

Tilith



Armando Lazzari



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Аннотация

A fantastic story that tells the vicissitudes of an insurer who must prevent an ancestral demon, Lilith, from returning to Earth to dominate mankind.

She was Adam's first woman. She dared to rebel against the Son of God. She disobeyed God and was punished for it. She is... Lilith! ”The curse that fell on her, fed over the millennia her hatred and contempt for the sons of man, until she decided to cooperate with some of them. An obscure satanic sect as allies, a mysterious brotherhood born at the time of the Inquisition as rivals and in his midst: David, a simple insurer. Strangled and disputed by the two sides, he will be forced to review all his convictions, freeing the ideas that he had enclosed and catalogued as absurd, in a struggle between good and evil from the boundaries so blurred that it will wear down his soul to the decisive choice for his salvation and perhaps that of all mankind”.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This novel is a work of pure fantasy. Any reference to personal names, places, events, e-mail addresses, websites, telephone numbers, historical facts, whether they really existed or still existing, is to be considered purely coincidental and involuntary.

I apologize in advance to anyone reading the novel who may have felt insulted or mocked in any way by a sentence of mine, assuring you that it was not my intention.

For the rest, thank you and I wish everyone a good read.

Armando Lazzari

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Dedicated to:

My children Alexander and Nicole, always in my thoughts.

My wife Alessandra, my partner in life.

To my parents Marisa and Augusto, who gave me their life and illuminated the path.

To my sister Tatiana, may you like and enjoy yourself.

The inexplicable assumption, that the unreal is enclosed only in the distorted dreams of madmen,

it falters inexorably when the absurd, projecting itself into our reality, penetrates as deeply as it is

difficult to say that even a simple pointed stone can be such and not a dangerous and mysterious weapon that will tear our soul apart.

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Prologue

The chase

One hundred and twenty.

The foot, arching, pushes even harder on the accelerator.

One hundred and thirty.

The man looks in the rear-view mirror and curses through clenched teeth:

"Damn, they don't let up!"

One hundred and forty: the road is too bumpy and the risk is too great, but he can't help himself, because he knows that if they just catch up with him....

No!

He shakes his head, chasing away the thought of what they would do to him... or not do!

Another glance at the mirror gives him another concern.

"Oh gosh! The guns!"

One hundred and sixty: that's the limit, he can't go any higher than that, not there!

He knows he needs a solution soon.

Bhang! Bhang!

"Shit, shit, shit..."

The bullets fly past him like a swarm of angry wasps.

He understands that at that rate, he won't stand a chance.

He needs reinforcements and activates the voice recognition

command device.

"Menu. Phone: Activate. Address book: Father. Call."

Tuu! Tuu! Tuu!

"Pick up, come on... pick up Father!"

Bhang! Bhang! Crash!

The response comes in conjunction with the rear window explosion.

"Where are you? We have a problem."

"Just one, Father? I've got several here, problems, sticking behind my ass and shooting! Where's the cavalry at?"

"Five of the boys are dead...three others are badly wounded: I can't send you anyone else, I'm sorry but you'll have to manage on your own. I know you'll make it, you've been in worse situations."

The first challenging curves appear on the road, forcing him to decelerate considerably.

His gaze slips behind him once again and....

Lord Almighty! A missile launcher! Have they a fucking missile launcher?

"No, Father, this is the worst! Pray for me... and if you can't, at least pray for my soul..."

In front, at the end of the curves, he glimpses a straight. Logic would dictate that they use it there. At a glance he has only a handful of seconds left.

"Don't say that, you don't have to give up!"

"Okay, Father, I swear I'll try, but in the meantime wave to the guys for me and if the line drops...don't worry, sometimes

missiles do."

The straightaway comes right on time and along with it he glimpses the buggers adjusting their aim as well.

"Either I pull a rabbit out of my hat now, or I'm toast! Speaking of rabbits: how the heck did Bugs Bunny always save himself?"

Chapter 1

The Awakening

Immemorial, lying on that double bed, my legs tangled in the sheets, I stare up at the ceiling made slightly opaque by time and, motionless with my arms outstretched, I try to recapture the memories of the previous night, faded like an echo from my mind.

The fierce rays of light filtering through the curtains are stabs in the eyes, but every muscle categorically refuses to respond to my calls, leaving me there to endure the torment, alone with my questions...

Red.

Long black hair.

Music.

It's just brief flashes that light up quickly in awareness, but the rest is still dark.

Driin! Driin!

The phone: cursed infernal device with an obnoxious sound.

Driin! Driin!

Stop it! Stop it!

Driin! Driin!

The ringing enters me and continues undaunted to echo. My whole head throbs following the incessant rhythm of the trill...

Damn it! Why don't you explode?

Driin...

Now the noise is softer, more distant, almost imperceptible.

The phone has stopped, but then why do I hear it anyway?

It's not real, that's why!

Yes, it's just the memory ringing and calling me, taking me back to the time when it all began...

Home

"Hello? Who is this?" I mumble with a slurred mouth.

"Hello Davide, this is Roberto, am I disturbing you?"

"No, no...tell me." Lie. At nine o'clock on a Sunday morning I'd kill an altar boy too!

"I just couldn't wait to tell you something incredible!" Typical euphoria: *yesterday I met...*

"Yesterday I met..." ... *the most beautiful woman in the world!*

"The most beautiful woman in the world!" Obvious. As is Roberto, by the way.

"It's... it's that I can't wait anymore! This time she's the one, she's... she's gorgeous!" Ouch! He stutters as well.

"And how... *ugh...*," I yawn, " ... how did you meet her?"

Obvious question. I look around. Coffee. I'm craving, needing a liter of coffee.

"Do you remember I had made friends with that group of people in a chat room?"

"Yes..."

I catch a pot with cold coffee in it, put it on the stove, turn on the gas and wait.

"Well, we decided to meet at a club they attend often."

"And in this group you met the suave maiden?"

The coffee is now hot and I reach for the pot.

"Ouch!" Hot as hell, the damn thing!

I use a potholder and pour it into a glass.

"Not really, the only two girls in the group are...let's just say nice!"

That means: a real stinker.

"Then I guess I'm lost. Sorry, but when does the fairy show up?"

A teaspoon of sugar, I turn and taste.

"Blah!" It really sucks! Nothing like freshly brewed coffee.

Idiots, me and my laziness.

"Keep calm, I don't want you to lose the taste." No mercy for sleep, though?

I listen silently, straining to swallow my dose of caffeine posing as a coffee substitute.

"When we entered the place, I thought that if they frequented such a place, it meant they were completely out of their minds! The decor resembled a catacomb, with coffin-shaped tables, skulls everywhere, and violent Heavy Metal music overwhelming you, all topped off with a rich and varied fauna of tattooed lunatics with serial killer faces."

"Um... a great place for a hot date! How did you survive?"

"All appearance, trust me. The bigger and more pierced they are, the more tame they are. Anyway, aside from the initial

discomfort, after a couple of beers everything seemed a little more normal to me."

Thankfully, he called. Now I was hungry, too.

"The evening was going on quietly, nothing exciting, but it was going on. Then suddenly I noticed a girl sitting alone at a small table not far away. She was staring at me insistently. Beautiful, trust me! The great thing was that, with mischievous glances, she was doing nothing but inviting me to go to her. My heart rate tripled, I could feel the adrenaline whipping every inch of my body and I didn't give a damn what the others at the table were saying, I just thought I had to go to her and kiss her on the lips. She had fully bewitched me!"

I don't think it should be that hard to bewitch a drunk with the hormones of a revved up Lamborghini.

"I have no doubt to think so! So what did you do?"

Where had I put the cookies? Ah, there they are!

"I gathered my courage and did the first thing that popped into my head: I got up under the guise of going to the bathroom. I walked by her table and then flashed her my best smile!"

"Did she reciprocate?"

Cookies without salt? How the heck did I get that wrong?

"More than that! I've never seen a better smile! On the way to the bathroom I was practically flying! But now hold on tight here comes the best part of the story. When I came out of the bathroom, she was standing, leaning against a pillar, with her arms crossed waiting for me. You can imagine the look on my

face when I saw her."

"Dumbstruck. Undoubtedly."

"Well, sort of, yes. I'm sure you would have been dumbfounded, too, in my place. She had on a decidedly short and very, very tight dress that highlighted her every curve perfectly in keeping with the universe. Trust me when I tell you that more generous than that, God could not have been!"

"Interesting...then what happened?"

"Then the first gaffe. She stares at me and says: *are you going to seduce me with your hidden talents?* I there and then don't understand and look at her curious about the strange question. She points at my pants and I realize that I had forgotten to unbutton my fly! Immediately I dissolve into a thousand excuses, while I try in every way to close the zipper, which was also jammed. At that point she stops me and says: *don't worry, you did it.*

How? What?

"Did you get it? What do you mean *you got it?* Don't tell me that..." He's mocking me! No doubt about it!

"It means she threw herself at me and while we were kissing she pushed me into the bathroom. Then she locked the door and...my God, I still can't believe it!"

Neither can I and I am a man provided with a lot of imagination....

For the first time since middle school he woke me up for a serious reason.

"But now you have to tell me everything in detail!"

You really managed to pique my curiosity.

"Actually, I'm a little bit confused, it's like I have a hole..."

You've had that since birth.

"What the hell are you talking about? It's not like I asked you what cocktail you had, you can't not remember the most mind-boggling thing that's happened to you in the last ten years!"

Maybe even twenty.

"It's weird, isn't it? And yes I was a little tipsy, but not totally drunk! I know something happened, but don't ask me what. I only remember that when I came out of the bathroom I was like in a trance and I staggered back to the table with the others, who in the meantime had given me up for lost." He raved.

"What happened to that woman? Did you ever see her again after that?"

