

*Uncorrected proof, not for publication*

The Polyglot Lovers

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As a child, I was neither beautiful nor intelligent, only extraordinarily rich, and I don't think anyone can understand what such a position can do to a person. People who saw me would think: There goes an ugly little child, and not just an ugly little child, but also an incompetent little child, and so I ceased to exist in their eyes. Luckily enough, I was—at least to begin with—wholly uninterested in anything to do with appearance and presentation. I didn't care about my plain features, nor about my transparent skin and the hatched pattern of veins woven underneath like a spider's web. I would turn around in front of the wardrobe mirror, stand in profile, and list my shortcomings one by one, as though they belonged to another creature, as though they'd have no greater impact on my life than a flaking wall in a house I'd never visit. In short, at that time I was one of those lucky girls who never compares herself to anyone else, for whom their own value is as apparent as gold bullion or diamonds.

My deficient appearance aside, in school I enjoyed a sheltered and privileged status. The teachers took great care not to shed light on my limited talent, for the simple reason that my family was the primary financier of the convent school's every operation. Everything, from classes to evening vespers, was afforded, as liberally as conscientiously, by my grandmother Matilde on the tenth of every month. A choirboy would then hurry that short distance between the convent and Palazzo Latini, bill in hand. My mother would ask him to sit down on one of the fluffy sofas in her office, and one of the waiters would arrive with a glass of lemonade on a tray while my grandmother issued the check using a long, elegant hand. Her distinctive script was achieved with a quill, which she slowly dipped in an inkwell made of bronze and moved over to the paper with the same triumphant pleasure in her gaze as an artist spreading oil paint on his canvas. The boy was then handed the check, and before the ink had dried he'd have hastened down the wide marble steps in Palazzo Latini, along the narrow Via del Seminario, and across Piazza della Rotonda. I'd stand at one of the apartment windows that were six feet tall and watch him go, presumably with a crooked smile on my lips.

In the recurrent parent-teacher meetings about me, it was always determined that the best fruits ripen slowly, and that coal and diamonds are in fact one and the same, but the diamond has taken the time to develop its distinctiveness—something my father, who is a mathematician, clung to throughout my childhood as if it were a great truth. In spite of my low grades, he always thought I was a promising mathematician.

“Indeed,” he said, nodding to himself, “the best fruits ripen slowly.”

My father. My father who sat on the sofa with an absent gaze, writing his formulas on scraps of paper, those that were to hand, and when he'd used up his own scraps he'd continue on whatever was within reach. That might be receipts or the reverse of a watercolor Mother had painted and was drying on one of the tables next to the sitting area, or it might be one of the arithmetic books I had

left scattered around. As a consequence, my math notebook sometimes contained long, complicated equations, which exceeded the limits of my math teacher's knowledge. I was proud of this, because my math teacher evinced an attitude that noble children suffered from some sort of congenital mental deficiency. Papa's notes in my book were my way of taking revenge, resolutely asserting that at least half of my otherwise perhaps degenerate chromosomes were razor-sharp.

I'm sure that Papa was very happy with us for a time. He walked around in a threadbare corduroy suit and left his blue backpack on the floor in the hall, teeming with books and pens. He cycled to work, cutting his path each morning through the traffic in Rome. No soul born in our city would subject themselves to that, but Papa radiated an irrepressible optimism about the state of things, so irrepressible that even drivers braked as he cycled forth. And he also seemed to harbor a hope that my mother's family could be brought closer to the world, and if not, then the world could be brought closer to us. Mohammed and the mountain . . . Perhaps this was the reason for the gatherings he arranged for his colleagues at the university. They were invited to ours on the last Sunday of the month, at seven o'clock. All were punctual and let in en masse by the porter. Because not everybody could fit at once in the small elevator, they ascended the wide marble staircase as a troupe. They were unusual, academic people who spilled into our hall on these occasions. People Papa had gotten to know in various contexts—doctors, professors, and occasionally students who were somewhat exceptional and granted the favor of mingling with the cream of Roman academia in an extraordinary environment, where the beating wings of times past could be felt as in a Henry James novel. These were people who were interested in impossible things—particle mechanics and quarks, or a type of rare dandelion. In Papa's set, there seemed to be no limit to the breadth or meaninglessness of the subject one might obsess over. Rarity was the decisive factor, as well as the adjacent madness and the confused, occasionally hunted look that made up the selection criteria for the circle. And it seemed as though the academics who were the most confused and detached from the world were at a premium, which followed the logic that the closer you wished to be to the core of your life's pursuit, the farther you were from normal, decent understanding and behavior. Mother would regard them silently as they stepped into the hall. She'd go to the kitchen and place chilled white wines on a tray while Papa took his friends over to one of the sitting areas. Papa might give Mother an appreciative glance as she went around with the tray. In that glance, one could read a certain pride, pride over the fact that someone like him could have a wife like her. My father's proud expression stood in contrast to the academics' embarrassment. It was an embarrassment rooted in their lack of practicality, being so inexorably subpar at moving through environs such as ours. We were not an academic authority and so with us, it didn't work to attempt to trump another with a display of superior learning. One couldn't advance by dazzling with one's knowledge of Darwin, or in any other way showing how grounded one was in the dismal humus of rationality.

With us, everything was overwhelming and mammoth. And here there was nothing of the bohemian or the attitude of sacrifice and hardship that people who feel they have a calling can emanate. Whereas, in their own hovels, they could at most choose in which chair to sit, at our home you could choose both the room and the sitting area. Mother enjoyed their embarrassment. She looked down on Papa's friends for many reasons, but the most important one was that they cared so little about their appearance and couldn't carry themselves. "Those academics," she'd say after they'd left. "Those academics and their traits—a sweet, piercing scent of moldering onion coming from their armpits."

But in the end, he couldn't handle it. Or rather I think he could handle us as a family, but couldn't handle seeing the world persist in regarding us with its cold, penetrating gaze. It's possible that he managed to digest the cruel remarks written about my mother and my grandmother, at least when he saw how little effect it had on them. But he couldn't handle what they wrote about me. When a paparazzo managed to infiltrate the school and gain access to a file that contained my low grades in black-and-white, a stark contrast to the high ones on my final report card—thereby showing how money from the house of Latini distorted the truth—something inside Papa broke. The article was bursting with pictures that had been taken one afternoon when I was sick and alone at home and so, with a swollen face and red eyes, I'd gone out to buy oranges from a fruit shop near Vittorio Emanuele. Somehow the sentiment conveyed by the end of the article was that I was the end of the road for our family, a rotten cherry atop a now-soured cream cake.

"Worse things have been written of us," said my mother, and dropped the newspaper in the wastebasket.

"They attacked my child," mumbled Papa.

And if you hurt a man's only daughter, you hurt him deep in his soul. He could find no way to recover from those articles, and even if he'd never admit it to himself, I think it was precisely the feeling that he couldn't protect me that finally made him rescind his care of me entirely. The backpack disappeared from the hall. The complicated formulas disappeared from my notebook, and the feeling of fresh air that Papa had always brought with him into the palazzo was replaced with the damp, aged smell of me, Mother, and Grandmother.