

Maria Mirella D'Ippolito

Defeating Bluebeard

If you can overcome “schizophrenia”, perhaps you can overcome any disorder

Preface by Professor Bruno Callieri

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PREFACE

In 1976, Carl Rogers decried the “increasing dehumanization of our culture, in which what matters is not the person but only his punch card and his social security number”. But already, ten years earlier, the Encounter Groups were facing up to that ever-increasing need for genuine, unplanned human relationships, with a view to giving new sense and meaning to their existence.

All the more so, today, with the mushrooming dominance of technology, neurosciences and the 'neuronal mind', we find ourselves called upon to seek out and fulfil the requirement for something that favours the emergence of deep-seated feelings and emotions. Perhaps the encounter groups, which Rogers so wanted to see, could – without setting themselves a specifically therapeutic objective – take on a particular experiential and existential significance.

Over the past thirty years, the critiquing of behaviouristic psychology and scientific reductionism has become yet more profound, and there has been an expansion of the critical vision to encompass orthodox psychoanalysis and the excessive ethical pragmatism of American philosophy. The *person's relational constitution* has come to be considered more fundamental, and along with it the awareness of the historical/temporal dimension, intersubjectivity, linguistics, intercorporeality and (as I have like to call it for some time now) the *edge of contact*, the edge of the *between*, as indicated to us by Martin Buber and by phenomenology, and especially by post-Husserlian phenomenology and that of the fertile French school.

In this second edition of her captivating work “Defeating Bluebeard” (the first edition came out back in 2003), Mirella D’Ippolito offers us a narratological, Wilhelm Schapp-style recounting of Saturnia's entanglement in the stories of others.

For her, the Rogerian relationship (individual and group) becomes the locus in which it is possible to integrate the corporal/emotional and cognitive dimensions. As Maria Felice Pacitto discusses in considerable depth in her valuable recent work entitled “Dal Sentire all’Essere” (published by Magi in 2007), it should be stressed that it is where the encounter group should also be considered “the site of catharsis and repair [...] a sort of new organism with its own mind, structure and intentionality” (page 125).

And in the dense, precious work you hold in your hands, Mirella D’Ippolito points out an uninterrupted path (not like those of Heidegger) leading towards the sense of belonging (I am part of), the sense of participation (I enter into genuine relations with others), and the sense of competence (I express myself, I know I can do it).

These global, long-term invitations are the message, both empathic and sympathetic, being sent out through these pages by Mirella, whose presence in me, her reader, is beyond categorisation.

Bruno Callieri

Psychiatrist and Lecturer in Psychiatry and Clinical Treatment of Nervous and Mental Disorders

INTRODUCTION

Defeating Bluebeard is a story that is a novel in the same way that many other stories I have come across in my long career are novels, too. The story has the privilege of being told with rare virtuosity by the author, Maria Mirella D'Ippolito, who has taken great care to retain and transmit the feeling that this is a story that is not her own, but one that has been gifted to her and made her own through profound empathy.

She begins by describing, with extraordinary lucidity, feelings that are at once profound, sad, terrifying and disturbing, which result in an attempt to commit suicide followed by a reawakening from the coma after three days.

How and why the tragedy came to pass can be understood by retracing the life of Saturnia, who from the moment she was born had to deal with a confusing tangle of emotions and events associated with her family history and with the relative relationship dynamics, and with the influence of the external universe, which at that time was subject to radical change.

Many years have passed since my first meeting with Saturnia, but my memory of her is very much alive, and – as if it were yesterday – I remember her being fragile, frail, with her eyes full of terror. I accepted her confusion and diffidence with profound empathy: she was experiencing an acute psychotic episode. Although the conditions were far from ideal, something caused Rogers' actualising tendency to resonate with Saturnia. What emerged was a peculiar, flexible relationship characterised by irregular timescales – we were often out of touch.

Saturnia was continually searching and I respected her decisions to distance herself and then return, time and again. There was, however, an invisible thread that held our relationship together even during the long silences.

She had undertaken a degree course in Psychology that turned out to be a very important part of her life. She began Jungian analysis. Acceptance, empathy, transparency and authenticity were my constant, even at our occasional meetings when she would not be slow to fill me in on her experiences.

I remember one day, while she was telling me she felt a chill in her heart, I felt deeply unhappy, and looking me right in the eye, Saturnia asked me, “Why are you so sad?”. “Because I'm worried about you,” I answered. Paradoxically, as she walked away towards the icy desert, she was so sensitive as to pick up on my suffering. Paradoxically, I, too, perceived at that moment an expansion of consciousness – an expansion that, I later explained to myself, “is the trap, you'll lose yourself if you enter into it”.

I had to be congruent to be in contact with myself, with my fear of failure and the fear of her losing herself in the darkness of her path (crisis). Oscillating between the inside and the outside, I had

to dig deep within myself to rediscover my basic trust and nourish the hope that her actualising tendency would steer her.

The night after the meeting, I had a dream that has stayed with me to this day: “A large well, with reeds and canes, like those that formed in the hollows of the fields close to the sea, where I spent my childhood. In the water, I see a young girl playing with a dog. Suddenly, as if they are having a turn, I see them drowning. I immediately dive into the water, grab hold of them and lay them out on the field. I give the kiss of life to the child, but for the dog I was at a loss: “How do you bring dogs back to life?” I ask myself. I make various attempts and in the end I manage to get him breathing again, too. Then I want to discover what caused them to faint and I realise that toxic gas is leaking into the well. Then I see a young girl picking a bunch of canes and chewing them, sucking on the fleshy white roots”.

On waking up, I still had that taste in my mouth, and while a strange sense of wellbeing rose up from somewhere deep down, I recalled the meeting with Saturnia: toxic gas but also trust rediscovered – the sort of trust that is not taken for granted but that has what it takes to make the therapeutic process effective. And so Saturnia, too, must have sucked on the white roots of that cane, which sank its way into the sand, crossed the water and headed towards the sun.

She did indeed come back to see me after the latest episode, with a deep depression, driven by her unconscious, as described in the story. She then got involved in a long-term relationship that allowed her to throw herself back into the depths, re-live her emotions and endow them with meaning. She could finally put her life back together and, illuminated by her consciousness, reinterpret her own story. Similarly, her relationships changed, and understanding and love came to the fore.

And so, in the end, her reaction to the great frustration of her decision not to have a child – which at other times would have inexorably unleashed castration anxiety and provoked a psychotic episode – was transformed into a creative form of angst, which gave rise to the book. The book is a creation that I, too, love very much because it contains within it the sacredness of the force that is released by the overcoming of many sad experiences and that pushes its way outwards, towards life.

Anna Nazzarena Nardini
Psychotherapist

FOREWORD

Saturnia, my friend and colleague, told me her seemingly paradoxical story. I listened to it, I was affected by it, and I made it my own. Saturnia asked me to tell it on her behalf. Her request made me feel some strange sort of recognition, almost as if I were an ancient poet.

In relation to empathy, Rogers states that it involves “entering entirely into the world of the personal feelings and meanings of another individual in order to perceive them [...] completely” and at the same time it also entails “being strong enough [...] to recognise [...] that I exist, distinct from the other person”. In other words, *empathy* is all about feeling as if you are the other person without ever losing the 'as if' dimension. This is what I have tried to do.

Saturnia's story, which sees her wrestling with hostile feelings and touching rock bottom, provided me with the stimulus to conduct a theoretical study, which is featured at the end of the Italian edition of the book. It constitutes the key example of my clinical work – with people affected by schizophrenic psychosis that I have followed and continue to follow – and of the theoretical basis underpinning that work. The final part of the version of that study included in the second Italian edition benefits from valuable references to the ideas and works of Bruno Callieri. As he said to me: “Trust, the trust received saved me and with it came the feeling of being accepted unconditionally, and of authenticity, and of really being listened to”.

All of this could not fail to resonate with the Rogerian theory on which I have done a great deal of work: trust in the actualising tendency followed through to its extreme consequences, where disfunctionality becomes only apparent, because in reality it contributes towards the full actualisation of ourselves.

What emerges out of Saturnia's story is the strength of her level-headedness, so typical of psychotics, which leads her and steers her to go beyond the Rogerian approach and arouses her interest in relational therapy, allowing her to interpret the secret of her family, to work through what happened to her family, where even the negative elements take on a sense of life.

In writing Saturnia's story, I drew inspiration from Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It*, Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, Alba Marcoli's *Il bambino nascosto* and Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. I was tempted to follow a chronological order, but the pain and strength of feeling with which Saturnia spoke about those dear to her who had passed away inspired me to write letters that would never be sent. I tried, in terms of the rhythm, to maintain the sense of psychotic thought: the leakage of ideas, the 'salad of words', while attempting to make it all comprehensible. What emerged, then, were the monologues, the associations, the dreams, like illuminating flashes.

They got me involved in the telling of the story – I would wake up during the night to take notes. I then needed to put some distance between me and the story and, to this end, my husband and my 'clients' proved exceptionally valuable, and I am most grateful to them.