"Yes, when we left, before leaving the club, she was standing by the door and smiling she came towards me. I was the last in line and kept contemplating her. She mischievously put her mouth to my ear and whispered: *see you soon!* Then she disappeared into the crowd."

"And when do you plan to go looking for her?" Assuming, in the best case scenario, you don't see her coming out of the bathroom with someone else.

"Tonight itself! I want to take her to my apartment this time though, the bed is certainly more comfortable!" He tries to sketch a half laugh of understanding. He fails badly.

"Roberto... I know you have already thought about it, but I recommend you: you don't know her well, try to be careful. Remember to take the right precautions..."

After all, he's a nice guy, a bit of a pain in the ass and quite petulant, but still a nice guy.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing and I've got a new twenty-four box. I have to say goodbye now, I have to get ready, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow at the office. Bye, Davide."

Twenty-four: call it just recovery.

"Sure! Bye and good luck."

With the hope that he would remember something later.

In bed

Now the sunlight is starting to fade. It's clouding over, a relief for my eyes. I loosen the grip with which I held them firmly closed. I feel a slight ache in my temples from exerting myself too long.

I stop struggling against the bed that keeps me encased, because I'm part of it now.

I try to open my eyes. Nothing doing, the eyelids are glued.

It's not possible! I can't stay here motionless waiting for someone to find me!

More minutes pass. Now the annoyance becomes anger.

I rebel, concentrating all myself on that simple movement that I will have done a million times. Easy, isn't it?

One, two and... three! Nothing.

Easy my ass!

But what's happening to me? What's happened to me? Is it possible that I don't remember anything from last night?

I smell something...where is this scent coming from?

Office

"Do you like it? My sister gave it to me for my birthday. Good, right?" Yes, I would recommend it to any prostitute.

"Do you decided to intoxicate the whole office? You're already wearing those armpit miniskirts, then you're also bathing in perfume, don't complain if someone gives you a good pat on the butt!"

Direct approach. Could this be the time she smiles and lets me know she wouldn't mind?

"Except for the fact that I put in very little...and besides, it's not like they're all maniacs like you, dear!"

Sour and moody like most secretaries. But do they take any special courses?

Attempting a smile, I flip through the mail she gently tossed to me on the counter.

"By the way, Francesca, has Roberto arrived yet?"

"Who, the klutz? No, he still hasn't shown up this morning. At the very least he's still trying to get his brain in gear, assuming he can find it."

It's more likely that he's walked by without her noticing him, since her attention is entirely focused on the nail art she carefully applies to her nails.

"Alright, thanks, I'm off to the office, but...don't tell me you

have a white hair?"

I hold back my laughter and point to an unspecified spot in her thick hair.

"Where? No way!" Hit and miss.

Vanity: the woman's weak spot.

"And yes... I'm sorry, but it's right there. Must be the stress of overwork?"

I leave her to her hysterical search for the non-existent evil one, while she torches her hair, plucking at it like a monkey.

It's ten thirty, I huff and puff and throw my pen on the coffee table. Coffee break. But what happened to Roberto? Do you want to see that last night he came back from the nymphomaniac and she exhausted him so much that he hasn't recovered yet? I kick the vending machine that has swiped my coin twice. It works, the coffee comes out and meanwhile I try to call Roberto.

First ring: free.

Third ring: sooner or later he will answer.

On the fifth ring, the answering machine comes on. Where have you been?

"Beep!"

"Hi Roberto, it's Davide. Where have you been? If you can connect your brain, call me back. I'm at the office working and, many times you don't remember, that's the place you're supposed to be. Bye and call me!"

He has been sick twice already this month. If he has flu or related again and disappears another week leaving me with his

paperwork, I swear I'll bring it straight to his door this time.

Seventeen forty, the end of the working day and Roberto still hasn't shown up. Maybe it would be better if I stopped by his place before going home, maybe he needs something.

Oh no, here we go again! Stuck in traffic. Freaking junction! It would take two of them, one on top of the other, not to widen it.

An hour and a half! It took me a damned hour and a half to get to his front door. On the intercom there is a sign: *out of order*. Luckily the front door is open. I go to the elevator. Another sign: *out of order*. What is this, a conspiracy? Doesn't anything work in this ruin of a building?

Sixth floor: hurriedly I arrive in front of the door and without any formalities I attach my finger to the bell.

Come on, answer! Don't tell me you made me come all the way here for nothing, or I'll kill you!

I hear some noises, I stop ringing.

I look at the door: still noises in the background.

"Roberto! It's me: Davide. Come on, open up!"

I knock so hard that even a deaf ninety year old could hear me.

Latch sounds. Hallelujah!

When he finally decides to open, I destroy the smile I'd been wearing and replace it with a chilled expression. "What the hell happened to you?"

He looks like he's aged thirty years. His face is gaunt and waxy.

"Ah, it's you. Come...come in."

Even his voice is altered: hoarse and phlegmy. I follow his footsteps, traipsing down the hall.

"My God, how badly you're hurt!"

He doesn't answer, coughs, and lets his weight drop onto the couch. I sit in the chair across from him and look at him worriedly.

"Did you call the doctor? You look like hell!"

And I'm a big optimist.

"No, I haven't had time yet..."

"What? I'm sorry, but then what have you been doing all day?"

Turning his head, he looks at an undefined point outside the window.

"I've been sleeping and maybe... dreaming."

"No, wait, I left you yesterday morning spewing energy everywhere with the story of that and then you disappear. When I find you again you sound like my grandfather and you're rambling like crazy! Let me hear if you have a fever."

I quickly bring my hand up to his forehead, he tries to fight back scared, but can't. His hands are freezing cold and his forehead is as hot as an iron.

"You're hot! But did you fall into the oven? That's it, I'm calling the doctor!"

"No! I can't go to the hospital! She promised me that tonight..."

Complaining, he struggles. I ignore him and pick up the phone. I dial the number.

"Oh yeah? Then I guess that means we'll put a nice sign on the door to match everyone else...hello, is this the doctor's office?"

Within ten minutes the ambulance arrives. To calm him down, the doctors are forced to administer a sedative and load him with the stretcher into the ambulance car.

Heralded by the roar of the engine, a motorcycle pulls up alongside. On it, straddling it, is a guy dressed in black leather who is watching us carefully. He realizes I've noticed him. He takes off his helmet and when he shows off a long black hair, I notice amazed that it is not a he but a she. Damn, she's very beautiful too! Could she be Roberto's mysterious lover? But if it's her, why doesn't she run worriedly to the ambulance?

She gives me an enquiring look, then quickly fastens her helmet, starts the engine and with a deafening noise disappears into the horizon.

The ambulance sirens bring me back to reality. I rush to my car and follow her to the hospital.

The bench in the waiting room is uncomfortable and cold: whatever, I don't have to sleep on it.

A doctor approaches, quickly peeks at a clipboard and calls me by name.

"Yes, it's me! How is Roberto Capua?"

"Well, undoubtedly better, but how did he get like this? When I saw his papers I didn't want to believe his date of birth."

"I assure you, doctor, that until a few days ago he was in excellent shape. I was amazed, too, when I found him in that

state. But what exactly is wrong with him?"

He is puzzled. Perhaps more than I am.

"It is difficult to say. We noted considerable blood loss, as if he had suffered a severe arterial bleed, but we found no evidence to confirm it: general absence of wounds on the body, lack of bloodstains on the clothing. Also, from what you stated at intake, you didn't notice any bloodshed in the environment where he was found."

"I confirm that, the house was clean."

Secular dust excluded.

"In any case, since there is no runoff in progress, the leak is a secondary problem that doesn't involve big consequences, at least on a normal subject. The fact that struck me is the physical deterioration of your friend: in a few words, he seems to have suddenly aged a few decades. To your knowledge, has he ever suffered from any particular pathology that would justify this state?"

"No, at least he has never told me about it, but I repeat that he has always been in excellent shape." So far.

"Do you have any relatives I could talk to?"

All I can think of is Sara...

"I know he has a sister who lives just outside of Rome. I had the intention to call her, but without a response from you I didn't want to alarm her for nothing... at this point, though, I think I'll contact her soon. In the meantime, could I see him?"

"It is better you come back tomorrow, he needs to rest and

he's under control, take it easy."

Before leaving, I leave my and Sara's information.

On leaving the hospital I decided to anticipate them, I called her to explain the situation trying not to alarm her too much.

It was useless, she was very worried. She tells me that she would have rushed there. It's nice to know that there's still someone who can feel sorry for you....

On my way home I can't help but think about what happened to Roberto and I'm partly ashamed of what I thought about him on Sunday. I'm looking for a rational explanation: maybe he's suffering from one of those rare hereditary diseases, but I don't know why my thoughts go to that strange girl.

Could she have given him some special drug?

C'mon! Do you want to see that now she belongs to a team of crazy scientists doing genetic experiments on poor unfortunates?

It's ok, let's joke about it, the fact is that I don't know any other way to exorcise my fears.

Poor guy, what a shame!

Isn't that... yes, it's the black bike. It's unmistakable! Do you want to see if the woman in the story was really her? But I can't see her in the admissions department, and I don't even think they allowed her into her room. Maybe I'm wrong.

Chapter 2

The Legend

In Bed

It feels like a movie. It's as if these memories don't belong to me and I'm a spectator who paid for a ticket to attend the premiere in a movie theatre.

These images surface and go away without my apparent will, at least they seem to have a consecutive logic. Now, however, I am more certain than ever that in order to solve this mystery I must get to the bottom of the story.

More time has passed and nothing has changed... well, not really nothing: the night has fallen; maybe if I could fall asleep for a few hours, when I woke up everything would be normal again.

