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Lukas Bärfuss

THE CRUMB OF BREAD

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The life of a woman: sometimes there's not enough love. And there's never enough money.

Adelina, the daughter of an Italian immigrant, is working in a factory in Switzerland when her brief marriage ends and she is left to look after her daughter, Emma, alone. A painful struggle for survival begins – until she meets an elderly Belgian man and moves to his estate in Piedmont. Life becomes easier in many ways, but without love it remains stale and dull. And one day the Belgian man disappears, taking the child with him. Soon afterwards another man turns up – a drifter, a criminal. Together they set out in search of Emma. The man often goes away for a while and returns with money, food and newspapers featuring reports of robberies and raids on munitions depots. He takes Adelina back to his own community in Milan, and for the first time she feels like part of a group. She learns how to shoot a gun, delivers messages, and stays out of the way of the police. This is not difficult, because the police currently have their hands full. In this time of bombs and violence, a mother searches for her daughter – and for a long time she finds no trace of her. Until the drifter says he has seen the lights go on at the estate: there is a man there, a man with a child.



Lukas Bärfuss was born in Thun in 1971. He is a dramatist, novelist and polemical journalist. His plays are performed all over the world, and his novels have been translated into 20 languages. Lukas Bärfuss is a member of the German Academy of Language and Literature, and lives in Zurich. He has won the Berlin Literary Prize, the Swiss Book Prize and the Georg Büchner Prize.

- Lukas Bärfuss's new novel takes us back to the 1970s and explores issues which also shape our present.
- Lukas Bärfuss was awarded a.o. the Georg Büchner Prize, the Swiss Book Prize and the Berlin Literature Prize.
- Rights to *Vaters Kiste* were sold to France (Zoe) and Korea (Maracas Publishing).
- English sample translation available.

LUKAS BÄRFUSS

THE CRUMB OF BREAD

[pp. 5–30]

No one knows where Adelina's misfortune originated but it began long before her birth; forty-five years previously, to be precise, at the university in Graz. That was where her grandfather, a man named Angelo Mazzerini, had read the banned work of Cesare Battisti during his law degree, and from that point on he venerated the Carso landscape of Istria as holy ground, despised the empire, the Austrian Kaiser and his henchmen. For the student from Trieste, every question could be answered by history, and he was of one mind with Barzini in seeing his home city as a bulwark of Roman civilisation. Had it not been for the defence of the Adria, the Slavs would have long since overrun the Occident. The Habsburgians, whose subject he was, sustained those hordes with their money, weapons and courts. Italians like him, descendants of a global empire, had an ally in heaven; on earth, they had stood alone in a battle against annihilation for fifteen hundred years. Immense forces had conspired to exterminate Latinity, as had happened in Dalmatia, and if many in Trieste considered him insane, then only because they were paid lackeys of Vienna.

When Italy declared war on Austria in May 1915, Angelo was vacationing in his home city, and after a sleepless night in which he turned in prayer to Fortunatus, the patriarch of Grado who had also stood up to an empire, namely eighth-century Byzantium, he tore up the Kaiser's draft notice and left the apartment on Via dell'Istria at dawn without taking leave of his parents.

Travelling via Udine, Padua, Ferrara and Bologna, he made his way to Rome. There, Angelo volunteered for the Granatieri di Sardegna, was given three weeks' training and posted to the front at Monfalcone. He suffered a leg injury during an assault on the Austrian lines and served the months until his recovery as a lieutenant of the territorial militia in the mountains at Garda, before being redeployed to a regiment that was almost entirely wiped out on the high plane at Asiago in May 1916. Sporting a gold medal for valour, he fought in the Battle of Caporetto under the Duke of Aosta, returning home after the Armistice of Villa Giusti in November 1918.

His mother and father had perished of cholera. Angelo, alone in the family apartment, found life difficult after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. He encountered his dying comrades in his dreams, and on Sundays, when his soul sought relief in the fresh sea air, he saw their ghosts crawling along the pier with ripped-out eyes and bloodied stumps. He drank, smoke and agonised, for instance over what to think of Rossetti, whether the engineering genius deserved admiration for sinking the Austrians' flagship SMS *Viribus Unitis* in its harbour with a torpedo boat, or whether a decent patriot ought to disdain him for defecting to the Republicans, the traitors to the fatherland.