Saturnia said, “This book will also be dedicated to the memory of Professor Sebastiano Fiume. Professor Fiume, who sadly is no longer with us today, saved my life. With his humanity, with the humanity of the organisation he founded, and by making me understand the importance of accepting regular pharmacological support, he took me by the hand, trusted me, and led me forward. He and Anna Nazzarena Nardini – who, as a Rogerian therapist, by loving me taught me how to love – were both indispensable; one could not exist without the other, and both accepted the other”.

The whole of Saturnia's life appears to have been a constant search to relive her initial traumas in order to overcome them, to experience buried feelings once again in order to then recover from them: coming face-to-face with the fear of death, with death itself, with the anxiety of castration for a cut-off feeling, and with the symptom of scission (containing buried jealousy and envy), repeatedly expressed through betrayals (and through the lustful affairs that characterise them), and through the inability to feel without acting – a skill that, by digging very deep, she went on to master.

Saturnia continued: “By telling my story with the sensation of being in labour right up until the metaphorical birth, I overcame my issues through a series of insights; I re-ordered, accepted, understood and, ultimately, forgave. The ongoing dialogue with my dreams helped me constantly and helps me to this day”.

“The 'black box',” as Foglia, one of Saturnia's sisters, said to her in a letter, having read the first draft of the book and using this as a symbol for the attitude of all her siblings, “performs a remarkable function in terms of the reconstruction of truth, but its role comes to an end in the catastrophe, and so we lack the space and the energy to pause for a moment to appreciate its merits. Well now, this book is also the 'white box' of our family 'still in flight' around the world, and it is a romantic opening statement that you make to our future, telling us to spy on our dreams through the keyhole, when they spy on us. Threads so subtle and evanescent as to be the preferred victims of blasts of air. In this way, you have given us a ride alongside you on your trip with these images under the microscope of your soul, or these enlarged 'index maps' as we could perhaps call them. Like a special envoy, you offered us your reportage from the battlefields of your inside/outside, in the inhospitable land of the unsaid and of the secret. With the dry style of the front-line journalist, you described to us the storms that overwhelmed you, of which only “silent and incomprehensible relics” reached us at the time. I participated in the pain you felt for your child, whom you loved so much you decided not to create. But this baby to whom you gave birth two months prematurely really is very beautiful and I want to thank you for inviting us to the baptism. Your Foglia”.

In the second Italian edition, the only point added – because it was cut by the first publisher – is to be found in the chapter entitled “Reconstruction” and concerns Saturnia's real physical attack on her mother.

And...at the end of the journey, Saturnia reaches a profound sense of peace, which serves very much as a redeeming message.

I hope that I have succeeded in encapsulating everything that she gifted to me, and for that I would like to thank her.

I would also like to thank most sincerely my friend, Professor Bruno Callieri for his excellent preface, and for loving my book and having demonstrated that love in a thousand different ways. Thanks also to Professor Luigi De Maio, Dr Salvatore De Mola, Dr Cristina Galli, Dr Maria Stella Lalla, Dr Giampietro Loggi, Dr Guglielmo Minervini, poet Plinio Perilli, Dr Maria Luisa Putti, Dr Katia Renna, Dr Alberto Zucconi, my husband Sergio Bagni, my brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, my friends and my 'clients', for having supported this true story of mine as told in the first edition.

To all of my brothers and sisters:

“This is my truth,
if your truth is different, it will also be true and,
even if it may seem absurd,
they will both be true”

Saturnia

CHAPTER I - IT WAS A BREAKDOWN

The unconscious erupted from deep down.

I was taken to a hospital in the mountains. There, I found myself terrorised by the icy stare of a doctor who was suspected of being an enemy by the leader of the organisation I was part of. I shall call the leader 'H'.

H was an enemy, as were the comrades under his command, and the enemies of my enemies.

I felt naked, without the suit of armour I had been wearing up until then. The so-called doctor considered himself to be a genius and was opposed to psychiatric medication. He – the enemy, with no specific training – proposed therapy. I said to myself: “How like my mother I am!”. I started to differentiate myself from her. I went ten days and ten nights without sleep, staring through the night at the illuminated corridor so that I would see face-to-face who was coming to torture me and kill me. The doctors wondered where I found the energy.

The medication wasn't cutting it. I thought about violent forms of suicide: drowning in the bath, slitting my arteries and veins...but I was afraid. When the doctor called on me, I ran off all round the hospital. He then forcefully stretched me out on the bed to perform acupuncture. As he rubbed cotton wool soaked in alcohol on my head, I screamed and screamed, convinced that he was holding some sort of conductor to torture me with electrical shocks. Faced with meals, I was utterly paralysed. I was afraid that if I didn't eat they would torture me even more cruelly, because I was being disobedient, but I was also afraid that if I did eat I would be poisoned.

It was a breakdown.

The doctor with the icy stare scrutinised me as if I were a guinea pig. On TV, they were talking about the Bologna bombing, and I felt sure I was somehow linked to it; I asked to be transferred back to Rome and my request was granted.

In Rome, I had lunch with H and his wife, whom H had not left. He wanted to have everyone at his feet, including me...and who knows how many others.

Shortly after, in a building occupied by the organisation, I leaned out of a second-floor window, looking at the trees and bushes outside, and I realised why psychotic breakdown had followed on from the paradox of feeling cold but feeling more, why I had left behind once and for all my toxic dependence on my first partner, Jei, and why I wanted to assert my difference from my mother...I could no longer feel nature, not even from a barred window located high up.

I felt depressed, I was coming out of the delirium with the help of psychiatric medication, albeit light. In my bag, I had Optalidon, Disipal and others; I took them all and went to sleep. I concealed the tubes because it had to seem real. But I left the door open. They came to see me, it looked strange to

them that I was sleeping – I hadn't closed my eyes until then, and they let me sleep. Two hours later, they told me that they found me transfigured.

So how would you have felt, Dad, once the secret was out? Broken, torn between the family you came from and the woman that you had chosen and loved, over and above everything, the value of sacred love. For you, it was impossible even to imagine this pulling apart taking place out in the open. You felt able to tell me certain stories about your family only after the death of your sister, while you were sorting out the family photos. You talked to me about it calmly, like someone who comprehends and understands and accepts. Now you could, a year before dying. But your family closed ranks about everything, all bound to each other and bound by the rules of Sicily, nothing ever seeped out. Auntie had remained a spinster, you couldn't get your head round why she was holding out for an aristocrat: “Where did my sister get all this nobility from?”. Perhaps in order not to find him, enamoured and ambivalent as she was towards you and towards your father? Your mother so enamoured of you, perhaps shut off because of this: inverted Oedipus, how powerful yet how little-known!

Your roots, all very clenched, there too, in the unsaid.

We could be united only by the secret. “You are a pillar”. That was the last thing you said to me before you passed away. I didn't get it at the time, it seemed excessive and unjustified, but you helped me, in my battle for myself.

And now, as I continue bit-by-bit with my suffering, I realise that 'being a pillar' is also my role and my duty towards my brothers and sisters.

I clashed with you, Dad, to cover my secret guilt, I clashed on the method, not on the content, even if it was rigid when it reached me, and I clashed using your own method, the negative “of the *Animus* ossified in a hard *logos*”. And, at a certain point, I threw the baby out with the bathwater. It couldn't have been any other way: the end was unity – the only possible unity – you and my brother Pinocchio bound by a blood oath, bound in the final battle, in a close alliance geared towards an ending shared by all. It's as if the questions I asked myself as a young girl – “Why is Pinocchio doing that? Why does dad smack him and sneer at him” – were finally receiving an answer. You allies, all of us allies, these two equal and opposite forces that I felt in my stomach united in the impossibility of being united, like an overdetermined force that brought them together only to repel them.

I clashed with you. You suffered in silence. When – during my fourth breakdown – the HR manager at work said to you, “Saturnia really loves you”, you couldn't hide your tears. She was taken aback. You, always so austere, were crying for me.

Well, my first breakdown: “It's not my dad, so it's my mum, so it's me”. Me and her glued together. My guilt emerged in all its vehemence, out of the blue, and with it the fear of dying, and I was overcome by

it. In a dream that I had while trying to integrate the parts of my self, in therapy, alone, a voice said: "I'm afraid of my wickedness". And another dream showed me, as a young girl of around six and a half, with my face squashed against a window, from which you could see my entire family, and a voice came: "They are all together, you're shut out". I cut myself out of the arcade game and I was left in pieces, it took the psychotic episode for me to begin rediscovering my family on a higher level. It was my tragedy, but perhaps also a stroke of luck, which was essential to allow me to come back from the brink, an opportunity that I was able to exploit.

It was the start of the journey towards finding you again, Dad, having you again, winning you back over.

You needed two things, Mum. This is what I am dreaming now. A husband who would not abandon you as your father did, and you found such a man, but at the cost of the secret. He was always with you, in his own way, by your side during your long illness, until the end of your days. But your fear of abandonment was all-pervasive, even to have interests different from yours was to be at fault.

