Per Aspera ad Astra

by Albione

Summary

Oliver leaves B once more leaving Elio behind. Both live their parallel lives, but this time they have to face the reality of who they are and what they want. Twenty years is a heavy weight to deal with and time has changed them and those around them. The people they have loved and lost, family and friends, all have shaped them; can they still be happy living in a coma or is it time to reach for the stars? And if they do reach for the stars, will it be too late?

Notes

This is my first time in writing a fan fiction. Any advice and suggestions are gratefully accepted. It is mostly based on the book but a few things from the film are used. The Latin of the title translates as through difficulties to the stars, and that is what Elio and Oliver will be doing, after I have put them through the wringer!
"Nel Mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, che la dritta via era smarrita" is Dante, the start of his Inferno, Hell. I freely translate it as: In the middle of the path of one's life I found myself in a dark wood, the straight path was lost. I think that it reflects the Oliver I took from Mr Aciman and probably ruined for ever...
Elio. Elio, Elio

Just as the cab door closed I heard a whispered “Elio, Elio, Elio!”
Like an echo from the past, a past lost in mythology, as Echo uselessly repeating the last word heard till the end of time till she evaporates.
Not his name. I smiled and stayed silent. Sitting upright waved to the figure of the man standing in front of the villa that quickly disappeared from my sight. As soon as he was gone, I slumped forward resting my forehead onto the back of the front seat; I saw the driver give me a quizzical glance from the rear mirror, our eyes met and he quickly looked away sensing he was witnessing something so private it was obscene.
“Elio, Elio, Elio”… So sweet, so cruel. I could not reply; not because I did not remember or cruelly wanted to hurt, but because I do not have a name to call him anymore.
“Oliver, Oliver, Oliver!” In my memories I can hear my voice deepening, feeling the orgasm that just speaking gave me. Sweated sheets, limbs entwined, a head on my shoulder, soft wet curls pressing on my jaw. I had a name to give him, to call him by, to tie our young souls with.
I do not have a name any longer. I am just “Darling”, “Honey”, “Olly”, “Dad”, “Pop”, “Professor”. Only my parents or wife call me with my given name, when displeased with me. And every time they call me thus, it kills another fragment of my soul.
“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovi per una selva oscura che’ la dritta via era smarrita”. I wonder what is my “the right way” that I have lost. Only once in my lifetime there was a split in the path. I took the right way, did I not? Why am I in a dark wood without hope and the path so narrow I cannot see it?
The countryside is as beautiful as ever, I want to stick my head out of the window and, as a dog on a day out, close my eyes and open my mouth to enjoy the breeze and the smells. The beauty tries to fill a void in me, but I am leaving it, and I know that just sunlight and beauty cannot fill it.
Elio, my grown, no, not my, not now, not ever. Elio, you are twice the man I ever was even when you were a boy. I cannot even give you my name; I have lost it long ago.
I called my name

Chapter Summary

Elio's point of view as Oliver leaves the villa.

Chapter Notes

I shall jump from different points of view, this time it is Elio and how he feels. I hope that I have managed to keep to cannon, but I have taken the liberty to make Annella suffer from dementia. When reading the book I thought that Elio is the much loved son of older parents.

The cab door closes and he turns to me and waves. The “ciao” hangs in the air. I am not sure if I really whispered “Elio, Elio, Elio”, was it a dream? I called my name, I know I did, he did not call out his. Was it in another life, a parallel universe where I have lost all dignity and pathetically seek confirmation that I am anything more than a summer fling a lifetime ago? “I remember everything.” Is your everything different from mine? As two men who look out of their cell window and one sees the stars the other mud, one remembers when we had the stars, the other a summer in Italy. No, that is not it; I know that he felt the same, once.

The car quickly disappears in the horizon and I see him wave till the end of the road. He has gone once more after filling the house and me with hope, memories and desire.

As I enter the house I hear mother talking in the sitting room.

“The couboi has left darling, did you say goodbye?”

“Yes, he is nice, I suppose, but there is an air of tragedy around him. Have you seen Elio? I do not like the beard, why has he grown a beard?”

“You and your Classical art, he doesn’t look like a philosopher, he looks like a bum! If only he would find a nice Jewish boy to settle down with…”

It hurts me to the bone; this can go on all day, her conversations with father. To settle her, I go to the piano and start playing all the Mozart I can think of; hours of music so it can reach the part that is left of her. The piano concertos fill the room and the house, but my sombre mood traps the music in a web and inhibits its flow; I am probably making things worse for mother and myself.

“Elio…” Her voice is frightened. “Here I am what is wrong? Do you want Mafalda?” I reply in the calm tone of voice I have learned to use with her.

“Where is my Elio, why do you call yourself Elio?”

“I will always be your Elio mother, even if I seem different. Do you want to go into your room and rest?”

She looks frightened, as a child that sees the vastness of the world without her parents beside her. She starts to tremble and cry muttering my name; I go to look for Mafalda, she has the power of reassuring her that I, her son, do not have.

“Nature has cunning ways of finding our weakest spot”

So true, my father’s big heart just gave up on him one day, just after breakfast. My mother’s inquisitive brain is closing onto itself. And as for me, nature has found all my weak spots, thousands of them, and poked at each one of them. Fear of loss, fear of loneliness, fear of fear. Like an open book of fears nature has underlined each one of them and made me relive them. I have kept them
close never renegading them, but it hurts. Each memory I have is tinged with so many ghosts and sorrows that it is difficult to keep them under control. Here in this house I dare not move, each and every place is a reminder to what I was, what I thought I had and what I wanted. Infinite memorials, like an avenue of Torii gates, passing through each one I am in one place with past versions of myself appearing. A hall of mirrors where each reflection slightly ages. And it all starts twenty years ago; there are no earlier ghosts, as though I was born as the Elio I am that summer. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end”. Is it Oliver saying this behind the curtain on the balcony, or is it that summer, as though as season could talk, always, always the same, always different. The start of my self-discovery, the end of my hope of love.

The weight of my memories and thoughts just seems so heavy that I cannot breathe, and I know I need to get away to recompose myself.

July 2007
Because he loved me

Chapter Summary

Elio returns to Milan and a dear friend is there to pick up the pieces.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Dottoressa, I shall place the files here ready for tomorrow.”
“Grazie Emma”. I thank my secretary and quickly leave the office. As I hurry down the corridors I avoid chatting with colleagues. I have just the time to get to the station, hope Elio’s train is late, I need a coffee.

Such a short text last night: “Arrive at 6pm Milano Centrale come and carry me back”
Five years ago I got a similar text, that time it was the airport after he had been to the States; he was a mess for quite some time. His face a mask as he told me “I fear I have woken from a coma and life has passed me by. For me you are still the teenager with whom I went swimming at night, but you are now a wife, a mother and a lawyer.” I could only hug him tightly and whisper “Elio, I shall always be that teenager when I see you, as you are the boy who transcribed music and swam in his underwear at night with me. But you are also a man, a professor and my daughters’ uncle Elio.”

I get into the car and switch on the radio; a pop song of the 80’s is playing. God Elio, you do mess me around, or spin me around like a record baby. And yet, here I am rushing to pick you up.
Hoping I do not get fined or crash the car, I call Bea to see if the girls are ok. “Tutto a posto signora” is all I need to hear. I live a life torn between my loves. Elio lives a life torn by his ghosts.
I manage to park in a legal manner not too far away from the station and I run to be there as the train arrives. I know he needs to see me there at the end of the platform, at the arrivals, at the corner of the road, leaning on the scooter with the spare helmet ready for him. And for twenty years I have been there, enjoying this feeling that in some way he needs me. I bask in light he generates just being Elio; like a lazy cat that knows she needs to hunt to eat, but feels that there is time for doing what you have to do and still enjoy the sunlight.

The train is fifteen minutes late. I am left on my own to wait and think; it has been years since I have done so. In a few days I shall go to the villa at B, like every summer of my life. See the same people and places, my husband and daughters will be with me as well as my parents. I lost my virginity there; I fell in love for the first time there. Elio was not the first or the last, but the heartbreak made me the woman I am. Desire and not being able to obtain what you desire and realising it has not killed you is the defining moment of adulthood.

I watch the people moving around me, arriving and leaving, all with their problems, losses and things to protect. A young couple holding hands passes by; they are off on holiday and it seems it is the first holiday together. Her wavy brown hair reminds me of a younger version of myself and he looks like Luca. The first time I saw Luca at university I knew he was the one that would lick all my scars and love me. He has never doubted me, he has never wondered if I would have chosen Elio if I could have had such a choice.

“Mummy why did you marry daddy?” Elena asked me this just the other day. “Because he is the best man in the world!” That was the answer for the five year old; the real answer is “Because he loved me”.

I am not a ghost, I am not second best; I am not a make do for Luca. I am not these things for Elio either, I am Marzia, loved by different people for different reasons, and that is enough for me.

“Marzia!”
I look down the platform, and there he is, hurrying towards me almost tripping over his case; still all legs and arms, slim and with boyish looks that a beard cannot mask.

“Marzia, do you have to rush home, or can we go and eat something? I am famished. I would not be good company for the girls at the moment. I do not want them to see a grumpy uncle Elio…”

“They are with Bea, Luca is away till Friday. I can have a quick pizza with you at the usual place, IF I find a place to park.”

“Marzia you are my gift from the Gods!”

I smile at that. It took time for him to see me as a gift; it took time for me to forgive and understand why I was hurt. That summer we both showed each other our vulnerable parts, we did not know we had them and reacted like children, running away from what we did not understand. We are silent while we get in the car and I navigate the intense summer evening traffic; cars and buses snarling themselves into eternal loops of metal and heat.

“How long are you staying this time? Trust you to be the only one leaving B just when we are all arriving there for the summer…”

“I need some time away from the ghosts; they were so real this time. My mother talking to my father and acting as though he had replied. Anchise was walking in the orchard and Vimini was eating fruit under a tree. I even saw you on my bed in the old room, through the light coming in from the closed shutters; you were sleeping so deeply.” His expression was haunted.

“And was he there?”

“He has never left Marzia, never. But this time his ghost merged in the real Oliver. After twenty years he was back and he was the same and not the same. I thought I had dementia like mother. I was talking to a ghost that was replying. But his conversation was different from the one I was having.”

“Bastardo” I muttered glancing at the crushed Elio sitting next to me.

“Elio, please do not rush off to Rome this time. Stay here till the end of the week and come up to B with me and the girls. I can kill my ghost easily. The girls can try to frighten off the other ones, they are loud enough.”

“Thank you my love” His smile was a bit lopsided, but it was a start. “But I need some time on my own. Milan reminds me so much of father. Rome has its ghosts, but I can avoid their haunts.”

“But you will not do so, will you? Like a child picking at his scab, you will walk there in a silent procession of pain.” I parked the car, and did not look at him. We have had similar conversations for twenty years. Each time a new ghost appeared. Sometimes they would go away as time went by, but Oliver was always present. I loved the boy, but twenty years ago the Americano took him away and then discarded him. “I have ghosts too Elio, and some of our ghosts overlap. You see me and I see you. But we are not what we were twenty years ago; we were not the same at the end of that summer as when it started. We are the sum of years and of the people that we met and loved and hated; especially those we hated. I have always wished I had the power to sweep away your pain. If I could only take away the pain of one person in the world, it would be yours. I am at a loss Elio, I really want you to be contented if not happy, but I do not have this power. You are the only one that can do it. I can give you the wooden stake, but you are the one that has to push it into the vampire’s heart.”

I stopped, I had said too much. I had drowned him with a flood of words that I had kept in for years. I turned to look at him, and he smiled at me.

“Thank you Marzia, you are right. But I am a weak man; I enjoy wallowing in my pain, so that I can remember the good things as well as the bad. I am sorry if this has hurt you for so long. I do not want to lose a stable point in my life. Please forgive me. Please.” His expression was so contrite.

I hugged him; I wonder what the people walking past were thinking of these two adults sitting in a parked car hugging each other for dear life. Some clandestine affair I suppose.

“You will never lose me Elio. Never. There is nothing for me to forgive, we all carry burdens of what was and what could have been. Do not fear this. Now let us eat, I am hungry and need to go back to the girls. So is the life of a mother!”

July 2007
This Marzia is Film Marzia; in the novel she was treated shoddily. During the summer of 1987 Elio bounded with two people, Oliver and Marzia. With one he had full intimacy, with the other he realised the differences between sex and intimacy. Luca Guadagnino thinks Elio has a future with Marzia, and I have written my version of it. She loves him dearly, they both grew that summer, but she has moved on, keeping the good and burying the bad. Elio hurt her, but she knows that the hurt that Elio received was worse. He could never be the love of her life, but he lost the love of his life.
I recognise the number as soon as the phone rings. As I answer, I know what she will say. “Signorino, ma quando viene?” When Mafalda calls me signorino, I am in trouble. I reassure her that by the end of the week I shall be there. I really want to go to B, but I still feel sore. Summer in Rome is hot, humid and oppressive. The city is almost empty of locals and full of sun-dazed tourists that move in herds. That is what I need at the moment. The university has closed; the libraries will do so soon. I have no excuse to stay, but I really do not want to leave my refuge. My flat is somewhere between via Santa Maria dell’Anima and San Clemente, so I can avoid both or walk to either, depending on my mood. This time I have been burrowed and avoided them both. I feel like going out to seek some evening breeze, and of course I go down via Cavour and end up in front to the Colosseum. It is ironic that the gay quarter is right in front of San Clemente; I wonder if I can find a hook up for a few hours of comfort. As I am walking along the road I see two men walking in front of me; one of them looks like Tiziano. I stop, it would be embarrassing if it really was him, and I do not need another ghost in my life at the moment. Of course, the way I behaved there is a real possibility that I am his ghost. I stand in front of San Clemente, it is closed and dark; behind me people in front of the bars are chatting, laughing, falling in love and living. I am walking in my San Clemente of memories; the stratigraphy is clear and terrible. Each stone a person I met, each altar someone I loved. In the Mithraeum there is you and I Oliver, surrounded by the villa and B. Above there is the first church, and I suppose Tiziano laid the foundations for it; but the Mithraeum was not destroyed, just covered. When the Normans, or in my case, I, burnt the first church down, it was built in a more magnificent manner, and filled with exquisite art, but there is no equivalent of this in my life. Mithra is eternally killing the bull, and I am the young bullock Oliver killed. No, I would like to think that, but we both know I desired him more than he desired me. I might be the god sacrificing Oliver, his blood covering the altar deep within the church. Each time I think I should have pushed him down that Christmas I plunge the knife deeper into the bull. I would have killed something in him; I would have laid bare the man he did not want to be, or was afraid to be. “Wishful thinking Elio; you have spent twenty years fantasising on what things could have been; thinking you know him better than he knows himself.” I would have simply killed something in myself. Both sacrificed on the altar of desire, carnality and oblivion. I was too young for this, he was too reasonable.
“Down the passage we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened”
We took the passage, we opened the door, but then closed it.
Turning towards the bars and restaurants I start noticing the male gaze. That summer was the time I started to be fully aware of it, and instead of ignoring it or being afraid, I revelled in it. Even after Oliver was gone, I played with it. In Milan in the final year of school, at college in the states, back in Italy. Wherever I was, I recognised men being attracted to me, growing up made no difference. Even now, older and bearded I am desirable to others, not as much as I was, but I am never ignored. Makes oblivion easy, but still there have been a few that have filled my heart.
“Elio, I cannot breathe when you are not with me.”
Yes, another ghost has appeared as soon as I set foot in this area. Tiziano standing under a lamppost, the light washing him with warm yellow light; his face almost crumpling like a discarded receipt. Tiziano to whom I told that I was moving to Oxford and he did not need to follow me. And it was after three years together, not three weeks. We lived in a small apartment near the university, filled with books and music; father liked him a lot, both Classic scholars they had a lot in common. Like an Antinous in the flesh, not cold marble, his lips were full and pouting; his kisses were lingering, his olive skin was warm under my touch, trembling in excitement every time. He picked me up, he dusted me down, helped me face the world, and I left him. I loved him, probably from the first moment we met, but I did not love myself enough to love him as much as he loved me. And also, the death of father unhinged me; there was nothing anybody could do for me at that time. But in the end, It was my decision to leave, and what hurts, I know it was the right decision for him, from my point of view at least, not sure what Tizano ever thought. I suppose that is what Oliver thinks about the two of us.
I am ashamed that I could have made someone suffer even a fraction of what I have suffered; I hope he is happy, really happy and if he ever thinks of me there is no regret. He can hate me if it makes him feel better.
Time past and time future/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present.
I walk home without stopping in any bar, I am no longer in the right mood for casual meetings; I compose a quick text to Marzia: “Will come up on Saturday. See you all!” If there be ghosts, let them be in a place I love under the shadow of my father and I will face them in the company of those I love and not alone. Let me feel all the pain in the world as to remember the happiness that seemed so eternal. Father, Oliver, Tiziano, Vimini and Jamie. Some still living somewhere away from me, others that did not want to leave, but are now gone, and only my memories keep part of them alive. August 2007
I Seek Treasures

Chapter Summary

Elio meets someone that can be a distraction for a night or for a lifetime.

