"Renzo Nissim, born in Florence to a Florentine Jewish family, left his native Tuscany and his peaceful professional and cultural life on the eve of the Second World War for the United States of America. He would become famous thanks to his broadcasts from New York for the "Voice of America," his later role as a correspondent for Italian newspapers and magazines, his radio and television programs, and his stage productions.

He returned to Italy at the end of the 1950s and settled in Rome, where he still lives, actively engaged in the world of art and culture.

Renzo Nissim puts everyday life to the test, exploring how much his personal story can be transformed into a novelistic narrative.

A childhood spent in the Florentine bourgeois environment during the First World War, in a family obsessed with the ideal of "respectability"; an adolescence marked by emotional and sexual struggles; a youth divided between a classical education, a passion for gambling, and an overwhelming love for a young American woman—beautiful, yet enigmatic and unsettling. Her radiant beauty conveys joy, but gives no hint of the morbid behavior and dark drama she would come to embody.

The author recounts the early chapters of his life with often stark and raw tones, set against the backdrop of the Fascist era, which culminated in the racial laws of 1938 and his dramatic flight to America. Yet it is above all his love for this young woman that drives him into exile, more than any other reason at the time.

In the United States, Nissim reunites with his former flame, now addicted to drugs and living a chaotic life. He experiences adventurous and unexpected years, going through unpredictable situations and taking on the most varied and contrasting jobs: from factory worker to radio host, from photographer to author of melodramatic tearjerkers, eventually becoming a commentator for the Voice of America and, finally, a correspondent for *Il Tempo* of Rome and contributor to major postwar magazines.

During this period, he meets many famous figures: Einstein, Fulgencio Batista, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Alberto Moravia, John Foster Dulles, Ezra Pound, and many others, along with jazz legends such as Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 1

My parents divided people into two broad categories: gentlemen and non-gentlemen. This distinction had nothing to do with wealth and was based entirely on social standing. Families of doctors, lawyers, and professors were considered gentlemen; merchants, regardless of their success, were not. If someone in a family "worked in a shop," my father—and especially my mother—would openly look down on them, even if they were perfectly honest and respectable.

“People who work behind a counter,” my mother would say with disdain, “he’s not a gentleman.”

Shopkeepers, particularly owners of grocery stores or similar establishments, were judged even more harshly. While not formally banned from our home in Florence, their presence was strongly discouraged.

There was a family in Florence with the same surname as ours who owned a successful fabric store on Via dell’Archivescovado—decent, well-regarded people. I don’t recall them ever setting foot in our house. If anyone asked if we were related, the answer was a sharp, indignant “No.”
In our household, it was more acceptable to welcome the wife of a notoriously unfaithful lawyer than the chaste spouse of a stationer or shopkeeper.

Today, more than fifty years later, these distinctions seem absurd and undemocratic. Back then, they felt entirely normal.

By my relatives’ standards, we were certainly considered gentlemen—but looking back, I’m not sure we truly deserved the label. It seems to me now a curious mix of refined habits and decidedly ungentlemanly attitudes.

My parents were more preoccupied with *appearing* to be gentlemen than actually *being* them.

Take, for example, the doorbell. It was considered vulgar to answer it yourself. This task was reserved for the manservant or, in his absence, the maid (back then, one didn’t need to be wealthy to have what were called “domestic staff”).
Even being seen in the entrance hall by a visitor was deemed inappropriate.

The sound of the doorbell—imperious and hoarse, I still remember it—would trigger a kind of mass retreat, with the whole family disappearing into the farthest corners of the house.
If an important guest was expected, not only would we hide, but all doors near the entrance would be tightly shut, as if the house were uninhabited.

In retrospect, perhaps these odd rituals masked deeper feelings of guilt or insecurity.
At the time, I never questioned them. That’s simply how things were done.

I've already mentioned behaviours that clashed with our obsession with being “gentlemen.” Here's another.

My maternal grandfather, for instance, was the picture of contradiction. He suffered from persistent constipation and relied on daily enemas. Every morning at eleven, he would heat water on a gas burner and pour it into a glass enema jar, the kind used at the time. Heaven help anyone who interrupted this sacred ritual.

Afterwards, he would sit on a large chamber pot placed in front of a sofa, usually reading a book—often in French.

My grandmother was almost always present for this procedure, perhaps as a sign of solidarity.
To me, this seemed completely normal.

Aside from this and other peculiar habits, my grandfather had the manners of a true gentleman.
His clothes were tailored by one of the finest and most expensive tailors, who travelled from Livorno, where my grandfather had once lived. The fabrics were always English and of the highest quality.
His grooming was impeccable: he would smooth his white beard with violet water or a branded cologne.
Though personally frugal—eager to leave as much as possible to his heirs—his gifts were always extravagant. He chose only the finest and most expensive items, showing remarkable generosity that contrasted sharply with his otherwise stingy ways.

He had a mysterious aversion to butter and cheese, so intense he couldn't tolerate even their smell.
Fearing cross-contamination, he banned them entirely from the household.
My mother would occasionally sneak us buttered bread as if it were contraband.

Despite this tyranny, he was not entirely selfish. Even in his old age, he would walk home in the rain to avoid spending five lire on a carriage (then known as a *legno*).
I believe this dietary restriction played a role in my frailty as a child.

His gift-giving clashed with his near-fanatical opposition to unnecessary expenses, which he called "irresponsible waste."
All lightbulbs were of the lowest voltage, and leaving one on unnecessarily was nearly a crime.

My brother Elio, eight years older than I, occasionally hosted tea for friends. Once, he invited some members of Florence's upper class—possibly even a few with noble titles.

For the occasion, the so-called *grand room* was used—though grand only in name. It featured an ornate, gilded chandelier (which I found beautiful at the time) with twenty-four small bulbs that could be turned on in sections. Other lamps and sconces added to the lighting.

Wanting to impress his guests, Elio had all the lights turned on, presenting a home of comfort and status—true *gentlemen* style.

My mother carefully managed the event: she ensured the servant Beppino wore white gloves without holes and that the refreshments followed English custom, avoiding pastries or cream-filled sweets, which might betray our standing.

Everything was going smoothly—until my grandfather appeared.
Without a word, he quickly counted the bulbs: thirty-six. Outrageous by his standards. Still silent, he switched off all but six, leaving the guests surprised and my brother humiliated, wishing he could vanish.

This mix of strangeness and contradiction, perhaps driven by unconscious complexes, also reflected my grandfather's absolute authority. After all, he owned the entire five-story building.
We lived on the ground floor; the servants occupied the basement.

The staff—valets, maids, the cook—referred to him as *the master*. My father was *the lawyer*, and we were *the young gentlemen*: "young master Elio" and "young master Renzo."
My mother was simply *the lady*.

Looking back, it all seems surreal—especially considering my parents claimed to be liberal and democratic. But only up to a point.

I remember a maid being fired on the spot for using the master bathroom instead of the one reserved for staff.
My mother often complained about servants who "answered back"—by which she meant they dared to explain or defend themselves instead of silently accepting a reprimand.

Yet this feudal severity was often offset by moments of genuine kindness: financial help for a maid's sister about to marry, concern for the staff's meals, and medical care with expensive medicine at the first sign of illness.

I never tried to understand these contradictions, but now, with distance, I think I can:
In my family's eyes, compassion should never be mistaken for equality.

"Everyone in their place," my mother used to say.

This principle applied even to those born into humble origins who had grown wealthy through business—or worse, through war.
"Upstarts in fancy clothes," my father would sneer. I suspect that behind his contempt lay a touch of envy for the wealth we lacked.

My family was of Sephardic Jewish origin—descended from Jews expelled from Spain—unlike the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe.
We considered ourselves the aristocracy of the Jewish world and viewed Ashkenazim as inferior: tradespeople rather than professionals or intellectuals.

Most Italian Jews were Sephardic, but if a Polish Jew appeared, my mother would remark:
"He's Ashkenazi—he's not a gentleman."

Even if someone pointed out that Einstein, Freud, or Marx were Ashkenazi, she'd counter:
"And what about Spinoza? Was *he* Ashkenazi?"

In our house, especially among my grandparents, conversation flowed in a mix of Italian, Spanish, and Hebrew. I never questioned it—it seemed normal, even practical, since the servants couldn't understand us.

My parents also used French frequently—perhaps to maintain an air of refinement.
When upset, my mother would exclaim, "*Mon Dieu!... Mon Dieu de la France!*"

We had a frequent visitor: Enrichino, a distant cousin of my father's. He was an elderly, slightly stooped man from a once-prosperous family, now living in genteel poverty.
He dressed modestly and often arrived unannounced, usually around lunchtime—meaning he'd stay to eat.

This irritated my father, who saw it as an imposition. My mother also complained, since feeding him required extra cooking, and we sometimes ended up half-hungry.

Enrichino loved to talk politics—especially about Giolitti. He also suffered from flatulence and made no effort to conceal it, even shifting in his chair for relief.

Elio was appalled and said we shouldn't let him visit when guests were around.
Once, my mother jokingly scolded Enrichino for his distinctly unrefined manners. He cheerfully

replied,
“Doesn’t Benedetto Croce do the same?”

To Elio’s protests, my mother responded,
“Say what you like—but you can’t deny that, deep down, Enrichino is a gentleman.”

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 2

When I was a boy, we used to vacation in Livorno. It was natural, because both of my parents were from Livorno, as were my paternal and maternal grandparents. Although I was born in Florence, part of me belongs to Livorno, which was constantly talked about in our home.

One of the favorite places for our summer holidays was Antignano, where we would stay at Hotel Cremoni, also known as "The Old Castle" because it had once been used as a fort to defend the city against pirate attacks. This hotel stood perched on a kind of promontory over the sea, at the point where the coastal road reached a curve. The cabins of the bathing establishment lined a short, rocky stretch between the cliffs; a creaky wooden walkway led to a circular platform on stilts. That's where mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and governesses would gather to gossip.

I don't know whether that sea really had any special characteristics. To me, it seemed like the only sea in the world, and I couldn't even imagine that others existed. There were no cars back then. Carriages and carts would raise great clouds of dust since the road wasn't paved, but nobody really cared. If someone praised other vacation spots on the Adriatic (Cesenatico was often mentioned), my mother would wrinkle her nose and say:
"Oh please. I know those places well and I don't like them, because the sun doesn't set over the sea but on the other side, and the twilight there makes me very sad."

Toward evening, the terrace of the Cremoni would come alive with preparations for dinner: the tables were set with immaculate tablecloths and the napkins stood upright on each plate, folded to look like a clown's cap. Mealtime was announced in two stages by a bell that could even be heard from the sea. The first ring was followed by a short chime to signal that there were about fifteen minutes to get ready. Then came the second ring with two sharp chimes at the end. My mother would shout to us kids:
"Come on, hurry up, they've already rung the 'second bell'!"

Sometimes my parents preferred to spend the summer (or at least part of it) in the city of Livorno, staying at the Pesaro Guesthouse, which I believe was on Via Goldoni. In hindsight, it was more of a "vacation" in name only, because the sea was far and we rarely went there. The aim of this "vacation" was simply to leave the house in Florence and get rid of the chores of family life for a few months.

The Pesaro Guesthouse was quite a peculiar place. It didn't accept just anyone—only people known and liked by the owner, Mrs. Norina Cabib, a large woman with an imposing chest that seemed to combine her oversized bosom into one massive bulwark, and a face with strong features that suggested a faded beauty, topped with a voluminous tangle of black hair—perhaps enhanced with wigs—arranged in tall spirals.

Mrs. Norina seemed the very symbol of abundance, and her monumental presence alone conveyed a sense of authority and power, like certain allegories and pictorial "triumphs" from the past. Despite her imposing figure, she had very kind manners, though also firm, to maintain order and efficiency among the service staff.

There were two elderly Livornese ladies who were permanent guests: Mrs. Clementina L.B. and Miss Carolina B., I believe distant relatives, who constantly argued. Mrs. Clementina was rarely seen because she spent most of the day in bed, all nicely coiffed, perfumed, and made-up to receive visitors. Miss Carolina, on the other hand, was more mobile, more active, involved in some kind of charitable organizations, feisty when needed, sharp-tongued, small, very agile, always wearing her signature cap. She walked around with a rattan cane, banging it on the ground as if to say, “Make way, I’m coming through.”

During the theater season, a young, already well-known actor named Luigi Cimara would come to the Pesaro Guesthouse—elegant and refined. He would go straight to the first floor, to Mrs. Clementina’s room, for endless games of écarté. Miss Carolina would instead entertain herself with the other guests in a small garden covered in fine pink gravel because, they said, the building had once housed a coral factory.

In those lazy Livornese summers, the accomplice to my first sexual stirrings was a variety theater whose name I no longer remember. When I had a couple of lire to spare, I would go see the shows: recitations by dramatic speakers, magicians, can-can-style dances, and above all the most anticipated act of the evening for an audience mostly made up of young dockworkers and sailors on leave: the performance by the *sciantosa* (a kind of cabaret singer and seductress). The theater was also attended by a few old ladies for whom the somewhat risqué, bawdy show was a kind of escape—and perhaps a reminder of their youth. There were also older men who would perk up at the sciantosa’s performances.

The venue had probably once been quite elegant, but by the time I knew it, it was almost a wreck—with sagging, broken armchairs, protruding springs, and walls that had once been gilded and lacquered now flaking and peeling. The velvet curtain was worn. But this atmosphere of decay perfectly matched the nature of the show.

This variety show was appealing precisely for its unpretentiousness, with just a hint of the forbidden. The audience matched the general mood with shouts and even obscene remarks directed at the performers, and it went wild when the sciantosa appeared—the highlight of the program. At her entrance, the crowd erupted in cries and jeers—I was never sure if they were of admiration or mockery, perhaps a bit of both. My young heart would pound, and my eyes would widen at the sight of this desired and forbidden fruit, without realizing how cheap the performance really was. The young men and sailors would egg the girl on to perform the “move,” and as a reward for the enthusiastic crowd, she would briefly reveal a bit of thigh or give a teasing wriggle that, for me, was incredibly exciting, though in reality quite vulgar.

When the show ended and the lights went out, I would remain dazed in the worn-out seat, hoping that, as if by miracle, the sciantosa would come down into the audience and let me at least touch her or feel her warm, provocative breath.

On the way out, I’d wonder what would be the most believable lie to tell my mother, who would be waiting anxiously for me at the Pesaro Guesthouse.

Livorno, the city where I recognized my true roots, remains in my mind through fragments of memories that resurface now and then like slides projected onto the opaque screen of time.

One very vivid memory is of certain long walks with my father along the seafront. When we reached an elegant little building near Ardenza, my father would look up, respectfully remove his hat, and make a slight bow to a beautiful woman on the balcony.

“My respects, Signora Tina… How are you?”

“Well, lawyer, and you?”

“Well, thank you.”

“That child is your son, isn’t he?… What’s his name?”

“His name is Renzo, but at home we call him Renzino.”

“Tell me, Renzino, are you a good boy?”

I didn’t know what to say, so my father answered for me:

“Well… not too bad… but sometimes, eh?…”
And the conversation would go on in this light tone. Then my father would explain to me that this beautiful lady was a great actress and the wife of another actor, Armando Falconi. Her name was Tina Di Lorenzo.

One day, my father came to the Pesaro Guesthouse with some small paintings wrapped in newspaper. They were Fattori’s panels, given to him by a client to settle a bill—he had to accept them for lack of anything better. My father knew nothing about painting and showed us the little pictures with a grimace.

“Just look,” he said in disgust, “what I had to accept from Commander F. after winning his case! They tell me this Fattori died penniless… I believe it! For this kind of garbage, they should’ve built him a monument?”

The monument to Fattori, despite my father’s sarcastic remarks, was erected by the people of Livorno, though many years later—I believe in 1925. In any case, the small paintings were hung in a dark corner of our house and stayed there for a while.

One day a man named Corbellini came to our house—a skinny junk dealer with a lazy eye, who collected all the useless and out-of-fashion items that ended up in the attic. While my mother was negotiating with Corbellini over the sale of a hideous marble statue (allegedly representing Cupid and Psyche), my father asked Corbellini if he wanted to buy the hated Fattori panels. Perhaps he wanted to recover part of the unpaid bill. The deal was quickly done: I remember that those panels were sold for 50 lire each.

The memory of Livorno was always kept alive through frequent encounters with old Livornese friends. While passing through Milan, around the late 1950s, I went to visit my friend Mario Borgiotti and to see once again his precious collection of 'Macchiaioli' in his studio on Via Manzoni. We went together to Livorno, and I accompanied him to visit several painters from the so-called Labronico group: Natali, Romiti, Rontini, and others. Romiti, for some reason, got it into his head that I was a relative of Modigliani and showed me an album of photographs of himself as a youth and a packet of letters from Modigliani sent from Paris.

"These letters," he said, waving the folder in the air, "I'm not giving them to anyone. They've already taken several from me under the pretense of writing biographies, but these I'm keeping until I die..."

Borgiotti asked him who he was working for at the time. Romiti said things were going very well because they were paying him eight thousand lire per panel. Borgiotti was annoyed and asked who these dealers were. Romiti named names. Borgiotti said:

“Listen, Mr. Gino, I’ll give you fifty thousand lire per panel and I’ll buy everything you can make, as long as you work only for me.”

Romiti almost fainted from emotion. That very evening, Borgiotti invited the dealers to dinner and, without much ceremony, at the end of the meal, told them:

“You should be ashamed of paying only eight thousand lire for the panels of a great master like Gino Romiti. Now the party’s over for you, because Mr. Gino works only for me.”

The dinner, which had started in high spirits, ended with many long faces.

Livorno also comes to mind because of another episode. Before leaving for the United States, in 1936 or so, a friend came to my house with a stunning blonde girl who looked Northern European but spoke with a strong Livornese accent. He told me she had come from Livorno to stay with a friend but had a violent argument with her. In the heat of the moment, she had left without even taking her things. Now she had no money and didn’t know where to sleep. She had run into my friend, who barely knew her, but he couldn’t host her since he lived with his parents. I was alone, so there were no obstacles. As he left, my friend winked at me as if to say: ‘Go for it.’

Naturally, I needed no encouragement. It was one of those dreary evenings with no special plans, and it’s not every day that such a tempting prey is brought to your doorstep. She had an exuberant but perfect body, incredibly blue eyes, a sensual mouth that looked as though it had been sculpted with a golden scalpel. Her messy platinum blonde hair falling over her forehead and the corduroy trousers with front pockets—uncommon at the time—suggested a decidedly unconventional lifestyle. The dull evening turned into an unexpected adventure.

I immediately tried to create a casual, intimate atmosphere by switching to the informal “tu,” which she returned right away. I was somewhat disappointed to see she was very tired and needed to catch up on sleep. I told myself: “Calm down. Stay cool and rein in those urges, or you’ll ruin everything.”

She was friendly and charming; it was clear she came from a good bourgeois family. I offered her a snack. Then she said:

“I’d love to go to sleep, I’m exhausted... But first, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a nice shower.”

“Make yourself at home,” I said, glad that she herself was setting a relaxed tone.

“Do you have plans for tomorrow?” I asked, trying to figure out how much time I had for my conquest.

“That depends on how things go with my friend.”

I gave her a bathrobe and a couple of terry towels, and she went straight to the bathroom without bothering to close the door, leaving it ajar. I was burning with desire to watch that shower, hoping to discover even more enticing surprises, but I restrained myself. I needed to earn her trust and not come across as too hasty. I only sneaked a few peeks through the crack in the door. I caught fleeting glimpses of her full breasts, her arms and thighs moving under the water. My desire thermometer soared like a raging fever, shivers of anticipated pleasure ran down my spine, and my sweaty hands trembled with emotion. But I held back. I randomly put a 78 rpm record on the turntable. It was 'Stardust', played by an orchestra. From the bathroom, I could hear her singing along in broken English, mingled with the sound of the water.

"You'll need pajamas," I called out. "You'll feel more comfortable."

"Thanks," her voice called back from the bathroom. "I'll be more relaxed in bed too."

Her accepting the pajamas gave me a perfect excuse to enter the bathroom and see her naked. But it seemed too easy a move, too cheap a trick. I preferred—though it pained me—to hand the pajamas to her through the partially open door. She barely reached out to take them, giving me only a brief flash of her arms and breasts.

Finally, she emerged from the bathroom wearing my pajamas, which were a bit tight around her chest and had sleeves that hung past her wrists.

"Where should I sleep…? I don't mind the sofa: I'm so tired I could sleep on the floor."

"Absolutely not," I reassured her. "There's a bed ready in the guest room. Let me show you."

I watched her, hoping for some subtle sign I could interpret as an invitation to join her in bed. Maybe she sensed it, because she quickly said:

"Sorry I won't keep you company, but I'm really beat. We'll talk tomorrow… Thanks for the hospitality."

The bed was freshly made, with the sheet folded hotel-style. It was already late spring, and the evening was warm. She lay down immediately on the flowered bedspread without even slipping under the sheets.

"Goodnight," I said. "Sweet dreams…"

She barely had time to reply, "Goodnight, and thank you."

Within seconds, she was already asleep.

That's when my anguished vigil began. I wanted to fall asleep too and wake up with her, after a restful night, sure that she would be more receptive. But how could I sleep when my burning desire kept all my faculties on edge and my body rebelled against such an unnatural frustration of the senses? I was alert to every sound, ready to spring into action at any sign of her waking. But all I heard were the occasional passing vehicles on the street or the whistle of trains from the nearby Campo di Marte station. Eyes wide open, I saw a pale dawn emerge in a gloomy, ghostly light filtering through the half-shuttered blinds. The city was waking up, the first trams began to rattle by, and the church bell sounded like a funeral toll when it should have welcomed a joyous morning after a night of intense pleasure. At that point, perhaps due to some mysterious biological rhythm, my desire gradually faded. I too had reached and passed the limit of exhaustion. I looked into the guest room and saw her still sleeping peacefully, just as I'd left her, her pyjama top open at the chest—perhaps she'd undone it in her sleep because of the

heat. She looked like she might sleep forever. I finally collapsed onto my own bed and, at last, fell asleep.

I was awakened around one in the afternoon by her silvery singing voice. She was already up, fully dressed, hair combed, face serene.

“I didn’t want to leave without thanking you,” she said sweetly. “I have to go to my friend’s place to pick up my things. I called her and we made peace. I’ll call you around five. If I end up staying longer in Florence, I’ll take advantage of your home—and your bed.”

The abrupt awakening after that anguished night left me a bit dazed. I felt generally weak, my mouth dry, and a bit nauseous. I said goodbye, and before leaving she gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek.

The call never came—neither at five nor later. I wasn’t upset. Maybe, now that the storm had passed, I no longer felt any desire. The frustration (certainly not the first, nor the last of my life) had strangely given way to a detached indifference.

Many years later, after my return from the United States, I saw her again—elegant—on Via Veneto in Rome, on the arm of a man slightly older than her. She recognized me first, greeted me, and introduced me to the man, who was her husband. She didn’t mention, not even indirectly, that she had become a famous figure in the world of cinema and theatre during those years.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 3

I still don't quite understand how I ended up in law school at university. The truth is, I never really attended school regularly. My mother was convinced I was in fragile health and needed a different lifestyle than other children my age. I was indeed delicate, prone to recurring low fevers, especially during puberty. But that was, at least in part, a result of the excessive care and poor diet typical of our household. Instead of strengthening me with sports, outdoor life, and proper food, my parents—well-meaning as they were—did the exact opposite. I was fed chicken breast, broths, light and easily digestible meals. Butter and cheese were banned by my grandfather and only available occasionally, in secret.

During the few months I attended the Michelangelo classical high school on Via della Colonna in Florence, I was the only student excused from gym class "for health reasons," thanks to the complicity of our family doctor, who wrote a certificate stating I was unfit for physical activity.

My mother grew increasingly convinced there was something wrong with me and decided to have me seen by a famous pediatrician of the time, Professor Comba. She had him come all the way from Bologna, likely spending four or five hundred lire—a considerable sum in those days. The professor looked like a priest in civilian clothes, or rather like one of those kindly uncles who occasionally visit their nephews with candy. He had a smiling face, like a confessor for children. He asked me many gentle questions, examined me thoroughly, then said: "This boy—his brain should be stored in a dresser drawer."

I liked this diagnosis because it credited me with a kind of "superior" intelligence, which perhaps my parents took a bit too literally. I certainly had all the traits of those children who are slow to develop physically and make up for it by thinking, brooding, asking questions. "Did you hear what Professor Comba said? Your brain belongs in a drawer," my mother would often repeat.

But instead of encouraging me to go out, walk, or play sports, she just kept repeating that phrase.

I never attended school for more than two or three months at a time. My mother wouldn't let me out if it was raining or windy, and so, after a few scattered attempts, I would drop out altogether. When the time came for exams to move up to the next grade, I would sit them as a private candidate, having been tutored at home by a teacher who charged five lire per lesson.

This tutor was named Guido Sorelli, a very eccentric man who often showed up either hours early or late, with no consistency. He gave me lessons in Latin and Italian; he was a great Latinist, but what I admired most was how skillfully he sharpened pencils with his little knife.

Not attending school regularly left me with the impression that I wasn't like other kids. It took a major change in my life to shake off that sense of inferiority. That happened when I was twenty-nine and left alone after my mother died. I was working as a lawyer in the office my father had left to me and my brother. I was also a university assistant, and I probably would have continued teaching if my life hadn't taken an unexpected turn with the implementation of the 1938 racial laws. Being Jewish, though not religiously observant, I was expelled from the bar and had to face serious hardship.

In the years before that, our home had become a gathering place for many anti-fascists. My friendship with well-known opponents of the regime made my situation even more dangerous. Still, I can't honestly say I was a committed anti-fascist myself. Yes, I disliked fascism—was even repelled by it in many ways—but not enough to actively fight it. My friends' anti-fascist outbursts made me more anxious than inspired.

One time, I really felt my political indifference—and my habit of addressing people formally with "lei" instead of the fascist-preferred "voi"—might get me into trouble. I was summoned by Pavolini, the Fascist Party leader in Florence, to the local headquarters on Via dei Servi. He said: "Young man, if you don't stop associating with certain people (and he listed names of my friends), we'll be forced to teach you a lesson. Watch yourself, or you'll be in serious trouble. Understood?"

I cowardly replied that it was all a misunderstanding, that I had nothing against the regime—quite the opposite... And that was the end of it. I left the building a bit shaken and was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of dread. I thought of my friends who were actually risking their lives fighting fascism. I thought of Nello Rosselli, who used to visit our house as a boy and would ask my mother, after drinking a raw egg: "Mrs. Adriana, may I lick the whisk?" He would tell us about his brother Carlo, living in exile in France. I felt small and somewhat cowardly. For a moment, I had the impulse to go back in and declare that I didn't support the regime at all. But it was only a moment—because that evening I had plans with Gwendoline (a Florentine girl who would later play an important role in my life), and that seemed far more important than whatever was going on in Rome at Palazzo Venezia.

One sweltering Sunday afternoon, we were playing poker at the home of my friend Guido C., another lawyer and avid card player. His mother, a dignified yet stern woman, disapproved of our gatherings. During the game, she burst into the smoky room and ordered us to stop playing and listen to the "Duce's" speech from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia—it was some kind of major Fascist anniversary, I forget which. "It's disgraceful," she said, "that you're playing cards while Mussolini is about to speak to the Italian people. He's the man who saved Italy from communism. You should be grateful."

At the time, we didn't really concern ourselves with such nuances—especially not in the middle of a game. Still, grudgingly, we made our way to the sitting room, where a few people were already gathered around the radio, which was playing triumphant marches in anticipation of the speech. Finally, silence fell, and Starace announced Mussolini's imminent appearance. From the background noise, you could tell Piazza Venezia was packed. A roar went up, signaling the Duce had stepped onto the balcony. But he didn't start talking right away. Several minutes passed with applause and chants of "Duce! Duce!" We, meanwhile, were itching to get back to our game. Those minutes felt endless, and as we waited, we quietly commented on the highlights of the interrupted match.

"You could at least have the decency to be quiet!" scolded our host's mother.

At last, the speech began. I don't remember the exact words, but the gist was: "We are here today to celebrate this great anniversary." That one sentence triggered another ten minutes of applause and cries of "Duce! Duce!" "I promise you," he continued solemnly, "that ten years from now we will be back here in this same square to mark another historic milestone of the Fascist revolution." The word "Fascist" was pronounced "Fasist" in his thick Romagnol accent.

Even though he had said nothing of substance, the reaction was overwhelming. The ability to give weight to empty words was confirmed by the reaction of Mrs. C., who said as we quietly returned to the poker table: “Take note! Now those are real men!”

