

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark, long-sleeved dress and red high-heeled shoes, is sitting on a bed. She is looking down at her feet. The bed has a striped blanket. To her left is a window with a white frame and a yellow curtain. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

A LITTLE
LUMPEN
NOVELITA
ROBERTO
BOLAÑO

translated by natasha wimmer

Roberto Bolaño

a little
lumpen
novelita

Translated by NATASHA WIMMER

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

for Lautaro and Alexandra Bolaño

All writing is garbage.

People who come out of nowhere to try and put into words any part of what goes on in their minds are pigs.

All writers are pigs. Especially writers today.

ANTONIN ARTAUD

I

Now I'm a mother and a married woman, but not long ago I led a life of crime. My brother and I had been orphaned. Somehow that justified everything. We didn't have anyone. And it all happened overnight.

Our parents died in a car accident on the first vacation they took without us, on a highway near Naples, I think, or some other horrible southern highway. Our car was a yellow Fiat, a used car, but it looked like new. After the accident it was just a tangle of gray steel. When I saw it at the police yard with the other wrecked cars, I asked my brother about the color.

"Wasn't it yellow?"

My brother said yes, of course it had been yellow, but that was before. Before the accident. Collisions warp color or warp the way we see color. I didn't know what he meant by that. I asked him. He said: Light . . . color . . . everything. Poor guy, I thought, he's taking it harder than me.

That night we slept at a hotel and the next day we took the train back to Rome, with what was left of our parents. We were escorted by a social worker, or a counselor, or a psychologist, I don't know. My brother asked her what she was and I didn't hear the answer because I was looking out the window.

The only people at the burial were an aunt, my mother's sister, along with her horrible daughters. I stared at my aunt the entire time (which wasn't long) and more than once I thought I caught a half smile on her lips, or sometimes a whole smile, and then I knew (though actually I'd known all along) that my brother and I were alone in the world. The ceremony was brief. Outside the cemetery we kissed our aunt and cousins and that was the last we saw of them. As we were walking to the nearest metro station I said to my brother that my aunt had smiled — meaning that she might as well have come right out and laughed — as the coffins were slid into their niches. He said that he had noticed that too.

After that, the days were different. Or the passing of the days. Or the thing that joins one day and the next but at the same time marks the boundary between them. Suddenly the night stopped existing and everything was constant sun and light. At first I thought it was exhaustion, or the shock of our parents' sudden disappearance, but when I told my brother about it he said that he had noticed the same thing. Sun and light and an explosion of windows.

I began to think that we were going to die.

But our life followed the same patterns as it had before our parents' death. Each morning we went to school. We talked to the people we thought of as friends. We did our schoolwork. Not much, but some. After we filled out a few simple forms, our father's pension was transferred to us. We thought we were going to get more and we filed a complaint. One morning, in front of a bureaucrat who was trying to explain that my father had earned X amount of money while he was alive and why we were due less than half of that after his death, my brother started to cry. He swore at the clerk and I had to drag him out of the office. It isn't fair, he yelled. It's the law, I heard the clerk say, sounding sorry for us.

I looked for work. Each morning I bought the newspaper and read the Help Wanted columns in the schoolyard, underlining whatever looked interesting. In the afternoon, after eating any old thing, I left the house and didn't come back until I had stopped at each place. The listings, whether they spelled out or not, were mostly for escorts, but I'm no prostitute. I used to lead a life of crime, but I was never a prostitute.

One day I found a job at a salon. I washed hair. I didn't do any cutting, but I watched how the other

girls did it and I prepared for the future. My brother said that it was stupid to work, that we could live happily on the pension we got from the government, on the income of our orphanhood. Orphanhood, a ridiculous word. We started to add things up. We really could get by, but only by going without almost everything. My brother said that he could give up eating three meals a day. I looked at him and couldn't tell whether he was serious or not.

"How many times a day do you eat?"

"Three. Four."

"And how many times a day are you saying you're willing to eat from now on?"

"Once."

A week later my brother found a job at a gym. At night, when he got home, we talked and made plans. I dreamed about having my own hair salon. I had reason to think that the future was in small salons, small boutiques, small record stores, tiny exclusive bars. My brother said the future was computers, but since he worked at a gym (sweeping floors and cleaning bathrooms), he'd started lifting weights and doing all the things people do to build their bodies.