Chapter Notes

Elio needs some love. He was a sensual boy and has remained a sensual man.

The courses at the university were going to start, the exam period had started, I was willing to be overwhelmed with work; any type of oblivion was welcome, I was not going to be choosy. Then Chiara phoned me.

We had not really kept in touch, only my uncle kept us up to date with her marriages and divorces. He died last April, another loss that I did not have the courage to tell my mother; her brother was still a young man in her world.

"Elio, I am going to sell my father’s collections, but I know he would have liked you to have something. Come up and choose something you like, not too expensive though!"

So for this reason I find myself in B in a chilly autumn day in front of my uncle’s villa. It was always much larger than ours; he was a collector that loved fine things, his wife was one of the finest items, incredibly beautiful, much more than Chiara, but sad that she was kept away from the scenes of her native Paris. Chiara was used to have all she wanted, and if she could not have it, she decided she did not want it in the first place. I wonder if she slept with Oliver that summer. Was he something she wanted and then decided it was not worth it for the pain it was causing? We never mentioned Oliver when we occasionally met. He is the no go area for both of us.

As soon as I enter the villa I am overcome by the number of objects uncle amassed. Paintings, sculptures, prints, medals and vases. It will be a large sale. I go straight to the library where there is the Roman sculpture of a head of a child. He is on the brink of adolescence; hair ruffled and eyes wide open towards the future, lips slightly parted as to express the wonder he knows that is in front of him. A moment frozen in time since the III century. I have always loved that sculpture, when we visited my uncle as child I would run straight to boy, looking at him and wondering about the world he lived in and the things he saw; father would tell me all the history of the empire, but I wanted to hear it from the child that had lived through it. I wonder if Chiara will have a fit if I choose it.

As I stand looking at it I sense the presence of someone behind me, and turning I see the child grown into a man wearing modern clothes.

“It is a lovely example of Roman art. Portraits of the period are so full of life and a tension reflecting the troubled times they lived in. Let me introduce myself, I am Richard Davenport, the valuer for S auction house.” He holds his hand out and I take it. “Elio Perlman, I have been invited by the family to choose an item as a memento of my uncle.”

“You have good taste if that is what you are choosing. It is my second favourite item in the house.” I was supposed to ask witch was his favourite, but instead replied: “It depends on the value; I cannot take something that has high monetary value when choosing something for sentimental value.”

“Well you are lucky, I have not valued anything in the library yet, take it and none will be the wiser.” There was something slightly unnerving about the conversation, as though we were speaking a parallel language. He was very handsome, tall with wide shoulders, his resemblance to the Roman
head was startling, same straight nose, untidy wavy hair, and heavy lidded eyes. I could feel my attraction towards him moving in my body, my hand still felt the presence of his skin. 

Startled by my reaction I reply more harshly than intended. “That is not very professional towards your client!”

“Depends who is my client. It is not the heirs; my auction house was contacted by the deceased. He wanted his collection to be enjoyed by those who love beautiful things and left a list of people that we wanted to gift something. The money from the sale will go into scholarships. I agree that defrauding poor students is not admirable, but it is not the most monetary valuable item in the house. Take it since I see it has an intrinsic value for you. And it might remind you of me.”

The last part of his speech was almost whispered, and I was not sure if I heard it right. I was flustered, and without thinking, picked up the sculpture. The roundness of the head was heavy, as though all the hands that held it before me had left their weight. I was afraid of dropping it, and Richard helped me hold it, our hands touching; again I felt his touch more than I should.

“Thank you, it is indeed an object I have always loved from this house and I cannot think of any better item that will remind me of my uncle.” I was ready to run away, flee from something that made me uncomfortable. As though he read my thoughts he asked “To thank me, you can keep me company at dinner, it is a very lonely place to be once the summer has ended.” It was a simple request, but I felt all the implications that were hanging in the air. But I could not resist. “See you at the monument at the piazzetta at eight.” as soon as I gave the appointment, I ran. What was I thinking of? But I knew that I wanted to know more of this man, his presence had woken feelings I knew I once had but forgotten. I was looking forward to the evening while being afraid, as an explorer crossing the Pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic Ocean for the first time; excitement of something new, the fear it was indeed the end of the world and be swallowed by nothingness.

As I arrived at the piazzetta he was there, five minutes early. I felt like hiding just to watch him, he was smart in a casual way, wearing a grey v neck sweater and a dark tweed jacket. He stood tall and the only untidy thing about him was his dark blond hair, flopping in the breeze. He was attractive, and he knew it, but did not really care.

“There you are; I was not sure that I had the right place, there seem to be a lot of monuments for such a small town, but this seemed the largest.”

I smiled, yes, I wanted to have sex with this man; I wanted to touch and be touched. It had been a long time since I felt such desire; it made me feel alive again. Thank you Chiara.

During dinner we found much to talk about, art, music and literature was a good way to probe each other’s ideas and views of the world. We would casually brush against each other and ponder the reactions. As soon as we were out of the trattoria without hesitation he turned towards me and asked “Your place or mine?” as though it was the only natural way to conclude the conversation started that morning in my uncle’s villa.

“It will have to be yours; mine has some problems at the moment…”

“Not a partner I hope?” he replied casually, as though he really did not care.

“No, ghosts.” He looked at me wondering if to ask for further explanations, but then smiled “Yes, they can be quite distracting.”

As we undressed in his room he kissed me intensely and muttered “I seek treasures, and I have found something magnificent.”

I closed my eyes and let myself be overwhelmed by my senses, losing myself in the moment and not worrying about tomorrow and all the days after it till the end of my time; I sought the warmth of skin and the sound of a beating heart as not to think of my losses and regrets.

October 2007
Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving is great when families are united and happy. This Thanksgiving is not good for Oliver…

Chapter Notes

This was a difficult chapter to write, and I have made many changes, and I fear still will do so. Oliver is a blank book in the novel. We know he is brilliant, handsome, shy, plays poker, will speak out when he has something to say, but little else. He is a clean slate on which Elio and the reader places the Olivers we want. My Oliver is a man that has arrived at middle-age and made to face all the wrong decisions he made and why he made them. I am hard with him, I always felt that the layers he had were all a façade that needed to be peeled off one by one. What will I do with him once the raw man underneath appears I still am not sure. I gave his wife the name Sarah, I was undecided and also liked Martha, but Sarah in the Bible was so forgiving of Abraham, the name seemed right. I feel there is a lot she could say of the lost years, but that would be another story.

Sarah loves Thanksgiving. The large table decked with decorations, all the family around. My hell is her heaven. It sums up over twenty years together. I watch her fretting in the kitchen and I realise how cruel I have been to her as well. Still beautiful, her dark hair streaked with discreet grey. As she turns and smiles to me I know that I have been luckier than I deserve.
“Darling, can you place the knives and forks on the table and call the boys? The turkey is done. I fear it is over-done!”
“Yup, I shall heard the lumpen beasts to the table.” I automatically smile the couboi smile I have mastered long ago.
The kids are on the PlayStation, engrossed in shooting up aliens; we are all relaxed this year by the fact that there are no relatives with us. Miracles do exist, between my in-laws and my parents I can’t decide which is the cruelest combination around a dining table.
Carving the turkey I look at my family sitting round the table. Sarah still tense in getting everything just right; Alex that has rapidly lost all of his childish soft lines and has a face of a young man I do not know, he is a dreamer; Julian lanky and morose, like a teenager should be is also the most practical person in the house. I wonder what they think of me.
“Dad, Mom…”
Julian is looking at his plate, but his tone alerts us immediately.
“Darling, what’s wrong?” Sarah asks, her voice deepening like the mew of a mother cat to her kittens.
I look at him and suddenly I feel he is a stranger at the table. There is something in him that is pushing me away, wanting to hide from me. “Little emperor, what’s the matter?”
He lifts his head and looks into a place far away from us, away from the dining room, the home. As a bronze god, the eyes focus away from the spectator, towards something that mortals cannot see. Follow his gaze and you are destroyed by the flames.
“Mom, dad. I am sorry, but I need to tell you both. I told Alex, and it is right you both know. I cannot lie to those I love. I cannot, as afraid as I am. I am not sorry, sorry.”
I watch his Adam’s apple move; it seems so large on such a frail neck. It seems to be the only thing moving as he is still as fledgling ready to fly away from his nest. I know what is coming, and it hits me in my gut.
“Mom, dad… I am gay. I have known this for the last few years. I have just started going out with a boy from school. I want to be open with you both.”
I am not listening to the rest of his speech; I can only feel the tears overflowing from my body. The knot that has lived in my heart for so long tightens further and I gasp “No, not you, not this!” I sob. The all turn to look at me. I have robbed my son of his moment of truth. I can see us all round the table, as though I am floating above the room. The chairs we bought at a thrift store when just married. The photos on the cabinet full of the expensive glasses we wanted on our wedding list that we have never used. Higher, the room, the house, the tidy street, the town full of green and bookstores. Higher, my country, the world, the nothingness.
Like a toddler that has just learnt how unfair life is, Julian’s face crumples. “Darling, darling…” Sarah sounds frantic, looking at each of us in turn and not knowing who to run over to first. Julian gets up and runs out of the room, Sarah following him. Alex sits as made of stone; all that he believed I was has been crushed.
“Dad, I am ashamed of you. Liberal when it suits you, but just like grandpas when the shit hits the fan.”
He gets up and leaves me. I am still crying in an empty room in front of the half carved turkey. I do not know how much time has passed when Sarah comes to look for me, a lifetime of lies probably.
“Oliver”. My name, called in anger and disappointment. “Oliver, what has got into you? I know it is a shock, but I thought you had it in you not to hurt Julian. You are the adult, the father. Are you so little minded that you cannot even try to support your son?”
“Seventeen.” I muttered under my breath, the number considered to be unlucky for some cultures. “What does that mean? Just because he is seventeen doesn’t mean he knows his own mind. I bet you had already slept with girls at the same age”.
I had. I so had. I thought that was the natural way I was. Seventeen. God, why? Why now, not next year, last year? Why God have you placed me in front of a mirror that I cannot avoid? Why cannot I be like Professor Pearlman?
“Sarah, of course I love him now as much, or more, than I loved him this morning. My reaction has nothing to do with what he said. I am sorry, it is just thinking of all the difficulties he will meet, the discrimination, the bullying, and the hurt.”
I look at the woman that has been with me twenty-two years, the woman that I have lied to for over twenty years.
“And you could not say these things to him?” It was a question, but her tone and her rigid posture with her arms crossed as to keep me away from her told me that it was a statement. Sarah, all the things I cannot say, all the things I have not said. To you, the boys, the boy.
“I have never been good with words, words that matter, you know that. I have never been good with gestures either.” The façade that I had created is slowly crumbling. The brilliant scholar, the cool professor, the loving husband and father, dutiful son, the liberal thinker… Lies, I am still the graduate living an Italian summer, my soul has been fossilised in amber for twenty years.
“You have always been good at hiding what you really feel, I have always known. I love you but…” She stops, and looks at me, at the real me with tear streaked face still sitting at the table in front of the now cold turkey.
“I loved you.” Sarah tone is of wonder, as though she has just realised the tense of her feelings. Present verb, past verb. The Imperfect verb has been my tense of choice. She has always lived for the present; present perfect is her way of seeing things. Or was.
“I loved you” It hangs in the room; large letters now out in the open. “Have you ever loved me?” She is asking this
to herself, as though I am not in front of her. I wonder if she is picturing our wedding, the birth of the boys, the holidays, moving house. All the big moments of our life together. Have I ever loved her? I loved what she could give me, a family, a cover, a shelter. But if it was not her, would any other woman been good enough? No, I love her positivity, I love the boys, and they are what they are because she is their mother. I love Sarah the mother, but not Sarah the woman. There are four broken people in the house today; I broke them all. November 2007
A Life Expected

Chapter Summary

Oliver collects fragments of his life and reflects on what happened when Elio came to dinner at his house five years before.

Chapter Notes

I have nearly finished this work. Revising six chapters, in the middle of writing a very difficult chapter and then two more till the end! Or three... I hope to have my life back, I have been thinking, dreaming and writing Elio and Oliver for the last three weeks. I need my sleep!

When reading about the meeting and Elio going to Oliver’s house, I wondered what effect it would have on Oliver? You can keep feelings neatly divided up to a certain point, but there will come the time when all will overflow. I enjoyed writing this chapter; I could have slapped Oliver when he replied “So” to Elio.

The boxes of books, a couple of bags of clothes and little else. Over twenty years together and little of me to show. Sarah and the boys have gone to her parents this week end, to give me the chance to collect fragments of my life from the house. All the important things I have kept in my office, away from home; from here I would like to collect up the good memories, because there were good memories, and keep them close to my heart.

I always thought I was not sentimental and that objects held little importance for me, but the framed postcard in the office taught me that I was wearing a mask of the rational man; one of the many masks I have in a drawer ready to pull out and wear when the occasion calls for it. The framed wedding photo on the dresser will be thrown out… No, Sarah is not the woman that throws out things in her life; she hoards memories. That was what attracted me to her, how things were easy and beautiful around her. She loved, probably still loves, the present and all the possibilities; the world around her and the world that still needs to be discovered.

I can see her twenty odd years ago, the party was almost ending and dawn was breaking. I had drunk so much and I was wondering if being sick would be a good option and where to go to sick up drink and boredom when I saw her standing by the window looking at the fragile violet light, as fragile as she looked. I stood next to her, very unstable, and muttered “City of light, with thy violet crown.” She turned and looking at me straight in the eyes exclaimed “Are you a poet? That is lovely!” “I am sorry, the poet is Pindar, and I am just a Classicist”. And from there our life together started, with her ups and my downs.

Being with her was a good mask, easy and pleasurable to keep. Kept me away from trouble and temptations; I am a law abiding man, except for once, and that de-railed me forever.

I will be alone, there are so many ways to love, and I love Sarah, but not in the way she thought she was loved and needed to be loved, and rightly she chose to call it a day. I will be alone because you cannot keep a mask on forever; sooner or later you will be found out.