Fortunately for him, in the courtyard of the old barracks one Thursday at the end of December, Angelo heard a former sniper from the Bersaglieri Corps lecturing on Oberdan and the Italian national question in Veneto, a marvellous speaker whose words touched his listeners' hearts. When he spoke of religious edification on the battlefield, invoked the new lineage born in the sacred clamour of the artillery, an elite ready and willing to lead the nation's rebirth, a tremor shook Angelo's wounded soul; and when that man, Mussolini by name, mentioned the Carso, the eternal grove of the Italian martyrs, his young listener knew who would stand up for his and the nation's good.

He found a position as a bookkeeper at the Generali assurance company and intended to run for the next town hall election; however, at a lecture evening at the Societa di Minerva, where a Bologna professor reported on the archaeological excavations in Veneto, he met Paola Carnieri, a blonde lady with thin hair who gripped her father's arm for support all evening and repeatedly turned around to Angelo. She was not actually to Angelo's taste; her squint and her pallidity repelled him slightly; however, since his desires had to date only found fulfilment in the trenches, he went along with her erotic game and did not refuse Paola's attentions. She wore a black fabric carnation on her chest in memory of the fiancé she had lost in Piave in the last year of the war, and when Angelo talked of his war experiences, their attacks on the Austrian lines by night, Paola's entire body began to tremble; likewise when he switched to politics, the other subject he was capable of commenting upon.

Paola was short of breath; their walks together were brief, and afterwards they would sit in a caffè in the old town centre where Paola would become affectionate, joining Angelo on his bench, seeking his vicinity, nestling up to him while quietly reading her poems aloud, somnambulist sonnets she published herself. Angelo found them as excruciating as Paola's passion for D'Annunzio. The latter was certainly a great man, a nationalist and a war hero, but when she spoke of Fiume and the Arditi and garnished her patriotic tales with quotes from *Il Piacere*, it was clear how little Paola understood of the poet's true, political significance. The afternoons purred onwards. They drank coffee with orange liqueur, Angelo smoked a cigar and Paola coughed into her handkerchief.

Paola's widowed father, a tall man with a monocle, was a former procurator in the literary and artistic department at Lloyd Austriaco. The old man suffered from arthritis but he approved of his only daughter's acquaintanceship, and he fostered it to the best of his ability. Angelo, now increasingly neglecting politics, felt he had been caught in a pincer movement. The Carnieris never left him a moment's peace, suffocating him with invitations to literary soirées and bridge tournaments until he began considering how to liberate himself from their grasp without causing a scandal. While attending the theatre together – Goldoni, to Angelo's mind a cheap comedy, typically Venetian, no depth or earnest to it – the father grabbed Angelo by the sleeve during the intermission and talked at him, imploring him to tend to his daughter, who had sought out the ladies' room. The war, he stressed, had robbed the poor sick child of the sacrament of marriage, as Angelo knew; Paola had only weeks or perhaps months to live, no more than that, and if Angelo were a man and possessed a modicum of honour, he must lead Carnieri's daughter to the altar. He would not regret marrying. The family's assets were intact, their name respected. The father wiped his eye and replaced his monocle, then the bell rang and the third act began, which passed Angelo by entirely since his mind was occupied by the conversation in the foyer. After the final curtain he took taciturn leave, and as he kissed Paola's hand her blue eyes cast him a glance as though he had wrested her heart from her chest.

Angelo could not find peace. The mention of the fatal disease, of which he had been unaware, the father's imploring words, the appeal to his honour all nagged at his conscience, and four weeks later Angelo Mazzerini and Paola Carnieri sealed the sacred ties of matrimony in the church of San Bartolomeo.

Paola moved into the apartment on Via dell'Istria and a tormentful time of waiting began for Angelo. He was familiar with death, had encountered it thousands of times on a daily basis in the war, but it had been men and pack horses whose deaths he had witnessed, never a woman's. With fearful curiosity, he watched Paola's last battle, wondered as he saw her at her desk in her room when she would give up and how large the promised fortune would be. There could be no reproaching him; he did not wish for her death but it happened to be inevitable – her father had said as much. Yet the anxious waiting gave way over the months to an unhealthy, bitter aversion, a tedium that crippled him and filled him with the feeling that his wife's illness robbed him too of his life's power, and he wondered whether the dying woman sensed how impatiently he awaited his liberation.