Gradually we gave up on getting an education. Sometimes I didn't go to school in the morning (the incessant light was unbearable). Other times it was my brother who didn't go. As the days went by we both ended up staying home in the mornings, yearning for school but incapable of going out, getting on the bus, walking into our respective classrooms, and opening the books and notebooks from which we would learn nothing.

We killed time watching TV, first the talk shows, then cartoons, and finally the morning show with interviews and news about famous people. But more about that later. TV and videos played an important role in this story. Even today, when I turn on the TV, I seem to get a glimpse of my criminal younger self, but the vision doesn't last long, no longer than the time it takes the TV to fully come on. For an instant, though, I can see the eyes of the person I used to be, my hair, my scornful lips, my cold-looking cheekbones, and my neck, cold too, like marble. The sight always gives me a shiver.

Around this time, because of his job at the gym, my brother developed a strange habit.

"Want to see how I'm doing?" he would ask.

Then he would take off his shirt and show me his muscles. Even though it was cold and the apartment wasn't heated, he'd take off his shirt or his T-shirt and show me the muscles that were timidly emerging from his body like tumors, protuberances that had nothing to do with him or with my image of him — of his scrawny adolescent body.

Once he told me that he dreamed of being Mr. Rome and then Mr. Italy or Master of the Universe. I laughed in his face and gave him my frank opinion. To be Master of the Universe you have to train from the time you're ten, I told him. I thought that bodybuilding was like chess. My brother said that if I could dream of owning a mini-salon, he had the right to dream of a better future too. That was the word he used: *future*. I went into the kitchen and got our dinner started. Spaghetti. Then I set out the plates and silverware. Still thinking. At last I said that I didn't care about the future, that I had ideas but those ideas, if I really thought about it, never extended into the future.

"Where do they go, then?" howled my brother.

"Nowhere."

Then we would watch TV until we fell asleep.

Around four in the morning I usually woke with a start. I would get up from my chair, clear the dirty dishes from the table, wash them, straighten the living room, clean the kitchen, put another blanket over my brother, turn down the TV, go to the window and look out into the street with its double row of parked cars: I couldn't believe that it was still night, that this incandescence was night.

It made no difference whether I closed my eyes or kept them open.

II

One day my brother rented an X-rated movie and we watched it together. It was horrible and I said so. He agreed. We watched the whole thing and then we watched TV, first an American series and then a game show. The next day my brother returned the movie and rented another one. It was X-rated too. I said that we didn't have enough money to rent movies every day. He didn't answer. When I asked him why he'd rented the same kind of movie again, he said it was to learn.

"Learn what?"

"Learn how to make love," said my brother without looking at me.

"Watching dirty movies isn't going to teach you anything," I said.

"Don't be so sure," he answered in a hoarse voice that I had never heard before.

His eyes were bright. Then he started to do exercises on the floor, sit-ups and other things, and for a second I thought he was going crazy. I shouldn't be so hard on him, I thought. I said that maybe he was right and I was wrong — maybe he was on the right track. "Are you still a virgin?" he asked me from the floor. "I am," I said. "Me too," he said. I said that was normal at his age.

The next night there was a new X-rated movie in the house. As we were watching it I fell asleep. Before I closed my eyes, I thought: I'm going to dream about this filth, but instead I dreamed about the desert. I was walking in the desert, dying of thirst, and on my shoulder there was a white parrot, a parrot that kept saying: "I can't fly, I'm sorry, please forgive me, but I can't fly." He was saying this because at some point in the dream I had asked him to fly. He weighed too much (ten pounds at least, he was a big parrot) to be carried for so long, but the parrot wouldn't budge, and I could hardly walk. My head was shaking, my knees hurt, my legs, my thighs, my stomach, my neck, it was like having cancer, but it was also like coming — coming endlessly and exhaustingly — or like swallowing my eyes, my own eyes, swallowing them and at the same time trying not to bite down on them, and every so often the white parrot tried to help, saying: "Courage, Bianca," but mostly it kept its beak shut, and I knew that when it dropped on the hot sand and I was dying of thirst it would fly, fly away from this part of the desert to another part of the desert, fly away from my expiring flesh in search of other, less expiring flesh, fly away from my dead body forever, forever.

When I woke up my brother was asleep in his chair and the screen was a gray sea, gray and black stripes, as if a storm was approaching Rome and only I could see it.