A good part of my free time was devoted to gambling. The *pokerini*—which often turned into real *pokeroni*—were the most sought-after pastime for spending the evenings, and often the nights.

Had it all remained limited to games among friends, the damage would have been minimal. Since the players were always the same, the losses and gains would usually balance out over a few weeks. The real trouble started when I began frequenting gambling houses: the Casino in Sanremo and, especially, the one at the Lido in Venice.

My excessive passion for gambling had worsened after the death of my mother, the last remaining member of my family. My brother had gotten married in the meantime, and I was left alone, deeply anguished: gambling became the most effective (and of course the worst) way to distract myself. I still can’t understand how I managed to get through a day of work—earning barely a few dozen lire—after losing hundreds gambling. Work had become a psychological torment.

My brother Elio had specialized in matrimonial law, leaving me with the rest of the clients. He focused mainly on marriage annulments and soon became one of the most well-known experts in the field. In the meantime, he had married the daughter of a prominent jurist, Professor Federico Cammeo, considered a luminary in administrative law. Following the Lateran Pacts, which resulted in the Concordat of 1929, Professor Cammeo was appointed by the Holy See to draft the legislation that would govern certain relations between the Vatican State and the Kingdom of Italy. Once the work was completed, the issue arose of whether—and how much—he should request from the Holy See as compensation.

At the time, I was regularly visiting the Cammeo household, and the matter of the fee to present to the Vatican had become a common topic of conversation, with everyone offering their opinion. The question was whether, having had the honor—he, a Jew—of handling the concordat laws, it was proper and appropriate to present an invoice to the Holy See like one would to any other client, or whether it would be more respectful to wait for them to offer something of their own accord. There were also discussions with other prominent lawyers from the Florence bar. Piero Calamandrei, a staunch anti-Fascist and anticlerical, who certainly had not approved of his esteemed colleague’s involvement in what he saw as a harmful agreement, advised Cammeo not to be too delicate and to demand a very large sum—almost as a form of silent revenge against the clergy. Others, however, believed that the prestige of such an appointment was reward enough and that the fee should be modest. A third group leaned toward refusing any payment at all, arguing that this was, after all, a truly exceptional “client.”

Eventually, after further stalling, when the Secretary of the new Vatican State finally requested the long-debated invoice, it was decided to forgo any remuneration. A well-known anti-Fascist and anticlerical lawyer from Florence, upon learning of the professor’s decision, quipped: “Cammeo may be a great jurist, but he’s a real fool. If I were in his place, I’d have sent those priests a bill that would strip them bare!”

After the carefully drafted and repeatedly revised letter of refusal, the Pope had a large gold medal sent to Cammeo, enclosed in one of those silk-lined cases with padding and bearing an appropriate inscription.

It was an honorary medal of which only a very limited number had been awarded, to figures of exceptional status such as the King, Marconi, Mussolini himself, and very few others. Cammeo was extremely pleased.

Soon afterward, Mussolini launched his famous campaign for "donating gold to the Fatherland" to finance the conquest of Abyssinia. The press and all available means of communication quickly aligned themselves with massive propaganda. Housewives gave up their wedding rings, sports champions donated medals and trophies, even goldsmiths contributed boxes full of watches and other items. Anyone unwilling to join the initiative was careful not to appear in public with any gold objects. Even displaying a cigarette case—plated or not—was seen as a sign of anti-Fascism.

This raised the issue of the large gold medal the Pope had given to Professor Cammeo. Discussions within the family and beyond flared up again. I personally witnessed many of them. As always, opinions were divided. Some argued that the medal represented recognition for a historic event (the Concordat) and therefore did not fall under the category of items to be donated; others believed that precisely because of that, the donation would carry particularly significant symbolic weight.

After much hesitation, the professor decided to make the grand gesture. The press didn't miss the opportunity to highlight it. Headlines read: *"Professor Cammeo, with exemplary Fascist spirit, donates a valuable gold medal received from His Holiness."*

After the solemn and widely publicized handover of the medal, the professor received a curt notice from the Fascist federation informing him that the gift could not be accepted, as the medal was allegedly gold-plated rather than solid gold.

Recently, Lisa Cammeo Manci—Professor Cammeo's daughter and my brother's ex-wife—informed me that she had the medal tested and found it to be made of the purest gold. So why did the Fascists return it to Cammeo, claiming it was only plated? Considering the state of Church–State relations in the mid-1930s, they must have had their reasons.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 4

My sexual life started late. My parents, according to the norms of that time, had never spoken to me about it. Even the symptoms of puberty were delayed. At the age of fifteen, I had only a few hairs on my pubic area and underarms. My mother, worried, took me to Professor Frugoni, who practiced in Florence at that time and had an office and residence in Piazza Indipendenza. The diagnosis was reassuring. I was prescribed a treatment to stimulate my physical development, which, frankly, was showing no signs of virility. Yet deep down, I strongly desired to feel like a man. While many of my peers were already shaving, I saw no growth at all. Advertisements in the newspapers praised the benefits of Migone Quinine Water for promoting hair growth. I thought that perhaps it could help me, stimulating the desired fuzz on my upper lip.

I began a diligent and conscientious treatment, rubbing my face with a cotton ball soaked in that water, but it yielded no benefit. Every time I saw my brother shaving, I felt an indescribable envy. By now, my sexual urges had become normal, but I didn't understand why I lacked secondary sexual characteristics like a beard or mustache. Besides, I wasn't the only one in this situation. Giorgio B., a classmate of mine, also had a smooth face like mine. A kind of competition developed between us. We reached the point of examining each other with magnifying glasses to look for any sign of hair. G.B. was a handsome, tall, blonde guy who, unlike me at the time, was very popular with girls. This, in a way, reassured me, because it meant that one could succeed in love even with a smooth face. He ended up winning the competition, but I remember the internal dissatisfaction and the joy I felt when I started shaving too. I had finally won the battle for what I thought was the ultimate seal of masculinity: the thought of being in any way effeminate terrified me, though I don't know why.

I had my first sexual experience when I was perhaps sixteen, rather late compared to the norm. In the 1920s, the period I'm referring to, it wasn't easy to get girls from good families into bed. Some of my friends succeeded, but they were isolated cases. We settled for kisses, hugs, and caresses on the most sensitive parts of the body. Sometimes, with the more free-spirited and eager ones, we even reached the point of mutual masturbation. This led to a sense of frustration and incompleteness. When one of us regularly dated a girl, everyone wanted to know about their real relationship. The responses from those involved were unreliable because they either boasted openly about successes no one else believed, or they responded with silence and a half-smile of superiority, leaving the mystery intact.

Naturally, there were always brothels, or "casini" as they were known. In Florence, there were places for all budgets. The cheapest ones cost five liras, but these were places for soldiers on leave who weren't too concerned about quality. Ten liras would get you a more respectable place, as it offered some privacy with separate rooms. However, when there were too many clients, even these could end up with you being put in a room with others, which was not very pleasant. Then, there were places costing twenty or thirty liras, and there was even one that charged fifty. The more modest and poorly frequented brothels were located in narrow alleys and poorer neighborhoods, while the more expensive ones operated in more upscale areas.

I lived on Via Giovanni Bovio, a neighborhood considered very respectable, made up mostly of small villas and low-rise buildings, almost all belonging to professionals or, in any case, to people from the "good bourgeoisie"—those people my family would classify as “gentlefolk.” Yet, since I was a child, I had secretly learned from my parents’ conversations that there was a brothel, or more precisely, a “house of appointments,” in a villa at the corner of Via Giovanni Bovio and Viale Mazzini.

From my terrace, which overlooked the garden, you could see the windows, which also faced a small garden. I spent hours trying to uncover the mysteries hidden behind those windows—something that felt forbidden to me and was thus all the more fascinating. Every evening, whenever a light turned on in a room, I would sharpen my gaze, hoping to glimpse something. But there were always the usual “curtains,” always closed. At most, I could make out vague shadows that certainly didn’t satisfy my indiscreet desires. When I was caught by my mother watching toward that infamous villa, I would be immediately sent away with some excuse.

In the garden of that house, there was also a small pergola accessed by a ladder, very close to one of my house’s balconies. But both the garden and the pergola were always deserted. This unusual fact reinforced the theory that the villa was indeed the site of sinful activities.

Then the villa was sold, and a lawyer moved in. But the doubt remained. Around the age of fifteen, my repressed sexual urges made me extremely irritable. An older friend of my brother came to my aid, taking me to the brothel of a certain Maurisette on Via Santa Reparata. At that age, I was very shy about these matters, and the idea of meeting a paid woman terrified me. This well-meaning friend had already taken me to the brothel several times to help me resolve my sexual issues with my first proper sexual experience, but at the last moment, I would panic and refuse to face this important step in my life. I was mostly afraid of appearing much younger than my real age. I wondered if, despite my friend’s help, they would allow me in. I also worried about how to behave with the woman.

Finally, I decided. The madam, Maurisette, seeing that I was still under the legal age of eighteen, stayed at the window, peering through the half-open blinds to make sure that the dreaded “round” or the doctor for the routine checkup didn’t arrive. If that happened, there would be trouble for everyone. Nothing like that occurred, and the psychological effect of that first sexual experience was extremely positive for me.

At last, I could say I truly felt like a man. Once the ice was broken, my ambition would have been to have one of those classic voluptuous maids at home, always ready to give herself. But that dream never came true. My mother—perhaps precisely to avoid complications of that kind—always hired women who were either unattractive or too old for my tastes. So, the only alternative remained the brothel. And it stayed that way for quite a while, as I grew more and more dissatisfied with having to rely on paid sex, while some of my peers managed to sort things out with a cooperative female friend.

I had many female friends; some even claimed to care about me, but when it came down to it, they had no intention of sleeping with me. Maybe because I wasn’t physically attractive, and they preferred to keep me as their “best friend” while sleeping with someone else—maybe less nice, but someone they felt more drawn to. The greatest victory of my life wasn’t earning my degree or winning my first court case, but the first time a girl (her name was Pina) gave herself to me completely. But even that was a Pyrrhic victory, which quickly turned into a psychological defeat, because I didn’t love her—actually, I found her unpleasant. She didn’t even match my

physical ideal: she wasn't ugly, but she was skinny and slight, with a flat chest, a boyish body, and a light fuzz on her thin legs. The fact that she was "eager" or, as they used to say, "good in bed" and always willing, instead of making up for her flaws, made them even harder to tolerate. And when I realized she was secretly hoping for a relationship, I didn't hesitate to break things off.

I had no choice but to go back to the brothels. One that was particularly popular was Madame Sappho's, tucked away in a small alley off Via Tornabuoni, the most elegant street in town. The rate was thirty lire (twenty for students). That's where many of our nights ended, after a movie or dinner—even if many of us didn't "go through with it," and just hung around, as we used to say, "doing nothing." Madame Sappho's was a warm, welcoming place, where you were treated with great courtesy. It had a reputation for being one of the best "houses" in Italy in terms of its "residents"—always beautiful women, never vulgar. No one was allowed in if the rooms were all occupied, to avoid awkward encounters.

For us young guys, being seen coming or going didn't matter much, but for others, discretion was essential. One evening, some high school friends and I came face-to-face with our history teacher—over fifty years old—as he was walking out just as we were going in. After a brief moment of awkwardness, we couldn't help but greet him:

"Good evening, Professor..."

"What professor?" he replied with a shrug. "In the brothel, we're all the same! Good night, boys—see you in class tomorrow."

He was usually quite a strict teacher. But from that day on, he seemed a bit more lenient: something had united us and put us on the same level. That episode was never brought up again—neither by him nor by us.

Naturally, women weren't allowed into these places. One time we had a close call. A girl from a very respectable family begged us to take her to Madame Sappho's dressed as a man. At the entrance—always pretty dimly lit—no one noticed. But once inside, the disguise was spotted. Nothing happened. In fact, the madam and the girls found it all rather amusing.

Out of caution, they kept the visit short, in case the police decided to show up. As we were leaving, our well-bred friend said, "I really envy them. I'd love to be one of them." It wasn't surprising, considering that she'd shown clear signs of nymphomania from a very young age. I'll have occasion to speak of her again, as she would become a very important figure in my life.

The so-called "appointment houses" were very different from brothels, even if the ultimate goal was the same. These were private homes serving a small, select clientele, without any kind of medical oversight. They arranged meetings with girls, and often with married women, acting—let's say—as intermediaries or, to put it bluntly, as procuresses. These houses were almost always run by aging former prostitutes. An internal hierarchy determined the pricing. Unlike the legal brothels, these places could sometimes set up encounters with women considered completely above suspicion. You were far more likely to catch gonorrhea in these private houses than in the more modest but regulated brothels.

A friend of mine, from old Florentine nobility and a regular at a certain Giovanna—well known in Florence for her limitless ability to satisfy the most refined tastes—once admitted, without shame, that he'd been offered his own wife, via a photograph, for the price of two hundred lire.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 5

Many foreigners lived in Florence, bringing with them the traditions and customs of their own countries. After the First World War, and especially during the 1920s, young men from Florence's respectable bourgeoisie would pursue American women, from whom they learned a somewhat rough version of English.

American women were considered the easiest prey. In reality, that wasn't the case. There was much more freedom of manners among German, Scandinavian, and English women than among the Americans. The latter, in fact, arrived in Italy carrying the cliché of the "Latin lover"—the unscrupulous seducer they were taught to beware of. As a result, they were always on guard, to the point of dancing with Italian men in a completely unusual manner: instead of pressing their bodies against their partner, as was common among Italians, they kept a proper distance. The "cheek-to-cheek" position was tolerated, but closeness—or worse, contact—between the more compromising parts of the body was considered improper and dangerous.

Florence at that time was a *sui generis* city, even contradictory. To the provincial aspects of small towns—with their gossip, petty rivalries, and often backward ideas—it added the qualities of a center with a high intellectual level and great Renaissance traditions, where anything and its opposite could happen.

Distinguished foreigners lived there, having secured the most beautiful villas in the surrounding hills: Fiesole, Bellosguardo, Arcetri. The villa "I Tatti," where Bernard Berenson had settled, possessed the opulence and natural charm of Medici-era Florence. An English writer who had lived for forty years in a splendid villa near the Certosa once told me:
"Florence is without a doubt the most beautiful city in the world. Too bad there are too many foreigners."
I pointed out to her that, in that season (it was winter), there really weren't that many. She quickly replied:
"You misunderstood me: I meant there are too many Florentines."

Near my home on Via Giovanni Bovio lived writers, poets, essayists, painters, sculptors, critics, and musicians. Tram no. 6, which served my neighborhood, was frequented by all kinds of people: one would often run into Giovanni Papini, Piero Calamandrei, Eugenio Montale (who lived in Florence at the time), Arturo Loria, Primo Conti, Emilio Cecchi, Ardengo Soffici, Ottone Rosai, Luigi Dallapiccola, Marino Marini, along with a host of distinguished doctors, aristocrats, and lawyers—a true little traveling salon, where greetings, bows, brief conversations, and sometimes heated discussions took place, often cut short—but also saved—by the brevity of the ride.

I rarely went out with my father, much more often with my maternal uncle, a highly cultured man who, never needing to work for a living, had spent his life reading and studying.

Often, on tram no. 6, my uncle would point out an ugly man, with crooked teeth sticking out of his mouth, modestly dressed, wearing a battered old hat, and with watery pale eyes behind a pair of incredibly thick nearsighted glasses. This man was always accompanied by his daughter, a little girl who, though pretty, looked just like him.

The man would stand on the rear platform of the tram, always reading a book despite the jolts. “You see,” my uncle would say admiringly, “that’s Giovanni Papini: a genius.” I barely looked at him, unconvinced. Papini lived on Via Colletta, at number 10. When we passed by, my uncle would glance toward the windows and murmur to himself: “I wonder what Papini is writing right now!”

Since I was a child, I had always seen America as a myth, a kind of distant earthly paradise, destined to remain in the world of dreams—unreachable. My brother Elio, on the other hand, had always been an Anglophile. He admired England’s traditions, fashion, and refined customs. He didn’t realize—nor did I, even less so, being eight years younger—what an enormous privilege it was to live in a city like Florence.

In fact, our secret desire was to leave a city we judged to be small, provincial, and lacking the kind of circulation of ideas we believed existed in other countries.

In that Florence—at once provincial, snobbish, gossipy, and warm; cosmopolitan yet inward-looking; friendly but often dark with resentments and rivalries, a little quarrelsome and a little good-natured—I spent the formative years of my life. When I came into contact with other social realities, I tried to shake off a certain way of thinking and judging, but I never fully succeeded: Florence, for better or worse, has always remained under my skin.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 6

When I was a child, my maternal grandfather had bought a villa in Chianti with seventeen farms, near San Casciano in Val di Pesa. To me, it seemed like a palace, but in reality, it wasn't anything truly beautiful: it was just one of many Tuscan country houses, lacking both style and that rustic character typical of peasant homes. It was large and spacious, with arches and staircases (and little stairways) that revealed a somewhat irrational layout and a building structure that made it uncomfortable. Naturally, back in those years before the First World War, when my grandfather bought it, there was no electricity or running water—let alone heating, which relied on a couple of poorly functioning fireplaces that filled the rooms with smoke.

In the evenings, lit by candlelight, that summer residence became filled with shadows projected on the lime-washed walls, creating mysterious effects—as if it were inhabited by dark phantoms. The silence and isolation of the countryside, instead of being relaxing, filled me—still a small child—with unsettling and gloomy thoughts. I often heard the eerie call of an owl or other nocturnal animals. Fortunately, sleep would interrupt these visions, and the first rays of the sun, along with the crowing of roosters announcing the new day, would drive away the dark thoughts born in the night.

This residence, far from luxurious (which my grandfather had named "Villa al Leccio" after a large holm oak that stood in the garden), certainly didn't look like the center of a property with seventeen farms, each with its own farmhouse for the farmers and their families. My uncle had modernized the estate only from an agricultural standpoint: the olive mill, the rabbit hutches, the large wine cellars—which were said to be among the most modern of the time. There was a lot of livestock and various threshing machines, still quite rare at the time. We also had a stable with a donkey and a thoroughbred horse, various carts, and an elegant "charrette" that my uncle used to attend horse races in Florence. Even the villa itself reflected the contradictions in our family: a modern agricultural business, but an unsuitable manor house.

At the entrance gate was a stone inscribed with "Villa al Leccio Benadì-Nissim," the names of my uncle and my mother, to whom my grandfather had entrusted the property. The entire management was left to my uncle Alberto. He was the one who had many of the farmers' houses built, some designed in a modern way—far more rational and livable than the villa itself, with its crumbling walls, somewhere between gray and yellow, a sign of dampness and neglect.

Every decision about the estate was his.
"We need to check with Alberto," my grandfather would say whenever a change was proposed. "He decides."

This favorite son was, for my grandfather, almost an extension of himself. He had even forgiven him for never finishing his engineering studies—abandoned just before graduation due to a crush on a foreign girl of questionable reputation. Everything settled down when Uncle Alberto married a girl from the wealthy Jewish upper middle class of Ferrara, very rich and socially irreproachable.

The only one who disapproved of the marriage was my mother, who was very attached to her brother—perhaps a bit too much. She felt that her new sister-in-law was "stealing" the affection

of her only sibling. There was probably, along with jealousy, some resentment at having to accept into the family a girl from a much wealthier background. The antipathy was so strong that she repeatedly described her as a complete goose—unattractive and sustained only by her father's wealth.

"Sure, they're rich," my mother would say, "but they're not real ladies and gentlemen."

Judgments and opinions that were completely unfair. Relations between the two sisters-in-law were always strained, and I must admit that it was due to my mother's persistent refusal to accept this aunt—who, truthfully, had never done anything wrong to us. My mother, a woman of exquisite sentiment and undeniable gentleness, felt such a deep dislike for her that it bordered on hatred.

I never wondered why. Everything that happened in the family, I accepted without question. My relationship with my aunt and cousins was perfectly normal. We cousins saw each other almost daily, since our homes were very close, while our mothers never spoke. If they happened to meet—at a funeral, for instance, or some other unavoidable event—they completely ignored each other.

In summer, both families were forced to live under the same roof at Villa al Leccio, though in separate and well-defined wings. My mother didn't want my aunt sitting in the shared courtyard's shade, and to prevent it, she would get there first and hang the laundry. My aunt retaliated by dumping trash outside my mother's bedroom window. Those petty acts made the summer holidays tense, even though we children, to be honest, didn't take it too seriously. That's just how it was, and it seemed normal.

They tried to solve the situation by using the villa in alternating seasons, but it didn't work—both families wanted to vacation in the same months. Another idea was for one family to buy out the other's share. But of course, my mother would never give up a property left to her by her father in favor of someone she saw as an interloper.

Eventually, to end an unbearable situation, they decided to sell the villa. The sale happened at a very unfortunate time. The villa and farmland were sold to a newly rich butcher for 400,000 lire. Not long after, it was resold for three times that amount.

We were saddened to give up those long holidays in one of the most beautiful areas of Chianti—especially the grape harvest season, complete with inevitable grape-induced stomach aches. That little road from San Casciano to La Romola, lined with villas and rows of cypresses; the Tuscan dignity of the farmhouses; the farmers offering us homemade bread, polenta, and delicious cheeses… all of it suddenly disappeared from our lives. At first, we suffered, but children forget quickly.

For summer vacations, we chose other places in Tuscany: sea, mountains, hills. But we never became attached to any of them, because none ever felt like ours. Looking back now, I realize those long months of isolation at the villa were, in the end, less fun and varied than the holidays spent in hotels or boarding houses, where we made new friends, had livelier interactions, and enjoyed more cheerful evenings.

But as usual, none of these thoughts even crossed my mind at the time. I accepted everything life gave me as if it were exactly how things were meant to be.

My mother used to say, “Renzino can do anything—he’ll have no trouble in life.”
And my uncle Alberto, convinced I was some kind of child prodigy, would add, “He has an exceptional mind—he’s a true eclectic.”

But this tendency of mine to pursue a thousand things at once didn’t always help me. My legal career was never really in question, but my passion for music—especially jazz—took up much of my free time. I played the piano fairly well by ear and enjoyed composing little tunes.

Meanwhile, I had also developed a passion for photography. I started with an old Miürer box camera with glass plates that had belonged to my father—it still took beautiful photos. Then I moved on to a Vest Pocket Kodak, the famous fold-out pocket camera, one of the first to use film. I was so proud of it. I’d tell my friends, “With this very camera, Cecil Beaton—the greatest photographer in the world—took his best pictures.”

At home, I had set up a fully equipped photo lab for developing and printing, despite my mother’s protests—she used that little room as a storage closet for old things she couldn’t bring herself to throw out: broken lamps, busted chairs, threadbare blankets, and a vast collection of outdated books and encyclopedias.

Even writing was among my “eclectic” pursuits. Since I was a boy, I occasionally contributed to *La Lettura*, *La Scena Illustrata*, and even a few newspapers like *La Nazione* in Florence. I’d find inspiration everywhere to write five or six pages, which were almost always published, with payments ranging from ten to thirty lire.

Another one of my many activities was playing piano on Radio Florence, which had just begun broadcasting. I’d perform short jazz pieces, some of them my own compositions. The idea came from the station director, Franco Passigli. The program was titled *Renzo Nissim at the Piano*.

“Unfortunately, I can’t pay you,” he said apologetically. “But I hope you won’t mind if I give you five lire per performance…”

And to keep that amount from seeming like an insult, he added:
“For your travel expenses.”

Of course, I walked to the EIAR headquarters, which was then located on Via Rondinelli.

My mother was a bit concerned about how scattered my efforts were—she would have preferred I focused entirely on my law studies at the university. But my uncle kept saying, “Let him be. He’s an eclectic.”

My father, constantly buried in paperwork from morning to night, viewed my future with a certain detachment. He was far more invested in my brother Elio’s path—justifiably so, as Elio was seen as the natural heir to the family’s law practice.

The activity that stayed with me longest—basically all my life—was the worst and most dangerous: gambling. I only gave it up after I got married and had children. But I have to admit, I experienced some of the most thrilling, emotionally intense nights of my life at the card table. If I were to be born again, I think I’d start over exactly the same way.

One field I almost completely neglected was sports. I did occasionally go skiing with friends, especially to Abetone, but I was always a terrible skier—I lived in fear of breaking a leg, as often happened to others.

My friend Guido—the one whose mother admired Mussolini—talked me into spending a month in Abetone, staying with an old local family, the Seghis. No heating—just a fireplace on the ground floor. In the morning, they brought us a jug of water to wash with, because the water in the room was frozen solid. At night, the bed was heated with a "prete," a kind of warming pan with coals suspended in a wooden frame.

After that month of rustic living, I returned to Florence tanned and full of energy—but my skiing hadn't improved one bit.

Everyone in the Seghi household skied. Even the youngest, Celina—she couldn't have been more than four or five—performed feats on two wooden planks shaped into skis, made by her father and strapped to her little feet with makeshift bindings. I envied her! Twenty years later, I saw the name Celina Seghi in the newspaper—she had become one of the world's greatest ski champions.

In 1938, on a hot summer evening, as we were leaving the office on Via Calzaiuoli with some colleagues, we heard a newspaper vendor on the corner of Via de' Tosinghi shouting: "Extra edition! The laws against the Jews!" He kept repeating it with the sing-song tone typical of newsboys. We looked at each other, stunned. Further along, toward Piazza del Duomo, other street sellers were repeating the subtitle: "Jews do not belong to the Italian race! Jews do not belong to the Italian race!" The tone and cadence betrayed no emotion.

There was no conviction in their voices, no patriotic fervor. The sole aim was to sell as many copies as possible of that special edition of *La Nazione*. Whether Jews did or didn't belong to the Italian race was of no concern to the vendors. To them, it was just another headline, to be announced with total detachment.

We argued about it late into the night, with both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, trying to understand the true meaning of this law. The regime's anti-Semitic campaign had already been underway for some time—that much was clear. Yet some still held onto the illusion that Mussolini's hostility toward Italian Jews—then about one in every thousand people, roughly fifty thousand individuals, all perfectly integrated—was more formal than real. Many thought Mussolini was only taking that stance to please his German ally, not out of personal conviction. They recalled his reassuring comments in conversations with Ludwig and believed it was more talk than substance.

The so-called "racial laws" shattered those illusions—even for the most optimistic. In fact, politicians weren't the only ones behind it: several "intellectuals" had already signed a document asserting what the law would go on to formalize—that Italians of Jewish origin, whether religious, secular, or even Catholic converts, could not enjoy the same rights as those descended from the legions of ancient Rome. In fact, they couldn't even be considered true Italian citizens.

I'll try to devote as little space as possible to this episode. Talking about it bothers me, and my mind even resists remembering the details. I mention it only to explain the reasons that pushed my life in a completely unexpected direction. I'll add just a few words. Strangely, everyone who spoke with me about the "racial laws" that night—and in the following days—did so calmly and rationally. It was clearly a very serious issue, but one to be faced with a cool head.

"A soap bubble," some said. "A farce!"

“Yeah, a farce that’ll cost us dearly—more like a bombshell than a bubble!” another shot back.

“I’m leaving,” I said. “As soon as I can. Honestly, the thought of leaving this provincial city feels like a relief. I need fresh air!”

“Don’t overreact,” said Gualtiero N., a dear school and leisure friend, and the only real Fascist among us. “It’s just a political move. And besides, you can always apply to be ‘exempted for special merit.’”

“I don’t want to be ‘exempted’—I don’t want to be pardoned like a criminal. I’m going to America. Best of luck to those who stay!”

But to explain the deeper, more personal reasons behind my irreversible decision to go to America, I need to go back a little further. Only then will it be clear what was truly stirring inside me at that moment.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 7

I don't exactly know what it means to be in love.

It can mean many different things, and I don't want to go into a long discussion about love or falling in love, especially since I'd likely end up repeating the usual clichés and textbook definitions about what is perhaps the most complex mystery of human relationships.

If by "being in love" we mean an intense longing for someone's company and the desire for a complete, total connection with them, then yes—when I was around twenty, I was without a doubt in love with Gwendoline, a girl of extraordinary beauty, daughter of an American mother and an Italian father. She lived in a beautiful villa in San Domenico, just below Fiesole.

She was born and raised in the United States, where she had lived until she was fifteen or sixteen with her mother's relatives. When she arrived in Florence, everyone was enchanted: blonde, with sky-blue eyes, a perfect face, delicate features—just a hint of a smile from her small mouth was enough to captivate. She was fairly tall, but not enough to be intimidating. Her body was stunning in its perfection—both mature and still youthful at the same time. As teenagers, we all dream of our "ideal type," and almost never do we find them. Gwendoline was mine. I met her for the first time at a small party at the home of mutual friends, just a few days after she arrived from America. I felt like Saul on the road to Damascus: it was a divine vision. I still remember her antique pink velvet dress, hugging her body, with a neckline that, for the time, was quite daring—it revealed a glimpse of her high, firm chest, a slim waist, and full, splendid hips. She was the woman I had dreamed of throughout my adolescent fantasies.