How things escalated, the first real row we had and it has all ended. I suppose we never really talked to each other, both being happy to float along and thinking this was what was expected. The first obstacle de-railed us. And really, it was not Julian’s coming out, it was much before that.
Elio was right, and I fear he has always been right about the two of us. “In truth I’m not sure I can feel nothing. And if I am to meet your family, I would prefer not to feel anything.” And yet there he was, at our table braking bread with my family. An angel at my table, a stranger to those that should have been those closer to me, but he was actually a part of me that I have never been able to tear away. A part of me I covered, tried to erase but in the quiet moments I polished lovingly. And he came and sat at my table and soiled my perfect stage. I could not place him back in B or Rome. I would eat dinner and see him sitting in the chair in front of me; I would open the front door and there he was entering the house with an uncertain smile. Elio in the living room sitting on the armchair, Elio passing the dishes to put on the table, Elio going to the bathroom; and every time I go I imagine him unzipping his trousers and peeing into my toilet. And I would get excited, wanting to touch him. Elio not frozen in B or Rome as an adolescent, but alive, warm and moving, if I reached out my hand I could touch him and realise that that was not enough. I was not idolising the teenager, I desired the man he became; my senses came alive again and could not be placed back in a drawer somewhere. And so, my mask started slipping, little by little and I was afraid of what was under it; only that summer twenty years ago I saw the real me, only during those two weeks I could look into a mirror and say “This is Oliver.”

Five years of torture that got worse as time passed; my house was not a safe place and I started to spend more time at the university. A new book, a new course, more research, meetings; so many excuses. And then, I just could not have sex with Sarah; nothing worked, the blue pills, the appointments with the andrologist;” it is all psychological” he told me, thanks Doc, I know! Middle age, stress at work I would tell Sarah, but I knew the truth, my body was rebelling. I could never confess that I really desired a man.

And then the excuse this summer to go back to B and place him squarely back where he belonged. Adult Elio to over-impose over adolescent Elio in the villa during summer. “I remember everything” was a good way not to talk about anything too personal. And it worked, till the last moment. Till I heard “Elio, Elio, Elio” Elio, you know where there is a small gap in my armour and pierce me; no, I am unjust, when I see you I open my shirt and tell you: “Here is my heart, open and ready to be filled with nostalgia and pain!”

We alternate the role of Saint Sebastian, bound with the past to places frozen in time and pierced with arrows of regret; our blood flowing and drowning those around us, actors in a self-inflicted tragedy.

I pick up the wedding photo, Sarah is smiling and I look dazed. That is the sum of nearly twenty years of marriage that ended not with a bang but a whimper.

December 2007
Elio remembers his past, and we learn more of the blank years the book mentions. People that shaped the adult Elio.

Chapter Notes

Difficult chapter to write, AIDS was, and still is, a killer. I feel Elio knew about it but never thought about it, he lead a sheltered and privileged life.
The statue is in the Met, here is a link: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248797
Any reference to personification of erotic longing is of course, not coincidental...

Fall is finishing and we are back to our daily lives dreaming of summer; all the gold of the leaves is starting to fade.
There are so many things I need to do. Mother had a bad crisis last night, I need to find someone to look after her when I am in Rome. I pick up the letter that I have been ignoring all summer. Week of studies in memory of Professor Perlman ten years from his death. Rome, June 2008. All his past students will be there. Maynard will introduce his work on the Ephebic and the ideal of Greek beauty; that figures. Pavel will talk about the Roman concept of Imperium; that figures even more.
And Oliver? He has accepted to be there, he was one of the first to enrol, but still no title of his paper. That is not like him. I need to write an introduction on father. I miss him so much. I would trade a lifetime of happiness for a day with him; but these barters never end well. I would not be able to look at him as I fetch him from Hades, and as I turn my head towards him he would be snatched away.
As I enter his study I can feel him still, expecting him to call out and show me something that has tickled his interest or ask me to play something.
Loss is a collection I have completed, but there are always new and different losses to torment me with. Losing mother day by day as she is still physically here is the cruellest of them all.
Etymology of words was something father loved; I could work on that for the introduction. Or his love of art and statues. I look at the pictures of statues on the wall.
Greek statues, sinuous curves to guide the senses.
“Sinuous curves to guide the senses, beauty is not straight, and as such, it is not honest”
Jamie. Part of my collection of sorrows, a cornerstone of what I am now, I owed him so much and could give so little in return.
My first few months at Harvard were hard; I really felt so European and found the courses unchallenging. One week end I travelled to New York and wandering aimlessly in the Met. I was examining the torso of a youth, years before dad had explained to mother and me the evolution of Greek art in the same place; it made me feel less home-sick. One leg in front of the other that was carrying the weight of the body, the back curved and one shoulder raised; it reminded me of Oliver playing volleyball.
“Sinuous curves to guide the senses, beauty is not straight, and as such, it is not honest”
The man standing next to me said these words, and I turned to look at him; he was one of the most extravagant men I had seen. He wore leggings and a torn t-shirt, his hair was long and blond, but the way he was standing struck me, straight back with his weight on his right leg and his left leg slightly forward, mirroring the torso in front of us, he had a slim build but with well-defined muscles, especially the thighs; sensing my stare he turned round towards me and asked: “Are you honest?”

“No, I am not honest, but I am not beautiful either.” I must have looked a bit mortified as I answered, because the man laughed and replied “You are beautiful, your head would be the perfect complement to this statue. Beauty is not what the magazines tell us, it is the sum of parts; the proportions of limbs, the curve of a spine, the nape of a neck of someone you love, the look in the eye. This statue has no head, no arms, the legs are cut off at the knees, but it is beautiful.”

“So I need to cut off my head to be beautiful?” I asked a bit too seriously. “No, it is perfect where it is.” His reply was quiet and his eyes were kind. We started talking, his name was Jamie, he was a dancer and a choreographer, and he was a New Yorker, loved travelling and loved Rome. That last part of him was what bounded us. I started to look forward meeting him for a coffee or a wander through art galleries. He was also gay and proudly out.

We talked a lot about Oliver, and, though I was close to Oliver territory, few miles separated us, I did not feel the need to seek him out; I had someone that could listen to me talk about him without embarrassment and understand my feelings without judgment. He had the same experiences; he had been through the same pain.

There was no attraction between us, I was not his type “Boys have never been my thing darling, I do like a bit of rough”; I was attracted to his personality and the way he faced all obstacles and still lived the life he wanted.

As summer was approaching he looked quite sick and he told me he was going to Rome to recuperate. Would I like to join him? Of course I wanted to. A summer away from B was a new experience, but I wanted to try new experiences on my own, maybe fall in love and bury some ghosts; my parents were upset, but understood that I was an adult and needed to do things on my own. So, at the end of July I was in Rome again, and Jamie showed me a different city to the one I knew.

He had lost weight, his muscle definition was slowly blurring and his cheekbones were more prominent. I thought he was living too intensely. His closest friends were a group of older English women living in the city; they mothered him and tried to keep him safe. They also adopted me that summer. I remember them telling me “Always use protection Elio, just because you cannot get pregnant doesn’t mean you should be stupid” and handed me a handful of condoms. “I will never use all of them!” I said. “You will”. I did.

“Just because you slept with a man once doesn’t mean you want to sleep with men in the future. But you have a great chance to experiment here, you are not known, away from your usual places, no fear of being found out or embarrassing your-self, just the freedom to explore and find yourself. Just be careful and take precautions” Jamie told me.

That summer I kissed men, I gave and was given blow jobs, and I fucked and was fucked. A look in a club was all that was needed to create a connection. I felt no shame or regrets, I knew that I needed to feel desirable, needed to find something I felt was missing. Jamie knew all the places where men that loved men assembled. And I realised that I was one of them. I was gay.

That realisation explained so much, and I knew that once I said it out loud to myself there was no turning back. “I am gay, I am gay! I, Elio Perlman, am gay.” The seventh seal was broken, they sky rolled back as scroll and the Apocalypse had started. I knew that there would be difficulties, that I would lose friends, but I knew that I would find others, that I now could carve my way in life as I wanted and not as was expected from me.

As I left Rome to spend the last week of the holidays with my parents, I felt that the teen-ager has shed his cocoon and the adult was ready to face the future. I said good bye to Jamie and his ladies looking forward to see them again.

I told my parents the evening I arrived in B. They were not surprised, just worried for me. All three of us hugged each other, a linking of arms, giving each other the strength to face the world. I knew
how lucky I was to have them as parents, to be loved by such splendid people. Back at college I did not say anything, but did not hide what I felt or was. And things seemed easier. Then Doreen, one of the Rome ladies, contacted me in winter. Jamie was back in New York, she was with him, and did I want to see him? There was not much time left. And then it dawned on me, I was a stupid youngster ignoring the wide world outside my bubble. Jamie was dying, dying because of AIDS.

He was in isolation in the hospital, his body riddled with infections he could not shake off. The shell of the man I knew. Just Doreen and I were at his bedside.

“I burnt the candle at both ends; it did not last the night, but what a light!” Jamie gasped, and I started crying. He had so many friends, but here he was with just us two at his bedside.

Nature had found another of my weak spots. Then a woman came to visit, and silently held Jamie’s hand whispering in his ear. She was his mother. The parents that had kicked him out of the house when he had come out, the mother he had not talked to in ten years had come to his death-bed. Alone, defying her husband, and like a Pieta’ made of flesh she was holding her dying son.

The mysteries of love, overwhelming you when least expected. He died on the strike of the wolfgang hour; but no daemons could come to claim him, two of us stood guard as strange Archangels, an elderly lady and a very young man, protecting the mother and child. All the machine lights slowly stilled and the buzzing sounds evaporated leaving us alone in a silence as vast as the universe.

It is strange, I have lost the postcard of the bearded Mithraic face that Oliver and I bought at San Clemente, but the postcard of the torso of a youth has followed me in all my moves. I suppose I cannot keep more than one memento of each loss.

I know now what to write to commemorate father to those who knew him and explain what a great man he was to those unlucky to have never met him.

November 2008
My Soul was Sated with Misery

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver each light the candles during Hanukkah in different countries; both trying to overcome their difficulties.

Chapter Notes

In the novel the fact that Oliver is also Jewish is an aspect that attracted Elio. I liked the idea of mirroring them during the same intimate ceremony, each with their sorrows and worries.

The poet Shelley drowned not too far away from where B is. When his body was washed ashore it was burned on a pyre on the beach. His friend Trelawny collected the poet’s heart from the pyre and gave it to the widow, Mary Shelley. Considering what a group of misfits the Romantic poets were, I shudder to think what the unburned heart could really have been, but I am a cynic, Oliver is not. Cor Cordium (heart of hearts) is inscribed on Shelley’s tomb in Rome, under the Roman walls in the Protestant cemetery near the pyramid. Well worth a visit.

Being back at the villa in winter, as Christmas approaches, is difficult time for me. As a child I enjoyed the quiet that the cold brought; all asleep waiting for the spring to bloom. After “that” Christmas all changed. My room was shrine to loss. I should have forced myself on him; it would have changed the course of my life in one way or another. Probably for the worse, but I would not have regrets.

Mother seems to have accepted Monika, the carer, she is a nice woman from the Ukraine; mother thinks she is Monica, a childhood friend long lost in the folds of time and life. Mafalda is not that keen on her, but she could not cope with looking after mother; she is ageing as well. We are all in the winter of our lives.

After dinner there is just the two of us in the living room, a mother that is now a child and a son that is now a father. I light the fourth candle on the Chanukah and recite as loudly as possible for her to hear “My soul was sated with misery, my strength was spent with grief”

And I could hardly go on, because it was true, my temple was being razed to the ground, my port battered by storms and I felt so alone. An errant Jew in a hostile world.

Mother smiles, the soft light of the candles tremble in a breeze but they hold strong. After winter there is always spring. She whispers softly: “Stay strong Elio, be true and steadfast. Rejoice for the light there is and keep it safe.” I turn my head so that she will not see my tears.

Keep safe the light that there is, I must remember this when I fear the darkness in my heart.

The flat is quite nice, there is not that much space for all my books that are still in boxes and will stay there for the foreseeable future, but not a bad find in such a short time. It is strange being alone; I think I never have been truly alone. Noisy home with the family, university with friends and lovers, married with kids. I used to dream for time to dedicate to myself and work; now I have all the time in the world.
I bought a Hanukkiah on impulse. Sarah was the one that kept track of festivals and celebrations; I was always casual in my prayers and obligations like I tried to be casual with all the other important aspects in my life. But I saw it in the window of a shop and bought it. As I light the candle I remember and repeat “O bare Your holy arm and hasten the time of Salvation.” Am I past the point of Salvation? I have avoided looking into my heart, there is a knot around it, and I am afraid of what is left if I untie the knot. Or maybe Salvation has already been and I did not notice; just pushed it into a drawer with other important things, like with Elio.

The lights of the flames bring a bit of warmth, but I fear it is too little too late. I fear that a raging fire would not warm me up, it would just consume me and lying in the ashes there would be my heart with a knot around it, still uncharred; I am too alone for anyone to collect it and bury it. I fantasise that Elio kneels and picks up my unburned heart and walks up to the berm and places it under a pine in view of the sea. My beginning is my end, it would be so sweet. My Cor cordium.

I turn away from the flames; the candles are nearly burned down. I need to collect myself; tomorrow I will see the boys again. There is so much explaining I have to do. I am afraid that Julian thinks it is his fault that his parent’s marriage has collapsed. Alex is just hostile; he has seen his father’s mask slip and is revolted by what was underneath. How to explain that underneath there is another mask still? I have so many layered for every occasion I have forgotten who is Oliver.

I have so little time to scrape off every layer and present myself to them as a man that has sinned but loves them dearly. The father that adored them was not an illusion; one of the few things I have been honest about. I owe them that at least.

December 2007
Chapter Summary

Oliver talks to his sons, and realises quite a few things about himself and Elio.

Alex and Julian are sitting on the second-hand couch I found for free on the internet. Julian is looking at his feet; Alex is looking at me straight into my eyes with a cold cutting glare. Both would prefer to be anywhere than here with me. It will be a difficult conversation.

“I know that this past month has been difficult for you both” I start looking at them; they do not make any movement at my words. I continue “You both must feel that as usual adults have screwed up, well, one adult, me.” They both slightly nod, at least they are listening.

“Neither of you have any responsibility in the break-up between your mother and I; it was going to happen because we, me, drifted apart. I shall not use the precious time that I have with you both to try to justify myself, since there is no justification. I want just to tell you that I love you.”

I feel an emotion in my voice as I speak that I have not felt for years: sincerity.

“Conqueror and Little Emperor, you are both my reason for living; I know that I have been a shoddy father, especially in the last few years when you probably needed me the most, and I can only apologise. I love you both so dearly.” My voice cracks.

Twenty years ago my choice was not only for the right and narrow path, to follow a life expected for me. It wasn’t self-sacrifice so that Elio could lead a happy and easy life. I also wanted to be a father. The strongest love I felt I could ever freely give and to prove that I was not like my own father. I fear that I failed miserably as the two adolescents sit looking at me in silence.

“Nice speech dad, should I clap or is there more to come?” Alex still has the cold cutting expression, a Siberia in the room. Julian looks surprised “I am waiting for the lists of blame, you are good at blaming others or fate.” His words hurt me, like all truths.

“You have talked about your feelings, but do you know how we feel? Do you care?”

“I would like to know how you feel, even if I am afraid to know.” My voice lowers in shame and hurt.

“I am afraid as well dad” Julian looks directly at me for the first time since Thanksgiving. “Afraid of what you might say, expecting you to say it is a phase; afraid that the father I remember as a child never existed…” His voice trembles, and I run to hug him, before he realises what I intended to do and move away from me; I am on my knees in front of him as a penitent. “I would never say it was just a phase Little Emperor, believe me, never”

We stay still in the embrace for years, Alex looking at us and trying to decide what to do. I turn towards him and say: “I am the same father of your childhood; I got lost and have lost, but please forgive me if you judge me. Not immediately if can’t, but please one day forgive me!”

The last mask has been ripped and at last the man I am has been exposed.

