

PART ONE

*Those who know say nothing;
those who speak do not know*

A pale three-quarter moon lit up the state highway at two in the morning. The road connected the province of Taranto to Bari, and at that time of night it was usually deserted. As it ran north, the roadway oscillated, aligning with and diverging from an imaginary axis, leaving behind it olive groves and vineyards and short rows of industrial sheds that resembled airplane hangars. At kilometer marker 38, a gas station appeared. It was the last one for a while, and aside from the self-serve pumps, vending machines that served coffee and cold food had recently been installed. To promote the new attractions, the owner had installed a sky dancer on the roof of the auto repair shop. One of those puppets that stand fifteen feet tall, pumped up by powerful motorized fans.

The inflatable barker fluttered in the empty air and would continue to do so until the morning light. More than anything else, it made one think of a restless ghost.

After passing that strange apparition the countryside ran on, flat and unvarying for miles. It was almost like moving through the desert. Then, in the distance, a sizzling tiara marked the city. Beyond the guardrail, in contrast, lay untilled fields, fruit trees, and a few country houses nicely concealed by hedges. Through those expanses moved nocturnal animals.

Tawny owls traced long slanting lines through the air. Gliding, they waited to flap their wings until they were just inches from the ground so that insects, terrified by the sudden tempest of shrubs and dead leaves, would rush out into the

open, sealing their own fates. A cricket, perched on a jasmine leaf, extended its antennae unevenly. And, all around, impalpably, like a vast tide suspended in the air, a fleet of moths moved in the polarized light of the celestial vault.

Unchanged over millions of years, the tiny, fuzzy-winged creatures were one with the equation that ensured their stability in flight. Tied to the moon's invisible thread, they were scouring the territory by the thousands, swaying from side to side to dodge the attacks of birds of prey. Then, as had been happening every night for the past twenty years or so, a few hundred units broke their link with the sky. Believing they were still dealing with the moon, they homed in on the floodlights of a small group of detached houses. As they approached the artificial lights, the golden angle of their flight was shattered. Their movements became an obsessive circular dance that only death could interrupt.

A nasty black heap of insects lay on the veranda of the first of these residences.

It was a small villa with a pool, a blocky, two-story construction. Every night, before going to bed, the owners turned on all the outdoor lights. They were convinced that an illuminated yard discouraged burglars. Wall-mounted floodlights on the veranda. Large oval polyurethane lights at the foot of the rose bushes. A series of faint vertical light fixtures lined the path to the swimming pool.

This kept the cycle of moths in a state of immanence: carcasses on the veranda, tortured bodies on the scalding hot plastic, in flight among the rose bushes. Just a few yards away, as it had the night before and the night before that, a young stray cat was moving cautiously across the lawn. It was hoping for another bag of garbage left out by mistake. Beneath the branches of the rhododendrons, a snake was splaying its jaws as it struggled to devour a still-live mouse.

The heavy barrier of leaves that separated the villa from its

twin next door started to shake. The cat cocked its ears, raised a paw in the air. Only the moths continued their dance, undisturbed in the spring air.

It was against the background of the impalpable grey-green bank of haze that the young woman made her entrance into the garden. She was naked, and ashen, and covered in blood. She had red polish on her toenails, nice ankles, and a pair of legs that were long but not skinny. Soft hips. A full, taut pair of breasts. She put one foot in front of the other—slowly, tottering, cutting straight across the lawn.

She wasn't much over thirty, but she couldn't have been younger than twenty-five because of the intangible relaxing of tissues that turns the slenderness of certain adolescent girls into something perfect. Her fair complexion highlighted the scratches running down her legs, while the bruises on her ribs and arms and lower back, like so many Rorschach inkblots, seemed to tell the story of her inner life through the surface. Her face was swollen, her lips slashed vertically by a deep cut.

That the animals were alarmed was to be expected. The fact that they hadn't remained so was far stranger. The snake returned to its prey. The crickets resumed their chirping. The young woman was no longer of any concern to them. More than her harmlessness, they seemed to sense that she was dragging herself once and for all toward the place that eliminates all differences between species. The young woman stepped on the grass, surrounded by this sort of ancient indifference. She was bathed in the glittering mantle that the swimming pool was reflected onto the walls of the villa. She passed the bicycle abandoned in the drive. Then, just as she had appeared in that small corner of the world, she left it. She went through the hedges on the far side of the yard. She began to vanish into the underbrush.