Your other need, Mum, was more difficult to fulfil at thirty years of age – to re-live your lost childhood. You tried to do it through us, and for this reason you justified everything, you gave us everything, even concealing it from dad, so as not to lose him. And through these two needs of yours you played your 'double game'.

I dream of talking to you about your desires, of embracing you and telling you them, and of not being able to do it because you're no longer around; I dream of almost wanting to climb over your grave, and I dream of the torment, I feel the pain because for us it is blocked.

But even if you were alive today, I wouldn't have been able to tell you these things. In the end, we communicated only through profound silence, in which we were terribly close, in the darkness of the secret.

It only became possible to say I, You as a result of the breakdown: "How like my mother I am". That was rock bottom, the start of the climb back up: for this reason I felt clearly that to come back to you, to you and dad then, was to go backwards. I had to press on, differentiate myself from you, rediscover dad. And I perceived myself in a way I had never done before, overwhelmed by fear and terror, and yet myself.

And I felt envious of you, born after me, Pinocchio: "I root for you but what if you put me in the shade?". You've got what it takes, I've always felt that, I've always rooted for you, I've always wanted. But the fear of being outdone. You can, if you want, outdo me in culture and in life: you have intelligence, sensitivity, creativity.

Today, me, mother and father of myself, can allow myself to feel envy and perhaps this is what I needed aged six and a half; my life would have been different then. But it wasn't possible, that was taken as read.

And I would like to be able to deal with that envy today, with the fear of being outdone, with actually being outdone, to learn to handle it, process it. I wasn't even able to recognise the envy and fear, to allow them to enter my consciousness.

Towards those who followed me – and as long as they followed me, I helped them generously – I felt the fear of being outdone, which was a distinct possibility, and I would tackle the issue head-on with them: “Outdo me, but don't ever use it against me”. The fear was this: that the fact of being outdone could be used against me.

I'm telling you this today and I almost wish, I ask you to experience the outdoing from your side and to feel it, process it, you as a man. Otherwise I would be incomplete.

Because of my buried envy, I could not have a real child, for what it had involved inside me, and because the strain lasted so long. I want at least to see you fulfil your potential, and for my part I want to finally get to grips not only with love but also with the outdoing and the envy today.

When I awoke, I could feel the tubes in my nose and in my windpipe. I tried to move but I was trapped in the bed in the intensive care unit, with drips and catheters stuck into me. Through the glass in the door, I could make out the silhouettes of my mother and Piccola Foglia. Nurses came to ask me what I had taken: they had found traces of barbiturates in my blood, and they were afraid that I would end up with brain damage due to the Disipal.

I was in a coma for three days.

They told me that – while I was in the coma – they would come to talk to me and I would answer: “Why did you save me? I wanted to die. I was afraid, but it's actually fine, it's like dying in your sleep”. I don't remember anything about it.

One part of me really did want to die, whereas another part had left the door open, and my unconscious – the higher intelligence of the healthy part of my unconscious – had led me to this strategy: if H and the comrades had saved me, they didn't want to kill me, and in my subsequent breakdowns they were no longer persecutors, just Soviet sympathisers, the enemies of my enemies.

Of course, they had saved me because a suicide within the occupied structure was dangerous, but now it was also dangerous for them to kill me. Subsequently, H told me that the worst political error had been to attempt suicide in there. But in part the tension had eased off.

11-year-old Djembè wrote me a wonderful letter, almost musical in tone: “Little Saturnia nooooo, they won't let children in, why did you do it? What need was there? In any case, we all get there in the end, and perhaps the time of your life is yet to come”.

CHAPTER VII - INCARCERATION

Six long years of incarceration followed. I recall now that my father, too, had spent the same number of years in prison during the war.

Before surrendering, however, I played a final card. Rather than signing up to the organisation, I thought I would give them a load of money to demonstrate that I was not a class enemy.

The idea of selling the house in the pine forest was being mooted. I suggested to my mother that I would deal with it, skimming off a high level of commission, which I would then give to the organisation. I came up with the pretext that I wanted to buy a house where I would live with Jei. She surprised me with an act of generosity that I have never been able to appreciate. But it was all wrong, right from the start, also because it was hidden from dad: 6 million, 60,000 lire per month, as it was back then.

After a few weeks, she took me to see a small loft, a jewel, 25 square metres including the terrace. It was on Via della Stazione di Monte Mario, a station nearby...the sense of wandering.

I could never get to grips with that house, and only now as I tell the story am I really feeling it, with its value emerging inside my current home, like churches, built one on top of the other: the later embracing the earlier, with all the good and bad that comes with it, the younger cleansing and going beyond the elder.

Mum had fulfilled my wish: a place of my own to share with Jei. I accepted. But the loft did not resolve my problem. I had to surrender.

I left all of my jobs, joined the organisation, and put myself entirely at their disposal – but my heart wasn't in it, I did so out of fear and guilt. I began to distribute pound after pound of what they called 'newspapers', without knowing what was written in them; for years, I simply could not read what I felt was being forced upon me. I would go to the working class districts of Rome, markets, factories, offices, I spent hours standing at traffic lights.

And there was the 'political work', as they called it, in the other regions of Italy, where H decided to send us, at his behest, me and Jei, often or almost always, to different places.

H was a freelance physician irritated by his work, with a wife and cleaner. Terrifying incoherence: fighting for the oppressed while doing nothing to free the slave back at home.

And then there was the graffiti and the posters put up for events that I didn't understand and felt numb towards, and even if there had been something to feel, it would have been smothered by the fact of being forced into it.

And there were the menacing batons we used to defend ourselves against the fascists and to help us escape from the police cars.

I moved from place to place: Primavalle, Civitavecchia, a long period in Emilia, Bologna, Ferrara. I stayed with comrades who had children, I would look after the youngsters...consumed with regret for a family I had yet to build.

She, the comrade, the mother of those children, killed herself a few years later, with her husband's pistol.

Emilia, Tuscany, Pisa, the steel mills of Prato and Piombino, the ports of Livorno. In a red Renault 4 belonging to the organisation, I covered mile upon mile, taking charge here and there. Then Turin, back and forth to there, too: Fiat, the satellite industries, Olivetti in Ivrea. And then a long period travelling across Italy, alone, in a Ford Transit 100, distributing books to the bookshops in all the biggest cities.

And the job in the textile union, thanks to an alliance with the left-wing socialists.

And the occupation, which I managed, of a factory in Settebagni.

A functionary with next to no money, on the organisation's payroll, thousands of sandwiches and subs eaten as and when.

The occupation in Rome of that abandoned building, where a number of years later I would have my first breakdown: the site was used to dredge up money with phony artistic initiatives. I, as an attractive woman, was dispatched to the painters – Maccari, Vacchi, Attardi, Enotrio – in order to get paintings and sell them to fund the organisation.

There were initiatives in support of the Palestinians held in Palazzo Re Enzo in Bologna, and actions to benefit the Afghan people, invaded by the imperialist Soviet Union.

And there were the Molotov cocktails thrown into the Spanish embassy to express our objection to the death penalty introduced by Franco with his garrotte.

I did feel something, but it was all under a cloak of terror: a road I was forced onto and from which I could not escape. Whatever I did was never enough, whatever positive position I reached gave rise to new requests.

And the suspects continued to exist, people who were deemed to be masked enemies. For H, they were always masked Soviet sympathisers, policemen, fascist infiltrators.

As a form of resistance, I convinced myself that there was something I liked about it, the nomadic lifestyle, for example. I talked up any experience that I felt some sort of bond with. Externally, even within my family, not being able to tell the truth I made out I was a dyed-in-the-wool believer.

And to keep everything under control, I wrote long to-do lists, I even wrote 'wash underpants': it was something which I kept on doing during the breakdowns, much to my chagrin, but which was actually very useful.

Sometimes, to alleviate the weight of living like this, I took Djembè with me to the occupied building, to distribute the newspaper. Once, we went to Tuscany, to Lucca, to Viareggio, and between

jobs we would go to the seaside, eat in trattorias, just us two together. Djembè, too, loved that wandering life and, perhaps he also loved the memory of the first two years of his life with me.

I wanted to participate in the meetings behind closed doors, to become a member of the national secretariat. I recall that H. imposed democratic centralism: the minority, while still having the right to declare its position and to retain it, had in any case to accept the decisions of the majority. At the endless meetings, H shouted, issued commands, gave out orders, everybody got in line, whoever dared step out of line was suspect. There were no more confabs in the hallways: they were forbidden after X's trial. The end justified the means, whatever they may have been. I, paralysed, as well as congenitally shy, said nothing, and those who keep silent tacitly give their consent. When it came to voting, I went with the unified majority, but I understood nothing, everything was fake.

And yet, the incarceration served my purposes to some extent. Indeed, since I had to appear – to the outside world – to be a proponent of the cause, I learned to speak in public, even in front of two thousand workers.

