to be able to enjoy the freedom to roam freely in the avenues, but I assure you that some really nasty things are happening. And the nun: "There are patients wandering around the hospital as mother made them. What do you plan to do about these?"

Andrea tried to defend herself by saying that there was a nurse in front of the door with the task of checking that those leaving had some clothes on. "Actually," the nun corrected herself, "they go out dressed, as you say, by your nurse, but since they cannot wear belts for fear that they might attempt suicide, they are forced to hold their breeches with one hand, which are very often not their size, so when they meet someone or something, if they raise both arms even just to say hello, by force of gravity the trousers go down, and since they don't even have pants... do you understand what happens, doctor?"

Andrea, restraining himself from laughing, took the ball and answered: "Dear sister, I understand very well what's going on, but you are in charge of the tailoring, invent something to prevent the trousers from coming down when they are no longer held by the hands and have something to put under the trousers. I know you are very good and capable, I'm sure you will find a way to avoid this.'

Taken aback, the nun was forced to come to an agreement that was reached on a fairly fair basis: the doctor would not let out patients who were too easily distracted for a few days; the tailor would fit the trousers with something, such as braces, that would counteract the force of gravity, so as to avoid any scandal.

At this point, Andrea, who had not missed the nun's interest in Franco and his 'children' on the first day of the ward's opening, wanted to try to clear up at least one of the many mysteries in which this strange man was involved:

"Tell me something, sister, did you know Franco and the sick people living with him?"

"Of course I know that man: he comes to us to clean the rooms where we work, so I don't waste the time of the seamstresses who have so much to do, but the ones he calls 'his children' I didn't know, although he used to tell us about them."

"And you reciprocate with a few extra dresses, right?" Andrea added.

"Certainly. Is there something wrong with that?" The nun defended herself.

"No, no, I asked him out of pure curiosity. I'm glad he's coming to work for you. In fact, now that the department is open, I expect you to use some of his people to do the cleaning as well".

"Certainly, doctor. And thank you for listening to me".

"Thanks to you sister"

Andrea was pleased with himself. He had noticed the seamstresses' interest in Franco on the opening day of the department, and from the nun's visit he had at least obtained an answer to his inner questions: in order to ensure a constant supply of new, clean linen for himself and his family, that clever Franco had created a direct connection to the source of the clothing supply. The man knew more than the devil

The second problem was presented to him by a phone call from one of his colleagues who ran a women's ward. She, seeing that getting patients out of the ward did not create particularly dramatic situations, had thought of doing the same thing. But there was one problem that seemed insurmountable to her: what would happen if male patients met female patients outside their wards?

His request to Andrea was clear: to avoid possible sentimental or worse sexual mishaps, it was necessary for men and women to go out alternately, one day the males and one day the females

Andrea objected to this request by posing a simple question: "Dear colleague, what would you say if the mayor of Messina made an ordinance requiring his fellow citizens to leave their homes on alternate days, one day only men and one day only women?"

It was strange for Andrea to walk around the half-empty rooms of his ward. Observing him as the patients were almost all wandering the hospital's avenues, it seemed to him much bigger but fortunately also much cleaner.

Walking slowly along with the chief nurse, he noticed that the beds were all clear except for one: that of the contained boy. The latter, for safety reasons, had a newly hired young nurse next to him, whom the doctor knew for his beligerent and argumentative character. The nurse, enrolled in

his second year at university, was taking advantage of his tedious task of checking on the contained patient to study the examination subject he was due to give any day now

Seeing the doctor with his boss beside him, he stood up to say hello but also to ask polemically: "Doctor what are we going to do with this boy? Must his fate always be to be bedridden?" His boss was quick to reprimand him for the inappropriate intervention: "You mind your own business. Someone else is responsible for thinking about these things.

However, Andrea took the opportunity to ask him: "What do you think we could do to get him out of this damn bed? Do you have anything to suggest?"

"Don't listen to him, doctor," the chief nurse intervened again, "you don't know him, but this is a cocky, know-it-all young man. Just because he is enrolled at the university, he thinks he knows everything, but he has no experience."

And to his colleague: "You just do your duty and don't you dare to read anymore when you are on duty, or else I'll throw you out!"

The young nurse did not give up: "If you allow me, doctor, I have an idea. You could put him, strapped up of course, in a wheelchair and take him out of the ward with the others. At least he could get some sun. Can't you see how pale he is?"

"Let's try," was Andrea's quick if unconvinced decision, "go get a wheelchair, we'll stay here with the boy". The wait was short. After which Mario, held by the arms to prevent him from hurting himself, was dragged on top of a horrible but very sturdy wheelchair, handcrafted from iron tubes welded together as best he could by the hospital blacksmith.

However, the boy, despite being already seated and well tied up, did not give up. Taking advantage of a mo-

ment's distraction of the bystanders, he caused himself and the chair to lose their balance with a violent thrust of his trunk, so that they both tumbled to the floor with a crash.

At this point the chief nurse, who was against this solution, could not refrain from railing against the young colleague who had not foreseen that the boy's self-destructive behaviour would continue even if he was tied to the chair: "Did you see what you did? You and your crazy ideas!"

Luckily Andrea seemed to have the solution ready and turned to the young nurse:

"You, Santoro, when we take him out will have the task of continuing to stand by him and prevent this from happening again. I hope you agree with me and commit yourself to doing this".

"Of course I agree," the nurse resumed, "don't worry, I'll be by his side. Mario won't get hurt again, I assure you."

And so, after dragging her around the ward, without leaving her for even a moment, with a terrible clanking noise the wheelchair and the aggressive intolerant occupant who kept fidgeting in the hope of getting her catapulted again, they were taken out of the ward to enjoy, so to speak, the sun and the morning air

In a manner of speaking, since this intervention, which was supposed to be the operators' last hope of helping this boy, seemed to be experienced by the person concerned as further violence against him. Violence that deserved the fiercest insults to be distributed equally not only to the operators but also to all those who, by accident or misfortune, passed by him.

Everyone, no matter whether they were patients, doctors, nurses, visitors, priests or nuns, without distinction of gender or role, were without any regard invested by Mario with a series of contumelies concerning their mothers and sisters who, according to him, all did the same old job. Not

only that, but when he had finished insulting their women, out of a sense of fairness and justice he then took care to do the same to the males of their families: husbands, fathers, grandparents, relatives and kindred, who, according to him, were colluding or unaware of what the women were doing in their absence.

The promise made by the young and cultured nurse did not last long, first only for a few minutes then longer and longer, the boy was entrusted to other hands and other eyes. The hands and eyes were those of the sturdiest and strongest of the young men hanging around Mario: it was Salvatore. The boy had been unable to escape the attraction exerted towards him not only by his battling occupant but also by the wheelchair.

That chair had stirred up many harrowing memories that rushed through his mind, like the water in an underground river when it manages to get out of the rock that had trapped it. They were memories of not one but many chairs like that, all the same colour blue and all placed side by side. These chairs remained for most of the day tied by their backs, together with their occupants, to an iron tube that ran along the four walls of a room that, to facilitate cleaning, was covered up to the ceiling with white tiles.

On those chairs he saw the faces and bodies of his former ward mates, of which Mario was also a member. Some were older, others were smaller than him. Almost all of them were shaking and crying, shouting and begging, spitting and vomiting, while rivulets of urine and faeces came out of their lower bodies from time to time, adding to and mixing with the excrement of their comrades next to them, despite the fact that the nurses diligently placed under each child, in addition to the jars to collect the excrement, plenty of sawdust to facilitate cleaning. Thus the smell of

sawdust, mixed with the stench of urine and faeces was predominant throughout the ward.

In the centre of that room stood a large solid iron structure, perfectly square like the room, on which rested a huge white marble slab, like a gravestone in a cemetery. This iron structure, covered with marble, which in places had become chipped over time due to the wheelchairs banging against it, served as a table for him and the other children when they were taken away from the wall along with the chairs for meals and brought closer, but not too close, to the large table.

Sitting in those wheelchairs, with his bottom uncovered so that he could do his business without troubling the nurses, Salvatore had spent some years of his life with his companions. On those chairs he had prayed and begged for a caress, when he felt the need to be hugged and cuddled; on those chairs he had screamed and cried, when no one came near him to console him. On those chairs beside the marble table he had eaten by bringing his hands to the aluminium bowl that was offered to him in the morning with milk and bread crumbled inside, at noon with pasta and meatballs, at dusk with vegetables and eggs.

Those chairs had also become a part of their bodies for the other children who, after a few days, climbed into them on their own every morning, without fuss and without protest. Only in the evening, after rocking for most of the day right and left, back and forth, would they come down as if intoxicated but without any joy, to go each to their own cot. The latter, together with the almost dark room, was for the children the most feared place in the ward.

For it was in those beds that shadows, nightmares, ghosts, dragons and other unclean beings waited for the white neon light to go out in order to appear and attack them with their jaws wide open. Those shadows, ghosts and dra-

gons, at those moments, taking advantage of the darkness, seemed to emerge from all parts of the dormitory, without any rules or preferences.

At times they attacked Dario, making him cry with terror, at other times they went to the opposite side of the room and frightened Joseph, who cried out in vain for protection from his absent and distant mother. On some evenings, it seemed that these monsters, born of fears, multiplied and infected all the children, so that, without fearing the nurses' reproaches, they all screamed together.

And since these terrifying presences could not be escaped, Salvatore and also many of his companions covered their heads with blankets throughout the night, unafraid of suffocating, waiting for day to come.

When, in the morning, one could finally leave the darkness of the rooms to sit on those cold iron chairs, the long neon in the centre of the room was greeted with joy, for with its intense white light it almost always managed to drive away the dragons and ghosts of the night

Apart from his attraction to wheelchairs, Salvatore was also fascinated by Mario, not only because he had been his partner in the ward he had left, but especially because, despite his bad temper, he was the only one who could entertain him and all the other children.

His insults, swearing and sneering were the only pleasant thing in those dreary places.

Mario very soon asked him to somehow get him a cigarette to smoke. Giovanni immediately satisfied him by asking passers-by for one and since his companion could not bring his hands to his mouth, as his arms were tied, he helped him in this operation by putting the cigarette butt between his lips from time to time.

His task did not end with smoking, he was always the one who fed him and it was he who called the nurses when

Mario had to go to the bathroom. In short, after a few days, a strange, intense and healthy friendship, made up of understanding, games and mutual support, had grown stronger between John and Mario

After a few weeks, both Andrea and the nurses, noticing with pleasure that Mario had become strangely more cheerful and smiling, whereas before he was perpetually sad and angry, tried to let go of his arm. Not only did the boy no longer hit himself, but he was happy to be able to smoke and eat without any outside help.

This encouraged them to let his other arm and legs free as well. The self-injury seemed to have disappeared completely, not only that, but he, taking advantage of his friend's considerable strength, used his rickety wheelchair as if it were a charming racing car. With this, to amuse himself at other people's expense, he let himself be chauffeured running up and down the narrow streets of the hospital, so as to bring home his laughter, jokes and sneers, which he distributed profusely, indiscriminately to everyone, even though his favourite victims were the nuns, the more serious and strutting ladies and the impeccable men in their grey suits and white shirts.

It is difficult to describe what the psychiatric hospital had become after the opening of some wards. It was not a hospital as in a nosocomial hospital one expects patients to lie in their beds waiting patiently for the staff to treat and assist them; on the other hand, those strange people who wandered the boulevards could hardly have met all together in a normal town.

Too different were their clothes, too different was their hair tousled or trimmed in a good way, too different were their behaviour, too different were their faces and eyes mostly dull, or excessively lit up with anxiety or fear. Not to

mention the manner of their approach: some did not talk at all and, fearful, slipped close to the walls of the wards, as if they were shadows wandering restlessly among those places of pain, trying not to be seen; others, excessively brazen, stood in front of visitors and operators to ask for money or at least a few cigarettes; some ran and jumped around frightening passers-by; while others, on the other hand, remained motionless for hours lying under the trees as if they were sleeping.

Then there were those who, sitting on a bench, spent their day playing with a blade of grass that they held between their fingers or nibbled on in their mouth. Even stranger was the behaviour of the so-called 'normals'. Many of them, even though they worked for the hospital or had relatives admitted within those walls, were trying hard not to see the strange humanity that Andrea and the other doctors had directly and brazenly revealed for the first time before their eyes; therefore, wrinkling their noses, they preferred to turn their heads, disgusted at having been forced, in the name of modernity and hospitality, to live with such a different and degraded humanity. Only a few, in the name of charity and human understanding, felt the duty and pleasure of approaching those strange new citizens to offer them, with a smile, a cigarette and some change to spend at the hospital bar

Andrea, walking through the narrow streets of the hospital, certainly felt the pleasant satisfaction of having done something for his patients, but along with these positive feelings, the awareness that he had still done too little continued to torment him. He was convinced that those people deserved much, much more than a few open doors.

The family home

This time it was Luisa's idea. The woman, having recovered from the restlessness that had invaded her after realising her overly intimate gesture towards the young doctor, seeing that the latter showed no sign of having noticed that instinctive contact, in order not to think of anything other than his work, so as to expel all tender illusions from her mind and heart, she explained to Andrea what she had been thinking about during those days.

A law had been passed by the Italian parliament that suited them. This law made it possible to transform forced confinement into voluntary. This operation, if properly exploited, could open the door to many interesting possibilities.

If compulsorily hospitalised patients only had the right to be supervised, treated and cared for, those same patients, once recognised as 'volunteers', could ask for much more: first of all, to be discharged and return to their homes, if of course there was a home available to take them in; furthermore, with a simple written permission, they could go out and walk the streets of the city as free citizens, but also live on their own, in self-managed communities.

Andrea immediately realised that the possibilities offered by these regulations were very interesting, so immediate efforts had to be made to implement these 'transformations'!

The documentation was not particularly complicated. After a few weeks, through the considerable efforts of Luisa and the hospital's administrative staff, almost all the patients in her ward had been turned into voluntary patients!

Apparently, but only apparently, nothing had changed for each of them: they lived in the same stinking rooms, ate

only with a spoon and with their hands from Goliath-washed cups, slept in the same peeling and rusty beds, but if the Director and Dr Andrea had not lacked courage, they could have achieved much more.

The first thing to implement, Andrea thought, was a group home for the whole of Franco's group. What was the point of keeping those sixteen patients inside the ward if they could live outside. And why did they have to be supervised and cared for by nurses, if the foreigner had proved he could do more and better?

"Call me Franco, please," was Andrea's request to the head nurse.

When the man was in front of him:

"Look, Franco, we thought that you and your patients could live alone outside the ward. You would have to manage on your own in everything, except for the medication, which will continue to be administered by the nurses. What do you think? Could such a thing be feasible?"

"What about food?" was Franco's practical request.

"You can take your food directly from the kitchen or from the ward, your choice.

"Yes, but where is the place where we should put the beds and the table for eating?" was the other simple and immediate request of the stranger, who looked at him attentively, though without showing any particular emotion.

"We are looking for suitable premises for this purpose, but if you find something, let me know".

When, on leaving the ward, he saw Franco and the dressmaker's nun talking to each other, he thought it was pointless for him to look for a suitable place for the group.

In fact, the next day, as soon as he arrived at the ward, the foreigner was there waiting for him. He wanted to show him around the premises he had identified to set up a family home.

These premises were located right next to the hospital chapel. The first impression was disheartening. Andrea had dreamt, rather than imagined, of a small flat for the first patients to come out of the wards, equipped, like all real houses, with normal wooden beds, at least two bathrooms, and a small living room with sofas and armchairs in which to sit and watch TV. That one room, narrow and long as a gut, which surrounded the hospital chapel on two sides, equipped only with a basin with running water for washing dishes and a shabby bathroom, did not seem to suit him at all.

Among other things, it also appeared unhealthy, as there were a few small windows on the outer side only, which let in some air and light, so poorly that without artificial lighting it was difficult to see where to put one's feet. The original use of that room must have been as a sacristy for the chapel, but this initial use had been distorted over time, so that it was now being used as a storage room for all the old hospital furniture that had been declared 'out of use'.

Andrea did not like that place at all: he did not accept that in the change the situation of his patients would get worse. He would have looked for something better! He went to the director and told him his idea: to create a totally self-managed family home. Having easily obtained his assent, he moved on to the next request: the necessary premises. But to this request his superior did not know what to answer, except that there were no suitable premises, neither inside nor outside the hospital. He concluded by saying: "You can see very well that the hospital is full as an egg."

He returned to the ward disappointed and bitter.

Luisa, in the company of Franco, was there anxiously waiting for him. The young social worker was also of her opinion: those rooms around the chapel, used at that time as a storage room, were not suitable. Better not to do anything with them.

Only Franco thought otherwise.

"We'll manage; we'll take care of it doctor".

"But how do you want to cope and what do you want to think? Space is what it is..." Andrea retorted harshly.

"I took the measurements. Our beds fit in those rooms".

"But you are many... too many..."

"Let us try," Franco insisted again.

In the end, albeit reluctantly, the young doctor gave his consent.

Over the next few days he tried not to think about the family home. The disappointment had been too great. Could it be that the monster he called the 'asylum institution' never gave up?

However, like children who want to play with something that is surely bigger than themselves, he did not have the courage to oppose Franco's demands, convinced that for him and the others in his group it was just a game, after which reality would take over.

The list of things the man asked for every morning grew longer every day: enamel paints, paintbrushes, a radio, a television set, coloured paper, many glasses. And later: steel cutlery, plates, dish drains, pots, brooms, frying pans etc.

Although many of these items he managed to retrieve from his home or by asking friends and relatives, there were some that he necessarily had to buy. These Franco paid for without batting an eyelid, out of his own pocket. But it was useless to wonder where the man got the money from. He just had it.

