VIGEVANO SCHOOLTEACHER

a translation of

Lucio Mastronardi's Il Maestro di Vigevano

by

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Date Oct. 13, 1976
Allo scrittore medesimo, che ardisco - dopo circa 57,000 parole - chiamare il 'mio' Mastronardi ed al nonno materno, Karl H. Ickrath, donde deriva il forte amore per le loquele.
The North America-patterned economic boom had barely taken hold in Italy when, in 1962, the first cry of rebellion was heard from the literary world. The blurbs to Lucio Mastronardi's _Vigevano Schoolteacher_ read: "one of the angriest stories to stem from the years of the economic miracle", "a fierce caricature of a world which has become hurried, indifferent, ruthless in its feverish pursuit of Well-being", "the dramatic failure of petit-bourgeois decorum." A film version, directed by Elio Petri and starring Alberto Sordi, followed immediately. As did lawsuits, brought by those whose decorum had not succeeded in withstanding the bitter caricature.

The novel, tragi-comic but ultimately tragic parabola to a petty doom, held - like its author - little hope. This hopelessness - of Mastronardi's, of schoolteacher Mombelli's, of industrial-era Man - I have seen as dispossesssion. In the first part of my critical introduction to the translation of _Vigevano Schoolteacher_, I have considered the innumerable essentials of which Antonio Mombelli, elementary teacher at his fourth pay increase of point total 271, has been systematically dispossessed.

Disfranchised -by a constantly changing society- of pride, he is an educator who knows there is no room for learning, a modern man unaffiliated with the present time. Eyewitness to the construction of a power plant on the spot where Hannibal defeated the Romans, to the hallucinatory
transformation of woman from Eve into Delilah, he is a middle-aged man who realizes there is no time for the past. Returning, humiliated, to the point of departure, he is an ex-father cured of the tendency to hope. Mombelli, then, is dispossessed not only of past, present and future, but of a calling, of pride (or 'tar', as Mastronardi terms it; a man's almost amusing but vital concept of Twentieth Century saving-face), of hope; even, perhaps, of control over his own mind.

The second part of the introduction addresses itself of necessity to Mombelli's reactions to his dispossession. I have considered first his initial attempts to fit in - as colleague, as Principe Bar hanger-on, as even small-time industrialist; then his subsequent forms of escapism - the fantasies and numbed despair; and finally his efforts at creating order - habits as holding off the holocaust.

The parallel then is clear. What have ultimately to be discussed are Mastronardi's linguistic equivalents to the life-responses of his character. To the schoolteacher's attempts at fitting in correspond the author's tries at various formulas of speech (bureaucratic, learned, journalistic, dialectal). To fantasies correspond linguistic experimentation and even outright invention. To Antonio Mombelli's two-decade-long habits, to his sentence to do first resigned, then ever more untenable, increasingly
surrealistic, and finally irreparable Time corresponds
Lucio Mastronardi's parabola. From the vise-like chaos
of dispossession, through a writer and novel, emerges -
anguished - order.
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For the more lengthy quotations from Alessandro Manzoni and Dante I have used the following editions: The Betrothed. New York: A. L. Burt, 1844; The Divine Comedy. tran. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Boston: Fields, Osgood and Co., 1870.
Parabola To A Petty Doom:

Dispossession and Order in Lucio Mastronardi's Vigevano Schoolteacher

"I'm an elementary schoolteacher with a family. I have a wife and son, and my earnings are enough to see us to the end of the month." ¹ The bourgeois bases are sketched in quickly and well; we are immediately given, as the much-discussed Italian writer Lucio Mastronardi opens his celebrated Vigevano Schoolteacher, the four solid walls of setting, simple assurance of an apparent small-town normality.

The simplicity, both of style and setting, however, is deceptive. Mastronardi's novel defined by critics as the, "fierce caricature of a world which has become hurried, indifferent, ruthless in its feverish pursuit of Well-being", is clearly in the tradition of Notes from Underground and La Nausee; Schoolteacher Mombelli's somewhat less anguished

notetaking may give us brilliantly focused shots of pedagogical absurdities, of the economic boom as high and hilarious comedy, but its course is that of an ultimately tragic parabola to petty doom.