Feminism arrived, the organisation did not support it, giving its support instead to the battles on divorce and abortion. For my part, I wasn't attracted by feminism. Certain things about that movement resonated with me, but most of it didn't – I couldn't tolerate the idea of a clash with the opposite sex.

My confusion in relation to sex remained unresolved. In the meantime, Jei – a vindictive sort – made me pay for my betrayal and brought a woman he was seeing to my house, desecrating everything.

Sometimes, he betrayed me and other times I did it to him. I fell in love another two times in those six years.

The first of those lovers was a very delicate and respectful guy, a member of the organisation, when I was responsible for the Civitavecchia section. Commuting between Emilia and Tuscany, I would meet him in Pisa, we would check in to hotels or sleep in sleeping bags on the lawn in front of the leaning tower. I have sweet memories of him.

The other – who was also affiliated with the organisation – was an empty, dismal character, and was, therefore, ideal for me to fill up with my projections.

In both cases, H called a halt to the relationship. The reason? “There shall be no fucking within the organisation”.

I kept wanting to openly love two men, both consenting, in the hope that I could understand something of my scission, which was bearing down on me more and more at that time. When I betrayed Jei, I felt guilty in relation to him, I was sexually aggressive with both men and I associated them with my brother. Then I told Jei about it and he went mad, becoming violent. Other times, in a

state of abject confusion about the betrayals (his and mine), I pretended to have hysterical crises, and faked self-harm. The masturbation continued, too, agonised, so much so as to make me feel ill.

Only much later – in therapy with the analyst who, with his silence, served as an auxiliary ego – did I learn, on my own, that masturbation is a relationship with yourself, as indeed homosexuality can often be: it is a tool that enables you to know yourself and to grow, not because it is something infantile, but because in life we keep on growing all the time.

I also experimented with a number of one-night stands, through which I discovered that sexuality is not a technical matter. I wasn't able to say no, for fear of being refused. I felt that I could still perceive nature, but there was neither space nor time, psychological or otherwise. And yet I could see, to my left, the side of the unconscious, nature sneaking its way into my life through the high-up, barred window of a cramped prison cell. This is how it appeared to me one night in a dream.

I had hardly any money and so, to support myself, I would even steal from the Standa supermarket. It was owned by the Agnelli family, and I was against the ruling class – there was always some sort of justification for my thefts. For clothes, I would just walk right out of the supermarkets holding a load of garments; nobody stopped me, I was shameless about it all, and back then there were no electronic alarms. I even sold my gold baptism charms and pawned the jewellery I was attached to, jumping through hoops or asking mum for the money to get them back.

The scission: on the one hand, thefts and no money to play with, on the other, the loft, which made me feel guilty towards the oppressors. At a certain point, H decreed that the house had to be confiscated from me as a 'member of the bourgeoisie', in order to turn it into the studio for the organisation's radio station. They even came to measure up. I couldn't prevent it, and I felt awful at the thought of having to tell my mother what had happened. In the event, it never came to pass, but it took total sacrifice to save the house and to save my life – my self as it was then, albeit out of kilter.

And I couldn't countenance staying on my own in that flat, so full of the pain of the past and present. I couldn't keep it clean, and only bothered to tidy up when I was submerged in dust, so weighed down was I by the thought of doing and of not doing. Me and Jei were hardly ever there, it was more like a dormitory; on the occasions when we were in Rome for longer periods, we would go and eat at his mother's house, after the endless meetings, and then head back home for some shut-eye. I would take my clothes to my mother to be washed, and for a long time, even later on, I would still take my dirty clothes for her to wash, with all the symbolic meaning that had.

Even though I was torn and frayed, I tried all the same to keep on studying. I attended a chemistry course and prepared for the exam together with Jei, and I moved into his house, while he got ready to graduate. I passed the written exam, which at the time was a selection exam for Medicine, and got 22/30 for the oral. When it came to physics, I spent more than a year preparing for it, and managed

to get a mark of 26/30 with some help from my father. A long time later, I sat the microbiology and anatomy exams, too.

I abandoned University, but in order to keep receiving my allowance from my parents – which I couldn't possibly have done without, since I was out of a job – I would put fake exams down in the record book. My father would say to my mother: “You see, Saturnia is studying and making her own life away from home. Talassa on the other hand...”. Mum, jealous on Talassa's behalf, went and asked for the list of exams, and discovered the scam. She told my father. I felt like I was up against a cold wall: I couldn't feel anger and hatred towards my mother, it was too dangerous. I identified with her, my first aggressor, I depended on her, she protected me.

In the meantime, Talassa had gone off the rails. She spent hour after hour in bed, went out in the evening, didn't work, didn't study, didn't think about getting her own place – nor would my mother have wanted her to. My father forced Talassa to leave, telling her to get a job and rent a house; she found work in a bank and it was hard for her, until my mother convinced dad to put down the deposit on a 60m² house in the Parioli district. My sister managed to pay half of the rent on her own through loans and redundancy payments – something that would later make me jealous.

Once me and Talassa had fled the nest, our room was refurbished: sadness, bereavement, anger.

Everyone was afraid of dad. Even the boyfriends of my younger sisters would sometimes climb out from the second-floor window when they heard my father approaching.

Piccola Foglia went to study restoration in Udine. I've already talked about Pinocchio: he got married around the time of my first breakdown. Djembè meanwhile was growing up, alone, with thousands of grown-ups round about her.

Within the organisation, I was subject to frightening injustices, because I was 'bourgeois', but I could never extricate myself and leave it all behind: the fear of dying stopped me in my tracks. I tried to rise up the ranks, hoping it would give me more chances, but it was a constant illusion.

I felt like a fraud, I didn't know whether that life was about struggle or grandstanding. And it was the feeling of being a fake – which I felt deep down to be true – that made me realise how, for years and years, I hadn't been feeling like myself.

After the final official betrayal of Jei, I was declared unfit to be appointed to a seat on the council.

The incarceration became increasingly claustrophobic, it really was a dead-end.

Shortly after, H informed me that he was “unhappy” – so he actually had feelings? – that he had declared me unfit, and he appointed me to the role of Administration Manager. A useless and very tough job for me, it lasted two years. And yet, at a time when I was failing at everything, it made me

feel important, and allowed me to become part of the national secretariat. They were two years of forced faithfulness to Jei, in a relationship that by this time I considered a chore. He seemed to me like a false husband. I ended up being disgusted by him, but the double bind that held us together, the toxic dependency, persisted, as did the ripping off within the organisation of the 'suffering souls' – something that I wanted no part of.

Incrimination, absolute turmoil, total aridity, imprisonment taken to the extreme, confusion.

In the aftermath of Aldo Moro's kidnapping, I – living in Monte Mario and driving a white Ford Transit – was stopped twice a day. They searched my house and confiscated several rocket launchers and a silencer.

Then there were H's rants against the instigators, the enemies, the Soviet sympathisers who had by now become the main enemy. The suspicions and shouting continued without end, and I, fingered on occasion as the aggressor, would shout, in turn, at my underlings.

I became more and more distressed, I trudged around, feeling more suffocated with every passing day.

We were invited to China by the Chinese Communist Party, who saw us as a sister party. There had been years of silence from China towards the organisation, due to the Gang of Four. Then there were changes at the top, and already the year before a delegation with H and his wife had visited the land of Mao. H's objective was to procure funding. The Chinese wanted to be introduced to a group of comrades and a group of allies. Even though Jei had been in a car accident, which forced him to wear a corset, he led the delegation of allies, socialists, republicans and the odd left-wing democrat. I was inserted into the delegation of comrades – there were a dozen or so of us – led by H. I had to buy a ceremonial costume for the official appointments. I asked my father for the money, directly this time, and he expressed his confusion over the trip, reminding me that as a child I had said that I wanted to marry a black man. Although he had nothing against other races, he couldn't compute, but he gave me the cash all the same.

The atmosphere was more militaristic than usual. We, like highly regimented little toy soldiers, were ordered to conduct ourselves perfectly and to take notes on everything with a view to pinpointing any chinks that H could exploit in order to blackmail the Chinese into giving him money, just – I realise now – as he had planned.

A clapped-out plane, touch down in Pakistan, hour after hour in the sky (24 in total, I think), dreadful food. Having arrived, I missed out on one of the rare 'tourist' visits to the Imperial City in Beijing, because I felt awful, I had gastroenteritis – a factor that I then interpreted, in my delirium, as the sign of an international conspiracy of Soviet sympathisers against me for having denounced X. The Chinese made us visit – always with the interpreter and always escorted by high-ranking, trusted people – two large cities, two medium-sized cities, two towns, a large commune, a small commune, and

hospitals in which they practised Chinese medicine, from acupuncture (as an anaesthetic during operations) to cupping therapy. We visited factories, bridges, museums, the Great Wall, and Mao's mausoleum, which H. claimed was made of wax, because he maintained that Mao had died ten years before his official death. Meetings were held with refugees from Vietnam on the border with China. We visited workers' dining halls, to which we were sent – following one of H's rants – without the interpreter, and where we were given nothing but water and a little bit of rice with a couple of lettuce leaves.