The boys are asleep, the flat is silent. Outside it is cold and quiet, as though the world has also curled up and fallen asleep. I pour myself a large glass of neat whiskey and I know I need a cigarette. I stopped smoking when Sarah was expecting Alex, but started smoking again a few years ago, in secret; like so many things I have done by stealth. I leave the flat and sit on a low wall near the parking lot and light the first cigarette of the evening. What have I done? How could I be such a jerk? I have spent twenty years patting myself on the back, thinking I took the only rational choice. Hurting so many on the way, all the love I felt for the boys has been wasted, I kept back from them
wallowing in my own self-inflicted misery when they needed me the most. It was easy to be a wonderful father when the boys were small, but you need cojones to be a good father of teenagers, and I do not have them.

And Elio, good Lord, Elio. He was seventeen, the age of Julian. How much must I have hurt him? There I was with false concern, telling myself that it was a far better thing I have done while breaking his heart. I am thinking of getting married this summer, and expecting him to… to what exactly? He was just a boy. The look of hate he gave me; and every time I say to him “you haven’t forgiven me” or “do you forgive me” as though it was up to him; I should have said “Please forgive me!”

Forgive me for not explaining, for not really talking to you. “I do not know the things that matter” you said that summer. You do know them and act upon them, while I am not good with words, and never admitted it. I am good at talking and explaining, I am good company, but the words that matter, “I am sorry”, “I love you”, these words that mean something, I could not say them when I really meant them. Tonight I have honestly and directly said them for the first time in my life, and it hurts.

December 2007
Monet on a Rainy Evening

Chapter Summary

Elio sees the painting of the berm in rainy London and is still torn by pain.

Chapter Notes

I found the Monet of the Berm, it is Les Villas a Bordighera in Chicago. It will now be impossible for me to look at it without thinking of Maynard…

Here is a link:
https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Villas_%C3%A0_Bordighera_(Monet,_Chicago)#/media/File:Bordighera.jpg

When Richard invited me to London over the New Year I accepted immediately. After our night of passion we kept in touch, edging round each other’s bastions; never sure if a move would be accepted or not. I wonder if he sensed something of my mood over Christmas. His invite was at the right time.

London is cold and rainy; as I am sitting in a café waiting for him to finish work, I think of how we passed New Year’s Eve. No parties or going out, but just making love with the sounds of fireworks outside to tell us when midnight struck. No hungry sex, just slowly exploring each other as though we had all the time that the universe has left. Just as the sun implodes we would say to each other “That is who you are!”

Making love, it has been a long time since I have done so. Just the thought brings me warmth. I watch him as he hurries towards the café, towards me. His expressions are so quick across his features, all his thoughts are visible, he has such an open face it frightens me sometimes.

“Elio, to banish this cold and dark day, follow me to the warmth of sun and art!”

He looks so pleased with himself that I eagerly follow him down the street to the museum.

Monet and the Mediterranean. The banner advertises an exhibition that has been very popular. I feel afraid. “It is a special evening view, wine and art without crowds. I managed to get the tickets at great risk of my life; there are a few colleagues that hate my guts at the moment!”

I move closer to him, as a child to his father when faced with a danger. He hugs me, not realising it was a request of protection, not affection.

The lobby is full of people, and as we hand over our coats at the cloakroom and pick up a glass of wine, I relax. It could be a good evening. Richard greets colleagues and friends introducing me as Elio and making it clear that I am something important in his life. It is a novel feeling, I am not something to hide, a “friend” or a colleague. The exhibition is magnificent; so many splendid paintings of light caught in all its forms, colours envelope me and banish the cold and darkness. I suppose I relaxed too much, as soon we entered the next room there it was: the berm.

“As soon as I saw it, I thought of you. I had to see it again with you. When I visit B again, shall we go there the two of us? ” There is happiness in Richard’s voice; I am thinking “to flee or not to flee.”

In front of me the twisted pines under which I kissed Oliver for the first time, in the distance B and the bell tower to die for that I visited with Oliver for the last time. They are not memories, they are weeping wounds painted on a canvass for the world to see.

“Think of me someday”, like poor Maynard, I implore the same. Cor cordium he replied, but the heart of hearts is buried in Rome under the cobbles of via Santa Maria dell’Anima; the heart has not
been given to me. Our berm will be reunited with me when he is no longer here, a strange man will
appear and hand it over; the small framed postcard an unwitting messenger between two men frozen
in time. At least I am frozen.

“Are you ok?” The concern in Richard’s voice brings me back from the edge of self-implosion.
“Sorry, I think the wine has had effect. I feel a bit dizzy.”

He looks a bit surprised as I give a wan smile turning away from the painting. I need to get out into
the rain and cold, away from the summer and sun festering in my soul.

“Do you want to go home? I am calling a cab” He squeezes my arm in silent encouragement, in the
street I feel I can breathe again; as a diver emerging for air after exploring the remains of a tragic
shipwreck.

I realise that I need to talk to Richard, not about Oliver, that is too intimate for the place we are now,
but I need to open myself at least on some fronts. What I was that makes me what I am; and I am
interested in his path.

In bed we talk, his head resting on my chest while I curl locks of his hair round my finger.

He laughs as he recalls his first love at public school, a boy his age, and how they were expelled
from the school when they went public with their love. “Mum took it in her stride, and reminded me
that sometimes discretion is the solution. Ten years later he is such a city prat, working in a hedge
fund and just thinking of money, I avoid him, while my mother and his are still friends after meeting
in the headmaster’s office! But I knew that I was gay as soon as puberty hit me! I fancied George
Michael, and actually, I was not wrong in doing so!” There are no regrets in the tone of his voice.

His memories are so funny, there is no sadness in the way he tells his past; there must have been sad
moments, moments of shame as being dragged to the headmaster’s office; but he has transformed
them into a ribald novel. I am afraid how I will sound when I talk of my past.

“Are there no regrets in knowing how your first love became? That there is nothing between you?” I
ask surprised. “No, we were young, he was the sun when I was sixteen, but we grow, and
sometimes one follows different paths; they can be parallel paths or diverge totally. The past is past
and you can do nothing about it. We are given only one had of cards in life, and we need to play
them as best as we can. Sometimes the hand given is a terrible one, but still we must play. It is worth
it in the end.”

“I had sex with girls and wanted boys” I started telling him; “I wanted to be woman and man with
men and women. I thought that was the way I was, and ashamed by the boy part. Then I desired and
had sex with a man when I was seventeen. That summer changed me, it took a few years to
completely realise that, but after I knew that I seeked the company of women for friendship. Men for
love.”

I was not sure if he heard the last part, I mumbled it hiding my face in his hair, but the way he
suddenly pressed against me reassured me he heard and approved.

As the rain continued falling during the night the berm slowly faded; I felt that I was at last
approaching a New World where I could seek refuge and thrive; a Founding Father of my future.

January 2008
As Spring Breaks

Chapter Summary

Elio faces another loss and realises that only the recent past is the one to forget.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the Kudos and the comments! I have finished the draft of the story, I am just obsessively re-reading and changing, and editing… Poor Elio, but I am trying to make things better, I really am!
I had not thought death had undone so many is from the Wastelands by T.S. Eliot
Black ink of morning we drink you is from Death Fugue by Paul Celan.

I was dreading the phone call I knew was to come. Mother had slowly declined after Christmas, eating less and less; I was readying myself for a good bye that had actually been said years ago. Arriving at the villa I knew that I needed to add a new loss to my collection; another ghost that I needed to deal with; more pain in my burdened heart. But I had been mourning her loss for years, now it was only the final act of a tragedy that started with my father’s death.
She was lying in her bed, she looked like a death-mask, all her features sunken into her skull; there was nothing of the beautiful Annella that we all loved. But she was trapped somewhere in that husk. As I enter her room I can hear her mumble, as I get closer I realise she is calling all her loved ones, almost chanting their names like a prayer.
“I had not thought death had undone so many” The line came into my mind; she had lost so much in her lifetime, friends and family during the war, as a child she had to hide just because of her name and religion; she saw the cruelty of man against man and yet she was a woman full of generosity and curiosity. Never giving definite judgments and trying to see the best in people.
I sit next to her bed, I need to be near her till the bitter end; I do not want to leave her ever, even if I will have to. I pass hours listening to her breathing getting ragged, Monika and Mafalda move silently around us, trying to make her more comfortable. We are all waiting for the end.
Then I feel her hand slightly tighten round mine. “Elio my love, sorry but there is everyone I have to go. Love you” It was said in such a soft tone I thought I was imagining it. Her grasp slackened and then she was gone as dawn broke. Black ink of morning we drink you at dawn. It is the first day of spring and my mother died. I know that waiting for her were my father, her parents and brother, all younger; she is happy now.
I started mourning her years ago, and now I can howl all my pain to the world living with the guilt of feeling relief as well as sorrow. I am truly alone, not a son any longer.

Organising the funeral kept my emotions at bay. The help and affection I received was almost overwhelming; Marzia acted as a gendarme and made sure visits of mourners did not overstay; Richard flew over and was just silently there for when I needed him.
Part of my mother’s ashes were laid beside her father in Milan, part I took to be near father in his ghost spot at the villa; it was now their ghost spot where I can talk to them both.
I made a list of those who I needed to inform for the funeral immediately and those I could take my time to write to.
Of course Oliver was the last of the list; I kept putting off the moment I needed to write to him and let him know. I did not write to him about my father, but we had not been in touch for so long and I knew someone would let him know; they were in the same field.

But now it was my duty to write to him, and dreaded it. The drafts of emails started and discarded was alarming. Dear Oliver, I am sorry to let you know… Dear Oliver, I am writing to let you know that my mother passed away. Dear Oliver, Another piece of that summer has gone.

In the end I went for the shortest option: Dear Oliver, I am writing to let you know that my mother has passed away. I thought you would want to know since I know the love and respect you both had for each other.

It seemed so final, as though with this email I was cutting loose that summer. There is little left to pine for; I need to look at the future. “You have a hand of cards to play, and play you must”;

Richard’s words have struck me, I look at the cards I have left to play in the many years ahead of me and I realise that they are not as bad as I feared.

My parents loved me dearly, they were not good parents in the conventional way, with a rich and stimulating life that was not cut out for a child; but they gave me their love and all the instruments to widen my horizons, books, music and conversations. I was a much wanted child that arrived when they had almost lost hope of being parents. They never judged me, and always supported me, I was lucky; Tiziano never told his parents that I was his boyfriend, when they came up to Rome I was his friend and house-mate; exhausting afternoons tidying the flat and placing my things in the spare bedroom. That and the death of my father undid us; I needed change, but really I did not change.

You can be in a new place, but if you still carry the burdens you will be the same person. I suppose that is why I decided to visit Oliver; I had not really thought of him for years. He was always there in a corner that I never visited, perfect lover, beautiful and better than me. The life I wanted and that was cruelly snatched by fate; all this had nothing to do with reality and I wanted to see him older and hoping he was waiting for me. Of course it did not go as I was hoping; why should it? He had his reasons twenty years ago and they had nothing to do with me. I should have been happy that he remembered me and that I was important for him and am still important if far away. That he has a parallel life that works for him; I need to do the same for myself. Not place blame of what happened twenty years ago for my present life.

I have wasted the last five years being bitter and forgetting that the memories worth to keep and that are full of pain are those of the summer that happened a generation ago, not the last few times I saw Oliver. I need to shed the last six years and open myself to all the possibilities that are in front of me.

March 2008
Chapter Summary

Oliver learns of Annella’s death.

Chapter Notes

I have now finished all the story, I am just revising each chapter as I go along. The problem is new stories come into my head, so I have started writing more. Oliver and Elio, I really would like my life back, my cat is starting to hate me….
I fear I like torturing Oliver and I have not finished doing so…

Time heals is the biggest lie ever told to the suffering. Time just changes unbearable pain into chronic pain. And now and again it flares up. Elio’s email did just that. “Mother has passed away”. How a few words can open a chasm of feelings? I cried for Elio, Annella, so changed and ill when I saw her last year, Pro that I missed still; I cried for the young man I was. Time is so cruel, twenty years ago is yesterday, tomorrow is twenty years away, today is just fog. That unforgettable summer is now finished; all the actors are slowly slipping away. The only consolation was that this time Elio had told me; in his pain he had found the time and will to write to me and I am humbled. Ten years ago there was silence; a colleague told me about the sudden death of Professor Perlman and I wrote to his widow. But we had not been in contact for years, a silence borne by my guilt and him getting on with his own life. There was no one I could talk to about my sorrow; starting a conversation with “The mother of the seventeen year old boy I fucked twenty years ago has died” would not elicit much compassion.

But since the divorce I have been looked after at work; colleagues that have been through the same experience, or at least they think it is the same experience. I wonder how many divorced because they had always lied to their wife and were impotent because they desired a man seen twice in five years. Sarah is a saint, if the roles were reversed I would have gone for the jugular not a no fault divorce. Of course, she still doesn’t know the truth. I hope I am dead and buried if she ever finds out.

Sitting on my office couch I look at the papers and books all around me; the papers for the conference have been sent, late, but my work on Plato’s Cave is good, if I am allowed to self-praise. I have been working on this for five years, and it is not a coincidence; I am the expert on not wanting to leave the cave and the chains that bind me and thinking the shadows on the wall is real life. The irony is that when I left my father’s house at eighteen I thought I was making my own mark and decisions on life, but once freed, I found a reality that I could not understand and it frightened me, so I returned into a cave and shackled myself. As Plato writes, as humans we cannot break from our bonds formed by the senses. What I learnt at home as a child has influenced me without realising it. Not that using such an example would stand up in academia, so I spent five years working on a philosophical mirror of my life using the right academic terms and shifting through sources; that is the way to get on in academia, or not.

As I try to bring order round my desk and place the books on the floor back onto bookshelves I see the hardback volume of Armance, another memento I kept away from home and displayed in my office. I do not need to open it and read the dedication. “Somewhere in Italy”; not somewhere, you evil boy, but paradise. I wonder if you knew that the poor impotent Octave was based on the
impotent and gay Oliver written by Claire de Duras. But you know everything, so of course you knew. The joke is on me, I am impotent, at least with my wife I was, and I have no interest in finding out if anyone else can raise the mast. Of course in my dreams all works perfectly well, but I do not want to think or remember my dreams, they leave a metallic taste and a feeling of dread born by shame and regret. Better get back to writing, work has a way of keeping me out of trouble. If only the conference was held anywhere but Rome I could almost look forward to it.

I wonder what seventeen year old Elio would think of this pathetic middle aged man? Actually, I am more afraid of knowing what my younger self would say about the present me; a decision made of fear has undone me, I wonder if I can ever atone for it.

April 2008
Cor Cordium

Chapter Summary

Elio goes through his father’s desk and finds two photographs and wonders about the conversation his father had with Oliver that Christmas.

Chapter Notes

I have finished the story, and will be checking the chapters, and publishing them two at the time, hope that is ok.

I have managed to be so busy that grief has had small chance to tip her toe in my soul. Lessons, exams, finishing papers and working on a book. I have even been contacted by a TV producer to front a culture programme. All is ready for the conference in honour of my father and I decide to pile more work upon myself: sell the house in Milan. Now that mother has died there is no point keeping it; she had stopped living there for years preferring the villa.

As I enter the darkened flat so many memories overwhelm me, but no ghosts, just memories of my toys, returning home after school, my mother talking on the phone, my father calling me, afternoons spent in my room reading or masturbating. There is little I want to keep from my old room or the apartment; I have hardly lived here since I went off to college. Family pictures and some paintings, a few pieces of loved furniture are what is important.

