Leonardo G. Luccone
House Eats Words/*Homes eat Words*
Ponte alle Grazie

Synopsis
The De Stefanos have never faced up to their marital crisis and they break up at an unexpected moment: just when he got his dream job and his beloved son Emanuele had overcome the trauma of dyslexia.
To the world surrounding them, the De Stefanos are an ideal couple: good-looking, well-off, successful, and this veneer even keeps them from telling her parents that it's finished. The De Stefanos spend New Year at house of her parents, like a separated couple living under the same roof, faking smiles and a future together.
De Stefano finds help from Moses, an Italian-American friend with whom he also works. Moses puts him up at his house and comforts him. Their relationship intensifies to the point where it becomes clear that Moses is not the man he seems to be. Like all the book's characters, he hides a secret that crushes him.
Yet neither Moses nor De Stefano could predict what is about to happen: a tragedy that will turn their lives upside down.

Themes:
· The De Stefano family is coming apart;
· Inability to communicate, holding everything inside;
· The work world, career. Many characters are employed by Bioambiente, a high-end engineering company that works in the environmental field;
· Dyslexia (Emanuele, the De Stefanos' son, is dyslexic);
· Friendship (between Moses and De Stefano);
· Climate change and militant environmentalism (Moses);
· Boston (the hometown of Moses) and the Great Molasses Flood (15th September 1919);
· The world of Italian-American anarchists;
· The world of the early hackers;
· Rome, a beautiful city that's falling apart.

Places:
- Rome;
- Boston.

When:
- 2010-2012.

Leonardo G. Luccone (1973) has either introduced for the first time in Italy or translated and edited a number of volumes of Anglo-American and European writers, including: John Cheever, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, Percival Everett, Joy Williams, Robert Olen Butler, Christine Schutt, Heather McGowan, Mathias Énard, Alain Mabanckou, Jakuta Alikavazovic and Esther Freud. He is the director of the Oblique literary agency and publishing studio in Rome. His articles and translations have been published in *Corriere della Sera, Il Foglio, la Repubblica*. Lately he edited F. Scott Fitzgerald's *It Will Be a Masterpiece*, published by minimum fax, 2017; in June 2018 *Questione di virgole* (*Questions of Commas*), a non-fiction book of reflections on the use of punctuation in the company of two-hundred great writers, has be published by Laterza, a best seller, recipient of Giancarlo Dosi Prize for Scientific Divulgation.

Praise for *La casa mangia le parole*

"When you translate and take care of other people's novels very well, and you do it for twenty years, there must be a good novelist within you. Leonardo G. Luccone found it, and pulled it out."
Sandro Veronesi (winner of Strega Prize with *Quiet Chaos*)

"A laser-like style that illuminates details and burns shadows in a hyperealism of absolute originality, you have made Emanuele's presence something unforgettable and comparable in the expressive power of fatherly love only to Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*."
Marcella Cioni

"Written very skilfully but, more importantly, with excellent structure. Sentimental, dramatic, moral. Areal book. The most impressive debut novel in recent years."
Franco Cordelli

"Luccone has written a novel for the Shitty Years – and a remarkable novel at that. You feel like saying 'At last an Italian writer you must read'. […] a bright, elegant exercise in exorcism that leaves the reader no way out, thanks

to a mastery of the language that gives the writing substance and rigour and demands respect. And this is no small feat but is essential for being taken seriously and the writer's stigma. Let's say it: this is literature."
Tiziano Gianotti, "D", *la Repubblica*, 13 October 2019

"This novel of Leonardo Luccone pops with energy. The sadness of the marital discord in the face of the son's struggle with a learning disability is open, raw and completely true. The friendship between the two men is beautifully drawn. The fine dialogue alone is enough to carry the work; the whole is remarkable."
Percival Everett

"Unbridled storytelling, a 'hypernarrative' novel […]. Its purpose is to fill the readers with wonder but also focus their critical attention on our present, and it's therefore quite a different kind of 'entertainment' from the currently dominant 'amusement literature'. […] One of its strongest assets is the perfectly symmetrical, concise dialogue".
Filippo La Porta, La Repubblica, 12 January 2020

"Luccone takes the issues of a 20th century that has been mulled over in our memory with interpretations and reinterpretations, and focusses on it by giving the reader his best writing craft. […] he avoids cloying outcomes and, instead, meticulously builds a body underpinned by well written dialogue that forms a true narrative backbone. […] With his *La casa mangia le parole* [Houses Eat Words] Luccone stands out as an author with a voice of his own. We couldn't have hoped for a better debut".
Giacomo Giossi, Il Manifesto, 16 January 2020

The novel operates on several levels and does not follow a linear chronology. Somewhat like memory, it goes where it pleases. Luccone knows exactly where he wants to lead us, though. In a clinical, controlled voice that's very skilled at defining characters and states of mind, as well as through convincing dialogue, he slowly takes us to a finale where every knot is disentangled and every apparent loose end finds its reason for being.
Simona Sparaco, *tuttolibri* of *La Stampa*, 1 December 2019

A novel with an ambitious structure (8 parts divided into 118 chapters with several time frames) and styles (with different stylistic tones and forms, as

well as the dominant third person, from personal notes to a blog, from e-mails to letters and pages of dense dialogue). […] In what is a choral novel, Luccone throws various narrative clues that are flagged up and which trigger expectations in the reader to then vanish and suddenly reappear further on: a suggestive flow in the storytelling, well managed and made possible by the broad connections. […] As you read, you can hear the buzzing of more old-time cynics because now of low calibre, and characters that bring up to date the industrial atmosphere of Paolo Volponi's 1989 *Le mosche del capitale* [*The Flies of Capital*].
Alessandro Beretta, *la Lettura* of the *Corriere della Sera*, 1 December 2019

The focus of the narrative manages to find a balance between a family snapshot and a collective view, partly thanks to the story about Bioambiente, the Rome-based firm where De Stefano works (chiefly told through very carefully crafted dialogue).
Gennaro Serio, *il venerdi* of *La Repubblica*, 29 November 2019

Translation by Stash Luczkiw

(incipit)

Of the winter what's remembered is the first cold – its irreversible uniqueness. Likewise for the first loneliness, the first cherry, the first pretend, the bed that becomes empty, the table half-set, often without even a tablecloth, the taste of breakfast alone; the first intrigue, the first pain inflicted, the first bad grade. The first horoscope read – nonsense for sure. Likewise for the last day of high school before the exams; for the night before the first funeral that counts.

The De Stefanos

1.

December 31, 2011

It's one of those days you wouldn't remember if not for its being a day of departure, one of those days in which the weather starts acting up and the gray covers even the remains of what Romans call "winter sun," a sun that makes the days of the sad season less dark and damp and it seems there are too few chances to make something happen, and you proceed like that, with inertia or in fits, and at day's end you wind up all bent out of shape for nothing.

He arrives first, early, and this is a novelty. The obelisk punctures the sky like the cold penetrates his coat, through his jacket, getting down to his poorly ironed shirt – a sheet of ice on the skin. Even his pants stick to him, riding into the crack of his backside along with his underwear; he's convinced someone had changed the position of the seat. Ever since he left, with one hand on the wheel and the other fiddling first with one lever, then another, he's been positioning and repositioning the seat, tilting the backrest forward and backward – a persistent wriggling of adjustments; he even tries lifting his butt cheeks, first both, then one at a time, moving his hips in circles to as if to untangle something –, and curses his underwear, too tight, and his T-shirt, too short, remembering when he used to wear that horrible woolen undershirt that got all matted at the armpits but kept him warm, a barrier of heat. The cold is within.

When he exits the roadway he notices the order in which the cars are parked, some have been there for ages and yet are cleaner than his. Today there's no one meeting up at that rendezvous spot, with the flow of cars heading south, mostly to Ostia, or toward Villaggio Azzurro, slowing down a little because the road seems to hug the obelisk. Someone makes a U-turn, circling around that smooth totem. You have to be careful, you can get distracted looking at it, you risk not seeing whoever might be merging in, or coming from the opposite way.

He double-parks the car even though there are plenty of available spots. He steps out just to get out, to be seen by he's not sure who, but he's cold and goes back into the car, turns the key, turns on the heat, and right away the air smells like burnt dust. It smells like an old car. He doesn't

know whether to listen to the radio, so he checks his text messages, sure to be informed of some delay.

He looks at the screen with the afflicted face of someone who thinks no one ever calls him. Ever since he got an iPhone he checks his texts, emails, WhatsApp, Facebook, both his and his son's, the newspapers, other people's photos (even those of his colleagues), there's always something you can do if you have nothing to do. It's as if silence, having become inconceivable, has been shut off for good, and this drift that wants to distract us from the wait, this noisy background that attracts more noise, more useless information, compounds the delay and puts off the need to act. How the world has changed compared to when you stayed at home waiting for a phone call! You didn't go outside because someone might call, someone you didn't want to leave to the mercy of an answering machine or others. How the way we share has changed, the way we hide. The threshold of shame has shifted.

She arrives more or less on time with a scowling cloud in tow. Both flash a vague I-saw-you! smile. His is slightly longer, but only because of insecurity.

Now she'll get a piece of my mind, he thinks bifidly; he knows that attacking first is a good way to keep from being subjected to her attacks, or be subjected as little as possible. He also knows that the day is long, and another day will follow, and maybe even another one after that.

Her A-Class Mercedes passes him too fast and slips into the second available parking space; the front right window is lowered halfway, her Gucci sunglasses are an ostentation. She squeezed in poorly, too close to the Fiat Punto's door on her left, but she doesn't seem to care; she's focused on reining in her agitation, busy repeating something short and pronounced (her lips enunciating words), and when she tries to step out she realizes the space is too tight even for her thin frame. She's forced into scowling and repeating the maneuver two spots down – as for the door-against-door impact, oh well.

"All of this is absurd. You realize that," he says as soon as she opens the door.

"Yeah, yeah."

"…"

"Open the trunk for me."

"It's full of my stuff, put it on the back seat."

"Okay. Let me get the other things."

It's the blue Samsonite they'd bought in Munich. He hoarded a pile of art books from L. Werner, on Residenzstraße. Three hundred ninety euros extra luggage, the blue Samsonite.

She goes back to the A-Class they'd chosen together the previous year and takes a giant bag stuffed with gifts. She holds it up with both hands.

"Hold on, let me help you."

"I got it."

"Don't tell me you got a panettone at Roscioli."

"Of course I got one."

"So did I."

"Means we'll be gorging on panettone."

"I'll tell you right away that's all I have as far as gifts."

"I'm not surprised."

"Anyway, I was sure you'd take care of it."

"Anyway, I was sure you'd take care of it." Her imitation is believable.

"…"

"Seriously, I didn't think I'd find you here already." She's sincere.

"You see? Every once in a while I'm on time," he says brushing the dandruff flakes off the shoulders of his jacket.

"Can you keep from doing that in front of me, or at me even? Jeez!"

Boldly imposing, the stiff big wheel looks on the verge of detaching itself and rolling forward to put an end to the decay.

"Why do you insist on passing through here? We have to go that way."

"…"

"Why do you like this junk so much?"

"I like it. It's sad."

The Ferris wheel is faded rust. Its carriages hover over the Tagadà fair grounds, which seems stuck in a vexed pose dating back to the last overhaul; the Ghost House is old for real, the big spider web and the hag's dress are more decrepit than they should seem. The giant spider is mangy and missing two legs. The roller coaster is cut off dangerously in the middle of a descent, not even the most exciting one, the rest of it has either collapsed or been dismantled.

"Ah, it's sad…"

"Yes." It's a faint yes, a little too drawn out, maybe because he craned his head to the left to check for dandruff.

"These aren't the things that are sad."

"So what are the sad things?"

"Your sad things are never the same sad things for the world that surrounds you."

“The amusement parks from when you were a kid getting dismantled aren’t sad enough? Even about sadness you want to pontificate to me?”

“Have you heard from your son?”

“I spoke to him last night.”

“…”

“…”

“Have you seen how he’s doing?”

“He’s doing well.”

“Yeah, real well. Sure…”

“He’s in God’s grace.”