Yes, but why isn't everything normal? That Roberto is the first victim of a tremendous deadly virus and I am the second and tragic episode? I would say that American apocalyptic films should be halved at the cinema.

Just a moment! Here's something new: my neck is no longer motionless, now I can move my head! And that's progress.

Who knows, maybe if I tried harder, I'd be able to move the rest of my body and maybe even stand up....

Inhuman effort.

What the hell!

I look around. Despite the darkness I can make out a few

objects in the room.

Doubtful: has the window always been open?

The white crenelated curtain, urged on by the wind, flutters free. It almost seems to be animated by a will of its own, with a tendency to take on distinct shapes with every puff it receives.

First it was a large bird, perhaps an eagle.

Now the meaning of the figure is lost and reinvented: it is a woman with long, loose hair.

It lasts a short time. A gust arrives and disrupts everything. The curtain becomes tangled as if handled by a skilful conjurer who cleverly makes it take the shape of...

Home

"Meow..."

"A cat?"

What the hell is a cat doing in front of my front door?

"Meow." It rubs ruffling at my pants. He looks hungry.

He has a small golden collar that stands out against the clear grey fur. I pet him smoothly and he lets me pick him up.

"Where did you run off to? Your owner is sure to be worried."

He wears a really nice collar. He's too clean and sociable to be for a stray.

"Meow." He appreciates my attention and purrs at me.

A tag pops out of his collar that I hadn't noticed before. There is opaque writing on it. I try to read it.

"Lil... what's next? It doesn't read well, maybe your name is Lilli. Are you a sissy then? Let's see if I can find you master."

I walk out the door and go to the intercom. I start ringing one by one to all the tenants. Except for three who don't seem to be home, they all answer me that they are not the owners.

"Now what am I going to do with you? I don't feel like putting you out on the street. I'll tell you what: I'll host you and I'll commit myself to finding your owner, but only for a few days at the most, but then..." With my hands I make a gesture more than eloquent even for the understanding of a feline.

"Meow." He seems to agree. Pact sealed.

I open the door with the keys and as soon as the door opens, he frees himself from my grasp with an agile move and quickly enters the house.

"Yes, good, go ahead and make yourself at home, don't worry."

Elegantly he points straight at the sofa as if he already knew the environment and with a decisive leap he takes possession of it. Sitting in a composed manner, she moves her paw. It seems absurd, but I could swear that she is pointing to the kitchen. If she's hungry, then that means there are two of us.

"Fine: I'll cook tonight, but we're agreed that you'll do the dishes afterwards!"

Of course I must have gone crazy if I'm talking to a cat and making a deal with it. What female, human or not, in history has ever respected a pact?

The cat seems to have fallen asleep, but I don't really want to sleep and the TV doesn't show any program worthy of attention.

I get up listlessly from the couch, letting the bluish light of the television give some colour to the room, and I look out the window. The thought of Roberto's fate is now a permanent concern, but I put it aside for a moment to admire the beautiful moon that illuminates the almost deserted street this evening. It's that almost that upsets me.

That bike again! I'm not wrong and it can't be just a coincidence. But where is the owner? I try to read the license plate: too far away. Okay, you won't get away from me this time.

I grab a piece of paper and a pen from the shelf, put on a jacket and hurry out to check for myself.

Gone. Damn it, it's gone! Yet I was a missile and didn't give her time to disappear. Unless I dreamed her, but I don't think I've gone that stupid.

I returned to the apartment and noticed that the front door was open. But didn't I close it? My eye falls on the couch: where did the cat go? I look for him, but he seems to have disappeared too.

What is this, the evening dedicated to Houdini?

Office

Is it possible that in this period my office is always flooded with papers? Okay, let's take a coffee break and call Roberto's sister.

"Hi, it's me: Davide. Any news of your brother?"

"Hi. The doctors say he's stable. I managed to see him, albeit only for a few minutes, but what happened? Blessed God, I almost didn't recognize him!" Her voice trembles.

"To tell you the truth, I was hoping you would know more, but listen to me: now you don't have to worry, he's being kept under control and you'll see that when he recovers everything will be back to normal and he'll explain everything to us."

"I don't know... I'm scared, I've never seen him like this!"

Can I blame her?

"Because you've never been there during one of our beer nights!" Bluff, maybe she believes it.

"Beer? But what beer! They didn't find a drop of alcohol in his blood, let alone traces of drugs!"

He didn't believe it. Let's try to change tactics.

"Did they mention the congenital disease hypothesis to you?"

"Yes! And I'm super sure it can't be, we've always been healthy in our family. Then there's the matter of all that missing blood, and you want to know another weird one? Apparently the only place it could be leaking from is a bruise on her neck, and there isn't even a tiny hole to give it any logic!"

"Ah!" Blown away. I try to baste something else.

"You'll see... but yes, you'll see that before long the doctors will figure out what's wrong with her and everything will seem simple. Don't make things more complicated than they are, after all, neither you nor I have a medical degree. Let those who are more competent than us draw the right conclusions."

"I'm trying, Davide, I'm really trying, but right now it's not easy to be optimistic. But you really have no idea what he might have been doing these days, or what company he was keeping?"

Maybe if we go back a few days before it happened, we could figure it out more."

"I know something about a girl he was seeing..."

Best to avoid specifics.

"...but I haven't had a chance to go into it properly, I don't even know her name, or where she lives."

"I understand... but if anything comes to mind, please tell me right away!"

"Count on it, don't worry."

Could I tell her that the girl is probably a nymphomaniac maniac picked up in the bathroom of a pub frequented mostly by exalted lunatics?

Come to think of it, though, Sara might not have it completely wrong. What if you investigated this phantom *lady x* a little more? With any luck it might be relatable to the woman on the bike.

It would take some sort of starting point that would reconnect the facts...um...maybe friends on the net. Yeah, if I could track them down, they could point me to the club he was at that night and maybe with a little luck I could meet her. From what I understand, the chick is guaranteed not to go unnoticed anyway.

What was the name of the site where she was chatting? Damn my memory!

I have to remember...

I have to remember...

Hospital

"Hi Sara. Do you think they'll let me in to visit today?"

She looks at me as if trying to get rid of a thought that had kidnapped her and taken her elsewhere. Probably, if I hadn't spoken to her, she wouldn't have noticed me. I get up from the bench and, occupying her entire field of vision, I help her to compose my figure. It works.

"Oh, David! Excuse me, have you been here long?"

"No, just now..." About three quarters of an hour.

"Roberto? How is he today?" I investigate, but his face doesn't hint at anything good.

"He's recovering, except for the amnesia." She is incredulous.

"Amnesia?"

Holy shit, is this getting worse instead of better?

"Yes, the doctors say it's due to severe psychological trauma and that it's probably temporary. Davide, it honestly doesn't sound like amnesia to me. When I tried to talk to him he would stare at me with his eyes wide open as if he didn't understand." This might be within the range of normal.

"Sorry, but at this point I'd like to check it out for myself. I don't know what my chances are of being recognized, but if it's okay with you, I'd like to try anyway."

"That's fine, but let's try not to tire him out too much."

I walk through the door of the room and contemplate in amazement the figure of the man who was once a great friend of mine. I struggle to frame him. Above the bed, with his back against the pillows, his gaze is immersed in the emptiness of the

beige wall. His hair is completely white. Deep wrinkles run down the sides of his mouth and forehead. My God, he must have lost twenty pounds. A grimace of pain appears on his sister's face, I ignore it and gently make my way to the bedside.

"Hi Roberto, how are you, do you recognize me? I'm Davide."

I slowly enunciate the words.

I manage to shake him out of his state. He turns his head, looks at me for a second and then, as if to say and who cares, goes back to silently staring at the wall that is probably more interesting than my words. I throw a half smile at Sara trying to reassure her. I have to find something that really gets her attention, even if it means destroying the damn wall with a spade!

"You need to hurry up and get yourself together, otherwise the gorgeous girl you met will pick someone else to have fun with. What did you say her name was? Giulia?"

It would be a miracle if I got her name right immediately. In fact, she doesn't respond. I turn the wheel and try again.

"... no, no. Now I seem to remember: Francesca?"

The most common female names throughout the peninsula. Nothing, this doesn't work either. It is useless to continue on this path. I try to touch his arm to shake him, but with a cold look he makes me understand that it is not even the case to touch it. I am more than a little embarrassed. I don't know what to do and I understand his sister's state of anxiety. Heck, now I'm seriously worried too.

"*Sniff! Sniff!*" What is she doing, sniffing me?

My God, this has reached the end of the line.

"You! You've met her!"

Okay, I managed to get him talking, or rambling....

"Met who? Maybe, Roberto, you're referring to that girl you were telling me about?"

"You've been with her! You, you touched her, you touched her, you touched her..." He continues obsessively, in a frenzy. What is he saying? I have to calm him down.

"No, trust me, I swear...I've never seen her."

Oh my God! He's shaking. Sara looks at me hallucinating. If she keeps this up, ten to one she'll burst into tears....

"Enough David...now leave the room..., please!" That's it, exactly: a flood of tears.

My heart clenches at that plea.

"Yes, of course. I'll be right out."

I get out of bed and look resignedly at my friend.

"Get well soon..."

A barely whispered phrase, who knows if he heard me.

With my hand I make a sign to Sara.

"I'll wait for you outside, I need to talk to you." Nodding, she gently strokes her brother to calm him down.

Minutes pass and I try to reorganize my few confused ideas.

Sara walks out of the room and wipes her eyes, now contoured by a black halo of loose makeup. I get up and walk towards her. She looks soothed again.

"I'm sorry if I was a little abrupt earlier, it's just..."

"Don't worry, it's okay."

In her shoes, I might have even been less diplomatic.

"I wanted to ask you something." I take time to phrase the request in a way that doesn't give her false hope.