He found distraction once again in politics. In May 1919 he had been present at the foundation of the Fascist Party, alongside two hundred Blackshirts at the home of Bartolomeo Vigni in Trieste. Despite never mentioning it to Paola, he regularly attended meetings at the Workers' Society building, though he felt out of place there and never took the floor. He remained a nationalist; the fascists, to whom he considered himself ideologically and socially superior, were merely a means to an end. Their leaders were all grandstanders; Jacchia an idiot, Comici a shirker and Suvich presumably Slovenian. Nonetheless, he stood by them, and his new connections gained him a subaltern position in the municipal tax office, replete with a ridiculously high salary.

Paola was proud of her husband's success and requested new furnishings, since they were still living with his parents' fittings; Angelo considered the change superfluous but did not want to refuse her last wish.

To his astonishment, however, Paola returned to Trieste from taking the waters in Veltlin visibly nourished and rosy of cheek. Angelo felt deceived by his wife, a dead woman on vacation who kept postponing her departure and refusing to die, in defiance of all medical diagnoses. Even his father-in-law had passed on before her, with the shame-faced smile of a man unable to keep his promise. His daughter drained her inheritance with rest cures in the Sondalo sanatorium, but in August 1923 – just as Banelli appointed Angelo to the commission in charge of exhuming the patriot Oberdan, hanged by the Austrians – Paola announced to him that she was expecting.

Angelo considered this a joke – a moribund wife harbouring a new life within her, how absurd – and he instantly forgot the news and went on working on the commission's report, examining the question of what those Austrian scoundrels had done with the martyr's head, whether they had shipped it to Vienna or the holy relic was still in the city. In the spring, Paola gave birth in the Ospedale Maggiore to a healthy boy, whom they christened Mario Giuseppe.

From then on, everything was different. Angelo loved the child, his son and heir, with a fervour he had never previously known. Politics seemed irrelevant to him, the scheming within the party ridiculous; the miracle of life overwhelmed him and he often stood at his son's cradle with tears in his eyes, listening to the baby's gurgling and immersing himself in his angelic smile, his mother's blue irises. That emotion expanded to include Paola. Angelo now recognised in her the matriarch who kept the Mazzerini line alive, and he cursed himself for the contempt, the lost years in which he had seen Paola only as a sick woman. Converted by love, Angelo felt regret; he spoke gently, took tender care of mother and child, and he found grace in Paola's bearing and her poetry, heroism in her existence, a feminine courage by no means inferior to that of the men in the trenches. He hoped for progeny as legion as the stars above the Adriatic, a dynasty. Yet in the autumn following Mario's second birthday, with the child still without siblings, Paola's health began to deteriorate. She expectorated viscous blood and was soon so weak that she could no longer take care of their boy. Angelo employed a nanny, a German woman from Württemberg with a lame leg. Weighed down with concern and uncertainty, he accompanied his sick wife on a cure to Sondalo, and it was from there – he had returned to Trieste to fend off intrigues and power struggles within the party – that he received a condolence telegram one early October morning.

Angelo buried Paola alongside her father in the central cemetery and sold her books to an antiquarian dealer in Milan, not wanting them to be doing the rounds in his city, but left the room with the desk untouched. The boy wailed for his mother and would not be pacified for two months, but the nanny said it would calm down; like every child of his age, Mario too would soon forget his dead mother.

Upon Mario's school entrance, Angelo dismissed the nanny and took personal charge of his son's education. He read him Gibbon's work on the fall of the Roman empire, took him to Winckelmann's cenotaph, showed him the Lapidario, where the boy had to draw the masks and amphorae in his sketchbook, and he got his son a place at the Regio Istituto Tecnico on Via Veronese. Mario thanked his father with dazzling grades, sailing through the lower forms at the top of the class. Though he was a clever, rather shy but generally popular pupil who maintained the black uniform of the Opera Balilla in meticulous order, his father could tell how unsuited the boy was for all things military. That did not trouble him, however. Mario resembled his mother more and more with every year; he was dreamy, a loner who spent his free time with books and chess puzzles, intelligent and quiet, vital source of his father's pride and concern as they roamed the Carso together in the summers and explored the fields of honour on the Isonzo and the Dolomites. All was well with the boy, in his father's eyes.