“Yeah, sure, because you’re convinced he isn’t suffering.”

“He’s suffering and coming to terms with it.”

“Co-ming-to-terms,” she repeats, reducing it to a loathsome nah-nah.

“For your information, there are only two students in his class whose parents aren’t divorced.”

“What class? Hello? He doesn’t have a class anymore. Why do think he wanted to go away?”

“Because we nagged him into it. That’s why he went away.”

“…”

“And he did right to go.”

“Anyway, we don’t necessarily have to follow the big-city trends.”

“Are you talking about divorce?”

“Yes.”

“We’re average, that’s the way things go now.”

“It’s not an obligation…”

“No it isn’t, and anyway we live in a big city. Besides, what a horrible word, ‘trend.’”

“What about *your* horrible words?”

Try-to-stay-calm.

“Point them out to me when I use such ugly words.”

“…”

“And anyway, he does have a class, the one he did three years of high school with, which will start up again next year.”

“And anyway we’re not divorced.”

Someone had ripped out the main gate to the amusement park as if to bring back the scene of the Saturday afternoon crowds pushing – dads with kids, moms and dads with kids, teenagers and post-adolescents in their free time, cigarettes in hand and curses muttering from their lips –, a jostling throng looking to conquer a play space, because the amusement park is nothing but the extension of a baby’s playpen. Someone else had put the gate back as best he could, securing it barbarically to the posts with a bolt.

For a while, after eight in the evening, it became a place for junkies. They got in from a hole in the fence, alongside the now rickety hedgerow. More like chasms, not holes, but that's an old story going back to the golden days. Monday night, deserted amusement park: and off we go with a little heavy petting in peace. They patch up the holes from time to time, but there's a secret passage, on the rise up the Via dell'Artigianato, near the lamppost, where all you have to do is lift up two flaps and that's all she wrote.

But now the junkies have left, which you can see from the bottles of discount beer, because there isn't much smack going around anymore, and the people that hang out in these places can't afford it.

"You get attached to words, you lose sight of everything else."

"What?"

"No, no, let's not start that. Pay attention to the road so we don't get lost."

"The GPS will do that, I'll pay attention to driving."

The highway on the last day of the year doesn't fluidify the words. The conversation isn't particularly sparkling. The essence is held back. Both of them dangle in futility, repeating themselves, each one in their own way and with their own attempts. Simplified every so slightly, it would sound like "you can do it" or "not now" or "it's just two days."

The highway broods over the traffic news, the GPS (a male voice) orders a right turn in 237 kilometers. The road is to be filled with something noisier than the silence with which important questions are not addressed. In such cases the list, the free association, the solitude of landscapes prevail. The other cars convey perfect intimacies one would like to access, to enjoy at least a few minutes of peace – a little girl standing in the backseat, brushing her father's bald head, the mother wearing a cowboy hat, laughing next to him; the man swallowing half a sandwich in a Mercedes that's too clean; just ahead of them in a slow-moving SUV they're busting a gut with laughter, there are three of them up front (mother and daughter and mother's sister?); even in the back there are three of them: two men in track suits and a nun. They laugh and laugh. It's a casual and sincere joy that's better not to watch because it's contagious, so don't get caught laughing for no reason.

"How's the dermatitis?"

"A little better."

"It looks like you don't have any today. You've got dandruff instead."

"If you keep irritating me it'll come back, you'll see."

“So you’re staying at Moses’?” she says with her eyes on her cellphone.

“Yeah.”

“…”

“Emanuele told you?”

“Yeah.”

“You know we promised: no questions, neither direct or indirect through Emanuele.”

“Are you afraid I might ask you about the little bimbo?”

“On with that again?”

“If you’d only deign to respond.”

Can-you-just-relax?

“And what are *you* afraid of?”

“…”

“I’m still waiting for you to tell me who Delicious Crow is.”

Her gaze softens: “You’re right.”

Rome fades in the distance, caressed by the ring road. The windshield wipers dust off a drizzle not even worthy of a ritual mention. The frayed drape of water in the interval between two swipes is, in her unfocused mind, like the down on a newborn’s head. Few forms of loneliness are sadder than what you feel in a car beside a person with whom you have nothing to say, and a three-hour trip ahead of you.

The landscape along the A24 livens up a bit after Genzano, especially once you get past L’Aquila, near the Gran Sasso mountain. The snow on the slopes seems to slide down, and it’s colder, you can feel it. He still has the sense that he’s wearing the wrong shirt, that his underwear isn’t warm enough. The driver’s seat position is a compromise. He has a sudden desire for a green tea, but a rest stop isn’t a good idea. Green tea reminds him of when he was studying for the Mechanics exam during his senior year of chemical engineering. Lots of concepts, lots of formulae, and a lottery of possible questions, especially if you wound up with young assistants. He dreamed of getting professor Caputo for the oral exam. The way Caputo managed to use a complex fractional formula to demonstrate the delay in the development of a specific turbine stuck in his mind. There’s a strange and crazy euphoria in wanting to face torture. History, mathematics and technology: with Caputo theorems became daily performances. With Caputo you could remedy a screw-up you made that would demotivate you for

months. But in the end he got Leone, the friendliest and best prepared of the assistants, and things went very well. Two fairly canonical questions, the first one difficult and dreaded, but because it was especially dreaded he'd prepared for it well, and at the crack of the third question the assistant got up and went to speak to Professor Caputo, who, checking out the number of people left, said that was enough, and at the next imperceptible sign from Leone (which he interpreted as "28 or 30?") the professor pronounced "30" and Leone came back to announce: "Okay, that's fine. Congratulations. We're giving you a 30." Those words were followed by an emptiness, which he often thought about later, because you can't give a perfect grade in Mechanics with only two questions. That emptiness counts more than fullness, counts more than the average grades that didn't get any blowback. From that exam De Stefano has retained the feeling that sometimes things go too well, and that too well seems like an intolerable wrong.

When they get onto the A14 at Giulianova they're more than halfway there. From her dismay he gathers that she can't handle Led Zeppelin for long. He mentally goes over the CDs he has in the car and opts for Virgin Radio, more neutral. He tries to give a good example, doing everything he can to avoid provoking her with his usual grousing: "Driving is so annoying," "driving is a waste of time," "it would have been better to take a train, at least I could have read."

Letting her drive is out of the question, not so much because he wants to maintain the sense of power the driver has, but because he feels the situation could degenerate, and he has no desire to find himself abandoned at a rest stop after an argument.

An hour of sighs and unease passes and she starts fidgeting, as if her thoughts can't manage to get to the processing center.

Castel Fontana is perched atop a hill and looks over the valley with the ceremonious severity of the Marche natives. All around you can see the pinkish stone that made a fortune from the Gola del Furlo quarries.

Ludovico Marchetti, her father surprisingly won the competition for the post of technical office manager in the tiny municipality of Serrabruna, after ten years of cash cows with his architecture studio: hundreds of projects, all the same, paid for under the table without even a whisper, as they did in those parts. "These are folks who don't want to stick out. They all want the same house – some bigger, some smaller." That was the tip from one of his colleagues, and he took it to the hilt.

His wife never worked. She was a proud and satisfied housewife, sharing with him a background from Molise and an adamantine respect for learning; she never meddled in her husband's business, not even when the possibility arose, many years earlier, of helping him in his office because one of the assistants took off with the money.

The road up to the town wraps around the hill in a gentle spiral. The windows suddenly fog up, and at least there's an excuse to do something. Her useless attempt with a paper tissue – immediately black – is rejected with a grimace and the fan switched on, full blast. The air, first on them, then turned to the windshield, quickly increases the temperature inside the car and their souls, and their sweat levels. It's an unpleasant heat that will contrast with the shot of cold when they step out without coats, in front of the garage, with her father waving his arms to greet them, and her mother still in the house, brushing aside the flower-patterned curtain in the kitchen, allowing herself a smile, then slipping away to put on a hint of lipstick.

From outside everything seems normal: a couple in a Volkswagen Polo with Rome plates going to celebrate the New Year; you can see bags in the back, a big blue suitcase, and on the rear windows a moiré pattern of rock group stickers. The car is not new, but it's not yet ready for the scrap heap; they are elegant, you can see, she wears a brand name perfume, goes to the hairstylist often. She seems to be smiling, has those good teeth, no cavities, smooth skin smelling fragrantly of pomegranate cream. What you notice about him is his hair, nice and high on the head, and thick; it could be the hair of a 1950s actor, James Dean just to mention one, if he combed it back with a little gel. Whereas he lets it fall forward on his brow and has it rise up like stubble. From the profile you can see a sharp jaw and some residual acne. Today he hasn't shaved, as if on a weekend, so no razor burn on his neck, no cuts under his ears and not even the scent of his favorite aftershave, Aqua Velva, supermarket stuff now hard to find, which reminded him of the nursery school mornings when his father accompanied him and his sister to school in that canary yellow Opel Kadett, the one with the trunk that never ended.

The road on the last stretch of the rise that goes up to the house is lined with the usual signs. The bruschetteria, the electrical appliance store "with the assistance of the best brands," the chic restaurant next to the Rotary Club with the terrace.

She acts as if she doesn't see them, and even this time he pauses at the sign of the bruschetteria, turns, she looks at him and shakes her head, but he doesn't notice because he's thinking back to how many times he's passed by

there. Every time he said the same thing: “You gotta take me there.” This time he doesn’t, obviously, but he thinks it, and maybe she’s expecting him to say it and would even be disposed to fling one of her high-strung darts at him. That bruschetteria had always attracted him. It had always struck him as a reliable place, even if it’s hard to understand why someone from that part of Italy would bet on bruschettas instead of piadina sandwiches or some other local specialty.

She bursts into tears in her father’s embrace. “You’re exaggerating, as usual. Just like your mother with her mother, as if they were taking her away.”

A wet and smiling face, a liberating contentment. Her father takes two steps back and looks at her.

“You’re so much more beautiful in person than on Skype.”

“I got all dressed up for you, Dad. So, how are you doing?”

“You did well.”

“It’s strange not to be welcomed by Corbusier barking.”

A gloom descends on her father, but he nips the worst of his memories in the bud. “Poor guy.”

“Yeah, mom said he couldn’t walk anymore.”

“He was shaking all over, limping. At one point it looked like he was recovering… then he stopped eating. And when an animal stops eating…”

“…”

“The willow isn’t in good shape either. I had it pruned but it didn’t help.”

“It looks like it can barely stay up.”

“The gardener says plants are like animals. But enough talk about unpleasant matters, let’s go up because it’s about to snow. Give me that, I’ll carry it.”

Sante is bustling around in the kitchen. He moves as if he were wearing armor.

“Your brother is busy with the cocktails. You know he’s obsessed,” her father says in a hushed tone.

“Still?”

“Yes, and we’ll have to pretend to drink them. The last time with the Armentanis we got drunk.”

“She’s here too?”

“Of course she’s here. They’re getting married in May.”

“You tell me just like that?!”

“How do you want me to tell you? They only told us the other day.”

“Oh God, Sante’s getting married!”

“Shhh. It’s a secret…”

“Secret? They’ve been meaning to get married for the past two years.”

“No, no, it’s that he wants to make the big announcement himself.”

“That’ll be a logistical feat.”

“Well, we’ll see. I think your mother is digging a tunnel so she can be at their place in less than a minute. Shhh, here she is.”

“Mom!”

“Finally, you made it.”

Now it’s her turn. She’s been waiting for it impatiently, with that pecking impatience, little moves and voices behind-the-scenes. She hugs them both (first her) hurriedly. The hug isn’t tight. She embraces them lightly and quickly. The kiss consists in a grazing of the cheek. Her neck makes an unnatural movement. Her face turns all to one side, followed by the placement of cheekbone against jowl. The actual kiss propelled through the air. The strong suit of this type of greeting is the mixture of wide open eyes with a display of rather white teeth. But there’s something too rehearsed about the sequence, a mix of monotony-breaking hysterics and disappointment over the moment’s falling short of expectations.

“Now we really have a full house. I live for these days.”

“Yes, your mother lives for these days.” There’s not a trace of annoyance in the father’s jovial voice, and with that smile you could forgive him anything. Even the crumb at the corner of his mouth.