As he walked in and out of the ward, he frequently saw someone from Franco's group laughingly carrying one of the many things needed in the family home. Some of the 'children' were intent on dragging bedheads, others nets; it

was not difficult to meet someone from the group holding a record eater or a large amount of laundry on their arms. All were on their way to their new abode.

Although he had decided to let them do it, his doubts about the feasibility of a family home in that condition increased every day. When he then saw how they were renovating the space front of what they already called their home, he had no doubt that it was just a game. He saw Franco together with some of his people planting two rows of branches, almost a metre high, with a tuft of leaves at the top, on either side of the entrance, in the mistaken belief and illusion that they could take root, take root and turn into flowering trees.

At that point, even his judgement of the man as a person of great intelligence and common sense collapsed miserably. Such high branches could never take root. What the whole group of rabble-rousers were so active about was just a game, like what he and the other children used to do when they would build little houses out of stones and mud in a corner of the yard, and at the end, just as they had done, they would put a few leafy branches next to and in front of the house to decorate it.

He was therefore surprised when, after a few days, the nurses asked him how they should deal with those patients who now lived outside the ward. Only then did he decide to check for himself, what that group of overgrown children was doing.

As he had imagined almost all the available space had been used to put the bunk beds. These, now repainted a beautiful sky-blue, predictably stood on both sides of the room attached to each other. Only in the centre of the room was a narrow corridor, while they had left the entrance free of beds to place a long table and benches. At the end of the

corridor, next to the sink, they had placed a small table with plates and other dishes.

There was no doubt that that arrangement, at least from the point of view of space, was worse than the one they had before in the ward, because in the large room where they came from, not only were there no bunk beds, but the windows were large and bright and there was plenty of room to move around. In that place, on the other hand, every inch had been used and therefore it was very difficult to move around. Moreover, the small windows at the top were absolutely insufficient to give light and allow a proper exchange of air to the room.

If the provincial doctor had seen that group home, he would have had it closed immediately for lack of a minimum of hygiene. However, he was struck by the beaming faces of each member of the group. All appeared happy and satisfied with their improvised and uncomfortable accommodation, so much so that, as he walked down the corridor, some of the younger patients, jumping from one bed to another, accompanied his visit with claps of joy. He thought disconcerted that fortunately for him, the smell of turpentine coming from the recently repainted beds covered the stench that must surely have been there, given the high number of occupants in the house

Trying not to show his disappointment, he ended his visit by wishing the group to live there with serenity and harmony.

Back in the ward she described to Luisa what she had seen. For her too, one of the few positive notes of that arrangement was the greater freedom and autonomy that the 'children' now enjoyed, but otherwise the environmental conditions had certainly deteriorated. The other positive element was that this shift of patients had made it possible to offer more space to those still living inside the ward.

About a month after the initial move, Andrea and Luisa received a strange invitation. Mario, entering the young doctor's office like a tornado with his squeaky chair pushed by Salvatore, with a mocking and winking smile reported that Franco wanted them to eat at their place.

The two young men would have accepted anything and towards everything they were ready and willing except for such an invitation. Each of them trembled, perplexed, at the thought of the level of hygiene in the canteen to which they had been invited. However, unable to offer any valid refusal, they accepted, with the aim also of observing directly how that group of patients lived on a daily basis.

The first thing Andrea noticed was that the trunks, planted very loosely on either side of the entrance to the house were still miraculously alive, indeed the stunted little leaves at the top had clearly increased in number and volume.

Upon entering, they were immediately struck by the predictable confusion of objects, furnishings and people who were present and swarming around the premises. It also seemed as if all the occupants were bustling about and doing something: some were laying out the tarp with tasselled, huge red roses on the long table; some were helping their comrades who were in trouble to go to the bathroom to wash their hands; some were arranging the brand new porcelain plates, glass glasses, water bottles, wine bottles and cutlery, among which were the forbidden knives and forks, on the table.

They were especially struck by the very unusual décor of the whole room: a large, old television set, no doubt a gift from some benefactor, towered high on a shelf surrounded by a series of plaster statuettes of Jesus, Our Lady, St Francis, Padre Pio and other lesser-known saints, which were accompanied by three or four rosary beads.

In addition, from some colourful radios and record players placed haphazardly on the beds next to the dining table, the notes of the latest musical hits were blaring, which hardly connected with the Saints and the rosaries. Real flowers, mixed with many fake ones, were scattered everywhere: they were attached to the backs of the beds, hung from the light wires and on the walls, peeped out from under mattresses

As Salvatore and Mario placed the guests at the head of the table, they, especially Luisa, struggled to conceal the intimate distress they felt because of the bad taste of those who had furnished that room

When everyone had somehow managed to sit down, it was time for the long complex prayer intoned with folded hands by Mario who, changing his usual impertinent timbre of voice for a moment, recited it using a courtly, warm and emphatic tone. The boy's face and tone of voice at that moment would have fooled anyone as to the sincerity of his devotion, had they not known from whom those prayers came. Only Franco, who had settled down next to the two guests, was the one who could most contain his exultation and behaved like a perfect host, quietly and graciously offering his guests wine, water and various foods.

The man immediately admitted what the guests had already suspected, namely that those excellent macaroni with sauce, Milanese meat cutlets and the mixed salad did not come from the hospital kitchen but had been prepared by themselves, using a small kitchenette with which they had also equipped themselves.

Once the prayer was over, Mario immediately resumed his role of unscrupulous jester, starting to comment on and torment, with salacious phrases, the presence of the couple sitting at the head of the table and the love and se-

xual relationship that, in his opinion, must surely exist between them.

The two young men, faced with the boy's innuendo, not deciding whether to counter or pretend nothing had happened, looked at each other perplexed, straining to smile at the jokes. However, for the first time they were both visibly prey to a strange disturbance, so much so that, when lunch was over, Andrea's arm, as if endowed with a life of its own, went to rest for a few moments on Luisa's hips, who willingly accepted that contact without moving away and without protesting at all.

Back in the ward, they discussed at length the incredible speed with which that group had abandoned the timetables, rules and style dictated by the institution, to acquire the normal, healthy habits of a family, certainly a weird one with very questionable aesthetic tastes, but still a family.

A few days after that memorable lunch, as Andrea walked up the street leading to the hospital, a street filled with shops of all kinds and already decorated for Christmas with cascades of multicoloured lights descending from above, he was attracted by a strange gathering on the pavement to his right.

He did not understand what was going on. Many cars slowed down, some had even stopped at the side of the road and from them the occupants got out to look around, while others walked away shaking their heads, with an expression of great perplexity in their faces at what they had just seen

Andrea also stopped and got out of the car, thinking to be of use or to render aid in case there were injured or sick people. What was his surprise to see, completely surrounded by onlookers, Franco's entire group slowly proceeding along the pavement, amidst the curiosity and perplexity of the onlookers!

The people who surrounded them and watched curiously, had not yet managed to understand where they had come from and who these strange individuals were who, although somewhat intimidated, were walking along the pavement holding hands. Their doctor, approaching Franco, asked him where they were going and the latter, having stopped the whole group, calmly replied that, given the beautiful day, they were going to the church just down the street to listen to Holy Mass

The doctor was about to reprimand them for the risk they faced while making this sortie outside the hospital, but held back in time.

"Who am I," he said to himself, "to restrict their freedom?"

And so, feeling like a good father giving his children permission to go out alone in a big city for the first time, he could do nothing more than advise them to be cautious when crossing the streets.

Seeing, however, how each was shaking the other's hand, he realised that his recommendations, as are often those of apprehensive mothers and fathers, were perfectly useless. Those unusual pedestrians lacked many things, but certainly not prudence.

Bashira

Franco had also noticed that a certain understanding had arisen between Luisa and the doctor that could be a prelude to something more important and intimate. After the lunch he had offered them, seeing them walking very close, he too felt enveloped by the magic of that moment and thought back to his meeting with Bashira, his bride. He remembered above all the day of their engagement.

She was there, beside him. Only for a moment did the maiden's gaze meet his, before they both lowered their eyes. Beautiful? Amin did not know whether to consider her beautiful. Perhaps in the eyes of his friends she was.

Her face, left free of the hijab, the blue veil that completely hid her hair and then opened softly over her shoulders, appeared regular, sweet and luminous. On the other hand, it was not possible to make out the features of her body, which could barely be glimpsed, covered as it was by a long, ample light-coloured robe, richly embroidered in yellow and green, like ears of wheat in a meadow.

However, the large brown eyes, barely made up to enhance their shape and depth, appeared full of intense warmth, helpfulness and tenderness: he could easily judge them as beautiful. Thinking of her as a woman like her sisters, he hoped that she was not as impertinent as they were, or, like them, capricious and uncontentious.

Watching her as, with her eyes downcast, she listened attentively to what was being exchanged between the two elderly mothers who, as if they were accomplices, were giggling amongst themselves, she felt that the woman was distant, extraneous and therefore did not dare disturb her.

On the other hand, she also did not want to go to the group of men who had secluded themselves in the corner

opposite to where they were standing, to discuss and settle the final terms of the marriage contract. Such a gesture would have been insensitive towards the young woman. Observing the very serious and detached way in which Bashira's father, his father and some uncles were discussing him and his future bride, without at all manifesting or perhaps even feeling the inner turmoil that he at that moment felt inside his heart but also in his body, he wondered if when he was older he too would become so unemotional.

Never had he felt so restless. The wooden chair on which he sat, despite the fact that his father had nicely stuffed it and his mother had made it even more comfortable by putting a large cushion on it, seemed to him to be made of nails and prickly pins.

Her mother had also prepared a chair and cushion similar to hers for Bashira. The cushions, larger than the chairs, were covered with pillowcases that the woman herself had embroidered with great patience and care, in order to use them for special occasions like that. On these pillowcases, the colour red and gold embroidery abounded and far outweighed the more delicate shades.

His uneasiness was accentuated when his mother began to recount in great detail some episodes from her son's past. What she called 'my little Amin', as she described him, seemed like a child who was only busy thinking and then practising a multitude of little and big naughtinesses.

What the young man's mother reported to the future mother-in-law were real incidents, but, as was her custom, she peppered them with exclamations and embarrassing details that Amin would have preferred to forget, but which the old woman liked to propose whenever she chatted with others. Naturally, included among these episodes was the most sensational and dramatic one of when her son had en-

ded up at the bottom of a well after descending from the top of the great pyramid.

"But do you understand?" he said, "a child putting such a thing in his head! And how he insisted to his father! And what does he do?... he tells him yes, while I was terrified that something bad might happen to him. The father always had a soft spot for little Amin. Why, do you understand? He's the youngest of my sons and then he looks like a drop of water just like his grandfather. And when they came back... and when they told me that he had ended up in the well!... May Allah protect us, I felt like dying. Fortunately everything turned out fine. But if the guards had caught him they would surely have whipped him and put him in prison, my boy! And now instead, look how big he has become, and he wants to marry your Bashira'.

Each time, he could not understand whether his mother was recounting his adventure to sing his praises or to mock him who, small as he was, had pretended to participate in such a great undertaking. This time too, like the others in which these events concerning him were re-proposed to an audience outside his family, he felt an urgent need to get away not only from those speeches but also from his home.

Bashira reassured him. The young woman, turning towards him, brushed his arm and let him know that she was close to him, that she understood his discomfort, but that she was also happy that this misadventure had been resolved in the best possible way. Not only that, but asking him: "How old were you?" And listening to his answer with an "oh" she also conveyed her appreciation for the courage he, so young, had shown in participating and carrying out such a feat.

After so many years, he still remembered that soft, small, ringed hand brushing against his arm and the warm expression of the young woman who at that moment, with

few gestures and equally few words, had put him at ease and made his heart leap with gratitude.

Having calmed down, he began to listen with greater interest to what was said between the two old women, not least because, in turn, Bashira's mother, not to be outdone, had begun to recount the most salient episodes in the life of her daughter, whom she was proposing to marry that day, and these episodes were of extreme interest to him.

After the two fathers, assisted by the other men from the two families acting as mediators, had finally reached a good agreement for the future contract to be signed on the wedding day, everything took place in a more informal manner. The brothers and sisters of the bride and groom-to-be, with their respective husbands, wives and children, who had been waiting in the courtyard in front of the house under the large sycamore tree, were brought into the group to celebrate.

Everyone was now so cheerful and giggly that they seemed to have drunk not the very hot mint tea that was then being offered in small glass cups placed on large pewter trays, but the wine or other spirits that the unbelievers used and abused. Liquor that fortunately had never entered that very Koran-observant house.

While that simple mint drink, together with the accompanying biscuits, had spread its aroma throughout the rooms, those present noticed, laughing with relish, that the most serious and composed on this festive occasion were the two betrothed. Both of them, perhaps feeling intimately involved in the important step they were about to take, could barely smile at the good wishes that were addressed to them and withdrew from participating in the unbridled merriment that had involved the other family members.

Hearing that Bashira felt and experienced the same fears and emotions as he did made him feel even closer to

her; so that, at a moment when, stepping out into the courtyard, he had managed to isolate himself from the others gathered for the feast, he inwardly made promises to his bride-to-be that he had never made to any woman. In his heart he promised not only to be faithful to her but, above all, to protect and take the utmost care of her person and soul.

He did not want his woman to lack anything, especially not the serenity, joy and respect that every good husband owes his wife. Turning then his eyes to heaven for a moment, he asked Allah to witness his promise but also to help him keep it.

The situation became even more awkward when the mothers asked their children to offer each other the gifts they had prepared. And so Amin gave her a gold necklace adorned with red coral. A necklace that the young men and the vociferous group of women wanted him to wear around his fiancée's neck.

This, predictably, intimidated him somewhat, since it was the first time he had touched Bashira's neck, but it was also the first time he had touched a woman from outside his family. She instead, after showing the other women the necklace, with a shy smile offered her future husband a leather belt that she herself had inlaid and decorated with finely worked silver plates.

This time Amin, in order not to make his fiancée feel the same embarrassment as he did, put the belt on and immediately tightened it at his hips, thus disappointing the on-lookers who were looking forward to joking about this gift as well, but instead received a look of gratitude from the girl for her extremely delicate gesture.

The celebrations ended late into the night.

The next day, Amin woke up and found himself in his bed, caressing the belt Bashira had given him. Only then was he able to admire the great skill and precision with

which both leather and silver had been worked and inlaid. He admired and was grateful for the many verses of the Koran with blessing phrases that she had carved into the leather, but above all he was enchanted by the skill with which his betrothed had carved various tiny birds and other small animals into the leather and silver.

They seemed to seek each other out, chase each other and play among the trees and flowers, as if they were in a fantastic Garden of Eden. In this garden, the woman had also managed to engrave on a silver plate on the front, near the buckle, a tiny bubbling waterfall that seemed to flow from a magical spring among the rocks.

Amin wondered if this engraving was just a wish for joy, happiness and well-being or if the woman, with the waterfall symbol, had wanted to emphasise the loving feelings she wanted to shower on him

Since he had no intention of ruining this little masterpiece, after looking at it and caressing it for a long time he placed it in a box containing his most cherished possessions, determined to wear it only on his wedding day and on major religious holidays.

The days and months passed peacefully: it was nice to stay and talk with his betrothed when she, together with some of his family, came to visit him or when he went to the village where the girl lived. As the actual wedding day approached, he felt the frenzy and excitement increase around him, in his family. Everyone, but especially the women, were getting more and more restless because of the preparations. He could hear his sisters talking all the time:

"Which dress did you choose?"

"No, this colour does not suit you!"

"Do you have a pair of gold shoes I can borrow? And your silver necklace that doesn't fit on your dress, can I wear it?"

"I have nothing to wear. The few clothes my husband buys me are not suitable for a wedding!"

"But why did they decide to get married in summer? For this season I have very few dresses to wear".

As well as being busy choosing and sewing clothes for them, the women were also busy preparing the ornaments to be placed in front of the house, and also the food to be offered to the guests.

The men, on the other hand, in addition to helping Amin build a simple dwelling for the future family, were busy preparing the tables and benches that were to be used for the wedding feast and, above all, they were busy building the golden throne where he and Bashira would sit, side by side, during the feast.

Bashira was the only one among the women to appear uninterested in clothes, ceremony and food. This made her sisters and especially her mother despair, who constantly tried to involve her in decisions:

"Bashira, what flowers do you want on your head?"

"Does the dress seem too long to you? Can you walk?"

"Do you want light make-up or like your sister's?"

"Remember to stand with your torso erect otherwise you look like you have a hump!"

"Bashira, why don't you answer me? If you don't want that man, I can ask your father to suspend everything."

Just hearing this, the girl shook herself and protested in response:

"What are you talking about, mum? You are mad. I love and want to marry Amin.

She often isolated herself, sitting under the apple tree at the bottom of her garden, to think and daydream. She reflected above all on the best way to relate to her future husband. When, though rarely, she confided in her sisters and friends, she strangely told them that she doubted her

abilities more than he did. She was sure that this young man, whom her parents had proposed to her and whom she had gladly accepted, would offer her all the attention a wife expects. She read it in his manner more than in his words.

From the very first meeting, she had felt treated not as a woman but as a queen, so that she had immediately felt an intense transport towards this young man, so attentive and delicate to every motion of her soul that it seemed almost impossible to her that such a man could exist. But would she be able to give him the tranquillity, tenderness and care that every husband is entitled to from his bride? Although she could not foresee the future, she felt in her heart that she would do everything to make her man, who was also the first and certainly the only one in her life, feel good.

She then dreamt of the house in which she, Amin and their children would live. Rather than thinking about beautifying her body for her wedding day, she thought about how to furnish this house to make it warm and comfortable for Amin and the children she, with Allah's will, would give him.