"Here, I was wondering if you could give me the keys to his apartment...you know, I have some ideas to try to figure out what happened." I nip her question in the bud.

"It's nothing concrete, I'd just like to take a look on her computer, maybe I'll find something interesting."

Her facial muscles relax. I convince her.

"Yes, that's fine. But please, whatever you find out, you'll have to let me know right away." Depends.

"Of course, of course!" Categorical as a maybe.

Six more floors to walk: freaking elevator!

I pick up the set of keys Sara gave me. I weigh it: it's going to be a pound! With all these key chains attached, it looks more like a defensive weapon.

Sixth attempt: I finally guessed the right key. I open the door and enter. Pitch darkness.

I turn on the light and...god what a mess! The last time I went in, I hadn't noticed that Roberto was so messy. Wait a minute, the laundry is fine, but the shards on the floor of the lamp really seem excessive. After all, the way he looked, he may have been so sick he couldn't make it to clean up. I can smell a nauseating odour, maybe it would be better to open the windows and let it air out.

I have to remember to tell Sara to come and clean up: this house is really pitiful!

Here's the computer, I turn it on. Luckily no password, blessed ingenuity.

Let's see if there's something interesting in the documents folder.

Nothing. Okay, go with Internet Explorer, I doubt he has Firefox or Chrome installed or familiar with it anyway.

Let's check the history: anthology of witchcraft, necromancy, demonology... but what the heck kind of sites does he visit? He's completely nuts. I wonder if I can find anything useful.

Got it! Here's what I've been looking for, at least I hope so:
Chat the spirits.

With a little luck I might find someone and chat with them.

It's as deserted as a cemetery, just to stay on topic. I'd say wait until later, maybe someone will connect. In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to do a thorough scan of your computer's hard drive. I realize it's like violating a person's privacy, but it's necessary if I want to find a minimum of information.

The grinder takes its time. I focus my attention on a folder with a strange name: *Black Moon*, could it be a collection of daring photos? Let's check the contents.

It contains dozens of written documents, it looks like material downloaded from those strange sites.

Beep! Each image suddenly disappears from the monitor.

"Beep? What do you mean, beep? The power had to go out

right now?"

All right, don't panic. I take advantage of the pause and take a tour of the house. The bedroom. Let's see if there are any diaries with phone numbers in the bedside table.

It's full of strange knick-knacks: a white candle and a black one: both used, an embroidered ribbon, bells, a mirror and this strange dust, what is it? *Sniff!* It smells like incense.

But yes! That's what the smell was when I walked in: incense!

I wish someone would explain to me if it's normal to have such items in the nightstand! Thinking back, though, I seem to remember something I read a while back about it... something that had to do with these materials for some pagan ritual.

Let's venture a hypothesis: the nutcase, that is Roberto, out of the blue and for an arcane and unknown reason, begins to be interested in esotericism, he knows some crazy people in a chat room that induce him to perform strange rituals and take mysterious hallucinogenic substances that reduce him to a rag.

This might be the best theory to unravel the whole thing, or almost. The strange note lies in the fact that doctors did not find any particular substances in his blood. Could it be that he used drugs so sophisticated that they couldn't be detected so easily, because they were expelled through bleeding? It would take a chemist, and I, unfortunately, am a simple insurance man.

I'm starting to get hungry, a nice pizza would be nice while waiting for midnight, if the power comes back on.

Beep! The computer turns back on along with the lights in the

room.

Fantastic! Apparently in this house you just have to want things.

Six more goddamn floors on foot! If I had thought of it sooner, I would have fasted. At least I digested the pizza.

I catapult myself onto the couch. The day has been destructive and the good thing is that it's not over yet.

Let's get back on the internet. Let's see what exactly this black moon thing is.

It seems that this is another nickname used for the figure of Lilith and that this was even the first woman of Adam created by God, for him and like him, from the mud.

Legend says that she escaped from Adam because, judging herself equal with him, she did not want to submit, especially during sexual relations... ah!

Lilith, moreover, pronounced angrily the name of God, took flight and left the garden of Paradise taking refuge on the shores of the Red Sea. Leaving the Paradise on her own initiative, before the fall of man and not touching the Tree of Knowledge, she was not condemned to mortality. Fled into the desert and met the Djinns, with whom she mated. It was generated so a line of demons called Lilim. This rebellion did not go unnoticed by God who sent three angels, Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangelof, to convince Lilith to return with Adam. A terrible punishment was the answer to her categorical refusal: almost all her children were exterminated. Since then, her hatred towards men was nourished

over the centuries, as well as the mortal danger for all those who wanted to hinder her revenge.

A story with a happy ending, no doubt about it. While it's undoubtedly a tale of terror, a warning to mind your own business is there, and I'm a guy who generally respects such things.

Below are also the rituals for conjuring it, with a marked note that absolutely discourages men from performing them. Wait, you want to bet that this list contains the same items I found in the drawer?

I'll check: I won a goldfish.

Now, more than ever, I'm sure that Roberto has already recoiled before he got sick.

Let's enter the famous chat room and see if I can catch some more goldfish in the net...

He wants a nickname, a nickname: Apollo sounds good, he's the God of the sun, he's what we need to keep our distance.

There are five people in the chat room, let's hope to catch the right ones. I'll enter.

<Apollo> Hello folks!

<Flap> Welcome Apollo.

<Carmilla> A new snack!

<Horus> Good Carmilla, this is a colleague.

<Zombi> Are you new around here, Apollo?

<Apollo> Minted a few million years ago.

<Kali> A humorist! But were you warned that this is a devilish chat?

<Apollo> A friend recommended it to me.

<Zombi> What did you do to him that was so terrifying?

<Horus> Guys, a little hospitality!

<Carmilla> Really, you want me to run out of dinner?

<Apollo> Careful, Carmilla, you might get burned....

<Flap> Who's your friend? We all know each other here.

<Kali> We're a small community of burnouts.

<Apollo> I don't remember what nick you use, but his name is Roberto and he's a tall, thin guy with curly hair.

<Flap> Lilim! No way, you're friends with the nutcase?

Got it! It can only be him!

<Carmilla> Hey! Easy with the insults! Lilim is my friend!

<Here we go again! Now Carmilla will ask to put in a good word....

<Kali> To tell you the truth, he's been missing for a while.

<Zombi> Yes, Angel, Phobia and Genie are also missing.

<Carmilla> Honey was supposed to call me on Sunday after Saturday's outing.

Yes! Got one of the mystery group.

<Horus> Did you fail the charm test? :-)

<Carmilla> Don't be alarmed, I have my ways of winning a man over!

Alright, but let's not get off topic: I want the name of the club.

<Apollo> He told me about the evening. He told me he had a great time.

<Flap> Yes, but behind Carmilla's back :-)

<Zombi> For me he is continuing to have fun, but with the beautiful Angel!

<Kali> I doubt Lilim is the ideal type of Angel....

Angel? And the girl would be...

<Apollo> I don't know who this Angel is, but Roberto... Lilim, he's not a bad guy.

<Flap> Dude, get served, she's too high of a target for many, and Lilim, with all due respect, at best can only polish his Harley!

The Harley Davidson! The same bike I saw that woman on. Coincidence?

<Zombi> Put it any way you want, but there was a lot of chemistry between the two of them lately....

<Carmilla> Theirs was just a friendship over the same fixation!

I'm not aware of Roberto having any special interest.

<Horus> Guys let's stop with the gossip! Our guest might think it's Novella 2000¹ chat!

<Carmilla> I agree with Horus! Apollo, you who heard it, do you know what happened to him?

He's in the hospital reduced to a vegetative state.

<Apollo> He caught a bad flu, he told me to say hello.

<Kali> He's really sick if he doesn't turn on his computer.

His pc is on, he is the one who is off.

<Apollo> He mentioned the club you went to on Saturday. What is it called?

<Carmilla> The Spider's Web.

It's about time! I'll take notes.

<Horus> Excuse us Apollo, but right now we should talk about the next convention....

<Apollo> Sorry you, especially since I got a phone call and I really have to run.

<Carmilla> So early? Wouldn't you be interested in joining us, maybe you can come with Lilim?

<Apollo> The idea sounds interesting, I'll talk to him about it, but right now I have an engagement that I can't put off. I'll talk to you soon.

<Zombi> Greetings from the deep.

<Apollo> Hello everyone.

I'm going to stay and listen a little longer, maybe if they think I'm gone, they'll let something interesting slip?

<Horus> So, as I had mentioned, the next "International Conference on Rituals and Beliefs of the Ancient World", will take place in 15 days in the National Roman Museum, in Palazzo Massimo, where they will tell about new discoveries and...

What a drag... I've been listening to the chatter about this damn conference for over an hour without getting any useful information.

<Carmilla> Absentees will need to be notified. I can call Angel and see if he can make himself available for that day.

<Zombi> Good girl! I'm sure Lilim will be with her, and if you hear strange moans, don't be too alarmed...

<Kali> Don't worry Carmilla, you'll see that at most they'll be

softening up with boring stories about Lilith!

Found it! And with that, mysterious Angel, you've won the role of possible inquisitor!

Unplugged.

I've marked everything, as a start it's not bad, at least this way. I have more information than before, even if honestly I haven't yet understood what I'm looking for.

Maybe the bed, since I'm collapsing and tomorrow I have to go to the office. Better to go home.

Chapter 3

The Dream

"Spider's Web..."

Found it, finally! This is supposed to be the club, not really my cup of tea, hopefully at least the beer is decent.

I usually don't like to judge by appearances, but these guys out here look like they've been out of jail for no more than a couple of hours. What the hell was I thinking coming to this place? At least they were in a group, but I'm venturing out on my own. The good thing is that there is a queue and... why is this human mountain staring at me? Indifference, Davide, don't look at him, show indifference...