My father’s study is the most difficult part; I need to see which copies of the books he had also in his study at B and bring to the villa those missing. I also have to go through his papers, I have been putting this off for ten years; it seems such an act of disrespect. I suppose I can box them all and take them to B un-opened and keep them in boxes till after my time, they will be still there when the villa decays and falls down in a few hundred years and we are all gone and our names forgotten. I like the idea, but my father was a convivial man, and if there is anything that I can give of his to the world he would appreciate it. But I do not have the knowledge to do so. The number of books is overwhelming, I know that father had catalogued them, so I go through his desk, and sitting at it I can feel his presence; to fight back the tears I start to open the draws and take out their contents ready to place them in boxes.

At the back of the middle drawer two old photographs are at the bottom of a pile of old bills. One is of me aged four with mother, I am smiling at the snow coming down and she crouched next to me, our heads touching; her smile is radiant. I turn it and “Cor Cordium” is written in my father’s handwriting; I do love them so, their loss has left such a wound. The second photo is of a young man, the way he is dressed suggests late 1950’s. He is leaning against a railing and not looking directly at the photographer, he is very handsome, dark and long limbed, as a Greek statue. There is nothing written on the photo, not a name or a place; I suppose father knew and that was enough. I wonder if he ever took the photos out and looked at them. Probably knowing that they were there was enough for him. As I do with billowy.

I remember the dream I had the other night, it was of Oliver, of course, he was at the villa “that” Christmas, but he was the Oliver of today, not of twenty years ago, and he wandered through the rooms looking for something or someone. I could not speak to him, my voice was mute, and I followed him hoping he would notice me. But then he saw my father and they both went off leaving
me behind. I wonder if the long conversation they both had that time was about me and the choices one makes. And if it was about Oliver and I did he say anything that made Oliver take the decision he did? Did he mention the man in the photo or was he as evasive as he was with me?

“I did not have the courage” father said, but did he have regrets all his life? Were mother and I his Cor Cordium or did he need to write it to convince himself?

No, he might have had regrets for a corridor he never took and a door he never opened, but he loved us both dearly, and of that I am certain. And I am sure the conversation at Christmas helped Oliver but did not influence him; my father would listen and get to the heart of people, he probably would have just told him about himself, like he did to me. Oliver took his own decision, there was no betrayal on my father’s side, there could never be. He wanted the best for everyone and knew that pain was inevitable whatever the choice, but “così e’ la vita.” Indeed, so is life.

I have been blessed with so much love, I have taken it for granted and now that I look at the photograph the sadness of the loss cannot overwhelm the memory of the love.

May 2008
The Gods look on

Chapter Summary

The conference starts.

Chapter Notes

Rome!
This scene with Greek statue came to mind watching the film when Professor Perlman was showing Oliver the photos of Greek statues and Arnie’s expression was “Are you trying to pimp your son sir?”
The faculty of Lettere at la Sapienza University of Rome has a magnificent museum of plaster casts of Greek and Roman art.
In Plato’s Symposium Aristophanes tells of how humanity had two fused bodies, male-male were the children of the sum, female-female children of the earth and male-female children of the moon; the gods split them in half and since then they have been trying to find each other.
Link to the statue:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resting_Hermes_MAN_Napoli_Inv5625_n02.jpg

“We are here to commemorate and celebrate a great man on the tenth anniversary of his death: Professor Perlman. A few months ago his beloved wife Annella Perlman joined him, not being able to stay away from him too long. But these three days here in Rome will not be sad occasion, because Professor Perlman hated sadness without good memories that can come with it.
All that knew him remember him fondly; as a scholar, a teacher, a friend and as a father. As a father he was the most loving and understanding man there could ever be, it was a privilege to be his son.
During his lifetime he gathered people around him; he was interested in new ideas and theories; he encouraged and pushed students to do their best. Every year during the summer holidays there would be a student staying with us in the holiday villa; there they could work on their projects, my father loved discussing and learning from them. Many of these students are here today; they have come from many different countries, proving how far reaching my father’s, Professor Perlman’s, influence was. He believed in freedom of ideas, he never judged and always tried to understand others point of view. He loved to discuss, never argue, to see how far theories could be stretched and how they could be proved or dismantled.
I hope these three days will bring new ideas, projects and friendships. This is the legacy he would have wanted.”
I feel tears threatening to overflow as I finish my speech. As I hear the audience clapping I keep the tears back; there shall be no sadness. I miss you dad.

_________________________________

I arrive late, stuck in the Rome traffic and not finding my way in the large and chaotic university. I manage to hear Elio’s opening speech, standing at the back of the hemicycle I watch him. He is standing straight and looks composed, but I sense the tension in his shoulders. I long to massage them. I clap as hard as I can when he finishes; the palms of my hands hurt. As he sits in the front row
I ponder if to sit and listen to the rest of the opening speeches, but decide that it is better to take a walk around the museum; I would not be listening, just looking at the nape of a neck quite a few rows in front of me.

Row upon row of plaster Gods and heroes stand silently as I pass along, frozen in eternity in this gipsotheke created long ago to help students. I have cast myself as some sort of tragic protagonist of a forgotten Greek tragedy, but it was wishful thinking; if it was a vindictive god that brought all upon me it would absolve me of my sins and errors. I have forged my life, and I must deal with it.

There is the resting Hermes, the tension of the muscled body while seemingly relaxed marvels me each time I see it. He is ready to spring away from your gaze; leg forward bust forward, not a straight line in all of the sculpture. He is young, but there is wisdom of the immortals etched upon his face. I remember when Pro showed me a picture of the statue that summer. It reminded me of Elio, and I felt the guilt sitting by this splendid man while fantasising about defiling his loved son.

Oh Lord, what a miserable creature I am; I look at a sculpture with impure thoughts, while just a few yards away Elio is sitting unaware of these thoughts. The next few days will be hard, but I must amend for all I have done and be the better man that my sons, and Elio, deserve.

I wonder if I was in love with Elio before I arrived to the villa, or the idea of Elio. I was entranced by the statues in the Sicilian museums, feeling I had an appointment with destiny. In the end I am no better than Maynard. But Elio was, is, part of me, I always knew that from the moment the boy with curly dark hair was introduced to me that summer day; desire was not the only or major factor for my attraction towards Elio. My soul just said “It is you” when I saw him, as though the child of the sun had at last met its lost half.

As I walk back to the conference the gods look on, their empty eyes judging me as I pass. Heroes struggle in their battles in eternity; some will become gods, others will be destroyed and oblivion will engulf them. I fear I know my destiny.

June 2008
Santa Maria dell’Anima

Chapter Summary

Oliver realises the pain when you are just a spectator in the life of someone you have deep feelings for.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading!
This is the chapter I wanted to write the minute I finished to book; it is the embryo of Per Aspera ad Astra. Reading of their meeting I thought that Oliver was being insensitive to Elio’s honest speech. If he was to remain a sympathetic character he needed to have his foot put into the other shoe.

The dinner was noisy and rowdy, nothing like a group of academics on the last night of a conference to bring mayhem to a restaurant. The wine flowed with conversations. I have not had the chance to talk to Elio, not that there could be much we can tell each other. He has been surrounded by people; he smiled when he saw me, he has complimented me on my paper eager to read the book when it comes out and he invited me to this dinner; I have been isolating myself from others, not like me. I watch him sitting at the end of the table; he has shaved his beard, as I have grown one, and looks younger, still beautiful, not a beautiful boy but a beautiful man, as an Apollo he shines. His parents named him well. Maynard sitting next to me is rambling on about Greek art. I wonder what he would say if he knew that I have the postcard of the berm hanging in my office wall? He was fifteen you pervert, not that I am less of a pervert; at least I still have feelings for the grown man and do not drone on about Epheboi.

Someone suggests a nightcap to conclude the evening. Elio agrees with enthusiasm, and suggests a place near Campo dei Fiori, right inside Pompey’s theatre. We all pile out of the trattoria and start walking along the alleys of Rome. I try to lose Maynard that is threatening to visit me at my university, and I agree just get away, asking him to let me know when, hoping that I can hide the postcard. As I walk I catch fragments of conversations, none that interest me. A couple of the women in the group throw very inviting looks at me; sorry not interested at the moment. Probably never will be.

Elio is ahead showing the way, and as we turn a corner I realise where we are. Via Santa Maria dell’Anima is like any other street, old buildings at either side and a cobbled road. For me it is a place where I dared to be myself for an instant. A public kiss, so intimate and hungry that desire had nothing to do with it. It was a statement to the world: I love this boy, I do not want to lose him, and I want to flaunt him so all can see what a precious treasure he is. I pushed him against the wall so he could not fly away as some dream as morning arrives; I kissed him deeply so he could feel my hunger and my will to fuse into one for eternity.

Of course, as morning did arrive, or in my case, daily life, I preferred to forget my declaration. Every time I visited Rome I avoided this street, taking long ways around; I remember Sarah holding a map and asking why were we going round in circles with the boys crying and holding onto her legs. Now Elio walks down this street still chatting. I thought he responded to that kiss with all his soul. “Stop it Oliver” I tell myself, “You do not know what he thought or what he is thinking now, you never
asked, you never told. You rescinded your right to Elio’s feelings long ago.”
A phone rings Elio stops to answer. As I pass I hear him “Hello Richard, yes it was a wonderful
evening, you know what would have made it perfect…” His smile and his deepening tone of voice
tell me all I need. He leans against a wall while talking, and his body relaxes, as though curving into
a lover.
As a searing feeling of jealousy rips through me; I hear a ghost Elio say: “The truth is I’m not sure I
can feel nothing. And if I am to meet your family, I would prefer not to feel anything.”
What did I do Elio, what did I do? I answered “So” in such an off manner, I dragged you to my
home using your happiness of being with me. I subjected you to the vision of my daily life where
there was no place for you. A world where you were a just a memory of something a long time ago,
a world filled with people for whom you were just the son of a much loved professor. The pain I
must have inflicted, if it was just half of the pain I am feeling now as a spectator watching you in
your world, it is unbearable. Unbearable that I put you through it in my thoughtless certainty that I
had done the right thing, took the right decision. And rightly, I was punished for it. My so called
perfect life unravelled from that moment onwards. And I have been blaming the presence of Elio in
my house; but he did not want to come, it was not his fault. I start to walk down Santa Maria
dell’Anima again, following the group, but my mind is a mess of sorrow. Elio has someone in his
life, he is not pining for me, he loves another man, I did not avoid for him difficulties by being self-
sacrificing as I have lied to myself; he chose the life he wanted to live, and I could have been part of
it if I was not a coward. “Forgive me Elio, forgive me for all the pain I have caused you, for being an
egotistical pig”. As I stop myself from shouting these words out loud the knot in my heart tightens
once more. I need to atone for this, and all the rest I have done, in some way, even if it kills me,
otherwise I will not be able to go on any longer.
June 2008
Where Caesar Died

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio talk about things in general...

Chapter Notes

Just behind Campo dei Fiori there was Pompeii’s theatre and a portico up to Largo Argentina; there is where Caesar was murdered on the Ides of March. A lot of bars and restaurants are in the foundations of these buildings.

As we arrive to the bar I cannot help thinking on how Richard knows the right moments to be present or to stay away discreetly. Walking down Santa Maria dell’Anima was not easy; but I could not avoid it, it was the only direct way to this bar and there were too many people that know the city so I could not invent a long way round. The beating heart under the cobbles was loud and clear, I was dreading to pass it, especially with Oliver walking behind me. I wonder if my anxiety carried itself to London, a voice that whispered in his ear “Call Elio, please call him and break the spell that is being cast upon him.” Like my knight in shining armour he acted.

As we all sit along a long wooden table I manage to place myself near Oliver, I am sorry that we have not had a chance to talk these last three days. He looks older, and it is not just the beard, which actually suits him giving him an air of rough manliness, I think he has also put on a bit of weight since the summer. I really want to ask him if everything is ok, but I am afraid of one of his brush offs. Since last summer I am not sure if we speak the same language.

“This is a great place Elio, is it one of your Roman haunts?” he asks while smiling. I remember my mother saying “There is an air of tragedy about him” and one of the few things she could recognise at the time was tragedy. The smile doesn’t reach his eyes, his blue and perfect eyes have lost something, and the lines etched around them are not laughter lines.

“One of my haunts, nothing reminds you of hubris as drinking close to where Caesar was murdered”

“Your drinking parties sound like loads of fun” This time his smile seems a little more real.

I wanted to reply something on the lines of loving Rome and how easy it is to be within the layers of its history, but I am afraid it is too close to the San Clemente syndrome. I just smile back and say “I am the soul of the party, you know me!” Do you know me? You knew me too well, but I am not that boy any longer. We grow, and new layers, stratigraphies, are added upon us as the years pass; and twenty years is a generation ago. I do not know the Oliver sitting next to me, but, God help me, I do so want to know him.

I look at his beard, and he touches it slightly self-consciously. “Just when I shave mine off you grow a beard!”

“I thought it would save time in the morning, but keeping it tidy takes up time!” I laughed at his rueful tone. “It suits you, you look like some Viking ruler; my beard looked like some adolescent trying to look older, now that I am older, I am trying to look younger!”

“Viking ruler, I like that. Pity they impounded my battle axe at the airport!”

“Battle axes and seminars sound like a deadly combination; I am glad it was impounded. Next you will order your drinks from a skull of a fallen enemy; please before you do it remember that I do like this place and would like to be able to return.”
He smiles, and then we are both fall silent looking at our drinks, both martinis, and I wonder if it is a coincidence. I am afraid that the silence will stretch into twenty years again, so I find the courage to ask what has been on my mind since I started to tidy my father’s study.

“Oliver, I know how much my father appreciated you; he thought you were an exceptional mind and able to extract facts from sources. While clearing the flat in Milan, I am selling it, I found so many work notes my father had left. Some are just ideas never elaborated on. Others are the bare bones of articles. They cover all aspects of the Classical world and I feel that it would be a pity to keep them away from view. I could give them to a university, but I would like them to be ordered and published if possible. I know I am being extremely cheeky asking, but would you be interested in doing this?” Oliver’s eyes widened, he turned away from me, and clutching the stem of the cocktail glass replied in a very quiet voice: “Are you sure Elio?”

I looked up at the barrel vaulted ceiling, was I sure of this? Was it a ploy to keep Oliver somehow tied to me now that the conference was finished and he was leaving the next day? No, I knew that the respect that both my father and Oliver had for each other was real and deep. I turned to look at the top of his head; he was looking down into his glass again. “Yes, I am sure. The logistics will be a bit complicated, but I can scan most of the manuscripts and email them to you. There are quite a few computer files that I haven’t started to explore, but those are easy to send over. There is no hurry, ten years have passed, and I do not think another ten will erase the memory of my father.”

“I might…” he stopped, took a sip of the Martini and thought something over, as though he had difficulty in expressing what he wanted to say, and shyly continued “I might… need to see the originals and check his books if his references are incomplete; is that a problem?”

“No, it would be a problem for you having to flying over, I suppose I can send some things over, the books would be a bit more troublesome. But now all is in the villa, and you know, you can come over when you want or can. I now live in Rome and go up only during holidays, but Mafalda still holds the fort; she is always happy to see the muvistar.”

See Oliver, it is not a trap, just pop along when I am not there; I will be in Rome or London, away from you, do not worry. I wonder if he read my thoughts, because he looks mortified. “It would seem strange to be in B without any of the family there.”

Welcome to my world Oliver. You deal with the ghosts at the villa while I am off to have hot sex with Richard. I feel mean thinking such a thing, and try to muster a genuine smile “Just let me know if and when you will need to come over and I will see what I can do. I do not want to cause any trouble, you are not obliged to accept; I understand it is a lot of work and you do have other commitments.”

“No, I would love to do it. Professor Perlman was such a great man, he helped me more than you can imagine; more than I deserved. I will be in Europe this summer; I could come over at the end of August; if you can let me have some of the work I can start and see if I need to be at B.”