I was so overwhelmed that at our first meeting, I couldn't utter a single word.
The final blow came from her voice—unparalleled in its musicality and sweetness. Her Italian, laced with English, only added to her charm. Gwendoline radiated an innocent purity, an angelic modesty, a virginal restraint—like a cherub who had descended from heaven. And that serene, immaculate beauty shook me so deeply that it blocked any immediate sexual instinct.

Strangely, meeting the woman of my dreams didn't bring me joy, but rather confusion—even a kind of anguish: like someone who, after years of searching for treasure, finally finds it and realizes it will never be theirs.

It wasn't easy to see her again. I was convinced I could never win her over—let alone her love, not even the smallest interest. Gwendoline was pursued by young men far more impressive than I.
One day, after countless attempts, I managed to get invited to her house. I found her alone, listening to *Mood Indigo* by Duke Ellington. That's how we discovered a shared passion: jazz. Gwendoline had brought rare records from America: Bessie Smith recordings, Armstrong's earliest work, and a piano solo by trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke that sent me into rapture. It was called *In a Mist*, and after listening, I said:
"I'll try to play it on the piano."
"Really? You can play?"
"I manage," I replied, feigning modesty—though in truth, I arrogantly considered myself the best jazz pianist in Florence.
"Then come with me—there's a piano in the other room. It's a little out of tune, but that's fine."

From that day forward, jazz became the glue between us. We'd meet with other jazz-loving friends and spend hours listening to records. Our discussions, comparisons, and debates went on late into the night. My tastes always matched Gwendoline's. When I played, she would correct me, point out the right chords, and offer truly helpful advice.

For a long time, during that early phase of our relationship, we never spoke of love, much less of sex. We hadn't even shared the most innocent kiss. But as our meetings became more frequent and intimate, physical desire began to stir in me.

Despite her young age, Gwendoline had a lot of freedom—her family barely paid attention to her. She went out with everyone, and I was just one of many. Naturally, I was jealous—terribly jealous. I wanted to be the only one driving her around in my beat-up Fiat 514. I consoled myself by thinking that none of my "rivals" were getting more than I was. I was convinced her virginity was intact and untouchable. How could such a pure creature possibly give herself to someone else? I didn't realize how illogical my thinking was.

We shared our first kiss on a sweet spring evening, in front of the gate to her villa, after seeing *Capriccio Spagnolo* at the cinema—a film starring Marlene Dietrich, based on the novel *La femme et le pantin*, accompanied by a famous piece by Granados.
"Do you really care about me?" I asked.
"Why are you asking such silly questions?" she replied. "No one makes me feel the way you do."
"And… the others?"
"What do they have to do with it? You're you. No one understands me like you do. And no one gets jazz like you do."

Driving home, I realized that this platonic relationship wasn't enough anymore. My desire for a real, physical bond had become too strong. Opportunities weren't lacking. At that time, I was sharing an apartment on Via dei Della Robbia with Emilio Ambron, a painter friend. Gwendoline would often come over, and we'd spend hours lying on the same bed, listening to music.
And yet, for a long time, nothing physical happened. One time, after a hesitant attempt on my part, she told me:
"Renzo, darling, why ruin this beautiful connection between us? We don't need sex. We care about each other too much."
"But do you sleep with the others?"
"What does it matter? You know I care about you."
And she would leave me in doubt—a tormenting, gnawing doubt.
Being with other women didn't help; it made things worse.
I knew that if I had insisted, Lilla (as we called her) would have given in—but that wasn't what I wanted anymore. I wanted her to want it too, to ask for it. A pity-based encounter would have disgusted me.

I remember a Saturday night. We were alone in the San Domenico villa. Her parents were in the United States. The servants had already gone to bed. Outside, it was pouring and cold—a sharp wind blew down from the mountains over Florence. Seeing the weather, Gwendoline suggested I stay the night. Her room had two twin beds. I agreed.
When we lay down, talking about our plans for Sunday, my desire surged again.
"Do you want to?" I asked her, almost begging.
"If it's to please you…"
Afterward, with her almost indifferent participation, I was ashamed of myself. I told her so. She quickly changed the subject and didn't scold me.

Things continued like that. I understood that Gwendoline had her own way of seeing life. That she preferred me to the others—there was no doubt. But her love was intellectual. Clearly, she could separate physical love from emotional or intellectual connection. I had no choice but to accept that reality and make peace with it.

Over time, that sweet fifteen-year-old girl who had stunned me at first sight gradually became an example of extreme nonconformity. In Florence—a small and gossip-filled city—her behavior was seen as scandalous.
She walked around with a snake in her handbag; sometimes dressed in men's clothing, wearing her brother's things. Once, right in front of me, she jumped naked into a fountain in the Boboli Gardens, in the middle of winter. Laughing, she told me how, at the School of Fine Arts in Piazza San Marco—where she had recently enrolled—she had slept with all her classmates, maybe fifteen of them, in an abandoned room in the building.

One day she told me she could no longer sleep with me because she had contracted gonorrhea. "See how much I care about you? I wouldn't want to infect you."

It was serious. At the time, there were no antibiotics for a proper cure. People started talking about nymphomania. Some even said she was mentally unstable.
Yes, the girl we once took—dressed as a man—to Madame Saffo's brothel was her.

In 1935 she left for New York with her father. It was supposed to be a two-month trip. But from that point on, she never returned to Italy.
By then, I was already well into my career and things were going well. Most of my free time was devoted to gambling (frequent and equally disastrous trips to the casinos in Venice and Sanremo, regular poker nights with friends, etc.). My relationship with Gwendoline had cooled off. Her unchecked promiscuity had driven me away.

My brother Elio was concerned that my professional reputation might be compromised—especially after Gwendoline came to him to ask that he persuade me to marry her, something I had no intention of doing. In the meantime, another woman had come into my life, and I was considering getting engaged.

So, Gwendoline's departure seemed like a good opportunity to close a reckless chapter and start a more stable one.
But it wasn't so simple.
Despite everything, I missed her deeply.
Deep down, I knew she would return—and that I didn't have to give her up forever.

From America, she wrote to me often. She told me how different life was in New York compared to the narrow and provincial world of Florence. She spoke of her encounters with great jazz musicians, her friendship with Billie Holiday and others. Naturally, I was fascinated.

At that time, marijuana was almost unheard of in Italy. One day, I received a package from her: inside were about a dozen "reefers"—as marijuana cigarettes were called in American slang.
It was an event. We had heard about them, but never tried one. So I organized a get-together with some curious, free-spirited friends to try this "extraordinary experience." We were expecting some kind of orgy. Instead, it was a disaster. Most felt nothing; some got nauseous, others fell asleep. I, cautiously, didn't smoke—waiting to see how others reacted—and in the end didn't try them at all.

We never really figured out what those cigarettes contained. Looking back, I suspect they were just dried weeds and that Lilla had played a prank on us.

Shortly after, I received a letter from her announcing her return.

At that time, I was going through a rough patch with the girl I had been considering getting engaged to, and the idea of reconnecting with Gwendoline didn't displease me at all.
But instead, only her father returned.

Here's what had happened: father and daughter had boarded the *Rex*.
When Gwendoline entered her cabin, she found that morning's newspapers, which the transatlantic liners offered complimentary to their passengers. While flipping through them, she read that Gene Krupa—the drummer and one of her many jazz musician friends—was performing that very day at the Paramount Theatre in New York.

She didn't hesitate for a moment: without a cent and leaving her suitcases in the cabin, she got off the ship to avoid missing the concert.
By the time her father went to look for her, the *Rex* had already set sail.

She herself told me about this latest "stunt" in a letter I received a few weeks later.

In each of her letters, she begged me to come join her in New York.
She told me she had found work as a secretary for a mysterious saxophone player in Krupa's orchestra and offered me a place to stay in her rented apartment in Manhattan.

My decision to leave for America—taken later, in response to the racial laws—was driven not only by the allure of the country I had dreamed of for years, but also by the possibility of seeing my first great love again.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 8

I left for New York on December 4, 1938, aboard the *Rex*, with $113 in my pocket—the maximum allowed under Fascist laws. Naturally, I was traveling with a tourist visa, since obtaining an immigration permit was impossible: the Italian quota for the United States had been full for years.

Only now do I realize what a risk that decision was—it was truly a leap into the unknown. I knew English, but—as I would soon discover—it was very basic and certainly not American English. I was well aware that the tourist visa would expire after three months and could be renewed only once, for another three months at most. After that, I'd have to leave—who knows where—and without resources. I also knew that working in America without an immigration visa was extremely difficult. And I knew that the $113 (at the time, a dollar was worth about 20 Italian lire) would last me just a few weeks.

It would have made more sense to go to London, where my brother—according to his letters—was working and had good connections.
And yet, despite everything, I left for New York.

In truth, I also had with me some valuables I could have sold. A jeweler friend of mine in Florence—an anti-fascist named Romagnoli—had made me a long, heavy gold keychain, coated with metal so it wouldn't catch the customs officers' attention. It was the kind you wore clipped to your trousers, as was fashionable then.
I also had with me a brand-new Leica camera, a diamond pinky ring, and a solid 24-karat gold cigarette case.

Two Jewish friends of mine also decided to come, and on board we met up with another friend from Rome, Gustavo Ajo, who was leaving Italy for the same reasons.

We arrived in New York on December 11, at dawn on a cold Sunday morning. The *Rex* glided toward the southern tip of Manhattan, passing the Statue of Liberty on the left. Its symbolic value was especially meaningful to me—but it didn't leave much of an impression. The real shock came a little later, when, entering the harbor, the jagged skyline of Manhattan's skyscrapers emerged from the mist. I recalled Emilio Cecchi's description: he had compared the skyline to "a giant comb missing many teeth."

That arrival marked the start of an adventure—perhaps a complete change in my life. There was the excitement of the unknown, the thrill of discovering extraordinary things, of another world. Faced with that looming new experience, thoughts of hardship or danger vanished.

Disembarkation took several hours: long lines on board to check passports, vaccination certificates, and all the rest. Finally, we set foot on American soil.

It felt like I had stepped into one of Dante's circles of hell. The vaulted ceiling of the massive Italian Line terminal echoed with deafening noise, overlapping voices in many languages, while carts and cranes unloaded luggage and cargo with a nonstop clamor. Everyone had to find their luggage under signs with the first letter of their surname. I went to the letter N, where my bags had already been placed.

There must have been over two thousand passengers disembarking, all searching for friends and family, running and pushing through the chaos.

Lilla, whom I had informed in advance, had written that she'd be waiting for me at the port—but it was nearly impossible to spot her in that madness. The travelers, once ashore, seemed to be swept up in a kind of revolutionary fervor, as if preparing to storm the Bastille.

Finally, amid the confusion, I saw her—waving at me with a smile from behind an iron fence. Apparently, since she wasn't family and had no official reason, she hadn't been granted a pass to enter the customs area.

The wait was long for her, too. But eventually, we met. I was so exhausted from the sleepless night, and overwhelmed by the emotion of the arrival and that first blast of American chaos, that I could barely speak. But I immediately noticed how much she had changed. She had gained weight, her clothes were rather plain, and although her eyes were still beautiful, they were weighed down by mascara—which she had rarely worn before.

It was almost noon by the time we loaded everything into a giant yellow taxi headed for her apartment on East 53rd Street.
It was a large, rather anonymous building. The apartment was on the thirteenth floor and consisted of a single room with a sofa bed, a small entryway, a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a closet. The windows looked out onto other identical windows—blank rectangles with no shutters, like eyelids without lashes—and below, a dull parking lot.

The fold-out bed was unmade, clearly used by two people. I immediately noticed men's clothes scattered around the room: a plaid shirt, a pair of socks, some ties.

Lilla explained right away that she wasn't alone in the apartment.
"You'll like Floyd," she said. "He's a great jazz pianist. I'm sure you two will get along."
"Is he your lover?" I asked bluntly.
"Lover? What a silly word... He's someone I like, so I let him stay. Right now he's out of work and has nowhere else to sleep."
"So... I have to sleep in a hotel tonight?"
"Why? That bed is perfectly comfortable for three..."

While Lilla was putting away my things—admittedly too many for such a small room—Floyd arrived. He was a medium-height Black man, slim, well-dressed, with bright eyes and a warm, reassuring smile. He immediately shook my hand firmly.
"Gwendoline has told me so much about you," he said, in an American English that sounded polished and polite.

I did my best to be courteous and to hide the embarrassment I felt from such an unexpected encounter.

"You and Gwendoline must have a lot to catch up on. I'll go get something for lunch," Floyd added. "That way, I won't be in the way."

Lilla handed him some money, and still smiling, he left.

"We're in America now... forget all those provincial ideas from Florence," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Here we live! And we live how we want—without anyone telling us what to do."

“I understand,” I mumbled. “This is America, not Italy. A whole different story.”

I was dazed and exhausted and just wanted to sleep. But she quickly dismissed the idea—after lunch, we were going to the Paramount to hear Benny Goodman. She was friends with one of the theater’s managers and always had tickets. Then, in the evening, another of her musician friends—Stuff Smith—was playing at the Apollo in Harlem. We couldn’t miss it.

I realized that my longed-for nap was not going to happen. And I didn’t want to seem like someone unable to keep up with the city’s whirlwind pace.

Naturally, I asked Gwendoline how she was getting by and what she was doing for work at that moment. But she quickly changed the subject.

“I’m doing fine,” she replied evasively. “Living day by day in New York is beautiful. And besides, I’m not made to be some secretary in an office with fixed hours.”

“So then,” I insisted, “how do you manage? Where do you get the money to live?”

“My God, how boring you are! Let’s talk about something else. What are those idiots back in Florence doing? Haven’t they realized they’re living in a city full of corpses?”

The phone rang. Lilla answered in a low voice, and I could barely make out that someone wanted to see her. She was replying that she was busy. There was something mysterious and vaguely shady in the air, but my fatigue and bewilderment kept me from digging into it any further—for the moment.

In the meantime, Floyd returned, cheerful, with the groceries. Lilla started cooking something while I collapsed on the bed, trying to recover a bit of energy. Not long after we ate, my first real day in America began.

I honestly don’t know how I managed to stay on my feet through the marathon Lilla put me through.

After listening to Benny Goodman at the Paramount—and skipping the movie that followed the show—we stepped out onto Times Square, already glowing with lights, and descended into the subway. I still remember that nauseating smell of burnt rubber that hit me as we descended the windy stairs. We were swept up by a train that shot off at lightning speed, covering many kilometers.

Amid the clattering of the train, Lilla told me we were headed to Harlem for a party at the home of some musician friends of hers. Sure enough, we got off at Lenox Avenue.

The contrast with where we had just been was staggering. It felt like another city—or rather, another continent. The buildings were low and sooty, the streets full of Black people dressed like in the American movies I’d seen: wide-brimmed hats, mid-thigh-length brightly colored coats, trousers that hung over dazzling shoes. The women wore dresses in bright colors and loud patterns that reminded me of South America. In front of a bar, I nervously watched two men trading insults I couldn’t understand—clearly on the verge of coming to blows.

My excitement, heightened by exhaustion, had reached its peak, and I was no longer fully aware of everything happening around me. I was living it all like a sleepwalker, barely reacting to the flood of sensations.

At the party, I was the only white person. The hostess, a large, smiling, friendly woman, was incredibly kind. She mumbled something I didn't catch, to which I replied with a sheepish grin, and she handed me a glass filled with some concoction I couldn't bring myself to drink. The feeling of dreaming with my eyes open continued.

At one point, Lilla introduced me to a chubby Black girl with chemically straightened hair. I didn't catch her name—only when she was invited to sing, accompanied by a pianist, and performed the song *Strange Fruit*, did I realize it was Billie Holiday.

After the party, we grabbed a quick hamburger and headed to the Apollo to hear the violinist Stuff Smith.

I don't know how, but Lilla managed to get us seats in the front row. When Stuff Smith came on stage for his number, he spotted her and gave her an affectionate,
"Hello, honey."
There was no doubt—they were truly friends.

At that point, I was completely out of it. My eyelids felt like they weighed a ton, my head was buzzing, I had become a kind of automaton, with no willpower or reflexes left. Only later did I understand that Lilla was able to endure such marathons because she was loaded up on stimulants.

It was almost dawn when we returned to the apartment, where we found Floyd already asleep on the side of the bed closest to the wall—leaving space for us without even needing to move. Lilla lay down next to him, and I took the narrow outer edge of the bed.

Unfortunately, there was no question of sleeping.

Floyd, now awake, began making love to Lilla, completely naturally. I wanted to get up and leave, but then I thought, "I'm in America now, not in stuffy Florence," and I tried to convince myself that this was completely normal. When Floyd was finished, I realized Lilla now wanted to make love with me. Half-dead as I was, and with another man in the room, I would gladly have passed. But she told Floyd to go lock himself in the bathroom for as long as needed—something he did without the slightest protest, still smiling.

Clearly, by excluding him, Lilla wanted to give our encounter a more intimate, respectful tone. Then, exhausted, I finally fell into a deep, heavy sleep. I don't know what happened in that room until around two o'clock the following afternoon, when I was awakened by a tender kiss from Lilla.

It was just before Christmas. Floyd had gone off on his own, and Lilla and I went out to walk around the city. The restorative sleep had brought back enough energy for me to be once again amazed by everything around me: the sheer size of the cars and the streets; a sidewalk on Fifth Avenue was as wide as Via Tornabuoni in Florence. The shops—already decorated for the upcoming holidays—were packed with people buying gifts for Christmas.

At Rockefeller Center, hundreds of people were skating on an enormous ice rink to the sound of *The Blue Danube*, coming from who knows how many massive loudspeakers.

My wonder and enthusiasm for that dazzling world were such that I started to delude myself into thinking I was in New York just on a pleasure trip.

While walking along Fifth Avenue, we passed a building with a sign in Italian and a large fascist symbol (the emblem of the Fascist regime).
That was the moment that snapped me back to reality.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 9

My fellow exiles had managed to get settled as best they could. Guido had been welcomed by a distant relative; Giorgio had found a small room in a brownstone—one of those typical old New York houses often divided into furnished rooms. Gustavo was temporarily staying with his brother, a doctor who had moved to the United States some time earlier.

I immediately decided to leave Lilla's apartment, even though doing so meant dealing a serious blow to my already fragile finances. I rented a tiny room on the top floor of a small house owned by a man named Pisapia, who, to show his solidarity as a fellow Italian, gave me a room with a bed all to myself for three dollars a week.

It wasn't so bad, even if I had to walk down a long, cold hallway to meet basic needs, and the room was lit only by a sort of skylight in the ceiling. When I explained to him why I was in New York, Pisapia was incredulous and kept saying:

"But you're not Jewish, you're Italian."

To him, Jews were only Russians or Poles. He couldn't fathom that there were Italians of Jewish origin. And since—unusually for an Italian-American—he wasn't particularly fond of Fascism or Mussolini, he showed genuine sympathy for my situation. I say "unusually" because Fascist propaganda in America had done its job. Mussolini, for the "paesani" in the U.S., was the man who had restored respect to Italy and to Italians abroad, helping emigrants finally shed the burden of inferiority they had carried for decades.

After the housing issue came the question of food. Eating in a sit-down restaurant was out of the question. There were cafeterias—large self-service canteens, like the ones you now see all over Italy. I preferred the Automat, the automatic restaurant chain run by Horn & Hardart. The food, mostly sandwiches of all kinds, was stored behind small glass-fronted compartments along the walls. You'd open them by inserting one or more nickels—the five-cent coin that at the time was practically a standard unit of measure: it paid for a coffee, a cigar, a Coca-Cola, a subway ticket, and so on.

In those Automats, the food was always the same: simple but excellent, if not particularly refined. You could eat a full meal for under fifty cents. People even said that the Automat served the best "caffellatte" in all of New York for just five cents—though of course it wasn't quite like ours: it was made with American-roasted coffee and cream. Eating there wasn't seen as undignified; in fact, people with stomach problems would go there on doctor's orders, since the food was mild, free of spicy sauces, and carefully selected.

The work problem showed itself quickly in all its stark reality. Like the others, I spoke English poorly and couldn't possibly aim for any sort of "white collar" job. I had brought several letters of introduction for influential Italian-Americans. One was addressed to the director of the New York branch of the Banca Commerciale Italiana. He received me kindly, but when I asked for help—any position at all, even a temporary one—I realized I was wasting my time. As a manager of a government-linked bank, he clearly didn't want to take any risks by recommending a Jewish "refugee," nor could he offer me a job at the bank.

I also visited one of New York's rabbis, the head of the Sephardic community, Dr. De Sola-Pool—a highly cultured man, respected even in non-Jewish circles—but even he was of little help. The only advice he gave was to look up all the Italian olive oil importers in the phone book and try to get hired as a salesman. It seemed like a decent idea, but reality proved otherwise. The heads of those companies, all enthusiastic Fascist supporters, didn't look kindly on an Italian declared "undesirable" by Mussolini. To them, a Jewish Italian was by definition anti-Fascist. So nothing came of it. All of them, politely or not, showed me the door.

I had no luck with the Italian-language radio stations either—there were about half a dozen in New York. One of the most prominent was WHOM, owned by Generoso Pope, who also published Il Progresso Italo-Americano, a daily newspaper for Italian-Americans written in a peculiar language that someone once dubbed "Anglo-cafone": a mix of Italian and American, or rather, a dialect in which English words were brutally Italianized—like "giobba" for "job," "checca" for "cake," "bisinisse" for "business," and so on.

Another station was WOV, run by Americans, which aired Italian-language content only during certain hours of the day.

Even there, I was received coldly. These stations more or less openly supported Fascism, so a political refugee like me was unwelcome from the outset. On top of that, those already working there disliked newcomers—they feared the competition. I suspect they may have even tried to tarnish my reputation, portraying me as an Italian rejected by Fascism—the very regime they openly promoted.

That nearly all Italian-Americans—except for a few rare cases—were Fascist sympathizers shouldn't be surprising. For them, Mussolini had given Italy dignity, founded an empire, and, despite threats from Britain, achieved self-sufficiency in wheat production (even though the cost far exceeded what importation would have required). Even Churchill, they claimed, was terrified of Mussolini.

They knew little or nothing of the regime's crimes, prisons, political exiles, suppression of free speech, censorship, political persecution, violence—and especially had no understanding of the racial laws. Many even doubted those laws existed, saying things like, "There aren't Jews in Italy—just Italians."

As for the Rome-Berlin Axis, they justified it by saying the colonial powers—especially Britain—had pushed Mussolini into Hitler's arms. In short, most of them were proud of Fascist Italy. Living in a democracy, free to believe whatever information they wanted, many embraced what they saw as the regime's "positive" sides—which, in their naive and nostalgic view, celebrated national dignity and protected Italy from communism.

This attitude was also rooted in the modest education level of many emigrants.

I got a perfect example of this hybrid dialect—already entrenched in the media—a few days after my arrival.

One evening I was invited to a family's home in a Brooklyn neighborhood. I was a bit puzzled when the father said: "So we'll be expecting you, but don't be surprised if there's not much esteem in the house." Only later did I realize that "esteem" meant "steam"—as in central heating—and that in Brooklyn, Italian-Americans had turned "steam" into "stima." In that case, "not much esteem" simply meant the heat didn't work well.

This kind of language has been the subject of many studies.

Anyone coming straight from Italy and unfamiliar with this linguistic code could easily mistake fireflies for lanterns.

A salesman from Italy, selling electrical appliances, once asked a shopkeeper in New York if he had “buoni costumi” (good morals). The salesman was shocked—it sounded like an insult—until it was explained to him that “costumi” was the local version of “customers.”

Both the Italian-American press and radio had to adapt to the situation—especially in advertising. Companies wanted to be sure they were understood, and insisted on using terms that might not be in the dictionary but were common among the public. I saw with my own eyes ads in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* seeking “esperti sciabolatori”—nothing to do with swords: it was a corruption of “shovelers,” from the English “shovel.”

A tomato cannery in Seattle ran an ad that read: “Presentando dieci ticchette al vostro grossiere, avrete una canna di free.” “Ticchetta,” from “ticket,” meant a coupon; “canna” came from “can”; and “free” was simply used as-is from English.

The Italian-American dialect—still alive when I arrived in New York—was colorful and fascinating, but destined to disappear along with the passing of those immigrant generations, now being replaced by a different wave of newcomers.

Even Italian-language theater was doomed to die, for lack of audience. The children and grandchildren of those who once attended were born in America and often knew only a few words of Italian. What would remain was the memory of their parents’ and grandparents’ language—something future generations, fully American, would view with the same affectionate curiosity we reserve for stories of the past.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 10

I still saw Lilla from time to time, but now without much enthusiasm. By then, I had come to understand that her income came from her work as a call girl, that is, a high-end escort.

Since it was impossible to find work—also because of my official status as a mere tourist—I focused on solving the second major problem: how to remain in the United States permanently, in other words, how to become an American citizen. To do that, I first needed an immigration visa from a country with a larger quota than Italy's. The solution adopted by many was to go to Cuba and then re-enter the United States with a visa issued by the American Embassy there.

I was fortunate enough to meet, through friends, Dr. Rosenthal, a prominent haematologist at Mount Sinai Hospital, who had already helped other refugees. He financed my transfer to Cuba, advancing the money for the trip and my stay.

I stayed in Havana for a couple of weeks, in a state of anxious waiting. To obtain the visa, I had to swear solemnly before witnesses that, if I were sent back to Italy, my life would be in serious danger. In short, I had to officially take on the role of political refugee. I swore the oath and returned to New York on the same small steamer that had brought me there: the *Oriente*.

When the inspector stamped my passport with my new legal immigrant status, I knew that the first battle had been won—but many others were still ahead.

With my new immigrant status, I could now legally work anywhere. But where, and doing what? The problems were still the same.

It was Lilla who introduced me to a friend of hers, an agent for second-tier musicians, in the hopes of putting my amateur piano skills to use. He was of Polish origin and his name was Joe Mankiewitz: friendly, optimistic, fond of telling off-color jokes. He took a quick liking to me—maybe as a favor to Lilla, with whom he clearly had more than a friendly relationship. He joked about everything, even though, given my circumstances, I had little reason to laugh. He even joked about my Sephardic heritage, saying that Sephardic Jews wasted time philosophizing, while Ashkenazis like him always got to the point.

"But really," he told me, "you're more Italian than Jewish. Honestly, I don't see anything Jewish in you at all."

I never understood if that was meant as a compliment. Once he realized I knew all the jazz standards and pop songs of the day by heart, he took down the number of the payphone at the entrance of the brownstone where I lived. A few days later, one morning while I was still dozing off, I heard Pisapia's voice calling down the stairwell: "You've got a phone call!" I rushed down half-dressed—it was Mankiewitz. I was to meet him by eleven; he would introduce me to a certain Frank Zito, who urgently needed a pianist.

The meeting with Zito, an Italian American, was friendly and productive.
"Well, I'll be," he said, "you play well. You're hired."
He explained that I'd be playing in his ten-piece band on a ship leaving in about two weeks for a four-week cruise in the Caribbean. I had always suffered from seasickness, and the idea of playing while nauseated scared me. But when he told me I'd be paid fifty dollars a week, plus

food and lodging, I didn't hesitate. Worst case, I'd take some motion sickness pills. He told me to come the next day to the Nola Studios on Broadway to start rehearsing with the band.

At first, everything went well. Zito would call out a tune—almost always Latin-American, well-known pieces like *Brazil*, *La Cucaracha*, and the like—and I followed along without problems. Things got complicated when he pulled out sheet music for new pieces, mostly his own, that he wanted to add to the repertoire. He handed me the piano score. Even though I couldn't read music, I still managed to follow the band well enough.

But disaster struck when the orchestra suddenly stopped for a piano solo. Zito gave me the cue… and I froze at the keyboard.

"What's the matter with you?" Zito shouted. "Can't you read music?"

I timidly shook my head. And that was it—I was shown the door, with a torrent of curses and insults aimed at Mankiewitz for not saying I was self-taught. That job opportunity vanished, too.

But good old Mankiewitz wasn't ready to give up. "All right," he said, "I'll find you another spot—maybe some club that needs a filler pianist between acts, if you're fine with five or six dollars a night."

That sounded great to me. And sure enough, a couple of days later, he took me to a pretty shady club in Greenwich Village, near Washington Square, where low-end singers, strippers, and comedians rotated through the bill—just what you'd expect. My task was simple: play soft piano bar music between acts until closing time. Four dollars a night, dinner included, and as much whiskey as I wanted—though the whiskey was wasted on me, as I didn't drink.