Soon I was going along with my brother on his video store forays. In the mornings, during school hours, while kids our age were in class or shoplifting or getting high or having sex for money, I started to visit the video stores in our neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhoods, at first with my brother, who was trying to find the lost films of Tonya Waters, a porn star he had fallen in love with and whose adventures he was getting to know by heart, and then alone, though I didn't rent X-rated movies except when my brother had a special request, say for something featuring Sean Rob Wayne, who had worked twice with Tonya Waters and whose film career had thereby acquired a particular significance for my brother, as if anything that came into contact with Waters became automatically worthy of his attention.

Without surprise I discovered that I liked video stores. Not so much the ones in our neighborhood but the stores in other neighborhoods. In that sense I was different from my brother, who only went to the video stores that were near home or on the way between our house and the gym where he worked. Familiarity was a source of comfort for my poor brother.

I, on the other hand, liked to try new places, plasticky sanitized stores with lots of customers,

dubious establishments with a single Balkan or Asian clerk, where no one knew anything about me. ~~those days I felt something that wasn't quite happiness but that did resemble enthusiasm, wandering~~ streets I had hardly ever been down and that invariably ran into Via Tiburtina or Trajan's Park. Sometimes I went into a video store and spent half an hour or more scanning the shelves of video cases and then I would leave without renting anything, not because I wouldn't have liked to, but because I had no money.

Other times, throwing caution to the wind, I'd rent two movies at once. I was omnivorous: I liked romance (which almost always made me laugh), classic horror, gore, psychological horror, crime horror, military horror. Sometimes I sat for a long time on Garibaldi Bridge or on a bench on Tiburtina Island, next to the old hospital, and I studied the video cases as if they were books.

Some cars would slow down as they passed. I heard whispers, which I ignored. Usually people would roll down the window and say something, make some promise, and then keep going. There were cars that passed and didn't stop. There were cars that passed with the windows already rolled down and kids inside yelling — "Fascism or barbarism!" — and they'd keep going too. I didn't look at them. I stared at the river and my videos and tried to forget the few things I knew.

III

One evening my brother came home with two men.

They weren't his friends, though my brother chose to think they were. One was from Bologna, the other from Libya or Morocco. But they looked like twins. Same head, same nose, same eyes. They reminded me of a clay bust I had seen recently in a magazine at the salon. They spent the night.

"But where will they sleep?" I said to my brother, "There's no room,"

He gave me a haughty look, as if to say he had the situation under control.

"In our parents' bedroom," he said.

He was right, there was room. The men slept there.

I went to bed early. I didn't feel like watching my favorite shows.

I hardly slept a wink. When I got up at six in the morning, the kitchen was clean. The men had washed the pots, the dishes, and the silverware and left it all on the rack to dry. The ashtrays were empty and clean. I think they even swept before they went to bed. I thought about that as I ate breakfast and then I went to work, though it was very early and I spent almost two hours wandering around the neighborhood.

When I got back they were still there. They had made a spinach purée and a spicy tomato sauce. The table was set. In the refrigerator were two big bottles of beer. It was only then, as we ate, that I learned their names. They introduced themselves. But I don't remember the names anymore and I rather not make an effort to remember them. My brother looked nervous and happy. The two men looked relaxed. The Bolognan even pulled out a chair for me.

That night I realized how alike they were, and that night, too, they told me that they weren't brothers, though many people thought they were. The Libyan said something that at the time I found mysterious. In a way, he said, those people weren't wrong. Silly as it may seem, people are never wrong. Even if we look down on them, and sometimes rightly so, people are *never* wrong. That's of course, he said.

"Are you brothers or not?" I asked.

The Libyan said that they were blood brothers.

"Did you swear a blood oath, did you cut your palms and rub the blood together? Is that what you mean?"

That's what they meant. My brother thought it was great that there were still people who swore blood oaths. I thought it was childish. The Libyan said he agreed with me, but I think he only agreed to be polite, since if he thought it was childish, why had he done it? Unless they'd known each other since they were children, which they hadn't.

That night I watched TV with them for a while.

My brother had met them at the gym, where they did some kind of work that was never clear to me. Sometimes I got the impression that they were trainers, a job with a certain prestige, and other times that they were just sweepers and errand boys, like my brother. Either way, they were always talking about the gym, like people who come home and can't stop going on about work. They talked about the gym — and so did my brother, with a fervor new to me — and about protein diets and meals with names that had the ring of science fiction, like Fuel Tank 3000 or Weider energy bars (all the nutrients you need for the body of a champion!).