There came 'the day of the enné', during which she felt as never before, caught in a trap, totally at the mercy of the women of the family and beyond. From the morning she realised she had no escape, hunted constantly as she was by her sisters, her mother, her cousins, but also her friends, with no possibility of escape.

While some were busy arranging her dress, others were taking care of her hair. The eldest sister had booked herself in to treat and make her eyes and face beautiful. A cousin calmly and expertly, as if painting an artistic masterpiece, had devoted herself to her nails and hands.

They all felt obliged to do something for his body, regardless of his heart, which would have wished instead, only moments of tranquillity, peace and reflection, the latter to be

carried out, if possible, under his apple tree. He could only resist thinking that those tortures would only last that day and the next.

The next day she went, as if in procession, to Amin's house for the actual wedding. The gilded throne, which she disliked so much that she would have preferred the two chairs with embroidered cushions that Amin's mother had prepared for the engagement, had been placed right in front of the house, while the tables for the guests stood on either side, so that the bride and groom and the guests were always clearly visible to each other

After the two were neatly settled on the golden throne, the actual ceremony began with the signing of the '*nikab*', the long-prepared indefinite marriage contract, and with the gift of almonds to the guests, symbolising the difficulties but also the sweetness of the marital pact. They were to all intents and purposes husband and wife

The return of Mary

When Mary was dismissed from the psycho-educational medical centre, it began for her what she described to herself and to friends who had the patience to listen to her gripes and complaints, as the most useless and silly period of her life. Her father, taking advantage of the disappointment she had suffered at her first and only job, had insisted that she take care of 'serious things and not disturbed children'. In fact, initially, before she protested vociferously, he used to refer to them as 'demented children'.

Not to mention the centres where they were admitted which, according to the parent, were built and run to make money and certainly not to help 'those poor derelicts'. These were also the terms that the parent liked to use and that Mary hated to hear.

The parent hoped she would enrol in law school, but in the meantime, while waiting for her to decide on this judicious step, he begged a doctor, a client of his law firm, to take his daughter on as a secretary in order to keep her busy. The girl also accepted because, for the time being, she saw no other job opportunities.

However, his job, which consisted of scheduling appointments, greeting clients with a big smile when they came in and greeting them with the same smile on his face when they left the office, was not really to his liking.

Although she was well liked by all the doctor's patients, who did not fail to give her good tips before leaving, she felt useless or almost useless. She missed the faces of her children, she missed their smiles, their naive words of affection, their hugs and kisses, their eyes sometimes full of joy and sometimes full of melancholy, which she was able to chase away so well using her innate cheerfulness.

Therefore, when Marco, a young client of the doctor's, after a short and close courtship asked her to marry him, she gladly accepted his proposal of marriage, in the hope of soon having children of her own to love and devote herself to, as she could not do so for others.

The birth of little Paul was greeted with great satisfaction by the whole family, but it was a panacea especially for Mary who, after years, could finally express freely, without causing jealousy and envy, all that motherly tenderness and affection with which she felt her heart was overflowing.

Not only did she feel little Paolo at the centre of her thoughts and daily occupations, but he represented for her that warmth indispensable to give meaning and purpose to her days. Certainly the man she had married and loved was important to her, indeed fundamental to her young life, but that son was something more and different.

When she hugged him, she felt she was also surrounding and holding a part of herself. When she spoke to him, it was as if her tender words bounced off his little face and then projected onto his heart. When she played with him, she rediscovered and rediscovered her childhood games

It was still winter when his parents were forced to admit little Paolo. He like all children in the world, had had to face and endure numerous illnesses that he had brilliantly overcome in the past, but the coughing and the constant fever that had started with the first winter colds, seemed to want to stay with the little one, who, lacking in appetite and thin, trudged with fatigue through the rooms of the house, searching uselessly, with his red eyes, for a toy or a game that could at least partially satisfy him.

The infection ward, where her little son had been admitted in the hope of ascertaining and then curing his medical problems, reminded Mary a little of the psycho-medical centre from which she had been dismissed. Here, too, there

were children of various ages who, having undergone multiple therapies and examinations, clearly manifested their suffering by crying or, even worse, by that continuous wailing in which there is no longer any call for help, but only so much, immense suffering, combined with a kind of distrust in others and in the world around them. In these suffering children, when the illness is prolonged over time, others and the world around them are seen as incapable of ridding them of their ailments and therefore distrust arises in them.

In this department, too, there were reception times and strict rules that had to be strictly adhered to.

All this caused Mary anxiety mixed with disappointment. She would have liked to stay night and day close to her little one who was suffering and asking for her, but instead there were timetables to keep. She would have liked to prepare and offer him her favourite foods but even this was forbidden: no food was to enter from outside the ward.

Even toys had to be few and sterilised before being given to the little ones in hospital. Some of these rules she understood and accepted, others seemed absurd and excessive to her. Therefore, even though she was forced to take them into account, she rejected them within herself.

As she tried, sitting next to the little one's cot, to control his irritation, she held his little hand between her own and, to encourage him to resist not only the evil from which he suffered but also the hardships to which he was subjected, she often liked to kiss and nibble that little hand, jokingly.

The little one had just fallen asleep when a young nurse peeped through the door. This one, after addressing a fresh and bright greeting to all the children also approached their relatives. What a surprise Mary was to recognise in the young woman approaching her Laura, a former colleague of hers from the psycho-pedagogical medical centre. The latter,

having recognised her, also approached her and embraced her

It was good to find a familiar face in that sad place. It was nice to talk to that young colleague, so that we could relive that distant, exciting past together: the large palace, the fountain surrounded by a forest of flowers, the very distinguished and mellifluous director, the playroom and then the many little guests...

Mary, almost afraid of getting emotionally involved in the memories, did not have the courage to ask about her protégé: little Salvatore. It was Laura who reminded her. She thus learned from her in the most direct, but also in the most brutal way, of his progressive deterioration over the years. Worsening that had forced the operators to request his transfer to the city's psychiatric hospital.

Almost as if to excuse the director, but also her, her other colleagues and the centre, she added: "Mary, it could not be done otherwise. I assure you that child had become unmanageable and aggressive."

Mary was certain within herself that it was not so, it could not be so. For the woman to say that Salvatore was ungovernable and aggressive was surely an atrocious lie, useful only to cover their incapacity, their incompetence, their lack of love for the little one. After those words, something seemed to fall apart between the two of them. That colleague of hers, with whom relations had always been quite good, suddenly appeared to her as an icy and cruel enemy to be chased away and driven away. "She shouldn't have said those words, she shouldn't have even thought them," she cried to herself.

Already the frost that had worked its way between the two women submerged and chased away any remaining signs of friendship and closeness with its cold fingers. Both at

that moment felt the need to get away from each other. And so it was.

Laura, with the excuse of having to go to the other patients, waved her goodbye and ran off, leaving Mary much sadder and more upset than when she had met her. The latter, in turn, as soon as she saw her colleague disappearing through the door, as if her sleeping child lying on the bed was already dead, burst into a sobbing fit of grief, but also of growing anger and rage.

Giving free rein to her most aggressive and violent emotions, she hated, as she had never hated before, not only that magnificent mansion and its horrible director, but also indiscriminately, without saving anything or anyone, she hated, almost wishing to physically assault, every person or thing present in the places from which she had been ousted. She wanted to punish, but also to crush with her hands, every person or thing for the horrendous crime committed without her knowledge.

He hoped never to see his former colleague again, fearing that he would not be able to restrain himself from insulting her, thus indirectly harming his son who also depended on her care. In the meantime, little Paolo had woken up and understood, as children are quick to understand, the rapid change in a mother's attitude.

The somewhat dismayed son did not know what was happening to his usually very sweet and tender mother, while now from her stone-hard eyes he saw hatred, resentment and aggression spewing out.

This time it was he who tried to be close and console the woman, caressing her hair and face while, later, to distract her, he tried to keep her occupied by asking her many small tasks:

"I'm thirsty, Mummy, can I have water?" "I'm uncomfortable, Mummy, can you make my pillow better?" "I'm hungry. can I have another biscuit?"

Mary, while mechanically performing what her son requested, swore to herself that she would go to the psychiatric hospital to find Salvatore as soon as her son was discharged. And so she did.

The day after Paolo was discharged, the young woman, entrusting the little one to the care of his grandmother, as if she had an appointment not to be missed, drove alone through the city streets to the asylum.

That place, although not very far from the centre, was almost unknown to her, as it was to almost all the inhabitants of the city. The walls that surrounded it, but above all the fear that seemed to emanate from that place of suffering and pain, almost managed to erase the reality of its existence from the inhabitants of the city, but also from those of the neighbourhood.

Mary had never before wanted to go through those gates, nor would she ever have agreed to do so on her own. However, after what she had heard from her former colleague, she felt an incredible, disruptive energy and strength grow within her, allowing her to do what she had never done before, without feeling any fear.

Whatever it took, he had to find Salvatore. Whatever it took, he had to verify what his former colleague had told him and if, as he thought, it was all nonsense, she was certain she could snatch him from that awful place. And then who knows? To assuage his anger, perhaps he would ask his father to file a complaint against those responsible for that unjust, absurd admission. Although she did not yet know how to do this, she was certain she would succeed.

In the hospital secretary's office, where she asked for news of him, they told her that Salvatore was in the 'filthy

ward', a ward she would easily find as it was at the end of the driveway directly opposite the secretary's office. These words sounded even more like a cruel insult to her. Why did you put him in the filthy ward? Salvatore is not filthy at all, he is very clean". She almost shouted at the secretary who, spreading his arms in front of such impetuosity, made it clear to her that he really did not know what to answer.

The woman, who felt her soul tightened as if in a vice, saw her resolve falter for a moment, but only for a moment. Would she be able to cope with this?

Pale and visibly shaken, she descended the stairs from the secretariat to the driveway below, almost in a trance. As she approached the ward that had been indicated to her, she observed that, unlike the others that seemed deserted, there was a great bustle of patients around this place, easily recognisable both by their incredibly sloppy and dirty clothes and above all by the way they moved and behaved.

Some of them approached her asking for some money, others signalled that they wanted a cigarette to smoke, others asked her for biscuits. It seemed that all the city's p-handlers had congregated there. She was struck by the very different expressions on the strange population: some smiled sweetly, others looked terribly sad, others were visibly tense and walked as if terrified, almost crawling along the walls, as if hiding from imaginary enemies

When she reached the ward she was led into the presence of Dr Andrea by a nice young nurse who stood at the door to check that those leaving were wearing at least some clothes. Mary introduced herself to the doctor as the pedagogue who had treated Salvatore in the past. She therefore wished to see him again and if possible do something for him.

Andrea immediately liked the young woman. Not only for her very pleasant appearance, but above all for the atten-

tion she showed towards her young patient. It was the first time that an outpatient showed real interest in one of his inpatients. Usually the recommendations he received, and there were many, were aimed not at following and treating this or that patient as best as possible but, on the contrary, at forgetting about him, so as to avoid the temptation to discharge him

Andrea immediately told her that Salvatore was not in that ward, but that he had been living free, as far as he could, with a group of patients in a family home nearby. He then offered to accompany her. This news lifted her spirits a little. Not only was it not true that Salvatore was in the sweat ward, but fortunately he was practically free in a group home. She almost stopped herself from hugging the nice young doctor for the wonderful news!

Luisa, who throughout the interview had continued to attend to her work, having listened to the whole conversation, seeing them walk away together, looked at them with ill-concealed jealousy. That woman, blond like Andrea, beautiful like him, was certainly much more interesting than she was. And if she had continued to frequent the ward, what would have happened? Put on alert, she waited anxiously for their return.

Meanwhile Salvatore, together with his friend Mario, seemed to have disappeared. Even that stranger Franco, while continuing to attend to his things, had told the doctor looking for him with a shrug of his shoulders that the two of them had gone out together and that he really didn't know where they were. He also added that Mario, bratty as he was, had a negative influence on Salvatore's behaviour

As they looked around for their two friends, they heard the distinctive noise made by Mario's wheelchair and, soon after, saw it zigzagging down the hill at full speed, with its occupant laughing happily on top of it.

They realised to their horror, however, that the wheelchair, having gained considerable speed, had slipped out of Salvatore's control as he chased it screaming down the slope. So the strange, driverless vehicle, after skidding down a long of road, had run straight into the trunk of a large lime tree, crashing into it.

Andrea, alarmed by what he had just seen, ran to help the restless occupant but, as usual, he was greeted by the laughter and jeers of Mario who, despite being on the ground with a bruised forehead, from which a nice bump was sure to appear, was laughing out loud, fully satisfied with this splendid, unexpected and for him happy conclusion to the race.

Salvatore, who arrived soon afterwards, although he was still in a hurry, took care to pick up his friend from the ground, who, not at all tired or frightened by the unsuccessful excursion, invited him, or rather ordered him, to take him back up the hill for another exciting descent.

As Andrea, glowering, blocked them both, Mary arrived. It was not easy for her to recognise in that tall, large, rugged and ill-dressed young man, the sweet little Salvatore she so often loved to welcome into her arms. Even the face looked different because of the features that were now very squat, but also darkened by the thick adolescent hair.

Her face looked clearly ungainly because of some obvious scars, clearly visible on her forehead, cheeks and chin. Scars that had changed her physiognomy for the worse. Despite this, he realised that it was indeed him. She could feel it, more than see it, by the look he had for a moment placed on her. It was a look of disbelief, fearful, almost alarmed by his presence, but it was the look of the child she had loved so much.

Salvatore kept silent, as if he saw in the woman a frightening ghost and not a sweet reality. Neither of them

decided to make a gesture: Mary, because she was heartbroken and distraught by grief, the boy because he was in the grip of disbelief and growing anxiety.

Andrea, who was free of their emotions, seemed to be the only one who had kept a good balance, so he tried to manage that difficult encounter as best he could, inviting them both into his study to talk, while he would take care of bringing Mario back to the family home.

While Mario, who protested loudly, was forcibly taken back to his abode by Andrea and Luisa, a few metres away Salvatore's meeting with Mary took place. A very different meeting from the one they had both dreamt of and waited for for years.

Words struggled to come out of Mary's lips, just as feelings and emotions had become glowing lava in Salvatore's heart, who could not even look his old friend in the eye, instead, visibly restless, he went from one side of the studio to the other, as if looking for a place to hide or escape.

The young woman, gently but also making a great effort on herself, tried to move closer to him, who had taken refuge in a corner by the window, until she clasped a hand between hers. She hoped that this physical contact would dissolve the tension between them, uniting them again in a warm, friendly bond.

Unfortunately, he had not foreseen the reaction of the boy, who, as soon as he felt the touch of Mary's fingers on his skin, without looking at her ran away, causing the window sash to slam and the chair in its path to tumble. It was as if he did not recognise her or, worse, as if she was someone or something to be feared and not desired and welcomed.

Could it be that he had completely forgotten her? Could it be that he felt so much hatred and resentment towards her? The young woman hoped that even if Salvatore

had not agreed to embrace her, as he did as a child, he would at least be able to listen to the reasons for her prolonged absence.

She wanted to tell him how much she had thought of him during those years in which she had been denied seeing him; she wanted to reassure him that she had not forgotten him at all; she wanted him to understand the suffering she had felt knowing that he had been transferred to that place; and finally, she wanted to tell him of her joy at having finally found him again.

However, now he was aware of it, that boy who had first hidden and then fled from her, these things would not even be heard. He clearly felt that her presence caused him, more than annoyance, a painful, intense suffering. Therefore Mary too, with a distraught face, almost fleeing, ran away from the room.

Outside the ward he found Andrea and Luisa talking animatedly about their plans for some patients. Listening to their talk and comparing his life with theirs, he felt even more unhappy: 'These two young people,' he thought, 'work amidst a thousand difficulties in a horrible place, but at least they seem to have a clear mission. Whereas me? Me, after my failure as a pedagogue, apart from my role as mother and wife, I don't know and I still haven't found a commitment that can fulfil me

Saying goodbye to Andrea and Luisa, who had seen Salvatore running out of the doctor's office and had realised what had happened, Mary promised she would come back to help Salvatore and, if they would accept her as a volunteer, she was willing to help other patients as well. Then she walked towards the car she had left outside the hospital, without looking back or even observing her surroundings. She was mostly angry with herself for not having been able to find

the right words and manners during the meeting she had had with Salvatore.

What did he expect? That after so many years and so much suffering, that teenager, almost a young man, torn apart by physical wounds and surely also by psychological ones, would still be her curly-haired Salvuccio, who loved playing with toy trains and toy cars and who in the evening would cling to her neck to give her the last kisses before slipping into her cot? How stupid she had been to imagine and dream all this! Her studies had been to no avail. Absolutely useless had been her degree.

Luisa, returning to the ward, appeared more relaxed. She had looked for and noticed in the finger of the young woman who had just walked away the glint of a gold wedding ring. The presence of that ring had calmed her. The man she was so interested in and with whom, she was now certain, she was madly in love, serious and controlled as he was, was unlikely to get involved with a married woman, even one as beautiful as Mary was.

Unfortunately, however, the man's seriousness was a double-edged sword: having focused his attention only on work, would he ever perceive her feelings? Would he ever correspond to her love?

Sometimes she felt a sweet rage as she saw him blind and deaf to the love emotions that upset her. "Is it possible that there is another woman in his life?" she wondered. From his behaviour when they worked together on the ward it seemed to her that 'no'. But when he came home, did he have someone else? She repeated to herself that at least that, since she did not dare ask him, she would have to find out.

When, as in those moments, her imagination galloped furiously like a bolted horse, she would see her young doctor in an amorous attitude together with a beautiful woman, and it almost seemed to her that she could hear what they

were saying to each other and see the gestures, the kisses they gave each other, the caresses they exchanged.