“It’s just that I wish it were always Christmas, when you’re all here. I don’t know what to do with your father anymore, he doesn’t remember anything.” And he, instead of responding, shrugged his shoulders.

You can’t really laugh, and no one feels like downplaying or diminishing, so the scene proceeds as if scripted, like all the other times, and it’s good that things proceed as such forever because any interruption, any change, would be tantamount to something ugly.

“You two came just in time.”

“We left at ten because we had a bunch of things to do this morning.”

“Why don’t you sit down? I still have to get the food ready.”

“What’s-her-name isn’t here?”

“Viorela,” the father says.

“Sister, sister…”

“She’s not here. It’s New Year’s Eve for her too.”

“That’s right. Viorela even has a gift for you.”

“But Mom, I’ve only seen her once.”

“She’s a girl with a good heart.”

“Sister, sister,” it sounds like a caveman’s voice.

“Mom, how did you manage alone in the kitchen?”

“Sante, stop yelling, come and say hi to your sister.”

“Sweetheart, I always do things alone in the kitchen.”

The father snickers and turns the other way.

“Ludovico!”

“Yes, apart from the lasagna, grating the parmesan, slicing the meat, cleaning the salad—” the father says while arranging the cushions on the sofa.

“And you, what’s your job here?!”

“And Sante?”

“What do you want from a mama’s boy?”

“Ludovico, you were a mama’s boy too.”

“All men are mama’s boys,” she says, but as she’s saying it she realizes that she would have been better off avoiding it.

“I’m sorry Emanuele isn’t here,” says the mother, who has understood everything and comes to the rescue.

“He’s coming for Epiphany.”

“To you. But his grandparents, when will he come see them? I’m tired of seeing him only on the computer. And anyway I can’t hear anything… I can’t talk to him like that,” she says, emphasizing the word “computer.”

“He calls us all the time. Things work different now. If you want to know how he’s doing you have to go and look at his Facebook page. This morning I left him a comment and he gave it a like.”

“Have you seen how many photos? But he writes almost everything in English, and I don’t understand anything. The other day he scolded me because I wrote him a message.”

“Sure, because everyone else read it.”

“So how many days are you two staying?” The question was largely to be expected, as were all the possible responses.

“We’ll be staying two nights, Dad. On the third we have to be in the office.”

“Okay, okay.”

“…”

“Look what we brought you!”

“Oh, the panettone from last time. Thanks… And two of them, good, good, you remembered.”

“Actually, it was you who reminded me, Mom.”

“All I said was that your father liked the panettone.”

“Yes, I sure did.”

“You ate almost all of it yourself.”

“Liar.”

“It didn’t make it past midnight.”

“Well, this year we brought two of them. But he remembered on his own.”

“Good.”

“What’s the name of that pastry shop?”

“Roscioli, Mom. But it’s not a pastry shop.”

“That’s right, it’s a bakery.”

“And what do you care about the pastry shop? It’s not like you have to go there.”

“I hope you didn’t bring work with you this time, too,” the father says with the resignation of an inveterate worker now retired.

“I like to remember names, that’s all.”

“Well… actually I have a report in my briefcase, but I promise I’ll do everything I can not to open it.”

“Mom, you’re obsessed with names, but then you mangle all of them.”

“Oh no, if you have to work then make yourself comfortable in the dining room. In any case we’re eating in the dinette.”

“You’ll see, I won’t mess up Roscioli anymore.”

“Thanks. Are we having the obligatory lamb tonight?”

“We’ll see. Do you remember what you got us into with that friend of mine from school you met at the supermarket?”

“Sure. But I switched farmers. The lamb last year was stringy.”

“Lucia Fustagni?”

“Come on, it wasn’t that bad!”

“There we go again. Luciana Fugnani. How do you do it?”

“Your mother has a special talent for names.”

“I hadn’t seen her for ages. She seemed so… worn. She has a chest that looks like a cow’s.”

“Tell him you have a secret diary!”

“What secret diary… I just write a few things down, ATM codes and passwords for the computer and bank.”

“So you’ve learned how to surf the net, too?”

“Yeah, sure, the last time she went surfing alone we had to call the computer guy because it wouldn’t turn on anymore. Not even Sante could figure it out.”

“Ludovico! It was the storm, I told you. Anyway, yes, I look for a few things on Google, I check the TV guide, the newspapers, the weather. It’s your father who doesn’t know what he’s doing with the computer.”

“I can do it all, my dear, I’ve always been on the cutting edge. In the office we were the first in all of Marche to have an IBM 5150. It was 1982. Giorgetti still has it in his basement.”

“Really?”

“Big sister! Wait for me…”

“Back then it wasn’t like you guys now, where everything is easy-peasy. We had to program. There was DOS. You don’t even know what that is.”

“Actually I started out with DOS. Must have been ’86 or ’87.”

“Those were the days! The machine did only what you told it to do.”

“That’s right.”

“Big sister, big sister.”

“Mom, I want to know how Dad is doing,” she says in as hushed a voice as she can.

“It only had up to 16 kilobytes of RAM, not like today’s monsters. We got by, the computers brought out the best in you and not the other way around.”

“While you’re all talking about these very interesting things I’ll go back into the kitchen and finish preparing. I’m warning you: a light dinner. Is that fine?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, Mom, that’s fine. Can we spare ourselves the early cocktail?” Then she lowers her head, eyes and voice. “Mom, tell me how Dad is.”

“Sante won’t have it… he said he was making a light aperitivo… non-alcoholic… he’s been concocting it for the past hour.”

“But aren’t they hungry?” The Signora’s hushed tone toward her husband isn’t exactly hushed.

“No, Signora, don’t worry.”

“In any case, I’m telling you all that tonight we’re not eating in the basement room, but upstairs.”

“Upstairs?”

“Mom, are you crazy? It’s a lot of work bringing everything up. And then we have to bring it all back down.”

“Your father and I have decided: tonight we’re eating upstairs. Anyway, up or down, we have to use the stairs all the same.”

The stunned looks of the other three intersected. The father tried to hide his surprise. “Yes, otherwise that room only gathers dust. I’ll go check that the radiators are on.” He gestures in a way that means “that’s how it is,” even though he interprets it as “ugh!”

“We’ll freeze, I know.”

“Signora, don’t worry, eating in the basement room is fine. Or in the kitchen, like always.”

“Let’s make a deal. For one day you’ll stop calling me Signora.”

“No, you know I can’t do that, Si— Okay I promise I’ll try to call you by your name.”

“With me too, then.”

“I promise. That is, I’ll try.”

[…]

The House

1.

The house is a top-floor apartment in one of the Prati neighborhood's busiest streets. A building that displays the quarter's typical friezes and the tedious architectural Decalogue of the mid-thirties. Fascist severity, solidity, and top-grade materials, even though De Stefano often worried about whether the reinforced concrete of his building, with its too few rebars, could withstand the vibrations of the new northern section of the metro's C line slated to pass right under there. A neighborhood of proudly rooted families, for the most part lawyers, doctors and people working in TV.

It took him a long time to get used to the traffic, especially in the summer. And her aversion to air conditioning forced them to keep nearly all their windows open.

"I feel like we're living on the street."

Even the smog slowly grew on him. The move had been painful: to go from living "on the margins of the city but in the city," as he always repeated to anyone when describing his parents' house at EUR, where "in the morning you hear birds chirping and not the genetically modified birds I now have under the house," in a neighborhood, Prati (meaning meadow), where the only green was in its name.

The apartment is a long corridor. The rooms, except the two bathrooms, are all on one side, left or right depending on whether you're walking toward the terrace or toward the kitchen, the antipodes of a linear development, a parquet path that's been furrowed by cars, balls, toy soldiers lined up before the battle, bloody soldiers after the battle. Little friends playing with a sponge ball, one-on-one soccer tournaments with same sponge ball, Luciferian laughter with every near disaster – chandelier swaying too wide or the statue that Emanuele called Amilcare falling dangerously forward.

In recent months there has been nothing but the boring restraint of a house emptied of the child, emptied of the needs of a seventeen-year-old son, inhabited by those who spend their whole day at work outside.

*

In a house you live between joy and fear. You crouch down on your knees in the corners, back stretched forward, protected by two walls to watch the movements in the shadows, and you listen to others who talk, who ignore you, who don't know where you are. Sometimes you hear the sound of the rag sliding on the parquet or the dishwasher at the end of the cycle. The crackle of the invisibles inside the walls.

At night, at a certain point you hear toc, toc, toc. A ping-pong ball falling on a hard surface, bouncing until it goes quiet. A cross-eyed pendulum on the edge of dreams. "If a phenomenon can be described by at least two people, independently of each other, then it means that it has occurred."

She didn't know if this was a law of physics – something that sounded so high-sounding had to have at least the status of an axiom –, but a vague search on the internet had led to nothing. She had talked about it with a colleague and in the end she was still confused. She had convinced herself, however, that "independently" didn't count for the two of them, because he was the one who had woken up agitated, and roused her to tell her what he had heard. One morning she told him that she had heard the ball, but after a month they stopped paying attention. How many times did you hear it last night? is all they would say.

Not once did they ever hear it together.

*

De Stefano does not fall asleep easily. He keeps the TV on until he gets stupid, she doesn't mind; only the rain makes her anxious.

To get to sleep it would be enough to isolate the bad thoughts, ferry them forward or backward, better forward, where they can't happen. You'd need to lock them up in the watertight containers for radioactive waste and take them to a distant and inaccessible landfill. You'd need to shatter the feelings, sloughing them one by one off the twists and turns of the heart. You'd need to sabotage the pain, and become blind in the face of outrage.

There's a thirst for silence, yearning for a good darkness, that of dreams we improvised while dozing.

De Stefano's gaze is clouded, his eyes seem to contradict the gaunt face and fluff of the beard he's growing, which subtracts rather than adds, with the slight dimple of his chin, his big ears and his hair combed upwards thick and black.

She snores a little, sometimes even in an embarrassing way, like an old grandfather who goes to bed after gorging himself. As long as he stays

awake, he enjoys this porous darkness, the whirl of thoughts and things to do.

Silence does not exist, and this is a silence that allows itself to be handled, a silence to be compressed and made to disappear in the hollow of his right hand, to then close his left over it, cupping it for further protection. Because this solitude is made of wind, of threadbare sheets; of the pillow that smells of her, of the fetal position he assumes to be embraced.

And the showers together in the morning "to find the temperature," then back to bed to make love, gentle or wild, and she resting her head on his shoulder and thinking of when she was a child, when her father took her to play tennis. She tells him about her father's thin ankles, the wooden rackets, the yellow balls spitting red clay; of the women who looked at him; of Signora Panzeri who tried with him; of how his father told them about it at the table and of the measures her mother had taken. Only one: tell the butcher, as if it were an insignificant confession.

It happened last night too.

They laugh a lot about that memory, which sounds new each time.

"What's the matter, why are you laughing?"

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? Are you cold?"

"No. You?"

"A little."

"…"

"You're thinking about your father playing tennis, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

"I don't know why it makes you laugh so much, too."

"Because if you laugh like that, I laugh too."

"…"

"Should I turn on the heat?"

"…"

"Should I get a blanket?"

"No, stay like that."

"…"

"Stay closer to me."

"Don't worry about your father."

"How can I not?"

Outside, the purple city light mixes with the rattle of the night bus. The gusts of wind shake the now-bare trees slightly. Mere caresses against the window.

"It's about to snow."

“It never snows in Rome.”

“No, it’s going to snow tonight and tomorrow we’ll be throwing snowballs.”

Emanuele

2.

Children can't stand hugs. Their hands stiffen like logs against their bodies and they wait for the maneuver to end. They move their necks reluctantly, make grimaces that look like scrawls of pain. Forget about kisses.