Now she was moving through the fields in the moonlight.

Her blank gaze was still locked onto the spool that was drawing her along a route that ran identical and opposite to that of the moths: one step after another, drawing blood as she crushed sharp stones and branches underfoot. This went on for some minutes.

The underbrush turned into a floury expanse. After not even a hundred yards the path narrowed. A dark surface, far more compact. If she'd been in full contact with her nervous system, at this point the young woman would have sensed the strain on her calves as she climbed uphill, the wind freely whipping her skin. She reached the top and didn't even feel the chilly metallic 500-watt power that once again revealed the curve of her waist.

Five minutes later she was walking on the asphalt, straight down the center of the state highway. The streetlamps were behind her. If she'd lifted her eyes she'd have seen, beyond the curves of the gas station sign, the pathetic profile of the sky dancer lunging skyward. She followed the roadway as it bent to the right. The road straightened out again. It was in this way—a pale figure equidistant from the lines of the guardrails—that she must have been reflected in the animal's pupils.

A gigantic sewer rat had made it that far and now it was looking at her.

Its hair was bristly, its head square. Its enormous yellowish incisors forced it to hold its mouth half-open. It weighed almost ten pounds and it did not come from the surrounding countryside. It came from the foul-smelling collection of sewers that fed into the tunnels that reached the outlying urban areas. The rat wasn't frightened by the young woman coming toward it. In fact, it watched her curiously, stretching the whiskers on its spiraliform muzzle. You'd almost have thought that it had its sights fixed on her.

Then the animal detected a vibration in the asphalt and froze. The silence filled with the roar of an engine coming ever closer. A pair of white headlights illuminated the woman's silhouette, and finally the girl's eyes were reflected in the horrified expression of another human being.

In the muggy, suffocating night, he went on telling the story of the crash.

“Completely fucked up. You’re just doing your job but that day Christ on the Cross decides to turn a blind eye to you. When He abandons you, He abandons you. I’m just saying that already that morning, things had started off badly.”

He’d told the story in the spring, and even before that, when the old single-pipe steam heating system was still struggling to ward off the chill in the recreation center, so that he, Orazio Basile, fifty-six years old, a former truck driver and now disabled, was forced to snuffle constantly. He sat there hunched over in his seat, his crutches crossed against the poker machine, with a grim, disgusted look on his face. And his audience—men on unemployment, steelworkers with ravaged lungs—listened closely every time, though not a comma of the story ever changed.

The rec center was in the old section of Taranto—the *borgo antico*—a small bean-shaped island connected to the rest of the city by the spans of a swing bridge. Charming, unless you lived there. Buildings with fronts eroded by time and by neglect, empty courtyards overgrown with weeds. Outside the rec center’s front door was a parking area where semitrailers were left overnight. Between one truck and the next you could see fishing boats bobbing in the water alongside the deserted wharf. Then huge red forked tongues of flame. The sea crisscrossed by reflections from the oil refinery.

“That fucking city.”

As Orazio said it, he widened his eyes. He spoke in dialect and he wasn't referring to Taranto. The others pricked up their ears even before he opened his mouth. Watching him over time, they'd learned that the metronome preceded the opening notes of the music—the trouser leg stitched shut at knee length was coming to life. The stump bounced up and down, increasingly rapid and edgy.

That morning a faint blue haze covered the fields between Incisa and Montevarchi. He'd been at the wheel for hours, driving his delivery van down the A1. His passenger just wouldn't stop talking. Orazio regretted having picked him up.

He'd left Taranto the previous afternoon and spent the night at a service area in Mugello, lulled to sleep by the reefer units on semitrailers packed with perishable food products. By 8:30 that morning he was on the outskirts of Genoa. He picked his way through the industrial park, down roads marked by implausible points of the compass. Electronics. Toys. Household Goods. One after another, he passed wholesale warehouses. Apparel. That's where he slowed down. He rummaged through his pockets for the crumpled sheet of paper. He'd been there once months ago, but still he was afraid he might get mixed up. When the letters of the sign matched what was written on the paper, he stopped.

He let the warehousemen unload the merchandise. Five hundred pairs of jeans made in Puglia and destined for retail outlets across Northwest Italy. While the men were unloading the clothing, the owner emerged through a glass door from a small office.

“Nice to see you again,” said the wholesaler with a smile.

The man was about sixty, and wore a pinstriped three-piece suit that had seen better days, his choice of attire suggesting superstition more than stinginess. Business must have been

thriving for years, as many years as it had taken to fray the jacket cuffs this badly.