The city did not find peace. The shipyard workers went on strike, police officers were shot dead, the place was on the brink of chaos. Functionaries from elsewhere took over the party leadership and began to clean up the mess, and Angelo was pleased to see the Slovenes get their come-uppance. The storming of the Narodni Dom had been only the beginning; now their newspapers and banks were banned and they were forced to change their names. At the tax office, a department head by the name of Slataper was thrown out on the street, literally, and Angelo took over his post. Twice he had an opportunity to remarry, and twice he let the chance pass him by. He managed perfectly well without a wife, and he did not want a stepmother to endanger his son's progress as he strode ahead, with Angelo preparing him step by step for greater tasks.

It was during that time, in the month after the anniversary of Paola's death, when a man sat down uninvited at Angelo's table in the Caffè degli Specchi. Angelo had come in after work to read the newspaper in peace and did not recognise the man until the second glance. A cousin of Paola's whom he had last seen at his wife's graveside, a drinker with a pointed red beard, yellowed eyes and a glass of Fernet in hand. The man behaved in an ostensibly friendly manner, apologised for the disturbance, enquired after the family, the boy now training as a geodesist. The cousin licked the Fernet from his lips, spoke of the good reputation Angelo had in the city, a confidant to Giunta, the pride of the family. Then he spoke abruptly of a maternal line of the Carnieri family originating from Istria, from Capodistria to be precise, undoubtedly Slavic blood retained in Paola's and also, if he remembered rightly, in Mario's pale blue eyes. He would keep the matter to himself, he claimed; no one wanted people to start talking about Angelo; he should merely be careful.

Angelo felt inclined to stab the idiot then and there with his cocktail stick, but he settled for a response so obscene that the cousin stood up from the table and took to his heels.

In the weeks that followed, Angelo made discreet enquiries. He ventured two risky telephone calls and found an excuse to visit the city archive, but his research led nowhere and failed to answer his questions. All that was nourished was his doubt. Angelo felt poisoned by the cousin and his words. Should there be anything behind the insinuations, should all answers lie in history, then he asked himself why fate had shaped him into a nationalist and forged him in the furnace of war, why he, Angelo, had not fallen on the battlefield with his fellow soldiers, why he had survived the slaughter, unlike millions of his generation. So that he might waste his life raising a Slav? His existence seemed to him a jest played by a wanton god, proof of the degeneracy of human civilisation. Nothing was holy, no emotion, no thought, no ideal and no idea, and when he looked at the boy now, at Mario's pale blue eyes, he was overcome with nameless rage.

Mario could not understand why his father was suddenly punishing him with disregard, why he no longer said a word to him, had stopped reading aloud to him and sent him outside on Sundays. What had he done, what mistake had he made, what crime had he committed? The withdrawal of his father's affection drove him out of his mind and he made even more effort at school, but none of his good grades and commendations brought the man's acknowledgement back to him.

At the tax office, meanwhile, a new wind was blowing. The old-guard nationalists like Angelo were now eyed with suspicion, seen as uncertain elements in league with the local elites, the Jews and the freemasons. Angelo kept his head down, hoping the storm would pass him by, performing his duties as fastidiously and unobtrusively as possible, yet it was only the war that brought his salvation.

At a meeting of the Avanguardisti on the piazza outside the stock exchange, the prefect approached him. His son, he said to Angelo, would soon be eighteen and thus of drafting age, but since he was the Mazzerinis' only child and Angelo was a war hero, his father would be able to buy Mario out of the army through a payment to the party and an additional fee for the prefect.

With that offer in mind, Angelo sat down for his evening meal with Mario. He looked into the boy's pale eyes, his witless face, the boy craving a tender gesture as he asked how he had performed at that afternoon's parade; Mario would have given his life for a loving word from his father. But Angelo's heart remained battened down. If the Slavs had saddled him with a brat good for nothing but bringing misfortune, he would give him an opportunity to prove himself on behalf of the nation. He knew what that meant. Angelo had seen the intellectuals in the Great War, those figures devoid of strength and vigour, whom no uniform, no rifle, no field exercise could make into soldiers. They died even in the rear echelon, of the runs, homesickness or with the dubious honour of a bullet to their own brains. And Angelo decided to leave the verdict on the Mazzerini line up to destiny.