The owner, as usual, was an Italian whose last name I never learned—everyone just called him "the boss," or occasionally "Jimmy." It looked like my survival was assured, at least until something better came along.

After four nights working among prostitutes, pimps, and people who said "shit" every third word, one evening a man approached me threateningly. He wore a huge hat and had a big diamond on his pinky. Without any preamble, he told me that someone else was taking over my spot and that I'd better clear out immediately or be thrown out like a sack of rags. So I left. The owner, using the excuse that he had to obey "that guy's" orders—whoever he was—didn't even pay me for the nights I had worked.

From that point on, I had no more contact with Mankiewitz.

Meanwhile, I had run through the famous $113 I'd brought from Italy and began selling off my belongings. First to go was the Leica, then the ring, then the gold cigarette case. Finally, I had to turn to the famous gold chain covered in iron. It took quite a bit of explaining to convince someone that there really was gold underneath. The only person willing to verify it was an old man on Second Avenue. But he told me that, given the labour involved in separating the gold from the iron, he'd only pay me half the market value.

I didn't have much choice. I broke off two of the sixteen links, he gave me a temporary receipt, and the next day I went to collect fourteen dollars.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 11

All of my fellow exiles had received, to varying degrees, money transferred illegally from Italy through complex channels. More than complaining about their financial situation, they lamented their sexual problems. It wasn't easy to find a steady partner, and relationships with prostitutes were too expensive. I, on the other hand, had a more urgent issue: survival.

As for housing, I was helped by an old friend who had married the daughter of an important American theater figure and had been living in the United States since the end of the First World War. His father-in-law owned a luxurious villa on Long Island, furnished with valuable furniture and objects. At that time, the villa was uninhabited, and the owner feared it might be targeted by thieves. So I was offered the opportunity to stay there for free, acting as a caretaker.

I still remember my embarrassment when my friend's father-in-law handed me a double-barreled shotgun and said, "In case of emergency, this might come in handy." I had never handled a weapon in my life. The idea of having to use a shotgun in that villa terrified me. Still, not wanting to risk losing the chance to have a roof over my head, I managed to hide my fear and inexperience.

I must admit that the days—and especially the nights—in that large house had something gloomy and often oppressive about them. The villa stood isolated on a hill, and I had to walk about a kilometer to the nearest shopping center for supplies. It was summer, it was hot, and the uphill return trip was tiring. When the first shadows of evening fell, I would be gripped by a deep sense of anguish.

One night, a violent storm broke out, with near-cyclonic winds. The trees in the garden swayed ominously while thunder and lightning crashed all around. I've always been sensitive to the weather and somewhat astrophobic. My grandfather, even during the smallest storm, would get into bed and hide under the covers to block out the sight and sound of it all. He would shout, "Turn off the electricity! Turn off the electricity, now!"

I've been told that astrophobia can be hereditary. It's not so much the fear of being struck by lightning as the overwhelming feeling in the face of nature's unleashed power. It was an infernal night, made even worse by the fact that I was alone and couldn't share my fear with anyone.

Even though I had long since decided to break all contact with Lilla, because of her dissolute lifestyle, in the desperation of that solitude I thought she might be willing to keep me company. Breaking the solemn promise I had made to myself, I called her. But the operator answered and told me the phone line had been disconnected for some time. I later found out that she had ended up in a reform school for prostitutes and drug addicts. She'd been arrested together with her inseparable friend, the singer Billie Holiday, while buying heroin from a dealer in Harlem. And so I remained alone, terrified of burglars, afraid of storms, and deeply anguished by my forced solitude.

I spent hours listening to the radio, especially the Italian stations, hoping one day I might work for one. Every time I heard those poorly produced programs, in a bastardized language, I felt anger and frustration. The thought of being unjustly excluded from them tormented me.

The Welfare Agency for Jewish Refugees had already been giving me a weekly allowance of twelve dollars for some time. To keep receiving this help, I had to leave New York for a place where finding work would be easier. I was given a choice among several cities, including Saint Louis, Missouri. I remembered that Rinetto Savorgnan, an old friend of mine, was serving as the Italian consul in Saint Louis. I wrote to him, and he quickly replied enthusiastically, telling me he looked forward to seeing me and advising me to bring my tuxedo, since I might attend many events within the Italian community and make valuable job contacts.

With just the essentials, including the tuxedo, I left for Saint Louis. After a long and uncomfortable trip due to the heat, I arrived to find an unbearable temperature: 105 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, or over 34 degrees Celsius, with very high humidity that made the air hard to breathe. Rinetto met me at the station. With the spacious Buick of the Italian Consulate, he brought me to his apartment in a residence with air conditioning, where I spent the night comfortably in a guest room.

Naturally, we talked about the situation in Europe, which was far from reassuring: the war hadn't broken out yet, but Hitler was preparing to invade Poland, and it was unclear what role Italy would play if conflict erupted. I quickly realized that Rinetto, despite being Mussolini's representative in Saint Louis, didn't have much sympathy for the fascist dictatorship.

He explained to me that Italian-Americans in Saint Louis were very different from those in New York, where fascist propaganda was quite aggressive. I also noticed that these Midwestern immigrants, though still emotionally attached to their homeland, viewed Italy's problems with a certain detachment.

From time to time I visited the HIAS office to check for job opportunities, but the answer was always negative. Rinetto had introduced me to the local Italian-American community leaders, who kept inviting me to their homes. I had found a small room for five dollars a week, which left me seven dollars for other expenses. In practice, I was living quite comfortably—going from one reception to another, from one event to the next, always under Rinetto's reassuring protection.

At one point, I even had a chance to earn something. Columbus Day was approaching, and the Italian Consulate was organizing a series of events to celebrate it. It was traditional to publish an illustrated program with advertisements from pasta companies, imported olive oil brands, and various local businesses run by Italian-Americans. I was given the task of collecting these ads, with a 10% commission on the payments. That job earned me about a hundred dollars.

I quickly spent twenty of it to buy Rinetto a leather suitcase and his secretary a tie clip. The other eighty disappeared just as fast. For a couple of weeks, I tried selling cosmetics for the Fuller Brush Company, which provided me with a nice sample kit. But once the few orders from friends and acquaintances ran out, I realized I wasn't cut out for going door to door. And so, those famous twelve dollars from the Welfare Committee once again became a blessing. Rinetto had had to leave Saint Louis, and without his constant support, my situation again became unstable.

That's when the Welfare Committee told me they had found a job for me in Granite City, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from Missouri. The owner of a women's clothing store had agreed to host me, asking in exchange that I help out in the store—cleaning, arranging merchandise, and assisting with sales.

For housing, I was placed with a Jewish family of Central European origin. They spoke Yiddish among themselves and barely understood my English. The family was composed of a widowed mother and two brothers: one worked for an insurance company, the other was considered a bit of a fool with obsessive sexual fixations. But oddly enough, I got along better with him, and he actually seemed to be the wisest of the three. I couldn't understand why he was considered mentally deficient—perhaps because he didn't want to work and had gotten several local girls pregnant.

Granite City is one of the most hellish places I've ever known. It's an industrial town with hundreds of smokestacks spewing thick, foul-smelling soot that hangs in the air day and night. The thought of spending the rest of my life in such a place horrified me. Perhaps that's also why I worked with little enthusiasm in the shop, despite the patience of the owner. Meanwhile, every radio played Bing Crosby singing:

"What's new?
How is the world treating you?"

...asking what was new and how life was going with a long-lost flame.

That song felt like a personal jab. To make things worse, Tommy Dorsey's latest hit, *"I'll Never Smile Again,"* played constantly—it truly made me feel like I'd never smile again if I stayed in that horrible place.

Even today, whenever I hear those songs, my mind goes back to those dreadful days in Granite City.

The store also employed one of the owner's daughters—a stocky girl of about twenty, short, with slightly crooked, hairy legs, frizzy black hair, a hooked nose, and an attitude that clearly revealed her sexual frustration. From the start, she overwhelmed me with attention and invited me to the movies more than once. When her father realized what was going on, he decided to let me go, afraid I might compromise his daughter's honor.

Truthfully, I was more of a hindrance than a help in that shop: I didn't know how to handle customers, I didn't mop the floor, and I was seen as a potential threat to the family's harmony. The threat, in reality, didn't exist: despite the constant advances from this girl (whose name, ironically, was Grace), the idea of having any romantic involvement with her never crossed my mind.

My situation kept getting more and more precarious, until I received a letter from my brother Elio, from London. He reminded me of an American woman who had married a fascist minister. The man had turned to my brother to have the marriage annulled—something my brother had miraculously achieved. This woman had a relative, a certain Weintraub, who owned an elastic ribbon factory in Haverstraw, on the Hudson River near New York, where I might be able to work. With her recommendation, I thought at last a real job was waiting for me, and that my odyssey was finally coming to an end.

I said goodbye to the people in Granite City, making the ugly daughter of the shop owner shed a few tears. The only one who said anything meaningful was the so-called fool. He told me, "Goodbye and good luck. Remember: when it comes to women, every one you let go is gone for good." The others just gave me the usual farewell lines, clearly glad to be rid of me.

Naturally, I made a stop in nearby Saint Louis, where Rinetto had returned. He wasn't very enthusiastic about me going to work in a factory without even knowing what the job was, and he made a sort of counteroffer:

"I know a very wealthy family here in Saint Louis with a daughter ready for marriage. The father, an Italian-American who got rich from a factory making agricultural machine parts, spoke to me about her. I've never seen the girl, but I've heard she loves music and studies singing. She's looking for someone with similar interests, and apparently hasn't found anyone yet. What do you say?"

"Honestly, I have no intention of getting married," I replied. "Unless, of course, I meet the ideal partner."

"You're right, but you never know. You might actually like this girl. After all, you're not a kid anymore—you should think about your future."

"True, but becoming the son-in-law of a spare parts manufacturer in Saint Louis doesn't exactly thrill me. And besides, who says she'd even want me?"

"Well, that remains to be seen. Why don't you come with me tomorrow night to meet her?"

I agreed. The Conte family lived on the outskirts of the city in a villa surrounded by a large park. It was a big, dignified colonial-style house. First, the father welcomed us—a man in his fifties, who seemed to have almost nothing Italian about him, but carried himself with some elegance. Then, in a tastefully furnished living room, his wife joined us—she was said to have German roots. We talked about Italy, about the European situation and fascism... and finally, the famous daughter appeared.

Her face was truly beautiful: dark eyes, classic features, and long chestnut hair cascading over her shoulders. But she walked hunched over, with her right hand seemingly trying to carve a path with each step, as if rowing through the air. It was clear she had been struck by a deforming illness—probably polio. Rinetto and I exchanged glances, but we managed to hide our discomfort. The girl sang *"Vissi d'arte,"* with me doing my best to accompany her at the piano, and all in all, the evening wasn't unpleasant.

On the way back, in the car, Rinetto said to me: "I'm sorry."

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 12

Despite Rinetto's doubts—he urged me to stay a bit longer in Saint Louis—I decided to return to New York as soon as possible and take advantage of the job offer at the Haverstraw factory. I asked to be voluntarily removed from the list of HIAS beneficiaries and requested that Rinetto lend me the money for the trip. Back in New York, after a nearly sleepless night at a friend's house, I used my last few coins to show up at the elastic ribbon factory in Haverstraw.

The owner was a man of few words, with waxed, upturned black mustache tips that gave him a stern, cold look. He immediately understood my situation and, without much formality, told me he could hire me in a certain department for $15 a week. Naturally, if I proved myself, he would promote me to better-paid tasks.

He kindly gave me two weeks' pay in advance to help me move. It was a Friday; I was to start working the following Monday. Before returning, I found a room to rent with a local landlady—it wasn't very close to the factory, but I couldn't find anything better.

Haverstraw is a small industrial town on the banks of the Hudson River, about an hour by train from New York.
Winter was approaching, and the snow had already made its first appearance. To be on time for the 7:30 a.m. siren, I had to get up at six. The factory was about two kilometers away, and I lost about thirty minutes having breakfast at the nearest luncheonette.

My task was to check the quality of colorful elastic ribbons that fell like rain from above after passing through a series of compression rollers. You had to stand the whole time. If a ribbon showed a flaw, I had to quickly cut the defective section and rejoin the two ends using pins kept in a small container within reach. The inspected ribbons would pile up on the floor and were occasionally collected by other workers, rolled up, and shipped to customers. It was simple work—but tiring.
At exactly noon, the siren announced the lunch break. By 1 p.m., we all had to be back at our posts until the end of the workday at five.

Everyone at the factory more or less knew why I was there, and they nicknamed me "the professor."
The foreman, an Italian-American named Giuseppe Russo, spoke excellent Italian. He was very understanding and knew that job wasn't right for me.
The only way I could rest from those long hours on my feet was to retreat to the restroom and sit as long as possible. Russo had figured it out, and when I asked to go for "urgent needs," he'd wink at me as a sign of friendly complicity.

Things got complicated the day the owner made one of his sudden inspections—he did this often to ensure everyone was working hard.
Suspicious of my absence and not seeing me return, he got angry with Russo. So I had to give up those stolen moments of rest.

On Sundays, Russo often invited me to lunch at his house. I noticed a chessboard on the table and told him I had once been a decent player. He immediately wanted to play.
He couldn't find anyone to play with in town and had resigned himself to studying game

manuals and playing with his eldest daughter, who barely knew the rules.
From then on, he wouldn't leave me alone—he insisted that I come over for dinner and stay late playing chess, so much so that I had trouble getting out of bed the next morning from exhaustion.
I noticed he didn't like losing, so every so often I would let him win by making basic mistakes on purpose. It was the only way to preserve his friendship—and his leniency during working hours.

My life was monotonous and, above all, sad.
The small room where I slept had two windows with typical American Venetian blinds (adjustable plastic slats), but they didn't work.
One of the windows faced the street—directly across was a funeral home where they brought the dead. The pale, flickering neon light of the sign disturbed me—it was a constant reminder of the fragility of life. I moved the bed toward the other window, but even that didn't cheer me up. At night, you could see the lights of Ossining across the river—the town where Sing Sing prison was located.

One day, Russo called me over and told me in confidence that the owner had decided to fire me for low productivity. He had intervened on my behalf, and for now the decision was on hold. But I told him honestly that I preferred to leave. I had worked there for four months—and even now I wonder where I found the strength to last that long.

Russo's disappointment at my decision moved me. But more likely, he was simply sorry to lose a good chess opponent.

Mr. Weintraub, happy to get rid of me, gave me not only my weekly wage but also two extra weeks' pay—about $30—which allowed me to return to New York with a few days of financial cushion.

I returned to my old attic room with the skylight—the one that cost three dollars a week—always available, since it was usually used as storage for junk.

Not far away was a cheap cinema. I went in the mornings when tickets cost only 15 cents. Trying to understand the dialogue, my English gradually improved.

I spent the rest of the day at the workshop of Joe Settin, one of the most respected violin makers in New York, whom I had met through Lilla. Settin was of Venetian origin and had offered to be my sponsor when I returned from Cuba to help me obtain the "first papers"—the preliminary documents for American citizenship.
The law required a responsible and financially stable citizen to guarantee that the immigrant would not become a burden on the state. In other words, the sponsor promised to support the immigrant if they lacked means.
Settin had no hesitation in vouching for me—he was confident I would never be a burden. And indeed, not even in my worst moments did I ask him for help.

Settin's workshop was on 57th Street, on the 20th floor of the Steinway Building. It was there that I met many famous violinists who brought him their instruments for repair.
One of them was Joe Venuti, the renowned jazz violinist—we quickly became friends.
In early 1940, he was leading an orchestra and playing at the ballroom of the Belmont Plaza Hotel. He often invited me and Settin to dine at the hotel before the show. I was reluctant, not wanting to seem like a freeloader, but he insisted:

“Why won’t you come? I’m not paying—it’s on the manager! I can have up to four guests every night—it’s in the contract!”

During the show, Venuti often spotted celebrities in the audience and called them on stage—usually famous singers, pianists, or actors.
One night, Hoagy Carmichael, the composer of *Stardust* and many other iconic American ballads, was in the crowd.
Venuti invited him to play and sing his latest piece.
Immediately after, he turned to the audience and said there was an Italian pianist in the room who had just arrived in New York—and, pointing at me, called me up to the stage.
I was terribly embarrassed and didn’t know what to do. But Settin encouraged me:

“What are you waiting for? Go! You need to get used to these things—this is America!”

So I went up. From the audience’s laughter, I realized that Venuti had added a few funny lines to his introduction, which I couldn’t understand due to my limited English.

I said I would only play with the orchestra—it was the only way to hide my amateur status.
We performed *'O Sole Mio* in a jazz style, a kind of jam session in which Joe worked miracles with his violin.
The audience warmly applauded that unusual interlude.

Unfortunately, no talent scout was in the room ready to sign me, or if there was, they apparently didn’t see anything special in my piano playing.

Meanwhile, my personal problems were being overshadowed by global ones. France and England had declared war on Germany, and Italian-Americans wondered what Mussolini’s position would be.
At movie theaters, between films, they showed newsreels with short updates on domestic and international affairs.
Whenever Hitler appeared on screen, the audience erupted into a loud “Boo!” of disapproval.
When Mussolini appeared, nobody took him seriously. Everyone just laughed—as if he were some sort of clown.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 13

Someone told me that Lilla had been released from the reformatory (which, in reality, was more like a real prison). I also learned her phone number and that she was now going by the name Lucia D'Arcel. But I didn't call her. I had enough on my plate and preferred to erase her from my life once and for all.

Since I hadn't managed to achieve anything with music or the piano, I became convinced that the only viable path was to keep trying to break into Italian radio. Some other refugees like me had found work—one at one station, another at a different one. Arrigo Colombo (who would later found a small film empire upon returning to Italy) was working as an announcer for Ronzoni pasta.
Erberto Landi (formerly Levi, who would go on to become famous in advertising and later as an impresario of Italian singers in American theatres) was, at the time, writing serialized radio dramas for an olive oil importer pompously named "Pace o Mio Dio Oil."

Fernando Pettinella, advertising agent for "Medaglia d'Oro" coffee, gave me a letter of recommendation for his brother-in-law, a certain Mr. Rossi.

I went straight to see him. When I told him I had been a lawyer in Italy, his face lit up, as if he had been looking for an attorney rather than a radio writer. I quickly understood why: a series was about to end, and he needed someone to write episodes for a new one titled *Famous Trials*. Who better than a lawyer for the job?

He handed me a book: *The Little Baker of Venice*, a novelized version of Dell'Ongaro's drama about the trial and unjust execution, in the 1500s, of young Venetian baker Pietro Tasca. A story so heartbreaking it could make even stones cry—let alone the loyal female listeners of New York's Italian-language radio.
I was supposed to turn it into around fifty half-hour episodes.

"I can't say anything until I read two or three sample episodes," Rossi told me. "But I think you're the right person."

He gave me a few tips, but I already knew how that kind of writing worked—I had listened to plenty of those programs on the radio. They followed a few well-established formulas, tailored to the older generation of Italian immigrants:
One focused on the lives of saints, embellished with fictional elements; another adapted popular melodramatic novels like those by Carolina Invernizio; the third—the most beloved—told entirely invented stories involving impossible love between a working-class woman and a nobleman, usually set in Southern Italy, with tearjerker plots full of illegitimate children, abandoned women, and dramatic turns, always ending with love's triumph.
There was also a fourth genre: comedic sketches in Sicilian or Neapolitan dialect, written and performed by the same authors.

I knew immediately that this was my big chance. I read the book during my subway ride back to my attic room on 91st Street, and finished it that same night.

I borrowed a typewriter and got to work. I had one week to write the first three sample episodes—known as “pilot episodes.”

I kept writing, tearing up pages, and rewriting, because the dialogue didn’t feel compelling enough. I started over again and again. Rossi’s main rule kept echoing in my head:

“Each episode has to end with a twist—leave the listener hanging, dying to know what happens next.”

That wasn’t easy to pull off. But after revising, rewriting, and experimenting, I thought I had finally nailed it.
On the agreed day, I went back to Rossi with the draft. He read it silently for about half an hour, his head in his hands. I was so used to rejection that I braced for disappointment.

When he finished, he looked up at me with an unreadable expression. I assumed the worst. But after a pause, he said:

“You lack experience—but you’re going to become the best writer in Italian radio in New York.”

“So I can continue?”

“Of course. I’ll pay you twenty dollars for seven episodes—a new one every day, including Sundays.”

Then he pointed out some weak spots, adding:

“Just small details. You’ve clearly grasped what this work requires.”

Twenty dollars a week wasn’t much—barely over eighty a month—but it would allow me a few pleasures I hadn’t been able to afford before.

I bought a used typewriter on an installment plan and changed apartments, sharing a small flat with a friend who was a chemist.

The Little Baker was a hit. I quickly got other offers and started cranking out dramas of all kinds. The pay increased—especially when I was hired by a company that also staged the dramas in live theater.

Here’s how it worked: the drama aired on the radio in daily episodes, and when the story reached its peak, it was performed onstage at theaters in New York and surrounding areas. The audience—mostly first-generation Italian immigrants—rushed in to find out how the stories ended and to see the actors in person.

If a show really caught on, we could even rent the big Brooklyn Academy hall with its 4,000 seats. Then we’d go on tour—to Newark, Hoboken, Trenton, and other nearby cities.
As the author, I received a percentage of ticket sales—sometimes as much as $100 in a single evening.
For a while, I also worked as the company’s prompter and even acted in minor roles. Sometimes I did both: after playing a small part—during which I whispered lines to actors who forgot them—I’d race down to the prompter’s booth under the stage.
I’d sit on a tall stool, surrounded by rats. But it was ten extra dollars a night.

After those exhausting theater tours, I'd return to what you might call my social life. I had made lots of friends and, in a way, had become two people: the makeshift stage actor who now earned a decent living, and the jazz lover slowly reconnecting with the music scene.

One day, I got a call from Lilla. She was phoning from Atlantic City to say she had married a very wealthy wine distributor and was living in a gorgeous seaside villa, with a private beach, a motorboat, a yacht, and a Cadillac.

"Jack wants to meet you," she said. "I've told him all about you. Why don't you come for the weekend?"

"I'm happy to hear you're settled," I replied.

"You'll see—I've changed. No more craziness. I got lucky."

"Good," I said. "Just don't ruin it by doing something stupid."

"So will you come?"

I didn't know what to say. I had sworn never to see her again. But I was curious—had the devil really turned saint? So, on a Saturday evening, I arrived in Atlantic City, New Jersey—a town on the Atlantic coast best known as the home of the Miss America pageant.

Lilla picked me up at the station, and within minutes, we were at the villa: a fake rustic-Moorish-style house, like many others in the area, with large porches, turrets, spires, and a big sea-facing terrace.
Waiting for us was her husband, with a martini in hand: a short man in his fifties, shiny-eyed, with a bit of a belly, warm and courteous. His name was Jack Kahn.

It was déjà vu—just like when I first arrived in New York and my Black friend tactfully left to give us privacy, Jack did the same. After saying, "Welcome to our house," he disappeared, saying he had to go into town for whiskey and cigarettes.

I realized immediately that Lilla was already tired of him.

"Can you believe it?" she said. "I barely say what I want, and he's already making it happen. See that yacht out there? It's called *Gwendoline*. He bought it for me. His eagerness to please is annoying."

I looked out to sea, at the moored yacht.

"What more could you ask for?" I said. "You've found, as they say, the devil while he sleeps—and you're complaining?"

Then came her stories from the reformatory.

"The director fell madly in love with me," she confided. "He's the one who got me out early. He even proposed."

"And why didn't you marry him?"

"Are you kidding? Besides, he hated jazz. Said it was barbaric music that led to drug use. What a fool."

Jack came back, and we had dinner on the terrace, overlooking a sea so calm it looked like concrete. The lit-up boats seemed staged.
After dinner, we chatted a bit, then headed to bed. My room was next to the master bedroom. As she wished me goodnight, Lilla whispered in Italian, “Once Jack falls asleep, I’ll come see you.”

“Please don’t,” I said. “I’m your guest. Your husband’s been so kind—it would be shameful to take advantage of that.”

But my words didn’t matter. I was starting to fall asleep when she showed up—smiling and completely naked. I was terrified.
She slipped into bed, and when I resisted, she had a hysterical outburst. Furious at my refusal, she grabbed the water bottle from the nightstand and hurled it at me.
Luckily, it shattered against the wall—loudly—but didn’t wake Jack, who continued snoring peacefully in the next room.

Then Lilla softened and came closer:

“Forgive me. It’s not my fault. Ever since I quit heroin, I sometimes have these moments where I don’t know what I’m doing.”

That confession lifted a weight off my shoulders. I thought: after all, she’s still young and attractive—maybe she’ll finally get her life together.

“I’m glad you’re clean,” I told her gently. “But is this really the right way to act? What if Jack found you here? What would he think of me? Just another sleazy Italian trying to seduce someone’s wife? Great image.”

She looked at me with her bright blue eyes—innocent, like a schoolgirl fresh from the convent.

“You still don’t get it,” she said. “This isn’t Florence. You’re such a provincial. Don’t you know that here, people swap spouses on weekends and nobody bats an eye?”

“Well, I don’t like that kind of thing,” I replied. “Sorry, but if that makes me a provincial, I’m proud of it.”

“And you really think Jack would be outraged if he knew I came to you? Just so you know, I only married him on the condition that I could keep my freedom. And he agreed. So…”

I didn’t know what to say. But the next morning, as we had breakfast on the terrace and Jack asked if I had slept well, I felt uneasy.
Maybe I was imagining things, but I thought I heard a hint of irony in his voice.

Later, we went to the beach. I’ve always hated the sea—the blazing sun, the water that chilled me even on hot days.
I was also a terrible swimmer—barely able to stay afloat with a sad little dog paddle.
Lilla, on the other hand, was a fish: darting through the waves, diving fearlessly, staying underwater for long stretches.
Jack, like me, didn’t feel like swimming, so we decided to take a short sailboat ride together.

Not realizing how helpless I was in the water, once we were far out, Lilla gave me a playful shove—sending me into the water fully clothed.
The current pulled the boat away. I panicked. I screamed, “Help! I’m drowning!” but maybe they thought I was joking.

I started gulping water and realized there was no way I could make it back to shore.
I would've drowned if a nearby sailboat hadn't come to the rescue. Two strong young men dived in and helped me back.

The day ended on a sour note.
Lilla teased me, calling me a coward. Jack felt guilty about the incident.
I was honestly relieved to take the evening train back to New York.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 14

My career as a writer, announcer, and playwright was going full speed ahead. I moved from one sponsor to another, depending on who offered better pay. I wrote a biblical drama based on the Massacre of the Innocents for the radio company of Maio Badolati, who had been hired by the "La Perla" spaghetti factory.

Badolati boasted of having worked in Italy with Eduardo De Filippo, but apparently, his roles had been minor at best. As an actor, he wasn't the worst, but he surrounded himself with a ragtag crew from the local amateur theater scene. In any case, my *Massacre of the Innocents* was a real hit: three nights at the Brooklyn Academy brought in thousands of dollars, though I received only a small percentage. I then had another major success with *The Black Mask*, taken directly from the legend of Robin Hood. That was followed by *The Three Marys*, a story full of intrigue, abandoned illegitimate children, and mothers searching for their children, victims of dark conspiracies.

The peak came with the story of a completely made-up saint. Unlike canonized saints, I could invent every detail without fear of offending religious sensitivities. At the end of performances, devoted housewives from Brooklyn and the Bronx would line up to kneel before the lead actor and ask for blessings and protection. That was the kind of audience that packed the Italian theaters in New York forty years ago.

I regret having thrown away the scripts of those melodramas. If I were to reread them now, despite their outdated style and naïveté, I'd probably find a treasure trove of powerful theatrical ideas.

In short, I had become the number one writer of radio dramas and stage melodramas. My income was now enough to afford a charming apartment on Central Park South, where I lived for over ten years, until 1956. The apartment was on the ground floor, one of the very few with even a tiny garden. Of course, sunlight was scarce, suffocated by the surrounding skyscrapers of forty or fifty floors, and growing plants or flowers was nearly impossible. Still, there were those typical American trees all around, capable of growing even from rock, with lush green leaves.

In that little home of mine, during that decade, nearly every notable or unknown Italian passing through New York paid a visit. It was Ruggero Orlando, everyone's friend, who would send them my way. I shared many unforgettable evenings in New York with him.