“Let’s go get a cup of coffee.”

The wholesaler acted like someone who was sure he’d neither stepped across the watershed that marks the midpoint of a lifespan, nor was running the risk of doing so in the future. It would take more than twelve hours of driving to get back to Taranto; every minute was precious. Orazio was trying to come up with an excuse when the man laid a hand on his shoulder. Orazio let himself be jollied along. That had been his first mistake.

When they got back from the café, he’d followed the owner into his office to get his signature on the bills of lading. Only then did he see the cell phone salesman. The young man was sitting at the desk, reading the paper.

“The son of a longtime friend,” said the owner.

The kid stood up and came over to introduce himself. Slim-fit suit, black shoes. Just as relaxed as the wholesaler was, that was how hard it was for the thirty-year-old to keep both feet flat on the floor for more than three seconds at a time. Without moving his head, Orazio looked out the window at the leaden sky outside. He was eager to get going. The same kind of impatience that, Saturday nights in Taranto at the rec center, drove him to get into an argument with someone after a glass or two.

“It’s practically a miracle that he’s alive,” said the wholesaler.

The previous afternoon the salesman had crashed his Alfa 159 outside of Savona. A curve taken too fast. He was looking for a ride home.

“He’s Pugliese, too,” added the wholesaler.

Orazio snapped to. “Where from?” he asked.

The kid told him. The wholesaler nodded with satisfaction. One crash leads to another, thought Orazio. He considered the fact that giving him a ride wouldn’t take him out of his way. He

could drop him off right after the toll barrier and then continue on to Taranto. Easier to say yes than to say no. And yet he could say no. The problem was the wholesaler: the bubble of bliss he was floating along in was a way of presuming—to the point of imposing—total understanding between Orazio and the salesman. Joviality capable of showing itself for what it really was—suspicion and arrogance—only if and when the bubble popped. But that hadn't happened, ensuring that the wholesaler chose, like the last time, not to have the items of clothing counted before having them stacked in the warehouse along with other identical garments. All jeans of the same brand. An attitude the truck driver had counted on for this second trip. And so he'd had to give the youngster a ride.

The second mistake had been to let him spew all that nonsense.

His passenger had behaved perfectly until they stopped for coffee at the Sestri autogrill. Which is to say that for the remaining 560 miles, he'd never once shut up.

“First there's the panorama of the Riviera di Ponente. You know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. Pine trees and citrus groves just steps from the sea. At that point, *wham!* and I'm sitting on the asphalt without even a scratch on me. Jesus Christ, you can't begin to imagine. I didn't really get what had happened myself. It was a brand new 159. Before that, I drove a VW Golf Variant.”

He burst out laughing for no reason. “A Variant,” he said again.

The accelerated precision of someone who'll go on being thirty well past the age of fifty. After all, he came from the regional capital. He spoke lightly of the danger he'd escaped . . . When His talon sweeps past, just grazing you and inflicting nothing worse than a scare, the thing to do is shut up and keep going.

Orazio continued to drive and pretended to ignore him. He was forced to acknowledge his undeniable existence, though, when, at Caianello, he wasn't able to pull into the gas station. That's where, if he hadn't had the salesman along, he'd have met the fence and handed over the forty pairs of jeans he'd pilfered from his freight.

He would have set aside part of that money and whatever else was left after rent. The cash would come in handy the next time he had an argument with someone at the rec center. Like other times before, he'd choose to leave the center rather than get into a fistfight. He'd drive through the outskirts of Taranto until the lights of the refinery illuminated the city limits ever more faintly. A swarm of sparks would carve out the darkness at the end of a dirt lane. Whores. He'd head straight for them, thanking his lucky stars for leaving out on the streets the women he didn't have at home.

Instead he'd had to keep going, which left the salesman free to take the initiative a little further down the road: "What do you say we stop here for a piss? Let me buy you an espresso."

They set out again after a brief break. Orazio was on edge. He kept brooding over the income he'd so recently missed out on. He totted up numbers in his head as he drove, as twilight erased Irpinia and a clear, metal-black evening in late April descended over the plains of Puglia.

As they approached Candela they saw the enormous pylons of wind turbines in rows across the fields in the moonlight. They suggested a landscape imprisoned for too long in the realm of the imagination. Cars instead of horses. Mechanical towers instead of windmills. After ten minutes, the wind turbines vanished, and the horizon flattened.