As we travelled around in presidential vehicles, we had to dodge the plethora of natives on two wheels – bicycles being the only form of transport making its way along the great boulevards of Beijing, Shanghai and Nanking – and the traffic police would yell at the cyclists with a megaphone, picking them out by describing their distinctive features, since the bikes had no registration plates. The Chinese were a silent multitude: it seemed impossible that such a mass of people could move around as if wrapped in cotton wool. H's screams, in contrast, invaded the eardrums even more than usual, and then there were the orders he barked out at every opportunity, even when the recipient had done nothing more than sneeze.

We all had to write everything down because we were all expected to then compare notes.

In August, in the heat, at the official receptions, we were offered boiling-hot serviettes to wash our face and hands, before being served green tea, steaming of course. We were accommodated in the best hotels, and in the wonderful homes owned by the Chinese Communist Party. The food we were served was – or was said to be – the very best, the most refined, the most exotic. We had to eat everything, from snake to jellyfish, an obligation that I would have welcomed if I had been able to savour the food, but – just like after the death of my grandmother and before meeting Bianca – I couldn't taste anything. Lunches, dinners, visits, official meetings – all under a cloak of terror.

My passive obedience had until then been dictated by the fear of dying and of disappearing – a fear that was rooted in reality; nor could I 'escape' into mental illness, because it was not permitted.

Between one flight and another across the great expanse of China, we stopped off in Beijing. H's wife had not come; she had recently given birth to a baby girl. One evening, just before we were due to leave China, I decided to have it out with H. Today I know – having since learned how to communicate appropriately – that I really faced up to him flawlessly. Crying, with the distress welling up inside of me, I said to him: “When you shout, I am paralysed”. He was struck, seemingly annihilated, he said sorry, he didn't know what to do, and for a while all he was capable of was mumbling excuse after excuse.

Having pulled himself together, he made a proposal: “How about screwing?”

“You always said that 'screwing' was off-limits within the organisation”.

“But between two members of the council...”.

“But I fall in love”.

“I was convinced that while you were with Jei you would sleep around every now and again...but you're a Victorian lady”.

He suggested once again that we screw. I said I would think about it.

After leaving his suite, I wandered around, listening to myself, in the hallways of the luxurious Beijing hotel. I felt an acute, dreadful sense of fear, and I also realised – with equal clarity – that it was the only way out. Perhaps I was feeling a psychotic breakdown, or the onset of one, with horrendous risks for my life, had I not accepted the proposal. The locus of evaluation was external to me, I had always received the diktat of what was right or wrong from the outside. Perhaps I felt – as, indeed, later turned out to be the case – that his perception of himself as a masculine man, with none of the nobility that the description connotes, would have defended my father in my stories; something that no one had done, but which I very much needed.

And above all, what would have happened had I said no, there in China, where it was impossible to trust anyone? What card did I have up my sleeve to get out of the tunnel I had been stuck in for ages? By managing not to feel how disgusting he really was to me, I consented.

He demanded that I leave Jei, and I went to tell him so. During the final days of the Chinese trip, he didn't shout and was polite to the comrades. Having lost his verve along with his booming voice, to get money he ended up pretending to burst into tears at an official lunch.

The Chinese didn't offer him a penny.

On returning to Rome, I was still getting used to the new situation when H's wife put two and two together and went mad. I was all over the place, as I looked for the best escape route, exploiting the new situation. H saw my house and thought it was very nice...it would be a shame to confiscate it and use it as a radio studio. So my sacrifice was perhaps worth something after all.

H, as I had guessed, on hearing my tales defended my father and attacked my mother. I tried to get a handle on it, but the tension was palpable: for several days, there were no shouts or orders. But one evening, with no warning, H exploded with violence, a volcano that never became dormant. With terrifying screams, he set about me on the pretext that I had not brought along a set of keys that he wanted.

I took refuge at my house. Before doing so, I went to see my mother, who could make out the fear in my eyes – she asked me what was wrong and I said “Nothing!”. I had a meeting, for the first time I didn't go, and stayed there, in the loft: the sacrifice wasn't worth it, the only feasible way out, it seemed to me, was a dead end. Paralysed, alone, in bed, smoking cigarettes, I felt that the walls were closing in, suffocating me. I wanted to get out, run away, ask for help from the first person I came across in the street. It was too dangerous.

H came with a team of comrades, all men. They asked me if I had spoken to anyone. I denied that I had said anything. I was taken to H's house. He gave me some soup and had me sleep in his bed. There, I began to imagine that I would be walled in, and they would leave only a small window through which all of the men I had been with, including Jei, would sneer as they watched me die.

The day after, I was taken to the house of an Italo-Chinese comrade, with his parents there. I entered into total silence. In the bed, stock still, silent, I was delirious. I said to myself: "If it's not my father, then it's my mother, so it's me". I imagined that the corpses of my brother and of X were next to me, in the wardrobe. I had just turned twenty-six. They informed me that I would be sent to a mountain hospital managed by a comrade. I was convinced that the soup H had given me the night before was full of glass, I even said it to H. At the Chinese woman's house, I lost blood, I imagined that the shards of glass were cutting my insides to ribbons. In fact, I was having a premature period.

Mute and paralysed, I fantasised about the torture that would be inflicted upon me: once he arrived at the hospital, H would give the order to cut my feet off, because I had accepted a pair of shoes he had gifted to me. They would then make me walk with no feet on the snow, up there in the mountains, until I died from exhaustion.

In the meantime, my mother, still very much on 'stand-by' as far as my 'political activity' was concerned, roused my siblings. Pinocchio, putting his neck on the line, called the police. They worked out where I was being hidden. My mum and dad came to get me, they seemed fragile, vulnerable. They asked me if I wanted to go back and stay with them. I felt that to do so would be to take a step backwards, so I rejected their offer. They called a psychiatrist named Cerquetelli, who came and asked me a series of questions. I didn't answer. Whatever I said could have been used against me. I was defined as 'catatonic' and, given that until then I had been in touch with reality, 'borderline'. In any case, they gave me some psychiatric medication in the form of Argactil and Disipal. Then I found out from Cerquetelli that my mother had been to visit him with my father to ask for advice before they got married: the doctor had told them they were made for each other. How true it was! But then Piccola Foglia attacked the psychiatrist during a hysterical crisis and shouted: "Made for each other, were they?".

After leaving the intensive care unit, I stayed in the inpatient department for fifteen days.

I have always been amazed by my timing: Law 180 had just been passed, which set out the plans to close the mental institutions, so I could dodge that endless experience, but I had to choose a hospital. It's as if I had waited for Law 180 to be passed before having a breakdown.

Albeit reluctantly, I returned to the mountain hospital in Piedmont. Two months of convalescence. My folks came to see me. I asked them to buy me the organisation's beige Renault 4, which I had been using for years, after the red one. My father bought it for me.

I was utterly away with the fairies.

Although I had always been underweight, because of the drugs I had put on a lot of weight, which I was then never able to shift. I didn't recognise myself, I didn't accept me for who I had become and it was many years later before I was able to do so again. So I tried not to think about it.

Jei got engaged to the Chinese girl, and made out that he was head over heels; it didn't last, but he didn't waste any time getting her pregnant. That was his revenge.

A new theory had arrived. In public companies, which at the time constituted the overwhelming majority in Italy, directors had to be technicians, not politicians: employees elected internally, for example, to the board of directors of hospitals would be doctors, nurses, stretcher-bearers, all familiar with the infrastructural issues. I embraced this theory. The power lay with the large private companies, the banks, Fiat, Olivetti. I asked to be dismissed from the national secretariat and to move to Turin: "I'm a wounded wolf, and wounded wolves must separate themselves from the pack".

It amounted to a year's toil, geared towards ensuring that the Fiat workers were struggling towards the same objectives as the workers in state-owned companies. I followed it up, on the factory council, in the low-level bodies, and I also did interviews.

I had a single room, rented for 24,000 lire a month, between '79 and '80, in Porta Palazzo: a working-class part of Turin, with clothes hung out to dry and tomatoes cooked on the balcony, immigrants everywhere. Toilet on the balcony, bathing in the tub, camping stove to cook what little I did cook.

I brought with me symphonies, albums by singer-songwriters and the odd book.

In the early days of my enslavement, H had said to me: "If you read, and stop smoking, we'll get along fine". Two knots to untie. I began my fight against smoking – which was a defence mechanism and a dependency that I detested, and I felt the obligation to stop, so it became impossible to quit. I had started to read a few books during my convalescence. I would get to the end of the book, but I just read the words, and gave no thought to the meaning, I felt nothing.

H came to see me in Turin, even though he was still with his wife, so that he could cultivate his harem. I got a bad headache that just wouldn't go away. I put it down to the pill, so I stopped taking it. Since I was convinced I was infertile, I didn't take care, and I ended up getting pregnant.