When Emanuele stares at something he is stubborn and mute. He forces others to look where he looks, to stare the way he's staring, to adapt to his silence. Emanuele draws the outline of the objects, he pulls them in and minces them. Watching him or the shovel of a miniature Caterpillar earth mover is the same thing. His face becomes a mechanical bucket, his eyes are a mechanical bucket. His father is wrong when he thinks the boy is not inclined to abstraction. In his diary Emanuele has drawn a world of robotic puppets. Brazenly smiling robots. Robots waving hello, robotic families at play, and behind them a recurring landscape. A house with a barn, a tree, a river, the shining sun breaking out from the mountains (sometimes with rays, sometimes not).

Colors are never flat. He has a strange way of using his markers, filling the white with color stripes, tight and parallel.

When his companions started reading more quickly and everyone was able to read whole sentences, when it was clear he had to do the same things more quickly, that's when the problems started. A devastating anxiety that produces and incubates rejection.

Emanuele is unshakable, he reasons more and better than a child of his age, but he has a serious initial defect, something that precludes him from accessing his horizon: the hatch is closed, the stimulation he receives get skewed, it's as if he needs to make up for something he can't have with intelligence and imagination.

*

"I'm getting old, aren't I? Look at how many wrinkles, look at the creases, what a deathly pallor. I'm getting old, aren't I? Tell me the truth. I can't stand it anymore, I have to stop with the whiskey, hairs are popping up everywhere, I look like a brown bear. I can't smell anything anymore, everything tastes the same, Nutella is like salami, potatoes like spinach, my beloved lasagna with meat sauce is like the soy meatballs they give to sick

people. Everyone looks at me like I’m about tear into someone with my teeth, like I’m ready to be taken away.”

3.
December 10, 2000

They realize it when Emanuele begins to say that he can't see well. It seemed as if the years had to pass quickly and become the future immediately, like in a TV series.
Dr. Favetti is the first to notice that the problem is of a completely different nature.
Emanuele pretends not to see well, he does it constantly, even during the visit; but Dr. Favetti needs just one test to understand that he's lying.

"Emanuele has the sight of an eagle," she says.

"…"

"It's just that he doesn't want to believe."

"Why?"

"Has he already had tests to see if he has learning difficulties?"

"No…"

"Are you joking? Emanuele has no learning difficulties."

"Signora, Emanuele definitely has a learning disability."

"Disability?"

"Signora, I don't want to tell you that it's something normal, but it's more common than you'd think. In the past people weren't sensitive enough to understand certain things and the kids were labeled as lazy or st—"

"Listen, we're used to hearing how good our son is, not that he's stupid or has a disability."

"Calm down. Let's listen to the doctor."

4.

The principal has a horizontal smile on a funereal face.

The approach maneuver lasts longer than it should, she's on the other side of the table and the teachers' room is empty.

De Stefano and his wife walk the oval, each on their side and the principal doesn't not know which side to take.

She immediately says that the interview with the doctor went well and that there's nothing to worry about. She called it "an interview," on the phone she called it "preliminary examination," on the form to be filled out there was written "visit."

"There were three of them and the… let's say… issue is the same."

"That is?" he says, "Which means?" she says at the same time.

"Not that your boy is stupid or doesn't understand things, but…"

"…"

"But he has this thing. A sort of block."

"A block?"

"What block?"

"How did he get it?"

"That I can't tell you, they don't know, but it's nobody's fault. That's just how it—"

"You mean to tell me he was born that way? Like that from birth?"

"I don't know, Signora, I'm not an expert on these things. It's all new for us too."

"What can we do now?"

"What, is he retarded?"

"Why no, signora, he's not retarded. You know better than I do how intelligent Emanuele is."

"Yes, yes, we know it but we're almost at the end of February and he still can't read, while his classmates are already making summaries. I don't remember what I knew how to do at the end of first grade but I know there are children who read well at five. Didn't you skip kindergarten straight into first grade?" she says, turning to her husband as if they were having breakfast at home.

"Yeah."

"How old were you when you learned how to read?"

"Let it go for now."

"There is nothing to worry about. These things happen frequently. And to be precise, you must have noticed: it's not that he doesn't know how

to read. He doesn't read quickly and doesn't read well out loud. But his comprehension and reasoning are excellent."

"Tell us what we have to do."

"What did I tell you?"

"What?"

"Something's wrong with Emanuele. He isn't normal."

"He's perfectly normal, let's not build this into some tragedy."

"I don't know how you can stay calm."

"I'm not calm, I'm thinking."

"Yeah, yeah, think about your work. We have a predicament here."

"We need to figure out what to do."

"All I know is that a few days ago he was a healthy happy boy. Now suddenly he's handicapped."

5.

Things exist when they are named. They are created when the name is pronounced. Then they become unwieldy. They have sharp edges on all sides, a fluorescent color you can even see at night. When things are named for the first time they become true.

The existence of evil for the De Stefano family took the form of the words pronounced by Amedeo Borghi, son of a colleague from Lacerti and a young pediatrician doing his internship: “Dyslexia is an unexpected difficulty that crops up when learning how to read. It occurs when certain areas of the brain don’t communicate as they should. In practice there is an atypical neurological development. An imbalance. Nothing can be seen from outside. Dyslexia is a learning disability. It can show up in many different forms… It’s not my field, but I think you need to look into it more. The best working group on dyslexia is in Padua. Professor Luceri is the head. I advise you to bring Emanuele to them.”

Go away

1.

Rome changes more than the melancholy of whoever is looking at her. The erosion of space reduces the imperial grandeur of the wind that caresses the ruins and puts the dust back into place.

The old suburbs, once full of cheerful sadness, have become part of a sepulchral donut that keeps the city afloat.

The countryside has forgotten the streams and snakes, comforted by the shouts of some haggard communist protesting the land policy.

In Prati there's nothing left of those vast meadows and vineyards belonging to Domitia.

By day and by night, beyond the bustle of traffic, an indistinct, even wild sound – in the near horizon – emerges. At night, when waiters and kitchen maids have finished straightening up, you can hear a feral hum coming from Monte Mario. It's the sound of the wind cutting through the branches but sounds like it's freeing itself from the bowels of a dying animal. The De Stefanos hear it, the Colasantis hear it on the same landing, because Arturo Colasanti, an insomniac, is rereading the *Iliad* and can't help but comment aloud about the passages that had inflamed his adolescence; Signora Rita, from downstairs, hear it and sees her husband dead forty years now in front of her. Rita feels him close, which is why she always smiles, even in her sleep; Riccardo the doorman hears it in his small apartment on the ground floor, he too sleepless. Moses hears it no more than five kilometers from there, standing to look at the amaranth light of Villa Sciarra.

When the house becomes restless it wraps itself up in memories and the space expands, a swarm of thoughts cuts through the long corridor, the alarm control panel is impassive, the infrared detector undeterred, the door has no fear of a break-in. Toc toc toc, that ping-pong ball again.

Everything that happens happens without our realizing it, with that reassuring gradualness by which the seasons change and leaves cover the roads in late autumn, crunching as we pass over them and turning into a muddy pulp when it rains.

De Stefano can't stand the struggles anymore, the second thoughts, the extended pillow hugs. He realizes that this sham can't continue. Love has

been reduced to an attempt, a privation of love, and Emanuele, along with all the other relationships that keep his life in place, is getting in the way. He can't stand his favorite music, the voice too high or too low, the smell of newspapers, any form of advertising, the people who step into the metro car he's on. He's intolerant of all forms of idleness, but it's only envy. Night becomes the territory of impatience, intrigues and tears; the day proceeds in a hurry until seven, when he has to go home and find something to say. He has to eat dinner, clear the table, load the dishwasher, take a shower, pretend to work or watch TV. He has to avoid the words, interactions, clashes, like a lithium battery recharging in silence to then donate a hundred percent of their aggressiveness. He started sleeping on his stomach – someone told him that this is the best way to dream about the devil. But maybe he just wants to compress his chest, crush his heart, invoke the nightmare; he wants to sweat away the poison, purify himself to be strong and face the new day and then curse it.

The morning glow melts over the barren hill of Monte Mario, dripping like caramel on the TV studios and retired lawyers.

The disintegration is only a manifestation. The crack creeps in but it's already there. It becomes visible but it's already there. When the child we have inside us has lost the words.

The collapse does not arouse any alarm. The collapse is a leak but it floods. The collapse removes space. Not breathing is merely a consequence. The crack soon becomes a crack-up.

What happens is that at a certain point all the gates are closed, by that time the void is an irretrievable orange that corrodes Moses' tired eyelids; in his room garden he concentrates on the unsuspecting existence of the many people we've met, on the rusty steel of our joints, on the worn out wood of windows pleading for copal to protect them.

"I tried every way I could. I tried to be kinder, nicer. I tried to always stay calm. It makes no difference. As long as Emanuele isn't there, it makes no difference. When he came back, those two days I had deluded myself that… but no. I no longer feel that…"

"Is it my fault? I mean, am I the one who's changed?"

"No, you've got nothing to do with it. Neither do I."

"…"

"I still love you. I can't say I don't feel well. Look, we're on our way to the movies with Guenda and Mara, Attilio and that other guy. You'll

smile and be perfect, I'll act as if nothing had happened, everything will seem okay, not even my best girlfriends will notice anything. Then once we're home, we'll take a shower, I'll put some talcum powder on your back and dry your hair. We'll go to sleep tired and relaxed from the alcohol. Tomorrow you'll set the table for breakfast and make a delicious porridge, with pine nuts and raisins, the way I like it. Then you'll tell me that there's a good chance you'll be late and I shouldn't expect you for dinner. Whereas I'll be home at five-thirty, I'll do the little food shopping we need, then I'll go to yoga or to the gym, I'll Skype with Emanuele or call my parents; I'll get bent out of shape when my father doesn't remember what we said yesterday or three minutes earlier, but I'll give him my sweetest smile as well, just like you will when Attilio tells us again how beautiful the two of us are together."

If these words were said or not in the house on Viale Angelico, at some point, it would matter much.

2.
November 19, 2011

The day De Stefano decides to leave, her cell phone won't stop ringing, she won't stop talking. Emanuele is watching a DVD with his girlfriend, waiting for their uncles and aunts to leave them free rein. (It's crazy how parents go to the movies again after their children turn fourteen.) At Earl's Court the leaves swirl on the sidewalks; they feel fine in the house on Penywern Road, it's raining outside but that's exactly what you'd expect in London on a late afternoon toward the end of November.

Whereas in the house in Viale Angelico, the corridor is crossed too quickly, the carpet that hadn't been there until yesterday has curled and lost symmetry with respect to the walls; the canvas bag closed poorly, the door slammed too hard, the elevator busy, a mere nod to the doorman at the window, the car in its usual place, it starts with a sick sound, the newsagent lowering the shutter of his kiosk.

There are no restraints, no one shouting "come back here" or "don't do it," no arms reaching out, no windows opening.

De Stefano looks up for a moment, looks at the lights on the fifth floor and nothing changes. There are no shadows, the curtains are always in the same position. Who knows if tonight the ping-pong ball will keep bouncing.

For a second, he thinks back to the fear he had of doing what he's doing. He should be suffering from a nervous breakdown but finds himself quiet. There's no resignation, no victimhood. He holds the steering wheel tight. With both hands. He senses that there's nothing rational about resolutions. Sometimes a flash of clarity prevails and we stop adapting to the situation.

[…]
Boston Is Everything

1.

Boston, North End, 539 Commercial Street, January 15, 1919, 12:40 PM. This is a story of immigrants, anarchists, unsung heroes. It's a story of work, exploitation, technical errors.

Built by the Hammond Iron Works for the Purity Distilling Company, a subsidiary of U.S. Industrial Alcohol (USIA), the Great Storage Tank was supposed to be finished before December 31, 1915, because shortly thereafter a ship from Cuba with the first load of molasses was due to arrive.

They worked day and night: the deafening clamor of riveters, overhead cranes, voices, and tons of steel. People running back and forth, out of breath. At the elbow that Commercial Street makes with the Charles River, in the lower part of the North End, housing was cheap and the smell of the ocean prevailed over the miasmas and fetor of decomposing fish.

But why right there? Many people asked, practically everyone who knew the North End, even those who only passed through. The North End: a lair for Italians and Irish. There was nothing serene about the place. There were so many people there that a fever was enough to set off an epidemic. They lived in miserable conditions, especially the Italians: often families of three, even four generations; they came from Sicily, Calabria, Campania and Abruzzo. After the invasion of the 1910s the neighborhood counted thirty thousand inhabitants.