That was a bit sooner than I had counted on, but somewhere in my heart a feeling of happiness was bubbling, I had found a way to communicate with Oliver without bringing up our past directly. I think I agreed with him a bit too enthusiastically because he looked a bit taken aback.

We ordered more Martinis.

June 2008
Oliver thinks over the last few days in Rome before he flies back to the USA.

Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake by the inquisition in Piazza Campo dei Fiori, where there is a statue to him.

I drank too much last night. I remember a group of us under the Giordano Bruno statue loudly discussing his Cosmic Pluralism. I tried to defend Plato, after all I am just publishing a book on him, but I was drunkenly beaten down, I think Elio was also in the group. At one point I vaguely remember that I declared that Copernicus and the Heliocentric theory, or as I put it, the Eliocentric, was the only way of life for me; but as I was being sick in a rubbish bin, thankfully nobody heard my sort of love declaration. The centre of Rome, Martinis and Elio are bad for my liver; I smiled at that thought. The airport of Fiumicino has changed in twenty years, I looked for the toilet where we kissed the last desperate kiss, but it had been obliterated. I think it was where there is a car rental stand now. Like the airport, we have changed. If you told me last year that I would be divorced, back in Rome and hungover after a night were I felt all emotions passing from dread, jealousy, shame, shyness and gratitude and ending up making a sort of drunken declaration of love, I would have thought it impossible. A year ago I was desperately hanging on to my respectable and expected life; while slowly sinking my family and myself into unhappiness. We can never bath in the same river.

Elio. He looked so small when giving his speech on his father, but at the same time he stood straight and his voice was clear and full of love. He has lost so much, but he seems to be in a better place than he was last summer. As though he has placed me where I belong: the past.

To hear his voice deepening while speaking to someone else, to see his body responding to a voice that is not mine has woken me from the coma; a place where I was happy to be because I selfishly thought he was there with me. I stalked him online when I had no news from him; surprised on some choices he made, keeping up with his CV and publications. I was relieved when there was no news on the grapevine of his marriage; of course there was no marriage, he is, as my mother would say with a note of disapproval, not of the marrying kind. And it has nothing to do with me, he is as he is and instead of hiding it in pitiful self-shame as I did, he has followed his heart.

I should have listened to what prof told me that night. He did not give any advice, even if he knew that the happiness of his only child was on the line, he just talked about the importance of special connections, how rare they were, and that they needed feeding to survive. That love could pass through many stages, could evolve, that it is friendship as well as physical, but one must be honest with one selves and the other. We have just one master copy of our lives.

I was young, I thought I had all the problems; I left it all on the shoulders of a very young man to make my decision and blotted the master copy. I was a coward, I did not explain; after the summer I was afraid to be open again, I thought all could go back to normal. I wonder what would I have done if Elio cried that night and begged me not to marry? I suppose I would have pretended to be “grown up” and lecture him on the responsibilities of adulthood. Pathetic.
This summer is a good time to start over again. I will be on holiday with the boys, they have agreed to go with me and I am looking forward to it.
Elio is in a relationship but he has given me a chance to stay in contact; he has entrusted to me the works of his beloved father. I am not going to mess it up, even if it kills me, I shall not hurt him again. I will accept his offer of friendship and concentrate of pro’s papers.
June 2008
A Harem Around the Pool

Chapter Summary

An August afternoon in the villa seen from Marzia’s point of view.

Chapter Notes

I made Marzia say what I was dying to say to Elio when reading the book…

As soon as Elio told me that Oliver would be visiting this summer I went ballistic. On the day the Americano arrived I picked up the girls and dragged them to the villa using as an excuse the need to get away from my in-laws staying at my own place. As we arrive to the villa the girls drop their bikes and run to the pool shouting their hellos like a summer storm. Richard is reading by the pool and Oliver sitting at the large table under the pergola with a pile of papers and books. Elio was serving drinks, making sure they were both comfortable; as though he was some sort of perfect 1950’s house-wife. As soon as he saw me he smiled “Marzia, what do and the girls want to drink?” Elena and Teresa rushed towards him shouting “Uncle Elio, ice-cream!”

“No ice-cream before swimming, behave, get into the pool the two of you and try not to drown. Elio, I need to have a word with you!”

Elio laughed “You heard the general! Will get you both a fruit juice, I will come in a minute Marzia” Richard and Oliver tried to greet me in the chaos, I smiled a radiant smile to Richard, nodded an acknowledgment to the Americano.

God, Richard is handsome, even the girls at their young age are intimidated by it; Oliver has aged well, still an exceptionally good looking man. Elio has always had good taste; Tiziano looked like some sort of demi-god. I should remind myself every Monday morning as I look in the mirror and battle with my hair that once Elio thought I was good enough to sleep with and be part of his harem; if that isn’t a confidence booster, I do not know what is.

As soon as Elio comes back with more drinks I grab him and drag him off to the other side of the house.

“What are you doing?” I try to keep my voice down so that the others cannot hear me, but the tone is harsh “Sabotaging another relationship? Trying to dismantle yourself? I am not going to pick up the pieces Elio, basta! I do not enable self-harm.”

He looks at me with such wide eyes; almost surprised by my vehemence “So you will not be Isis to my Osiris?” he tried to joke.

“Do not give me any of your mythological shit Elio, I am serious!” As soon as I said it, I was sorry, his expression was crestfallen. “Elio, I am sorry, I should not have said that, I am just…”

“Worried about me, I know. But please Marzia believe me, I am so happy having the villa full of people and voices, knowing I can eat in company. It is like when my father was still with us, I know he loved sharing the villa with others and I want to do the same.” Elio did look the happiest I had seen him in ten years. “But having the man that broke your heart here is not good, is it?” I asked.

“I feel a difference; it might be me, it might be him, but the past has run its course. After mother’s death there is nothing that ties me to it except memories, and as dearly I hold to them, they are just memories. The Oliver here now is not the Oliver I loved; he is a man that has had a life away from
me. I was holding on to his memory because I was in a dark place. The death of my father and mother’s illness hit me hard, and I was seeking a crumb of the past happiness, the last swipe in the bowl. Looking back is easy even if painful, looking towards the future less easy, but having Oliver back in my life and being able to communicate without raking up the past is helping.”

I could not give any reply to this, he seemed to believe it and that is all that matters.

As I went back to the pool I saw that the girls had latched onto Oliver asking him never ending questions; I almost felt sorry for him, but not enough to retrieve them. As I sat, or collapsed, into a deckchair Elio appeared and asked me what I wanted to drink. “A gin & tonic” my answer was automatic; Richard gave me a sympathetic smile and said “One of those days?” ”It is always one of those days between the girls, my in-laws and my parents!” And Elio I thought. I wonder what Richard senses, if he has noticed anything? There is nothing erotic in the air but there is a strange current, almost electric like when a summer storm is going to appear. The past was so real here, even I could sense the ghosts living in the villa, and I wonder where they have gone at the moment and when will they appear again. And if they do appear, who will they be?

Elio manages to convince the girls to get into the swimming pool with him, freeing Oliver; the look they exchange is a laughing exchange of exaggerated gratitude and mock acceptance; so innocent but miraculous considering their history. As Elio is in the pool pretending to be a Kraken, nothing as simple as being a shark for him, and the girls are arguing who is Beowulf, I realise I have not seen such a happy Elio for decades.

I realise that his fear of being alone and unloved has made his decisions in the past; holding onto affairs well past their sell by date until they spectacularly crash and burn; running away from confrontations and thinking back to when all was perfect; that perfect fortnight that nothing else can compare to.

The rest of the afternoon passes with chatter, laughter and drinks; I am part of Elio’s harem around the pool, a small price to pay to see him in a good place. Hope it lasts.

August 2008
Chapter Summary

Elio thinks over the few days Oliver was at the villa with mixed feelings.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the kudos and lovely comments!
The Seven sleepers of Ephesus is a legend about youths fleeing the persecution of Christians and they hide in a cave and sleep for three hundred years. When the wake they find a world without persecution and are brought to the bishop that tells them that Christianity is the only religion. They die immediately after. There is also an Islamic version of the legend and both versions have a dog that stood guard over them while asleep.

During the last week of August, Oliver came to B. He wrote to me while he was on holiday in Greece that he would be able to stop over for a few days before going back to the States and sent me a list of the books he was hoping to look at. I was surprised on how quickly he worked on my father’s papers. I wondered if he wanted to get it over with as soon as possible so not to have any more ties to me. But the tone of his emails did not betray such sentiments; just enthusiasm.

As the date of his arrival approached I was filled with dread, which Oliver would arrive, the one of last summer or the one in Rome a few months ago? But there was also a feeling of anticipation, in my heart I knew that any Oliver was better than no Oliver. I chided myself for this last thought, I needed to be better than this, having these thoughts would only bring me back to square one, and I had come a long way from the boy I was and the man I was last summer. I liked the present Elio and I wanted him to evolve freely towards new opportunities, remembering the past, all the past, but looking towards the future.

Oliver coincidently arrived when Richard was also staying with me, I would have never chosen such a ménage, but it also made me happy; it filled the villa with people that were important for me; Richard by the pool, Oliver in the study, I wanted this moment to be eternal. As soon as Marzia knew that Oliver was coming over she pretty much moved to my place with the girls. I got a telling off that my parents never gave me, and I had to admit she was right, but I felt happy that she cared so much for me; she could get angry again and again if it meant I could hear the concern in her voice. The Oliver that did arrive at the villa was a subdued Oliver, but there was much sweetness in him; he was entranced with Marzia’s daughters, playing with them. It reminded me of the way he was with Vimini. He also spent the evenings after dinner talking about what he discovered in my father’s papers with much enthusiasm, his eyes lighting up and I saw traces of “my” Oliver, or better the Oliver I thought was mine twenty years ago.

The afternoon of his arrival I felt like playing the piano, as I sat down I had the impulse to play Bach, but stopped myself; it did not feel right. So I started Chopin’s Variation on La ci darem la mano, losing myself in the complexity of the score. As I was finishing there were both Richard and Oliver in the room listening; overcome, I morphed Chopin into Mozart’s Rondo alla Turque. Richard started clapping “I really do not know why you never pursued a musical career, you are exceptional, the way you can move those listening to you!” I shrugged and said “I love music; it is where I can find
refuge and communicate my feelings. If it was a career it would stifle me and it would not be a pleasure. I play for myself and those that want to listen and it makes me happy. If I am unhappy the music I play is never quite right.” Oliver nodded as though I had just confirmed something he knew. I wonder if he was thinking of the past, and how that Christmas I never touched the piano or the guitar; even when my parents begged me for some music.

It was strange seeing Oliver go into my old bedroom, or his old bedroom, while I slept with Richard in another room. Only once I made love with Richard while Oliver was in the house; my senses were heightened, each inch of my skin wanted to be touched. I was afraid of making any noise, as though I was seventeen again and did not want my parents to hear. I felt insatiable, I wanted to melt in passion; to be exhausted the next morning and spend the day with my skin tingling, remembering all the kisses. But the guilt was overwhelming; I was not sure with who I had drowned in passion with; the man in my bed or the man in the other room.

Oliver disappeared the next day, taking an old bike and was away till dinner time. When he came back he looked spent, as though he had battled an unknown but vast army. I did not dare to ask where he had been, I was afraid of the answer.

Dinner that evening was apparently normal, the usual conversations, but I felt the gaze of Richard on me while Oliver was talking about Plato’s cave. It dawned on me, I was in a new world that I never expected, having Oliver at my table, the same and so different Oliver; I could die now and it would be worth it, like the sleepers of Ephesus, wake up after centuries in a world of peace that is different as well as the same of that when you fell asleep, and die happy knowing persecution and pain has ended.

The next morning Oliver left, and this time his leaving did not diminish me, I knew that I would hear from his soon. He would need more scans of documents, he would ask for some footnotes or the edition date of a book in my father’s study.

And that was enough for me, it was not a crumb begged in desperation, it was a connection that two adults had made based on the past but not forced by the past; I liked this adult Oliver in my life; he has subdued some of the ghosts of his younger self that haunted the villa. Our connection was not an illusion even if we avoided talking about ourselves, but we always had avoided many subjects, an embryo of friendship is evolving. Or that is what I told myself hoping that if I repeated it often enough it would be true.

As fall starts to cover everything once more in gold I know I need to make another step towards the man I need to be, the master of my ship. Not afraid of being alone, not making do with it, but being honest with myself and take arms to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

September 2008
I am Better than This

Chapter Summary

Oliver’s point of view on the five days at the villa.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your comments and kudos!
I have Oliver where I wanted him and how I wanted him. It took some time, but now he is ready to face anything the future throws at him. He always was better than the way he chose to live.
In the Jewish religion asking for forgiveness to those you hurt is teshuvah. If you are the victim you have to forgive if the person is really repentant, but you can give a generic mechilah recognising the offender is sorry. There is also the selichah, which is forgiveness from the heart, understanding the sinner.

Summer started with a long tour of Greece with the boys. I was slowly mending my relationship with them and I knew that showing them things I loved was a way of being myself without putting up facades.
Alex loved seeing the scenery where the myths I told them as children took place. Julian was interested in the tales of homosexuality, a bit less when he realised that marriage and children were the end game. I think he was surprised on how genuine my commiseration was. As soon as I waved them off at the airport, I had my one battle to face. The villa at B and Elio. But I wanted to go, I needed to go.
I did not expect Richard to be there; being faced with such a good looking man ten years younger put me back into the place I deserved to be: the past. I could only think that Elio had very good taste and that I should be honoured that he thought me attractive once.
But his presence made things much easier, I could work on Professor Perlman’s papers without too much distraction. Marzia was often around with her two small daughters. While she was hostile towards me, a hostility borne of knowing too much of my past behaviour, her daughters took to me; but I am good with small children, I manage to be totally at my ease and enjoy seeing their young minds discovering and commenting on new things; also, they do not use adult meters of judgment so I can be as close as possible to my true self.
And Elio was Elio, fretting around trying to make sure everyone was at ease and getting nervous if he felt he was lacking in hospitality in any way. It was strange to see in fragments of the boy he was in the adult in front of me.
I had no wish to talk of the past between us because I did not want to ruin my stay, hurt him and, I realised, I just wanted to enjoy watching the man he had become; the way he moved, talked and expressed himself, the expressions that would travel across his face in quick succession as he was doing things entranced me. He always had an expressive face, but the years had added new feelings to the range.
I was only a five day stay, but I could have stayed there forever; the villa has that effect on me, time stops, yesterday was a thousand years ago, twenty years ago was yesterday and tomorrow is now.
Only one occasion past and present mixed. I was resigned to be in my old room knowing the
balcony was closed, but knowing that Elio was sleeping in a different room with someone else was another matter. I tried to fall asleep early, but one night I woke up; I had been dreaming that the balcony door was opened by Elio, a seventeen year old Elio naked in all his glory standing there in front of me illuminated by a full moon, I sat up as he approached me, and suddenly he was adult Elio, an unknown territory, sitting on my bed. He leaned over to kiss me, a deep kiss, and as I embraced him I woke up. I heard noises from another room, subdued moans and gasps and realised that I had an erection. The relief that I still had a sexual desire was reduced by knowledge of what did arouse me. I did not want to eavesdrop on what was going on in the other room, but could not go back to sleep. I looked at the wall and saw where the postcard of the berm used to be. There was no light patch on the wallpaper any longer, but rubbing my hand on the wall I felt that the nail had been left; a lone and empty memorial of the past.