I lower my gaze and rummage through the pockets of my leather jacket pretending to look for something, then with a distracted air I cast a fleeting glance at the man. Damn, he must be at least 6'2" and 130 kilos and he keeps staring at me. A deafening roar gives me the excuse to turn my eyes on the road... the black Harley! Could it be her? I capture all the details of the scene. She parks the bike on the sidewalk near the others. She takes off her helmet and whips the air with her long hair. It's really her! I quickly try to take cover so as not to be noticed and use the giant in front as a shield. I watch her while she gets off the bike like an elegant panther and with a confident step she heads towards the club. The hiding place works very well, she

passes me without seeing me. She goes straight to the entrance and greets the security man, who lets her in immediately after a nod.

"Nice bike, isn't it?"

Aroused by the scene, I catch the words coming from above. It's Cyclops, who with a grimace that should summon a smile, tries to interact with me.

"Wh... what?" I stutter, taken aback.

"The Harley. It's a stunner! Sure, in a woman's hand it's wasted, but at least she's holding it together."

"Yeah, she's a real gem," I reply shyly.

"I'm sorry I was staring at you before, but you look incredibly like a friend of mine and I thought you were him. Your name wouldn't happen to be Caesar?" He rubs his hand over his thick beard and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"No, I'm sorry, I'm not him."

I keep looking at the front of the line, trying to catch a glimpse of something at the entrance.

"This is your first time at the Canvas, isn't it?"

I humour him with a nod.

"Fridays are always like this. In fact, the line is sometimes twice as long, but it's worth it, believe me!"

"Yes, I have no doubt about that."

"Of course, it would be nice to be like Angela, to arrive and get in right away, but..."

Stop, what was her name?

"Angela? Are you referring to the biker girl?"

If he knows her I'll play the lottery tomorrow.

"Of course! She's the dancer. I come here mostly to see her dancing. She's stunner!"

Okay, I jump off the diving board and jump in. Hopefully there's enough water.

"Do you think I could meet her? I mean, talk to her even for a second?"

I'm starting to think I haven't really thrown the night away.

"You're a connoisseur, huh? Ha! Ha!" He laughs guff wily and pats me on the back that crushes me. Tomorrow I'm going for an x-ray.

"I could, but I warn you: that one's a special kind, it's hard to interest her, she's on another level!"

Yes, for someone like you I have no doubt.

"I'll take my chances. What's your name?"

Better to make friends with him than like anything else.

"Franco, glad to meet you. But to my friends Buba."

At the risk of dying, I swear if his name had been Goliath, I would have burst out laughing in his face. He wipes his sweaty hand on his jeans and hands it to me.

"I'm Davide, nice to meet you...Buba."

I repress all my disgust at shaking that calloused big hand.

In the meantime the line has moved on and we are in front of the door.

The bouncer looks at us, or rather looks at Buba, since the two

are about the same height.

"Nice, Buba, right on time as hell again tonight."

"Like every shitty Friday, bro'!"

Just conventions.

"Is this with you?" He points at me like he would a Chihuahua and while he waits for the answer he whispers into his earpiece, giving himself the airs of a CIA agent.

"Sure! Can we come in?" Buba smiles at me, giving me a satisfied nudge with her elbow.

"Please, come in, Friday night is 10 euros: show and first drink included."

At least the price is reasonable.

We pay at the cashier and they issue us a free pass for the exit.

As soon as we enter, a shockwave of music and stench overwhelms me. It takes several minutes to get my ear used to other sounds. While I'm wading around definitely lost, Buba draws my attention pointing upwards. I follow his finger-wurst with my eyes. There are some sort of cages hanging from the ceiling, with some very flashy cubists in them, moving in a sexy way, but I don't see Angela.

"Where's Angela?" I yell to my new friend.

"She'll be here soon, don't worry! In the meantime, let's go to the bar and get a plug!"

I follow him into the crowd, as he high-fives and greets practically half the club.

By some strange miracle, when we arrive there are two free

stools and the music seems less loud, or at least it's already so much that I can hear my own thoughts!

We're served two mugs of beer and toast.

"You don't seem like the type who frequents these clubs often. How come you're here?"

I look down at his mug, which, after the first sip, is already less than halfway full.

"A friend recommended it to me who couldn't make it and asked me to say hi to Angela."

I throw it at her. He stares at me silently in that weird way of his. He takes another sip of his beer and taps the empty mug on the bar. I try to imitate him and almost choke on it.

"Come on, I'll take you to her before she gets in the cages!"

I think he's doing it more for him than for me, so he has a good excuse to talk to her. I set down the tankard and follow him again into that torrent of people.

We arrive on a platform, under the cages. They look like freight elevators. We wait a few moments. A curtain on the wall opens and there she appears! She looks at me surprised to see me and stops; this confirms my hypothesis that she recognized me. Buba makes herself known.

"Hi, Angela!"

Like a teenager he went all red in the face, proving that even Yeti's have feelings.

"Hi, Buba." She walks up to him and greets him with two little kisses on his cheeks. That's enough to send Buba into a parallel

dimension. Instead he turns his back on me, trying to ignore me.

"I came to introduce you to a friend who wanted to meet you."

She points at me. Now, my beautiful Angela, you can't pretend you didn't.

She unwillingly turns around and extends her hand to me.

"Hi Angel, I'm Davide."

First shot fired: I called her Angel. She remains silent, then detachedly looks at me mockingly.

"Nice to meet you..."

She turns back to Buba, but I notice that she keeps me under control with a wary and alarmed look.

"So? I'm still waiting for you to free up one night to go out to dinner like you promised."

Damn, he's really marking her tight.

"You're right, I'm sorry. But you know very well that I'm messed up right now! Come on, let's talk about it calmly next time, they're waiting for me now."

Cleared as an ice cube in the oven.

"Sorry!" I tackle her.

"Before you leave, I wanted to ask you a few things about Roberto..."

"Who?" Questioning air. She sounds sincere.

"Roberto? Does Lilim ring a bell?"

Come on, don't pretend. Remember? The idiot from the ritual...

"I don't know who you're talking about, I think you've

confused me with someone else. Sorry, but I really have to go."

She unwraps me like candy. I contain my pissed off and hold her arm with one hand.

"Listen to me, baby: I don't know what the hell you two have been up to, but know that Roberto is in the hospital reduced to a human larva, maybe even because of you! You're the last person who saw him in a decent condition and you know what he did to get like this! Do you have a shred of conscience?"

Buba's huge hand presses one of my shoulders.

"Hey, man! Don't you think you're overreacting?"

End of a friendship.

Hers is peaceful advice to let go. She lowers her gaze in mortification. I release my grip and calm down. Then with a sigh I turn to Buba.

"I don't hold it against her. But she's the only one who can give me answers and I know she has them!"

"What if she doesn't want to give them to you?" I could always pull her hair, like a good caveman would, until she spoke.

"No, Buba, wait. He's right, she's entitled to some answers." Oh! We finally made it!

"Anyway, I'm not the last one to see him before... before he got sick." Her voice trembles.

"Weren't you the pretty brunette from the chat room meeting?"

"No, I didn't go that night. Lilim... Roberto had told me about it and I was very worried."

"Worried about what?" If I had a nymphomaniac like that!

"I told him not to do it... but that stubborn man wouldn't listen to me!"

"Do? Do what?" I press curiously.

She almost makes to answer, when a woman's croaky voice interrupts her.

"Well? Angela, are you moving or are you going on strike tonight?"

"Yes, yes! I'll be right there, excuse me." I turn around. There's a woman in her early years who looks like an arm wrestler.

"She's the owner! I have to go or she'll fire me. Do you have a cell phone?"

"Yes..." I pull it out of my pocket and hand it to her.

She grabs it with her tapered hands and quickly types a number on the keypad. She presses enter and hangs up to memorize it.

"This is my number, call me tomorrow after 5pm! Bye."

With that said, she runs over to the open cage, locks it from the inside, and pushes a button that makes it slowly rise to the ceiling.

"Bye, Angela!" Buba, with his little hand, greets her as she climbs without deigning him a response.

I remain staring at that beautiful moving maiden as I think back to the enigmatic phrases she threw at me.

I'm watching Buba as he tries to peek at the number she has dialed on my cell phone, which I'm absent-mindedly holding with

the display facing up. Realizing I'm looking at it, he turns around with an angelic look. I smile at the pathetic scene, but think that in her place, maybe I would have done the same.

"He must be something very important, to have left you his number. She's never given it to me in two years."

Maybe because she's more sane than she seems?

"Well, yes, it's a very touchy matter!"

But don't be jealous gorilla.

"Can I give you my number in case you want to go on a double date with one of her friends?"

This one is worse than a pit bull that won't let go.

"Of course, but be warned: I'm not trying to hook up with her, I just need her help."

Is he going to get in your fat head?

"Yeah, yeah, sure! I was just saying that, just saying..."

Okay, let's exchange this number so you can go to bed tonight happily ever after.

Finally home, another ten minutes in that club with Buba and I would have had to do a liver transplant. How do some guys always drink like that? I'm so woozy from the beers that I can't even take stock of the situat....

I jolt awake. I quickly and abruptly turn my head left and right. Shocked, I look for something that isn't there. I realize that sweat has totally soaked my hair and is now running down my face.

I wipe my face with my hands to get rid of that annoying itchy feeling.

It's not just this that irritates me, but the dream. That damn dream that for a quarter is still stuck in my mind. To put it better, it's the unpleasant feeling of anguish that has left me, also because I don't really remember a damn thing.

I get up and gently rub the knuckles of my aching hand. I look at them: they're red as if I'd punched something... or someone!

Flash.

I find myself in an alley in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. Behind me there are two buildings closing at an angle as if they were that of a ring.