_Vigevano Schoolteacher_ was first published in 1962, with a fourth edition within a decade. Preceded by _Vigevano Shoemaker_ and followed by _Vigevano Southerner_, it was immediately made into a popular film directed by Elio Petri and starring Alberto Sordi. Its author, son of Vigevano schoolteachers and formerly an elementary schoolteacher himself, was just as immediately faced with lawsuits, brought by those whose "petit-bourgeois decorum" had not succeeded in withstanding the bitter caricature. Literary critics at their harshest relegated him to the minor branch of dialectal literature; at their most laudatory spoke of the caricatural force and ruthlessness of a Balzac or Gogol.

The book, which both stems from and strikes out at the provincial _Amarcord_-type atmosphere of the tiny shoe capital of Italy (letting us see through those bright, satisfying Fellini colors to the colorless realities beyond), admittedly holds little hope. This hopelessness - of Mastronardi's, of Antonio Mombelli's, of industrial-era Man - is the result of a systematic and modern-day dispossession: the confiscation - worked by Economic Miracle - of past, of pride, of the cultural and psychological equilibrium counted upon by a State employee at point total 271 salary bracket #4.
The days of the petit-bourgeois status quo, then, are numbered, and from behind those steadfast walls of setting we hear already the ominous sound of preliminaries to the wreckers' ball: "Ada, my wife, is always saying to me, 'Let me go out and get a job!'... 'All the women in Vigevano work!'" (p.13)

The fact that decade-long habits - nearly rites, Mombelli observes - are disturbed on the third page of the novel is significant. "I stretch out, but now there's somebody at the door asking for me. I can't stay lying down, can't drink my coffee, can't smoke in peace." (p.15) From these first and relatively tolerable hints of change, of muddied waters, the spiral is vertiginously downward. Consecutively dispossessed of present, past and future as well as of a calling, of dignity and of hope, Mombelli soon suffers from far more than merely a "disagreeable feeling of annoyance". (p.15)

With his slow, secure values called into question by a split-second world, he becomes a modern man disaffiliated with the present time. Having spent nineteen years as an educator, he comes to see that there is no room - in these Italian lives stepping to big-money U.S.A. time - for learning. Humiliation, at first simply one of the occasional bothers of daily life, becomes a constant state of mind. The tar, a man's almost amusing but vital concept of Twentieth Century saving-face, becomes considerably less amusing as quicksand.

And still to follow this dispossession of the present and of pride, is rough eviction from an idyllic view of the
past, gradual surrender of any sort of faith in the future. Eyewitness to the construction of an Edison power plant on the spot where Hannibal defeated the Romans, to the hallucinatory transformation of woman from Eve into Delilah, Mombelli learns, as a middle-aged man, that there is no time for the days that were.

One final mirage, however, perseveres. "He reads a lot, you know! He'll be a Group A." (p.51) Having bowed to the impositions of leaving his profession, of becoming 'prince consort' to a wife and brother-in-law gone into business, of being presented with and then losing an unwanted redheaded baby, he pins all hopes on the true son. "The thought of Rino as a future Group A is the hope that helps me forget the present. The tar." (p.51) But he is destined finally to be evicted from this dream as well. Ex-schoolteacher Mombelli thrusts his son into the future, wishing to save him. Instead, Rino too is sucked under by the present, leaving Mombelli an ex-father in the end, cured of the tendency to hope.

"And I think, I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I'm myself, Antonio Mombelli - and my name sounds sarcastic to me." (p. 90) The Vigevano schoolteacher's world becomes slowly surrealistic in its ever-multiplying tragedies of dispossession. What were originally idiosyncracies become fatal symptoms, what was black humor reaches bitter proportions of doom.

"I think about whether there could be a logical connection between a paper bag and this granite.... The feeling of
not being in control of myself came over me again." (pp. 83-4)
The parabola points downward. Explosion, not even halfway through the novel, seems imminent. One would almost hope, in fact, for the book and its world to self-destruct - the only humane solution.