This went on until I told them that if they wanted to keep talking they should do it in the kitchen because I couldn't hear my game show. I liked (I still like) to listen carefully to the questions and

answers because that way while I'm being entertained I learn something that probably won't help me in any way but that seems worth knowing. Sometimes I get an answer right. When that happens I start to think that maybe I could go on TV and be a contestant. But then more questions come and I don't know any of the answers, which is when I realize that I'm better off here, on this side of the screen because if I were there, in front of the cameras, I'd probably just make an ass of myself.

The surprising thing, though, was that when I asked them to stop talking, they stopped. And then we were all quiet watching the show, which was at the most exciting part: there were only two contestants left, an older man, maybe forty or fifty, and a girl with little glasses and a face that was too serious, kind of scrunched up. She had incredible hair, shoulder-length and shiny, all silky black. For a minute I imagined her sitting in the salon. Ugly thoughts. I tried to wipe them from my mind.

Then the girl was asked to define the word *nimbus*. And the Bolognan, next to me, said that it was a halo, the circle of light around a saint's head. And before the girl could open her mouth, he added that it was also a low cloud formation, a cluster of cumulous clouds.

I stared at the Bolognan and I stared at the TV. My brother smiled, as if he knew the answer to the question though I knew he didn't. And time ticked away and the girl lost her turn and it was the older man's turn and he said that a nimbus was, in fact, a low cloud. And when the host, to give the old guy a hard time, asked "And what else, sir?," the man was silent and couldn't think of anything else.

And then came more contestants and more questions and the Bolognan answered almost all of them, some of them wrong, admittedly, but most of them right, and my brother — and even I — said that he should try out for the show, he could make a shitload of money (though I didn't use that word) and then my brother told me that his friend was always doing crossword puzzles and he actually finished them, unlike the average person, who would start a puzzle and leave it half-done, and it seemed to me that it was one thing to be able to finish crossword puzzles and another thing to be a game-show winner, but I kept my mouth shut, because clearly the Bolognan could win any quiz show he signed up for.

But then I stopped to think: when had my brother seen his friend doing crossword puzzles? Because if anything was clear it was that they knew each other from the gym where my brother worked and the Bolognan worked and even the Libyan worked, mopping floors, scrubbing lockers and showers, sweeping the weight room or selling energy drinks, all tasks incompatible with a leisure activity like solving crossword puzzles, which — as everybody knows — is something that's done when you have nothing else to do.

That night, when I was in bed and the house was quiet, I imagined — or rather saw — my brother and his two friends at Rome's Central Station sitting in the cafeteria waiting, my brother and the Libyan doing nothing, watching people come in and out, and the Bolognan working the crossword puzzle from the *L'Osservatore Romano*, a right-wing paper no matter how you look at it, though he claimed it was an anarchist paper, a superfluous and therefore futile explanation or excuse. Once I saw him with *Tutto Calcio* under his arm and I said "That's what you read," a simple statement of fact, not meaning anything else by it, and he said yes, I read *Tutto Calcio*, but it isn't a right-wing paper the way people think it is, it's an anarchist paper.

As if I cared what newspapers he read or didn't read.

My father read *Il Messaggero*. My brother and I didn't read anything (it was a luxury we couldn't afford). I don't know which papers are right-wing and which are left-wing. But the Bolognan was always justifying himself. It was part of who he was, and also part of his charm, or so he thought. But as I was saying, I was in bed with the lights out and the covers pulled up to my chin, in the silence of the night, a silence that looked yellow to me, and I saw my brother and his two friends in a bar

Central Station, sitting around a table with three glasses of beer and looking bored, because waiting terrible and they were waiting for something that wasn't coming, but was about to come, or at least that was what they were betting on, the three of them, and while they were sitting there the Bologna had more than enough time to finish a crossword puzzle, from *L'Osservatore Romano* or *La Repubblica* or *Il Messaggero*. And imagining this scene, I was overcome by an infinite sadness. I felt weight on my chest, a pain in my heart, a sense of anguish. As if a fog were rising from the underground tunnels and swamping the whole of Central Station, and I was the only one who could see it (but I wasn't there). As if the fog was blurring my brother's face and coming irrevocably between us. But then I fell asleep and I forgot or dismissed what I had seen — or what I had foreseen, because it really was a premonition.

And so the days went by.

IV

One morning the Bolognan and the Libyan left. I spent an hour, more or less, going through the drawers to see whether they'd stolen anything. Nothing was missing.