At other times, her vivid imagination, which she also judged to be remarkably sick, led her to fantasise that not one but more than one girl was circumventing or even cheering up the evenings of the young doctor, who, in his morbid fantasies, tried to forget that awful place by indulging in lascivious love affairs.

When she came to think that, she tried to force her mind to shut itself off from any fantasy that could remotely provide her with that agonising torture

The only thing that gave her faint hope was the disturbance she had noticed in him following Mario's salacious allusions, but also the still vivid sensation, which almost stunned her, of his arm encircling her hips for a few moments in a gesture of... It was difficult, as well as painful, to define the reasons for that gesture, as it could only have been a kind gesture and nothing more.

But this kindness she really did not want. She would have preferred a thousand times to see him as a rude lover than as a kind work colleague, as he had unfortunately behaved until then.

Giovanna

Mary kept her promise. The next day she was back in Andrea's ward. She thought about what her father would have felt and said if he had seen "his little tender child" within these walls, in constant contact with the worst rejects of society, he who absolutely did not want her to attend the luxurious psycho-pedagogical medical centre and had been happy when she had been removed from that place.

This time he did not even try to talk to Salvatore. First he wanted to study and understand. He wanted to study and understand the strange world in which that boy was living and with him all the other inmates.

It was not difficult to imagine what the 'guests' were feeling, as Dr Andrea was trying very hard to make her participate and convey to her, along with the many pieces of information she so desperately wanted to have, all the emotions the staff and probably the patients were feeling. Moreover, she had taken a very quick and deliberately superficial tour of the ward with Luisa and what little she had seen was enough for her.

On the other hand, it would certainly have been more difficult to understand the way family members felt. Andrea had made it clear to her that this was perhaps the most difficult and rough subject to deal with. The doctor said that for a long time he had noticed that in relatives and relatives' attitudes of love and rejection blurred into each other and often intertwined, coexisted or alternated. An example was the visits made by them to the in-patients.

Andrea, perhaps too cynically, compared these visits to those made to the dead in cemeteries. Usually, in front of the tombstone of a relative, the person or persons who, by duty or role, go to make these pitiful gestures of presence,

love and remembrance, bring flowers to place on the grave and while murmuring a prayer of suffrage, take care to arrange the tombstone as best they can, pulling up the weeds that tend to disfigure it. After a few minutes, their duty done, as they wipe away their last tears, they leave to resume their normal occupations.

Something similar happened during visits to the hospitalised: instead of flowers, relatives bring food to offer to their relative, and just as at the cemetery people clean the grave of the deceased, the relatives while sitting next to the relative, waiting for him or her to eat, wipe their relative's face and hands with handkerchiefs soaked in perfumed cleanser, and then wipe a few of their tears with another perfumed handkerchief when the visit is over.

Ultimately, it was impossible for the staff members who attended these practices on a daily basis to understand what they really felt and what the real needs and wishes were of the relatives who came to the ward to visit their in-patients

One example was Salvatore's mother who systematically came to visit her son. What did she feel and want for her son? And what did the rest of his family think and want? Only through frequent and in-depth interviews, not only in the ward but also in their homes, would it be possible to know and understand more.

The proposal made to Mary was clear: if she was willing to take care of the family aspects of the patients, she would be welcome. Mary enthusiastically accepted this assignment, thus becoming, to all intents and purposes, part of the small working group that Andrea jokingly called 'the desperate group'

The woman wanted to begin her assignment, as was to be expected, with Salvatore's family, whom she knew well.

After making an appointment with Giovanna, the boy's mother, she went alone to visit her at home.

The apartment building where Salvatore's family lived was nothing special. The architect or engineer who had designed that building had not made the slightest effort to make it different from all the other buildings that had grown absolutely anonymous in the city of the straits in recent decades. Having rung the wooden door of the house, a young boy opened it. He must have been Salvatore's younger brother, wearing a sweatshirt with some strange English writing printed on it and crumpled blue jeans. The look he gave her was impertinent and visibly annoyed, as is often the look of many teenagers who don't seem to like anything. After he had called his mother, snorting at the onerous task to which she had subjected him, asking her to open the door, he had already locked himself in his room without even greeting the young guest.

Giovanna, on the other hand, welcomed the woman with much thoughtfulness and kindness. As he invited her to take a seat on the sofa in the living room, he was already rushing to the kitchen to make her a cup of tea, at the same time taking the excellent ricotta, cream and fruit pastries he had bought just for her.

Mary's feeling was that the woman had been longing and waiting for such a visit. She also realised this from the flood of words imbued with intense feelings and fiery emotions, to which she let herself go as soon as she saw that her guest had begun to sip the warm drink she offered her.

While wrinkling a handkerchief she held in her hands, Joan recounted the hardships her family had endured because of Salvatore's problems. Of these, some were well known to Mary, while others, such as the separation from her husband that had taken place some years ago due to the con-

stant discussions on what to do and how to deal with their son's problems, were unknown to her.

It was strange to see that woman again after so many years. Her face was thin and furrowed, indeed hollowed out by a spider's web of wrinkles, her small, moist eyes looked as if they were about to disappear. The unkempt brown hair was sprayed white in several places.

There was, moreover, a tremor in the hands that clutched and sometimes wrung the tear-soaked handkerchief. It was clear that the woman, prematurely aged, was suffering from a considerable inner tension that was destroying her psyche as well as her body.

Giovanna's words as she recounted the endless discussions with her husband and other family members about Salvatore's fate, often appeared uncoordinated and confused. At times she seemed to blame her husband and his family for accepting Salvatore's transfer to the psychiatric hospital; at other times she blamed herself for what had happened; at still other times, almost shouting, she hurled heavy accusations at the doctors and institutions for not having helped them sufficiently or even for having abandoned them to their fate. She harshly and unabashedly confessed to her that she had no faith in the workers: doctors, nurses or social workers that is.

After much listening, she realised that the only person the woman saved from accusations was another patient in the infamous filthy ward; it was the man who had been looking after her son for a year; it was Franco, the foreigner.

Mary, not knowing what to say, was just trying to make her way through the flood of memories and emotions that Joan poured over her, as she struggled to jot down the most salient facts and considerations on the note she had brought with her and held in her lap.

As she left the house dazed, the only thing that seemed quite clear to her was the suffering and confusion that reigned in that woman's soul and head, and not only in her. Reflecting on the behaviour of her other son who was in the house, she was certain that the same suffering and confusion as her mother was also present in that little boy.

He thought he had done well to avoid mentioning the possibility of Salvatore's discharge. Resettling him in that house at that time was impossible. Neither his mother nor his younger brother would have been able to cope and manage such a situation. Gradual action had to be taken. Yes, but how?

When the woman reported the interview to Dr. Andrea and the social worker Luisa realised that it was no surprise to them. They knew that each of their patients carried with them a considerably problematic and disturbed family background, which had to be dealt with if any results were to be achieved.

When she then mentioned the woman's confidence in Franco, she felt the two in front of her stiffen, as if she had touched a raw nerve. Both of them, for a few minutes, did not know whether to confide also to her the suspicions the nurses had about the man's conduct. Therefore, for a few moments they tried to tergiversate about what had been reported to them, until Andrea decided to confide to her what was being whispered in the ward, as the doctor did not want there to be things left unsaid in the group of operators.

Mary listened attentively to the nurses' suspicions about Franco, but when Andrew finished speaking, rather than being scandalised she defended the foreigner by saying:

"Let's put it to the test. What do we have to lose? If the mother trusts him, let's see what he can do and how he behaves."

Andrea, although judging himself to be a man of great open-mindedness, did not really understand what that man could do to help Salvatore's reintegration into his home and family. Unable to control even a hint of jealousy at the abilities that everyone seemed to see in that stranger, he cut him short by saying: "OK, I'll talk to him, but I just don't think he's the right person. This task should be carried out by you and Luisa, who are professionals; Franco is just an inpatient of whom we know very little, apart from the undeniable fact that he has been seen hugging some of those with him.'

As the days passed, Mary realised that Andrew had no desire to talk to the stranger, so she decided to do it herself. She approached him while he was hanging laundry outside the family home. She told him about her visit to Salvatore's mother and the woman's confidence in him. Then she asked him directly the question that was brooding inside: "What could you do?"

The man, partly disappointing the young woman's expectations, without looking at her, as if absorbed in his own thoughts, only replied: "I'll think about it. We will see."

It was he, a few days later, who approached Mary to tell her that he had spoken to Salvatore's mother. She was willing for her son to come with them to her house for a simple short visit, with the doctor's permission of course.

At this point Mary realised that she had to be the one to convince Andrea. He gave his assent, even though he thought that the operation would prove useless. On the other hand, she thought, Salvatore's hospitalisation had also been made voluntary, so that boy, by law, could go wherever he wanted, especially if accompanied by a pedagogue.

Franco and the doctor had agreed to make the visit on Sunday morning, quite early, so as to be back for the Holy Mass that was celebrated in the hospital. "Mass to which the children are very attached," Franco had added

While Mary drove her car, the stranger was in the back with Salvatore in order to reassure him with his presence. Only a few days before, this role reversal would have bothered her greatly, as Franco or someone like him should have been driving the car, while her place should have been next to the boy and instead... Nevertheless, at that moment she felt it was better this way.

Salvatore seemed perfectly calm as he held Franco's hand between his own. Strangely, he didn't even look out of the windows; he appeared content just to be next to 'daddy'. He rarely looked forward to her driving. Mary, in turn, was undecided whether to talk to him or remain silent. She chose the second solution so as not to upset the boy.

Even when they parked in front of his house, Salvatore did not seem to react in any way. He only manifested some pleasure when his mother opened the door and warmly embraced and kissed him. Yet even in those moments he did not want to remove his hand from Franco's, as if he had decided in his heart that this man and only this man was his lifeline.

While they were sitting in the living room, Mary could clearly hear a continuous roar of water coming from the bathroom. She thought Salvatore's younger brother had taken advantage of that moment to take a shower.

While all of them, and especially Salvatore, helped themselves profusely to the sweets the woman had placed on the coffee table in the living room, the mother looked increasingly restless. It was clear that she did not know how to behave. Perhaps her son was feeling the same, although he seemed only interested in the sweets and Franco's reassuring presence. As Giovanna nervously went in and out of the living room, on one of those occasions she brought a large, worn teddy bear, which was probably one of her son's favourite toys when he was a child.

There was a clear intention to give it to Salvatore, perhaps to link him to his past in this house, but then, looking at Franco, at his nod of refusal she made a quick U-turn, returning to put the puppet down where she had picked it up. After a few minutes she instead made a gesture of understanding to the man, turning to Salvatore, inexplicably, given the situation, suggested he take a bath.

The latter, although not fully convinced, agreed and together they approached the tub that their mother had already filled with hot water. This sudden and inexplicable change in the purpose of the visit alarmed Mary. She really did not like the image of a grown man bathing a teenage boy. Could it be that the nurses were right about Franco? As the two women stood outside the door Franco began to undress Salvatore.

The boy did not know whether or not to accept that bath outside the usual ward environment, however he did not resist too much. As he took off his clothes one by one he looked at Franco who reassured him with a smile and nods of his head. Salvatore, as he used to do in the ward's tub, slipped into the tub while standing. Only later, gradually, did the man manage to get him to lie down, joking with him by means of the splashes of water he threw in his face.

When he saw him well and quietly lying in the tub, the man began to wash him slowly, using a large sponge he had found beside him. As the water and foam caressed his body, the boy relaxed even more, until he closed his eyes to better savour the gentle warmth of the water combined with the pleasant sensation of the sponge sliding over his body.

While he was enjoying these dual sensations, however, he felt a distinct change: the hands that rested on him were now much softer, caressing and attentive to every fold of his body, which they palpated almost as if trying to reco-

gnise him, so as to better envelop him with clear gestures of tenderness and love.

At the same time he no longer felt the acrid smell of dirt and male sweat of the man he called 'daddy', but was enveloped in a much more delicate and sweet scent. Opening his eyes he met his mother's small, moist and deep ones that were trying and trying hard to smile at him. Immediately afterwards, as if to hide the face on which the tears were flowing copiously, the woman laid her head on his, covering her son's face, forehead, arms and hands with kisses.

While all this was going on, Mary, who had looked into the bathroom, noticed that the faces of both tended to relax more and more, so much so that the wrinkles of that mother, so tried by life, seemed to vanish as if by magic.

While mother and son were experiencing this moment of intimate communion, Mary, returning to the living room, observed the man: Franco, who, before sitting down on the sofa, with his usual quiet, satisfied manner was wiping his hands and face wet with water and smeared with foam.

For a moment, I likened it to images, many times seen on TV, in which the surgeon comes out of the operating theatre, takes off his gloves, dries his hands and announces to the relatives of the patient he has just operated on that the operation was perfectly successful.

Seeing this, a rush of anger crossed her chest. It was clear that this bath idea had been prepared and agreed upon beforehand between her mother and the man, without either of them having thought of communicating it to her or to the ward doctor

However, this emotion lasted only a moment. It was difficult to be angry with Franco. His disarming smile and the simplicity with which he organised everything made any resentment quickly vanish

When, after a long time, mother and son came out holding hands, the pedagogue saw that the woman had dressed Salvatore in the clothes and civilian clothes she had prepared for him. She also noticed that Giovanna had styled her son's hair according to the fashion of the moment.

Seeing Franco sitting on the sofa, the boy approached him, hugging him and then, as if he was pleased to distribute his joy to everyone present, he caressed Mary's shoulder, smiling at her. The latter, in turn, no longer knowing how to behave with him, limited herself to looking at him, trying to communicate her great love only in this way.

In saying goodbye, almost as if to take revenge, she made an appointment with her mother for the following Sunday for another tea with pastries and, perhaps, another bath

Mary did not let that week pass in vain. Agreeing with Andrea and Luisa, who knew the individual patients better than she did, she started to contact other families.

Some seemed to absolutely preclude not only any return to their relative's family but also any visit to their home; others seemed more amenable, and this, the woman soon realised, had little to do with the severity of the symptomatology. Many other components came into play: very complex, deep and distant realities favoured or, on the contrary, made more intense and constructive contact between the in-patients and their families difficult, if not impossible.

In the meantime, Andrea, with the help of the entire 'desperate group', of which the nurses were also full members, had structured with cards an ingenious and practical card system in which the strengths and weaknesses of each patient in the ward were described in a few lines and with the help of many symbols.

Each form summarised the patient's capacity for autonomy, language, psychological status, length of hospitalisa-

tion, the greater or lesser interest shown by relatives in the family member according to the frequency of visits, and so on. The idea was to start by discharging the most easily discharged patients and then gradually tackle the more difficult cases.

The simplest case seemed to be that of an absolutely quiet, docile, cooperative young deaf-mute, who was considered valuable by the nurses for the help he gave in dressing his companions in the morning. Mary had already spoken to her sister, who was married to a town hall employee, and the latter had shown a good willingness to welcome her brother into her home.

One day, therefore, dressed in the best and most elegant bourgeois clothes kept in the ward's large wardrobe, this young man, together with Mary and a nurse was taken to his sister's house. After ringing the doorbell, the woman's husband came to open the door, who, without even letting them in, after hearing the reason for the visit, while holding the door firmly with one hand, quietly declared: "This is my home. I married this gentleman's sister and not him. Therefore since I do not want him with me, you can take him back."

There was not much to say in reply, also because the sister had not turned up, leaving all decisions to her husband. After this clear stance, both Mary, who could barely hold back the tears of anger, and the patient and the nurse accompanying them, were back in the hospital after a few minutes to tell Andrea about their misadventure

Something worse happened to two other nurses on the ward who had volunteered to take another young man, who was just as calm and cooperative, and who had mild mental retardation, back to his birth home in a town over a hundred kilometres away from Messina.

Once Andrea had been discharged, the two nurses set off on their mission to find the parents or family of the now former patient, whose relatives had not deigned to answer the letters sent by Luisa

They lived in a country house outside the village, so it was not easy to find the family cottage, which was also far from the main road, surrounded by a large garden of fragrant lemon trees. However, after many travails, they managed to reach the young man's home.

This one, like so many in the Sicilian countryside, consisted of a ground floor, whose rooms were used to store foodstuffs and agricultural tools, and an upper floor that served as the owners' dwelling. The family dwelling was accessed by an external staircase, placed in front of the façade, which ended in a small balcony.

When the nurses arrived on the scene, they were forced to call out loudly to the owners of the house, which appeared to be uninhabited. Only after a few minutes of waiting did they see a gentleman who, looking out onto the balcony above the stairs, in a firm and gruff tone, without perhaps even recognising his son, shouted at them: "Who are you? What do you want?"

'We are two nurses from the psychiatric hospital in Messina. We brought your son home and he has been discharged,' the nurses replied.

After listening to the reason for the visit, the man promptly re-entered the house and then immediately took up a double-barrelled shotgun and pointed it straight at them, shouting:

"That boy who is with you has not lived here for a long time. Therefore, if you don't immediately bring him back to where he was before, I will shoot all three of you in the forehead."

Despite the clear threat aimed not only at them but also at their son, who was looking perplexed at his father with his rifle drawn, the two nurses, in order not to be intimidated and not to give in to intimidation, and in order to complete their mission, which had cost them a long, costly and arduous journey, left the house and immediately went to the town's Carabinieri, to whom they told and reported the incident.

The latter, however, knowing the considerable irritability of the young man's father, persuaded them to back off in their intentions: "Unfortunately, that man is very dangerous. It would be good to avoid irritating him. We cannot force him to accept his son if he does not want to. We advise you to take him back to Messina."

And so they did.

The case of the elderly blind man whom Andrea had visited on one of his first days on duty was different. After much pressure from doctors and politicians to delay his discharge, one fine day the doctor saw his daughter appear out of nowhere. This one, having read the various letters sent by Luisa, made herself available to welcome her father into her home. In fact, she had come from Rome, where she now lived, precisely to do this.