The next day, he went to the palazzo on the Piazza dell'Unita and told the bewildered prefect how scandalous his offer was. Never would he exploit his position, never would his son welch out of serving his fatherland; Angelo talked himself into a rage, felt himself talking himself into misfortune, but he could not go back, could not find a way out of the tangle of confusion into which life had brought him. The prefect, amused by his outbreak, wondered whether this strange fellow Mazzerini was the city's only genuine patriot or simply a fully-fledged idiot.

And so Mario joined the Eighth Army without ever finding out that his father might have saved him from the slaughter. One Friday morning in May, they said their goodbyes. He wanted to embrace his Papa at the station but Angelo would not let him; the boy was already dead to him. Mario felt how cold his father's hand was, how dismissive his eyes, and after the man in the red cap had given the signal, after the train had set off and vanished from sight, Angelo wandered the city aimlessly, losing himself because he was not on the streets of Trieste but with his son on the train, accompanying Mario to Laives, where he learned the craft of killing in the 232nd Infantry Regiment before being taken one late May day to Bronzolo station in Bolzano. Thirty days, the journey to the war was to take. In Warsaw, the child that he was saw his first bullet-ridden bridges, ruined villages, people on the run. In Brest-Litovsk it was old men, children, Jews, rounded up by the SS, and onwards by train to Minsk, along the Dnepr, five hundred kilometres to the south, to Kiev. In Dnipropetrovsk it was autumn already, German, Hungarian, Romanian soldiers, the mud, the sleet, the winter, the air raids, the mortar fire, the murdering, his thoughts incessantly with his father at home in Trieste, who regretted his betrayal of his son more painfully with every day that passed.

Angelo missed the son he could have saved, and he understood less from day to day what had driven him to his betrayal. In Rome they had deposed Il Duce, arrested him and freed him again, the Germans in the city, the Carinthians took over the murder squad, Rainer and his executioner Globocnik, presiding judge at the special court and a born Slav, a National Socialist, a German, an Austrian, which played not the slightest role; for people, Angelo realised, could be divided into only two categories, no matter what their language or origins: the just and the criminal, and

Globocnik, whichever hole he had crawled out of and whichever uniform he happened to wear, was a mass murderer; he had the Jews rounded up and locked them in away in the Risiera di San Sabba, and everyone in the city knew the direction and the destination of the Reichsbahn cattle cars. Anyone who had got involved with them was likewise a criminal, and he, Angelo, counted himself among their ranks.

He cursed his books, nothing but lies, he cursed history, one immense crime, he cursed God, who played men for fools. It was a brief redemption when Mario one day turned up at his door, alive but incurably shattered by the war. The shame destroyed Angelo; he was unable to look his son in the eye, those eyes he had once loved for their colour, then hated, and that were now no longer blue but black, from the cold, from the explosions, from the sight of the hell of the Donets Basin through which he had run, walked, crawled.

Mario had no inkling of what his father reproached himself for; he did not know his shame, or that he was waiting for forgiveness, and his father was too cowardly to admit his guilt to him. They boarded up the windows, hid inside the apartment until the Allies liberated the city and the war was over. Father and son found one another in a silent, wordless manner, in the meals they ate in the kitchen, in the sheets they washed together.

When the bells of peace tolled for a new beginning, Angelo did not want his son to stay in the city; too much had happened, too many murders, too much betrayal; Mario would always be seen as the son of a criminal. Everything was poisoned, spoiled – it would be best to change his name, deny his father.

The young man was reluctant, not understanding what was going on and not sensing that his father was disowning him for the second time. He underwent three vain attempts to change his mind, one evening in the apartment on Via dell'Istria, one Sunday during a walk along the pier, and late one night among drunken soldiers in a bar. Mario asked, he wept, he threatened, he begged. It was no use. Three more months, and then his father kicked him out.

The war had begun for Mario with an expulsion, and his peacetime too began with another.

Kitted out with two new suits, Mario boarded the train to Bologna one Sunday morning in June. He found a furnished room in a devout widow's pension on Piazza Santo Stefano, and enrolled to study geodesic engineering at the polytechnical college.