Even I couldn't deny that their conduct had been impeccable for the five days they'd stayed with us. They always washed the dishes, three times they made dinner themselves, and they didn't touch anything with me, which was important. I could sense the interest in their eyes, in the way they moved, and the way they talked to me, but I also noted their self-control and found it flattering.

I'd only had one boyfriend in my life and we had broken up shortly before my parents' car accident on that terrible southern highway.

My boyfriend lived nearby and was the same age as me, so it wasn't long before I saw him with another girl, both of them looking happy, near the entrance to a club. I was on my way home from my job at the salon, it was a Saturday, and I was walking in a daze, staring up at the sky, which — as I've said — looked stranger every day. My ex-boyfriend was with his new girlfriend, propped on the wall outside the club, and when he saw me go by he said my name. I lowered my eyes and there he was. He was smiling a friendly smile. I smiled at him too. He asked if I had dropped out of school. I didn't answer. I thought for a second that the logical thing would be to stop and talk to him and his new girlfriend, but instead I kept walking. When I had gone a little way I stared up at the sky again and had the feeling that I was living on another planet.

So much for that.

You couldn't say I'd gained much experience with my boyfriend. He was an ordinary guy and I liked him and then one day I stopped liking him. That was all. With the Bolognan (and the Libyan) it was different, because they shared meals with us, slept in my parents' room, and watched me from up close in a way that no one (except my brother) ever had. What do they *see*? I wondered. What faces, what eyes do they see? I didn't wonder this very often, but once or twice I did. Now I know there's no such thing as closeness. One person's eyes are always shut. The first person sees and the second doesn't. Or the second person sees and the first doesn't. Only a mother can be close, but that was unknown territory back then. A blank space. There was only the illusion of closeness.

And the closeness of my brother's friends, a closeness built on the basis of glances and small gestures, among other things, wasn't just flattering; I liked it, too. Let me explain: I was no one's slave; I was the arbiter of them all. I was blind, but I was the yardstick by which they measured their freedom. It sounds stupid, but that's how it felt and I'm sure they intended it that way. They didn't swear in front of me, they weren't like my brother, they took out the garbage, they always raised the toilet seat, unlike even my late father, a silent and considerate man.

But I don't want to talk about my father. I want to talk about my brother's friends and about the evening or night when I went through the drawers to see whether they had taken anything when they left. My brother saw me, I remember, and said with uncharacteristic certainty: "They didn't take anything. They're legal. They're my friends." But I still inspected the whole house, room by room, even searching the bathroom to see whether anything was gone, a bottle of cologne. Nothing. My brother was right.

Then a week went by and then another and my brother hardly mentioned his friends.

One night, as we were watching TV, he said that they were in Milan at a bodybuilding competition. Mr. Italy. I laughed.

"In Frosinone, maybe," I said.

My brother looked at me, confused. What was I trying to say? That they might be able to make in Frosinone, but not Milan? Maybe. I could imagine them anywhere else in Italy — Cosenza Catanzaro, say — but not in Milan.

After that my brother stopped telling me things about them. I was someone — I realize now — who liked to face things head on, whereas my brother and his friends wandered real and imaginary places with their heads down. But facing things head on meant being consumed. I was being consumed.

I worked, did the shopping, cooked, watched TV, went with my brother to rent videos. Some nights I looked out the window and the night was as bright as day. Sometimes I thought that I was losing my mind, that it couldn't be normal, such brightness, but deep down I knew I would never lose my mind.

I was waiting for something. A catastrophe. A visit from the police or the social worker. The approach of a meteorite, darkening the sky. My brother rented Tonya Waters movies and I washed heads and nothing happened.

One day they came back.

My brother didn't mention it, maybe he didn't know they were coming back either. They were there one night when I got home from work. The three of them were sitting on the couch watching TV. I looked them straight in the face and asked how things had gone in Milan. The Libyan got up and shook my hand. The Bolognan nodded irritably and didn't get up from the couch. I could tell by their expressions that things hadn't gone well. So I didn't ask again. We ate together. We watched TV together. That night, while I was in bed thinking about them (or to be precise, thinking about their battered faces, shiny as if they'd been washed by force, as if a dark hand had dashed a bucket of water at them and then scoured them mercilessly, faces as wet and tired as if they'd returned from Frosinone on foot or in chains), while I was in bed, as I was saying, with the lights out and my eyes open, sure I would never fall asleep, one of them came into the room and made love to me. I think it was the Bolognan.

