

A black and white photograph of a man in a suit sitting at a round table in a cafe. He is looking towards the right. On the table is a coffee cup on a saucer. The cup has the text 'A Novel' on it. The background is dark and out of focus.

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LIGHT-YEARS**

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Translated from the Italian by
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ABANDON ME ON THE ICE PACK

For some months Marta had been experiencing memory problems. She would repeat the same question or the same story three or four times in a row, she forgot where she'd put her keys or glasses just moments before, and now she had started leaving pots and pans to scorch on the stove. Giulia had noticed it and, worried, had pointed it out to Viberti, who acted as if he weren't aware of it. But pretending is a subtle art that requires a lot of practice, guile, and nerves of steel, and Viberti wasn't up to it. Giulia made him confess that, yes, he had noticed his mother's memory lapses and had ignored the facts, deciding that there was nothing that could be done. Always the wrong tack to take. So Marta was taken to a geriatrician, and the tests ruled out Alzheimer's but not senile dementia. In a woman of eighty-two the course of the illness was unpredictable; she might not recognize anyone in three or four years' time or she could die at the age of a hundred with the same minor issues.

A year after having met Cecilia in Pediatrics, Viberti, returning home one evening in May, stopped by to see Marta, as he often did, though never frequently enough to allay the feeling that he was neglecting his elderly mother, who lived just three floors

below him. It sometimes seemed to him that his ex-wife had settled in a nearby apartment with the goal of fueling that guilt (guilt was the alimony Viberti paid to Giulia). Marta's kitchen was plastered with notes written by Giulia or by Angélica, the Peruvian woman who looked after her. *Prosciutto and stracchino cheese in the refrigerator; Heat for 4 minutes on High; This envelope contains six (6) Ibuprofen tablets, given to Marta today, April 23, by Giulia, which must last until Sunday evening (April 27?)*, the last parentheses added in Marta's rounded, ornate handwriting. The table was littered with old photographs on the backs of which Marta had been adding captions for months now. *In the chalet at Montenegro Bagni, Marta is holding her "dear" puppy Haile, it was a "fashionable" name because Italy had just "conquered" Abyssinia. Or: Excursion to San Colombano. Pietro displays a "trophy" of porcini mushrooms.* On virtually every photo there was at least one word in quotation marks. Giulia claimed that the proliferation of quotes was due to a specific neurological problem: Marta no longer remembered whether certain expressions could be used in certain contexts, everything seemed out of place and uncertain to her; better to distance herself from them.

Viberti's visits might last a few minutes or more than an hour. That evening they'd started talking about Stefano Mercuri, an old family friend, a doctor, who had been like an adoptive father and spiritual guide to Viberti. Mercuri had long since retired and lived on the Riviera di Levante, where Viberti visited him from time to time. Marta listened absently to the latest news of their friend, then changed the subject and started retelling a story by Chekhov or Maupassant or Tarchetti, which she called "scandalous." The name of the protagonist (who may have been Russian, French, or Italian) was Cecilia, and the chance appearance of that name on his mother's lips seriously upset Viberti, though the story left him somewhat indifferent (some kind of incest)—especially since his mother's narration was even less consistent than usual.

After a restless night he awoke with the conviction that he could no longer put it off; he had to speak to Cecilia or stop seeing her. He was forty-three years old. At forty-three, one could have a child of fifteen or twenty, at fifty, one could become a grandfather, at seventy-five, a great-grandfather. His father and mother had married late; he was the son of elderly parents and now he, too, was getting on in years; he'd lost some time but his time wasn't up, it was at a standstill, dormant, adrift, stagnant and swampy.

He began the day with the sole intention of finding ten free minutes to go down to the ER as soon as possible to find her. He never did that—usually they would agree to meet from one day to the next or they'd send each other messages, but the previous afternoon, saying goodbye, Cecilia had mentioned she wasn't sure she'd be able to eat with him the next day. He scrambled to put off his outpatient visits, raced down the stairs, dashed into the ER, and looked into the ward where Cecilia was on call. She barely raised her eyes from the desk and told him she'd be busy at lunch.