Flash.

It's the middle of the night and in the distance I hear the roar of what could be a river.

Flash.

Something is changing, I don't think I'm alone anymore.

Flash.

Certainty. There's a shadow peering at me: it's menacing!

It looks like a crawling figure. It quickly approaches and assaults me. Instinct makes me raise my arm as a shield. It doesn't look human. It is hairy and smells terrible. With one hand I squeeze its hairy neck as I see, from its gaping jaws, sharp canines pointing at my throat. A full moon slowly makes its way through the clouds and illuminates the creature: it's a big black wolf. An atavistic terror envelops me and with my fist I desperately try to strike the animal's muzzle. With every moment my resistance weakens and the deadly fangs get closer.

Then, suddenly a mighty whistle breaks through. The beast is distracted and I take the opportunity to push it away with a shove, using my last strength. It works.

With a leap I get back up and wobbly I try not to fall back to the ground. I stiffen my muscles, ready for a new attack. But the wolf doesn't move and turns his head backwards, intent on staring at a motionless figure that fades into the horizon. It is a woman with long hair, moved by an imperious wind that envelops her. She raises an arm and makes a gesture of call. The wolf obeys immediately. I look at that distant woman and I don't know how, although I can't see her face, I perceive that she is smiling at me, while the animal, at the end of the run, crouches at her feet with docile reverence. With an elegant and decisive step he comes towards me. The wolf stands up and follows her like a silent guardian. Petrified, I watch the scene. My heart begins to beat rapidly: *Tum! Tum! Tum!* Now I hear the beats echoing like drums in the air: *Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum!* They increase with each step of the woman: *Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum!* She's pretty close, but I can't see her features yet: *Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum! Tum!* Everything becomes blurry, my legs become soft as wax in the fire and I collapse on my knees. I try, squinting my eyes, to make the scene clearer, but the oppressive darkness catches me: **Tum... Tum... Tum...** and my heart gradually slows down before exploding.

Flash!

As if coming out of a long apnea, I let out a loud sigh. I smile

as I recognize the room where I've spent so many nights.
Would you look at that dream! Damn alcohol!

Chapter 4

Angela

I keep moving up and down the room, thinking of a thousand and one possible scenarios of what could have happened: the absurd ones far outnumber the normal ones.

I look at the clock for the umpteenth time: 17:15. I really think I could call her now.

The phone rings: once, twice, three times... come on, damn it, what are you waiting for to answer!

Fifth ring: "Hi, I'm not home at the moment, if you want you can leave a message..."

And no, damn, another damn answering machine! Come on, let's talk like a moron with this thing.

"...beep!"

"Hi Angela, it's Davide. We met last night at the club...sorry, but you said to call you after five. When you come back you can call me anytime at 06..."

What the hell! I hung up the phone unnerved, both by Angela's absence and by the feeling of complete idiocy that envelops me every time I talk to an answering machine; and I was hoping they had become extinct like dinosaurs!

By way of ballast I throw myself heavily into the chair. Hypnotized, I follow the hand of the pendulum, which inexorably marks the minutes. It's not one of the best pastimes, but it works.

6:20 p.m.

Driin! Driin!

I make a quick dash toward the device. The edge of the table finds me unprepared and I hit it with my shin. Pain in the ass.

"Hello?"

"Hi Davide, it's Angela. I just got in the house, my daughter Elisa has been wasting my time around, sorry to keep you waiting."

"No worries, I've had a few things to do myself anyway..." Like stare at the pendulum for about an hour.

"I've been thinking all day about the fact that my behaviour toward Roberto has not been very fair. Partly I feel guilty for what happened to him, but mostly because, out of fear, I abandoned him when he needed it."

"I'm sorry, Angela, but I'm a little confused, what really happened to him? I would need you to tell me everything from the beginning. Would you be willing?" I try to be calm, but in fact mine is not really a question.

"Yes, you're right, it's better to start everything from the beginning, but I'd rather talk to you about it in person. I don't live very far from the Canvas, would you like to meet me at home?"

"Sure, that can be arranged."

As he gives me directions, I can't help but smile at the thought of Buba and the blow he'd get if he only learned about the appointment.

It takes me ten minutes to get to my destination and twenty to

find a decent parking spot that is discreetly out of the obsessive reach of some easy-pencilled vigilante and/or auxiliary with the sensitivity of a hungry crocodile. Maybe I exaggerated, hungry crocodiles are much more sensitive.

I ring the doorbell and a cheeky little voice asks me who I am. This should be the daughter.

"I'm Davide, a friend of mom's. Is she home?"

She'd be missed.

"Wait a moment, I'll go ask her if she's in."

Perfect secretary sorting visits.

A sound of deadbolts makes me assume that Mom has answered that she is home.

The door opens and the figure of a maybe three-foot gnome appears, her arms clasped at her sides.

"You're lucky, Mom said she's there and you can come in. She's in the bathroom right now, go ahead and have a seat."

She points to the doorway with her hand as she catches her breath from the long sentence she just displayed.

I thank her and smiling I enter the house. I notice that she looks at me grimly. All of her mother.

"Well? How long does it take you to say that?"

The first Gift of children is to displace adults.

"Say what?" I ask her curiously.

"Like what? You have to say: excuse me?. Mom always says that when you enter someone else's home, you have to ask for permission!"

The second Gift, is to make them uncomfortable.

"Elisa!"

Saved in the corner by mom Angela who, despite having the towel tied around her still wet hair, appears in all her glory.

"Sorry about her, but when she gets into it she's awful! Now be a good girl and go to your room and play, and the gentleman and I will sit in the lounge and talk."

With a polite pout, she obeyed and walked to her room.

"Good, now we can talk quietly. Would you like some iced tea?" I humour her and make myself comfortable on the couch.

She is tense, I think the tea is more for her than for me.

She returns to me after a few moments, carrying a tray with an iced pitcher of tea and two glasses. Angela's shaky gait almost makes me bet on a disastrous end of the tray on the floor. Luckily I'm wrong and I manage to sip a little. It's homemade: too much lemon and not enough sugar, ideal for a woman like her who always has to keep in shape. I don't want to press her, but I have to find a way to get her going. Let's start with the basics.

"Have you known Roberto long?"

She unties the towel from her hair and begins to gently dry it, patting it dry.

"Not long, but just long enough to say that he's a good person and that maybe I should have helped him...or at least, insisted that he not make the mistake he did." I frown at such mystery.

"Did he use any particular drugs?"

We begin the elimination game.

"Drugs? Who, Roberto?" She smiles in amazement.

First guess eliminated.

"I don't think he even knows what drugs look like," she adds to punctuate.

"I see, but then explain to me how he got that way?"

She picks up a cigarette and nervously lights it.

"Do you believe in the existence of good and evil? In the sense of a physical embodiment of the thing, I mean?" She's damn serious.

"I don't know, I've never had a chance to personally test either one." What's your point?

"Well, I am, and so is Roberto, at least the part about evil." I raise my eyebrows.

"You don't think I'm entirely sane, do you?" You'd have to give me at least a little sketchy, though.

"I'm not used to judging without having a broad view..." Go with the courtesy.

"Maybe it would be better if I told you how things went from the beginning." Hoping at least that there's a more earthy, less mystical logic to it.

"Back in the day, before Elisa was born, my husband and I were not having a happy marital time. Perhaps precisely because children are a glue for a family and we didn't have any yet. Anyway, to break the boredom, or just to forget the now daily fights, we went to all sorts of parties that were organized, sometimes even by strangers." All good living.

"One night, I don't even really remember who invited us, we attended one of them, where there was an obligation to wear a mask for the entire party. Believe me, it wasn't even among the strangest of requests."

I dare not imagine the others.

"We went to a villa with the usual dull enthusiasm that had reigned between us for some time now, with the only difference being that during the trip we had not yet quarrelled once. On the contrary, my husband, Diego, drove in reserved silence, aided by the three glasses of whiskey he had already drunk at home."

Odd that you got there safely.

"The party itself didn't differ from those of previous weekends: music, buffet, Diego still drinking, Diego being silly with everyone in his way, and me trying to pretend everything was going right."

Basically a nightmare.

"Basically the usual nightmare." Exactly.

"I'd knocked back my martini fix, too, but I could control myself better. Out of the blue, what was supposed to be the hostess announced that the hour was upon us and the real soul of the party was about to begin. Having said that, she urged us to follow her and we all went to what at first seemed to be the cellars of the villa, but then we realized it was the exit to a large room."

Sipping more tea, we are about to get into the thick of the story.

"There was music in that room too, but it had changed, it

almost sounded like classical music. I looked for my husband and noticed that he was stranger than usual, but I didn't think anything of it, I thought about the alcohol. The music suddenly stopped and everyone, as if following a well-designed script, first stopped and then arranged themselves in a circle. I began to worry when I realized that I was at the centre of this human chain. I thought it was some sort of prank and didn't want to show my discomfort." In your place I would have run like hell!

"Perhaps, I told myself, I had missed something of the landlady's speech, and so I made to enter the circle too, but every attempt of mine was thwarted and unknown hands pushed me inwards. It quickly went from simple annoyance to outright concern as everyone began chanting a strange litany. Tired, I angrily took off my mask and started railing against everyone in front of me, repeating in a firm voice that I didn't like that kind of game and that I wanted to leave, but no one gave me an answer: they seemed to be in a trance state." I remain silent, astonished, listening to the continuation of that incredible story, so reminiscent of *Eyes Wide Shut*, and I try to imagine its conclusion.

"When I decided to break the barricade I was slapped violently by a guy and then pushed to the ground in the general indifference. I began to cry in despair, calling for my husband's help..."

She hastily wipes away a tear she couldn't control. I fully understand that such a memory must not be pleasant.