Andrea was no longer excited. "Very well," he said, "I will see to the discharge immediately. While she was looking for the file, the woman smiled brightly: "Doctor, I remind you that my father, as a blind man, received his pension and accompaniment money every month, which I know is deposited at the hospital bursar's office. You well understand that by taking him to Rome with me I will have to take great care of him and incur many expenses. I would be grateful if you could kindly let me have all the money that is deposited with you.'

"Certainly," replied the doctor with the same enthusiasm as before, "I will immediately get in touch with the bursar's office to get you everything that belongs to your father.

Despite the fact that most of the morning had been taken up with the necessary paperwork, which was also made difficult by the fact that the money that had accumulated over the years at the bursar's office was so much, Andrea felt truly satisfied and happy when he saw the daughter of his former patient lovingly accompanying and supporting her father along the driveway to the waiting car.

He had finally succeeded in his intention to bring that man back into his family. He had given a father back to his children and his children back to their father. What greater satisfaction could there be for a doctor in his condition?

After telling the other operators about this magnificent feat, subsequent commitments made him forget about that father and daughter.

After no more than a month, as he was leaving the ward, he saw both father and daughter appear before him. The daughter, only slightly embarrassed, standing outside the ward door and refusing to enter, told him in a soft voice: "Good morning, doctor, as you see I have brought my father back; he cannot stay with us; this is his suitcase. I have to take the train back to Rome. Thank you for everything. Good morning."

After these meagre words, he saw her leave with a certain solicitude without giving any explanation as to why she could no longer keep her father, or what use she had made of the considerable sum of money that had been handed over to her. There was no doubt that Andrew and his father had been elegantly mocked by this woman.

Then there were those who just did not want to leave the ward. Among them, besides Franco, was Stello, the old

man we met at the beginning of our story as he was slicing bread for his fellow inmates in the nun's large storeroom. Although he was the nun's favourite, as he was very clean and could help her better than the other inmates in distributing the food, Andrea seeing him so tidy, clean and mentally lucid really resented him being in the hospital. Therefore, she often asked him that if he wanted to go home, she would discharge him immediately, on the spur of the moment.

Both he and the nun tried in every way to procrastinate this discharge until the day when Dr. Lo Conte grew impatient and called him in to give him the discharge papers. Only on this last occasion, when cornered, did Stello tell him clearly why he had to stay in that hospital: "You will certainly have read in my file that I come from the judicial hospital of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto where I spent many years to serve out the double murders I committed. In fact, I killed both my wife who was cheating on me and her mother who knew and covered up the betrayal. As you will have seen from the file my country is in Calabria, so as long as I stay here or in a place similar to this one to serve out what I have done nothing will happen to me, but if I am discharged and go anywhere, I will undoubtedly receive a shot in the back from the families of the two women I killed. I have no other choice. If you want to get rid of me permanently, resign me."

Of course, Andrea had no intention of getting rid of him in such a drastic way and so Stello remained, still smartly dressed, to help Sister Celestina cut bread

Sebastiano

Although there were many cases where only a few hours or a few days elapsed between discharge and readmission of patients, fortunately more and more former in-patients were staying permanently with their families, which facilitated the management of the others still remaining on the ward.

Among other things, it was now possible to convert the bunk beds into single beds, but also to restore the corridors that had been adapted as dormitories to their original function. One of the first who was well received by his family and stayed permanently in his home was Sebastian.

Andrea got to know him because of the disappointment he felt at how so many linens and garments that were brought from the ward to the laundry either did not return at all or returned in the form of a pile of rags. Rags that only vaguely resembled the originals that had been delivered. The doctor therefore wanted to understand how this service, or rather this disservice, worked.

He went to the large pavilion at the very edge of the hospital and was immediately struck by the chaos reigning there. From every wall but also from the floor, as if they were strange and complex futurist sculptures, large tubes of various colours rose, fell and intertwined, from which water and steam came out.

The industrial washing machines that were supposed to do the washing and drying work were so old-fashioned, noisy and, above all, malfunctioning, that they looked as if they were about to explode all at once, involving the caretakers who were flailing around. Fortunately, at least at that moment, they were only spewing steam, soapy water and detergent everywhere.

The latter made the air suffocating and unbreathable, irritating, to the point of tears, the eyes of those who moved about the place. Water, steam and detergent spread and spread everywhere, transforming that huge, smoky room more like the antechamber of hell than a place suitable for cleaning clothes.

The first was the poor washerwomen, almost all of whom were in their late teens and had nothing to do with the devils except for their fatigue-streaked faces, their red eyes from the detergent vapours they lived with all day, and the presence of tousled hair that came out of a sort of bonnet on their heads.

However, for the rest, these women had loving and calm faces and eyes, and not only that, but they also carried out their work with great personal sacrifice. From the great disorder and the obvious confusion, it was easy to see that all their efforts did not achieve much. This was prevented not only by their absolutely insufficient numbers, but also by the very old machinery that was unsuitable for the great amount of work they had to cope with on a daily basis.

The other element that clashed with the hellish vision was a gigantic, young man, towering far above the elderly women. He moved quietly among them and in the room, carrying enormous quantities of blankets, sheets or clothes to and fro, sometimes dry and sometimes still dripping with water.

To do this, he used only his huge, brawny arms. Although his eyes appeared to be dull, his whole person exuded something sweet and dreamy, as if he were the good giant from the fairy tales who had agreed to come to this unhealthy place to perform who knows what beneficial mission.

This young man, totally unusual in the rest of the environment, showed at all times, a total self-denial and avai-

lability to every request, sometimes shouted, given the noise of the place, other times only mimed, that came from the willing old washerwomen who trotted around him.

This giant, with his distinctly helpful and calm appearance, was indeed Sebastian, who, using only his Herculean strength and large arms, was able to move from one side of the huge room to the other a large amount of laundry, whether clean or dirty, making his way through the water and steam coming out from everywhere. It was evident that this work, which he performed almost effortlessly, would have been very problematic, if not impossible, for the elderly women who surrounded and guided him.

Opening the medical file on him, Andrea looked at his picture prominently displayed on the first page: it was that of a four-year-old boy, overdeveloped for his age but beautiful, with his curly blond hair falling in a crown around his head and partly over his face.

In spite of this, the ever-present medical certificate drawn up twenty-seven years earlier diagnosed him as a 'retarded child, very dangerous to himself and others!'. This was probably a case of gigantism, which had perhaps frightened his parents, causing his estrangement from the family. The image of Sebastian moving calmly amidst the steam and mountains of clothing remained engraved in Andrea's memory, so that when the discharge of patients began, his thoughts went to him as well.

To his parents, who had not seen him for over twenty years, that huge, robust man who looked at them calmly and, at least apparently, with a serene spirit, seemed an unexpected gift, so much so that they accepted his resignation without protest at all. Perhaps because, Andrea commented maliciously to the others in the 'desperate group', the now elderly father had well understood that their newfound

son could be invaluable in the work to be done on the family's small but demanding farm!

Although this was successful, Dr Lo Conte did not expect the many complaints from the washerwomen who, deprived of such valuable help, no longer knew how to carry on with their laborious work. In order to help them, but also to enable other patients to gain useful experience through what was pompously called 'occupational therapy', Andrea proposed to the women that, in exchange for the young man being discharged, they should be helped by not one but three patients or more, chosen by them from among those abundantly present in his ward. A proposal that the elderly washerwomen immediately and willingly accepted.

About a month after discharge Luisa, also thinking about the suspicions at the origin of Andrea's sentence, namely that the family had only accepted Sebastiano into the family to exploit his Herculean strength, avoiding looking at Andrea but only scrutinising his notes commented:

"I think it would be good to check how resignations proceed. It is not right to send people home after decades without knowing how they are received and what happens to them."

"What do you propose?" Andrea asked her, looking at her curiously.

"I was thinking, for example, of Sebastian. We should make a home visit to his house. It is the least we can do. We should see for ourselves the welcome he received in his family and the appropriateness of his new accommodation. We know that he was very well liked by the laundresses who treated him very well, like a son; we must be sure that his family and his home give him something more and not less than what he had when he was here. Otherwise his could easily be seen as a wild discharge, not at all helpful to

him and his family, and we could rightly be criticised for the way we act'.

"That's right," Andrea commented, "it seems like a good idea. Although he lives many kilometres from the city and it will take us the whole day, if our director allows us, we could go with my car to visit him and his family."

Andrea did not know and had not at all guessed that the woman, although she was dutiful to her professional duties, could not conceal from herself that the need for that home visit had also arisen in her from the thought, or merely from the wish and dream, that it might turn into a pleasant pleasure trip for two: her and Andrea.

Seeing that the latter had immediately taken the bait and accepted her proposal, he thought that he too, although he seemed to be made of stainless steel, felt the need, if not for her, at least to do something else to rest and to get away, at least for a few hours, from the thoughts that were nagging at him, so as to restore his strength weakened by stress and daily fatigue.

The possibility of the visit and consequent outing seemed to give full substance to her dreams and new vigour to her burning desire. Fantasising as she had never done before, with her heart in turmoil, she imagined herself next to that young man, both of them immersed for an entire day in the splendid, sweet-smelling Sicilian spring. And then, who knows? anything could happen. It could even extend into the evening with a dinner for the two of them, in an intimate out-of-the-way place. She felt her heart burst with joy.

Her disappointment was great when Mary, who was present and had heard Luisa's proposal, intervened saying: "I would like to come too, if I can. I would like to see how Sebastiano has settled in his family. And, if you agree, I would also like to bring my little Paolo with me. The paediatrician,

to make him more resistant to disease, has recommended that I give him plenty of air and sunshine'.

At these words Luisa, who had not at all anticipated this intervention by Mary, felt a bitter disappointment. She hoped that Andrea, with some excuse, would be able to dissuade her from coming with them. Instead he smiled: "Very well Mary. So we know little Paolo you always talk about. I'll ask the director's permission, you women prepare a good sack breakfast, because we will certainly be late and won't be able to get home for lunch."

It was difficult for Luisa to hide her disappointment but also the anger she felt towards both Mary and Andrea.

"Not only does she have to come with us,' he thought to himself bitterly, 'but she also wants to bring her son. And he even seems happy about it. No! I absolutely must be able to erase this man from my mind and heart. He really doesn't care about me. What I feel for him only serves to bring me suffering.

The journey thus began under bad auspices at least for Luisa, while Mary, her son Paolo and Andrea seemed perfectly at ease. However, the social worker, as if defending his exclusive property, forgetting his intentions to stop thinking about Andrea, did everything he could to sit next to him driving the car. Fortunately, as the splendid views of the island flowed before his eyes, the tension and anger seemed, as if by magic, to vanish

Being close to him, feeling his hand brushing her body when he was forced to shift gears and his faint masculine scent merging his cheerful, satisfied voice, not only made resentment and anger disappear but also served very well to renew that sweet warmth of falling in love with which she had been living with ever since she had met the man she did not want to do without, at least at that moment.

Even when he was talking to Mary and the child, their stories, their observations, the sound of their voices not only no longer irritated him but were sweet music to his heart. He was in that frame of mind in which we love everything around us.

For Luisa at that moment, it was not only the beautiful things that flowed before her eyes that were to be cherished: the breathtaking views; the sparkling sea crashing into the rocks below the road they travelled; the bright, clear sky; the citrus groves dotted with white orange blossom that invaded the air with its sweet, irresistible scent; the gracefulness of the many palm trees that spread high as if they were wide arms of classical ballerinas ready to twirl in the air; the colours of the oleanders and prickly pears in bloom; in that magical moment she felt she could love even the most unpleasant things that could happen to her. Every now and then she turned to look at Mary and her son.

The latter, perhaps because he was constrained to immobility, perhaps because he too was excited by the images flowing before his eyes, jumped from one side of the car to the other, noticing and observing everything. To see him jumping around, it didn't look as if he had been ill and needed sun and air, as his mother had said. His cheeks, full and red from constant agitation, betrayed an enviable physical and mental well-being.

Before arriving at the farmhouse where Sebastian's family lived, they stopped, to stretch their legs and let the child pee, near a meadow full of daisies, clovers, camomile and poppies.

Little Paolo also took advantage of the stop to run from one side of the spontaneous meadow to the other as if he were a roaring car speeding, backing up, parking or overtaking imaginary other cars. Then, tired of this game, he wanted to switch from cars to another means of transport:

the aeroplane. But to do this he needed two arms to lift him off the ground and make him fly through the air. Mum and Andrew gladly lent themselves, each lifting him with one hand, to the game of 'fly - fly - fly', until Mary, tired, decided to stop, exclaiming in exhaustion:

"I can't take it anymore!"

"I'll fly you, Paolo," Luisa willingly offered.

As she and Andrea played along, another dream, which she judged as completely unreasonable, a dream she had never had before, exploded in her chest:

"If Andrea and I were married, this child could be our son." While she was as if enveloped in this fantasy, she scanned Andrea's face, hoping to find some trace of her own thoughts and desires

Unfortunately, she found none: the young doctor's face seemed to betray only the pleasure of participating in the child's game. While she judged herself a little fool who continues to delude herself that others feel and live her same loving thoughts and dreams, she was pleased to observe that among Andrea's merits, there was also that of loving children and knowing how to play with them.

After a few minutes she too, tired of this unusual exercise, suggested they get back into the car and continue on their way. Therefore, in spite of Paul's protests, who would have liked to continue frolicking on the lawn, they set off towards their destination.

After more than an hour they arrived at Sebastiano's house. This was a very simple dwelling and also looked very old. Distributed only on the ground floor, it comprised many rooms used partly as living quarters, partly for storing tools and foodstuffs produced in the countryside that stretched out, clearly visible, in front of the house.

As far as the little group could tell, there was a bit of everything in that plot of land: many fruit trees, among

which citrus fruits stood out: oranges, lemons, mandarins, but there were also olives, pears, apples, apricots, plums, almonds. In short, Sebastiano's parents didn't want to miss anything. Only a slice of land near the house was dedicated to the vegetable garden, already flourishing in that spring period.

As they were expected by Sebastian's parents, they were welcomed and immediately made to sit on the stone benches set up in front of the house. Luisa again reported, as she had already said on the phone, the reason for their visit: to see how the young man had settled in after his return to the family. And finally she asked: "Where is he now?"

"He is at the fountain," his mother replied, pointing to an undefined spot behind a thick group of flowering trees. "We don't know why he loves that place. He stays there for hours and hours.

"Doing what?" intervened Andrea.

"Oh, nothing special. Look at the fish and the frogs. He wets his hands. He picks up some flowers which he puts in the tub and watches them float".

"After so many years away from home, how did he get on with you?" Mary asked her mother again.

"To tell the truth, we don't really know. It has only been a month... maybe he has to get used to this new environment and we also have to get used to him; but he is still very quiet, tidy, clean and obedient. He doesn't bother us at all'.

"Doesn't his size scare you?" the social worker asked again.

"At the beginning a little bit yes, especially the youngest, our grandchildren, I have three of them, they didn't dare go near him, but not any more."

"We would like to see him, can we go to him?"

"Go ahead, in the meantime we will set the table. You will stay with us for lunch, won't you?"

After paying a few compliments on this unexpected invitation, all four set off in the direction indicated by Sebastian's mother.

Running through the trees, the most excited of the little group was Paolo. The little one, escaped from the overprotective hands of his mother who was trying to keep him in check, went here and there picking little flowers that he invariably gave to her, each time demanding a kiss.

The others in the group walked between the rows of trees, almost afraid to touch the flowering branches which, as soon as a light breeze shook them, dropped hundreds of white or pink petals that descended from the branches like unusual snowflakes. Some of these petals also fell into their heads so that, laughing, they removed them helping each other.

Luisa was happy when Andrea, with the excuse of removing a petal from her hair, touched it or brushed it against her face, so much so that she hoped a few petals would fall on his hair to do the same.

At the very end of that path, the small fruit trees were interrupted to make way for an enormous carob tree that spread out over the crest of the hill and overlooked, almost covering it, an old spring water fountain and its moss-covered stone trough, which stretched out before it

This long, narrow tank, which in the past had served as a drinking trough for the animals, had now been transformed into a large open-air aquarium, where many goldfish cohabited, seemingly peacefully, along with numerous tadpoles and frogs. The latter, which had been perched at the edge of the trough, annoyed by the noise made especially by little Paolo, thought it best to dive into the tank, disappearing from their sight.

The sight of so much water, fish and, for a moment, frogs, had made the child even more excited. He did not know what was the most pleasant thing to do: whether to dive his hands into the water to try and catch some small fish or to throw the flowers and leaves at them to feed them or to chase the tadpoles that moved slowly through the transparent water. Seeing that the attempts to hold him back were futile, the mother allowed herself to enjoy that enchanting place too

In order to climb onto the base of the fountain, both Mary and Luisa accepted the hand of Andrew who, like a good knight, climbed up first to help the two women. Luisa would no longer have wanted to let go of the hand that had been offered to her, however, even if reluctantly, she had to do it quickly, lest the other woman realise the feelings she had

It was only when they were above the base of the drinking trough that the small group noticed the man sitting on the very black stone boulders near the fountain. Boulders that in the past allowed women to place amphorae to be filled with water from the spring. The man, immersed in his thoughts, seemed not to have noticed them. Andrea approached him:

"Hello, Sebastian, how are you?" she asked him.

"Good," the man replied dryly and without getting up.

"I see you like it here" was the predictable remark of his former doctor.

"Yes". Replicated Sebastiano in a low voice.

Luisa's questions were not much more original either.

"Do you get along with your parents? Do they treat you well?"

To these, too, the man replied with a timid "Yes".