Viberti left the ER without knowing where he was going or why. The thought that he couldn't stand this torment much longer crossed his mind, and he was immediately surprised. It was the first time in his life that he'd described an attraction or feeling with the word "torment," the first time he'd doubted his ability to carry on. He'd always believed he was capable of enduring the most painful trials, certainly more painful than an infatuation or falling in love. Should he call it that? He wasn't sure. But precisely because he was a loner, as his mother had described him the night before, precisely because he was acquainted with and dwelled in solitude, he didn't need anyone, he'd never needed anyone, he was self-sufficient and then some. In any case, and this he was sure of: it was important to never feel sorry for yourself, ever.

He kept walking briskly as if he were trying to run from the prospect of making a fool of himself, but in fact after two right turns he found himself returning to the ER via Radiology. That department must have been built or renovated in the fifties: the

wooden moldings, baseboards, windows, and doors were pale, with shiny blue Formica panels, and the contrast between the two materials dated the work. For some reason that type of workmanship had become a mark of modernity and for a period of several years had been used extensively in schools and hospitals, only to later be replaced by metal and plastic. The work might have been done by the hospital's on-site carpentry shop, which had existed until the early seventies, when Viberti, on a school trip to the hospital, had visited the workshop with his class to see how the lathe and milling machine worked. He had a clear recollection of the strong, pungent smell of the wood, the unbreathable air, the two carpenters who had been transplanted up north from Tuscany, craftsmen who in their spare time built inlaid furniture and bric-a-brac but who out of necessity had taken more practical jobs. When a classmate asked if they also made wooden legs for amputees there were several stifled laughs, and he, already quite shaken by their visit to the operating rooms, had fainted. When he came to, he found himself lying on the ground, his feet elevated on a low stool and his head resting on a soft bed of sawdust and wood chips. He'd never passed out like that again. And that might have been during the period when Marta was trying to starve him to death.

Seeing that he'd come back after just a few minutes, the nurse at the reception desk looked at him with surprise. Cecilia was showing a medical student how an EKG in the cardiology textbook looked like the one they had just performed on a patient. Her tone was playful. Trust me, she said, things are often simpler than they look. The student walked away, somewhat troubled and still skeptical, and Cecilia looked at Viberti, smiled at him, and said: "Sometimes they don't believe us." Viberti slid the book left open on the desk over to him, turned to the blank flyleaf, and in the space hidden beneath the jacket flap wrote: *I need to talk to you. Let's eat together.* Then he shoved the book back to Cecilia.

She didn't understand at first that it was a message, that she

should read it, and when she read it she seemed uncertain and vaguely embarrassed. “What’s wrong?” she whispered, as if someone were spying on them, though the nurse nearby didn’t seem very interested in their business.

He hadn’t expected Cecilia to have any doubt about the nature of their talk—his blush, his uneasiness, his look gave him away. An overture like that, for him, was virtually the height of intimacy. He felt exposed, and though the clues were obvious, she was far from the answer and getting colder.

“Nothing,” Viberti stammered, “there’s no hurry . . .”

Cecilia looked at him, confused. She told him she had agreed to eat with two colleagues. “See you tomorrow, okay?”

He went to eat alone behind the usual column and brooded over the situation, hardly raising his eyes from his plate of boiled vegetables, analyzing and retracing each and every moment of the scene in the ER. What had he been thinking? Why that particular day, why not a month ago, or a year ago, or six months after he’d met her? For a year he’d acted as if nothing had happened, and then suddenly he’d realized that the woman had become irreplaceable.

He’d spent the long weekend of April 25, Liberation Day, with three friends and their families. Had it been the children who’d made him feel his failure more intensely?

Had it been the story by Chekhov or Maupassant or Tarchetti that pushed him over the edge? Or Marta’s condition, or the fear of growing old alone . . . ? But if any of these were the case he would have been better off enrolling in a tango class or taking Spanish lessons, or bridge, or he could have taken a trip, a singles cruise. If he wanted to find a mate, anything would have been better. And besides, she might not even be his type (especially since Viberti had never really understood what the expression meant).

“She’s not your type,” Antonio Lorenzi, his pediatrician friend, had remarked a few months earlier, “why are you attracted to her?”