Instead, time - one hundred sixty-eight hours by one hundred sixty-eight hours - goes on. There can be no relief by means of explosion. But Man, in order to survive, will seek alternatives. Mombelli's first try is at conformity. Perfectly aware that Amiconi is recounting the same story he told "yesterday, the day before yesterday, last year, two years ago, three years ago" (p. 24) (and addressing not Mombelli but himself), aware that one quarter of his hours are spent in listening to arguments about sputniks, about reading in the bathroom, and about grain-fed chickens, Colleague Mombelli attempts nevertheless to fit in.

"I ordered coffees at the bar. 'Wait a minute, who's paying?' Amiconi said.

'It's on me', I said recklessly." (p. 46)

Humiliated by his wife's asking a pupil's industrialist-father for money, mortified at her working, he swallows the rage and resigns himself. "'Go get the vegetables' she tells me. So, for the sake of peace and quiet, I go. I'm getting used to it now." (p. 38)

The last chapter of Part One - four lines, two sentences - constitutes Mombelli's final try at amalgamation. "I have the
feeling of being satisfied with myself. Tonight I sat down at the Caffe Sociale with the small-time industrialists; the same ones that used to get on my nerves when I was a teacher and I'd see them sitting there satisfied with themselves." (p. 109) Mombelli has by now been deprived of a profession, of colleagues and of independence: four pages into the next part, he will have lost nearly everything.

The next alternative to explosion (Mombelli barred now from his wife's business and affections, given a daily allowance, and immobile before the window for hours on end) is clearly fantasy. Raving by the banks of the Ticino, he has already seen a woodcutter and his companion as primeval Man and Woman; a pool of water and hut on pilings as Nature and Earthly Paradise. He now becomes, in his mind, a great cyclist; Super Champion!, dreaded rival of the famous Coppi and Bartali. "I keep on thinking about Eva. And when I'm not thinking about her, I'm thinking about being the super-cyclist." (p. 194) "I went for four hours in a state of semi-consciousness, thinking, I'm alive, I'm winning the Tour, Coppi's behind me somewhere!" (p. 230)

But the boom years, the century, the society - and, above all, Mombelli's sanity - will allow only briefly for such escapism. "I started thinking about being that great cyclist who pulverizes Coppi, and I realized that thinking like that was like drugs; as dangerous as taking drugs." (p. 184)
From the initial semblance of petit-bourgeois decorum, through wrenching impositions, a precariously-balanced period of false normality and evasive reactions, Mombelli must now accept an unchosen and raw-skinned return to the point of departure. A return in which fantasies can have no part, in which only order - however superficial - can be used as counterbalance to the foregoing chaos. And only those same habits - ritual-strength and token of normality - that marked the first pages of banal and stolid setting can now serve to hold off the holocaust. Mombelli is dimly aware of the need: still fantasizing, he nevertheless sees clearly enough to enroll in two supplementary education courses, infantile and ludicrous as they may be. Nearly unconsciously, he becomes again a Colleague; tackles a certification exam; "picks and discards, picks and discards" as a card partner once more; frequents teachers' meetings, Bar and Piazza; revives his obsession with toes.

"I think about how it's Monday. I try to remember where I was ten years ago on a Monday of this month. And it strikes me that I was right here, that I'd seen the same people and the same scenes as tonight... I think about how today's over too, how the night's going by, how from Monday you go to Tuesday. And in a few days it'll be Monday again and then Tuesday again. Point total 202." (pp. 254-5) Having come full circle (all external elements regained; once more "a
man of habit, and... almost fond of my habits" (p.14) means not necessarily a solution but, at least, survival.

The difference lies again in dispossession. Mombelli has recovered the bare facts of pay increases and soccer disputes, schedules, Scoop games and 'paying his dues to life'; but those bare facts are now stripped of goals, of resolve or ambition, of any extrapolation beyond the next and identical day. He has learned cynicism and paid dearly for order.

**Vigevano Schoolteacher** is not fable, however, and its success must be measured not in terms of lessons learned by the character, but of heights achieved by the author. Mastronardi's use of language closely parallels the life-responses of his protagonist; yet his final sentences have strength enough to lift both character and reader out of that life and into literature.