Then I asked again:

“How was Milan?”

And he said, “Bad, it was bad,” as he put something on his penis and penetrated me. I think it was a condom but I can't say for sure.

The next morning, before I went to work, I looked for the used condom and couldn't find it. Sure maybe it was a condom that he put on and maybe it was something else. But what? I'll never know and now I don't care, but back then, that morning, as I was getting dressed and making the bed, I thought about that and about danger and love and all the seemingly strange things that turn up when you least expect them and that are actually pretexts for something different, something else (attainable things and not unattainable things), and then I went to work, the others were sleeping, my brother in his room, his two friends in my parents' old room, and the streets I walked didn't look like yesterday's streets though I knew they were the same, streets don't change overnight, maybe in some places they do, but I've never been to those places, maybe in Africa, but not here, here I was the one who was changing but when I got to the salon I realized that I hadn't changed, that the streets had shifted slightly, to the left or to the right, up or down, but I was still the same.

In my defense I can say — if anything needs to be said, if the notion of defense is pertinent (which it isn't) — that at no moment did I think that I was falling in love. I saw the shadowy negative of romantic situations. I saw the negative of passionate moments whose point of reference was always a TV series or the whispering of girls now forgotten. Sometimes I saw the negative of a whole life: a bigger house, a different neighborhood, children, a better job, time passing, old age, a grandchild

death in the public hospital or covered with a sheet in my parents' bed, a bed that I would have liked to hear creak, like an ocean liner as it goes down, but that instead was silent as a tomb.

That night I made love again with one of my brother's friends and the next night and the night after that too, and every night that week and the week after, until it began to show on my face that I was making love every night or that I wasn't sleeping much, to the point that my friends at work asked me what was wrong, whether I was sick or what.

Then I looked in the mirror and I saw that I had circles under my eyes, that my face was pale, as if the moon, which shone as brightly for me as the sun, was affecting me. And then I decided that I didn't need to make love every night and I locked my door.

Life, despite what I expected, continued unchanged.

V

What did I expect? Back then I must not have been completely sane, because I expected tears.

That was what I expected. But there wasn't a single tear. They knocked at my door, many times night after night, but neither of them cried.

Sometimes, as I was washing hair or sweeping the hallway at the salon, I imagined them waiting for me at home, patient in a way that was not of this world or at least not of the world that I knew, doing nothing but watching TV while my brother and I worked and brought home food and paid the bills that had to be paid. I imagined them sitting silently on the couch or I saw them doing push-ups and all those exercises they did to keep in shape, on the rug or by the balcony that overlooked Piazza Sonnino, as the day slowly faded and the light of the moon grew more intense, until it flooded the farthest corners with a blinding light.

They'll never leave, I thought then.

Other times I thought: they'll leave without telling us, one day we'll come home and they'll be gone.

But when I got home they were always there, the house spotless, because they made it their job to cheerfully do everything that I used to do. Cheerfully, I say, and gladly, though I knew perfectly well that it was a fake cheer, as fake as mine, that their apparent good will hid feelings of emptiness, sadness and grief in the face of the void. But they worked around the house. Dinner was always ready, the bathroom scoured with bleach, the rooms tidy. As if with these gestures they were saying to me we aren't shiftless, we seem shiftless but we aren't, in fact if it was up to us we would do everything we could to make you happy.

Once a week, sometimes twice, I let them into my room. I didn't need to say anything, I just had to be more talkative than usual or give them a meaningful look (or what at the time I imagined was a meaningful look) and they knew immediately that they could visit me that night and they would find the door open.

Other times I got home and found the table set for one — me — and a note from my brother saying that they would be home late, that they had urgent business to take care of on the other side of the city, that there was rice in the kitchen and chicken in the refrigerator. At the end there were always a few lines from the Bolognan (sometimes I thought the Libyan didn't know how to write, not that matters), repeating what my brother had said and promising to take care of him.

After eating and washing the dishes, I would sit down to watch some game show on TV and I tried to imagine where they might be, what kind of mess they had gotten themselves into. Sometimes, sick of the desperation and greed parading by on the screen, I reread the note and compared my brother's handwriting to the Bolognan's. My brother's was fragile, clumsy, insecure. The Bolognan's handwriting was like a convict's handwriting. After studying it for a long time, I decided that it looked less like handwriting than like a tattoo. Sometimes I tried to remember the naked body of the Bolognan, I tried to remember whether he had tattooed anything on his own body — a letter, a word or a picture — but I couldn't remember.