In a trattoria, he met Fiorella, a young woman from Cilento, a student of medicine, Fiorella with her carefree laugh and her gentle gait. On Sundays they took long promenades, visited the museums, sought shelter in the cinema, and whenever the widow was out of the house they made love on Mario's narrow bed. The rest of the time, they devoted to their books.

Studying came easy to Fiorella, who passed her preliminary examinations on the first attempt, and Mario too made smooth progress, working through all his intermediate exams and completing his geodesic diploma in nine semesters; while Fiorella began a post as a junior doctor, Mario arranged for a stipend and a supervisor for his PhD. Everything was moving in the right direction.

That is, until the seismic data he was evaluating for his dissertation brought him into contact with the authorities in his old home of Friuli. His father warned him. Mario thought his warning ridiculous. This was about earthquakes, and earthquakes had nothing to do with politics. Mario ignored his father's advice and continued his research, until a man Mario barely knew, an assistant at the Institute of Mining Engineering, began spreading rumours at the university about the year 1943, about that spring, to be precise, about incidents in Trieste. The affair made waves, and before the summer even started the faculty heads advised Mario to content himself with his diploma and abandon his PhD.

Mario was enraged. He hated the university and likewise his father, to whom he saw himself as chained, and whom he wanted to defend all the more against this slander, as he called it. He would continue work on his PhD. If they wanted rid of him they would have to throw him out.

Fiorella supported him, stood by him, soothed his rage and consoled Mario in his desperation. She told him not to take it too hard. Why wear himself out in a pointless battle? And what did anyone

know about his father and what he'd done in Trieste? What did she mean, Mario asked, but Fiorella changed the subject and encouraged him to look for a job, in industry for example, the chemical industry for example. Engineers were wanted, he would soon climb the career ladder and earn good money. A PhD was a nice thing to have, but not essential. And so Mario gave up, left the university, relinquished the stipend and cleared out his office. He was disappointed, he was relieved, he was grateful to Fiorella for extricating him from the intrigues, the battles for which – he admitted – he had no talent.

In the Pinacoteca one afternoon in early October, in front of Tintoretto's Visitation, Fiorella told him she had met someone, at the hospital, a colleague, another junior doctor. Mario would surely understand; they had grown apart recently, as she put it. Mario did not understand in the slightest, however. He wanted to know the other man's name but she shook her head; he wanted to know whether she'd slept with him, and this time Fiorella did not shake her head.

The ground opened up beneath Mario's feet, his stomach, his heart, his everything plunged to the centre of the earth; Zacharias and Joseph gazed on in pity, the Virgin Mother sang the Magnificat, but there was no salvation, only a feeling of being absolutely lost, a feeling he had once heard was synonymous with the state of souls condemned to hell. Fiorella, whom he afterwards harangued into a caffè for two terrible hours, had left him, for good; he knew it and yet could not believe it. He hurled bitter accusations at her, called her a traitor, but she insisted his academic failure had nothing to do with her decision. And with that, she vanished from his life.

His father died a few months later, fairly healthy and as taciturn as ever on the telephone the previous day, missing the last opportunity to confide in his son in the evening and suddenly, early the next morning, a fatal cardiac arrest.

Over the subsequent six years, Mario worked as a production manager in a lamp factory in Veneto, withdrawing to his bedsit outside Vicenza every evening. During that time, he developed an enormous appetite; he went through all five courses in the trattoria four times a week, dunking a pound of white bread in one bowl of soup; it was as if he felt the need to eat up the world, swallow it down. He surpassed a hundred kilos in his mid-twenties, reaching a hundred and thirty by the end of that decade of his life.

For most of the time, he battled his ghosts alone. He would be seen at the racetrack or the betting shop on Sundays. He gambled away a good part of the money he'd made from the sale of the apartment on Via dell'Istria, and then succumbed to depression. Dismissal, Al Pozzo Eterno Clinic, close to utter desperation and self-annihilation, close to death, when on the second Saturday of his sanatorium stay, a certain Margherita Pelli from Padua approached him, the daughter of a patient who had found the blood of Jesus Christ in her washbasin at the age of forty-five, the first in a series of visions that plagued her from then on. This woman had lost all interest in worldly matters, had signed her business and her home over to a palm healer who interpreted the signs for her and sold her holy oil from Jerusalem for the price of pure gold, before her only child Margherita could have her declared incapacitated and put in the sanitorium.