It was clear that their presence was more of a disturbance to him than a pleasure. Despite his size, sitting on

those black boulders, huddled as he was, he looked much smaller. Both Andrea and Luisa decided to leave him alone to devote themselves to little Paolo, who wanted at all costs to drink from the spout of the fountain towards which he stretched out his little mouth, without however being able to reach the jet of fresh water that came out of it, risking, among other things, falling into the trough to keep company with the goldfish and frogs. The little one also refused the adults' willingness to let him drink from a glass cup that had been placed next to him for that very purpose.

This was saved by Sebastiano who, rising slowly from his stone seat, approached the little boy and asked him if he wanted to touch the sky. Paolo initially hid fearfully behind his mother's skirt, then, looking alternately at the man's large arms and the sky, he decided to try this new and exciting experience.

Undecided, looking at his mother to make sure there was no danger from what had been proposed to him, he approached the huge, tall man holding out his arms. Sebastiano asked him instead to hold them tightly beside his body and clench his fists. The boy promptly obeyed. The man bent over him with extremely slow and calculated movements and then pushing him from his clenched fists, without any effort, he carried him higher and higher, so high that for a moment Paolo was breathless, feeling for the first time in his life the strange, incredible sensation of observing others and the world from a completely different perspective to the one he was used to

The man held him like this for a time that seemed very long to the mother and also to the others, and then slowly lowered him to the ground. The child, who for a long moment had been as if intoxicated by the strong emotion, soon recovered:

"More! More! Please, more! She shouted loudly, hugging his leg".

Both his mother and the others in the group immediately realised that Paul had found in Sebastian his playmate but also his conscious and willing victim for the day.

On their way back to the farmhouse, everyone thought of picking some wild flowers to take home. Andrea did the same, but only to offer them to the two women accompanying him. Luisa, predictably, would have preferred the man to offer them only to her, but she consoled herself by noticing that only in her bunch was a beautiful red poppy that stood out and almost hid the beauty of the other little flowers. And this she thought, or rather hoped, contained a definite signal, so that, without being noticed, she lightly placed her lips on that one, delicate, red flower.

The lunch the hosts had prepared was enjoyed by all, although someone noticed that Andrea, who ate little and drank none of the good wine offered, was as if absorbed in his thoughts. The doctor reflected on the fact that it was not so difficult to link the fountain and trough where Sebastiano liked to be now, and perhaps even as a child, to his choice to help the laundresses at the psychiatric hospital, just as it was not difficult to see in the game he had played with Paolo his need to rediscover the games he played with his father as a child

Noting then that the mother sitting next to her newfound son, as she stroked his hand, was constantly picking out and offering him the most delicious morsels of the food she had prepared, she reflected bitterly that certainly the joke he had made about his parents' acceptance of the young man, namely their need for his physical strength, had been misplaced, but also that the web her son and his family had undertaken to weave in order to be reunited again after

so many years of separation would be completed after a while.

The storm

In every man's life there are sad days but also happy days; exciting days alternate with dull moments; bright days may follow dark ones. Usually one compensates for the other and the person or persons involved have the feeling that in the end the accounts will balance out.

However, in certain cases, at certain times or in certain circumstances, the positive situations, but more often the negative ones, rather than alternating with those of the opposite sign, seem to add up and overlap. In these cases, the expression usually used, 'it's raining cats and dogs', really does not convey the idea of how serious the physical and psychic upheaval is due to negative circumstances that follow one another and add up rapidly, so intensely that the intended victim has no time, I won't say to face them adequately, but at least to try to defend himself.

Therefore, the person(s) involved prefer to compare these events to a storm raging wildly and violently over their head, rather than looking for similarities with rain adding to more rain.

This is what happened to our Dr Andrea.

At that time, if not all, many things in the filthy ward seemed to be going well. Meanwhile, the number of permanently discharged patients was increasing, so that those he, the nurses and the two volunteers had to care for were no longer two hundred and thirty but only - so to speak - one hundred and twenty.

It was therefore relatively easier to dress, feed and care for them. It was also easier to help them with their personal cleansing, using no longer the old-fashioned coil immersed in the black pot, but four new showers whose water was heated by a modern gas boiler. In addition, almost all bunk

beds had been eliminated, which among other things prevented patients from having to climb, with the risk of falling, when they wanted to reach their bed.

These single beds had been given back their beautiful original blue colour. And this was thanks to the helpfulness of the nurses but also to the incredible new-found attitude of the man whom Andrea had seen squatting in the living room on his first day in hospital, drawing with his saliva.

In addition to this, the new mattresses, all of which were well covered with a waterproof tarpaulin, allowed for good cleanliness, and this gave the remaining patients the possibility of sleeping on a bed that was not only intact but also quite hygienic, if not exactly clean. Incredibly, then, with the passage of time, those branches placed in front of the family home before the inauguration, branches that had made Andrea much doubt Franco's ability as a gardener, had taken root, so that they had turned into pretty little trees on which small but fragrant violet-white flowers had blossomed.

Within the same house, Franco's 'children' were also constantly diminishing, even though he, on his own initiative or at the urging of Andrea, the nuns or the families, was continually accepting others. So that when every afternoon in May they would gather together with the nuns in front of Our Lady of the Hospital to pray the rosary, the group of faithful was getting thinner and thinner. This unnerved Mario, who saw the number of his colleagues to be subjected to his jokes and taunts constantly diminishing.

He himself, 'the stranger' as he was still called by the nurses, had changed considerably and for the better. Since he constantly visited Salvatore's house, he was always dressed in an elegant bourgeois suit and, above all, appeared much cleaner than before. This made Andrea suspect that Salvatore's mother, Mrs Giovanna, prepared, every Sunday,

not only a bath for her son, but also a warm shower for the man who used to accompany the boy.

Seeing that he had put on a bit of bacon, Dr Lo Conte was also mischievously certain of another thing: that in that flat, on the coffee table in the living room, during visits, there should never be lacking biscuits, pastries and good Sicilian cannoli filled with ricotta cheese mixed with chocolate chips and garnished with coloured candied fruit, and who knows, on non-holiday days there might even have been some invitations for lunch or dinner

For these and other reasons that it would take a long time to enumerate, Dr Andrea was sleeping the sleep of the righteous in his home when, at around six o'clock in the morning, the telephone rang. As the device was in his parents' bedroom, its ringing initially woke only them. It was his mother who answered and called Andrea. The latter heard one of the nurses on the night shift asking excitedly from the receiver:

"Doctor come to the hospital immediately: we need you for something important".

"But what is it all about?" Andrea wanted to know.

"Come, we are expecting you as soon as possible," only the nurse added before ending the communication.

Dressed in a great hurry, his heart pounding, he wondered what could have happened that was so important and urgent to be called at that unusual hour of the morning. The speed with which he drove together with the sparse traffic allowed him to arrive at the hospital in a few minutes

Parked in front of the ward, as soon as he got out of the car he noticed that some of his nurses were trying to carry something heavy from the family home to the ward by means of a sheet. It was not difficult to see that they were carrying a man, and a recently deceased man at that.

They whispered that Franco had warned them that one of his people had been found on the floor, dead. There was also blood near the corpse, so to avoid trouble for their doctor they were taking the body to the ward, to make it look as if he had died there and not in the family home.

Hearing those words and thinking about the naive action of his diligent and faithful nurses, who were willing to get into trouble of their own to save him, he was shaken by a shiver of emotion. However, as he thanked them, at the same time he ordered them to take the corpse back to where they had found it.

He went to the family home and found Franco, for the first time frowning and nervous, intent on wiping the blood-stained floor with a mop. He, too, did not seem to realise that in such situations one should not touch anything, waiting for the investigators to investigate the case.

Having alerted the director of the fatal event, the investigative and medical machinery was set in motion to understand how and why the patient had died and, above all, what the blood found on the ground near the corpse represented.

As could be expected, an autopsy was requested for the following day. Dr. Lo Conte was instructed by the director to procure everything necessary to help his anatomopathologist colleagues in their task, but since, despite several months spent in that hospital, Andrea had never seen the autopsy room, a nurse had to show him:

"It is not difficult to find it, Doctor. You go behind the large laundry pavilion and you will see a small house. In there is the mortuary which is also used for autopsies.

Andrea went straight to where he was shown but could not see what he was looking for. Behind the laundry room was a small house, very shabby, with the pink plaster peeling in several places and the shutters completely open

and lopsided, but it seemed to be inhabited by a man and a woman who, at that moment, were busy preparing bottles of tomato puree.

The two of them had set up everything they needed in the space in front of the house: on one bench was a green plastic tub for washing the tomatoes, on another was the machine for separating the pulp from the tomato skins, then there was the indispensable gas cooker for boiling the sauce, and finally, a large sheet-metal drum placed on two large stones was awaiting its final intervention. Next to this there was already a nice pile of wood that would later fuel an intense, mighty fire that was indispensable for sterilising the sauce bottles that were already well corked.

Andrea recognised in the two a couple of middle-aged patients who had been talked about in the hospital for some time. These ones, discharged by colleagues from other wards, having nowhere to live, had got together and had found their abusive accommodation there. He knew that Maria, the rotund woman now wearing a big apron and a handkerchief on her head to keep her hair up, was busy washing and cutting tomatoes, was in charge of the house, while Lillo, the man who at that moment was intent on checking the pot where the tomato sauce seasoned with garlic and basil was boiling and at the same time turning the crank of the machine that separated the peel from the pulp, scraped together some money for himself and his companion by cleaning the cars of the doctors and nurses at the hospital. Andrea asked him where the mortuary was.

The latter, sweaty and soiled with sauce as he was, politely pointed with the ladle in his hand, from which he was draining red sauce, to the door behind him, which at that moment had its two doors wide open:

"This is it, doctor. Be my guest. And excuse the mess."

Entering the room he had been shown, he saw on one side a stack of crates of still unprocessed tomatoes, on the other a large number of bottles ready to be cleaned, while in the middle, on what looked like a long, narrow marble table with grooves at the edges, lay a large number of freshly washed and therefore well-cleaned bottles, all arranged with their necks downwards to drain water.

He realised he had found the anatomical table even though, momentarily, occupied as it was by the bottles that had been put to drain, it had another important function. On his way out he told the man what had happened in the family home and asked him:

"Lillo, I see you and your wife are very busy with the tomato bottles, but please, tomorrow we need the anatomy table for an autopsy."

And the man always with a kind and accommodating manner: "I am sorry for the man who died! Anyway, don't worry, doctor. By this evening we should finish corking and boiling the bottles, then we'll clean everything up and so tomorrow you can do what you want."

And then turning to the woman: "Isn't it true, Maria, that we can finish the bottles by tonight?"

"Of course" replied the woman nervously and rudely, perhaps because of the effort and commitment she was putting into her work. And then more and more nervously:

"We will definitely be able to finish this job by tonight if you hurry and if the doctor doesn't waste our time."

"All right then," replied Andrea, trying not to upset the woman further, "the important thing is that everything is clean and tidy by tomorrow morning."

"Don't worry, as you saw inside the autopsy room Maria has already cleaned the marble well to put the bottles in. It's just a matter of removing the tomato crates... and everything will be fine".

Andrea returned to the ward quite satisfied. The first task had been accomplished. It was now necessary to find a trolley on which to place the scalpels and other surgical instruments needed by his colleagues. This task was not difficult either. In the nun's room he had noticed a beautiful stainless steel trolley on which Sister Celestina and her trusty old helper placed the bread baskets or cups with food to distribute to the sick. By giving it a little cleaning, it could well serve its purpose.

The next morning, when my anatomical pathologist colleagues arrived at the hospital, everything was ready. Apart from an intense smell of sauce, garlic and basil, persistent both outside and inside the little house, everything seemed clean and tidy. The room had been cleared of bottles and tomato crates and, next to the anatomical table where the corpse had been laid that night, the nun's stainless steel trolley was waiting to be used, pulled to a shine. Maria and Lillo, for their part, had also diligently removed from the space in front of the entrance to the house the cooker, the pots and pans and all the other utensils that had been used to cook the sauce and to bottle it, including the large iron sheet drum that was indispensable for sterilising the freshly corked bottles.

Dr Lo Conte, knowing that the very permanence of the family home but also his own employment depended on what would be discovered, scrutinised with tension and apprehension every operation that his colleagues, slowly but also perfectly at ease, performed on the corpse, lying naked on the marble table, waiting to reveal its secrets.

Finally, after what seemed a very long time, seeing that they were intent on quickly and roughly stitching up the man's body, he realised that they had completed. Only then did he dare to ask if they had discovered the cause of death.

"Here is the cause". The chief pathologist replied, showing him on a bean-shaped basin the man's heart that had just been extracted. As you can clearly see, your patient died of a heart attack.

"What about the blood that was found on the ground?" asked Andrea again

And the colleague, pointing with a finger still covered by the bloodstained gloves to a small wound on his head: "That came out of this small head wound, which he got when he fell.

These words were greeted with great relief by Dr Lo Conte. Apart from the sorrow for the poor patient's death, things, at least for him and the family home, were looking up.

All that remained was to take his colleagues to the bathroom adjacent to the mortuary, to allow them to wash their hands and rinse the instruments they had brought. He had no idea that this would turn out to be so embarrassing.

Opening the door, they realised that Maria had just hung her freshly washed underwear out to dry on a line running from one end of the room to the other. Therefore, in order to get to the sink, they had to make their way through nail stockings, panties and colourful, large bras. Andrea, red in the face with shame, thanked in his heart his colleagues who had the delicacy to pretend not to notice anything strange in that bathroom!

Not more than a week had passed since the man's death when a second grievance fell on poor Andrea's head. He realised this from the commotion and whistles he heard while working in his department.

As he approached the street, he noticed that a demonstration was taking place in front of the office building, complete with placards carried by a large group of men and women shouting and shouting slogans of protest against the

highest authorities of the hospital. As they approached, they realised that they were the owners and clerks of the shops along the street where the hospital was located, who, according to they shouted, were very concerned about the decrease in income, which they said was caused by the presence of patients on leave who, as they walked along the street where there were many shops, frightened away any customers.

He also learned that a delegation of those demonstrators had been received by the director, who had pledged his commitment to trying to reconcile the necessary liberalisation of patients, permitted and desired by the new laws on asylums, with the needs and fears of citizens

It was only a few days before the director called him to inform him of other pressures and protests he had faced. This time it was some politicians, trade unionists, but also some doctors from the city hospitals. All of them, in one way or another, reported that they had had problems with the people discharged from the filthy ward: former patients had been found begging, others had created difficulties for the families to which they had been relocated, and finally some had clogged up the emergency rooms of the various city hospitals to which they had been taken by relatives who wanted to get rid of them

Like a series of immense waves spreading out and moving threateningly when the sea is in the grip of a storm, in those days everyone seemed to have something to dispute and object to. Shopkeepers, politicians, trade unionists and doctors were joined by the mothers of the neighbourhood children.

They complained that they could no longer get their children out of the house because of the presence of patients, whom they said were dirty and potentially dangerous, freely roaming the streets and courtyards where their chil-

dren were supposed to play. Some even spoke of the discharged patients or those walking in the city streets as walking time bombs, ready to explode at any moment if action was not taken soon.

What was the significance of this? Who was orchestrating these protests? Andrea then asked himself. His fear was that behind the shopkeepers, the families or the medical colleagues there was a more efficient and powerful organisation, which could, for example, be the suppliers who did not look favourably on the rapidly decreasing income due to the declining number of in-patients; or the protest could be fomented by trade unionists fearful of possible lay-offs of nursing and technical staff; but also the politicians, noticing the hospital's dismantling, could be worried about a decrease in their power.

While he was trying to understand where such strong and massive opposition could have come from, he was summoned by the director who informed him that although he had tried everything to address and counter the various protests, he had been forced by the political authorities to organise a commission of enquiry into the young assistant's actions.

This commission had the task of examining and determining whether Dr Lo Conte was endangering the tranquillity, security and also the economy of the city by his behaviour. Having established these allegations, it should have taken the necessary and appropriate measures.

Back in his department, as was to be expected, the bitterness that shook Andrea's soul was considerable. He did not fear for his salary because even if he had been fired, he would have easily found another job. Moreover, strangely, he did not feel resentment or anger towards anyone in particular: not towards the director who had always supported him in his initiatives, not towards the shopkeepers and mo-

thers or individual colleagues; instead, he feared that, once again, the institutional monster he now knew well and had been fighting for months, after losing a few battles, would win his war against change and succeed in making everything go back to the way it was before.

There was nothing else to do but try to deal with all this with the weapons he had at his disposal; weapons that, to tell the truth, did not seem very effective, given the magnitude and intensity of the protests and the mobilisation that had been put in place.

Returning to the ward, he found Franco waiting for him. The man had heard what was happening and had come to see him in order to support and comfort him in the only way that seemed suitable at the time: by telling him about the terrible misfortunes that had befallen him and his family years before. But perhaps for the man it was not quite as he thought. Perhaps, after so many years, the need had become too strong and pressing to confide his ordeals to someone he felt was a friend, in the hope of being heard and understood.

Franco's story

"I was in the fields behind the house when my brother-in-law, the husband of Dalal, my elder sister, came to visit me. It seemed strange to me to see him there early in the morning. He immediately said he wanted to talk to me about something very important: he wanted to offer me a well-paid and stable job. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness towards me. Until then I had been engaged in a lot of small, low-paid odd jobs in the village where I had been born and raised and from which I had only rarely left. A new job, and a well-paid and stable one at that, was what I had been looking for for some time'.

Stopping his story for a moment, Franco turned to Andrea, looking him in the eye, as if apologising and seeking his understanding, and then...

"Those houses in my village, doctor, built at the edge of the great river where it was necessary and possible, without regard to any master plan, in your eyes I am sure they would not have said much, but to me they were my whole life. I loved those poor houses. I loved their inhabitants who had known me since I was born and I loved above all my family that I had built right there".