Just as I had reached the height of my, albeit debatable, fame as a "radio dramatist," hostilities broke out in Europe. In June 1940, Mussolini declared war on France and England, convinced their defeat was imminent. He believed that with a few thousand casualties, he could sit at the peace table and claim honors and benefits for Italy's contribution to the Axis victory. On December 7, 1941, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into the war. On December 11, Mussolini declared war on the USA, which greatly complicated things for Italians who were not yet American citizens.

Those who were involved in or suspected of supporting Fascist propaganda were sent to Ellis Island, which had become a sort of small internment camp for investigation. In reality, there weren't many, and in most cases, it was just a temporary suspension from work.

Italians were automatically classified as “enemy aliens,” citizens of a hostile country. Those who, like me, had already applied for American citizenship could demonstrate loyalty by volunteering for the armed forces. I submitted my application, much to the anxiety of Badolati, who feared for the future of my melodramas. He kept measuring my chest, which barely met the minimum requirement, and advised me to use the old trick of exhaling all the air at the moment of measurement to lose a few critical centimeters. He also wanted me to fast in the days before the exam to look even skinnier than I already was. The idea of wearing a uniform and being sent who knows where didn’t thrill me, but applying felt like a duty to the country that had taken me in.

On the day of the medical exam, Badolati anxiously waited outside the enlistment office and rejoiced when I told him I had been rejected due to being physically unfit.

My work continued for a while, but soon the Office of War Information was established—a government service for overseas broadcasts, especially to countries at war, known as *The Voice of America*. These programs were partly propagandistic and partly informative, entrusted to people with journalistic or radio experience and with clear pronunciation. For the Italian section, they couldn’t choose long-time immigrants with strong Italo-American accents—they wouldn’t sound credible. The best candidates were recent arrivals, especially Italians who had fled racial laws. From the beginning, many Jewish refugees were hired, including Leo Wollemborg, who later became a well-known journalist.

It wouldn’t have been right to shy away from the “war effort,” as they used to call it. So when I was offered a place in the Italian section of the Voice of America, I accepted. I suddenly went from making a thousand dollars a month from my melodramas to less than two hundred.

There were still those who believed that thanks to German military successes, the Axis would win easily and that England was already finished. They underestimated the political will of the Western democracies and, most importantly, the military power of the United States, which managed to organize a formidable war machine in just a few months.

The Italian radio stations in New York were decimated: many contributors, due to their past Fascist ties, were dismissed. This created a difficult and ambiguous situation among Italians in America. While Mussolini had only declared war on England—the country blamed for the “unjust sanctions” (which had never really been enforced)—everything was fine: finally, Italy was getting revenge on “perfidious Albion.”
But now that it was at war with America, the old immigrants who had arrived in New York with nothing were seeing their children go off to fight against the land of their birth. Everyone had hoped until the last moment that Mussolini would remain neutral. After his arrogant declaration of war, even those who had once admired Fascism began to question his judgment.

It’s also worth noting that Italian-Americans had never felt much sympathy for Hitler’s Germany.

The war, however, didn’t change daily life all that much for Americans who stayed home.
Even I, in the end, was barely touched by the tragedy unfolding in Europe.

During the war years, I regularly went to Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, where I listened to the great jazz innovators who gave birth to "be-bop"—soon shortened simply to "bop." That’s where I met Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Oscar Pettiford, Billy Eckstine, Kenny Clarke, Sarah Vaughan, Lester Young, and, of all of them, the one who struck me most: Thelonious Monk. These names might mean little to those who don’t love jazz, but for enthusiasts, they are true milestones. The

only one who never showed up at Minton's was Armstrong, who felt a deep aversion to these innovators. In an interview I did with him at the time, he didn't hesitate to describe the Minton's crowd as "a bunch of amateurs who couldn't even play the simplest musical phrase." The great Satchmo never changed his mind—and it was understandable: his roots were too grounded in the New Orleans tradition to accept such a radical shift in style. Still, many other older musicians saw be-bop as a healthy jolt to the commercial jazz of the 1930s, which had become too tailored to dancing and mainstream tastes.

I'm often asked how I managed to get close to so many American showbiz celebrities. The answer is simple. During the war, the most famous performers gave their contribution to the war effort by recording the now-legendary "V-Discs," which in Italy were nicknamed *padelloni*—big records made for the armed forces and now collectors' items. Each division of Voice of America—including the Italian one—used top orchestras to broadcast American music overseas. I was assigned to this task. Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Harry James, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and many others happily agreed to be interviewed and to perform pieces suited to the Italian public.

When I visited Irving Berlin for one of those interviews, I was struck by the sight of his famous piano, which he had specially built to allow him to play in his preferred key at all times. Berlin composed his melodies using one finger and a few basic chords—always, as far as I remember, in the key of C. This created problems, especially when he had to teach a song to singers who wanted to perform it in a different key. His piano—likely one of a kind—allowed him to shift keys using a simple lever.

There was also another reason, he explained:
"Always playing in the same key becomes monotonous and ultimately limits creativity."

There are countless examples in America of composers and performers who became famous without ever having studied music.

I once attended a party thrown by the famous lyricist Yip Harburg, known for writing the lyrics to Harold Arlen's most beautiful songs—including the legendary *Stormy Weather*—as well as for his collaborations with Vernon Duke and Jerome Kern.

The occasion was Harold Arlen's birthday—though I can't remember which one exactly. He played the piano and, after much coaxing, sang (very badly) a few of his most famous songs. Among the many entertainment personalities present was the young pianist Erroll Garner.

In my group was a man named Charlie Kramer, an aspiring songwriter who never missed an opportunity to showcase his questionable melodies, hoping to be discovered. He had brought some of his compositions to the party, hoping someone there would be willing to play them. Too shy to sit at the piano himself, he decided to ask Garner. He handed him the sheet music and asked him to play it.

Garner burst out laughing and, turning to the guests, loudly said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd love to play the music in front of me—but unfortunately, I can't read a single note!"

Everyone broke into thunderous applause to celebrate Garner's extraordinary talent.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 15

After my unlucky visit to Atlantic City, I hadn't heard anything more about Lilla. "Better this way," I thought — fewer problems, fewer unpleasant surprises in the future. I had come to believe she was beyond saving. Still, sometimes the many happy days we'd spent together came flooding back — moments of intense joy followed by deep despair — and I ended up almost finding excuses for her. So my days passed in a constant swing between disgust and pity.

One day, I made up my mind and tried calling the house in Atlantic City several times, but no one answered. I figured the season had ended and she must've gone back to Chicago with her husband.

I didn't think much more about it until one day I got an unexpected phone call from Jack, her husband, who urgently asked to meet with me.

I found out Lilla had run off some time ago with a drummer.

"You got lucky. She wasn't the woman for you. Her head's not on straight. Maybe you dodged a bullet."

"I agree," I said, "but now I'm in trouble because most of what I own is in her name — including the villa. I was in love and trusted her blindly. Besides, she'd given me so many signs of generosity — she never seemed greedy."

"But why did you need to put the villa and everything else in her name?" I asked him.

"I did it for tax reasons — and now I'm at risk of losing everything. She hasn't shown up since, and from what I've found out, she hasn't set foot in the Atlantic City house, even though she still has the keys."

"I know Lilla. She's capable of anything, but not of stealing what isn't hers. You need to track her down, get the divorce, and reclaim what's yours."

"I already went to the police, but no luck. I think she'll contact you sooner or later."

"If I see her again, I'll do everything I can to help you."

I felt deep compassion for that man, but also a certain contempt — compassion for the disappointment he'd suffered, but also contempt for using Lilla in his tax schemes.

A few weeks went by, and finally, by chance, I ran into Billie Holiday, who told me Lilla was in New York, staying with a friend. Billie was singing at Café Society Downtown, in the Village, during one of those rare times when she wasn't in jail. She told me Lilla would be at the club the next evening.

And sure enough, she showed up — very late, with a noisy crowd, mostly Black. She was thrilled to see me again, but that night I couldn't talk to her about Jack. She looked great — too good not to suspect she'd relapsed into drug use.

To my surprise, everyone was calling her Gloria. The place was full of smoke and noise, making it hard to talk. I barely managed to tell her I wanted to see her soon, in private.

She gave me an appointment for the next day and handed me a note with an address, a phone number, and a name: “Gloria Stuart.”

The next day, at five in the afternoon, I found myself at 245 East 63rd Street, in front of a uniformed doorman who asked who I was looking for.

“Miss Stuart,” I said.

The doorman simply replied, “Oh… yes… Seventeenth floor, apartment 172.”

The building and the apartment were clearly upscale — a residence with high prices, no doubt.

“I share the apartment with Maxine, a friend of mine,” she immediately explained. “Last night, with all that noise, we barely got to talk.”

“Tell me why you’re now Gloria Stuart,” I asked.

“Because of those damn cops… they’re always on my trail…”

“I see… But hadn’t you quit?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t do it. Actually, sorry — if we’re going to talk calmly, I need five minutes to pull myself together.”

From a cabinet in the bathroom, like a small pharmacy, she took out a little aluminum bowl and a kind of makeshift syringe: a long needle attached to one of those rubber bulbs used for filling fountain pens. She poured some powder into the bowl, heated it for a few seconds, then sucked the liquid into the bulb. She rolled up her left sleeve: in the crook of her elbow was a large, purplish hole. She injected the liquid into that spot and put everything back in the cabinet — bowl, needle, leftover powder — without even washing or disinfecting anything. Then she let out a long sigh and calmly sat down next to me.

I told her about Jack’s phone call, explained the situation, and tried to help her understand right away that it was necessary not only to grant the divorce, but also to resolve the issue of the property in her name.

She waved a hand like she was shooing away a fly:

“If that’s what this is about, tell Jack I couldn’t care less about his villa, his yacht, or any of it. And as for his money — he can shove it.”

“You mean you’re ready to admit it all belongs to him?”

“Of course… Right now, I can afford to live however I want.”

“Then if you’re okay with it, I’ll call Jack so you two can set up a meeting with his lawyer.”

“Go ahead. I’ll sign whatever he wants, as long as he stops bothering me.”

I called. Their conversation lasted maybe two minutes: “Meeting… OK… Good luck to you…”

As I had expected, Lilla had no intention of extorting money from the man — and he would’ve gladly paid to clean up the mess.

After the call, she said she wanted to celebrate our reunion at Minton’s Playhouse that very night, and she invited me. I told her I had a date with Nancy, a model from Conover, and she immediately replied, “Great, bring her too.”

At Minton's, Lilla was greeted with enthusiasm by her old jazz friends. There was pianist Thelonious Monk, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, saxophonist Charlie Parker, drummer Kenny Clarke, Billy Eckstine — the guardian angel of the new bop movement — and many others. Hugs, affection, shouts, and above all, music of the highest level. The only one who didn't share in the excitement was Monk, who, when he wasn't playing, stayed silent and brooding in a corner, or stood outside the door, maybe just to get some air.

At one point, Parker — without saying a word — practically carried Lilla away with him. It was already very late. Nancy, who had never been to Minton's, thanked me for the wonderful evening. Naturally, I had to pick up the tab for everyone — there went half a month's salary.

With a call from Chicago, Jack Kahn informed me that Lilla had signed all the documents to return the property in her name — including the divorce, which had already gone through in Reno — without asking for a thing. She only wanted her amplifier and records back.

In the meantime, my job at Voice of America had become pretty exhausting. Switching back and forth between day and night shifts took a serious toll on my rhythm: one week I slept during the day, the next at night. And often, because of absences, shifts overlapped, making it hard to stick to regular meals and sleep. I was nervous, irritable, and at that point, had neither the energy nor the will for a social life. I'd built up a circle of women who could satisfy more immediate needs. But they were casual encounters — just a way to stay connected.

One morning, around ten, I was desperately trying to fall asleep after a night shift. I had forgotten to unplug the phone, as I usually did to avoid interruptions. When it rang, I picked up reluctantly, half-asleep.

A weak voice, as if from beyond the grave, pleaded: "Come quickly… I'm dying…"

At first, I thought it was some dumb prank, but then I recognized Lilla's voice.

"Where are you?" I asked anxiously.

"146 West…" the sentence was cut off before I could get the full address. I only heard the phone fall and the murmur of street noise through an open window.

I hung up and called Spencer, a mutual friend, to get the exact address. He advised me to contact the police before going. We went together and found officers already there, loading Lilla into an ambulance amid a small crowd of onlookers. My friend and I were asked to report to the police station right away, but we weren't held long. They asked a few brief questions, and we told them everything we knew about her, honestly. They asked me if I used drugs. I said no — and it was the truth. Despite all our time together, Lilla had never once asked me to join her in using heroin. Maybe she knew I never would; or maybe — in her instinctive generosity, her most touching quality — she didn't want to involve me in something she herself knew was destructive.

I've never once, under any circumstances, felt the desire to "try it." And I don't take any credit for that. It wasn't about the morality I learned as a child. It was pure fear: fear of the consequences, not just for my health, but for the stability of my job. Just basic survival instinct.

At the detox unit of the detention center where Lilla was locked up — once again — visits weren't allowed. I regularly asked about her condition until they told me that the detox treatment was going well and that she'd be released in a few weeks.

It was the usual routine for addicts — which often ends in tragedy when the body can no longer respond to treatment.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 16

The war years I spent working at the Voice of America were, all things considered, fairly calm. Still, communication with the countries at war had been cut off, and I kept hearing about the bombings in London, which made me very worried for my brother, who had been working at the BBC ever since the Italian section was founded. I also knew that Radio London's broadcasts were much more widely listened to than ours — not only because Italians could tune in more easily, but also because they were simply more effective.

I had managed to get exempted from delivering actual commentaries: my duties were mostly limited to writing and reading the news. Only occasionally did I handle other content. Back when I worked for the Italian-language radio stations in New York, they had already changed my name because my real one didn't sound "Italian" enough, assigning me the name *Renzo Renzi* — a pseudonym I never liked.

Anyone who enters the United States as an immigrant has the right to choose a new name. Many people do — especially immigrants from Central Europe, and particularly from Russia, most of them refugees fleeing various *pogroms*. For that reason, it's very hard to tell someone's origins just from their name. There are Russian Jews today who go by Smith, Howard, Johnson, and so on — all names of Anglo-Saxon origin. I believe they didn't do it to deny their roots, but rather to make a clean break from a past that was often painful and difficult, and to begin a completely new life.

Italians, on the other hand, almost always kept their original names. They tended to change or adjust them mostly when they entered show business. The list of Italian singers, more or less well known, with fully American names would be very long. As for me, when I arrived from Cuba with the well-known quota visa and was asked what name I wanted to use, I very sincerely said I preferred to keep my own. I had no reason to hide behind a false identity. In fact, I felt a certain aversion to the idea of erasing my family name. When the name change was imposed on me, I accepted it — but every time I said that name that wasn't really mine, I felt like I was speaking about someone else. That's why the pseudonym *Renzo Renzi* stuck with me even after the war — but as soon as I could, when I finally returned to Italy after many years, I resumed using my real name.

Many, when becoming American citizens or waiting for naturalization, chose a middle ground: they kept part of their original name. There are thousands of people in America named *Rose*, derived from names like *Rosenbaum*, *Rosenthal*, *Rosewitzky*, *Rosenblatt*, and many others. The clarinetist Artie Shaw was actually Arthur Arshawsky. Irving Berlin was originally Israel (Izzy) Baline. The saxophonist and bandleader Tony Pastor was Antonio Pestritto, while composer Vernon Duke was born Vladimir Dukelsky. Eddie Lang, the inseparable companion of violinist Joe Venuti, was born Salvatore Massaro — just to name a few.

Some may still remember when I had the task of introducing New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia on air at the Voice of America. He had a very clever approach to propaganda. His method was to read the Sunday newspaper comic strips — a complete novelty for Italian listeners. Very often, he would use those stories and characters to highlight how absurd it was

to be fighting a war alongside Nazi Germany. It was known that his monologues were followed with great interest.

I have a vivid memory of Mayor La Guardia — not only for his cheerful, witty character, but also for his incredibly down-to-earth manners.

After the broadcasts, we often went together to a drugstore on the corner of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, just a few steps from the Voice of America studios, for a malted milk or an American-style coffee. Fiorello would strike up conversations with everyone, speaking loudly, often repeating what he'd just said on air, to the delight of an Italian clerk who served us. It's a pity we didn't have a tape recorder back then — it would be incredible to hear those colorful little conversations again, nearly forty years later.

One day, La Guardia asked me to prepare a summary of a *Pinocchio* episode about "the lies that make your nose grow," intending to base a radio address on it to expose fascist falsehoods. I found an Italian edition of the book at the Italian Book Shop on Mulberry Street and wrote the summary for him — although I never found out whether he actually used it.

La Guardia was famous for showing up wherever something bad happened in the city. Once, there was a major fire in a large warehouse in New York. I went to report on it live, and was surprised to see, among the many firefighters, a very small man in full uniform — standard helmet and flameproof suit included. It was odd, since the minimum height for a firefighter in America is, I believe, over six feet. Then I realized it was Fiorello La Guardia himself, doing what he could — running, shouting orders. At the time, many cartoons depicted him dressed as a firefighter because of his habit of rushing to every fire in the city.

La Guardia was the first New York mayor of Italian descent and served from 1934 to 1945. When he died in 1947 at the age of 65, I went to his funeral. The crowd was so huge I couldn't even catch a glimpse of the casket.

* * *

In the final period of the war, we often gathered to listen to the Italian broadcasts of Ezra Pound's speeches in English, aimed at American soldiers on the front. The tone sounded like it came from a madman — delusional and constantly spewing insults against America.

It's hard to imagine how the author of the *Pisan Cantos* — where the poet's soul soars — could have supported ideas so completely at odds with the gentle and elevated spirit of so many of his verses. But it's easy to attribute this to a deterioration of his mental judgment, bordering on dangerous schizophrenia.

After the war, when Pound was interned in Washington, I tried several times to visit him, but visits — especially from journalists — were forbidden. I ran into him by chance in Florence, when he was old and had regained his freedom. We ended up at the same table at the famous *Trattoria Sostanza* (nicknamed "Il Troia") on Via del Porcellana. At first, I didn't recognize him. It was clear he was nearly blind and was accompanied by a woman — I don't know if she was his wife or just a friend. Once I realized it really was him, I spoke to him and said I had lived in America for a long time. He replied that he deeply wished to see the city of Hailey, Idaho, where he had been born.

I couldn’t resist the urge to provoke him a little and asked whether he had any issue sitting in a trattoria next to a Jew. His answer left me stunned: “What are you saying? I’ve always been a great student and admirer of Jewish culture.”

It didn’t seem like the right time to point out the contradiction between that statement and his past. I confess that that evening, Ezra Pound — whom I had always despised as a man and admired as a poet — made me feel pity. He left with his wrinkled cap on his head, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses, his step unsteady. But before leaving, he insisted on shaking my hand tightly — and if I hadn’t pulled back, he would’ve hugged me, as I later heard he did with the Jewish poet Allen Ginsberg. Who knows how many crises and torments his mind endured in those final years of his life.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 17

I've always had an irresistible aversion to waking up before ten or eleven in the morning. I've always been a night owl — the kind of person whose engine doesn't start until the afternoon. I had to find a way to avoid working in the early morning hours. With the complicity of my section chief, I managed to get complete flexibility with my schedule, under the pretense that I needed to go to the library for research or out into the city to gather material for my broadcasts. In fact, my job was to produce a segment describing the so-called *American way of life*. This, at least in theory, required me to have regular contact outside the office. In reality, those meetings always happened when the sun was already high in the sky, allowing me to dedicate my evenings to a fairly active social life. The job I enjoyed the most was preparing music programs.

When communications with Italy were reestablished, these programs were recorded on large discs, similar to the wartime V-Discs, known — as I mentioned — as *padelloni* ("big pans"). Through these broadcasts, which focused heavily on jazz, I introduced many Italians — often for the first time — to American orchestras, singers, and soloists. Upon returning to Italy after the war, I was surprised to learn that I had been the first to broadcast tracks that later became famous, such as *In the Mood* and *Moonlight Serenade* with the Glenn Miller Orchestra. It had been easy — I had the right resources to be ahead of the curve.

Although I had lived in America during what was probably the most stimulating period of my life, I never truly assimilated — in other words, I never became a real "American." There was always a kind of inner resistance, something mysterious that kept me from being completely absorbed by the American way of life. And yet, especially after the war, I was in an ideal position to forget my origins, my traditions, my customs — both good and bad — and embrace those of my adoptive country, which were far more practical.

If I ask myself why, I can't give a definite answer. I can only recall the answer I gave when my dear old friend Amerigo Gomez asked me, during a conversation at Radio Florence, why I had decided to return to Italy for good. The only words that came to mind were:
"I came back because I couldn't be happy in a city without church bells and swallows."
A naive and childish response, perhaps — but looking back, a deeply telling one. Those words, after all, masked the real ailment I carried: nostalgia.

December 1945. New York was caught up in the usual pre-Christmas frenzy — a time of year I've always disliked, because it imposes social and traditional obligations that are hard to avoid without risking friendships or, in some cases, even professional standing. It's a ritual that regularly disrupts the routines of millions of people.

I had long since stopped sending greeting cards — not without criticism and some social fallout. That whole tradition is a huge seasonal business, involving entire companies and billions in revenue. As much as possible, I tried not to reply to the dozens of cards I received, which, to be honest, brought me no joy at all — only the annoying burden of having to decide whether or not to respond, depending on the sender. I hadn't been able, however, to avoid the obligation of

giving some gifts, especially when they were part of a mutual exchange. The whole thing wore me out and forced me to waste time hunting for the right gifts amid the chaos of overcrowded stores.

About two weeks before Christmas, I was knocked out by a bout of the flu. The season was especially harsh: cold, sleet, and wind kept me inside.

I was still recovering, and Christmas was fast approaching — I hadn't thought about any gifts yet. The idea of inevitably disappointing people terrified me, and I didn't know how to avoid it. Just a few days before Christmas, one evening, an old friend came by to keep me company. I appreciated Emanuele's bravery in venturing out on such a bitter night — although, being an avid gin rummy player, I suspected his real motive was the hope of playing a few rounds. Even though I was still in bed, full of aspirin and other remedies, I ended up getting up — a sign of how, at that time, a deck of cards could have brought me back even from the grave.

It was past midnight when the doorbell rang sharply. I lived on the ground floor, in a very central part of New York, and around Christmas, all sorts of people were out and about — especially drunks. I put on the security chain and pressed the buzzer to open the front door. I had no doorman, so I was exposed to whatever surprises might come. I asked my friend to check who it was. A blast of icy wind and sleet swept into the apartment. My friend saw that it was a woman: Lilla.

I hadn't seen her in a long time, and after that night at Minton's with Charlie Parker, I had almost forgotten her. She was in a state of extreme agitation. She threw herself at my feet, begging me to save her from the man she was living with — someone I knew nothing about. Her voice was so loud and frantic that she was in danger of waking the whole building. She told me that this man was abusing her violently. She kept repeating, "Save me… save me…"
I understood that she wanted to stay at my place — but that was out of the question.

Still, her situation was too serious to ignore. At one point, she said: "If I go back to him, he'll kill me."

I made the only decision I could: I gave her some money so she could pay for a few nights in a hotel, and asked my friend to take her there by taxi. Faced with this emergency, Emanuele gave up our card game and agreed to help. Just over half an hour later, he called to say that once in the taxi, Lilla had decided to go to a friend's place on West 65th Street. He said he'd left her at the door, relatively calm. Somewhat reassured, I went back to bed to finish recovering from my pre-Christmas flu.

Two days later, Lilla called me in high spirits — I had come to know her sudden mood swings well — to tell me she had reconciled with the man who abused her.

"Well, good," I thought. "Let's just hope she stays away now."

On Christmas Day, the weather had improved. I was feeling better, but I stayed in as a precaution. Many friends called to wish me well, and their greetings kept me company. Outside, I could hear church carillons, while the radio endlessly played *Adeste Fideles*, *Silent Night*, and other Christmas hymns repeated year after year with exhausting monotony.

The next day, the sun was melting the snow piled along the edges of Central Park, and the city's plows were hard at work clearing away the slush.

Around noon, I went out to buy the newspaper and read that Lilla had been found dead under unclear circumstances. If her photo hadn't been included, I probably would have missed the news altogether, as the various names listed (as often happens with those in police records or criminal registries) were unfamiliar to me.

Despite my shock, I found the strength to call Spencer — the only friend who had known Gwendoline since our days in Florence. Once he had recovered, Spencer told me we had to go to the police immediately: our names were likely found among Lilla's personal belongings.

At the precinct, they told us that no one had come forward to claim her body or handle the funeral, and that her partner was already known to the police as a drug user. According to his account — considered fairly credible — on Christmas night, the two of them, completely drunk and likely under the influence of drugs, had gotten into a fight. At some point, he took off a shoe and threw it at her, hitting her in the head. She fell, struck her head on one of those marble thresholds between rooms, and died instantly. He was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

Offers came in from several sources to ensure Gwendoline could receive a decent burial. Even Jack Kahn, the husband she had abandoned and betrayed, sent money to prevent poor Lilla from being buried in a pauper's grave, as would have been required by law. I also contributed, along with Spencer, on that deeply sorrowful occasion.

Spencer went to the morgue. I couldn't bring myself to go.

Even though I had long since ceased to be part of her life, Lilla's tragic end closed a chapter of my own — leaving behind a long, painful regret, and a sharp sense of guilt for not having done more to help her.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 18

With the end of the war and the resumption of communications with Italy, prominent figures from Italian political and cultural life began arriving in New York. Many turned to the Voice of America as their point of reference, and indirectly, many of them ended up visiting my home as well.

Up until that point, the only Italian friends I had managed to see again were a few prisoners of war assigned to small towns near New York. I saw them when it was decided that some of them would come during the day to work at the Voice of America, helping with news writing and various research tasks.

It was thanks to a prisoner exchange in 1945 that Michelangelo Bongiorno — later known as Mike — arrived in New York. I still remember him walking into our office on 57th Street, accompanied by his father, lawyer Philip Bongiorno, offering to collaborate with us. He couldn't have been more than twenty: a blond, rather shy young man who we couldn't immediately place within our team, as we were trying to reduce personnel, not increase it.

Shortly afterward, Bongiorno found work as an announcer at WHOM, a station owned by Fortune Pope, son of Generoso Pope, publisher of the Italian-language daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* in New York.

Even then, Mike Bongiorno showed great tenacity and a passion for his work. I, too, worked irregular hours at various stations, including WHOM, so I often ran into him. But while for me it was just a job, for Bongiorno it was everything. Our colleagues used to say, "Mike doesn't work to live — he lives to work." That attitude, no doubt, contributed to his later success.

He joined the Voice of America a bit later, as a freelance contributor. He mostly handled sports coverage and, for a time, participated in a program under my supervision, where we — along with other collaborators — answered questions that came in from Italy. At that time, right after the war, Italians were thirsty for information about America. They asked about everything, and we had to create a dedicated office just to handle the volume of correspondence and select the most interesting questions.

By the early 1950s, my journalistic ambitions had quietly begun to take shape. Even though I didn't know the editors of the major magazines or their political leanings, I began submitting articles to the new Italian weeklies that had emerged after the war, focusing on everyday life in America.

Each piece earned me between 25,000 and 30,000 lire — a decent sum at the time. I wrote constantly, about everything and everyone, in a kind of feverish publishing frenzy that soon caught the attention of several newspapers. From time to time, I also sent in articles for the cultural pages. *Il Tempo*, founded and directed by Renato Angiolillo, asked me to work as a special correspondent — an occasional role, typically related to visits from Italian politicians or events of particular interest to Italy. Then, in 1955, Angiolillo called me to Rome to sign a contract as a full-time correspondent based in New York — a role I held for several years.

In the immediate postwar period, the so-called “war brides” began arriving from Italy: young women — often very young — who had married American soldiers stationed in Italy. Many of these marriages were built on misunderstandings and quickly led to bitter disappointment. The soldiers spoke of country homes, cars, appliances, and other wonders. The idea of leaving a war-torn Italy for a prosperous America was, understandably, very appealing.

These G.I.s were often mild-mannered — a welcome contrast to the jealous and controlling nature of certain Italian men, particularly those from the South. The liberators were tall, healthy, generous: they handed out food, cigarettes by the carton, and left a strong impression. In turn, these young men — from places like Pennsylvania or Minnesota — were charmed by the grace and beauty of Italian girls, and many married them.

But once they arrived in America — relocated to small towns in the Midwest or suburban neighborhoods where they didn’t know a soul — these brides were faced with a very different reality. Sure, the husband had a car, but maybe he was just a bus driver or the owner of a small deli in the Bronx or Brooklyn. The “country house” was often just a modest wooden home, indistinguishable from many others, far less charming than even the simplest summer cottage back in Italy. The climate, too, was often harsh. And a limited knowledge of English made integration even harder — especially in a society so different from their own.