"...When I spotted him in the crowd, I was incredulous to see that not only was that bastard doing nothing to help me, but that he was in cahoots with everyone else!"

"Do you think they plagiarized him, or drugged him in some way?"

I interrupt the story, only because sometimes memories can become more vivid than they should, and it seems like a good point to bring her back to the present time in part.

"Clearly something had been done to him, because his gaze was practically blank!"

It worked, she seems to have calmed down.

"I was on the ground with no strength, they had probably drugged me too. Diego came up to me and picked me up like I was weightless. There was a moment when I thought he was taking me out of there, but I was quickly disillusioned when I saw that he was walking on the opposite side of the exit, towards the centre of the room. Stunned, I realized that I had been placed on an altar only when I saw my clothes, torn with force, flying on the ground."

He looks up and stares at me coldly.

"He raped me in front of everyone, as if nothing had happened." Speechless.

"Eventually I must have blacked out, because all I remember is waking up in a wooded clearing covered only in the shreds of the clothes I had on at the party." Satanic cult stuff.

"I take it you filed a complaint." Husband or not, I would have

sent them all to jail and more.

"Of course. Too bad, though, that they all disappeared! Including Diego, who I haven't seen since. God knows how long I looked for him, but in vain. Not for nothing, but just for the sake of smashing his face in!" More than fair.

"And the owners of the villa? Didn't they track them down?"

"From the investigation it turned out that they had moved to the Canary Islands for more than two years, without ever having returned to Italy, and that for six months they had entrusted a real estate agency with the sale of the villa. Six years have passed and now everything has fallen into oblivion."

Six years! Am I wrong or is that more or less how old little Elisa should be? She reads the question in my face and I don't have time to formulate it.

"Yes, Davide, Elisa was conceived that night. She is the only good thing in my life."

Certainly a tragic experience, but I still don't understand how this story can connect to Roberto.

"I had long since, if not forgotten, at least put that day in a corner, until I met Roberto in a chat room."

"The spirits, I guess."

"You know it?"

Right, the one made up of the exhausted group.

"Vaguely... Roberto had told me about it once."

Lately lying is becoming more and more natural to me, maybe I'll run for office in the next election.

"I had started dating her thanks to a friend who had almost forced me, but for Roberto it had become a mania: he was looking for particular information."

"What kind of information?" I pretend to be oblivious to the whole Lilith myth thing. I want to see if he's hiding something from me.

"There's one detail I left out in the story earlier..."

She hesitates. Come on, tell me the whole truth, just the truth.

"When I was in the mansion and those fools were chanting that strange litany, they were doing it to invoke Lilith: the black goddess." Bingo! The stories are finally channelled on the same track.

"Have you ever heard of it?"

If you're referring to that nonsense I read on the PC, yes!

"I know roughly the story..."

"Good, then you'll save me from talking about it. Anyway, the fact is that Roberto's obsession was actually Lilith."

And here I thought it was you who had stupefied him.

"He confided in me privately about the strange dreams he was having. For my part, however, the recondite hope of knowing what had happened to Diego pushed me to delve into the subject.

I thought Roberto might be a link in solving my mystery."

If there weren't idiots on this world....

"He never told me about it. What kind of dreams did he have?"

As I formulate the question, I think of my own and a slight shiver runs down my spine.

"He said they were always fuzzy when they woke up, except for Lilith's name, which invariably rang out in the darkness." That he drank my own beer?

"I provided him with all the material I had collected over time about Lilith. There were also instructions in the handouts to perform an invocation ritual, but I strongly advised him against it."

"Let me guess: he didn't rest until he did it, did he?" I know the chicken and she lights the bonfire for the spit.

"He had convinced himself that only through ritual could he bring to the surface something that was inside him, but which he could not yet bring into focus."

Wouldn't it be better to pay for a good psychologist?

"With the excuse that everything had to be prepared in the right way, I convinced him to at least do it in my presence. In doing so, I hoped to slowly dissuade him."

"What happened during the ritual?"

At least he burned himself with a candle.

"I couldn't witness it." She lowered her gaze.

"Why? He wouldn't let you anymore?"

"Not him...but the man who threatened me. I got a phone call in the middle of the night. He told me he knew everything about me and my daughter; where we lived and especially what I was trying to do, finally advising me to forget everything and disappear from Roberto's life forever. I don't know who he was or why he did it, I only know that the threat was far from veiled

and I was scared to death." Another conundrum.

"I only found the courage to phone Roberto one last time to warn him. I was terrified and didn't tell him anything about the threats, but I think he understood that something wasn't right. I begged him to drop everything and said goodbye, doing as the man had told me."

With the responsibility of a daughter, she's hardly to blame.

"Not entirely, though. It was you on the bike the night I had him committed, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I sensed something was wrong and then when I saw you, thinking you were the man in the threats, I fled. I contacted a friend who works as a nurse at the hospital, and she filled me in on your condition, and from what she reported, it's certainly not the best."

And you haven't even seen him.

"He's in rough shape...the doctors still don't have much figured out and I, hearing your story, even less so."

I close myself off for a few moments to reflect.

"I even followed you home, to see how far you were involved." I would add that you're not much of a stalker.

"So, if you told me everything, I guess you cleared me of the charges?" I smile at her.

"To be fair, you don't look dangerous."

She reciprocates, but with style, my smile.

"What about the famous meeting with the chat people at the pub instead?" Let's see if you know anything about the famous

dream woman.

"Which unfortunately you'll have to ask others: I never went there. After the threats, it would never have crossed my mind to see Roberto again. However, you can ask Patrizia, aka Carmilla in chat. She was there for sure, since she had an unrequited crush on Roberto."

Dear Roberto, you should have settled for a normal woman instead of getting involved in this whole mess.

"Do you have any way to contact her?"

"I could try to arrange an outing somewhere quiet, where you could ask her all the questions you want, obviously without going into too much detail." Wake the girl up.

"Great! So, I'm just waiting for you to tell me when."

Would right away be too soon?

"Let's do it later in the week, as soon as I have a night off and can arrange a babysitter for Elisa." I'll wait.

"One last question."

I stare into her eyes searching for an honest answer.

"Why did you decide to help me now despite the threats?"

Be careful not to lie to me...

"Because I feel guilty with Roberto and I would like to help him; because I know that you will be the one to expose yourself, thus limiting the risks; because I often think back to when I needed help and no one wanted to give it to me; and because I would like to close the accounts with my past for good. Is that enough motivation for you?"

I suppose so, but let's just say I want to trust.

"Has anyone ever told you you're a piece of work?" I chant.

"Why, did you ever doubt otherwise?"

A shiny Miss Toothpaste smile lights up on her face.

Chapter 5

The Notary

I walk down the long corridor of the hospital, look around, and notice a strange commotion. I reach room twenty-three hoping to cross the threshold and finally see my lifelong friend and not the surrogate he has become. It occurs to me that twenty-three is supposed to be a lucky number, but as soon as I come face to face with the reality of Sara's face I abandon any idea of applied numerology. She is sitting in a chair looking at her brother, searching for a reason.

She doesn't notice me come in. Actually, no one notices me, not even Roberto, whose gaze seems to go right through me. His expression is different from last time: he has a hint of a smile on his face, almost an imperceptible grin that makes me uneasy.

Gently, I step back and knock softly on the door. No reaction. Perhaps I had better bring along some stadium horns. I try again more vigorously and this time add voice support.

"Hi, am I disturbing?"

"David! Hi."

Sara gets up from her chair and walks over to me. I greet her.

"Is there any news?"

I approach Roberto.

"He seems to be getting better...at least physically."

It's the brain part that concerns me.

"I notice that at least the pallor of his face is gone."

Before you could hardly tell it from the sheet.

"The doctors say the latest test results are normal, despite still not explaining either what might have happened or the psychological trauma."

"But you still haven't spoken or said anything meaningful, to get a clue as to what happened?"

"Nothing. The last time he talked...you remember that, right?"

Right, after the snort, I expected a lick too.

"How about you? Got any news?"

Yeah, your brother's probably a Satanist and fused his brain with some drug.

"Nothing particularly interesting. Right now I'm trying to get in touch with someone he was dating recently. I'll probably talk to him later this week and hopefully something useful will come out."

"Okay, thanks anyway for the time being."

Thankfully he doesn't seem to be demanding much from me.

As I head for the exit I give in to the temptation of a vending machine coffee. I know it won't live up to the smell, but it's an irrepressible call.

I rummage through my jeans pocket looking for the last tenner I need. I notice from the window overlooking the street that the sirens are really there: those of several police patrol cars. A trance of excited people starts running wildly, followed by journalists with cameras and microphones.

"What the hell?"

I remain stuck in the doorway with coffee in my hand and an infinite number of questions hanging in the air. Across from me, nurses mumble conjecture. Trotting along, hands in her scrubs, another orderly approaches and agitatedly addresses the small group.

"Looks like they found him!"

"Who? The two porters? The ones who were missing?"

"Yes, it seems those poor wretches were murdered!"

"Killed dead? Oh, Jesus!"

"What a time, even at the hospital you can't be safe anymore."

Sounds like my grandmother, but she's right.

The next day the news appears in all the newspapers, I read it with curiosity while devouring a croissant with honey in the office. It's strange how, just because you were there at the time of the event, it can be exhilarating to read a story like that in the paper, no matter how tragic it is.

It would seem that the two porters had literally been torn to pieces!

With growing disgust, I put the coffee cup on Roberto's desk and slide away the crumbs of the brioche anchored to the shirt. A slight halo of coffee is added to the grime, which by now has become attached to the desk.

"Yikes!"

I realize I've soiled a file. I grab it on the fly and start waving it around, hoping to rid it of the unwanted stain. I wonder what

it was. I read sideways.