Arthur P. Jell, the head of the project, didn't want to listen to reason; with the sinking of the *Lusitania* by the Germans (more than 1,200 dead, of which 128 Americans), the United States felt more vulnerable. Jell was suffocating under the pressure. He was the right man, but he had to prove it.

The Great Storage Tank. The molasses. Molasses means industrial alcohol, therefore munitions, dynamite, in short, explosives. Therefore money, and goodbye to the recession.

"Twenty percent goes to the production of rum. Don't forget that, Jell," one of the operation's financers kept repeating to him, confident about extracting money from alcohol, much more so than about getting it back from the government during wartime.

"But why make a storage tank so big? No one has ever made such a big storage tank in so little time."

Jell smiled. "You're all greenhorns. You don't understand anything about industry."

“Can’t we make it smaller?”

“Then where will we put the molasses? In your Italian neighbors’ stinking pots? That way they’ll keep it warm in their homes, and when we need it they’ll bring it over to us and we’ll pour it into the rail tankers?”

“…”

“Idiots, how do think they’ll bring the molasses? In champagne bottles? They’ll be coming in ships as big as a transatlantic liner.”

“…”

“Two million gallons at a time.”

“Two million gallons of molasses, my God.”

“And it will last less than a week. I want to have a ship come every five days,” he said as a gust of salty wind forced them to close up their coats.

The storage tank was the North End’s cathedral. Almost ninety feet in diameter and fifty high; seven layers of gunmetal gray sheets anchored to a three-foot-deep foundation. A colossus, a gamble for the times. Whenever the molasses was pumped from the ships you could hear the vibrations and growls of steel. The molasses came from Puerto Rico and Cuba; from India too.

And then there was that damned cloying smell.

“It’s just a big box with a little sugar inside,” Jell kept saying to anyone who looked worried.

The storage tank becomes operative on December 31, 1915, as planned. After a few months the first rust, the first leaks. Trickles of molasses dripped from the higher joints, dozens of viscous snakes that issued from the plates near the roof. Kids went to get the molasses, some with glasses, others with tea cups; they came back home with their honeyed bundles. Anyone could go up to the storage tank, undisturbed.

The molasses was transported from the storage tank to Purity Distilling, in Cambridge, via rail tankers on a special track.

The storage tank had been re-caulked twice to fix the leaks, nothing more than a patch-up job.

“I don’t like that thing,” Nick Montanari had said at the first assembly of Italians in the neighborhood. “Makes a terrible noise when they fill it up.”

“It’s brought us work. Lots of us work there, and at the distillery too. Don’t worry, just keep cool.”

1918 was a year of upheavals and emotions. In August, silent in its mystery, there was an epidemic of the Spanish flu. September was dramatic, with hospitals full and no good ideas about how to react. Early October the mayor was forced to close the schools and all meeting places to keep the virus from spreading further. Within a few months six thousand people died in the Boston area alone. Fortunately there was something to cheer people's souls.

Thanks to Babe Ruth's slugging, the Red Sox had won the World Series again. Then, even before December came, the Great War had ended – finally – and hundreds of thousands of Americans were on their way home.

It was as if the world were preparing to release its greatest talents. In Alabama F. Scott Fitzgerald was working on his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which would be published by Scribner within a few months. Max Planck received the Nobel Prize for physics, Apollinaire's calligrams of love and war were published.

The fear of terrorist attacks were well founded: the storage tank had been a primary target for a tight group of Italian anarchists inspired by the ideas of Luigi Galleani. In December 1916 they had put a bomb in front of the Salutation Street police station. Every day there were fliers, intimidations. Anonymous phone calls. "We're going to blow up the storage tank. Long live anarchy."

In October 1918 the government's response against the anarchists reached a turning point: the Immigration Act went into effect: all immigrants who were not already U.S. citizens and who sympathized with anarchist ideas were to leave the country. And who was to decide whether an immigrant was fond of the anarchists?

Galleani and his followers were unfazed, in fact, they rekindled their activities. They were probably the ones who plastered Boston's telephone booths with threatening posters shortly after the disaster. "We will dynamite you," the posters yelled.

2.

April 12, 2011

“Why do you want to take me to Boston so bad?”

“I want to show you where I was born, where I lived before coming to Italy.”

“I don’t know if we can carve out an extra day.”

“One day isn’t enough.”

“So how will we do it?”

“We need to take the weekend too. In any case, with our tickets it’s the same.”

“Main thing is it doesn’t cost more.”

“I’ve already checked. In fact, we wind up saving him four hundred euros.”

“You know that Fauci will find a way to get on our case.”

“Right.”

“Let me guess.”

“It’s easy.”

“Ah, sure. He’ll tell us that by coming back on Sunday night we’ll be too tired because of the jetlag.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, the only thing he’s interested in is the report. We’ll do it on the plane.”

“Or on the ferry to Provincetown.”

“What’s Provincetown?”

“It’s the gayest place in the world.”

“Ah, good. So what are we going there for?”

“We’re going to scope out the scene.”

“Where’s Provincetown?”

“In Cape Cod. You know it?”

“Isn’t it an island off the East Coast?”

“Not quite, it’s a peninsula, a little like Italy. A sort of horn sticking out from Massachusetts, immersed in the ocean.”

“There it is, I can see it. And Provincetown is on the point.”

“Yeah, it’s a wonderful place.”

“And where do you get the ferry?”

“In Boston.”

“Sounds great, especially for my wife.”

“How’s that?”

“I’ll be coming home two days later because I’m spending the weekend in Provincetown, the gayest place in the world. Together with you.”

“Why, does she think I want to lead you astray?”

“Considering the way things have been with us lately, she might suspect that I’m giving it some thought.”

“I can understand her, she’s never seen me with a girlfriend… Not to pry, but how have things been lately?”

“…”

“…”

“You’re the one who won’t allow yourself…”

“I haven’t met the right person yet.”

“That’s not true. You get hung up. Alessandra was perfect for you.”

“It’s me who’s not right for her.”

“You know she messages me from time to time on Facebook, asking ‘What’s Moses doing?’ Naturally she told me not to tell you.”

“And you’ve been good enough not to.”

“Yeah, pretty much. But aren’t you curious to know more?”

“No, I’m sure there isn’t anything else. She’s not the type, and you would have told me.”

“…”

Moses looks out the window for ages. The steeples of pines, the benches, the grass in the park already dried out. He doesn’t realize that in the meantime Pomarici has returned to his desk, that the Midget has come in, he doesn’t realize that the meal vouchers have been given out, that Fauci is standing at the threshold of the door, touching his chin, then his mustache. He wanted to tell him something, but when he sees him like this he holds back. Once Giuli Capponi asked him in front of everyone: “What are you thinking about when you’re thinking like that?” “Like what?” “Just the way you’re thinking right now.” “Hmmm, I don’t know.”

The matter of his estrangement had already come up quite a few times.

Moses’ loneliness is a mirror that undercuts thousands of pages of Greek mythology. It’s a dense soothing disquiet. Moses doesn’t ask for help, doesn’t show unease.

“So can I tell Ines to proceed?”

“Let me tell my wife first.”

“Doesn’t sound good…”

“It’s an anger management problem.”

“Look, I can understand her.”

“Yeah, Sunday for her is fundamental. And in this period…”

“Is she stressed from working at the city hall?”

“Moses, I appreciate it when you don’t insist on asking me questions. In any case, she doesn’t work *at* the city hall, but *for* the city hall. I don’t think she likes it that much, but after a certain point work had become a necessity.”

“…”

“Not because of money but—”

“Yeah, I know the situation. It happened to my mother, too. When she finished raising me and my sister she didn’t know how to fill the days anymore.”

“She started working with your father, didn’t she?”

“That would’ve been the most obvious solution, but my father told her to look for another job.”

“A way of telling her, ‘You’re on your own.’”

“I don’t know.”

“In the end what did she find?”

“She wound up working as a secretary for my father’s partner’s company.”

“Did she like it?”

“I guess, you know how it is, they made cat and dog food, she organized the distribution and looked for new customers. That must have been why my mother never liked the idea of keeping animals in the house.”

“But did she speak English well?”

“She learned it right away. Worked her tail off. She attended classical high school in Italy. She’s someone who takes her commitments seriously… She made a big fuss over our pronunciation. Hated it when people mangled her name: Tirisah…”

“Anyway I think pets are fundamental at home, they make all the difference. We realized late with my parents.”

“At least you realized it.”

“Right. It was nice though. We got our first cat when I was twenty…”

“Makes me laugh.”

“Why?”

“I know it’s normal and it’s a great thing, but when I was that age I’d already been out of the house for a while.”

“You’re Italian enough to understand how it works here. And you Americans are regressing in that respect… with the recession… Remember Mike Owen?”

“The one from White Glasses?”

“You know he still lives with his parents?”

“All grown up and adult…”

“He told me he’d gone to college near home, so there was no sense in living alone, then his father died…”

“A little like you.”

“More or less. But I flew the coop relatively early compared to the average!”

“Right.”

“But having pets is important. You don’t know the fights I had with my wife.”

“She didn’t want them?”

“She can’t be budged. Emanuele wanted a dog. One of those puppies that become really big dogs. A German shepherd or a husky. She was totally against it.”

“Then why didn’t you get a cat?”

“Let’s say Emanuele and I still haven’t managed.”

“Not exactly democratic.”

“Two against one is still democracy?”

“Very democratic.”

“Like the Americans, I might add. But let’s not get into that again, because otherwise I’ll get angry. I can’t talk about politics with someone who won’t tell me if he voted Democrat or Republican.”

“Why are you interested in knowing?”

“Because I’d understand something more about you.’

“Again with this nonsense; it’s not as if a person is defined by his political choice, like where you come from.”

“No? In America the choice is so clear that there are no doubts. Anyway, you know I think you voted for the conservatives, which horrifies me a little because it means you voted for Bush.”

“I’ll let you stew in those pleasant thoughts.”

“Would you have voted for Obama?”

“I don’t know. My sister is a believer. She’s one of those volunteers… But you know, New England is true-blue… Though you might be led to think otherwise.”

“I might indeed.”

“The Puritans are extinct and so are the Yankees.”

“You see, that’s the answer of a conservative.”

“Maybe a nostalgic conservative. You take me for a right-winger?”

“I said conservative.”

“You mentioned Bush earlier.”

“Look, Bush represents a part of America very well. C’mon, don’t start looking for Italian equivalents.”

“You’re right about Bush and America. If for four times we voted for the same people it means that we liked them a bit. And bear in mind that I have a neutral point of view. I’ve gotten the shaft from Democrats as well as Republicans.”

“Sure.”

“Anyway, my mother worked at Quincy Market before becoming the secretary for my father’s partner.”

“What’s Quincy Market?”

“I’ll take you there. They sell a bit of everything, food I mean.”

“A market?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it in Italy. Imagine the market at Piazza Vittorio. You’ll find hamburgers and hot dogs, classic Americana, down to the most Bostonian things like clam chowder or beans cooked in molasses.”

“In molasses?”

“Yeah, in molasses.”

“You mean that dense liquid you get from sugar?”

“Yeah, more or less…”

“What do beans have to do with it?”

“Baked beans is the Bostonian dish par excellence. The molasses is important. For better or worse molasses has left its mark on my city. And of course molasses explains the world.”

“I assume you’re referring to the distilleries, prohibition?”

“Not only. In the twenties there was an incredible accident. A storage tank exploded and the molasses flooded into the streets. It was a founding episode in American industry, and as such of the world. You’ll find it in the databanks we have at work. A storage tank of almost two million gallons. Today it’s a trifle, back then it was a monster.”

“I’m looking at it… Wow! A wave of more than twelve feet!”

“Right. A couple of buildings and the elevated train track wound up collapsing.”

“Yeah, I’m reading.”

“Imagine the smell.”

“Of burnt molasses, you mean?”

“When I was little there was a friend of my father’s who always told me about the explosion. For me it became a little fairy tale. But he was still blown away. He’d seen the wave from his house…”

“‘The molasses advances like lava.’”