In short, most of these wartime marriages ended badly — even more tragically when children were involved.

In 1955, I conducted an in-depth investigation into these marriages, which became a long article published in the weekly magazine *Tempo*. To my great surprise, some of the Italian wives’ comments were picked up by American news agencies operating in Italy and made their way into the U.S. press — even *The New York Times* published a summary of my report. I was later invited to speak about the issue on several New York radio and television programs, including NBC.

Americans were stunned — and even outraged — that these girls weren’t happy or proud to be living in the country with the highest standard of living in the world. They couldn’t understand why so many were leaving their husbands. One major reason was the radical change in the men’s behavior once they were back home. The carefree, fun-loving spirit of the liberator was replaced by the routine of daily work. The carefree nights during the war were gone, replaced by evenings slumped in front of the TV, with tired, silent husbands already worried about the next day’s grind, alarm clock set for 7 a.m. It was a monotonous life — a far cry from the Hollywood dream.

One particular confession, from a young woman married to a Brooklyn housewares shop owner, caused a real stir. I quoted her in my article:

“Life in that apartment, where everything was made of plastic, became unbearable. My husband had complete trust in me, never showed the slightest jealousy. He never looked at other women, and treated me like a saint. But instead of feeling flattered, I was so irritated that I couldn’t stand to live with him anymore.”

A real backlash followed — some papers even began referring to the war brides as *signorine*, a clearly derogatory label. What the critics failed to grasp was the deep psychological dimension of the phenomenon.

Some of these disillusioned wives, if they had the right qualities, turned to modeling for fashion houses or photo agencies. I personally knew at least three who, after leaving their husbands, tried to pursue careers in that world — facing fierce competition, of course. Eventually, some may have come to realize that staying with a boring but loyal husband was preferable to the daily struggle to survive in a tough job market with exhausting hours. Two of them returned to Italy; the third divorced her first husband and married an Italian immigrant who better matched her tastes. I don't know how that second marriage turned out.

The Fontana sisters — renowned Roman fashion designers — came to New York shortly after the war, bringing with them four young models to present their latest creations. It was inevitable that I'd meet the group. Among the models was a very friendly young woman from Florence, with whom I spent time during her free hours. Her name was Elsa Martinelli.

* * *

In his final *Diary 1942–1968*, published by Rusconi, Giuseppe Prezzolini — quite rightly — scolded me for only getting in touch with him in New York in 1954 (page 211). But I do have a few excuses for that delay. I had never met Prezzolini in Italy, partly because he had already moved to New York when I was still a boy, with other things on my mind than seeking out intellectuals and literary figures. At that age, it had never even occurred to me to visit Papini — who, incidentally, lived on Via Colletta, just a few steps from my house.

Once I was in the United States, the idea of meeting Prezzolini made me uneasy. Everyone described him as a very difficult man; some even accused him of coming to America to run Columbia University's Casa Italiana with Mussolini's blessing, and a few openly labeled him a fascist.

However, the reason I eventually decided to visit him was not — as he seemed to suggest in his comments — fear of McCarthyism or a desire to seek advice from a man "on the right." Honestly, I can't see what connection there could have been between McCarthy and my visit. My reasons were entirely personal — or perhaps, more simply, motivated by the curiosity to meet a man who, still in his youth, had helped shake up and renew Italian culture alongside Papini.

I'm grateful for the kind words he wrote about me in his *Diary*, and I've always appreciated the long article he later wrote about my eventual "conversion" to painting.

Later in the *Diary*, Prezzolini recalls an evening at my apartment on Central Park South, with Leonardo Sinisgalli and others. If I remember correctly, that gathering — which included some distinguished visitors from Italy — had been organized specifically in his honor.

The more I spent time with Prezzolini, the more I realized how different he was from the image that circulated in certain American circles. Certainly, he was gruff, naturally reserved, and allergic to flattery.

That first meeting — which he also mentions in his *Diary* — took place in March 1954, on a cold wooden bench at one of the entrances to Columbia University. I began by offering him a few words of admiration, but rather than being flattered, he frowned and, in his unmistakable Tuscan accent, said:

“Listen, my good man: if you came here just to give me compliments, you’d have been better off staying home. I don’t like compliments.”

Once we got past the small talk and dropped the formalities, he began to invite me often to his now-famous attic — described countless times by journalists and visitors.

That tiny, wind-swept apartment, with its peeling walls and a kitchen completely un-American in style, was exactly what one would expect from a man like Prezzolini.

More than once I wanted to take a peek at his famous collection of letters, which took up a large part of the apartment along with mountains of stacked books. But I quickly realized how protective he was of it. To discourage any further requests, he downplayed its importance, saying it was nothing more than a bunch of personal letters, of little interest to outsiders.

That precious archive was later donated to the authorities in Italian-speaking Switzerland, and today we know just how extraordinary its contents are. The Italian authorities, for a very modest sum, let an irreplaceable treasure of cultural and historical value slip through their fingers.

Prezzolini didn’t give his friendship easily. But he liked me, and from time to time we would have dinner together — if you could call it that. Like me, he had simple tastes. Often, a bowl of bean soup, a bit of cheese, and a slice of rustic bread were more than enough for him.

Let it be said clearly: Prezzolini had a complicated relationship with Italy — part love, part resentment. I believe that, deep down, he loved Italy — but not Italians. Perhaps he could tolerate Italians one by one, but not Italian society as a whole, which he considered unfit to manage a true democracy.

* * *

After the 1950s, my American life had become quite varied. The Voice of America only occupied part of my time, which allowed me to pursue other activities — journalism, music (especially jazz), and, let’s say, a certain kind of social life. I earned enough to afford good restaurants and enjoyable evenings with a variety of girlfriends, who came and went according to my mood. My friends were always surprised that, despite not being particularly handsome, I always had women around me. But it wasn’t a matter of luck — not really. My so-called “successes” were simply due to the fact that I never fell in love. I never went crazy over anyone, and I didn’t suffer much if someone left me.

I never fixated on women who didn’t return my interest. I just moved on and looked for someone more receptive. This attitude was possible precisely because I never truly lost my head over anyone. And that, perhaps, is the main reason I remained a bachelor until the age of forty-eight. I was too fickle, too individualistic — maybe even too self-centered and selfish — to commit to something as binding as marriage. I can’t recall ever asking a woman to marry me. On the contrary, some asked me. And I must admit, on a couple of occasions I came very close to saying “yes.” Once, in fact, I did say it — albeit half-heartedly. But perhaps fate had other plans, and nothing came of it.

It was around that time that Giorgio Padovano, head of the Italian section at the Voice of America, called me into his office and said something along these lines:

“One line in our annual budget is dedicated to staff travel. This year, we still have several thousand dollars left, and if we don’t use them before the end of the fiscal year, Congress will likely cut the funding. What would you say to traveling across the United States at our expense to produce a series of broadcasts showcasing the diversity of American life? You could even take three months if needed.”

At first, I was a bit hesitant. I’ve never been fond of long trips. I’ve never really been a traveler at heart. Traveling means sticking to schedules, catching trains and planes, adapting to unfamiliar habits — often uncomfortable ones. A love of travel doesn’t go well with laziness — and I’ve always been, fundamentally, lazy. Restless, yes — but from an armchair. Fickle, sure — but only on my own terms.

The idea of stepping away, even for a few weeks, from a life filled with friends, entertainment, and light relationships made me unsure.

But then I realized: this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — to explore the United States on the government’s dime. And there was another compelling factor: the total freedom I was being given. I could go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, however I wanted. Everything was left to my judgment. My only obligation was to spend the money — how I did it didn’t really matter.

So, I accepted.

I was given an official statement from the State Department instructing local authorities, institutions, and police to offer me assistance wherever needed. I also had a government press badge that gave me privileged access in almost any circumstance. They provided me with a booklet of blank airline vouchers that allowed me to fly for free with any carrier — I just had to fill them out and sign, and the government would cover the cost. For meals and lodging, I received an advance in traveler’s checks to spend as I pleased. Additional funds could be wired to me if needed.

I couldn’t have asked for more.

I decided my first stop would be New Orleans — a city I had long wanted to visit, drawn by its musical history and deep jazz roots.

I stepped off the plane into what felt like a Turkish bath — no surprise, since New Orleans is semi-tropical and lies below sea level. Naturally, I settled into a small hotel in the Vieux Carré, the only part of the city that truly interested me. The rest — the modern part — was just a poor imitation of any other American city.

The French Quarter, the Vieux Carré, is like a small jewel set in a cheap frame: two cities within one, so different from each other that it’s almost unbelievable they coexist. From the glass towers of modern New Orleans, you transition without warning into a world of *belle époque*-style balconies overflowing with flowers and vines, their wrought iron railings reminiscent of corners of old Spain or the baroque terraces of southern Italy. You’re struck by the vitality of the little bookshops, the cafés, the fruit stalls and Creole specialty stands that line the sidewalks, among vendors selling trinkets and crocodile-skin handbags. It’s a cheerful, carefree atmosphere — more Mediterranean than Anglo-Saxon.

As night fell, the quarter transformed into a true Babel of sound and voices spilling out from the bars and clubs — most of them with their doors wide open. You could hear jazz, striptease music, and even the off-key singing of tourists paying to indulge their dream of being onstage.

* * *

I was well aware that the Mississippi was no longer the one romanticized in *Show Boat*. And I knew perfectly well I wouldn't be greeted by the sounds of old blues drifting off the banks, nor stumble upon the evocative pages of Mark Twain come to life. Still, I could never have imagined just how different the port would be from the image of the Deep South portrayed in certain folklore books. Massive cargo ships and tankers lined the docks, disappearing into a hazy atmosphere thick with the deafening clatter of cranes and loading equipment. The water was murky and yellowish, full of silt.

I'd been officially invited to take a sightseeing tour aboard a vessel outfitted for visitors. The tour, full of statistics about the port's immense economic importance — at the time, the second largest in the U.S. — was led by a young man in his thirties who, in classic American fashion, introduced himself before beginning the speech: his name was Frank La Rocca.

After the rather drab tour, I approached him and asked if he happened to be related to Nick La Rocca, the cornet player famous for composing *Tiger Rag*. He replied that Nick was a distant cousin of his father's, though he had never met him personally. When he found out I was a jazz enthusiast, he confessed that he was only doing the tour guide job temporarily — in truth, he was an unemployed trumpet player.

It was clear to me right away that he knew his jazz. We quickly became friends, and thanks to him, I was able to hear some excellent jazz — not in nightclubs, but in the homes of out-of-work musicians like himself. These were humble homes, yet each one had its own little *patio* full of flowers. I remember a particularly moving jam session held outdoors in one of these small courtyards, where the scent of magnolias was almost dizzying.

Another must-see stop was the Grand Canyon. The El Tovar Hotel stood atop a bluff — the starting point for guided excursions to the most scenic spots. After dinner, I would sit in the lounge with the other tourists, all trying to pass the time before bed.

At one point, a man — not young, a bit stocky, with graying hair — sat at the piano and began playing selections from *Grand Canyon Suite* by Ferde Grofé, the same composer who had orchestrated Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Everyone listened in reverent silence, but I was visibly annoyed by the performance, which I thought was dreadful.

I couldn't help but turn to an older woman sitting beside me on the sofa and say:

"Who is this terrible pianist ruining the *Grand Canyon Suite*?"

She looked at me, clearly offended, and said:

"Why, that's the composer himself — that's Ferde Grofé."

I must admit, after the performance, Grofé himself offered a sort of self-critique:

"I only played because someone asked me to. I know I'm a terrible interpreter of my own music — I've never been much of a pianist. I apologize to myself and to all of you if I made a mess of it."

That disarming bit of honesty made me forget the bad playing and actually warmed me to the man. He explained that he came to the Grand Canyon nearly every year for vacation. That year, in fact, he was there on his honeymoon with his beautiful new wife — much younger than he was.

I told him I'd dedicate a special radio broadcast to Italians, sharing the story of our unexpected meeting. Grofé invited me to his home in Santa Monica, California, where I ended up spending a couple of delightful days.

By this point in the trip, I was being welcomed almost everywhere I went — usually preceded by phone calls from local authorities or journalists. I was treated like a visiting dignitary, all thanks to the "mission" I had been entrusted with: to help introduce America to the world beyond its borders. That this "mission" was modest, almost symbolic, didn't matter much.

In Santa Fe, they even reserved a small suite for me at the famous Hotel La Fonda — one of the most enchanting hotels in America, perhaps the world. Styled in a rich and refined Mexican tradition, it made me forget all about the glittering lobbies and excessive luxury of other American hotels.

At La Fonda, I met an extraordinary character — though, unfortunately, I no longer remember his name. He knew everyone in town and used the hotel lobby as his base of operations. He was the one who took me to Taos to meet the widow of D.H. Lawrence, the author of the then-controversial, semi-autobiographical novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

Lawrence had died in 1930, and his widow, Frieda, had since married the man who had long been her lover — Angelo Ravagli, a former *bersagliere* from Spotorno. Back in 1926, the Lawrences had spent an extended stay in Spotorno, living in a small house that Ravagli owned. It was there that the affair between Frieda and Angelo had begun. After Lawrence's death, Frieda settled in Taos, and Ravagli joined her there — and eventually married her.

I spent an entire afternoon with them. He spoke English with a heavy Italian accent, and she spoke Italian just as roughly, with a German lilt — she had been born Frieda von Richthofen, after all. But before long, Ravagli switched to his Ligurian dialect and began recounting his exploits with the Bersaglieri Association of Savona.

Naturally, I tried to extract some juicy, unpublished details about Lawrence — but it was no use. Every time I steered the conversation toward the writer, they changed the subject. It was clear they didn't want to talk about him at all.

At one point, I asked Angelino (as he liked to be called) if he missed Italy.

"You bet I do!" he replied with a smile. "Here in Taos, there's not even a coffee bar where you can meet up with friends and play cards. I haven't been able to find a single person to play *scala quaranta* with."

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 19

Every now and then, I would call the New York office and ask Padovano if and when I should return.
“How much have you spent?” he would ask. I’d tell him the amount. And he would always reply: “Too little! Keep traveling.”

As fascinating as it was to visit such different places for free and in such comfort, with no specific obligations, free as a bird, I was beginning to feel a certain nostalgia for my little house near Central Park, my friends and girlfriends, the jazz evenings, and all those little things we build around ourselves day by day and find hard to give up for too long.

Evelyn Waugh’s book had made me want to visit the famous Forest Lawn cemetery in Los Angeles, which he had so sharply satirized.

In that cemetery, truly one of a kind in the world, I found confirmation of what I already knew: Americans reject the idea of death and try to avoid it by disguising it with life itself.
With the goal of making people forget about death and turning the cemetery into a joyful place, the result—at least from my European point of view—was quite the opposite.
Despite its splendid flower-lined avenues, reception halls, luxury, and carefully curated cheerfulness of symphonic and choral music, Forest Lawn is one of the most lugubrious places I have ever visited.
The unsettling and eerie atmosphere of this refuge for the dead, who are meant to seem alive, stems from the very effort to distort the nature of death.

A guide took me along the paths, where there were virtually no visible graves: they were hidden beneath the flowers surrounding gushing fountains and small ponds crossed by white swans. The parks all had suggestive names: *Lullaby Lane*, *Serene Oasis*, *Hill of Inspiration*, *Garden of Meditation*.

“This isn’t a cemetery,” the guide told me with a smile, “but a haven of peace, a place where love and sweet memories are cradled by birdsong and the murmur of brooks. Isn’t it wonderful?”

I truly wondered whether all of this—which leaves us Europeans perplexed—might actually be a better way to confront and overcome the issues that trouble us most.

Then we entered one of the many buildings, built in an elaborate and undefinable style, where a few people were gathered around what looked like a mannequin lying on a sofa: it was actually an embalmed corpse. The family had the illusion he was still there with them, simply asleep.
In another room, there was a choral concert—but nothing funereal: they were folk songs, and the audience clapped at the end of each piece.
I asked the guide whether they also played jazz at Forest Lawn.

“Certainly,” he answered, “especially for the wedding celebrations held here.”

Surprised that people got married in a cemetery, I asked again.
“At Forest Lawn,” he said, “an average of two thousand couples get married every year, of all religions and denominations.”

“An ideal place,” he added, “for lovers and artists. It’s no coincidence that we have one of the most important collections of reproduced artworks, many by great Italian masters.”

He showed me a stained-glass window featuring a decent replica of Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. “The original, as you know, has been nearly destroyed by time,” he explained. “These are the original colors of the painting.”

I didn’t have the courage to challenge that rather bold claim.

We climbed a slope to a sort of enormous building, perhaps larger than Rome’s main train station. One long wall was covered by a huge curtain which, motorized, opened to reveal a fresco showing, in a sort of synthesis, the Crucifixion of Christ, with all the biblical characters and a panorama of Jerusalem in the background.
It is, I was told, the largest painting in the world—though not necessarily the most beautiful. But as we know, for Americans, superlatives are often the rule.

Next, we visited the small and large enclosed mausoleums where the remains or ashes of famous people from entertainment, finance, and politics were kept—all well-known names.

The last words the guide said to me as we parted stayed in my memory:
“Dying is beautiful—if you have the privilege of being laid to rest at Forest Lawn.”
Just be sure to book early.

By then, tired of traveling across the American continent, I made the usual call to New York to find out what I should do. My hope of being called back to headquarters was fulfilled.

“Come back as soon as possible,” Padovano ordered. “We need to deal with the elections in Italy.”

I had just returned home and thrown myself onto the bed, enjoying the comfort of being back among my things after so many weeks spent in hotel rooms, when the phone rang.
No one knew I was back, so I answered with some surprise. It was Carla.

I realize I’m mentioning her here for the first time. To explain who she was, I need to take a step back.

Carla was one of the many “war brides,” mostly disillusioned, that I’ve already spoken about. But I found that out later.
I met her at a fashion show shortly after the war, and at first, I didn’t even realize she was Italian—Roman, in fact.
She struck me with her beauty: Madonna-like face, sweet brown eyes, statuesque figure, Titian-red hair flowing over her rounded shoulders—just the way I liked it. I was available, and she was glad to speak an Italian that wasn’t the usual “paesano” kind.

She told me she had come to America to work as a model. But there was something mysterious about her. At first, she wouldn’t even give me her phone number, claiming it wasn’t working.
She said she lived in Brooklyn, about 40 minutes by subway from my place. She came to visit me often.
Unlike other girlfriends, she didn’t want fancy dinners or nightclubs—just to be in my company. She cooked, tidied up—she was the ideal girlfriend.

When I went to friends' houses for poker nights, instead of heading home, she wanted to come along and would fall asleep on a sofa until the game ended—often around two or three in the morning.

She eventually revealed the mystery of her life once we had built a relationship of mutual trust.

Carla had married a young American soldier under pressure from her father. This soldier, drunk in a Roman canteen, had raped her and gotten her pregnant.
So, after a forced marriage, her husband brought her to America, to Brooklyn, where he ran a household goods store.
Of course, the marriage was a failure from the start, and the birth of a daughter—result of the Roman episode—didn't save it.
Still, Carla had to live with him, since her sporadic and modest modeling income wasn't enough to live independently.

She told me they had a kind of "modus vivendi": their cohabitation had no intimacy and was simply a practical solution.
Despite her resentment toward him, she always spoke admiringly of her husband's intelligence.
Apparently, Barney was meant to be a sociologist and was actively involved in psychoanalysis.
The store, inherited from his father, was just a source of income. He would've gladly gotten rid of it, if not for an old-maid sister and co-owner who couldn't manage it on her own.
Carla described him as a frustrated man full of complexes.

Our relationship was almost entirely sentimental and platonic.
The assault she had suffered in Italy left her with a deep aversion to sexual intimacy—perhaps also due to a naturally cool disposition.
She knew I had other girlfriends with whom I had more satisfying sexual relationships and accepted it.
I believe she had genuine affection for me.

One day, she invited me to dinner at her place in Brooklyn.
I didn't want to meet her husband, unsure of how he'd react, but she insisted, assuring me Barney was away on business and that we'd be alone. So I agreed.

The apartment was like thousands of others. The furniture, lamps, trinkets, and mirrors were all in questionable taste. Carla knew this and apologized, saying it was all bought by her husband.
When I arrived, the child was already asleep. Shortly after, we sat down for dinner. Carla knew my tastes by then: the wine was what I usually drank—nothing too expensive.
I remember that after dinner, maybe because of the wine (which I almost never drank in the evening), I suddenly got very sleepy. She noticed and suggested I make myself comfortable and take a nap in her bed.
To help me feel even more at ease, she offered me one of her husband's pajamas, which fit me.

"What time do you need to be at the office tomorrow?" she asked.
"My hours are flexible. I usually go in around ten."
"Don't worry… sleep as long as you like. I'll make sure to wake you on time."

The whole thing didn't sit quite right with me, but sleep overcame any hesitation. I slipped into Barney's pajamas and fell into a deep sleep.

I don't know exactly what time it was, but I was woken by voices in the hallway. I immediately understood that her husband had come back.

Carla, sensing the noise had woken me, came into the room cheerfully to reassure me: “There’s no reason to be embarrassed. In fact,” she said, handing me a robe—again her husband’s—“come meet him.”

“What? Like this? In his pajamas and robe? Do you realize what you’re asking me to do?” I protested.

“Barney knows everything about you and can’t wait to meet you. Think he cares about the pajamas and robe? Come on, don’t waste time—come with me…”

And so, in the kitchen, that curious encounter took place.
A husband finds you in his wife’s bed, wearing his clothes, and instead of making a scene, greets you with a smile. Incredible.

This famous husband was a man in his thirties, blond, rather short and stocky.
Not handsome, but with a lively and intelligent expression.
I immediately tried to explain how and why I was in that situation, blaming—rather cowardly—Carla for having made me drink too much.
But he brushed off my excuses and redirected the conversation to much more stimulating topics: the political situation in America, fascism, communism, foreign propaganda, and so on.
We then talked at length about psychology and psychoanalysis.
He asked if I had read certain authors, and I had to admit my cultural limits in the subject.

Carla seemed to enjoy the friendly exchange developing between us.
Perhaps there was a touch of malice in her enjoyment—a bit of sadism toward her husband.
From time to time, she’d chime in to highlight one of my qualities, as if she were introducing a boyfriend to her father, seeking approval.

Naturally, their personal situation was never mentioned.
A kind of tacit understanding had formed. He clearly knew that I knew.
It was three in the morning by the time I left. Back home, after four, I couldn’t sleep a wink and called in sick the next morning.

Around noon, Carla herself woke me with a phone call:

“I just wanted to thank you for being so kind to Barney the other night. You really made a great impression on him!… He’s thrilled with you!”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I replied sleepily, “but now, please, let me sleep.”

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 20

In 1951, after nearly thirteen years away, I decided to spend my vacation in Italy.

The first stop would be London, where I'd finally reunite with my brother after all those years apart. It was April 13th—a Friday. Not exactly the ideal day for anyone even slightly superstitious. But I've never believed in such things, and I actually chose that date thinking the plane would be less crowded.

That morning, something curious happened.
I went to the bank where I kept my modest savings to withdraw a thousand dollars for the trip. As usual on a Friday, the place was packed with people preparing for the weekend.
The teller handed me a bundle of bills, held together with a band labeled "$1,000." I slipped it into my pocket and went home to finish packing.
Not wanting to carry all the bills in a single bundle, I removed the strap and realized that instead of one hundred ten-dollar bills, I'd been given one hundred hundred-dollar bills—ten thousand dollars.
No one could have challenged the error once I left the bank. And besides, tellers are insured by law.
The temptation to stay quiet was real.
But I didn't hesitate for a moment. I rushed back to the bank to return the excess.
It had just closed, and a security guard blocked my way. It seemed like fate itself wanted me to leave for Italy with this unexpected windfall.
I explained the situation to the guard. "Come back Monday," he said.
I told him I was leaving that very day, and eventually, he let me in.
I expected at least a word of thanks from the teller—but all I got was a flat "Oh..." that made me feel like he was almost annoyed I had noticed the mistake.

My flight was scheduled for around four in the afternoon.
A group of friends came with me to the airport, including the ever-faithful Carla, who even wiped away a few tears at not being able to come along.

It was a very windy day, and the sky didn't look promising. The plane was a four-propeller aircraft, and as soon as we took off, it started shaking.
It was a rather rough flight—clearly, Friday the 13th hadn't been the best idea.
After a couple of hours, we had to make an emergency landing at a small airport—I think it was Newfoundland—under torrential rain, thunder, and lightning.
We had to wait several hours before we could take off again across the Atlantic.
The weather had calmed, and the worst seemed over, but time dragged endlessly.
I was too excited to sleep, so I passed the time playing gin rummy with a fellow passenger—an Englishman filled with whisky who cursed like a sailor every time the plane jolted.

Back then, there were no direct flights to London, so we landed in Shannon, Ireland, where bad weather forced yet another long stop.
I couldn't stop thinking about my brother, waiting at the airport with no idea why I hadn't arrived.

Finally, we left for London.
We were flying high under clear skies, when suddenly we entered a curtain of pitch-black clouds

so thick we couldn't even see the plane's wings.
We kept descending, with some turbulence here and there, and it felt like we'd never see the ground again.
Then, all at once, through the clouds, tiny houses, roads, and cars began to appear. I sighed with relief, and we landed safely at Heathrow.
My brother had even sent a flight attendant to meet me at the steps, and over the loudspeakers came the announcement:
"Doctor Nissim has arrived safely."
Everyone turned to look at me as if I were some important dignitary.

My brother has always had a talent for staging these theatrical moments.
Who knows what he told the airline staff to arrange such a royal—and, let's be honest, wildly over-the-top—welcome.

The reunion, as expected, was full of embraces, emotion, and heartfelt words.
Our voices—so similar—had spoken to Italians from London and New York for years, and now, thirteen years later, they came together in a rush of overlapping questions and answers, as the Bentley my brother Elio had rented took us to his home in St. John's Wood.
I stayed there a week. We had too much to say, too many confidences to share, too many memories to stir.
Then I flew to Milan and took a train to Florence.

Even the few words exchanged with the porter who helped with my luggage sounded like music to my ears.
My heart was pounding—I was returning home after thirteen years. Everything had changed, except my deep longing to see my city again.
And to think that back in 1938, when I'd left full of anger and bitterness, I had sworn to myself I would never set foot in Italy again.

"Shall I get you a taxi, sir?" the porter asked.
"No," I said, "I'd prefer a carriage."

It was one of those typical spring days in Florence—a soft drizzle in warm, faintly scented air.
During the short ride from the station to my hotel on the Lungarno, the coachman, sensing I had come from afar, said:
"You picked a bad time. Don't you see what awful weather we're having? It's been raining for three days straight."

Oddly, to me, it felt like a beautiful day despite the drizzle and the gray sky.
I said the air was scented—maybe not with flowers or plants, but with the familiar smell of the narrow streets, a scent I had breathed during the first thirty years of my life and now was breathing again.

After New York, London had felt small and cramped.
But Florence immediately struck me as vast, immense.
Surely it was an illusion created by my emotions. It was raining, but I saw sunshine. I wanted to hug the coachman, hunched on his seat, wearing a gray raincoat and an old worn oilskin cap.

At the Grand Hotel, the concierge first spoke to me in English—probably because of my American passport.
But then, after glancing at my name, he looked at me and recognized me.

“Welcome back, Avvocato, welcome back,” he said warmly, offering his hand.
“I hope you remember me. I’m Beppino… When you left, I was just a trainee at the bar in the Baglioni… You used to come by in the evenings to play cards with your friends… Do you remember?”

Truthfully, I didn’t—but I said yes, that I remembered perfectly.
They gave me a splendid room with a sitting area overlooking the Arno—a kind of tribute.
As I opened the windows to the hills of San Miniato and Bellosguardo, dimmed by the rain, a joyful burst of bells suddenly rang out. I hadn’t heard them in so long.
Their chimes echoed in the air as if they too were welcoming me home.

The three weeks I spent in Florence turned into a whirlwind of reunions—with friends, relatives, and former sweethearts, now settled with children.
Many of the people I hoped to see were gone—some lost to the war, others fallen on hard times, others who had moved away.
I’ll never forget the dirty, thin beggar with a long beard who stopped me on Via Tornabuoni and called me by name:
“Renzino… it’s me, R. We were in first-year high school together at the Michelangelo. Do you remember?”
“Of course I do! You were top of the class, always getting perfect grades. If you brought home a 9 instead of a 10, your father sent you to bed without dinner. The teachers used you as an example…”
“And now look at me… I won’t burden you with my sad story. I just wanted to say hello.”

