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Blood Sisters

Translated from the Italian by Howard Curtis



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First published in Great Britain in 2011
by Hersilia Press, Oxfordshire
www.hersilia-press.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

Originally published as *Una Piccola Storia Ignobile*
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English Translation © 2010 Hersilia Press

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Printed in Great Britain by
the MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

To Barbara

What a squalid little story
is the one I have to tell you
just a stupid story like so many
not even worthy of
an item in the paper
or a slightly rhyming song
not even worthy of
the attention of people
with more important things to do

(Francesco Guccini, *Piccola storia ignobile*)

There comes a moment when you start to wonder how you got to this point. And you wish you could disappear, be somewhere else, you wish it had never started. Maybe this is happening to me because I'm a woman, because I'm not a detective, because the day I graduated in psychology I thought everything would be different.

Here I am, in the middle of the night, in the gloomy undergrowth of the South Milan Agricultural Park, and I'm scared. I'm digging with the little folding snow shovel Stefano gave me, which I've never before taken out of the car. I know that, soon, a hand will start to emerge from the ground, or maybe a foot, or a piece of material, and gradually, if I'm brave enough, I'll unearth a dead body, or what's left of it. It's the price I have to pay to be sure it's all true.

It's quieter than you'd expect just a few kilometres from Milan. Far away, on the main road, lorries pass, but from here all you can hear of them is a deep, muffled vibration. So the sound of my shovel hitting the earth echoes a lot more than I'd like. Fortunately, there are dogs barking loudly in the surrounding farmyards, and that partly covers my digging. Only the cars passing on the nearby unpaved road make much noise, but they're few and far between and the drivers stop beside the fires of tyres and crates lit by the prostitutes: prostitutes from a Europe that's adopted the laws of the market with unseemly haste, the laws that say 'everything's for sale, anything can be bought'.

But how did I get to this point? In my mind, I go over the whole story, to persuade myself that it's worth going on, seeing it through to the horror of a body buried and disinterred without pity in a small wood on the edge of a city. And when I go over the story in my mind, I see it in an orderly way, as if written in a kind of imaginary diary. And that bureaucratic

clarity makes it seem all the more tragic.

I can't help it, if I search in my memory I always find the hook, the point of departure. And from then on, the events fall into line, complete with dates and hours. And that hook, that point of departure, is Valentine's Day.

Monday, 14 February, Valentine's Day

At seven, the unpleasant screeching of my old rotary dial telephone put paid to any hopes I might have had of making up in the morning for the hours of sleep my backache had stolen from me during the night. Even Morgana had spared me her hungry dawn miaowing, but the telephone was less merciful. I got up, and my body moved with the unnatural lightness it has after it's been given a copious dose of anti-inflammatories. As I took the first few steps from the bed to the desk, I hoped that the ringing would stop, that the person at the other end would get bored or the battery of their mobile phone would pack up suddenly. But it didn't happen. For a moment, still hovering between sleep and waking, I felt touched: Valentine's Day greetings! No, it wasn't possible, not any more. I lifted the receiver and a hoarse 'Hello?' emerged from my mouth.

Ignoring all the disappointment concentrated in that one word, the female voice at the other end began, in the tone of someone who isn't used to waiting or being contradicted, 'Signora Anna Pavesi, I presume?'

'Yes, that's me.'

I expected a 'Sorry to disturb you at this hour', or something similar, instead of which the voice continued, 'I was given your number by Signor Crocetti, of the firm of Crocetti and Borghi in Turin. My name is Benedetta Vitali. I need to talk to you urgently and in person. I'm in Milan right now. If you can see me this morning, I'll leave immediately.'

‘This morning would be fine,’ I replied, still groggy with sleep.

‘Could you give me your address, please?’

‘10 Vicolo Aquila Nera, Bergamo.’

‘Is that in the Upper City?’

‘Yes, just after the Piazza Vecchia, coming from the funicular station.’

‘Is there somewhere to park?’

‘Nowhere at all. In fact, there’s no thoroughfare, except for residents...’

‘That’s all right. I’ll be there in an hour.’

‘Could you give me some idea what – ’

But she had already hung up.

I collapsed onto the sofa, trying to put my thoughts in some kind of order and figure out what this woman – who, from her tone, sounded like some princess from an old noble Roman family – wanted of me. The one clue was the name of Signor Crocetti, whose missing son I had tracked down a year earlier.

To be honest, the whole idea that his son had been missing was the father’s version of events.

‘Signorina,’ he had said in his best declamatory manner, handing me a cheque for a decidedly generous amount, ‘you found my missing son and reunited us. I’ll never forget that.’

But his son hadn’t gone missing at all, he’d actually run away from home, or rather, given that he was twenty-two years old, had simply moved house. He hadn’t been hard to find, I’d gone around the squats in Turin and in two days I’d tracked him down. The hard part had been persuading him to return home. Fortunately, I knew some of the other squatters, kids who’d occasionally spent time in the hostels

where I worked in those days. They were the ones who'd helped me, telling him that his political commitment could be just as effective at home, because he'd be fighting the system from within. They'd done it out of friendship for me, but above all, I think, to get that daddy's boy out of their hair. So he'd let me take him home and his father, after the cheque and the ritual celebrations, had asked me to give the young man a little 'psychological help'. We'd had four or five sessions, but then Signor Crocetti had come to the conclusion that his child's recovery was too slow, so, to speed up the process of welcoming him back fully into the bosom of his family, he'd bought him a Porsche and I'd refused to continue with my assignment. That was the story of Signor Crocetti: perhaps Signora Benedetta also had a son who was squatting and could be won back with the aid of psychotherapy and luxury cars?

I got dressed, without taking too much care over it, then closed the bedroom door and, occasionally taking a sip from a cup of scalding hot tea, tidied the other room, which served as kitchen, living room and consulting room combined.

I'd just done the absolute minimum necessary in order not to feel too ashamed of the state of my apartment, when, leaning out of the window to open the shutters, I saw a woman get out of a taxi and walk towards the front door of my building. After a moment the entryphone rang and I opened. I calculated the time that had passed between the phone call and the woman's arrival. There was no way she could have come by train. She must have taken a taxi all the way from Milan: one more indication that I was going to have to deal with another poor little rich kid.