Deep down, I think I was afraid something bad would happen. I think I sensed that it was coming soon and I worried about my brother, whose fate seemed so bound up with his friends' fate. I didn't care what happened to them. They were older and they were used to hard times, but my brother was innocent and I didn't want anything to happen to him.

Every so often I had terrible dreams. I saw my parents walking along a southern highway, the

didn't recognize me, I kept going, happy to be so changed, then I thought better of it and turned around, but now my parents had turned into worms dragging themselves away, one after the other torturously along the pavement, below a sign that read REGGIO CALABRIA 33 KILOMETERS, and though I called them by name, begging them to answer, warning them that they wouldn't get far crawling like that, they didn't even turn their worm heads to give me a final glance and they continued impassive along their way. Once in a while a late-model car would drive by with the windows rolled down and the kids inside shouting "Fascism or barbarism!"

In the dream I was crying, but when I woke up my eyes were dry and if I jumped out of bed and looked at myself in the mirror, the grim expression on my face frightened even me.

Sometimes my brother's friends turned sullen. If I asked what was wrong, what the problem was, the answer was always the same: nothing's wrong, everything's fine, our luck is about to change. My brother listened and nodded. Sometimes their own words actually cheered them up, like a shot of some mood-boosting drug.

Then I would carry the dishes into the kitchen and ask whether they wanted coffee and they would say yes, we do, and I would make coffee and sit in the kitchen chewing mint gum, and I would contemplate the phrase "our luck is about to change," a phrase that meant nothing to me, no matter how much I turned it over in my head, because luck can't change, either it exists or it doesn't, and if it exists there's no way to change it, and if it doesn't exist we're like birds in a sandstorm, except that we don't realize it, of course, like in the Luciano Marchetti song: "The wind blows, we're birds in a storm, and nobody knows." Though I think there are people — very sad or unlucky people — who do know.

It's best not to think about these things. They're here, they touch us, they're gone, or they're here, they touch us, they swallow us up, and it's best — always — not to think about them. But I kept thinking, waiting for the coffee to be done, and I asked myself what my brother's friends meant by saying that their luck would change, how exactly they planned to change their luck (*their* luck, not mine or my brother's, though in a sense their luck would have an effect — any idiot could see that — on my brother's luck and maybe even mine), what they were ready to try, how far they were prepared to go to get their luck and ours to turn around.

At the same time economic conditions were deteriorating. Not much, but on TV they said they were deteriorating. Something was wrong in Europe or Italy, I think. Or Rome. Or our neighborhood. What I do know is that we barely had enough money to eat and one day my brother approached me with his friends trailing a few feet behind, as if not wanting to intrude on anything as intimate as a conversation between a brother and a sister, but also as if they couldn't resist the temptation to be a witness, even if at a prudent distance, my reaction to what my brother was going to say, which was already old news to them.

And what my brother said was that he wouldn't be working at the gym anymore. I asked whether he had quit. He said yes, in a way.

"Did you quit or were you fired?"

He admitted that he had been fired. When I asked him why he had been fired he said that he didn't know. Then he added that it wasn't surprising, that lots of young people lost their jobs overnight.

"But those people aren't orphans like us," I yelled, "those people have parents and can afford to be out of work for a while."

My brother said that when people started to get fired it didn't matter whether they were orphans or not. The Bolognan and the Libyan nodded in agreement. The understanding look on their faces turned my stomach. I stared through them as if they didn't exist. I asked my brother how we would manage

on my salary alone. My brother shouted that it wasn't his fault. I told him not to yell, just because I was unemployed didn't mean he had to be rude, but my brother kept yelling and threatening people I had never heard of in my life and promising me that the situation was going to change, though he didn't explain how, and anyway I can't remember his promises because then I started to think about other things, and the Bolognan and the Libyan took a step forward, or three steps, or maybe four steps, and they grabbed my brother, who had gone pale as a sheet, by the shoulders and the belt, I can't remember exactly, all I know is that the way they grabbed him gave me a bad feeling at the time, it's all right to grab someone by the shoulders, but grabbing him by the belt seemed excessive, my brother was upset but he wasn't out of control, he just kept yelling, probably so he wouldn't cry, but they grabbed him by the belt and dragged him into the living room or my parents' old room and I went into my room.

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