A lot stemmed from this: I had the womb to become a mother, but I didn't do so for other reasons.

When, later on, I grieved for a child who was never born, I worked through that grief on the basis of a real truth, not a presumption.

The feelings I had when pregnant were disturbing, similar to those I had when I all of a sudden discovered sex: a mix of eroticism, passion, hate, envy and anxiety.

In the state I was in, I couldn't have kept a child with me for a mother and H for a father. Once again, it all came back to my timing: abortion had just been legalised, so I was spared all of the terrible scenes I had witnessed accompanying other comrades to get backstreet abortions. Mine was in a day hospital in Turin.

In the homeland of Fiat, a sweet comrade – already engaged to be married – kept me company. His nickname was Barbun. The experience in Turin was a first effort towards liberation, a first attempt to come face to face with heartfelt solitude, and an awareness of the lack of 'object constancy'.

There, I got a call from Talassa. She told me that she had completed a course with an ascetic psychologist and was embracing Catholicism. Shortly after, she left the bank and went to work in a community – where she still works to this day – for the rehabilitation of drug addicts. Later on, she would meet her future husband, a monk. From Turin, I wrote to my father, asking him for a larger house in Rome, and in the meantime I transferred my residence to Turin, I had yet to leave the Roman residence. It was a move that was baseless in terms of the choices I was making and was not in line with how I felt. It was the trigger for a new crisis, one that was necessary – like all of the others – to take steps towards freedom.

During that year, while taking a brief holiday with H, I burst into floods of tears, full of psychotic distress, during which time I talked about the arcade game. He exclaimed: “You're pretty screwed up inside”. The psychological problems started to have the right to citizenship.

CHAPTER VIII - THE CRISIS YEARS

The second breakdown was very clear, the paralysis less serious: the comrades were excluded from persecution. I was in Rome, I had changed my residence, my mind was wandering all over the place: “Who am I? Where am I? What do I want? What should I do?”.

Right before the breakdown, there's an opening up of consciousness – which even encompassed Anna in my fourth crisis – in which you seem to understand a huge number of things all together and you are attracted and engulfed, and you don't want to interrupt it with psychiatric medication, and you follow it until you lose yourself.

You feel yourself, you seem to understand, then you see enemies, people who make evil eyes at you in the street, and you don't know what clothes to wear because you don't know who you are, and a piece of clothing given to you by your mum is your mum, and you don't know if it's right or wrong to wear it, like all the other magic symbols that follow you and confuse you, but that you don't want to stop because they seem to be making some sort of sense.

Much later on, I would learn to recognise these signs and to intervene in time.

I began to lose the plot. H's wife had turned to a counsellor for help. No one wanted to treat her because she belonged to an organisation that was against extra-parliamentary parties, all of which were Soviet sympathisers, according to H. Anna took her on. H suggested that I, too, should go and see her. I was terrified in the wake of the experience with the priest psychologist, but I accepted.

Telling H about the episode of the arcade game ended up being useful: this was how Anna entered my life.

At the clinic, everyone looked down on me. No doubt, they would have inserted a hooked object into my vagina to crush my ovaries. I was facing Anna: I received love, but I couldn't speak, H had taken me there. At my parents' house, I was scared for all of my siblings, whom I felt were on my side.

They put me in Cerquetelli's clinic. Apart from him, all of the other doctors and nurses were enemies, Soviet sympathisers, I didn't speak to anyone. I would only eat if spoon-fed by a comrade, who turned out over time to be delightful, just like Ada, a nursemaid, who became a cloistered nun and lived at home for several years during her childhood. I trusted her alone. But I had to flee, get back to Turin. Thanks to Law 180, they let me out. At my folks' house, I thought that someone was controlling my mind with hypnosis, and that the television was talking about me, whatever it said. I decided to go to Florence, the first city outside Rome that I came to love. The 110 gave me a train timetable, no doubt the call had been tapped, but I had to go. At the train station, I discovered that the train was part of the convoy headed for Pescara; it was a sign, so I went. Along the way, I was afraid, too many people around me, I saw knives, I got off the train. In the station toilets, I set fire to my organisation

membership cards. Outside, some railwaymen were burning paper: they had spied me. So back to Rome I went, and then back on the train to Turin.

I decided to flee in the hope of some respite, which never came. In reality, I was trying to escape from myself, but you can't, you're always there.

In Turin, I was terrified of going into the house: Jei and his Chinese woman would surely have built a contraption with torture machines that would cut me to pieces. I took refuge in the neighbour's house. I had ordered a cappuccino in a bar, it was definitely spiked, I could feel the poison running through my veins. So I went to Barbun's. I asked him: "Who am I?".

They took me back to the mountain hospital: they hooked me up to detoxicating drip-feeds, but the delirium continued. Someone, a doctor, a friend of the doctor with the icy stare, proposed the sleep cure, which they put me on for a week; things went a little better, they gave me some medication, then I was back in Rome.

I finally came out of the hysteria. I transferred my residence to Monte Mario in Rome. I asked H for permission to go to work, and he consented.

In the meantime, my brother had got married, and my mother had started to be afflicted by Parkinson's disease.

Mum, I have always thought that, having killed off the memory of the unconscious with Tavor, you were then attacked by Parkinson's. The coincidence of the onset of your illness with Pinocchio's fleeing the nest did make some sort of sense: it took away the possibility for ambivalence to be acted out day by day. You, who were always so courageous in your dealings with doctors, operations, childbirth, had to go and choose an illness that you didn't accept, and which made you lose your sense of independence and determination. You fell into a depression, nobody knew how to help you get over it, not even me.

With the illness came the deterioration of the so-called 'third age', or elderliness as you would call it, because you have never accepted that new-fangled term. Softly, more and more often, you said you wanted to die, and all of us, around you, were worried about you. I still hadn't worked out a good way to help you, look after you, support you, and I pushed you to react. I couldn't bear it.

You were worn down slowly, by the disease and the consequent depression, and you didn't want – quite rightly – to have an operation on your little head, which remained wide awake, forever engaged in the crossword puzzles that Dad gave you to stimulate you – you were even able to remember your Latin. They operated on your herniated disc, the last brave operation you underwent, but then you had to face osteoporosis, and every time you fell, you would break something.

I got myself a job as a secretary, cash-in-hand, eight badly paid hours a day.

My father, in an act of self-flagellation, had asked for help from a colleague, who had found an interesting opportunity for Ryunyo, who was having problems at work and in life generally: in Brussels, for one year, good salary, short-term contract, and the possibility of being taken on permanently, further down the line, in Rome. You had to know French. Ryunyo didn't feel like going.

My father came to see me, timidly, asking if I would take the job. He was at risk of making a bad impression due to his children – first of all asking for work, only to then refuse it when offered.

I felt obligated to ask H's permission, and he replied:

“You're in love with me, and it's driving you mad, and for Victorian ladies like you, who have been made ill by love, the done thing was for them to go on a trip, so off you go!”.

The idea of going abroad on my own, while I was enslaved by H who lived in Rome, made me feel trapped. I had to consummate a one-night stand with a guy I liked, whom I had already been with back when I was together with Jei, it had been one of those almost numb relationships. That way, I felt less hemmed in. I got ready to leave.

I left in the beige Renault 4. Piccola Foglia came from Udine to Milan to go with me. I had just turned 28.

Brussels, on my own. I wandered around and visited the whole of Belgium at the weekends, in search of the Flemish painters. As well as Amsterdam, Paris, Germany. I often went to the cinema museum, where – with 1,000 lire – I would watch three films in French. I took a course on photography in French and developed my first and only photos in black and white. I signed up for an advanced course in French, at which I really shone – 'très honorable' my final mark. At work, I could just about manage. My father was proud of me. I was happy.

H came to visit me. I realised that I couldn't have a relationship with him after having spent the night before I left Rome with another man. I confessed, I was unable to lie to him. He demanded that I go into the office, even with my face black and blue. And he also demanded that I offend my sister-in-law, with whom I had discussed my relationship with him – he said I should call her a whore.

He didn't like my silver rings, I should throw them away. He didn't like my stomach, I should lose weight. I should stop smoking, sell the house in Monte Mario where the 'misdeed' had been done, I should ask my parents for money and give it to the organisation.

I did everything he asked.

I buried the rings in a station. I got Ryunyo, for a fee, to sell the house in Monte Mario and find me something larger, as per the agreement with my parents, who had promised to help me. It was my first house, and I was never to see it again. I told a series of lies to get 2 million lire out of my mother, who was undergoing the operation on her herniated disc, and I handed the money to the organisation.

Mum, today I'd like to say sorry for what I did, I was still in bondage. I had made the sacrifice to the monster, to Bluebeard. And yet, even the beast had some positive characteristics, which is more than can be said for H.

In Brussels – an attractive city – the sun never made an appearance, so to find it, I organised a trip to the Greek islands during the 17 allotted days off. H came to Greece, splitting his time between me and his wife.