I took him by the arm and brought him to eat—he truly needed it.
He told me about the string of hardships that had brought him so low: the war, family problems, misfortunes.
And I thought of what my mother used to say:
“Why don’t you spend time with R.? *He’s* a serious boy… He’ll become someone…”

Between lunches, reunions, nights on the Baglioni terrace, trips to friends’ villas in the countryside, and a few pleasant flings, there were also difficult moments.
Old fascists who had turned their backs on me during the racial laws now greeted me with open arms.
What could I do? I don’t know if I did the right thing, but I couldn’t reject anyone.
I chose to let the past go with a kind of general amnesty. And in the end, I think that was the wisest choice.

Word of my return spread quickly. Everyone wanted to see me.
Each evening, when I got back to the hotel, I found dozens of messages at the front desk—friends inviting me to lunch or dinner.
I saw names I had forgotten long ago.

Those thirteen years in America had given me an unexpected glow, as if I had returned from heroic adventures—when in fact I had done nothing heroic.
Quite the opposite: I had always been safe, far from bombs, risks, or deprivation.
Still, everyone asked me about America.
“Lucky you!” they’d say. “Lucky you, living in the United States! You were really fortunate!”

I saw my old house on Via Giovanni Bovio, almost exactly as I'd left it. My heart swelled with emotion when I stopped below the window of the room where I had slept as a child.
That was the room where I had watched my parents die, and the memories overwhelmed me.

The shutters were closed, and a "For Rent" sign hung on the door.
Pretending to be interested in renting it, I managed to go inside. Again, surprise: the entrance, which I had remembered as large and almost noble, now seemed so small I wondered if the walls had been moved.
But no, everything was the same.
The doors, the frosted glass panels—just as they'd always been.
Via Giovanni Bovio was no longer served by a tram, but by a bus, and all around, the little villas had been replaced by tall modern apartment blocks.

It was as if my old house had been miraculously spared—almost in tribute to my return.
The building manager was surprised to see me examining the light switches, the bell buttons, the radiator knobs.
They were exactly the ones I had left behind all those years ago.
Even the Art Nouveau nameplates next to the main door, listing the tenants, were still there. One or two names hadn't changed.

As I was leaving, a slightly heavyset woman stepped out of the building and stared at me for a moment.
I had the impression she recognized me. But I didn't have time to figure out who she was.
Perhaps one of the general's daughters from the first floor—clearly much changed.
I had erotic dreams about her as a teenager.

Hearing the Tuscan accent again gave me an odd joy—as if my friends were speaking that way just to please me.
Even the colorful expressions of the San Frediano district seemed delightful.
I often wandered across the Arno to Palazzo Pitti and beyond, where the swearing and shouting sounded like rustic theater—worthy of being recorded and replayed for pleasure.
I know my mood colored everything, but I'm convinced there's something intrinsically noble in the Tuscan dialect—especially the Florentine variety.
No other dialect has the dignity of Tuscan speech, which is not even a dialect, really—it's something more: a language of its own.

By the end of my vacation, I was so physically and mentally exhausted that I decided to take an extra week off and return to New York by sea, sailing from England.
This gave me a chance to spend a few more days with my brother.
The Atlantic crossing aboard the *Ile-de-France* restored me.
When we arrived, the sight of New York's skyline felt completely different from the one I had seen thirteen years earlier.
Now I was returning with a stable job, a comfortable apartment, and friends waiting for me.
And yet, all things considered, that first arrival had been far more thrilling—and far more emotional.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 21

In 1955, Gina Lollobrigida arrived in New York, riding the wave of success from films like *Bread, Love and Dreams* and *La Bersagliera*.
Arturo Tofanelli, editor of *Tempo* magazine, entrusted me with the task of writing the diary of her visit, which Gina herself would then sign. To do this, I had to take my vacation two weeks early and entrust a colleague with handling my journalistic responsibilities. For two weeks, I followed Gina everywhere—morning, afternoon, and evening.

She was invited to the most important television programs, and her popularity exploded. She couldn't leave the hotel without being recognized and surrounded by fans seeking autographs. Working with her was a real pleasure: she was always in a good mood, her comments on my texts were often insightful, and her observations were spot on.

It was a nonstop parade of parties in the most exclusive homes in New York, lunches and dinners at the Morocco or the Colony, among famous actors, agents, directors, and producers—some of whom had come from Hollywood just to meet her. In a matter of days, Gina charmed everyone with her grace and touching simplicity, despite speaking little English and needing me to constantly act as her interpreter.

One particularly memorable evening took place at Spiros Skouras' villa on Long Island. The entire international film world was there. Skouras was absolutely enchanted by Gina and told her he would do anything for her.

Gina noticed a photo of Eisenhower with a personal inscription and asked Skouras if he could arrange a meeting with the President. A few days later, a message arrived from the White House: Eisenhower would receive the actress at a set date and time.

In the meantime, *Time* magazine had dedicated a beautiful cover to her with a glowing article.

Finally, the day of the meeting arrived, and we all went to Washington. Only Gina and her husband were allowed into the meeting, so I can't recount firsthand how it went. It lasted only a few minutes—just enough for enormous media coverage.

An American photographer present at the meeting confided in me that Eisenhower kept calling her "Countess." It was suspected that the President, confused by the many ceremonial visits, had mistaken her for someone else on his schedule.

Dr. Skofic, her husband, was beaming; Gina was the first Italian actress to be received by a President of the United States.

For some time, I had been looking for a way to interview Einstein, who since 1933 had been part of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton—a sort of "university of universities," where students are often professors and professors students.

Eventually, I met a physicist, Dr. Frank Klaus, a friend of Einstein's. After much insistence, he agreed to take me to the physicist's home, on the condition that I not say I was a journalist—otherwise, Einstein would have thrown me out.

We arrived early in the morning at the modest wooden house at 112 Mercer Street and found Einstein at the door, wrapped in an old coat with a worn fur collar and a strange fur hat.

He was waiting for the Institute's shuttle.

There was time only for a quick introduction. Einstein shook my hand absentmindedly as the minibus approached. We got in too. Sitting next to him was Dr. Kurt Gödel, from the mathematics department.

The short ride was filled with light chatter: whether it would rain, the price of eggs, the condition of the driver's son who had the measles. I wondered if the driver knew he spoke every morning with a man whom George Bernard Shaw had called "one of the discoverers of the universe, alongside Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Galileo."

We arrived at the Institute for Advanced Study, a building in mock Georgian style, more like a private villa than an academic center.

Einstein said to me: "You can come in and take a look, but I think you'll be bored."

He went straight to his office, followed by Klaus and me. The room was small and simply furnished. His assistant, Bauria Kaufman, was waiting for him. No calculator, just a blackboard behind a desk cluttered with books, some reams of blank paper, and a jar full of pencils that Kaufman always kept well-sharpened.

From time to time, colleagues from the Institute would knock to ask for explanations or advice. I stayed seated in a rather uncomfortable chair in the corner. Occasionally Einstein would glance at me and say:

"Are you bored? Why don't you go to the bar? Or the library? You might find some interesting magazine..."

Since I insisted on staying to observe him working, he—perhaps a little annoyed—asked Kaufman to take me on a tour of the Institute and offer me a drink.

I saw him again around one o'clock, when he closed his notes in an old folder and asked if I wanted to walk home with him.

During the walk, I tried in vain to broach deeper topics. I wanted to know his opinion on the atomic bomb, but I immediately realized I'd struck a nerve. He looked at me suspiciously, as if he feared I wanted to extract a statement from him.

"The atomic bomb? And what do I have to do with it?" he said.

I timidly replied that he was considered the "father" of the bomb. By then I was too involved to turn back and decided to insist, even at the risk of making a poor impression—an opportunity like this might never come again.

Einstein stopped abruptly and said:
"My studies are only distantly related to the atomic bomb. If you don't believe me, ask physicist Otto Hahn and Dr. Lise Meitner."

They were the ones who studied chain reactions, later developed further by Niels Bohr in the United States.

Up to that point, we had been speaking in English. Einstein didn't know I was born in Italy. When I told him, he started speaking to me in Italian—which was, by the way, quite decent.

"Professor," I asked during the walk, "would you give me your formula for success?"

"Look, if A represents success, the formula could be: A equals X plus Y plus Z, where X is work and Y is luck."

"And what does Z represent?"

"Keeping your mouth shut as much as possible."

I realized it was best not to ask anything more, and we continued in silence.

When we got home, Einstein invited me to lunch with him, his friend Klaus, and his housekeeper and household manager, Helen Dukas.

Unfortunately, the conversation was almost entirely in German, but I understood they were discussing the political situation in Germany.

After the (American-style) coffee, Einstein took an old violin and began playing a piece—I believe it was by Kreisler—but stopped after a few bars.

"I can't remember the rest," he said. "At my age, memory plays nasty tricks."

Mrs. Dukas intervened: "Come now, Professor, memory was never your strong point. Remember when you found that $4,000 check used as a bookmark in an old treatise? It had expired six years earlier!"

Einstein smiled: "I don't think that money would have changed much in my life."

Klaus added: "Everyone knows that when the Institute wrote to Professor Einstein asking if an annual salary of $40,000 was acceptable, he thought it was $4,000 and replied that it was fine."

Einstein got annoyed: "Enough, can we stop talking about money?"

Then, as if struck by an idea, he grabbed the violin again: "Ah! Now I remember how it went..." And happily—though quite poorly—resumed the Kreisler piece.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 22

"But we've already met!... Of course, in America, in New York... Don't you remember?"

That's a phrase I still hear quite often here in Italy, even after many years since my return.

Whenever I see Piero Piccioni again, we always end up reminiscing about the time he spent in the United States and the unforgettable jazz evenings we shared.

In the biographies of Piero Piccioni (or "Fiero Morgan," as he was known in Italy), there's no mention of his appearance on an important television program with Charlie Parker.

To be honest, Piero was never known for being punctual. I was at the NBC studios, the opening titles were already running, and there was no sign of Piero. In America, television schedules are incredibly strict—a quality our own productions generally lack, where even a fifteen-minute delay is seen as normal. We couldn't possibly postpone the start of the show because of his absence. We were all on edge. Finally—and fortunately, before his segment—Piero arrived with his trademark slanted beret, as calm as ever. With Parker, he played *Cherokee*, a jazz standard, accompanying him beautifully and delivering an excellent piano solo. It's a pity there's no recording of that rare encounter.

Needless to say, Parker was, as usual, lost in his own world. At the end, he turned to me and said, "I didn't know there were good jazz pianists in Spain." When I pointed out that Piccioni wasn't Spanish but Italian, he didn't seem to register the correction and went on, "Someday I want to go to Spain—that country fascinates me." And when he said goodbye to Piero, he added, "Adios."
I insisted, "He's not Spanish, he's Italian," but Charlie had made up his mind, and nothing would change it. His stubbornness was legendary.

I remember a rehearsal session from way back in 1943 with pianist Earl Hines. I was there thanks to Joe Bushkin, another pianist and a close friend of Parker's. They were playing *Rosetta*, a famous Hines composition. Parker kept insisting on a variation that Hines didn't like. Hines kept stopping the performance and asking Parker to stick to the melody. Parker would stare at him with his wide, vacant eyes, nod in agreement... and then repeat the exact same variation, provoking more protests. Eventually, an argument broke out, complete with insults (not unusual when Parker was involved), and Parker stormed out of the studio with some of his crew. The session was postponed.

I followed him, hoping to act as a peacemaker (what presumption!) and bring him back. I caught up to him in the elevator. Before I could say a word, he said, "You're a friend of Sarah, I recognize you... Why isn't she here?" (I think he was referring to Sarah Vaughan, who at that time still went by Vaughn, without the 'a'). He raised his fist to hit me, but someone stopped him. Who knows who he mistook me for?

Sergio Pugliese's visit to New York, at the time Director General of RAI-TV, on the eve of Italy's official launch of television broadcasts, was a very pleasant experience—but for me, it turned into a kind of tragedy.

A warm relationship developed right away between Pugliese and me. I tried to show him the most important TV programs. Perhaps as a gesture of appreciation, one evening at dinner, Pugliese offered me a position at Italian television as a program coordinator. The idea of returning to Italy with a prestigious job thrilled me, so I accepted. With my usual lack of practical sense and a certain carelessness, I didn't ask what the salary would be—and he didn't mention it. But I had every reason to believe it would be more than satisfactory.

Pugliese left with the understanding that I would move to Italy within a couple of months. I enthusiastically announced the big news to my friends: I was moving to Italy as a television executive. I immediately began preparing for the move, starting by selling my furniture, which friends and acquaintances rushed to buy. I was so enthusiastic that I ended up selling fine rugs and valuable pieces for just a few dollars. I was left with only my bed, a rickety table nobody wanted, a few kitchen utensils, and not much else: it was bleak.

Just then, the cold shock came from Milan. I received a draft contract from RAI specifying a salary of, if I remember correctly, **150,000 or 160,000 lire per month**.

I sent a telegram to Pugliese asking for clarification. There had to be a mistake. His reply was something like:
"The salary listed is that of a first-level executive. You could soon reach 200,000 lire per month."

I did the math and realized that, while the salary was respectable for the time, it wouldn't allow me to maintain even remotely the lifestyle I had in New York. I had no choice but to decline. And perhaps Pugliese was relieved—years later, he admitted that he preferred not to take responsibility for a decision that might have made me unhappy.

So I had to start all over again, rebuilding my home from scratch. I think Pugliese always felt a bit guilty about the misunderstanding and, perhaps to soften the disappointment, offered to stage one of my television plays in Italy—the one he had seen at the WOR station in New York, titled *The American Wife*. He had been enthusiastic about it, which made me proud, coming from an expert dramatist.

At that time, I didn't have the energy, time, or motivation to translate it. I only adapted that script much later, after returning to Italy, and Pugliese—true to his promise—produced it with direction by Guglielmo Morandi, starring Lia Zoppelli and Armando Francioli.

Unfortunately, the demands of Italian TV scheduling forced Morandi to cut the dialogue in half to fit the program into one hour, even though it should have lasted two. The play became a sequence of comic-style episodes, and the dialogue lost all nuance. I didn't take it too hard, though, especially since the play was successful and was re-aired multiple times, always with high ratings.

Antonello Marescalchi and Massimo Rendina arrived in New York, both very young at the time and recently hired by RAI. They had been sent to the United States with rather vague assignments and were supposed to tour other parts of America as well. Their travel companion and guide was Mike Bongiorno.

When they returned to New York, they said Bongiorno seemed like an agent tasked with promoting America to citizens of a developing country—a kind of drill sergeant who forced them into a rigid schedule full of visits and meetings with people the two Italians found largely uninteresting.

No doubt Mike intended to fulfill his role as a "public relations man." Perhaps he didn't realize he was dealing with two Italians who saw the trip more as an opportunity for a break and some fun. Then again, who knows—maybe later on they came to appreciate the value of that kind of structured tour.

When Gianni Granzotto arrived in New York as RAI's correspondent, he asked me to help him find an apartment near the Voice of America studios, from where he sent his reports. I found him one on Central Park South, just a few steps from my own apartment. This made our meetings easier, and over time, they became more frequent and cordial.

I owe my introduction as a correspondent for *Tempo Illustrato* to Granzotto. Here's how it happened.

I had met Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of New York. At the time, Sheen was the brightest star on American television. He had overturned all the usual rules of religious programming, winning over millions of viewers with his half-hour of unscripted monologues titled *Life Is Worth Living*.

The show, with a religious theme but a very modern tone, was sponsored by Admiral, a U.S. manufacturer of televisions and household appliances. At the beginning and end of each episode, an announcer—using language that was perhaps less elevated but no less effective—would praise the features of Admiral TVs, refrigerators, and dishwashers.

The format of the show was as simple as it gets: one man, in a plain studio, in front of the cameras, microphones, and his theology. From the very first broadcast, this bishop with a piercing gaze, ready to speak about any topic—even sex (quite revolutionary at the time)—and capable of slipping in witty remarks never before heard from a clergyman, immediately captivated the audience.

Bishop Sheen literally hypnotized his viewers. He was compared to Peter the Hermit; some described him as a brilliant blend of Saint Paul and Thomas Jefferson; others saw him as a modern-day Savonarola. He was even called the most photogenic "actor" on TV: in short, he was a phenomenon.

A bishop who could preach the faith and make people laugh at the same time was something unheard of. Sheen was undoubtedly the first bishop in history whose words not only converted souls and raised money for the needy—but also helped sell freezers and televisions.

When Gianni Granzotto read the article I had written about Bishop Sheen, he put it in an envelope and sent it to Arturo Tofanelli, editor of *Tempo Illustrato*, with an appropriate cover letter. That was the beginning of my long collaboration with *Tempo* from New York.

I'm often asked—especially by jazz musicians and enthusiasts—if it's true that I played with Benny Goodman in the late 1940s. Imagine that! Me, a humble amateur pianist, playing in the orchestra of the King of Swing? Still, there's a reason why such a ridiculous rumor got started.

Benny Goodman had agreed to record a few tracks, along with an interview, for broadcast in Italy. While waiting for him in the studio with the sound technicians, I started tinkling on the

piano. Not long after, Benny arrived with three other musicians for the rhythm section. The pianist, Dick Hyman, was late. Hearing me play and a bit annoyed by Hyman's delay, Goodman said:

"Dick must've been held up. All right, let's rehearse with you."

That "you," of course, was me. I froze. But without any further ceremony, Goodman and the others launched into *Sweet Georgia Brown*, a piece I knew very well.

After realizing I could hold my own, he told the technicians to start recording. We played three or four standards, one after the other. In the last one, *Memories of You*, Benny even invited me to take an eight-bar solo in the bridge. I would have preferred that this last-minute appearance remain anonymous, but during the interview, Goodman clearly said that, in the absence of his regular pianist, the man on piano was the interviewer—me.

Everything was broadcast in Italy, and that's probably how the rumor started that I played with Benny Goodman.
Unfortunately, the recording stayed in the archives of the Voice of America. I later tried to retrieve it, but it seems it was discarded—most likely destroyed.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 23

Since the days when I worked in the tape factory in Haverstraw and, from the window of my small, bare room, I could see the lights of Ossining on the other side of the Hudson River—where the infamous Sing Sing prison was located—I had always been curious to visit that notorious place.

Permission was granted immediately, and so, on a beautiful spring morning, I went to Sing Sing. From the outside, it could easily be mistaken for a private home or a quiet nursing facility. In the small entrance courtyard, there were neatly maintained flower beds, full of colorful blossoms. Perhaps by association, those flowers seemed to carry the same sweet and sorrowful scent one smells at funerals.

After the usual checks and formalities, I was allowed in. There was a heavy, oppressive silence, and along the walls were panels dotted with blinking electrical signals. A little later, the prison warden explained to me that this was the same entrance used by inmates: tenants who didn't pay rent and were served, with stopwatch precision, three meals a day—entirely free.

The first mandatory question asked of newcomers was: "Who should we notify in case of emergency or accident?"
The execution of a death sentence wasn't considered an emergency or an accident—it was a routine, scheduled procedure.

Regulations required the chief guard to ensure that the sentence was carried out "in the manner prescribed by law." The executioner, who at the time was paid $150, was in charge of ensuring everything was done properly.

I visited both wings of the cell corridor, the exercise yards, and finally another hallway that led to the "death chamber." The room contained only one piece of furniture: the electric chair. A simple, rough wooden chair equipped with straps, electrical cables, metal plates, and other strange devices. You could sit in it on your own—but you couldn't get up by yourself.

Before being led into the execution chamber, the condemned man waited in a kind of antechamber located exactly one hundred steps from the chair.

"Now I'll show you the ballroom," the guide told me, winking, as if to highlight the irony of the name. He added, "It's where the condemned spend their final hours."

It was a bare, slightly off-kilter room, about seventeen meters in length and width.

"The ballroom?" I asked. "Why that name?"

I was told it had earned the nickname because, from the earliest days, the condemned would request cheerful music. To accommodate them, a gramophone with a horn was initially installed to play the requested songs. Later, it was replaced with a radio, which would be switched off a few minutes before eleven p.m.—the hour of execution. The next person to flip a switch would be the executioner.

I asked what kind of music the condemned usually preferred.

“It’s curious,” the staff member explained. “During imprisonment, almost everyone prefers classical music—but once they get here, they want to hear jazz, fast and intense rhythms.”

The section of Sing Sing where those sentenced to the electric chair were housed (including, at the time, the Rosenbergs) was known as the “House of Death.” Before arriving there, the condemned underwent an extremely thorough search: every fold of skin, every orifice was examined to ensure they weren’t hiding poison for suicide. They were to die, yes—but “in the manner prescribed by law.” It was a right they could not renounce.

Once they arrived at their final earthly residence, the condemned had to undress; a guard would hand him a bar of soap, a towel, and place a brown robe over his shoulders. He was then pointed toward a door: under the guard’s watchful eye, he would take a brief warm shower. Perhaps he thought to himself, “After all, a shower is just a shower,” maybe he even allowed himself, for a moment, to imagine he was at home. But that iron door, those bolts, those stark walls, and the man watching him reminded him—no, this was no ordinary shower.

The shower had only one purpose: to eliminate any suspicion that the condemned had covered himself in poison—a constant fear of suicide. Because death had to come, yes—but “by the book.” Hygiene had little to do with it.

I noticed that all the guards were unarmed. That way, inmates had no reason to try to seize weapons and revolt.

It was hard to imagine another place where such effort was made to preserve the lives of its “residents” as at Sing Sing. No matches—out of fear inmates would suck the phosphorus to poison themselves. Shoes were kept outside the cell because of metal components: rubbed against the wall, they could be used to cut one’s wrists. No clocks—too many removable parts, potentially usable as weapons. But time could still be tracked: breakfast was served at seven sharp—coffee and milk, bread, a bowl of toasted cereal, and a spoon (of course, knives and forks were banned to prevent suicide). The condemned had to die “legally.”

Throughout the day, varied and nutritious meals were served, intended to provide a balanced diet according to modern nutritional standards.
“It would be immoral,” one supervisor told me, “not to provide these men, who are destined to die, with the minimum conditions for good health.”

On the day of execution, the condemned man was handed over to the doctor to confirm that he was in perfect physical health: one had to die in the electric chair healthy. Even a cold could be enough to postpone execution.

“I still remember,” the warden told me, “a prisoner who gained almost two extra months of life because he always had a fever when we came to take him. In the end, the intensive care we gave him cured the fever—and so he was finally able to be executed, according to the law.”

Contact with the outside world was maintained via radio.

“We’ve determined,” the warden said, “that politics doesn’t interest them much. Most prefer music, and many even enjoy the weather forecast.”

After seeing how much care was given to those awaiting execution—their last meal of choice, music, cigarettes, and so on—I expected that at least the electric chair itself would be comfortable, maybe a real armchair, something offering a bit of comfort. But no: as I already mentioned, this object—aside from the strange equipment attached—looked very much like

one of those cheap folding chairs used on balconies or beaches, the kind that no one cares if it lasts only one season.

I asked one of the officials what the typical attitude was of someone who had reached the end and was preparing to leave this world.

He replied:

“You’ll be surprised, but almost all of them arrive at the electric chair in a state of resigned acceptance—perhaps helped by the drowsiness after their abundant final meal, chosen according to their tastes. Very few resist. Some cry, others laugh hysterically. But the real agony isn’t the final hour—it’s what comes before: weeks, months, sometimes years of waiting. With every appeal rejected, with every clemency request denied, all hope falls away, one piece at a time.”

“But wouldn’t it make sense,” I asked, “to administer a calming drug beforehand—maybe a sedative—to avoid unnecessary shock?”

“No… that’s not allowed under the rules. At the time of execution, the condemned must be in full possession of their faculties. They must die—in the manner prescribed by law.”

On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in Sing-Sing on the electric chair. It was a trial that captivated the entire world. Opinions were divided: there were those who believed fully in the Rosenbergs' guilt and those who doubted it.

At that time in America, the anti-communist campaign had already been underway for some time — a true "witch hunt," led with ruthless inquisitorial methods by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Even those who admitted (and not everyone did) that the Rosenbergs had engaged in espionage believed the death penalty was disproportionate. To my knowledge, the case has never been officially reopened, despite petitions submitted some time ago by their two sons, now adults. And even in the event of a belated acquittal of the Rosenbergs or the finding of criminal responsibility that did not warrant the death penalty, a correction would no longer be possible. Beccaria was right: the dead cannot be brought back to life.

If I remember correctly, Gianni Granzotto, who was always affectionately thoughtful toward me, offered to take me with him to Sing-Sing on that June 19. But I didn’t go, and there was a reason. I had decided to go that afternoon to a private home in New Jersey where the Rosenbergs' two sons were being hosted — Robert, six years old, and Michael, ten.

I arrived just before three o'clock: the boys, in rolled-up blue canvas trousers and T-shirts, were watching a baseball game on television. The broadcast was suddenly interrupted to announce that the request for clemency filed at the last minute by the Rosenbergs' lawyers had been denied, and that therefore the execution would take place that very evening at eight o'clock.

I expected a dramatic scene. Instead, Michael simply said: *“Goodbye Mommy… Goodbye Daddy…”* and sank into the couch, pale and calm. The baseball game resumed as normal.

The Rosenbergs’ stay at Sing Sing was one of the most unusual and curious episodes in the prison’s history. Their conviction for atomic espionage was something rare—Sing Sing was familiar with murderers, not spies.

Ethel arrived at the prison 35 days before her husband Julius. The conviction for high treason stirred a particular kind of respect among the other inmates—probably because the Rosenbergs had refused to "sing," that is, to name alleged accomplices, giving up their only real chance at saving themselves. Criminals often admire silence and courage in the face of death.

I learned that from her very first night, Ethel Rosenberg, in her cell in the women's section, turned on a small portable radio and began singing opera arias in a silvery voice, as if she were on holiday in a country inn. Her singing carried all the way to the men's cells. In a thoughtful and kind gesture, a collection was quickly organized to send her a generous portion of vanilla ice cream with assorted pastries.

The night Julius arrived—without his wife knowing—at the "House of Death," there was a duet: she, as usual, began singing *Un bel dì vedremo* from *Madama Butterfly*, and Julius, to let her know he was there, responded with one of the tenor arias from the same opera. His voice clashed somewhat with his wife's pleasant one, but the inmates didn't have the heart to boo or silence him—they understood this was the only way the two could communicate. And so this strange musical dialogue was respected.

For one of those paradoxes that are hard to explain, men who didn't hesitate to shoot someone in the head just to rob them could still be moved by simple emotional gestures. Many criminologists have studied the behavior of Sing Sing inmates to better understand the psychological forces that drive such men to acts of extreme cruelty and, sometimes, surprising compassion.

An old guard told me that one condemned man amused himself each morning by loudly counting down the number of days his cell neighbor had left to live. Yet that same man worked with dedication to collect insects as a gift for the Rosenberg children, after hearing that they collected beetles. The guard told me that every fly or mosquito drawn by the faint light in the cells was carefully captured by inmates with impressive skill and care. And even the guards themselves, with touching kindness, took part in the effort: many of them were seen in the yard chasing colorful butterflies as they landed on the first geranium blossoms in the prison garden.

Toward the end of May, less than a month before the execution, something unusual happened: some telephone technicians installed a new phone in one of the private visiting rooms. An event like that was enough to break the monotony at Sing Sing and spark the most imaginative speculation. Rumor had it the line was directly connected to a high-level government official waiting on the other end. All the Rosenbergs had to do was pick up the phone and give a few names, and the nightmare of the electric chair would vanish forever. But they didn't do it.

The prison chaplain at the time, Father Thomas Donovan, told me he often spent time playing chess with Julius Rosenberg.
"He was an excellent player," Father Donovan confided. "The week before the execution, Julius won every game…"

I had the strong suspicion the kind reverend had simply let him win—just to give him that one last bit of satisfaction.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 24

My romantic adventures had their own, let's say, intense phase, but they never lasted very long. Still, when the initial spark began to fade, there was never the typical sudden breakup with little dramas, accusations, scenes, and slamming doors. All of my relationships always ended gradually—in fact, they never truly ended, because a cordial and friendly connection remained.

Many of my former partners got married and continued to visit my home with their husbands, without resentment or jealousy.

My passion for photography, besides serving to illustrate my articles, also found an outlet in portrait work. My enormous Graflex camera was always ready to capture the current companion, in 18x24 format. These portraits—some of which, with no small amount of presumption, I considered worthy of a professional—were lined up in identical mahogany frames on the grand piano in my living room. The current flame, however, had a place of honor on the nightstand beside the bed: it would be replaced with each "changing of the guard" and added to the collection on the piano.