The kid should have gotten off at the South Bari toll plaza. But just before they got there he said: "Now, please, let me repay you."

He spoke of a restaurant in the center of town. From how he described it, a very fancy place. He reeled off dishes and brands of wine, and when he stopped he still hadn't finished—Orazio had nodded in agreement. His third mistake. It wasn't greed but exhaustion that had convinced him that, when the kid offered to treat him to dinner, the damage was going to be made whole, at least in part.

They pulled through the South Bari toll barrier and headed toward the coast.

Quidde païse de mmerd'!

At this point in the story—when he referred in dialect to “that fucking city”—Orazio was usually already standing up. He'd hoisted himself erect with one hand gripping the armrest of his chair while, with the other, he harpooned his crutches. The effort charged him with an angry energy that swept over the counter and the bottles behind the bar, as well as over his audience as they nodded, in the throes of indignation, well aware that their own city might be an endless list of disasters and infamies of every kind. But Bari was even worse.

Any mentally sane individual would feel dismay upon entering Taranto from the Ionian state highway. The tranquil promise of the seacoast shattered against the crusher towers of the cement plant, against the fractionating columns of the refinery, against the mills, against the mineral dumps of the gigantic industrial complex that clawed the city. Every so often a foreman would be carted off in an ambulance after a grinding machine spun out of control. A plant worker would find his forearm stripped bare to the bone by the explosion of a machine tool. The machinery was organized so that it hurt men according to a cost-benefit equation calibrated by other men in offices where they optimized the most unbridled perversions. The regional assemblies ratified them, and the courts acquitted them at the end of battles the local press fed on. Thus, Taranto

was a city of blast furnaces. But Bari was a city of offices, courthouses, journalists, and sports clubs. In Taranto it was possible to link a urothelial cell carcinoma classified as “highly improbable in an adolescent” to the presence of dioxin, used in ninety percent of Italy’s entire national production. But in Bari, on Sunday afternoons, an elderly appeals court judge might sit comfortably on the living room sofa watching his granddaughter pretend to swing a hula hoop around her hips, dressed in a filthy pair of sneakers and nothing else. That episode had been recounted by a worker at the cement plant whose own daughter was working as a maid in the regional capital.

That’s why he shouldn’t have accepted the salesman’s invitation. What did it matter if he’d gotten a home of his own out of the story? Four sparkly clean rooms in a building in the better part of Taranto.

In Bari, after dinner, he abandoned the salesman to his fate.

He had no time to enjoy the solitude because he immediately got lost. He made a left turn, then a right and then another right, and found himself right back under the blinking neon owl outside the eyeglasses store. He cursed as he swung the van around. An advertising panel scrolled vertically from a sunny ad for toothpaste to a velvety one for a clothing store. That was when Orazio thought about the jeans still hidden in the van.

After driving around aimlessly for half an hour, he pulled onto the bridge that connected the center of town to the residential area. Ten minutes later he saw the Ikea tower and felt relief. He realized that he was on the state highway facing the cement barrier that separated the traffic going in opposite directions.

The person he was all this time later made a tremendous effort to lift a crutch to shoulder height. Wild-eyed, he pointed to the dark space beyond the breakwater, as if to say that not

even a Man who'd come walking over the waters could have warded off his accident. The mistakes had piled up in the empty primordial space where life stories are written before the events make them indelible and comprehensible.

He barreled down the deserted state highway, jamming on the accelerator. The roadway rose so that the vineyards stretched out as far as the eye could see. The moon was just a few days short of full and right now it gave the illusion that it could wax ad infinitum. He accelerated into the curve, altering the relationship between the passing seconds and the reflectors on the pavement. In the distance, beyond a second curve, he saw the inflatable man flailing wildly atop the roof of an auto repair shop. There was something ridiculous about the dance. Orazio furrowed his eyebrows without losing sight of the angle of the road: the absence of lights in the visible stretch corresponded to the lack of dangers in the blind spot. He would have been able to see a car with its parking lights out of order. But what happened was impossible to avoid.

A woman, or maybe she was a girl. She was walking in the exact center of the roadway, completely naked, and covered with blood.

He violently jerked the wheel to the right. That was a mistake, since the van immediately shot in the opposite direction. It went whizzing past the girl. It hit the guardrail. The van slid across the road until it smashed into the barrier on the opposite side. It tipped, flipped, and landed on its side, so that he could very clearly see the wall of metal coming back toward him.