The next day I found a bike in the garage and rode to the berm; I sat down under a pine and looked out to the town and the sea below while crying. I have cried more in the past year than in the rest of my life. I suppose they are the tears kept in for twenty years. I cried especially for all those I hurt; but I also cried for myself, for the hurt I had caused to myself by the arrogance I had in thinking I had all the answers. As my tears fall I could sense the knot in my heart slightly loosen. “I am better than this, I am better than what I was. “ I said it aloud, I almost shouted it as though hearing it and not just thinking it would make it true. I needed to be the man I wanted to be, aspired to be, not the one that I was expected to be. Little by little I was getting there, and it was difficult, I had to learn to be open and be good with words; words had power and I had used that power to keep myself safe. I needed to use the power to heal all the hurt I had caused or at least ask for forgiveness. I did not care how long it would take me, twenty, forty years, it did not matter. Even if it took me up to my death bed, I needed to do it. My teshuvah had just started.

When I got back to the villa Elio did not ask me where I had been, but there was concern in his expression; he sensed something and was worried for me. I smiled and went to his father’s ghost spot; I ignored the memories of summer breakfasts and silently asked him and Annella to forgive me, for being weak when they were strong and loving.

Dinner that evening was a strange affair. It was my last evening, August was ending and there was a cool breeze as we ate outside. The atmosphere was charged, it was not unpleasant, it was just unsettling, as though all three of us at the table were speaking different languages. Elio asked about my work on Plato’s Cave; I tried not to be too detailed not knowing how much Richard knew about the subject. We then discussed how the human mind was influenced by the senses, even if they are lying to you. Elio was silent for a bit and then said: “I would prefer to be one of the seven sleepers of Ephesus if I had to be imprisoned in a cave!”

“I suppose it is better to wake free in a world without persecution but then die immediately than be freed in a world you do not understand and it frightens you so want to return to be a slave again.” As I said this I realised that Elio had a valid point, it is better to be free even for a short while than go back to slavery.

Richard smiled “Elio, you are a heavy sleeper, but three-hundred years is a bit much even for you!” We all laughed, and as we were debating the type of dog that was in the cave guarding the sleepers, I realised how much I missed this type of informal but intelligent conversation over a meal. And how much Elio had changed; the teen ager who talked fast afraid of being ignored was now the man that talked fast, but was not afraid of changing topics or leading discussions.

As I left the villa the next morning I was filled with sadness but not desperation. I almost whispered “Oliver” as I closed the cab door; but I bit my tongue in time.

September 2007
Chapter Summary

Mafalda knew!

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your comments!
This chapter just started writing itself, as though Mafalda said: “Excuse me, and when am I going to have my say?”
So here she is! And of course, Mafalda knew!
Scalinatella longa is a Neapolitan song, this time the girl lives and has run off with a foreigner while he is desperate and is probably going to throw himself into the sea.
Next chapter is causing me so many problems...

“I am going to check the olives, we will need to collect them soon” I nodded as Manfredi left the room.
Another summer has ended, and without the signora, the signorino will not be back till Christmas, if he feels like coming back to this big empty house.
Manfredi avoids passing the place where the ashes of both the professor and the signora are buried; he thinks it weird burying your family away from consecrated ground and in your house. I like sitting there and talking to both of them when it is quiet. I mainly tell them of what Elio gets up to, or actually, complain about what Elio does.
I saw him grow, and he was such a curious but lonely child; he would go into the kitchen and ask me all types of questions. He liked hear me sing, and would want “Fenesta ca lucive” to lull him to sleep on hot afternoons. At first, when I had just arrived north with Manfredi I was so homesick. I missed the small streets full of people, the noise and chaos of a large city as Naples is and hearing my dialect spoken; this small town that emptied as soon as summer ended seemed so sad. “It is a job Mafalda, and when we have saved enough we can go home again.”
He still dreams of going home again, but now here is my home.
Singing the songs of my city to the lonely child of the padroni made things a little bit easier.
Watching him grow during the succession of years has created mixed feelings; he was such a restless adolescent. I was shocked when I realised he was sleeping with the movie star; it is a sin I thought. I could not bear thinking about it or telling anyone; it was too serious to gossip about. But he looked so happy, and I did not have the courage to judge him; I have my sins as well, and the Lord will judge us all. Manfredi tells me there is no God, but he is an old Communist, and knows no better.
And then there were more men brought to the house during the years; it seemed strange to call them boyfriends, but they were handsome and nice, like the present one, Riccardo. But I still remember that summer and how happy he was, he seemed so alive. I have never seen him the same, and it is not only because he grew; there was a light of wonder in his eyes that he never had again.
The years have not spared this house sorrows, but I think it is not a punishment, but just a test. I remember in Confirmation classes such a story; the Lord tests you because he loves you. It seems a strange thing to do, but I am just an ignorant sinner. This summer hearing the voices of guests was a blessing; it meant more work and I am getting old, but it was nice even if it was for a few days.
Oliver back as well as signorina Marzia’s daughters. I hope only that there will be no more sorrows; my old heart cannot stand seeing the signorino suffer. I never thought he was my son, I know well he was the loved son of the professor and signora, but he filled an empty corner of my heart; the Lord gave me some consolation for my childless fate.

As a child he hated the song Scalnatella longa; “she is leaving him for someone else!”

“But signorino, Fenesta is about her dying!”

“It is better to die than be unfaithful!” He looked so serious I stopped myself from laughing. Life is a scalnatella longa e strettulélla, a long and narrow staircase; it is tiring and sometimes you need to stop along the way to rest, especially as you get older and lonelier, but you have to continue climbing till the top.

I finish putting away all the washed beach towels and as I close the large wardrobe door I hope that next summer there will be many voices and laughter again. Even for just a week or a day. And to hear the signorino’s laughter, it has never changed since he was a small child, but I had forgotten the sound of it.

September 2008
Last night we made love in such a tender way, I wanted to cherish him as the special person he is. As dawn broke I was awake looking at him sleeping, not wanting to hurry the moment that was coming; I just listened to the rain. I do remember London without rain, but every time I visit him it seems to rain.

“Elio?” he is awake and is looking at me with such sorrow; he knows what is coming. He knows me too well in such a short time. I think he knew me the moment we met; but Richard shows his cards, he doesn’t keep them close.

I nod in agreement with whatever he is implying.

“Why?” His question is rational, but he is not dealing with a rational man.

“Richard, I love you, but I am not in love with you, and it is not semantics. You are so perfect that I could indulge staying with you for a lifetime, but it would not be fair on you. There will come the day you resent me for it, and I could not bear your resentment. Hate yes, but not resentment.”

“Shouldn’t it by my decision if it is fair on me or not?” He wasn’t going to make it easy, and he had all the right to do so.

I thought I knew what I was going to say, but then I realised it would not be all the truth, and I needed to be truthful because he deserved it. The problem, I was not sure what the truth was.

“You are right, it regards you, but your decision is only relevant being happy with a partial love and a one sided relationship. My decision is wanting you to be free to find someone that will give you all you want and deserve. When I was young someone took the decision for me and broke me, but he never explained why he did what he did, and that is the difference.”

We look at each other with quiet desperation; sounds of daily life start to rumble into the room; life goes on outside while a personal drama takes place inside.

“Once I did not like being alone, but I could live with it. Then I discovered what love was and since then, for twenty years, I dreaded being alone. That made me a very egoistical person and I know I hurt quite a few people that did not deserve it. I do not want to hurt you as well. I do not know if I can still be alone, but I need to be honest with myself and those I love.”

“So last night you stored me in your memories while having the best sex we ever had? I suppose desperate sex is always good.” He looked towards the door avoiding my gaze “Is it about Oliver?” His tone was deliberately neutral and seeking confirmation of a hunch. God, he knows me!

“Yes and no.” I collect my thoughts, since I really do not know the answer. “Oliver was the man that I fell totally and desperately in love with during summer twenty years ago, the man that went off and got married leaving me distraught. As you can imagine, he is an artificial and impossible comparison to use with relationships since he was a first love that ended brutally a lifetime ago. But the present Oliver is another person, he has his life and family in the USA and by chance we are in contact again. The past is a different country, and I have no intention of travelling to it even if I could do so."

Lies, it is not chance, is it? You seeked him, he visited, and you proposed the work on father’s papers. We have been dancing round each other for six years. But present Oliver is not past Oliver; that at least is true. I am not sure what he is, and if he is still relevant.
“But one thing I learnt that summer is that complete and perfect intimacy can exist; I have been searching for it ever since, but I could never find it again because I was unable to open myself to the others; afraid of not being good enough or too needy. You are the person I have come closer to being vulnerable open to, but not enough. It is my fault.”
I felt like crying, running away, hugging him, dying.
It would have been so easy just to disappear, like with Tiziano; but not just, and I need to be truthful. I have run from my feelings for twenty years, I need to stand my ground.
“I am sorry Elio; I never make things easy for myself and others. You are right in many things; we met a year ago and have only seen each other for a total of eight weeks adding holidays and weekends. Attraction and passion was immediate, but the more I got to know you the more I like you and started to love you. But…” He was choosing his words very carefully.
“But there is a closed door that I could not open. I am actually frightened to open it; I feel that if it is opened it cannot be ever closed. And that I might not like what is there. That it would swallow me and destroy me. I suppose I am being silly.”
No, you are not; there is a void and a need behind that small door Richard. You saw it and rightly left it closed. Oliver opened it and showed me what total intimacy was. Physical and mental; we reached the stars and played with them. I felt that not to be lonely I needed everything from others so that I could give everything. Quite rightly, very few are willing to do so. And the only one who did left me.
“No, you are not silly, never were, never will be. That door exists opens a black hole that frightens even me. You are a perceptive man, and that is what makes you irresistibly attractive.”
“Evidently not attractive enough.” His smile was slightly bitter, but I could see that he was starting to react as he usually does: Humour to change the bad into experience. I suppose soon I would be the mad and damaged Italo-American academic he had dated.
I took the liberty of hugging him; he did not escape the embrace, but was still and did not reciprocate.
“You are almost too irresistible. Goodbye my lovely Richard, I am sorry not to be the man you deserve.”
As I got up and dressed Richard just sat on the edge of the bed in silence. I turned to him, ready to leave, close the door and walk away. I was keeping my tears back, but I could not cry in front of the man I was leaving; he was the only one that had the right to cry if he wanted to.
“Can I have a kiss before you go?” His tone was mournful.
I kissed his forehead lightly, as though he was a statue of a saint and I was thanking him for a miracle he had granted me. He hugged me quickly and whispered “Goodbye treasure, goodbye.”

October 2008

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your comments! Much appreciated.
This has been the most difficult chapter I have ever written; there are a million drafts. I needed to get into the mind of Richard and Elio, make it believable that Elio would leave him, make Richard human and not a cardboard saint; I am still not sure it has worked.
Chapter Summary

Oliver and Sarah really talk for the first time ever.

Chapter Notes

Sarah is a saint! She is not only a better person than I am, but also quite unbelievable, unless she has had been having an affair with Julian’s football coach for the last few years. I shall think that is the reason and good for her! Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way is Tolstoy, Anna Karenina. As an angst fan, how could I not have an Anna Karenina shout out. No trains in my story though.

Next chapter is where it all began, at the villa in Elio’s old bedroom…

When I arrived at the café she was already sitting at a table; I felt guilty for making her wait, even though I was early. I wondered if she had wanted some time for herself, if she was unwilling but for a sense of duty she had come. She had, of course, cut her hair and looked younger, as the girl I met twenty odd years ago. The girl that was full of optimism and vitality that I could not help being dragged along with; I must have stifled it since there was little trace of it at the end of our marriage. As she saw me she stood up “Oliver!” my name in a neutral tone.

“Hi Sarah, I am glad you could come.” We sat down and I ordered a large coffee, even though a whisky on the rocks is what I needed.

The silence between us was not hostile but guarded; I had hurt her and she had the right to be wary.

“The excuse I used to meet was to talk about the boys, and I do want to talk about them with you, but in reality I want to apologise to you for hurting you, for not being there for you, for not loving you as you deserved, for having been a lousy husband. You deserved so much more, you deserve so much more. I cannot undo twenty years, but I want you to believe me that I love you as a woman and as the mother of my sons, just…”

I did not know how to continue, Sarah looked at me with such tenderness.

“Just you could not love me as a wife and as a lover. When you proposed, I was so happy; you were the most beautiful man I had ever met, since that dawn meeting I was obsessed with you. When you went to Italy that summer I was sure it would be the end, but you came back, and then, after Christmas, you proposed. I accepted without thinking why did you propose? The first years of our marriage were wonderful; you were a perfect father and husband. And I could not have asked for more; being loved and living the life I had always wanted. Then something happened, a shadow fell over you and I thought it was some problem at work, and tried to be what I thought you needed, throwing myself in being the perfect wife. But things got only worse, you spent more time at work, you closed yourself to me and, worse of all, to the boys.”

I felt a wave of shame hit me as I listened to her, I could not raise my head, so, looking at my hands
clutching the untouched cup of coffee that was getting cold, I muttered “I am sorry, so sorry…” and my voice was breaking.

“Oliver, please, I am not accusing you, not now at least. You must have been so unhappy, and I was unhappy, but we just could not talk, could we? We just continued our daily lives, both trying to do the right thing, but failing miserably. I was hoping the young man I fell in love with would magically re-appear. What were you hoping for?”

Not to wake from the coma, but as truthful I wanted to be, I could not quite tell her this. “I did not know what I was hoping for. I feel, felt, that there was no hope for me ever. I was torn between daily gestures and wanting to curl up and sleep. When I took the antidepressants it dulled some of the pain but also dulled everything else. I wondered if pain was the better option than not feel anything.”

This is the first time in over twenty years that I am really talking to her. The woman that I married and divorced, the woman I deliberately choose over Elio, the mother of my children; I floated along life with her and never told her what I felt, only what I thought she wanted to hear, till I could not tell her anything.

She is now looking at her hands thoughtfully.

“What a mess we have made of our lives; thank goodness there are the boys, otherwise we would not have much to look back upon, would we?”

“All the mess was mine Sarah, you do not have anything to regret except marrying me” I sounded like some wounded beast.

“No Oliver, I did not want to hear what was wrong with you. I was afraid of the answers. I just hoped that by ignoring it would go away. Then you did not desire me any longer. We used to laugh as we made love; parenthood changed it, but it was still good. Then slowly, year by year, it seemed it was starting to be a duty on your behalf before it stopped. Feeling I was not attractive any longer made me so jealous. I paid an investigator but you were not having any affair; I still did not want to really talk about us. I started doing things to try to get a reaction from you, like getting close to your parents; I know how difficult your relationship was with them. I thought you would get angry somehow; you never did. It is also my fault playing the part of the perfect wife while not being one.”

Sarah, how much pain have I caused. I took her hand and squeezed it. She did not retract it.

“I hope that we can both have what we hope for. Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. We have the chance to be happy Oliver, not the two of us, but each in our own way. I give you my selichah, I hope you can do the same for me.” and I saw her real smile again, after so many years. I nod “I give it, even if you have not offended me in any way, my Sarah.” As I watched her leave the café I felt the knot around my heart slightly loosen. Just one more apology to go. The most difficult of them all; back to where it all started.

October 2008
Chapter Summary

Oliver breaks the truce and talks of the past to Elio.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos!
Alpha and Omega, I am the beginning and the end; Book of Revelations. We are nearly at the end, what will Elio do?

Elio’s reply took a few days; I had emailed him immediately after my conversation with Sarah, hoping I would not lose the courage I needed.
“I would like to be in B over Christmas, so just let me know when I can come without causing any problems. I really did not want to inconvenience you so much when I started the work on your father’s papers.”
I had already booked the tickets. I would probably have gone even if he had written that he could not be there, that he did not want me back there at Christmas ever. I know that if the roles were reversed, that is what I would have written. Hopefully by the New Year I could start seeing myself in the mirror and have paid all my debts.

The villa in winter has such a mournful air, as though it is waiting for the sun and life to be the backdrop for it to shine. Elio is waiting for the cab, me; he is so handsome I can barely look at him, the man who was the boy I loved. A man that I need to apologise to before I collect fragments of my life and haphazardly put them together.