“Apparently much faster. Some reports talk about a forty miles an hour.”

“Hmmm, it strikes me as very strange that a substance so dense could move so fast.”

“You find it strange that molasses can move that fast?” he says as he gathers sheets of paper scattered all over the desk into a single pile, then straightens out the pencils and pens. “I need to pinch some more Ticonderogas from Vaciaghi.”

“Anyway, you got me hungry with that story about baked beans before, but now it went away.”

“I’m sorry. You’ll see, it’ll come back. Should we get a pasta today?

“Yeah, c’mon. But you were telling me about your father’s friend.”

“Luis. He kept going on about the smell. One time he even melted a mountain of sugar in a pan to give me an idea of what it smelled like.”

“Like caram—”

“Yeah, like caramel. Imagine the air saturated with caramel…”

“With me just the smell of cotton candy turns my stomach…”

“That’s more or less what it was like from what I gather. Amplified a thousand times.”

“So how did they clean it all up… doesn’t the molasses vitrify when it cools?”

“You really are an engineer—”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about what happened after the accident.”

“Sure, sure. Maybe in terms that are slightly more poetic than yours. You’ll find a bunch of photos online. Hundreds worked to clean the streets. Part of the port stayed brown from the molasses for months.”

“From the CCPS report I can see that analyses of the causes of the disaster went on for decades.”

“Yeah, there was a long trial. They didn’t have the tools we have now. But it was a notorious case.”

“Not even the engineers…”

“Look, in America the firefighting culture was already advanced at the beginning of the last century. Here, before the fifties, you still had royal decrees on public safety.”

“I hear you, but you’re shooting at an easy target.”

“Now you’ll say that all my American pride is coming out.”

“I’d say it a little differently. Anyway. I see that they accused the anarchists.”

“It’s logical. In order to avoid having to compensate people the company came up with the story of the bomb. The usual dynamite. You see, prohibition was at the doors and the market was looking for lots of alcohol, and molasses was the main ingredient. The anarchists were accused because alcohol was also used to make munitions… for sure the anarchists had nothing against rum.”

“Maybe they had something against the company… I see it was called Purity—”

“Purity Distilling. Look the Puritans have nothing to do with it.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Anyway, that was the company that distilled the molasses. The giant was USIA. U.S. Industry Alcohol, practically a state company.”

“Ah.”

“Luis told me that because of the fear and disgust they didn’t use sugar for a year. Imagine that all the way into the eighties, when it was hot, the old timers in the North End smelled molasses in the air rising from Commercial Street.”

“I hope after the accident they realized it might not be a good idea to put potentially dangerous constructions in the middle of a city.”

“At that time the factories were part of the city, or maybe the concept of city wasn’t so clear. Anyway, the factory was the city.”

“We started out with baked beans in molasses and now we’re talking about land-use planning.”

“Well, yeah. I don’t think there’s any hope, and you’re making things worse.”

“…”

“In any case, baked beans are amazing. My mother learned how to make them, and I only found out what the ingredients were when I was an adult.”

“What’s in it besides molasses?”

“It takes a very long time to prepare and she would start on Friday night by cleaning and soaking the beans. The Puritan ladies started very early Saturday morning. Because then they had to observe the precept that prohibits any kind of manual work until Sunday evening. They boiled them first in water, then the pot would go into the oven for five or six hours. Once ready, the beans lasted all weekend. The ingredients are always beans, bacon, onions, molasses, cane sugar and mustard.”

“Alright, let me try these beans in one of the little restaurants at the market you were telling me about.”

“They aren’t restaurants. They’re take-away stalls, or street food as they’re now fashionably called. There’s a common space for eating. The place had already become a little too touristic by the time I left, but some of the stalls kept the spirit of the times.”

“Such as?”

“I remember that when my sister and I were little my father often took us there. The chance for us to eat like that, with Coca-Cola and all the other

things our friends talked about, was like a moment of being normal. Of course there were a lot of things we weren't aware of."

"You mean about eating?"

"Yeah. I think my parents must have spent a fortune in those days to have us eat Italian. You know, fruits, vegetables and cheese were very expensive. They could only be found in import stores. I remember when we went shopping at the salumeria on Prince Street, my father left satisfied, but his wallet was lighter. The few times he had spoken to me about it, he said that in the beginning it was hard for them, and the packages that relatives would send from home came less and less frequently. My grandfather immediately got sick with nostalgia. He didn't learn a word of English, became skin and bones. The only thing that soothed him a bit was when he played bocce. Always around Commercial Street… a little dirt court right near where the storage tank had been."

"Did you and your family come to Italy?"

"Twice as a kid. I hardly remember anything from the first trip, just the faces of my maternal grandparents and the firepl—"

"Where did your grandparent live?"

"My maternal grandparents were from Lucoli, near L'Aquila, whereas I think my father's parents were from Avezzano; they also came to Boston, but they died before I was born."

"And the second time you came?"

"From the second time I remember everything because I was older and it was for the funeral of my grandfather. You know, in a way I was named after him."

"What do you mean 'in a way'?"

"Yeah, his last name was Moser. He came from the North, from Saronno, I think, and after giving my sister the name Liliana – with all the difficulties in pronunciation that ensued – they didn't feel like naming me after my grandfathers. Evaristo and Giovanni. So in the end they took grandpa Giovanni's last name and adapted it to the closest American name."

"What a story!"

"It could have been worse, no?"

"Moses is a beautiful name. Maybe it's less beautiful when you think of the biblical Moses."

"What's wrong with Moses?"

"Nothing. I have the utmost respect for the man who split the sea in two. I'm just saying it sounds strange – at least in Italian – to call someone Moses."

"As usual I digress. I was telling you about my mother."

"Yeah."

“She worked at one of the Italian food stalls. She cooked lasagnas, parmesans, macaroni, American style, naturally. My mother had tried to bring a little authenticity into the recipes but I think that people wouldn’t listen to her, or it simply didn’t work. Today it’s clear to me, but back then I couldn’t understand why it upset her.”

“I don’t understand…”

“She got mad because they distorted all the Italian recipes.”

“Maybe they adapted them. Foreigners don’t like pasta al dente.”

“If only that were all. She always came back home from work with a long face.”

“And you?”

“We didn’t say anything. I only remember one time, when I asked her if I could go to her with a friend to eat. I’d never seen her so worked up. She, who never raised her voice with us.”

“And so you never ate there?”

“Sure I ate there. Obviously when she wasn’t there.”

“And…”

“At that time it didn’t seem so bad. But today I can say it was pure and authentic American junk. The pasta was overcooked, okay, the mozzarella wasn’t mozzarella, the Bolognese had nothing to do with ragù, but the ice cream was especially disgusting. Today I can say it. Not back then. That was why my mother kept me from expressing my opinion on that food. Because she knew that I wasn’t able to.”

“Hold on, but you ate Italian at home, so…”

“You’re so naïve. You’re a chemical engineer and you’ve never heard of industrialization.”

“You lost me.”

“Food has to be attractive. It doesn’t matter what’s inside. That’s how American food is. There’s so much stuff in it that your taste receptors get short circuited.”

“So you’re effectively telling me they can’t distinguish anything anymore.”

“Little or nothing. And then there’s the abundance, dishes spilling over with food…”

“Fat, big and fat.”

“She’d go crazy over the waste. Her boss obliged her to fill the plates beyond belief. ‘The plate has to be full, nice to look at, otherwise we’ll wind up throwing even more away.’ And if my mother asked what sense there was in preparing double what was sold, he’d answer: ‘If our display before lunch is bare or with just few things, then everyone will think that we don’t have

good food, that we're having problems, that no one comes to buy from us. The display is our advertising.'"

"He really said that?"

"Sure, I gave it my own touch, but you get the idea."

"And at home, who cooked? Always your mother?"

"Yeah, my father was never there. More than a kitchen it looked like a cell in a convent. 'At home we're not to waste anything. It's a sin,' she would say."

"Healthy common sense."

"Right. She never told us what happened to all the leftover food from her stall. She didn't have the courage. Many years later I learned that she would stealthily take what she could and bring it to St. Leonard's church."

3.

“There’s a wave of molasses going down to Commercial Street! Send all the men and equipment we have,” police officer Frank McManus screams over the phone to his colleagues.

January 15, 1919. The temperature has risen about forty degrees in the past week. Forty-one degrees on January 15 means spring. In fact, there’s sun and the women are hanging laundry outside to dry. Everyone’s eating lunch outdoors, relaxing without even a coat.

At exactly 12:41 a “boom” is heard. Or more like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Like a machine gun. Those are the rivets popping out of the plates. There’s an explosion. The storage tank collapses. Massive fragments are hurled into the distance. More than two million gallons of molasses pour out. The containment basin, barely five feet deep, is ridiculous and can’t do anything against the wave. Four railway tank cars that had just finished loading are swept away. In a few seconds the wall of molasses liberated from the steel is already fifteen feet high. The first to be hit are the longshoremen. They try to stay afloat, poor men, as the wave slams everything in its path: the nearby fire station, which at first holds together, the elevated train tracks connecting North Station to South Station, which hold together too, the people on Commercial Street, the people in the buildings and on the port side of the square, as well as a number of horses.

The Boston newspapers unsheathe prose rife with biblical iridescence: “The explosion came without the slightest warning. A dreadful noise, a rumble took possession of the air and no one had a chance to escape.” Under the deadly wave’s thrust, the buildings in the immediate vicinity “begin to crumple,” “they look like pasteboard.” “Dozens of people remain trapped in buildings, some dead, some seriously injured.”

Everything that comes into contact with the wave becomes part of the wave – automobiles, carts and horse-drawn carriages, rail tankers, wagons, pieces of the storage tank, then whole warehouses around the port, homes, goods of all kinds. An inconceivable wave: who could have ever imagined swimming in molasses?

The sticky mass crashes into the buildings at the foot of Copp’s Hill to then turn back towards the harbor and destroy anything left standing. The reflux finishes off the elevated railway, bending it forward ominously at the curve, sweeping the fire station, which looks crippled; it winds up razing most of the sheds in the North End Paving area. “They look like eggshells.”

Martin Clougherty is at home with his mother, brother and sister, plus two rental guests. The three-story wooden building is located right in front of the tank, on the other side of the road. Like almost every night Martin spent the wee hours at the nearby Pen and Pencil, on Dock Square, a bar always full of journalists looking for scoops. He's been worried recently, Martin has: that bar is his pride and joy, and he's invested all his savings into it. Martin is still asleep and hasn't read the papers that morning. The headlines are interchangeable: "35 States on Dry list," this is *The Boston Post*. Prohibition is coming, and no alcohol for the bar would be a disaster. Teresa, his sister, wakes him up by shouting: "Something awful's happened at the tank." Martin gets up abruptly with no time to draw the curtains as the wave lifts the house from below and heaves it against the elevated railway. A moment later Martin swims through the sludge and fortunately manages to grab onto something solid floating on the treacly surface. It's the net of his bed, at the mercy of the current. Martin tries to swim but he can't; the molasses is too thick, so he decides to climb onto that raft. At one point he sees an inert hand pop through the bubbling molasses; he does all he can to get closer, and finally manages to grab it and lift the body: it's Teresa. "I got you, hold on." They still don't know that their mother is dead.

Maria DiStasio, on the other hand, is surprised by the wave as she's playing with her little brother Antonio and some friends between the wagon sheds in the train yard, behind the tank. The fury of the molasses presses her into a pile of barrels, and that's where she's found, even if for at least twelve hours nobody can identify her. Who knows if Maria heard her mother cry her name while the treacle submerged her.

In those very moments a train is coming from the South Station on the elevated tracks. Royal Albert Leeman, the brake attendant, hears the terrible noise the metal makes when it's ripped open. He looks toward the sea and sees a 150-foot blackish mass dangerously approaching the railroad. As soon as the train reaches the bend, a large piece of the tank is hurled against two of the El's support columns. Leeman immediately gives the signal to the motorman and activates the command ("Stop! The tracks have collapsed. You can't go on. That damned tank is blown to bits"), then gets off and runs towards South Station. Leeman is fast and manages to intercept the next train. When he's back on the tank side of the El, he takes in the disturbing sight of the railway's severed electric cables falling to the ground and flailing with a spray of sparks.