And one day, no one knows exactly when, over cassata after lunch, in the neon light of the windowless dining room, at the wobbly tables with their waxed tablecloths, Margherita Pelli lost herself in Mario Mazzerini, in his dark voice, his black eyes. From then on, it was inexplicable: she belonged to Mario, the slow, gentle and clever bear who smelled irresistible to Margherita's nose, and she loved him unconditionally. He never told her about his ghosts, about what he had experienced.

Margherita kept her curly hair cut short; she was blessed with strong hands and an inexhaustible creative force. She never lost courage, always knew what to do, what next steps to take. She rose at the break of dawn, took care of the paperwork, kept the apartment ship-shape, went to the market every morning and bought only the freshest vegetables for Mario, the juiciest cuts of meat. Then she went to work in a notary's office. She took care of her sick mother as best she could, and on Wednesdays she cleared the tables in the diocese kitchen. No job was too humble for her; whatever she did, she did thoroughly and without delay. The most diligent woman in the universe, as Mario said, and she used her strength and circumspection to get him back on his feet in no time. He moved to Padua, lost ten kilos, wore a clean shirt every day, found work in a road-building company. Soon after that they married, with no great festivities, no relatives; Margherita's mother was delighted and they exchanged vows out of deep conviction that they were tying the knot for life. They spent a two-week honeymoon full of sunshine and giddiness in a hotel in Menton, they found a larger apartment, then Mario got in a major row with the porter, who had given him a stupid look one Friday afternoon, probably because he had knocked off five minutes early, which was none of that spiv's business. Mario demanded a meeting with the personnel manager but the porter denied everything, claimed to have no idea what Mario was talking about. The personnel manager took Mario aside, shook his head and the matter was dealt with, but shortly after that he got in an argument with the foreman, a trade-unionist who failed to keep the workers in line and disposed of engine oil illegally, except that Mario couldn't prove it because the personnel manager covered for the lump of a man. These people were a heap of godless criminal idiots.

It was not much longer before Mario left the company. He spent three months looking for work, getting on Margherita's nerves at home. Even with her, he had become suspicious and argumentative. In the end he replied to an ad from a plant nursery and re-potted conifers for nine weeks, after which he was so demoralised that there was no other option but the clinic.

Three years passed by, from bad to worse, until Margherita turned thirty. She was no longer a young woman and something had to happen. She hesitated for a few weeks, not wanting to leave her mother alone, but then she suggested to Mario over Sunday lunch that they should leave the country, get away from the old stories, start a new chapter on a new page, a blank sheet, with new courage.

That afternoon, they got into a terrible fight. Mario found her suggestion ridiculous. He had spent his whole life running away and he had to stop. Every stage along the way had been worse than the last. He raised his voice, shouted that they ought to build a future in his homeland, show the bigwigs in Bella Italia that they wouldn't be driven out, that they'd fight for a place in society. He was prepared, or that's what he told himself. And yet he wasn't strong enough, not for that battle, not even strong enough for Margherita.

Mario sulked for a while and then demanded it had to be at least New York or Buenos Aires, but Margherita had already written to a cousin who worked for an international industrial conglomerate in Zürich. He was married to a Swiss woman from a good background, and his response came by return of post. Yes, he had contacts, links, there was plenty of work, especially for engineers, and he would help.

A place was found for her mother in a home run by Ursuline nuns, the cousin in Switzerland sent the forms, they obtained all the papers, sold their furniture and crockery, and one dull, wet and foggy autumn day, they arrived in Zürich.

They moved into an apartment near Enge station. The building belonged to a fellow Italian from Rimini; they had four rooms, third floor with a balcony, a stroke of luck. The only strange thing: they had barely got to Zürich before the cousin started snubbing them. Denied being at home when they called on the telephone, never called back, left them standing, and they wondered what mistake they had made. The old stories seemed to be catching up on them, poisoning their new start in life. The country cold and grey, the people busy and aloof.