“Oliver, where is your beard?” are the first words he uses to greet me, as though he was expecting someone else. “Even Viking kings need to look respectable sometimes. It can grow back, but not in the summer, I had a very light area around my chin when I shaved. Too much sun!”
Elio nodded, and looked at the sun spots on my hand. I had taken pride in how I looked, in the last few years that pride had gone together with many other things. I was trying to take it back, start running again, thinking of the clothes I wore, shave the beard. Mafalda and Manfredi came to greet me, their happiness in seeing me always was welcome; makes feel less like an intruder.

Elio took me up to my room, as a ritual that needed to be followed every time; “I shall let you unpack.” And he turned to go, down the stairs, away from me. “Please, can you stay a moment? I need to speak to you.” I wasn’t sure I had said it aloud, but Elio stopped, and gave me a troubled look. I did not want to hurt him ever again, but I needed to talk, needed to say sorry, rake up the past. I did not want to unpack in case I had to leave the villa, this time forever.

“I need to talk about the past, what happened here twenty years ago; I know both of us would prefer it never happened, but it did, and it was my fault.” I was sitting on the edge of the bed; he was standing not quite in front of me, as though he needed to be closer to the door as to bolt at any minute. It reminded me of our first time, both aware of being on the edge of something that could be
so splendid it was terrible and both unwilling to start. Like the pitiful slaves unchained let out of the
cave in a world they could not ever comprehend.

“I wanted just to say I am sorry for being a coward, for never explaining and acting as though it hurt
me as much as it had hurt you. I am sorry for telling you that you have not forgiven me, while I never
asked for forgiveness.” He was looking at me, straight into my soul, his eyes did not have any
expression, and I wondered if he was thinking back at that Christmas or the time we met at my
university.

“Over the years I have created so many reasons for my behaviour. The first and most obvious one
was that you were so young, so I was sacrificing myself for your future, away from the difficulties a
same sex relationship would bring. Marrying Sarah was the excuse of wanting to be a father, my
love of children is obvious, but I ended up being a crappy father, not quite as bad as my own, but
nonetheless not a great father. I then invented that I was a victim of fate, cursed to follow into a life
expected, the “coma”, and the parallel life. But we do have free will, and I chose not to use it. In the
end it was Sarah that took the decision to divorce, I could not do even that.”

“Divorce?”
Elio was still standing, I was not sure he was even breathing except for the gasped question. Was I
hurting him once more? Was all this truth I was chasing another way to hurt the man that least
deserved it?

“In reality I was a pathetic man, afraid of the perfection of what I had, because it stripped me of all
my masks; I was totally naked with you, I had bared myself to the soul, and it terrified me. I was not
sure I could live the rest of my life in such a manner under the gaze of society’s judgement. Once
back in New York it was so easy to put back the masks and behave as was expected for me. Italy
seemed a dream and I was afraid that I could never go back and be the same even if it was the thing I
desired the most. And in my cowardice, I told you I was thinking of getting married without any
explanation; hoping you would take the decision for me, any way you would react would give me an
alibi. I was, I am, a coward. Hopping you would react the way you did, not really understanding what
was happening so I could pretend you were too young to tie myself with forever; giving me a free
pass to play the martyr for the next twenty years.”

“I always thought I should have pushed you down that night, I spent years thinking that; I suppose I
was right, I should have done so.” The pain in his voice was so raw that I thought I would die.

“No, I was a pathetic man, and any reaction you would have had would have been wrong; because I
was wrong. I hurt you and I hurt Sarah. What sort of decent person would have reduced someone to
wonder for twenty years if he had acted differently?”

I could hear the wind outside rustling the trees, a clock ticking somewhere in the house and Mafalda
talking on the phone; but I could not hear Elio breath, he was still while the world was turning
around him.

“I am sorry to have talked of the past when we have been avoiding it; I suppose this is the last act of
egoism on my part, asking for forgiveness, making it about me while hurting you again. I worked
hard on your father’s papers so that a first part is now complete. I will leave you the work. If
anybody else starts working on it there are no gaps. I knew that I would break the truce, but I wanted
to be honest with you, you deserved to know what a small pathetic man I am”. I placed on the bed
the books I took last summer and a memory stick. I stood up and picked up my bags and turned to
say good-bye to the fragment of my soul that for years I had unsuccessfully tried to rip away and
discard.

“Don’t go. Don’t’ go away like this.” The voice was so low I thought it was my imagination
speaking, Elio’s stillness frightened me, “I need to bury some ghosts, so if you are truthful about wanting my forgiveness, stay here a few days. I am not immune of guilt; I indulged in self-pity, especially when things were difficult. We both have a lot to forgive ourselves for. I think we both need time. Dinner is at eight.” And he left, leaving me standing in the room where all had started and finished.

As I unpacked my bag I heard Bach being played on the piano downstairs; the tone was heavy and sombre. I knew that I was not being let off easily; but neither was I being cast away into the storm.

December 2008
The End of the Beginning

Chapter Summary

“Oliver I have spent twenty odd years remembering that summer, but I am tired now.”

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading this far. One chapter to go.
A Squonk is a mythical animal that melts into tears when cornered. What would I do without Wikipedia…

I was playing Bach as Bach would have played it if he had a piano, but I played the piano just to do something and the music reflected this. I kept thinking of the phrase “I should have pushed you down”. Down onto the bed, under my body, pushed him into my life. But would he have the same haunted expression today? Our lives would have been different, but would they have been better? Father and mother would have still died and I would have never met Jamie; would I have started been afraid of loneliness and never learned to cope with it? Would we be still together or would we have left each other in such bitterness that all the good memories were erased and the pain be engulfed with anger. I could not answer any of these thoughts, life was unpredictable. I was starting to like the Elio I was, it had taken time, but I felt that I had at last grown up; the Oliver upstairs was an unknown entity, but in the rawness I witnessed there was something of the young man I thought I knew. And he could still undo me, but I was determined not to run away; as with Richard, I was done with avoiding difficult situations that needed honesty.

Dinner was a strained affair; we both were walking on a field we knew was mined, but there was no other way to cross to the other side. Even mentioning father and his work could bring up so many memories. Sitting at the table he decided to talk about the end of his marriage and how he was trying to mend his relationship with his sons. I was touched with his honesty and sad about the suffering they all felt. I had thought for years he was living a happy parallel life, sometimes I was happy for him, other times I felt anger and resentment; we never know the daily hell others carry on their shoulders being obsessed with our own. I felt ashamed for the times I had hoped he was alone waiting for me; his pain hurt me.

Oliver looked downcast, and I wanted to tear down the new barriers that we were unconsciously erecting around ourselves after the old ones had crumbled. The past was the past and we both needed to remember that.

“I suppose we can go for a walk tomorrow.”

Oliver looked up and thought over my words. “What is there to do here?”

“Nothing much, we wait for the summer. But we can go and see the train tracks and the gypsies living in the abandoned train carriages with the Savoy coat of arms. Except the gypsies now live in warmer camper vans and the carriages have been taken to the transport museum and are restored to their former glory.”
“Time changes everything; you cannot bath in the same river twice.”

“I think that nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed. The gypsies families live in better conditions and the carriages are safe and visible to all. Sometimes we think it is the end of everything, but if it was only the end of the beginning?”

Oliver’s expressions were a sequence, as though he could not keep up with what was going through his mind, I had never seen him so unguarded.

“But the end of the beginning is the beginning of the end.” He sounded so mournful I had to restrain myself from hugging him but I leant over and clutched his hand; he was so surprised his body shot back against the chair but his hand stayed in mine. Of course, we had not really touched since that Christmas, warm hugs or embarrassed handshakes were how we greeted each other, and even the last kiss was a full stop to a summer of kisses given and desired.

“The human race has been obsessed with the end; created religions, tried to seize the day, invented methods to count hours and years. We live in fear of the end; that is inevitable. But in the time we have been given we need to do our best. I think of Vimini, her life was cut short but she still manages to live on in the memory of all that knew her thanks to her strong personality.” Oliver’s hand trembled under mine.

“As I told you, she wrote to me every day; but when I got back from my travels, I knew the letter that was waiting for me would be the last ever. She must have known, and, for the first time she wrote about you. She never did before, as though she knew it was a door that I had closed to the outside world. “I always told Elio that you liked him more than he liked you. But I fear I was wrong Oliver, and I am sorry if my words hurt either of you.” She was dying and she was sorry for both of us, sorry that I could not be honest.” A sob wrenched him and I squeezed his hand tighter in fear he would just dissolve in front of me into a pool of tears like a squonk.

“She loved you so much, her thoughts would naturally go towards you, even at the end, it did not matter what you did. And she was just worried about us both.” His hand relaxed under mine, but he still looked down at his plate. His hand was cold and I so wanted to warm it.

“The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. So did we. When I look back at myself at seventeen I see the bud of what I am, but it was the bud; I was a in a state of mutation. I forgot that you were young as well, the stupid things I did at twenty-four you would not believe. We had something wonderful, we had the stars, but it was dazzling, too much. As the slaves in the cave we could not deal with it. We did not have the means, we were both in different stages of life, had different fears and a different upbringings. Oliver I have spent twenty odd years remembering that summer, but I am tired now.”

He nodded and tried to remove his hand from mine, but I gripped it.

“I am tired of being eternally seventeen and wondering what my life would have been. I am thirty-eight and I wonder what my life is going to be like.” The dining room seemed so vast, the fire crackling in the fireplace was the only sound and threw strange patterned shadows across the two of us; I felt we were the only two people in the universe. I looked at our hands on the table, my tendons visible in the effort to hold his still. They seemed removed from our bodies.

“I am the sum of the years, as you are. We are not the same people we were that summer, we will not be the same in twenty years’ time, but…” I needed to choose my words carefully, so much depended on them “But I want to learn about the present Oliver and hope to know the future Oliver, even if it takes another twenty years. I am ready to take all the time it needs, I do not have the impatience of an adolescent.”

I could feel Oliver’s hand move and as I slightly lessened my grip, he turned it palm up and laced his
fingers into mine. As I rubbed my thumb on the back of his sun spotted hand I felt that I had finally arrived home.

The look that Oliver gave me was that of someone seeing a loved one after years being in exile, “I will be there all the time it is needed. The present Elio is as precious as the past Elio. I fear that the future Elio will be so dazzling I shall burn as Semele. It is worth the wait.”
I laughed “My dazzling days are so long gone, if they ever existed!” I raised his hand to my lips and slightly brushed his knuckles, he blushed. “We have all the time in the world!” I said in wonder. “Yes, till the end of the end.”

December 2008
A Riveder le Stelle

Chapter Summary

And after angst and pain, the stars are visible again.

Chapter Notes

And here it ends.
Thank you all for the kind words and kudos.
I have a few short scenes written as a continuation, nothing much, but just to see what
Richard, Oliver's sons, Elena and Teresa get up to. And of course there is angst, there is
always angst.
A riveder le stelle is the end of Dante's Hell; at last we see the stars again.

“So, with this the lesson ends. I will be back after Easter; I have left notes in the library where you
can photocopy them. Have a good holiday!” I grabbed my bag and the trolley handle and dashed
from the desk towards the classroom door. “Professor Perlman, about my thesis…”, without turning I
replied “Email me anything!” I was not going to stop, was it faster to walk to Termini station and get
the train to the airport or a taxi; or a taxi to Fiumicino?

Finally on the plane I could relax, the feeling of excitement was making me nauseous. I was going to
see Oliver again; I was going to be in Oliver territory as an invited guest. He stayed at the villa only
till after Boxing Day, went back just before New Year, but those few days he was at the villa had
been the happiest for a long time. We read, talked, took long walks, we only kissed once, just before
he left, as a token of return. We were taking all the time in the world to discover what we had
become and realise that part of our souls still lived in each-other. That summer was not an illusion,
but I had always known that, and so had he.

Months of emails, phone calls and video calls just could not fill the void in me, as a child trying to fill
a hole in the sand with sea water.

He was waiting for me at the arrivals, so beautiful and tall, a Norse god even without the beard, he
looked as nervous as I felt and that reassured me. I threw myself into him still not believing that he
was there for me and it was not a contrived chance meeting. I had not forgotten his taste or his scent;
the memory had been hidden away so not to drive me mad and now resurfaced in all its glory. I
could feel the bowl of happiness filling again and inviting me to partake from it with full hands, I
could be greedy, no need for little drops taken with guilt, afraid it would empty. Looking up at him I
could read the same feelings in his expression; it was not a one way conversation, the meeting of the
parallel lines was not an illusion of the horizon.

“Elio, I have missed you so” and he took my face in his hands and kissed me; not with the intensity
and desperation of Santa Maria dell’Anima, but with intent. He was declaring to the airport and the
entire world how much he loved me. There were no words I could use to reply, so I just kissed him
back with gratitude and love.
In the car we were in silence, occasionally catching each other’s eye in the rear mirror and smiling. I felt seventeen again with all the excitement but without the doubts and fears; that is one of the advantages of ageing.

His flat was light and sparsely furnished, as though it was a parenthesis in his life, even if he had been living there over a year, full bookshelves were everywhere and on the only free wall there were some framed photographs of his sons I suppose, very handsome. There were also the postcards of the berm and the bearded Mithras follower. What surprised me was the photo taken by Luca during Christmas Eve dinner at Marzia’s house; I did not know that she sent it to him. Elena and Teresa were both sitting on Oliver’s lap fighting over him while I was being crushed by Marzia giving me the biggest hug she has ever given me. Both Oliver and I look dazed by so much love around us. “When Marzia emailed me the photo I just could not resist printing and framing it. It makes me smile when I miss you; your expression is priceless!”

“Yours is no better!” I wonder if his sons commented on it.

“I’ll show you the room, I shall be in the boys room, I could not give you the bunk bed”; his tone of voice was like the night of our first time, it was his “Are you sure? Do you want me to stop?” not wanting to pressure me into anything.

As Oliver was in the kitchen preparing dinner I feel very sleepy, lying on the couch I wonder on how much has happened in such a short time. If it is a dream I hope I just slip into death without waking up. “Elio, don’t fall asleep, open the bottle of wine instead!”

“Are you trying to get me drunk so you can have your wicked way with me?”

“I would prefer you sober, but everything is fair in love and war” and laughing he reaches towards me and starts tickling me. I entwine my legs around his waist and the laughter changes into desire. Desire repressed for twenty odd years; desire that only dared appear in dreams in the middle of the night, when it could be forgotten in the morning, leaving behind a sickness and longing.

As we made our way to the bedroom we kissed and kept our bodies pressed as though the thought of separating again would be unbearable. As we undressed we were searching for the ravishes of time that had left their mark, knowing that each one of them was a day, a year we were in exile; kissing them would lessen the hurt. I took him into my mouth because I felt that I did not remember that taste of him; he bit the nape of my neck as to mark me again and again. I was aware that the creaking was not only of the bed, but it made me impatient to know this older body that had lived in my memories for so long in a younger version. We came, we came alone and united; we came as the first time feeling it was the last. I slowly traced my finger along his laughter lines wondering when they appeared, what made him laugh and would my presence be blessed with more of them around these blue eyes I could never stop staring at.

“Oliver…” he kissed the tip of my nose.

“Elio, Elio!” I buried my face in his neck.

“A riveder le stelle, at last! We are not holding them yet, I raise my arm as though to reach them, but the stars belong to the young and dreamers and I know that I am neither, but being able to see them again is enough for this greedy heart. Oliver also raises his arm towards the ceiling, hand open and palm up “I can touch them, I can just reach and catch for you the lowest hanging star, shall I pluck it and gift it or shall we wait till we can sit among them?”

“We can wait, we have all the time in the world and the time after that.”

April 2009

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