The sticky wave spares nothing: the blacksmith's forge, the poultry slaughterhouse, the carpenters' workshop, railway warehouses 2 and 3, the North End Paving depot. "Molasses is worse than fly paper," one newspaper writes a few days later. "It's not just that you can not break away; you are

buried." The wave engulfs live bodies and returns smooth bodies of molasses.

The first to come to the rescue are the 116 sailors on the *Nantucket*, moored not even two hundred yards from there. "The molasses was like quicksand," Cameron Burnap recalls. "It took three of us to pull them out, the living and the dead; the molasses didn't want to give them back to us."

They scour ever inch of area in search of the missing. The shouts of family members chant the names. They wade through the molasses lake that slows down their movements; you need to feel their way with their hands in order to search. The bodies of the victims are mangled, bones can be heard cracking as they're placed on the stretchers. And then that veneer of treacle that makes them unrecognizable. From time to time a rescuer sees "a pair of legs or an arm poking out of the sticky mass." They rush over, illuded by hope, though more often than not there is nothing but those limbs.

When Mayor Andrew Peters and John F. Fitzgerald, the beloved former mayor, arrive in the early afternoon, the landscape is dramatic: the storage tank is reduced to its scattered sheets, a dozen buildings have been swept away, and then cars, carts, and railway tankers have become mechanical sludge. On Commercial Street they immediately notice a row of dead horses with their terrible expressions. There are not enough carts and horses to take them away.

By five o'clock there are three hundred people working tirelessly and, of course, a considerable number of onlookers who have ventured as far as the edge of the North End to get a sense of what happened. The police are struggling to get rid of them and make them understand that have to keep the way clear for the rescue efforts. They need an acetylene torch to extract some bodies trapped under the steel sheets. There are still many of them under the rubble.

The casualty figures coming out on the first evening are rather clement: eleven dead, in addition to the horses of the North End Paving and Commercial Street.

As for the smell, there is nothing to be done about it. And while the molasses footprints invade the center of Boston, in the distance, from the dock where the *Engine 31* pump is anchored, a player piano floats on the sea.

One hour after the disaster the molasses is knee-high, but in the meantime the temperature drops and it starts to harden. It takes weeks of saws and chisels and millions of gallons of pressurized sea water to get the streets reasonably clean. It will take six months to get things back to normal.

But what happened, why did it happen?

In no time USIA, through its lawyer, sends out a dispatch that claims the explosion was caused by “an external force,” and therefore the company has no responsibility.

The anarchist threat was real. The storage tank was a perfect target for the anarchists, who are against war, against capitalism, against government, against any form of corporation, especially if it’s linked to the war industry (in short, America’s perennial problems). A permanent guard was placed at the storage tank to guarantee its safety.

But the North Enders have a different idea. The arrival of inspectors was anxiously awaited. Walter Wedger is a practical type. He’s an expert in explosives who works for the Massachusetts police. The first thing he wants to understand is if the storage tank collapsed or exploded. It doesn’t take long to be convinced that an explosion took place, otherwise the fragments couldn’t have been projected so far. Even before USIA exults, he specifies: “An explosion, but not a bomb.”

The Municipal Court of Boston charges Judge Wilfred Bolster to conduct an investigation. Bolster goes to the disaster site several times, accompanied by state chemist Walter Wedger.

Three weeks later he makes his first, concise report: the storage tank was not strong enough to contain all that molasses. It was the unexpected heat that caused a fatal rise in pressure. If the storage tank had been designed adequately it would have resisted the change in temperature. Therefore USIA is responsible.

But here’s the twist. Apart from USIA there’s another guilty party: the people of Boston.

“What Have We Done?” the *Boston Daily Globe* shouts in dismay.

In order to keep the taxes low, according to the judge, the municipality tried to save on everything, including safety authorization procedures. The Building Department did not examine projects presented to them with due diligence.

But there’s another dramatic turn of events. The Grand Jury, after examining Bolster’s report, rules that USIA cannot be charged with negligent manslaughter.

The twists continue, and the anarchists come back into play. A series of terrorist acts occur on June 2, 1919: bombs explode in Boston, New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Newton, Paterson and Cleveland. Exactly what USIA was waiting for.

The toll is 21 dead and 150 wounded, but that doesn't get across the idea of what a wound it was for the city. In addition to Maria DiStasio, three other Italians lost their lives: ten-year-old Pasquale Iantosca, killed by a railroad car that flew off the tracks; thirty-seven-year-old driver Flaminio Gallerani, found eleven days later; and Cesare Nicolò, a thirty-two-year-old dispatcher, the most unfortunate of all: his body found under the pier near the Boston & Worchester freight loading station on May 12, with the square already clean. Like all the others, as epitaph to the tragedy: his nose, eyes and ears are full of that deadly sugar.

4.

“And you don’t think the anarchists had something to do with it?”

“No, they had nothing to do with it. I don’t mean that they didn’t want to blow up the tank. I’m just saying it wasn’t their fault.”

“Wait: if they were dangerous, then they should have been stopped.”

“The question is: ‘Why were they dangerous?’ Dangerous for whom, on the side of whom?”

“If you set off a bomb and kill regular people then you’re in the wrong.”

“It should be avoided in every way possible. It’s a terrible secondary effect. But the goal is more important. Still, none of this justifies the lies around the anarchists.”

“They asked for it, though. They were coming out unscathed… then they fell into it again.”

“The authorities at the storage tank had stopped thinking about it. The war was over, molasses for bomb-making wasn’t a problem anymore.”

“Yeah, but they were getting flushed out everywhere.”

“Because of the lies I told you about.”

“*The* lie.”

“Look, a lie repeated over and over becomes the truth. That’s how they do it. It’s a technique as old as the hills. Applied by kings, emperors…”

“By Goebbels.”

“Sure. By Fauci…”

“Don’t exaggerate.”

“Don’t you see what we’re supposed to be writing? Replace certain terms and you can use our reports again for a political party. We’re just recycling old tricks.”

“Maybe tricks from the right wing.”

“From-the-right-wing,” he apes him. “What’s the difference? The art of propaganda has been plied by all sides to some degree, with varying results. You need to rely on feelings. With words it’s easy. There’s only one problem.”

“What? Kicking up too many feelings?”

“Yeah, that too. More than anything it’s a question of form. Finding the *psychologically*…” – Moses pronounces “psychologically” with a smile as he lowers his eyelids slightly – “suitable form that will attract attention and touch the heart of the masses.”

“Or just four morons listening to some random whacko.”

5.

Franco Lagomarsini is a basic worker. After a quick apprenticeship handling plates, he is assigned to the riveters' unit. Whole days of shooting nails into the already marked stripes.

Lagomarsini lives less than two hundred yards from the construction site. It takes him only three minutes to walk the two blocks up Charter Street and clamber up to the third floor. He and his wife are subletting a room from some countrymen. She's pregnant and can only work for another few months.

They have no one in the North End but hope her parents can join them in America to help them out. They work as much as they can to ensure they have money for the midwife and the expenses that would entail. Going back to Italy was out of the question. Lagomarsini is twenty-three years old, he's an orphan, and has sold everything. He studied at the D'Annunzio high school in Pescara, got the best grades, and intends to continue his studies, as soon as things get settled.

For him the Great Storage Tank is an opportunity, his first job in America.

He realizes that things are taking a turn for the worse when Jell calls him into his office."

"So you're the one who pointed out the leaks in the storage tank?"

"Yes sir."

"Thank you for your observations, Mr. Lagomarsini."

"Thank you, sir."

"And you also noted that there are loud noises when the molasses is being pumped in."

"Yes sir."

"What kind of noises?"

"It's a scary noise, sir. Like a giant spitting out its metal organs, sir."

"Have you seen any metal organs spat out, Mr. Lagomarsini?"

"No sir."

"Good. It's all under control, Mr. Lagomarsini. Carry on with your work. You may go, good day."

Jell has already picked up the telephone when Lagomarsini asks: "And the leaks?"

"It's a matter of occasional microscopic discharges of molasses in a few imperfect joints. You may go."

"But there are kids collecting the molasses. Look out the window. I saw them as I was coming here. I see them every day."

Jell doesn’t change his position, or the direction of his gaze.

“Those are the DiStasio brothers. They live here out front,” Lagomarsini ends up saying with his head turned toward the children.

“I repeat, they are occasional discharges. Go.”

Lagomarsini goes away with Jell’s frightening eyes glued to his.

The telephone call comes ten days later. Lagomarsini is working his shift and the foreman is out to lunch. He picks up the phone.

“You’d better stop building weapons, otherwise we’ll blow up the storage tank. We have the same dynamite you produce.”

Lagomarsini recognizes the Italian accent.

6.

“Sorry, but now what do Sacco and Vanzetti have to do with molasses?”

“What do you mean what do they have to do with it? You don’t get it, do you?”

“…”

“Do you know the story of Sacco and Vanzetti?”

“Sure I do, Moses. I even wrote an essay on them in high school.”

“Good. The verdict came in July of 1921. Just when the trial against USIA was going on. So you can imagine how their conviction rekindled those lowlifes’ hopes that the anarchist leads would convince the judge and grand jury.”

“I get it. You’re still on about Massachusetts.”

“Right. That’s the story of that trial. Things look like they’re going well, then boom, the anarchists pop up again. With Charles Choate, their lawyer, who did everything he could to divert attention toward the subversive trail. Of course the anarchists gave them a hand. The year before, in September 1920, Luigi Galleani’s supporters had placed a bomb on Wall Street. Imagine: when he found out that Sacco and Vanzetti had been charged, Mario Buda left from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he was hiding, and after getting hold of a horse-drawn cart, left it in front of the J. P. Morgan headquarters. The usual dynamite and iron scraps. Forty-three dead and a hundred thirty-eight injured. Not bad. The following day pamphlets claim responsibility. They had the habitual tone (“Remember, we will no longer tolerate. Free the political prisoners, or it will be sure death for all of you”). The signature was a variation on: American Anarchist Fighters.

“Choate, happy as a clam, presents a memo in the blink of an eye that points out how the source of the terrorist attack is the same as that of the disaster in Boston. Basically anyone willing to listen will understand.”

Sounds like the same thing that happened to us in the seventies with the—”

“More or less. You had your Red Brigades, we had the red scare. And I’ll tell you something else. The year before that, in 1919, Galleani’s followers had sent explosive packages to quite a few people. Google ‘Plain Words’ and ‘Galleani.’ ‘Plain Words’ is the title of the pamphlet.”

“Ah, here it is… ‘It is war, class war, and you were the first to wage it under cover of the powerful institutions you call order, in the darkness of your laws… There will be bloodshed; we will not dodge; there will have to be murder: we will kill, because it is necessary; there will have to be destruction; we will destroy to rid the world of your tyrannical institutions.’”

“Not bad, don’t you think? All the anarchists did was shed light on the security management flaws. They should’ve made a monument to them, not chase them away. Instead they reacted just like they’re reacting today. They churned out three special laws, and that way sent more than ten thousand people to the joint and quite a few of them wound up on a ship and goodbye America.”

“I see you’re interested in this issue; don’t tell me you wrote an essay on it too.”

“No, but the beautiful thing is that Pomarici is also obsessed with Sacco and Vanzetti. Before you came we had our share of chats. Man, we’d known each other for years and it never came out.”

“Yeah, but you two are interested in different ways.”

“Excuse me, but how did you get interested in Sacco and Vanzetti as a kid?”

“Haven’t I told you that my mother was sort of an anarchist? One of our American uncles was a relative of Sacco.” De Stefano says it as a point of pride, as if to lay claim to his little piece of America.

“It was a bad situation. There was this attorney general, Mitchell Palmer. He only wanted convictions.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Sacco and Vanzetti were labeled ‘anarchist bastards’ by the judge who followed the trial. Can you imagine?”

“I know.”

“And then they convicted them of first degree murder.”

7.