Mario took a job in a packaging factory, badly paid, beneath his level, began to struggle with his weight and his nicotine addiction, and that only changed when Margherita was expecting a child. It was not an easy pregnancy; there was a risk that she might lose the baby in the sixth month and the doctor ordered strict bed rest, but after nine months of abdominal pain and constant fear, after weeks without sleep, Margherita gave birth in the municipal hospital to a healthy girl, three and a half kilos, with the sweetest little head covered in dark curls. The baby was perfectly healthy, the parents were assured, and the mother would soon be back to normal. Mario doted on the child from the very first day. Adelina, as they named her, had a smile that healed her father, made him forget the world's depravity for a moment and led him into a land without pain. He fell into the child, into her big black eyes, her immaculate face, as if delight and bliss had found a home in her.

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Adelina felt cheated, left without a mother and with a little over nine thousand francs in debt. For a day and a night she racked her brains, tried to conquer her rage, fear, her sense of being lost, and then, between two sips of coffee, she accepted her fate, went to Frau Gastweiler and explained the situation. She simply did not have the means to continue her apprenticeship. Her boss wept when she saw the young woman, who looked exactly as she had the week before, girlish and fresh-faced, and yet had become an adult overnight. She could come back, Frau Gastweiler said, once she'd paid off her father's debt. No matter how long it took, her door would be open; Adelina had worked off the costs of her apprenticeship without going on to draw wages, and Frau Gastweiler was genuinely sorry for that, and if Adelina wasn't too old by then, she could come back to the contract and finish her apprenticeship.

She found a place to stay with an acquaintance by the name of Vicky, a tiny room but it would do for the time being. Vicky was nearly forty and worked part-time for an agency that placed ads. She hated her job, wanted to quit and dreamed of a life as a tour guide, but it was no use, she had to stay; she was having an affair with her boss. He would turn up between three and five in the afternoon on Vicky's days off, hustle from his car, parked three streets away, up to the third floor, and Adelina soon worked out that it was better for her to go into town for those two hours. The man was married and an idiot, Vicky said so herself, and aside from that he sweated a great deal, but nonetheless she could not extricate herself, which was inexplicable to Adelina. In the evenings, she would sit in the kitchen with her friend and listen to her introduction to the realities of life, as Vicky called it.

You're in a pretty bad place, with your debts. How much is it? Nine thousand? What can you do without? A hundred a month? What does that add up to? Eight years of penny-pinching? You need a man, probably an older one. It's not nice but it's a fact of life, I'm afraid. The old ones just have deeper pockets. Is that our fault? We all use what we've got, and you, my dear, have a good deal to offer, but you have to use it right. Do you want to work your fingers to the bone in a factory? Take a look at me. I need a bottle of cognac, nine hundred cigarettes and three pairs of stockings a month. Those are my essentials – how else am I supposed to survive in this society?

Vicky was right about one thing. Men liked Adelina, and she knew it. She was delicate and pale, her dark curls fell long and heavy over her brow and hid her black eyes. Her mouth was large and rarely spoke, but that didn't mean she didn't have her own thoughts about the world in which she lived. She asked herself many questions, for instance whether evil people existed, fundamentally bad characters, and especially how to spot them before you had dealings with them, because afterwards the bad thing had already happened and you'd fallen for a bad person, deep in a ditch, and then it was too late.

If there were bad people, then there had to be good people too, and what was it that distinguished one kind from the other? Was it their deeds, everything a person did in their life, that made them either one or the other? But it seemed that good people were sometimes forced to do bad things, by necessity, out of a lack of alternatives, and didn't they deserve a different verdict than those who caused suffering to another person for no reason, stole from or threatened or hit someone or all three together? And if a good person had to go before their judge for a bad deed, the judge in heaven, if he really existed, or the other judge, the one in court, what would their just punishment be? She herself would have liked to be generous, but she could rarely afford that generosity. But perhaps, she thought, that was just an excuse. She might actually be depraved, or everyone was depraved, and perhaps that was the only option for staving off harm in this world, ice-cold calculation and deviousness. That was how to get on in life. That was how to build a nice home. She shouldn't think too much, at least not about the world; it couldn't be changed, after all. She could think about her own life, of course, how to pay less in this or that deal so as to buy more elsewhere, a small advantage here, not turning down an offer there. That was how to get ahead, but Adelina wasn't that kind of person. She sensed it, she knew it, she was convinced with every fibre of her body that one day, whenever it might come, there would be a reckoning.