"Mancini Practice." It says in red: Gold treatment.

I wonder if Roberto will have completed it before the crisis? And how come it's Gold? We usually only award it to very important personalities: politicians, high prelates... and everyone, invariably, wants the honour in front. I think it's time to do some deeper checks on the client. I'm afraid that the De Carli lawyer's patience with Roberto could be exhausted if a Gold contract were to be cancelled. From my workstation I connect to the server and search for Mancini. This damn computer takes a while, but when will the boss decide to renew them?

Here is the file. I check the status: in suspension. Who knows what Mr. Mancini wanted to insure... holy shit! Assets worth more than eight million euros! It's time to call the boss.

"Lawyer, hello, this is Dionisi, I wanted to talk to you about a Gold file that Roberto Capua left in suspension, regarding Mr. Mancini. I was wondering if Capua had mentioned anything to you before he got sick."

"A Gold, he says...wait a minute, let me get my mind right."

He looks like he's just come back from a trance. I solicit his neurons with math applied to his wallet.

"It's 8.4 million euros." He either croaks, or recovers immediately.

"I'll be damned! I remember now. He'd told me about how he was pulling off a good heist, but I thought it was just one of his usual rants!"

I can almost hear the old man's head ringing like a cash register at Uncle Scrooge's.

"Come to think of it, he also told me that he set up an appointment for an evaluation about a week ago. Dionisi: track the client down and deal with them immediately, before the deal falls through. And keep me updated!"

"I'll get right on it, Counsellor."

He hangs up the phone, without even asking me about Roberto's health. The old saying that everyone is useful and no one is indispensable is always valid.

From the card I get his address and phone number. I don't wait any longer and try to contact him.

"Telecom Italia, free message, the number you have dialled does not exist..."

How does it not exist? I try again, maybe I typed it wrong.

"Telecom Italia, free message, the number you have dialled does not exist..."

Go to hell! I throw the handset like a basketball player on the base of the phone. Three points.

How do I find this guy now? Obviously: with the address.

Ask yourself a question and give yourself the answer.

I think of Claudio Bisio and his advertisement with relative musical tune on the number find everything.

"... I'm sorry, sir, but at the address you provided, I have no record of a telephone subscriber. I have checked several times."

I'd switch to competition if I didn't think the result would be

the same.

Do you want to see that the guy was playing a joke on Roberto and provided him with false data?

"Hi, Davide, am I disturbing?" I turn around, it's Simonetti from accounting.

"Hi, Marco. Don't bother, come on in."

"I heard about Roberto and wanted to know if you have any news."

So someone with a bit of humanity still exists. I explain to him in broad strokes what little has been understood about the official and it seems to be enough.

"Poor guy. And to think he was so elated the other week because of that invitation to the mega party."

"Party? What party? He didn't tell me anything."

"He told me about a very important client who had invited him to an exclusive party, the main theme of which was...sex!"

My attention goes up, I search and find a more comfortable position in the chair.

"A shy guy like Roberto attending some kind of orgy party? I can hardly believe it."

"Yet I swear he seemed convinced."

He is as amazed as I am. No, that's impossible, I'm more so.

"And how did it end? I mean, he must have told you the outcome of the evening, right?"

"Unfortunately, then I went on vacation and couldn't talk to him. But is it possible that he didn't tell you anything? You're his

best friend, you should have been the first to know."

Yeah, why didn't he tell me anything? Was he afraid of my judgment? Come on! As if I was some sanctimonious moralist.

"I assure you, I didn't know." Nor did I imagine.

Roberto's dark side shows up once again.

"However it went, I hope you'll tell us in person soon. Give him my regards if you hear from him."

The question is whether he will hear from me.

"Of course, I won't miss it." They always say that, don't they?

He greets me and walks to the door.

"Marco? One last curiosity: do you remember the name of the client who invited Roberto?" He pauses in the doorway in reflection.

"It seems to me that he was a notary, something like Sinistro or Mancino..."

My eye falls on the paperwork soiled by coffee: you can see that it is....

"Mancini! Yes, the notary Mancini." He concludes my thought, adding another link to the chain. I try to dissimulate my dismay. I succeed and he leaves the room. I throw myself headlong at Roberto's station looking for a clue to track down the mysterious notary. I'm more and more convinced that the party has something to do with Roberto's current state, but I don't understand how an event from a week earlier could have such delayed events: a singular drug. Very singular. At this point, I think it's appropriate to learn more about the notary. I wonder if

Roberto had mentioned anything to the beautiful Angela? I look at my watch. It should be traceable by now.

"Hello?"

The little handyman secretary always answers the phone.

"...yes, I am the gentleman who came to see mom. No, I'm not her new boyfriend. No, not a serial killer either. Now, though, can I talk to Mom?"

But did the CIA train her?

"Angela, finally! I'm sorry to bother you. I have some news and I wanted to talk to you about it. Do you know anything about a certain notary Mancini?"

"Who, sorry?" The answer is not the most encouraging. I explain what I've heard, but the outcome doesn't change.

"Maybe he was embarrassed to tell me something that is strictly for boys." Sure. I, too, would have had trouble talking about it with someone who dances a lap dance every night half-naked in front of hundreds of individuals drooling like molosser.

"It's probably what you say, although I don't understand why he left me off the list."

"If he really is involved, it's critical to track him down." And what do you think I'm trying to do?

"Yeah, unfortunately I'm left with just checking the address and I'm afraid that's another dead end as well."

"One would still have to try. Keep me posted, please." Aye-aye, Mr. Lieutenant.

"Sure. See you soon."

I flip through the crumpled road map I keep in the car. Here's the street, in the middle of the countryside on Laurentina: I'll get lost for sure. Want to see if I'll have to drive blind all night? Damn, sooner or later I'll buy a satellite navigator!

I slow down my pace. I should be in the home stretch. On the left there is an almost dirt road that leads to the top of a hill. I stop at the intersection and try to scan the end of the hill: there is a building not well defined. I take the road. A huge gate delineates the entrance to a large square, with a deactivated fountain in the middle and surrounded by well-kept hedges. In the background stands a dream villa for anyone who hasn't won the lottery. I get out of my car and approach the gate: no signs of rust or decay. But a general sense of abandonment permeates the air: I can hear the sound of silence, which sometimes is more annoying than the noise of a built-up area. A prominent bell invites me to be pressed. I approach it hesitantly, afraid of introducing a sound out of place in a quiet and sleepy atmosphere. I press it gently and imagine the echo inside the house. How silly of me to think that it could be heard from this distance. Nothing changes, it almost seems to be lost in an undefined place. I wait with the good manners of a guest. The lack of any response gives me the courage to try again, but this time more vigorously. One more time. By now it is certain: the prediction of the empty trip has come true. I don't know why, but a sense of unease surrounds me, convincing me to hurry back to the car.

As I manoeuvre in reverse on the narrow lane, out of the

corner of my eye I glimpse in the rear-view mirror the figure of a car stopped at the end of the slope. The nose of a sedan is pointing towards me, waiting for something. I'm convinced that it's not a driver who has taken a wrong turn, but that it's specifically there to observe me. Quickly, my hands move to find the optimal angle of the mirror, but a ray of sunlight, now dying, dazzles me. A moment, a few seconds of daze, and the vehicle is no longer visible. I turn sharply, compromisingly twisting my poor back, already pinned by the seat belt. A cloud of dust returning lightly to the asphalt is the only thing left in the air. It's not paranoia. Someone was watching me and I don't understand why.

Finally home. As I undress, I run the hot water for a shower. I lose myself in the vapours, relishing in the silence every single drop that falls on my skin.

Driin! Driin!

It's clear that the concept of peace of mind is foreign to certain moments.

Dripping, I grab my bathrobe, curse Meucci and Bell, just to do no one any harm, and head for the privacy-killing device that continues undaunted to play.

"He's missing! Roberto is missing!"

It's Sara's agitated, tear-filled voice.

"Calm down Sara! What do you mean Roberto is missing?"

"Today, when I went back to see him, he wasn't in the room. I thought he was having tests: his clothes were all still there, but

instead no one knew where he was. They searched the whole hospital. My God, I'm scared, Davide. What if something terrible had happened to him, like to those two porters? I don't even want to think about it and I don't know what to do!"

Heck, I'm worried too.

"Don't jump to conclusions."

Now what am I going to make up to reassure her?

"They confirmed on TV that the porters were mixed up in a nasty drug racket and that that was the work of a settling of scores and not a crazed killer."

Put like that, it should sound good.

It takes him a while to swallow the pill, but then the placebo effect sustains its effectiveness.

"Maybe you're right, I've definitely gone too far. But then what happened to Roberto? Where did he go?"

I haven't idea. In this instant, however, I know where I would send that idiot!

"Have you asked the authorities for help yet?"

Maybe he's wandering like an automaton down some alley.

"Yes, there were still some police officers at the hospital about yesterday's incident, and they helped me with the report, but I don't know what good that will do."

Jokes are fine, but a guy in a hospital gown roaming the streets with his eyes wide open I don't think is that hard to spot.

"Then don't worry, you'll see he'll be found soon enough. He must have had a lost moment. The important thing is that when

he comes back, you stay very close to him, ready to help him."

And to the assistance of good psychiatrists. I suggest a dozen.

"Yeah, in fact, my husband and I were thinking about having him stay with us for a while."

"Good idea. Family members are more helpful in these cases than cold hospital facilities."

"You know, I've thought it through and I don't care what happened to him, now I just want to get back to a peaceful life."

Does he really think that ignoring is the right way to regain normalcy? Even these searches of mine have now skewed the concept I had of it. The beauty of it is that I'm looking for answers to questions that are still unclear, including why I want to get to the bottom of this.

"He'll be back the way he always was...have faith."

And may God hear us.

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