“So as a kid you went to church every Sunday?”

“I did.”

“I wouldn’t have thought it.”

“It was beautiful. I don’t know how to explain it. Father Giovanni called us all by our name. If you didn’t go, he’d ask you why not. The sense of community… Now that we’re coming toward the North End I hope I can make you understand. We’re nearly there, turn here.”

“What?”

“Just look at the cafes; if things haven’t changed, it’ll seem like a little village in southern Italy.”

“Do you still think that way?”

“About what?”

“About church?”

“No way. After fifteen years in Italy how can I think about it in the same way?”

“But you miss it.”

“To free yourself from Catholicism you have to flee as far as possible. I fled.”

“You fled because you wanted to free yourself?”

“Let’s say that Catholicism gives you the tools to rid yourself of it.”

“How did you do it? In what sense did you flee?”

“First of all I stopped going to church.”

“Okay, that happens to everyone.”

“Yeah, you probably didn’t even want to be there when you used to go.”

“That’s right, I went rarely and unwillingly. I just wanted to make my father happy.”

“You see? Anyway, I’d say my hacker friends had a decisive role to play, but before them there were my college professors. Actually one professor. I don’t even remember the others’ names. His name was Philips. Adam Algernon Philips. He changed my life. He taught physics but was obsessed with cybernetics, computers, and instead of teaching Newton he spoke to us about relativity, black holes, space-time horizons, mixing in all kinds of music, art, technology, and especially the history of science. He spoke with a hushed voice. He sculpted his words. They were there in front of me, and slowly they chased away those of Father Giovanni.”

“Doesn’t seem like it took much effort…”

“Right. I didn’t remember Father Giovanni’s words. But they were there all the same. Philip’s words never left me. Look at the Charles, it’s so beautiful.”

“It’s huge…”

“Divides Cambridge from Boston.”

“Where are we?”

“Still in Cambridge, Boston starts there, after the bridge.”

“It sure is cold here for being May.”

“It’s the digestion! With all you ate.”

“What did I eat?”

“After all your speeches you ate like an American hog.”

“I certainly didn’t come here to eat vegan, I get enough of that from my wife.”

“My veggie burrito was excellent.”

“Yeah, but my cheeseburger, you can’t imagine!”

“I think you have to take it easy with the food.”

“Why, am I looking that bad?”

“You’ve put on few kilos… when I first met you—”

“You sound like my wife. It’s tedious. With Emanuele, too. At his age it was disgusting how much I ate. Whereas he—”

“I have to say she’s right there.”

“Look, she goes overboard. Vegetarian, then vegan, then raw vegan. She lets her friends convince her. These are people who are not well in the head. There’s one who’s doing the paleo diet. She eats only things that primitive people ate.”

“Good God. Poor us… But she eats meat.”

“No way, fruits, vegetables… certain vegetables… seeds, roots… And what’s that?”

“This? A present from Emanuele.”

“Ah, a pillbox. He told me he’d gotten it for you.”

“I’d better take this; yesterday I forgot.”

“What is it?”

“Candies.”

“…”

“This way I convince myself things are getting better.”

“You know, I just don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand myself either.”

“It sure must be a trip… coming back here, seeing your sister again, your friends, old hangouts.”

“It is.”

“You’re not having regrets, are you?”

8.

March 25, 1921, Belmont Hotel, New York. The lawyers of the plaintiff Damon Hall and USIA interrogate Arthur P. Jell, who has conveniently been unable to appear at the Suffolk County Courthouse in Boston, where the civil trial has been going on for almost a year. Judge Hugh Ogden reads the stenographic transcript.

Hall: Mr. Jell, are you an engineer?
Jell: No.
Hall: Were you trained in either mechanical engineering or chemical engineering?
Jell: No.
Hall: What did you study?
Jell: I studied economics.
Hall: What has your job at USIA been up till now?
Jell: I deal with finances. I'm the deputy treasurer.
Hall: By what criteria did you choose Hammond Iron Works for the metal carpentry in building the storage tank?
Jell: Upon the recommendation of a colleague and on the reputation of USIA.
Hall: Was it you who ordered the construction of the storage tank with a factor of safety of 3?
Jell: Yes.
Hall: How did you choose this factor of safety? Did you determine it as a result of any investigation or advice from technically trained engineers, builders, or architects?
Jell: No.
Hall: No?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you, prior to making that recommendation of a factor of safety of 3, make any investigation whatever as to the factor of safety which the ordinary engineering practice called for?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you consult *anyone* before making that suggestion as to a factor of safety of 3?
Jell: I don't remember having done so.
Hall: Is it fair to say, then, that you arrived at that in your own mind?
Jell: Not entirely. I had been told in the past by tank manufacturers that they built with a factor of safety of 2. So I figured 3 would be sufficient.

Hall: Do you know what manufacturer told you that?
Jell: I do not.
Hall: Or the size of the tanks to which they referred?
Jell: I do not. […]
Hall: When Mr. Shellhammer of Hammond Iron Works showed you the plans, in January 1915, did you have any talk with him about the factor of safety in the specifications?
Jell: I don't remember.
Hall: Do you remember what you did?
Jell: No, I do not.
Hall: With such experience you had, were you able, by looking at the plans and specifications, to determine from them what factor of safety had been provided in them?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you submit the plans or specifications to any architect or engineer?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you submit them to the New York office of U.S. Industrial Alcohol? Did you show them to any officer of USIA?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did anyone ask to see them, to inspect them?
Jell: No. […]
Hall: Upon the delivery of the metal, did you have any engineer or builder examine the material to ensure it conformed to specifications?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you seek the advice or consult with *any* person outside of the employees of Hammond Iron Works as to the quality and fitness of the steel which was delivered or the method of construction?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you at any time have or ask for any test to be made of steel being fabricated on your behalf?
Jell: No. […]
Hall: Why were all these controls overlooked?
Jell: They weren't overlooked. Hammond Iron Works is one of the best companies in the building of storage tanks. I had always felt assured. My concern was about finishing on time.
Hall: Was there a deadline?
Jell: December 31, 1915 the first shipment from Cuba was to arrive aboard the *Miliero*. Before that date the tank had to be ready to hold the molasses. That's all that mattered for me.
Hall: Did you at any time after the tank was erected, and before the steamer arrived, have any investigation made of the tank by any architect, engineer,

or man who was familiar with steel construction, as to the sufficiency of the tank as erected?
Jell: No.
Hall: Referring to the contract for the erection of the tank, do you recall that it provided for a water test after the tank was created? That the tank be filled with water to test for leaks?
Jell: Yes.
Hall: Was any water test made of the tank – except by putting in six inches of water, as you have already testified – before it was put into service?
Jell: No.
Hall: Why?
Jell: Well, for one reason, there was no time. It would have been impossible to empty the water again before the arrival of the steamer. It would have been impossible to fill the tank. There was not a supply of water at that point sufficient to fill the tank within a reasonable time.
Hall: Do you mean by that, or do you not, that if you had made that water test, it would have delayed the unloading of the steamer.
Jell: Yes.
Hall: That is what you mean?
Jell: Yes, sir.
Hall: Did you investigate to see whether there were water mains on Commercial Street which would have afforded ample quantities of water to fill it in much less than weeks?
Jell: I did not.
Hall: Any other reason why the water test was not made?
Jell: It was considered an unnecessary expense.
Hall: By whom was it considered an unnecessary expense?
Jell: By me.
Hall: From the information we have, one of the workers, Franco Lagomarsini had reported a leak in the tank several times and you minimized it, saying he was exaggerating or his deductions were incorrect. Can you confirm that?
Jell: Yes.
Hall: Then why did you order the tank caulked twice and then have it repainted?
Jell: This was normal maintenance work.
Hall: Actually not everyone thinks so. Especially because you chose a paint color identical to that of molasses. Those who malign you claim the reason was so as not to see the leaks.
Jell: It’s a classic tank color.

*

Choate: The one in Boston is not the only USIA tank, is that correct?
Jell: Correct, in Baltimore there is a bigger tank.
Choate: Was it also made by Hammond Iron Works?
Jell: I don't remember. But Hammond is one of the best known companies when it comes to ironworks.
Choate: At the time of the order did you furnish Hammond with all the technical characteristics of the tank?
Jell: Yes.
Choate: Did Hammond make any remarks or observations after examining your specifications?
Jell: No.
Choate: Did they make any observations about the factor of security chosen?
Jell: No.
Choate: Is it true that during the operational period of the tank you received a threat from anarchists?
Jell: Yes.
Choate: Is it true that Lagomarsini himself had said that there were rumors about destroying the tank?
Jell: Yes, besides having set up a security service, we asked the police many times to increase patrols in the port area.

*

Hall: I'd like to go back for a moment to the factor of security. Did you ever ascertain, prior to the erection of the Commercial Street tank, by submitting those Hammond plans to anybody on the face of Earth, whether they called for a safety factor?
Jell: As I said, I fully trusted Hammond Iron Works.
Hall: Did you have any training or experience that enabled you to determine whether they were skillful and competent people or not?
Jell: No.
Hall: Did you have any knowledge or experience whatever that enabled you to tell whatever the construction work was done satisfactorily, or whatever the tank was strong?
Jell: I considered the tank satisfactory for our purpose.

9.

“Between the end of the 19th century and 1920 more than six million Italians moved to the United States. A good slice of us came right here. For nearly all of them, the idea was to stay for a short time, a few years, and then go back to Italy with money. Many of them stayed forever.”

“When did your folks come?”

“Mine are a special case. They weren’t part of any wave. It’s true that many came from Abruzzi. At my parents’ house, in plain view, there were postcards from Erminio, my father’s uncle, who wrote to them: ‘Come, there’s work here, good schools, lots of bread and butter.’ ‘There’s air-conditioning, the future is here. You decide if you want to stay in Lucoli. I’ll be waiting for you.’

“My father couldn’t stay in Lucoli, or anywhere in Italy. He was obsessed by the lack of industry. For him a country meant its industry. Production. He fell in love with Boston’s port, the constant traffic along the river – later I have to take you to a place, remind me. For him, there was no development without industry.”

“No wonder you became an engineer…”

“No, he has nothing to do with it.”

“Of course he does.”

“I told you, it’s my own thing, my own contradiction. I wanted to study literature.”

“At eighteen you’re not your own person yet.”

“Look, that’s St. Leonard’s Church, let’s go.”

“Everyone knew about everyone else. It’s normal that everyone on Prince Street knows what’s happening on Salem Street or on Endicott Street. I’d say it’s still like that.”

“I doubt it, I only see tourists here.”

“Look over there. That’s the Caffè dello Sport. Tell me that doesn’t look like you’re in Italy.”

“Yeah, it looks like the bar in my grandparents’ town!”

As they get closer they notice that the people at the tables and the group at the entrance are speaking in dialect.

At one table there’s a raging card game, *tresette*, with four Peroni beers on the table and other bottles on the ground. It’s all Italian. The faces are Italian, the words are Italian. When they look at you, they recognize you,

they know in which language they have to speak to you, they know how much they can ask you to pay.

In the window there's an old sign:

IT'S GREAT TO BE ITALIAN
PARCHEGGIO SOLO PER GLI ITALIANI

There are croissants, *bignè*. And then there's the espresso. The two baristas speak a drawling English.

There's a line at Mike's Pastry, the most famous pastry shop. In Italy they don't make pastries that big anymore. Here they go crazy for Sicilian cannolis filled on the spot. More than twenty flavors, some of then never seen before. Syncretism.

"Most families didn't even lock their doors. There were people who bragged that they never had a key to the house. There were women who spent whole days at their window sills. All of us neighbors helped each other out. If you needed something you asked, word got out and in the end someone would pop up to help you.

"Before the Second World War most of the North End apartments had neither bathtubs nor showers. On Saturday you went to the public baths. It was a horde of adults who looked like children… Or you could go to North Bennet Street, where there was a Bath House open five days a week for men; two for the women. Going to the Bath House on Friday evening was for us a way of spending the evening in company."

"A little like Antonio's Colombian community."

"I think so. Here we are, this is where we lived. My goodness, what memories… Look, on the second floor. There's a kid in the window."