I went on my own to Cefalonia, where I got to know three French girls who have remained good friends.

I was with H on the other islands, and it makes me feel terrible just to mention their names. He talked a lot of nonsense about our eternal friendship; as a token of that friendship, he gave me a gift of some expensive fossils, which I then threw away, together with all of the imitation jewellery, books and cassettes he had given me – the only presents I got rid of.

It has been very difficult, over the years, to have a clear out and work out what's actually mine – photographs or books, for example – and what, in contrast, was associated with the vice I was being gripped by.

They took me on at the Institute. I returned to Rome. Once again without a home of my own, I went to stay with my folks and I was driven crazy by the lack of my own space, which I had once had, but had then been forced to sacrifice. They sent me to the typing pool rather than to work for the people who had given me the job. Once I had been recruited, I could allow myself another period of crisis.

In the third breakdown, the delirium was short-lived. Me and my dad were allies: there was our job to be saved. Villa Giuseppina, Mariani, an excellent psychiatrist prescribed the medication.

Far from the organisation, I was better able to perceive my mother as being dangerous for me. I felt cold towards her, like a wall. I saw her as a lost cause. I viewed Talassa and my father as cornerstones. When I was admitted to hospital, they said: “Everything except electroshock”. They filled me up with a load of medication. Vacant and dazed. Piccola Foglia later said to me, crying: “I saw you in that state, and I couldn't get my head round it”.

Almost immediately, I suffered from exit depression. It lasted for months. When you're inside it, it seems there's no way out, that it will always be like that. Even lifting up a glass becomes an onerous task.

At Villa Giuseppina, talking with other patients, I discovered that many of them were convinced the television was talking about them; I realised this was a symptom. My dad came to see me and my heart opened up, I felt affection, tenderness from him, comfort.

Once I was out, I stayed with Talassa. Little Talassa, how much I have cost you. Ryunyo found me a house on the Via Cassia, outside the ring road. The prices had risen – it cost the same as my older sister's house in the upmarket Parioli district.

With Talassa's help, despite my depression, I took possession of my home. New. To be furnished. The permanent job had driven me nuts. I paid for everything in instalments: furniture, mortgage, books, encyclopaedia, new Renault Parisienne, the collected works of Freud and Jung, university, analysis. I robbed from Peter to pay Paul, just to cover my debts.

I emerged out of my depression for no obvious reason. Trudging on, you stay alive, even if you feel you are vegetating. It was an important lesson for my subsequent depressions. During them, even though I couldn't see a way out, I repeated to myself: “You'll come out the other side”.

I searched for Anna at the clinic.

It was a strange year, enveloped in the fog of memory. At the Institute, I felt uncomfortable with the idea that it would be my lifelong job, and I said to myself: “I'm getting out of here”. I wanted to matriculate at the university, but I was too late.

After the crisis, they removed me from the pool and I went to work under the people who had taken me on, friends of my father, where I felt protected. I was assigned the role of jack of all trades across several offices. The first word processors arrived. All of my colleagues refused them, but I could see an opportunity: a practical, non-bureaucratic job, the possibility to acquire new skills. So I became a technician. I began reading a few books; it was always a struggle but finally I managed to feel something. Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, which I read in French: a woman tells the tale of a shipwreck. The person who demanded to get on board a lifeboat that could only hold a certain number of people would have caused everyone to drown. The sailors cut off the hands of the shipwrecked who tried to grab hold, in order to save the lives of those already in the lifeboat. The woman stated: “This is what I did with my feeling so as not to drown”. That's how I felt, as if I'd killed my feelings. I thought that for a long time. And that was also the reason that led me to try suicide when I accused myself of having sold my soul to H.

I was confused that year, practically on auto-pilot due to the medication, the depression, the requirement to get used to the new situation. I went to see Anna, but it was as if I was dragging myself there, I submerged her in dreams, though, four per night, I typed them out with the dates. I didn't face up to the nuclei, or the symbols of the nuclei: it was too dangerous. It was H who took me to Anna. And it wasn't just a fantasy of mine. As she confessed to me many years later, H often went to see Anna to interrogate her, to find out what I had said. She told him nothing.

Anna transmitted love, patience and tenderness to me; I had trouble perceiving them, but my unconscious registered them, as it then demonstrated. She advised me to join a Rogerian group first

and to then sign up for the Rogers course, where I met Alberto, Patrizia and George, who ended up being crucial parts of my life. I went to therapy a little blank. I had the sensation that she was doing everything, I told her so and she replied: “Well, you're the one making the effort to come and see me”.

Without me realising it, Anna provided so much support that at the end of that year I left H, I ripped up once and for all my organisation membership cards, and signed up once again to study Psychology. It was a step that I made quietly, but it was a turning point, a launch pad, *the* launch pad.

I stayed in contact with H for another three years. In contrast to his reactions in the past, he didn't do anything when he found out that I had met a guy on the Rogers course and that I had started to see the guy as far more than a friend.

The guy, with whom I was in a relationship, was from Milan – it was too dangerous for me to get involved with anyone in Rome. The distance served as a guarantee. He was a bad lot, who made out that he was a Jungian psychiatrist, and when he was revealed to be a fraud, they threw him off the course. The fact that he talked to me about Jung, about the possibility of working on dreams, attracted me. Indirectly, he introduced me to a real Jungian psychiatrist and so without warning I asked Anna if I could switch from her to this new path. She accepted, out of respect for me.

Much later on, while weighing up some of the decisions I had taken during my life, I asked myself: “Why did I leave Anna?”. It seemed to me that I had lost precious time, but I found the answer: when I went to see the Jungian analyst, at the suggestion of the real psychiatrist, I felt clearly and unequivocally that if I hadn't talked about X and about my certainty that he had been killed, because of me, I wouldn't have got out of it.

And I couldn't, back then, talk about X to Anna, who had been introduced to me by H and who knew X through the wife. It was dangerous.

I went to see the analyst, and straight away we set the start date for three months later. I drafted a piece, on my own, dealing with X, with the before and after of the mental breakdown, with my enemies and my enemies' enemies. At the age of thirty, I had my first session. I also transcribed my dreams. I told her that I wanted to leave her the notebook in which I had written it all down. “You read it,” she answered. I read it.

Everything resonated as if it were amplified. I was sure, microphones, put in place by the Soviet sympathisers, were recording my voice, without the analyst realising it.

Fourth breakdown. My mind was being opened up. Anna described it before she had a dream in which, in a landscape of windswept reeds, she saves me as a child from drowning in a toxic, polluted lake. And so it came to pass many years later.

I didn't want this opening up of my consciousness to come to an end. I didn't want medication: it didn't make me feel like myself, but there was the work to be saved. Back to Villa Giuseppina, with Mariani once again saying to my father: “Schizophrenics are very sensitive and intelligent if you can

manage to orientate them towards something positive”. Once more the feeling of a cold wall in relation to my mother and her being lost, again the support of Talassa and this time also of her future husband, the monk, and, above all, of my father yet again; a terrifying fear and a beginning-continuation of analysis.

Again the depression on leaving, very tough, which began in the hospital and carried on, spiralling downwards, once out, for months, staying once more with Talassa.

The Milanese guy left me. I had to go back to work with serious depression, it was such a struggle to concentrate; I still hadn't started studying, and then there was my abandoned house on Via Labranca. Very few things remained, I felt poor, my ability to see beyond was very limited, or indeed non-existent, but this time I could repeat to myself: “You'll come out the other side”.

After the fourth breakdown, which for a long time I called the final one, I went through six years of Jungian analysis. Despite the terror that kept regenerating within my delirium, I decided to set out on that path.

And so began the slow reconstruction.

During that entire period, I had the feeling of working alone. One time I said it to the analyst, who took offence. Perhaps what I felt from her was a lack of love, perhaps the upshot of the fear of any form of involvement, which would be difficult to manage.

It was an orthodox analysis with very fixed timescales: 45 minutes on the dot, with no telephone support in the event of emergencies.

Much later, during the last breakdown, her criticisms cut like a knife in my delusion of guilt, whereas her positive comments, which I clung on to in my fantasies of omnipotence, were like stigmata.

I was fascinated by the conception both of the analyst and of the Jungian psychiatrist who was following me in terms of the medication, according to whom mental breakdowns are positive, because Jung himself suffered from them, and because – distorting Jung – the unconscious is creative. I learned to my cost that the unconscious is not only terribly creative, but also terribly destructive and captivating, and that only by allying with the conscious, the prince, the king, and allowing the unconscious to be filtered through a grid of healthy defences, is it possible to tap the potential it affords.

There was such an emphasis on the breakdowns, that the psychiatrist had indicated to me I should manage my own intake of the medication. I made a real mess of things and, even more seriously, my autonomous handling of the medication was fatal for me during the final breakdown. When I was getting ready to face up to event X in the presence of the analyst, I increased the medication because I felt a sense of danger, but she maintained that she wanted me without that filter.