Some of these fleeting companions received particular photographic attention. The most photographed were Carla and, after her, Nancy—both of them models who knew how to pose well. When Nancy came to visit me after getting married, accompanied by her charming diplomat husband, I thought it best to hide her photos—especially the one I liked most, which bore a passionate dedication. I was a bit embarrassed when she, noticing her absence from the "gallery," asked to show that very photo to her husband.

He didn't bat an eye: he looked at the portraits appreciatively, complimented me on my photography skills, and after reading the dedication, exclaimed:
"Nancy told me you two really cared for each other—and I can see that's true."

Carla, being a good Italian, didn't like being, as she put it, "put in the wax museum," meaning alongside the others on the piano. She demanded that her photo have a special, separate place—which meant every time she visited, I had to put her portrait back up on the fireplace.

I was never able to photograph Judy: she categorically refused to take part in this ritual. Maybe because she was herself a professional photographer working for *Life* magazine.

With Judy, expecting an exclusive relationship would've been pointless—and I was fine with that. I preferred relationships that allowed for freedom and detours. After being together, each of us went our own way. We often called each other the next morning to share how our nights had ended.

It was during one of those occasions that I had a rather unusual experience. Judy had been invited to an evening party at the home of an elderly woman passionate about music. She told me that some musicians would be there, including Artie Shaw, the famous clarinetist and bandleader who, by then, had stepped away from jazz and devoted himself to classical music. Judy asked me to come along.

We arrived at a large apartment on Central Park West, where Mrs. Schwartz lived. There were about fifty people, maybe more. There weren't enough chairs or sofas, so many guests were

sitting on the carpet, glasses of whiskey in hand. A mediocre singer performed *Ciribiribin*, a pianist played a shaky Chopin, and finally Artie Shaw—sitting on the floor as well—played a piece by Mozart.

I was seated cross-legged on a cushion in a rather tight space. Judy had quickly reconnected with an old acquaintance, and I didn't know exactly where she was. Suddenly, someone tugged on my jacket from behind. I turned around—it was a blonde girl with long hair, a bit plump, wearing a rather daring neckline for the time. Overall, she was attractive. I'd never seen her before. Without much small talk, she said something like:

"Why don't we get out of this fucking party? I'm bored to death... don't you think it'd be better if we went to bed together?"
(Of course, in English the phrase sounded much more provocative—with just the right edge of vulgarity to make it even more exciting.)

I didn't need convincing. Without saying goodbye to anyone, we slipped out during the confusion as everyone moved toward the cold buffet in the next room. With a quick elevator ride, we were out on the street. New York's main avenues were constantly filled with taxis—we only had to wait a moment to flag one down.

We got into the first available cab without saying a word. The girl—whose name I didn't even know—was wearing a flashy fur coat, which I believe she had kept on even during the party, perhaps for fear of losing it in the chaos of the coatroom.

She didn't say a word during the short ride to my place, and I stayed silent too, not wanting to break the spell of the moment with the wrong sentence. I glanced at her occasionally, but she seemed completely uninterested in me. She took long drags from a cigarette holder, filling the cab with smoke.

Still in silence, we arrived. She asked right away where the bathroom was. She stayed in there for at least fifteen minutes, and from the sound of the water, I got the impression she was taking a shower.

I figured I'd better put on my pajamas and wait for her in bed. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and honestly, I was rather bewildered. The woman joined me—and it was more her possessing me than the other way around. In her way of making love, there was something angry, primal, deeply repressed. No words of affection or tenderness passed between us—it was a violent, animal act, followed by deep exhaustion, at least on my part.

She fell asleep before me, face down, one arm hanging off the bed. Soon after, I too fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke up, it was broad daylight—and she was gone. The pillow still had the hollow imprint of her head. I got up thinking she might be in the kitchen or the bathroom—nothing. She had vanished without a trace. In the bathroom, I found a crumpled handkerchief on the floor, stained with the imprint of her lips from her lipstick.

I was already late for work. That morning, everyone noticed something strange about me—I was distracted and spaced out. I couldn't get what had happened out of my head. I had no way to find this ghost woman again.

Judy called me that evening. She was annoyed I'd disappeared without taking her home. She told me, in a tense and irritated tone, that she'd gotten a ride from a guy who then insisted on

sleeping with her. It happens. I told her every detail of my strange adventure and asked if she had any idea who that blonde girl could have been.

“I don’t know her, and I didn’t even notice her at the party. Nice catch, by the way. She was definitely just a vulgar nymphomaniac.”

Looking back… maybe she was.

At seven in the morning on July 26, 1956, I was abruptly awakened by a phone call from Renato Loffredo, head of the ANSA agency in New York. His voice was agitated:
"Get to the Italian Line offices right away. The *Andrea Doria* is sinking."

I had no choice but to get dressed quickly and rush to the offices of the Italian Navigation Company, located at the southern tip of Manhattan, near the area known as the Battery. When I arrived, the scene was chaotic. Hundreds of journalists were crammed inside, all trying to gather information — which was scarce and often contradictory. The only certainty was that the *Andrea Doria* had been struck on the side by the Swedish ship *Stockholm* and had already tipped completely to the right. There was no hope of saving it from sinking. There was talk of casualties, rescues, aid from other ships — but everything was confused and uncertain. The executives of the Italian Line knew less than we did. Just before eleven, confirmation came: the *Andrea Doria* had sunk.

The first unanswered question was that of responsibility. Who was to blame? The American press leaned toward blaming Captain Calamai, claiming he had made a serious navigational error. Some even alleged that, at the moment of the collision, Calamai had been dancing in the first-class lounge while the orchestra played *Arrivederci Roma*. He was also accused of abandoning ship before the last passengers were evacuated.

I interviewed the final passenger to be miraculously lowered into a lifeboat and rescued by the *Île de France*, one of the ships that had rushed to the site of the disaster. He was accountant Arturo Lavoratti from Genoa, on vacation in New York with his wife. He told me that earlier that evening, just before the crash — while the ship was proceeding slowly through thick fog and calm seas — he had asked why Captain Calamai hadn’t been seen all afternoon and had yet to appear. He had wanted to thank him personally for the kindness shown to him and his wife during the voyage, including an invitation to a cocktail in the captain’s cabin the day before.

Colonel Chiappori, the ship’s chief engineer, explained to Lavoratti that Calamai had been on the bridge since 3 p.m. and hadn’t left due to the fog. In that part of the ocean, just beyond the Newfoundland currents, unexpected dangers could always arise. Lavoratti also told me he had seen the captain directing the rescue operations and spoke highly of the crew, who worked tirelessly to lower the lifeboats — a task made extremely difficult by the ship’s tilt of more than thirty degrees to the port side.

In my own small way, I tried to counter the unfounded accusations against Calamai, but I also learned — from very reliable sources — that the *Andrea Doria* had been poorly constructed, lacked essential safety measures, and was far from the unsinkable marvel its builders had boasted.

I am not qualified to confirm the validity of that information, but it is at least curious that neither the Italian Navigation Company nor the Ansaldo Shipyards (which by then had been absorbed

into the IRI conglomerate) were ever able to produce the original blueprints of the *Andrea Doria*, claiming they had been lost. Those blueprints would have made it possible to determine whether the Italian flagship had indeed been structurally safe, even in the event of a collision.

If the fault truly lay with the *Stockholm*, and if that could have been proven in court, many wondered why the Italian Line didn't pursue the lawsuit to the end, instead settling for an agreement that was far from favorable. The answer likely lies in the enormous financial interests at stake.

Even assuming the error belonged to the *Stockholm* — and that, at the moment of the accident, the bridge was in the hands of a relatively inexperienced 25-year-old third officer — and even assuming that the Swedish ship veered to avoid a freighter, none of that excluded the possibility that the *Andrea Doria* still bore some responsibility, especially for failing to prevent the ship from sinking.

A noncommissioned officer from the *Andrea Doria* told me bluntly that Calamai had been ordered to shorten port stops, preventing him from completing the usual inspections and procedures.

The maritime disaster claimed 55 lives. Insurance companies were asked to pay damages totaling 50 billion lire, but only 5 billion were ultimately paid, following a negotiated settlement between the parties.

After the incident, I tried to come to a firm conclusion, sifting through the arguments of the prosecution and defense, the accusations and retractions, and the web of circumstances surrounding the tragedy. But in the end, I never truly understood how it all happened.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 26

My third visit to Cuba took place in June of 1957, this time as a journalist, when Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces seemed on the verge of overthrowing the dictator-president Fulgencio Batista.
At that time, to Italians, Cuba was just a far-off island in the Caribbean, mostly known for its cigars.

Matthews, a journalist from the *New York Times*, told me that Batista's government was about to fall to Castro's movement.
Matthews, a supporter of the rebels, had direct ties to Castro, who was entrenched in the Sierra Maestra mountains.
Just recently, there had been an attack on the presidential palace by about forty insurgents aiming to assassinate Batista.
The dictator had narrowly escaped with his life, and, according to reports, all of the attackers were killed.

Matthews was preparing to go to Cuba to witness the revolution's victory firsthand.
I asked my newspaper for permission and left with him.
No other Italian journalist was in Cuba at the time, and I was pleased by the opportunity to send exclusive, firsthand reports on the unfolding events.

The situation in Havana was extremely tense.
To get an audience with Batista, I had to go through the American ambassador, a personal friend of the President.
Batista sent a luxurious Cadillac—so long it looked like a train—to pick me up from the Hotel Nacional, where I was staying, and take me to the presidential palace.
In those turbulent days, the palace was more like a fortress.
The driver, named Pepito, informed me on the way that guards surrounding the presidential building had orders to shoot on sight at anyone who approached too closely.

On the roof of the building, I noticed armed men in uniform with machine guns at the ready.
At the entrance, Pepito whispered a few words to the guards through a slot.
One of them looked me over, checked a list, and then the heavy iron door opened.
I stepped inside. Pepito would wait to drive me safely back to the hotel.
When the door shut behind me, I felt a wave of unease—Batista had previously disposed of perceived enemies without much ceremony, and I couldn't help wondering if I would walk back out.

But my fears quickly eased when, after a short wait, Batista received me cordially in his office.
Behind his large desk hung a bas-relief of José Martí, the Cuban patriot who died in 1895 fighting for Cuba's independence from Spain—an oddly ironic symbol under the circumstances.

The air was heavy, not just because of the 40-degree heat, but also because of the atmosphere of tension and suspicion.
That first meeting, and those that followed, didn't reveal much about the real condition of the Cuban Republic, but they were revealing on a psychological level.

Batista was a man weighed down by deep insecurities, stemming mostly from his humble beginnings.
Facing someone more educated than he was seemed to frighten him more than an armed battalion.
I noticed this right away when he began talking about his reading habits: he told me he kept Plato's *Dialogues* by his bed and was well-versed in the biographies of Abraham Lincoln.
It didn't take much to realize his knowledge of these works was shallow at best.

I also found it significant that he invited me to visit his estate, the so-called "Finca," in Kuquini, just outside Havana.
It was the most uncomfortable breakfast of my life: Batista and I sat at opposite ends of a very long table, while four armed guards stood at the corners of the room, rifles ready.
It wasn't exactly the most relaxing way to enjoy a meal.

Afterward, the President took me into a large room with bookshelves reaching the ceiling, filled with hundreds of books that clearly looked like set decorations—unused and unread.
One section featured Spanish translations of every book on Mussolini, including his speeches and a collection of articles from *Il Popolo d'Italia*.
Then we entered the "art gallery," where, among countless portraits of himself in every imaginable uniform and adorned with every possible decoration, Batista proudly showed me some of the most tasteless paintings I've ever seen.

Thinking he was doing me a favor, he pulled out a cardboard tube containing a certificate for some decoration he had received from Victor Emmanuel III and showed me a few autographs from the former King of Italy.
He insisted that, unlike Hitler and Mussolini, he was not a dictator. He feared being seen as cruel and ruthless. He told me:

"Believe me, I'm too soft. If I wanted to, I could crush the rebel forces in half a day. But I avoid it to prevent bloodshed. Besides, I feel only pity for Fidel Castro. I love my country and don't want the people to suffer."

Still, the fact remained: Batista had seized and held power by force and didn't hesitate to eliminate his most dangerous opponents.
That said, his dictatorship—run by a former sergeant—differed in some ways from the European models.
During the five weeks I spent in Cuba, I often heard people openly criticizing him.
Even the man Batista assigned to handle my "public relations" made no effort to hide the fact that the President's days were numbered and that he would be wise to slip away quietly before someone assassinated him.

Were those honest words or calculated provocations?
I was never able to tell for sure.

The wealthiest and most influential Italian-Cuban on the island, Mr. Barletta—owner of *El Mundo*, a newspaper often critical of Batista—confided to me his open dislike for the regime.
This encouraged me to inform Batista that, as a journalist, I had a duty to also make contact with the rebel forces.
He gave me a sort of silent approval.

In the evenings, I frequented the casino at the Hotel Nacional, a small gambling room run by two Italian brothers from Genoa.
In just a few nights, I lost around $300—not surprising.
During one of my visits to the presidential palace, Batista asked if I played at the casino and, bluntly, asked how much I had lost. I told him.
The next day, when I returned to the casino, one of the brothers handed me an envelope and said:

“We’ve been ordered to give you this. Sorry, but by presidential order, you are no longer allowed to gamble at our tables.”

Inside the envelope was the $300 I had lost, along with a note from Batista apologizing for the order.
He said he could not allow a journalist, guest of the Cuban Republic and of himself personally, to leave money behind in a casino he merely tolerated.

Part Two: A Personal Crisis and Return to Italy

The final days I spent in Havana were increasingly nerve-wracking.
Walking around the city had become dangerous due to the rising number of bombings and attacks.
I had the distinct feeling I was being followed by suspicious individuals, and I was nearly certain I’d been approached by provocateurs trying to assess whether I had ties to the revolutionaries.

One night, a bomb exploded right under my hotel room window.
I don’t believe it was meant for me personally, but it was hardly reassuring.
It was clear that bloodshed was imminent, and Batista’s fall was expected any day.
I was the only Italian journalist on the ground and would have liked to be there when the regime collapsed.

But just then, I received a message from my newspaper instructing me to return immediately to cover the visit of an Italian delegation to Washington.
I had no choice but to leave.

Unexplainable circumstances were wearing down my nerves.
Journalism no longer excited me.
The thought of spending more years attending press conferences, cocktail parties, and sitting in front of telex machines filled me with a strange sense of dread.
My familiar restlessness had returned, accompanied by the urge to change, to pursue new experiences.
This desire was overpowering all logic, drowning out any reasonable reflection.

To make matters worse, my wife had just told me she was pregnant with our first child—news that, in that moment, clashed completely with my mood and my lack of readiness for fatherhood and its responsibilities.
I felt a wave of nausea and pointlessness about everything I was doing.
And above all, an irrational aversion to America and Americans.
Everything that once excited me now annoyed me—for no real reason.

With a clearer head, I might have admitted that this unrest was the result of psychological imbalance.
But neurosis doesn't respond to logic.
Day by day, I became more depressed and difficult to be around.
I eventually stopped writing my daily reports and handed them over to a deputy.
I consulted my trusted doctor, who was blunt:

"There's only one cure for you: a vacation in Italy. What you're going through is mostly a bout of nostalgia. The sooner you leave, the better."

True to my impulsive nature, I decided to leave immediately.
In the end, the doctor had simply put into words what I had already been wanting deep down.
Now I had an excuse—a justification to drop everything and return, at least temporarily, to Italy.

Of course, there were practical issues: obligations, the house, a thousand things to organize.
But my wife was patient and understanding.
I would leave on my own, to shake off the depression as soon as possible, and she would join me later once everything was in order.

Twenty years earlier, America had been my lifeline. Now, it was Italy.
Even just the thought of spending time in Italy had an immediate effect on me—like a kind of therapy.
I chose to travel on the *Cristoforo Colombo*, almost to get an early sense of reconnection with Italian soil.
Besides, the sea voyage would certainly do me good.

And indeed, when I disembarked in Naples, I already felt like a different man.

IN SEARCH OF TOMORROW – Chapter 27

Two weeks in Florence, then I arrived in Rome. The newspaper showed great understanding. I was entitled to a month's vacation: we agreed that I would take an additional month off before returning to work in New York. In truth, deep down I wasn't at all sure I could resume that job, but at the same time I didn't want to jeopardize my position with a hasty decision. Time would tell.

I had enough money with me to enjoy this "therapeutic vacation" without too many restrictions. The exchange rate was favorable: with just over a dollar you could have lunch in a trattoria, and with two dollars you could eat very well in an excellent restaurant. Everything seemed, compared to America, incredibly cheap. I was staying at the Hotel Nazionale in Piazza Montecitorio, but that arrangement didn't allow me to host friends, have even basic service, or eat meals comfortably at home. So I decided to rent an apartment in the old part of Rome.

One afternoon, sitting at the Caffè Tre Scalini in Piazza Navona with a friend, my gaze fell on a top-floor apartment with a terrace, directly across from us: the windows were all closed behind green shutters.

"There," I said, "that's the apartment for me—it looks uninhabited."

My friend burst out laughing:

"You're crazy… A penthouse in Piazza Navona is for billionaires. And imagine if it's actually available!"

The building belonged to banker Scaretti and had its entrance at Piazza Madama No. 9, right across from the Senate. I learned that the penthouse had been rented to an Italian minister who had since moved to Strasbourg. When they told me the name, I jumped: it was Giorgio Bombassei De Vettor, my inseparable university friend from Florence—the one, just to be clear, with whom I used to compete as boys to see who would grow a mustache first.

I couldn't have gotten luckier. Bombassei, after furnishing the place from top to bottom, had been abruptly transferred to Strasbourg and was thrilled to pass it on to me, confident that his furniture, paintings, and carpets would be in good hands. The rent, considered quite high for Italy at the time, seemed more than reasonable to me: one hundred and fifty thousand lire a month plus building fees. Once I got permission from the landlord to sublet, I moved in within a few days—into the most beautiful square in Rome. Across Via degli Staderari, in a similar penthouse, lived Indro Montanelli, and we often greeted each other from our terraces.

I found a perfect couple for the household chores: Silvana and Giuliano. And my home immediately became very popular: Giuliano, in a white jacket with gold buttons, served at the table, while Silvana took care of the cooking and cleaning.

The carefree lifestyle, the climate, old and new friends, joyful dinners, evenings in the apartment, and of course the occasional little poker game—all of it brought back my joy for life within just a few days. Now and then, though, I would think of Elizabeth, left alone in New York dealing with so many problems and, on top of that, expecting a child. A vague sense of guilt would come over me. Was I perhaps an unforgivable egoist? I would get through these small

crises of conscience by telling myself that this vacation was, after all, a form of therapy, a necessity prescribed by a doctor. I would call my wife from time to time, and it reassured me to hear her calm and happy about my regained good spirits. Maybe it was another form of selfishness that led me to ask Elizabeth to join me in Rome. Once the initial excitement of this lifestyle change had faded, the desire to have the partner I had chosen by my side began to resurface. Her approaching due date forced me to face moral responsibilities I could no longer avoid.

So I asked her to come to Rome as soon as possible. We would figure out what to do next once she arrived.

Since the moment I had set foot in Italy, I'd been living in a kind of delirious dream, with a faint hint of megalomania. I didn't realize it at the time, but now I do: you don't go from depression to euphoria without some psychological turbulence. I was convinced that my savings would never run out, and even now I can't understand what reasoning made me believe that.

* * *

I was fifty years old and had tried a bit of everything. There was, however, one area I had never explored: the visual arts. I had always been convinced I was completely hopeless at drawing and painting, and I readily admitted I knew very little about art history.

Many of my friends painted, and one in particular claimed to have found great satisfaction standing at the easel. He too had returned to Italy after some rather chaotic years in America and had gone through a period of depression—much like I had. According to him, painting had saved him. His name was Paolo Sereno, and he insisted so much that he finally convinced me to buy all the necessary painting materials. I had already come through the most critical phase of my psychological struggles, but the idea of trying something completely new intrigued me. I thought: I know I have no talent for drawing, I understand next to nothing about painting… but why shouldn't I give it a try?

My first attempts were nothing short of disastrous: I still keep, with some embarrassment, a few of my earliest brush experiments—utterly bland little exercises. How they could have seemed acceptable—or even beautiful—to me at the time remains a mystery I've never solved. But it taught me just how hard it can be to judge yourself clearly in certain moments of life.

Day and night, I had the Baroque splendor of the Fountain of the Four Rivers, the Church of Sant'Agnese, and the reddish-yellow old buildings of the square in front of my eyes. I tried desperately to reproduce them on canvas without the slightest idea where to begin. I bought every possible how-to manual for beginners, but they only left me more confused—my ideas about painting were all wrong. I was obsessed with the details, when instead I should have focused on the overall composition. I thought about enrolling in the Academy, but my friend and critic Marco Valsecchi advised against it: at my age, it wouldn't have helped much. So I became obsessed with learning everything—knowing everything, studying everything—about visual art, and my house turned into a warehouse of artist monographs from every era. I became fascinated by their lives, and it comforted me to think that many great masters had started almost by accident, just like I had. I spent my mornings at the modern art museum in Valle Giulia and never missed an exhibition.

The contemporary painter who resonated most with my tastes was De Pisis, partly because I had, for years, kept one of his paintings in front of me—bought from him, almost indifferently, I believe, back in 1936.

A friend had practically forced me to go meet the painter, who was in Venice for a short stay from Paris, where he lived at the time. I was invited to lunch by a friend who greatly admired De Pisis. After the meal, I was eager to catch the vaporetto and get to the Lido Casino just in time for the chemin-de-fer tables to open.

“Come with me,” my friend insisted. “I’ll introduce you to an extraordinary figure, a painter who's gaining huge success in France. You’d do well to buy a few paintings from him before his prices skyrocket.”

Imagine how little I cared about De Pisis and his paintings! At the time, I didn’t even know who he was. But reluctantly, I went. I think he was staying with friends near San Zaccaria. What struck me were the parrot on his shoulder, his eccentric manners, his nasal voice, and a monocle tied to a silk ribbon. I glanced at the paintings—some still wet—scattered about, with no interest at all.

My friend bought three paintings and handed me a medium-sized canvas showing a Venetian canal with a few gondolas. I asked the painter if the piece was finished—it seemed to me more like a sketch than a complete work. My friend shot me a reproachful glance, and De Pisis—this I remember very clearly—asked what I did for a living.

“I’m a lawyer in Florence,” I replied.

“Well then,” De Pisis went on, “you clearly don’t know much about painting.”

At that point, I had to recover by saying that I really liked the painting and wanted to buy it. I was surprised when he asked for only 300 lire—a sum I could have lost in seconds at the casino table.

“You got a great deal,” my friend told me. “That painting will be worth millions one day.” And he wasn’t wrong.

Since then, I’ve become quite attached to that painting, which I handed off here and there during my travels but fortunately always got back. Today, it still holds a place of honor in my collection. It was from that painting (and, of course, all of De Pisis’s work) that, years later, my own desire to paint was born. Critics have always considered me a disciple of the great master from Ferrara, and that comparison—absolutely fair—doesn’t bother me. In fact, it flatters me. We’re all, inevitably, the artistic children of someone. I just hope that in my modest painterly language, there’s also something personal.

My “conversion” to painting piqued the curiosity of my fellow journalists and a few critics. Marco Valsecchi examined my work after just one year of frenzied output.

“We’ll talk again in ten years,” he told me.

I had been hoping for a little encouragement and felt quite disheartened.

“You see,” he explained, “you can’t fast-track becoming a painter. It’s pointless for me to list all the flaws in these paintings—you’ll have to discover them yourself, through a lot of work and hardship, by living the problems of art. One day, you won’t even be able to look at these early works. That’s a compliment—because it means you have what it takes to succeed.”

My friend Virgilio Guzzi told me the same thing, as did many others. Today, more than twenty years later, I realize just how right they were.

Since then, I've held around thirty exhibitions. In 1961, Alexander Iolas, one of the most important art dealers in New York, invited me to exhibit at his gallery in Manhattan. The idea scared me, but I accepted—also because it gave me a chance to return to the U.S. with a completely different mindset and career.

To my great surprise, Iolas sold practically everything, allowing me to stay in New York for nearly a year and to sell many more paintings on the wave of that unexpected success. When I returned to Italy, I had no trouble organizing more exhibitions, which also went well.

Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts called my case "clinically interesting." Dr. Ferruccio Di Cori, a well-known psychoanalyst in New York of Italian origin, after buying several of my works at the Iolas show and directly from me, found a rich case study in the fact that, from the beginning, I had painted almost exclusively domes. He made it the focus of an in-depth presentation at the Annual Psychiatry Congress held at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. He spoke of Oedipal complexes and unconscious drives, titling his paper—later published—*Unconscious Motivation as a Source of Creative Expression*.

I'm not in a position—being too personally involved—to judge the accuracy of Dr. Di Cori's thesis. In reality, the choice to paint domes stemmed from a visit I made to Mario Borgiotti, painter and expert on the Macchiaioli, to ask for advice. He took me into his studio and, perhaps sensing my nostalgia for Florence (he lived in Milan on Via Manzoni), handed me a color postcard of Brunelleschi's Dome and said:

"Here are brushes and paints. Paint our beautiful Florentine dome in your own way. I've got clients in the other room. Make yourself at home—we'll see each other in half an hour."

Borgiotti returned about an hour later. I had already made good progress: I had painted the reddish-brick dome against a vast blue sky and was about to add lots of details. Mario literally yanked the brushes from my hands: "For heaven's sake!" he exclaimed. "Don't touch it anymore. It's a wonderful painting. I'll have it framed under glass so you can't ruin it."

It's one of the few paintings I've never disowned, and I still keep it. At exhibitions, I show it as "not for sale."

My style of painting, born under the influence of De Pisis, is spontaneous and impulsive; my weakest works are the ones I obsessed over for days, trying in vain to improve them.

When I gave up everything for painting, my friends thought I had gone mad. I had left America to return to a country still marked by war, giving up a job as a correspondent for a major newspaper that would have guaranteed me a comfortable life for the rest of my days—and all of it to throw myself body and soul into the uncertain and poorly paid life of a painter. *Il Giornale d'Italia* ran a full-page story on me: **"Painter at Fifty After a Psychological Breakdown."**

But was I truly mad? Or had I, on the contrary, finally come to my senses by following the impulses of my shifting nature? These are questions I prefer not to answer—because the answer wouldn't change the reality.

* * *

In 1964, RAI offered me the chance to collaborate on a radio program of my choosing. I thought of a music show that would draw on my long experience in the field, developed during my time at Voice of America. Back then, RAI only aired pre-recorded shows, with the exception—naturally—of news bulletins, perhaps out of fear of not being able to properly manage live broadcasts. Accustomed as I was to American programming, which was almost entirely live, I was surprised and proposed an improvised show. The idea was a dialogue between myself and an imaginary character who spoke only through me and always disagreed with my opinions. Some still remember that Monday morning show, which stirred up curiosity and controversy. It was titled *"Me and My Friend Osvaldo"*, but no one ever knew who this silent Osvaldo really was. To be honest, I wasn't even sure myself, but over time he became a kind of reflection of my conscience, in constant conflict with my ego.

This program, which started almost as a joke, ended up—as often happens—attracting the interest of psychologists and psychoanalysts, just like my painting had done before; another example of how complex theories often grow from small, simple events. And perhaps, in their analysis, there was a kernel of truth.

At the time, listeners were used to extremely conventional programming. Mine, on the other hand, unfolded in a *happening*-like atmosphere, where anything could happen. I deliberately kept the studio door open so that anyone could walk in and take part. Once, the cleaning lady burst in with a broom in her hand; realizing a show was on air, she rushed to leave, but I invited her to stay and join me in commenting on the records we were playing. Some listeners didn't appreciate my criticisms of certain trendy singers or their latest hits. But overall, this unconventional program—the first to be broadcast live after years of recorded shows—was a great success.

As usual, though, I quickly grew tired of it and replaced that segment with another show, this time in collaboration with Alberto Lupo, who was already well known but then just starting out in radio. And so, almost without realizing it, I became the first *disc jockey* on Italian radio—a label that was attached to me somewhat against my will. Almost at the same time, Adriano Mazzoletti began a series of similar shows; and from then on, disc jockeys flooded RAI's programming. This type of figure gradually lost its original traits, becoming merely a means of promoting records, with shows often entrusted to inexperienced young people.

This constant back-and-forth between different activities has always made it difficult for me to list a profession on official documents. Depending on the context and my mood, I write: *journalist*, *writer*, *painter*, *radio presenter*. When I can, I prefer not to write anything at all, leaving the space blank—perhaps to say that I'm still in search of tomorrow.