"So you were married?" Dr Lo Conte interrupted him with interest.

"Yes, of course. I had a wife and two children".

"Then why did you tell me that you had no home to go to?" replied the doctor.

"Because it is so. I had and have no home to go to. Please be patient, doctor, and listen to me".

"All right, I'm listening.

"As I told you, I had a wife, her name was Bashira, and also two children: a boy and a girl. So I assure you that

when my brother-in-law came to visit me, while I was watering the plants in my garden, I did not see him as a 'saviour', allowing me to leave a very poor and simple place, offering me in exchange a comfortable life in a very big city like Cairo. No, doctor, I assure you that I did not want to hear those words and I did not feel his enthusiasm at all'.

Andrea didn't understand where Franco was going with this. Why was he defending himself? And what was he defending himself against?

The man had resumed his story and the tone of his voice had suddenly become tense and distressed. Franco was no longer the confident, always smiling man that the doctor knew so well. There was something gnawing at his soul, but he could not tell what it was. His tension, however, was palpable and was also transmitted to his doctor, so that the latter's attention became more vivid and involved.

"You understand," my brother-in-law told me, "what this big company offers us in one month, we here in our miserable villages don't even earn in six. Think of your wife, my sister, think of your children. They have to go to high school. Or do you want them to grow up ignorant like us? And then look at the safety and cleanliness offered by the houses in the city, built with cement, iron, mortar and iron-hard clay bricks

Would you perhaps compare them to these houses of ours, made of sun-dried mud and straw bricks? Houses that, when it rains for a long time, bend and melt like butter? And then wouldn't you like to walk into some shop full of a thousand useful and interesting things to buy? And when one is sick, wouldn't it be important for you and yours to have a well-equipped and efficient hospital at your disposal?

Not to mention mosques. You and your family who are so religious, do you want to continue praying all your life in that tiny stinking hovel of a mosque you have here?

Just think that in the Grand Mosque in Cairo your whole village could fit in there and maybe mine too! And do you want to compare the mosaics with pure gold that cover it inside and out with that ridiculous hovel you have in this village where, before you kneel down to pray, you have to chase away the rats and be very careful not to bring home the fleas that live in the carpets and hop around on the floor?

My brother-in-law certainly did not know me well. My family and I were interested in a place to pray, we were certainly not interested in the beauty of this place.

And then seeing me still puzzled... 'Please think well about this possibility, Amin, we cannot neglect this opportunity. I have already spoken to my wife and she told me that she would only come to the city if you also come. She doesn't want to go alone. Please, talk to Bashira and if you want, to your father too, and you will see that they too will agree; they too will tell you to accept without even thinking much about it.

"I repeat, doctor, that I did not feel your enthusiasm at all. Nor had his words fully convinced me. I knew that big cities can give a lot, but they can also take a lot away: I would certainly not have my vegetable garden, I would no longer pick dates by climbing palm trees, I would not be able to bathe in the big river beside which I had grown up and where I would have liked my children to grow up. Certainly not.

However, I still decided to talk to my wife and father about this job offer, to hear their opinion and feel more confident and comforted in my decision.

Both Bashira and my father, contrary to what my brother-in-law thought, did not seem at all enthusiastic about this change, but neither did they try to dissuade me. They simply told me that I was old enough and mature enough to

choose what was best for my family. Ultimately they left the decision to me.

Those were difficult days. There were so many pros and cons that it was not easy to resolve one way or the other. I came to a compromise: before making a final decision, I would try life in the city for a few weeks or a few months at the most and only after that, if everything went well and I found all the conditions for a peaceful and quiet life in the city, would I move my parents to Cairo. It seemed the wisest thing to do.

As my brother-in-law had repeatedly said, the construction company that hired us was really important. It paid its workers well because it was able to receive good orders both from private individuals and from the municipality and central government.

They hired us on probation and so my brother-in-law and I rented a room in a house where there were other workers like us.

We did not always work on the same site; in the evenings when we got off work or sometimes in the mornings, the boss of the company, an efficient engineer, who always seemed to be rushing because he was busy with a thousand problems to solve, would shunt us to the various sites where our arms were needed.

Only a few days had passed when he pointed at some of us with his finger in his usual commanding tone:

"You, you and you, tomorrow you will go to the pyramids. There is already a group working there to repair the road, but they need extra men to finish the work in time. Bring your tools, report to the site manager and try to work hard. In the evening, the truck will come by to pick you up and take you back to your homes."

I did not expect such a request but I was happy about it. Although having chosen only me and not my brother-in-

law as well, we were forced to remain separated during work'.

At this point, Franco told his doctor about the time when, as a child, he had not only seen but succeeded in climbing the pyramid with his father and brothers. And then:

"Since I had taken part in what I called 'the great enterprise' as a child, I had not seen the archaeological site where our most important pyramids stood. It would have been nice this time to enter through the main gate and not by stealth as I had done when I was a child. Moreover, I would see them again illuminated by the sun. I was not only happy but also proud of my new job that allowed me to collaborate in some way to make this unique place more beautiful and functional.

Because there were so many of us, the work on the pyramids proceeded quickly, but it was longer and more challenging than I had initially imagined. Rather than repairing, we were actually building on the same track a new road that was much wider, more beautiful and efficient than the small, narrow and full of potholes road that was there before.

Curious and interested as I was in archaeology, in the two hours we were allowed for lunch and rest, I liked to wander freely the site and discover all its wonders. One day, I don't know whether by chance or by a hidden desire of mine, it occurred to me to retrace the route I had taken as a child to escape the guardians and their dogs. After finding with some difficulty the point of the pyramid from which we had descended, I tried to retrace the path we had run that distant night.

After a while, as I expected, the reeds, bushes and branches behind which I wanted to hide appeared before me, and in the midst of them I saw again the well that had swallowed me that night. With the years, both the fears and

the tension associated with those events had disappeared; all that remained of that childhood adventure were the most beautiful and pleasant memories. I was happy to have rediscovered all the places of that night.

The well had not been cleared of the reeds and saplings growing in it. Whatever its function, it was clear that it had long since been abandoned. As I stroked the long reeds above it, I felt a strong desire to descend into it again, almost as if to experience the pleasure of being a child again so as to relive the same emotions.

On the other hand, big and strong as I was, and moreover in daylight, it was not difficult to do so. I descended into it with ease, using the uneven walls more than the small trees. In doing so, I discovered that the shaft was little taller than I was as an adult, and this realisation partly obscured the reconstruction I had made of my great adventure for so many years. The interior was filled with the same smell of rotten leaves that had struck me then.

I was about to go outside to return to my work, when I again came across the iron on which I had then placed my foot and which had helped me out. This time I observed it well: it was actually a handle and that explained why it had bent under my weight.

"But if this is a handle," I said to myself, "it must be used to open something". Indeed, more by touch than by sight, I felt that the handle was engaged in a metal flap. I pulled hard and to my surprise the flap opened easily. I slipped a hand inside the long duct and clearly felt that there was a shutter almost completely destroyed by rust, which, having not been used for decades, had been abandoned to its fate.

I was about to leave since there was nothing else to explore when, as I slipped and moved my arm down the shaft to make sure there was nothing else there, I clearly felt

something soft to the touch, as if it were fabric. I immediately thought of gloves lost by some plumber who had inspected the shutter.

I was about to take it, because I might need it for my work, when I realised that the fabric was much wider than I had imagined, and it must have contained something heavy. Pulling it out with some difficulty because it had got caught in what remained of the shutter, I saw that it was in fact a sack.

Using my vivid imagination I imagined a plumber who had climbed down into the well to repair the shutter and, noticing the futility and impossibility of doing so, had forgotten his work tools inside the cavity. I therefore thought of taking out what I had found and handing it over to the foreman.

As it was getting late, walking quickly back to my colleagues, I stopped only for a moment to scan the contents of the sack. What I glimpsed made me stop suddenly. I was amazed but also frightened. Inside were not pliers and spanners at all, as I had imagined, but much, much older and more precious artefacts. That bag was full of necklaces, tiaras, bracelets, breastplates, all embellished with precious stones that shone in the sun as if they had a life of their own. I immediately compared them to the jewellery I had seen printed in colour in the history books I had studied as a child.

I remained for a few moments as if stunned, then I instinctively did the thing that seemed most reasonable. I quickly went back, threw the sack with all its contents into the well and ran away as if instead of jewellery that envelope had been full of poisonous snakes. I could not carry them around as if nothing had happened. I needed to think, I needed to reflect.

I returned to the group of workers with my heart in turmoil. I feared that the others would read on my face bur-

ning with anxiety what had happened and what I had found. Those last hours of work seemed eternal. I needed to be alone to reflect, and I could not do that while we scrambled to transport cement, stones and bricks from one side to the other. Finally, the site manager told us the end of that day's work:

"Enough for today! Take back and clean all your tools thoroughly. Wash yourselves in the fountain near the guardhouse and rest. In a few minutes, the truck will arrive to take you home. Don't leave anything behind. Get those sacks off the road! Come on, it's time to return to our homes!

Back in my temporary accommodation, it seemed to me that someone had turned upside down the world in which I had lived until then. I saw everything as if I were under the influence of a drug. My ears were throbbing, my heart was pounding, my palms were sweating profusely and my vision had become blurred.

I was constantly asking myself if I should do something and what was the right thing to do. In the meantime, throwing the sack into the well from where I had taken it did not seem the proper thing to do. Although I would never have taken possession of a single one of those precious objects, it didn't seem smart to let them rot in that stinking hole.

Those necklaces, those bracelets, those ornaments were the history of Egypt, they were precious objects that belonged to my nation. They were a part of us because they were part of our history. A history that could best be reconstructed through those very artefacts that I had thrown back into the well as if they were rubbish.

After a sleepless night, I had made the decision that seemed most rational, right and proper. I had to take them and deliver them to the most suitable place for them: the

great Egyptian museum in Cairo. The scholars and specialists would take care of giving each jewel its rightful place and appreciation. I absolutely did not want the thieves or grave robbers who had hidden them in that hole to take them abroad to sell them. In past centuries, my nation had already been plundered of many of its treasures. It was not worth continuing on that path.

The fact that those precious objects were in that hole clearly showed that they had been stolen from some tomb or even from some museum, by stealth. Yes, but what if the thief or thieves discover me? You have to be careful,' I repeated to myself. 'Better to put everything in a wrapper and deliver the ill-gotten goods to the museum anonymously, like a normal parcel to be delivered. That way I would be safe from the thieves' revenge, and at the same time I would still be doing my duty as a good citizen.

The plan seemed well thought out to me. The next day, at break time, I moved away from the others and then with great circumspection, looking around so as not to be noticed by anyone, I approached the well and descended again. I easily found the bag I had thrown down there the day before. Without even opening it, as if afraid of its contents, I quickly hid it in the work bag I had brought with me. I quickly returned to my companions and tried with difficulty to eat something with them.

I spent the evening packing the parcel to be delivered to the museum in the best possible way. I wrote the address of the recipient and that of a fake sender. I also applied some stamps to it, to make it even more credible

In the morning, before going to work, I asked my brother-in-law to accompany me on his motorbike to the museum where, I told him, I had to deliver a parcel on behalf of the boss

It was strange to enter such an austere building, full of statues, ornaments and ancient objects. Since I had no plans to visit it, although I would have loved to, I only stopped for a moment in the offices to deliver what I had brought, having the clerk in charge sign a false receipt. Without any delay I left, certainly much more relaxed than when I had entered. Everything had gone according to the plan I had devised: the employees had suspected nothing. Now I could have my brother-in-law accompany me to work.

Since I had delivered the ancient jewellery to the museum, about a week had passed and everything seemed to be going as usual. Our work was proceeding smoothly, although there were a few hiccups due to the material not always arriving on time, so that when the trucks finally unloaded it, the site manager urged us to hurry, to make up for lost time.

On one of these convulsive days, one of my comrades let go of a stone slab before I had removed my hands from the one I had just put down, giving me an injury to my left hand. The foreman, concerned about the accident, immediately had me taken to the hospital emergency room. Here they treated me and ordered me not to work for at least forty-eight hours.

When I returned to the site, I immediately noticed something strange: my comrades not only did not ask me about the incident but also avoided approaching me. As I walked to introduce myself to the site manager, it was as if I were a ghost moving among them. No one seemed to have noticed me; only the supervisor, having caught sight of me, approached me and, in a furtive, very worried and tense manner, told me that the previous evening, some disreputable people had come and asked about me in a threatening manner.

"I don't know what you did, Amin? but knowing the guys who were looking for you and the way they were asking about you, you must have done something really bad." And then he promptly added: "This morning I spoke to the boss about this matter; he told me that he did not want any trouble with those people. And so he instructed me to give you what you are owed for the days you have done, plus a little extra, and to ask you not to be seen in the company again.

In fact, if you want my advice, the best thing you can do is to disappear from the city as well. Those are very dangerous people; they will keep looking for you until they find you, and then I don't know what will happen to you. Here: take this envelope with the money and go!"

I walked away quickly. Turning around for just a moment, I saw that some of my former comrades were looking at me quizzically. There was astonishment mixed with pity in their gazes. On the one hand, they were surely wondering what kind of relationship I was in with the rabble who had come looking for me, and on the other hand, it was evident that they were reluctant to show the pity they felt for me

As had sometimes happened to me as a child in dreams, I felt my mind and body gripped and powerless. I had been living for a few hours in a nightmare, such as walking on the edge of a precipice, unable to get away from the imminent danger. Only this time it was not a dream.

I was well aware that even though I was not near a real precipice I was in real danger. I felt the violence hanging over my person like a cold little snake which, before biting and killing with its venom, slowly slithers between my shoulder blades and down my back, looking for the most suitable place to plant its deadly teeth.

I did not know what to do or where to go. I could not go back to the rented room, because that would be the first

place they would look for me. The only thing I could think of was to go to the construction site where my brother-in-law worked, so that he could advise me. To find him I had to cross almost the entire city and it took me hours.

When I told him what had happened to me my brother-in-law looked at me strangely: in his gaze there was fear for me but also contempt. It was clear that he saw me as a stupid boy looking for trouble, who had no idea how to behave in the adult world.

"The only thing I can do for you is to take you to the village to your father. He will see what to do." And then, in a slightly sweeter and more understanding way: 'But why didn't you tell me the truth about what had happened to you and what you wanted to do? I would have advised you, but it's too late now. You got yourself into a lot of trouble and I don't know how you can get out of it. If at least you hadn't delivered those jewels to the museum... something could have been done. I'll warn the site manager and we'll leave."

The cold air slapping me as we raced on the motorbike did nothing to remove my anguish. The confusion in my head increased as I realised how naive I had been. I told myself that my brother-in-law was right: I was a stupid and naive boy; incapable of handling something much bigger than myself.

Everything was now clear to me: for the thugs, enraged by the loss of the loot, who were looking for me, it must have been easy to find me, since I was the only one who left the group of other masons during lunchtime. Moreover, it was also possible that the site guards had seen me go down that shaft twice. The thieves might have been warned by them or, even worse, the guards might have been in cahoots with the thieves themselves.

On the other hand, if the hiding place was there, one of the guards must necessarily have known about it. In any

case, the site manager was right: I was never to be seen in the city again. To top it all off, the company offices had a copy of my identity card and, no doubt now, so did whoever had organised the theft, but so did all his henchmen who were looking for me.

In every car or motorbike we encountered or that passed us, I feared I would see one of those men with a rifle or pistol drawn, ready to fire on me. I had never been in a situation, I won't say similar, but not even close to this one.

We finally arrived at my village. Here too, as I had noticed at my construction site, I immediately felt a strange, murky atmosphere. The streets lacked many things that should have been there: there were no children chasing each other and playing, no women chatting with each other, laughing and joking as they went about their many daily tasks outside. It seemed that even the animals did not make their daily noises. The village was as if shrouded in a shroud of silence, fear and terror.

My brother-in-law felt the same. Saying a curse word, he switched off the engine. "Maybe they are already here," he whispered. "Let's hide." After leaving the bike in one of the first lanes, he took me by the hand as if I were a child to guide and then, trying not to make any noise, he led me to my father's house. Always careful to hide, as if we were the thieves and malefactors, we approached one of the windows.

We peeked in and saw only one person, my father, sitting by the table with his head bowed as if he were dead or in a deep sleep. We went inside. Hearing our footsteps he gasped in fright. As soon as he recognised us, he raised his head and looked at me with an expression I will never forget. There was in that look a mute reproach combined with such immense sorrow.

"It is you. Why have you come here? Go away. Leave now!"

We did not understand. "Are they there?" I had the strength to ask.

"No, they are gone but they may return. They are looking for you!"

"All right," I said, "I'll take my wife and children and leave".

Hearing me say those words my father looked at me for a long time and with greater sorrow without saying anything. Then, without looking at me, with his head bowed, he managed to mumble something in a low voice that I had to repeat several times to understand:

"You have no more wife and no more children." And then in a louder voice, "Run away, I say, before they catch you and kill you too!"

For hours now I had been fearing for my life, but I did not expect this. What sense did it make to kill my wife and children? Even putting myself in their shoes as violent men with no moral sense, I and only I was guilty. Why pick on my family? I understood the reason as my father, with the force of desperation, almost dragged me into my house that was right next to his and pointed out with his other hand, visibly trembling, the havoc that had occurred a few minutes earlier. The thieves knew that I no longer had the jewellery. They knew I had given them to the museum. And since they had not found me, the scene before me was their punishment, it was their revenge.

And then again my father, in an even more desperate tone: 'Here, take this money. Go to the river and look for Dabir. He is the one with the blue boat with white stripes. He is a good sailor. He will take you as far as the harbour and put you on some deep-sea fishing boat that can take you far from here, preferably out of our country'. He threw the

money he had in his hand almost violently into my pocket and urged me, pushing me, to run towards the river, using a tone as hard as steel. A tone he had never used towards me.