When the unconscious attracts you, seduces you, wrong-foots you and says to you: “The beard of your Bluebeard is not so blue in the end”, it's difficult for you to decide on your own to block out everything with medication, unless you find yourself further along the path, as is the case with me today.

Anyway, I felt very ambivalent about the breakdowns: in theory, they were applauded, but in practice judged to be a form of resistance. There were, certainly, a number of positive aspects. The fact that I could talk about myself with an analyst who would stay quiet or say something only every once in a while – but things of no consequence, so I can't remember them – served as an auxiliary ego.

In a totally silent session, during a pseudo-breakdown, I was in a really bad way. There was no attempt to understand my silence. She, too, remained silent for an hour.

Every once in a while I would lose patience.

These were seeds that fell into what was already fertile soil for my latest breakdown's delusion of guilt.

And yet, one phrase of hers helped me: “You can never go back, if you have the impression of returning there, it's only to take a run-up”.

The criteria she gave me for reporting on the multitude of weekly dreams was useful: pay attention to the latest ones. I, however, also reported on some that I had had earlier, whenever they seemed important to me. And also useful for me was the fact that she believed, as a Jungian, in the meaning of dreams, in and of themselves, rather than taking the Freudian approach whereby the dream images encompass a manifest meaning and a latent or hidden meaning. But often she believed in dreams in static mode. She did not always communicate the sensation of becoming.

Every now and then, I went to see Anna at the clinic. This, too, was positive. Perhaps out of fear, the analyst allowed me to be in contact with “this woman who represents a safety net for you”. She said I should leave out the Rogers course, because it would be too much for me and would mean piling up too many different tasks. I went away, leaving the leaders with the impression that I was abandoning it because I had found it too forceful.

And so, without love, after three years of analysis, I ventured into a project based around my mother, which involved me facing up to her, since in my fantasies she terrorised and paralysed me. My concrete, magical thought made me live what was simulated as if it were real. I tried first a final repositioning on my father, but the dreams were clear: “It's not worth rubbing your father up the wrong way”. But my mother remained.

Three years before the work on my mother, I experienced – piece by piece – a productive period.

At the start of the analysis, my first nieces were born, Pinocchio's daughters, but I couldn't have a close relationship with them as I was so consumed with my reconstruction. After many years, I did my best to rebuild my relationship with them.

I was stressed out by the difficulty of studying, and I took this problem to therapy; I wanted to work through it so that the studying didn't weigh so heavily upon me. The analyst told me, "Why don't you try to cope with your feelings?". This was precisely what I couldn't do. I had to toughen up with respect to my feelings and live with the feverish commitment that the studying demanded of me. I tried to deal with the job in hand: "To study, I need to do a read-through first, underlining certain bits in black, before doing a second read-through, underlining bits in red, then a third read-through, underlining bits in blue, like an extended filtering process, and then I need to write up summaries of all the books". The analyst said in response that I must like colours. It was hopeless, I continued to struggle.

I had chosen to go down the experimental route, I felt safer with it than with the clinical approach, which at the time frightened me; what is more, I was doing well in the scientific subjects – statistics and psychometry seemed to bring me and my father together, and he helped me out with great tenderness; I still have the notes he took for me. It was important for me to participate in the lessons, it gave some human colouration to the arduous nature of the task in hand.

For three years, I attended and worked hard. I had discovered a system for scientifically dividing the number of pages by the number of days. For the first three years, I was up-to-speed with the exams, including two recognised as valid for Medicine.

After the work on my mother, I had six left. It took me another three years to clock up five of them, but the final one was a real sticking point, as was the thesis.

I learned that I could manage, with my type of mind, to grasp the abstract and the summary, after pages of analytical work, as if for me the creative moment could be the fruit of a long, laborious, construction process. Significantly, I had an average of 28, and it stayed that way.

The best exam was General Psychology II. The lecturer frightened everyone, and the concepts on the nature-nurture diatribe, the systemic vision, and on entropy applied to the living system, were all fascinating. The lecturer wouldn't let on if the answers provided to her questions by the student being examined were correct or not. I engaged with her, she asked me about complex concepts, and finally she hit me with a superficial question, which I duly answered. She said to me: "Shall we continue with the exam or shall I just give you 30/30 with distinction?". I was in seventh heaven. The next exam was the only one I failed. Many years later, at the end of my first family therapy session as a psychologist, which went pretty well, my dreams indicated to me that I could never reach the top, because if I did I would become full of myself, releasing the tension. I'm a 28/30, and that's how I've got to stay if I'm going to continue improving.

I studied in the evenings, at the weekends, whenever I could carve out some time, but above all in the office, between one call and another, one task and another on the fledgling computers. On my own, I had never managed to study, until I managed to get my first house. Sure, hypersensitive to stimulation as I was, when in company I really struggled to concentrate, but I preferred it to solitude, which produced an uncontrollable noise, in contrast to the shrieks of the colleagues with whom I shared a room, which were incredibly annoying, but well-defined.

I read a lot of books here and there; I started to read properly. I also re-read the books that I had always wanted to embrace as a child, and this generated some very strong feelings in me.

My house was cold, I had awful trouble trying to keep it clean and tidy, everything was cold and hard. I entered into relationships with people, but on my own I had no 'object' inside me, and the analyst couldn't help me to construct one, there was just coldness and deafening silence. I was certainly vain about my home, but that, too, had been jinxed from the outset, and I felt the burden of it.

The work, too, was difficult. I couldn't suppress my need to help others...I had even spent a month with those affected by the Irpinia earthquake. It was my father's job, and every once in a while his rigidity had me gripped with fear. It was without sense, without an end, the only purpose being to maintain myself, work on myself and, by studying, try to get away. In any case, I didn't have to report to anyone about the time I spent studying and the methods I used. I did, however, make alliances with 'human' bosses and colleagues. They allowed me to study. I refused promotions in the hope of asking, in future, for a part-time position in view of the profession, even if far off. So I kept right out of the feuds and fights for the crumbs of fake power.

During the holidays, I would travel, often on my own, often with my French friends. I went with them to Sicily, which I hadn't been back to since I was 16: and I burst into floods of tears, at the sea shore, when I was overcome with emotion for what were my only certain roots, which had been betrayed all too soon.

I also swam and did folk dancing, as well as yoga, as recommended by the analyst, who didn't understand that, for psychotics, who can't relax, working on the body is counterproductive. And then I did some bicycle races, Rome to Ostia and back again. I won a cup: the only woman to reach the finish line. That's how tense I was!

You learn to fight against smoking.

All of this gave me the sense of reconstruction. I felt that my identity had been lost, scattered and rediscovered, but I still felt the cold...

All the while, I was working and educating myself through my relationships with the opposite sex.

I reacted to the experience I had had with the Milanese guy, by getting involved in several emotionless relationships, out of spite.

Then, for a year, I was in love with a distant lecturer. Alone, dealing with the fantasy and with the feeling of getting everything dirty, once again, with an emotionally hollow relationship.

Having renounced pure passion and deliberately chosen guys from other cities, as a form of guarantee, in the end I reconquered Rome – I did, however, keep picking guys who had been shattered by previous relationships.

I worked on developing my patience, and I realised that something I couldn't do, I couldn't even feel.

The dreams indicated that I was building with bricks and mortar.

I worked hard to free myself from dependency. My dreams pointed towards the left: a mother was killing her child and then throwing her back into the water, the water was a stagnant lake. And I worked on being less possessive, and on being at peace on my own, even though it was incredibly cold.

This was up until my first defence of myself. I cuffed an amoral guy, who used to smoke joints with his friends and engage in unbridled sex, convinced that he could “try it with anyone”, even with close female friends. For the first time, I used my paralysed hands, I didn't seek protection or defence from others, I defended myself, under his house, in front of the caretaker.

My unconscious erupted from deep down. In the meantime, I had a premonition of an impending breakdown due to overloading: a failed exam, mathematics to prepare for but I couldn't be bothered, the competition to become a policewoman – I wanted to try to get a job for the council so that I wouldn't fall foul of the age limitations – an English course at the Institute with my brother, who at the time had found work as an underground labourer, happy to see himself as the head of the family who goes out to work, the pain I felt for him, since he had abandoned the course due to the difficulty of respecting the rules. The first insights came my way, the first regressions, even in the foetal position. Something much larger began to take shape.

I met Fioredivetro, who is now a dear friend, as I am to her. Since that time, she has provided a constant frame of reference for me. And with Fioredivetro I experienced the problem of boundaries: should I say everything? Feel guilty for not doing so? The risk of losing someone in an extreme defence of your own boundaries.

The unconscious erupted.

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Set against Cold-War Italy's 'Years of Lead', this is a true story of schizophrenic psychosis with a happy ending and a redeeming message of healing. It exposes the gravity of secrets and double messages, and demonstrates that the repetition of the negative is necessary if we are to overcome it, in order to make our lives better. The novel describes a combined intervention by a psychiatrist with a human face and a psychotherapist committed to the pure Rogerian way of being as a cure.

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