To this day I still cannot forgive him for the harshness he had towards me that day. He should have asked me the reason for what had happened. He should have allowed me to give one last kiss to the remains of my wife and children, who were there, a few metres away from me, and whom the women, who looked at me from a corner, frightened and weeping, had already reassembled in our marriage bed... next to each other. But nothing was granted to me.

I wanted to get away from there. I wanted to get away from that horror, I wanted to get away from my wife and my children who were also slaughtered because of me, but I also wanted to get away from my father, my brother-in-law and all the others who saw me not as the victim but as the culprit. In those moments I felt disgust and horror for everything and everyone.

"Of course I would leave," I said to myself. I would have gone away to the farthest place possible and I would not have returned, and not for fear of ending up like my wife and children; I would not have returned so as not to meet my father and all the others who saw me as the thief and murderer

"I am not the murderer! I am not the thief!" I kept telling myself over and over again as I walked and cried.

At the river I found the man my father had pointed out to me. I immediately understood, from the tone with which he greeted me, that he had not yet heard anything about what had happened. I told him that I was tired of working the land and that I preferred being a fisherman. I asked him to take me to the port and point me to a boat that needed a deckhand

"I am glad," he told me in his hoarse voice, perhaps from too much singing at the top of his voice, giving me a big pat on the back, "I am glad when some of you young people leave the dirty soil of your fields for the clear waters of the river or the sea. Water is a clean thing that cleans, land is a dirty thing that dirties, can it be that many of you young people do not realise this simple truth?"

As his felucca glided over the water dragged by the current of the Nile, this concept of his, I do not know whether philosophical or biological, I heard him repeat it at least ten times without being able to tell him that I loved the land and that I was fleeing because I felt betrayed by everyone: by society because the right thing I had done had led me to lose my wife, my children, and even my own country; by my father who accused me and condemned me to exile without even listening to my reasons; by my brother-in-law who considered me a stupid and naive boy; by the villagers who, out of fear, had barricaded themselves in their homes and had not intervened against the evildoers. And finally, I also felt betrayed by my workmates who had probably spied on my movements.

I had nothing left. I had no honour due to a husband, whose first duty is to protect and care for his wife and children; I had no family; I had no country; and above all, I had no will to live.

It would have been easy to let go in the river, and be done with the remorse and guilt that gripped my soul. By the way, I had also lied to the old sailor that I wanted to be a deckhand; but that was the smallest of my faults.

Only faith in God was able to keep me from making that extreme and desperate gesture that had crossed my mind. Also contributing, I am sure, was the splendour of nature, which on that day, like a divine gift, was evident on both banks of the river. Unlike men, I felt her tender and af-

fectionate towards me, as if she caressed me, enveloped me and above all understood me.

As the felucca passed the trees near the shore, they seemed to look at me with the pity and solicitude that men had not shown me. I felt that the tall palm trees that almost touched the red sky of the sunset and the river water lilies that bloomed in banks near the shore, were able to give me the closeness and consolation that men denied me

We arrived at the roadstead when it was dark. Fortunately, the old sailor knew many of the captains of the fishing boats in the harbour, as he too had commanded a deep-sea fishing boat in his youth, before age forced him to pilot the felucca with which he had brought me there.

The old man introduced me to one of his former colleagues, joking about my seafaring vocation: 'This is a 'land-eater' who got tired of hoeing and planting potatoes. He wants to be a sailor. I entrust him to you. As you can see, he is sturdy and strong and can give you a hand in fishing. When you no longer need him, you can throw him to the sharks'. The captain, who needed men in those days, looked at me for a moment as if to weigh my qualities and then willingly accepted my help aboard his fishing boat

I did not feel like deceiving him too. So when we were far enough out at sea, I confided in him that I was not made for water but for land and that I would give him a hand in the fishing and even some money if he would take me as far as any port outside Egypt, and then I would be grateful to him if he would let me disembark and forget about me. He understood that something serious had happened to me and asked no further questions. Much later he asked me if Sicily was OK with me. I said yes, even though I barely knew where that island was.

After several days of sailing and fishing, when he landed me it was evening. After having given a good part of

my money to the captain of the fishing boat, with what I had left I looked for a small pension for the night.

I remember little of that place. All I remember is that my wife's disfigured face and the quiet faces of my children, all lying in our double bed, seemed to haunt me as I tossed and turned for hours without respite in my bed, unable not to sleep, but unable to have a moment's peace.

I don't know exactly what happened to me. I must have had a nervous breakdown and lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw the lady from the boarding house pointing to the nurses, who were trying to hold me down on the floor, the chair, lamp and the other objects I had broken. And then I must have fainted again because I found myself in the ambulance with my hands and face bandaged. I think I was taken straight to the observation ward of this hospital. And from there, after a few days, I found myself in the sweat ward. You know the rest very well."

"I understand". Only Andrea said.

And he hoped that Franco, or Amin as he was called, would not ask him any more questions about what he had understood. It was not by chance - he now knew - that Franco had accepted, without protest at all, to be hospitalised and to remain with the most dispossessed people on earth; it was not by chance that he had taken to heart that group of his, made up mainly of mentally retarded people with the mental age of children; it was not by chance that he had been seen hugging some of them; and finally it was not by chance that he had not wanted to be discharged after so many years. He thought he was thus serving his error of judgement and this he had done and was still doing in a manner most in keeping with his uncompromising religious morality.

Speaking of religion. The doctor wondered again: "Why had he fully embraced Catholicism, complete with

masses, prayers before lunch, statuettes of saints and rosaries under the statue of the Virgin Mary?" "Had he done it to get clothes for himself and his family from the nun at the tailor's shop, as he had thought at first, or were the reasons otherwise?"

There were at least two important clues to this question. The first concerned the comment he had made when his brother-in-law tried to persuade him to move to Cairo, where he would find bigger, richer and more beautiful mosques than the small, miserable and squalid one in his village: 'I and my family were interested in a place to pray, we were certainly not interested in the beauty of this place'. But there was also a second important clue: where had this man and his group chosen to live if not in the premises of a former sacristy that almost embraced the church with its shape?

At this point it was clear that clothes had little to do with his conversion. The reasons were more intimate and profound: that man, he was now certain, in order to have a minimum of inner peace could not do without being in contact with a friendly and consoling God, but also with Our Lady and the Saints, the only realities capable of protecting and supporting him, day after day, in his lacerating inner torment.

The doctor got up to dismiss him, but first he wanted to embrace him saying: "Thank you". He did not know what that 'thank you' referred to. Whether he wanted to thank the man for the lesson in humanity he had offered him; whether he needed to thank him for all he had done over all those years for the in-patients; or whether for making him realise in the most direct and sweetest way that when one does good and noble deeds, one does not always get applause, on the contrary

The investigation

Not only the medical and administrative director but also the provincial councillor, all the union representatives and some nurses were present on the day of the investigation. There were also some people whom Dr Lo Conte did not know, perhaps parents or shopkeepers in the area. The councillor took up the accusations and grievances of the bystanders.

Strangely enough, however, Andrea noticed, the most virulent criticism against his actions was not so much about his resignation or leave of absence, as he had expected: he was above all being accused of the construction and management of the family home

It is inconceivable", thundered the councillor in a heated voice as if he were making a rally of his own, "that a situation of anarchy and potential danger, such as that represented by a group of patients left alone, without the care and custody of staff trained and specialised for such a task, should be allowed inside a hospital.

It is inconceivable that mentally ill patients, potentially dangerous to themselves and others, should be entrusted to another epileptic patient, and with a dubious sexual reputation to boot. This is too much! It should be known that in that so-called family home a patient died a few weeks ago, without the nursing staff having been able to provide adequate care. This is the clearest proof of the neglect in which the patients entrusted to Dr Lo Conte were left'.

To defend himself, Andrea had deployed a simple but hopefully also effective tool: photos, or rather slides taken over time. These, projected on the screen behind the authorities, showed faces and surroundings that were supposed to

highlight to onlookers how much the department had changed during the period in which he had served.

It must have been evident, at least to those willing to look at them without preconceptions, the remarkable transformation for the better of both people and environments. Among these images were also those depicting scenes from the family home. However, as these flashed before his eyes, he became increasingly convinced of their lack of usefulness in countering the accusations being levelled at him.

Those beds piled up in the narrow rooms, the forks, knives and wine bottles that could be clearly seen on the dining table, and the fake flowers sprouting everywhere, were not only unable to challenge the criticism that had focused on this very structure, but were in danger of confirming it.

Having finished his defence, he sat down and waited for the others to speak. As he tidied up his papers, he saw Luisa, sitting next to him, stand up and introduce herself to the group: "I am a social worker. I would also like to say something about this matter". One could clearly feel her anger at what was going on in that room. For more than a year,' she continued, 'I have been working as a volunteer in what you call the 'sweat ward'. (By the way, I hope that after what Dr Andrea just showed you, you will change the name you gave it). I therefore know every patient and every situation. I just wanted to add a few facts about the autonomous ward that we call 'Family House'. Dr Lo Conte showed you the beds, the tables, the flowers, the radios, the record players and the cassette players; he also showed you the ceramic plates and cutlery with which the people in the home eat. All things that a normal community of people, indeed a normal family, is equipped with. Things that, however, you know very well were and are totally absent in the wards. Dr Lo Conte failed to show you the most important thing: this'

Saying these last words, he waved a big book. "You know that each ward has its own register in which, every day, or rather every shift change, the nursing staff have a duty to report any anomaly or problematic situation encountered either in the sweat ward or in the family home. I, with the help of a nurse, took the trouble to note down all the difficult or problematic situations in which the nurses or doctor had to intervene. I recorded all the fights, injuries, deaths, admissions to city hospitals, visits from relatives and so on. We turned all this data into percentages, taking into account the different number of patients in the sweat ward and in the family home'.

Immediately after these words, Luisa began to show a series of slides full of numbers and diagrams that Andrea had never seen. They were data that clearly and unmistakably demonstrated how the ward controlled and managed by the nurses was considerably more at risk than the autonomous ward. There were far more frequent assaults, fights, deaths, injuries and bruises, both minor and serious. Conversely, with regard to the number of visits and contacts with family members or other visitors, these were much more frequent in the family home than on the ward.

This undoubtedly showed how much safer, better cared for and closer to the heart of the family the patients were in this new facility. The social worker finished with a sentence that made Andrea wince: "I, in my school for social workers, have met many excellent lecturers, doctors, psychologists, sociologists, pedagogues, among them also the director of this hospital, but I assure you that none of them made me understand, not only with words but above all with example, the meaning of care, of respect, of attention and, I would say, of love to be offered to each and every patient, as the doctor in front of you has done, and whom, incredibly, you want to accuse of I don't know what misdeeds,

while on the contrary you should support and encourage him in his very difficult but valuable work'.

After these words, she sat down exhausted. She had never spoken in public and overcoming her shyness seemed to have drained her of all energy, so much so that only after a few minutes did she realise that Andrea, who was sitting next to her, had shaken her hand to congratulate her but also to thank her for her speech.

That hand, however, strangely enough, had not only remained in hers, but she could clearly feel the man's fingers caressing her fingers and wrist with slow, skilful movements. Realising this, she felt empowered to squeeze the young man's hand and fingers as well, so hard that he groaned with pain, while at the same time looking at him with the moist, large, strange eyes of love, in which was clearly visible an accusation from which no investigating committee could exonerate him: not having noticed her sooner and having let all those months pass without reciprocating his feelings

While an intimate, silent, loving dialogue continued, or rather intensified, between those two hands clasped to each other, it was difficult to remain attentive to what was going on around them. Andrea only noticed that some of the nurses on his ward, as well as the director, had also asked for the floor to defend and applaud him.

Therefore, the councillor, noticing as a good politician that the accusations were turning into cheers for that young assistant, quickly closed the session with a generic request for more caution and left disappointed. The committee of enquiry was formally dissolved.

The Amin Dali Room

Egypt was the last stop of the honeymoon trip that Andrea and Luisa were taking on a very elegant and gigantic cruise ship. After that stopover, only the sad return home remained.

In the various countries and cities they had visited, she had packed all the clothes she had brought with her in her enormous pink suitcase, which stood tall, like one of the many monuments they had visited, in the corner of their cabin.

From the suitcase, which now opened up looked like a small wardrobe, he had taken out and was intent on scrutinising with considerable perplexity the green jacket and trouser suit that he had already worn with pleasure and joy the first few days of sailing but which now, having been 'already seen by everyone', looked very sad and drab to him.

Scrutinising Andrea's face, not sure whether for advice, suggestion or approval, she did not decide to put it on. "What do you think of it?" she repeated to him for the sixth time, almost whimpering at the uncertainty gnawing at her, as she waited for Andrea to tell her again, "It's beautiful, you know, and it looks really good on you." The man indulged her, expecting the usual wistful and dissatisfied reply: "But I wore it two days in a row. The whole ship knows it."

Since one cannot have everything in life, almost ashamed of how she was dressed, she agreed to wear that very outfit to tour the city of Cairo and to go to the capital's great Egyptian museum.

In truth, neither of them was thinking that day about their working environment, which they felt was psychologically and physically miles away from their interests at the time. Instead, they listened with a certain irritation to their

guide who had lingered at length in every mosque and holy place in the immense city, to illustrate the marvels not only of architecture but also of the Islamic religion, and now, when it was time to visit a historical and secular place, he fulfilled his task in a tired, hurried and almost unfriendly manner. It was evident that to this young man with his lanky body and mystical, dreamy gaze, all those relics and statues of the pharaohs and gods of ancient Egypt were annoying.

In each room, after letting them in, he would linger on only a few important items and then leave the group of cruise passengers free to look at the rest on their own, saying the inevitable phrase: "You go ahead and turn around, I'll wait for you in ten minutes outside the room.

Tired of so much wandering and especially no longer motivated, they almost missed the name of the last room to visit, dedicated to a certain Amin Dali. It was Luisa who, on entering, noticed the photo inserted in a frame beside the door, under that name written in beautiful Arabic and Latin characters in polished brass that shone, in the light of the spotlights, as if it were gold.

The woman, her throat closed, as if she had seen one of the many mummies surrounding her come back to life, took the young groom by the arm and forced him to look at the photo and the inscription above it. The man, even more tired than she was, despite having little desire to look at the thousands of objects present, was forced to obey. His interest and numbed senses were in an instant awakened by that name and that photo that his wife pointed out to him.

He seemed to know both the subject of the photo and that name very well. Without saying anything, he almost ran into the room, dodging and overtaking the other tourists, but what he saw was at odds with the suspicion that had for a moment come over him and his wife.

In the large room, many artefacts were displayed in a modern and functional manner: there were several mummies, terracotta canopic jars, funerary beds, sarcophagi and statuettes. This was certainly a case of homonymy. Franco, during his long, tragic tale had only spoken of a sack in a hole. The exhibits were numerous and very bulky. There was no way that name and photo referred to him

Almost disappointed, he was about to retrace his steps, tired, hungry and only eager to seek solace in the beautiful, cool dining rooms of the cruise ship, when his eyes were drawn to a small glass showcase placed right in the middle of the room. In this one, cleverly illuminated by the various spotlights on the ceiling, a number of beautiful jewellery pieces, necklaces and many other pieces of jewellery were on display. For each of them there was a description in various languages. Next to it was, also on display on a tray, a not at all precious object: a brown cloth sack

Both newlyweds ran back to contact the guide who had stayed outside to rest and asked about the hall. The young man, annoyed by the heat and the constant silly questions he was forced to answer, explained to them that it was a hall that had only been open a few years, which contained everything they had managed to recover from thieves who had discovered a tomb of a high Egyptian dignitary who had been buried there with his family.

"And is this Amin Dali after whom the room is named an archaeologist?"

"What an archaeologist!" exclaimed the guide, almost scolding them for their ignorance. As if to say: "Don't you read the newspapers, don't you listen to the radio, don't you watch television?"

"The room is dedicated to the man who sacrificed himself and his family to recover the stolen items. All our

school children know his story and his sacrifice for the good of the fatherland".

At this point there was no longer any doubt: it was indeed the treasure discovered by Franco.

The guide, seeing that the two, after his explanations, were hugging and kissing as if they had seen each other again after who knows how long, were laughing and jumping around like mad, became even more convinced that the tourist race was really strange and that he would perhaps do better to change his profession

As they descended the stairs holding hands, still laughing, Andrea turned to Luisa in a joking tone:

"Remind me dear, as soon as we return, to discharge Franco immediately and send him back here to receive his well-deserved medals for valour. I would not like to risk another enquiry for causing a diplomatic incident by keeping an Egyptian hero in an asylum."

Whereupon Luisa, coquettishly: "But you remind the hero to bring Giovanna and her son Salvatore here too. You will have realised, I hope, that they are both in love with him'.

'Women always think about the sentimental aspects of things,' thought Andrea, happily nodding to his wife's request.

Author's note

It is difficult for anyone attempting to write a book of fiction to avoid including autobiographical elements, and we have made no exception to this rule. In this book, the experience we had in the 1970s as a neuropsychiatric assistant at the Mandalari Psychiatric Hospital in Messina was certainly useful to us and we have poured it abundantly into these pages. Despite this, in many cases imagination clearly took over in adding to, modifying and enriching the many real situations.

INDEX

The department	
Andrea in the studio	
Franco: the foreigner	
At home	
In the morning	
Salvatore	
Mary	
The first interventions	
Goliath	
Luisa	
Outside the department	
The Great Enterprise	
Mario and Salvatore	
The family home	
Bashira	
The return of Mary	
Giovanna	
Sebastiano	
The storm	
Franco's story	
The investigation	
The Amin Dali Room	

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