To the schoolteacher's varied attempts at fitting in, correspond the author's tries at various formulas of speech. A possessor of words, Mastronardi moves easily from dialect to learned language, from sports jargon to a principal's rhetoric. The sometimes dizzy experimentation, however, is not without motive. As a linguistic equivalent to the experimentation-for-survival practiced in life by the dispossessed, it serves to expose such social codes as purely Form; and to indicate that Communication lies elsewhere.
Mastronardi, in vividly reproducing the lexical settings of myriad social contexts, echoes Mombelli's last-ditch efforts to adapt to just such levels and systems. And underlined by both Mombelli's unsuccessful efforts and the author's linguistic mimicry is the superficial and formulistic nature of these various categories of society.

"In the morning I go to school, and think about how I'm going there to pay my dues to life. I know I'll see Cipollone and that he'll be talking about his feasts and about how chicory hits the spot. That Bragaglia'll be talking about legal status. That Filippi'll be talking about getting it up. That Peschetti'll be talking about athletic phenomena. That the assistant superintendent wants me to watch my loops."

(p.247) Clearly, both to author-character and reader, it is not the speakers who possess the language, but the patterns of life and speech which possess them.

Thus, the next venture of a linguistic kind is — in harmony with Mombelli's ensuing daydreams and fantasy — outright invention. Somewhat stymied for labels but appreciative, the critics speak here of "syntactic distortions", of "phonic barbarism", surreal expressions, mimesis and "corruptions." Gianfranco Contini, in his exclusive anthology of contemporary Italian authors, Letteratura dell' Italia Unita, assigns Mastronardi a place among the more important of the neorealists. "This extraordinary vivacity, physiologically
optimistic (even though one is dealing with Lombard 'losers')," Contini says, "is above suspicion of being 'art for art's sake'." 2

Mastronardi's agile improvisation, however, like Mombelli's fantasizing, is not enough. The novel too must be capable of coming full circle: the answer again is order. And while Mombelli does no more than learn, with cynicism, of his dispossession; Mastronardi must ultimately possess.

The schoolteacher's experience is of a society which is shown as primitive backbiting survival; of an educational environment with no room for true teaching or learning, and even less for anything like wisdom. From such an experience, he can discover only the all-inclusive impossibility of learning: One cannot learn from the (economic boom) present; it has nothing to instil, only to impose. Neither can one learn from the (Earthly Paradise) past; it pales and is covered over from one day to the next. And one cannot learn from the (ever-identical) future; it holds no hope.

"Every day little things'll happen, new little things all the time, and that'll distinguish one day from the next; I'll fill up my time with little things, besides paying my daily dues to life." (p. 257) There is no use in under-

standing, Mombelli has found. Order may soften the sentence, but one must simply do one's time. If he has indeed returned to the point of departure, this can be considered a new beginning only in a highly ironic sense.

We have seen, however, that it is not the Vigevano schoolteacher but the author who must finally command the experience of two hundred pages. Mastronardi, himself dispossessed but a possessor of language, rises—simultaneous to the last words—above the experience of the novel; having surmounted it, ordered it, and thus possessed it. To Antonio Mombelli's two-decade-long broken and then reinstated habits, corresponds Lucio Mastronardi's perfectly balanced parabola. To the schoolteacher's sentence to do first resigned, then ever more untenable, increasingly surrealistic and finally irreparable Time, corresponds a masterpiece of tragi-comic symmetry. From the vise-like chaos of dispossession, through a writer and novel, emerges—anguished and ironic—order.
VIGEVANO SCHOOLTEACHER

A Novel by

LUCIO MASTRONARDI

Translated from the Italian by

ANNELIESE SCHULTZ
I'm an elementary schoolteacher with a family. I have a wife and son, and my earnings are enough to see us to the end of the month. Ada, my wife, is always saying to me, "Let me go out and get a job!" Or else, "All the women in Vigevano work!"

She sees that I'm wearing myself out what with school and private lessons, and she takes advantage of it. "Why don't you let me go work?"

I realize her working would be vital to the household economy, not to mention the economy of my energies; but I can't take the thought of my wife - the wife of a petty bourgeois - going into a factory, putting herself on a level with the workers. "You've got the house to worry about," I tell her.

In my house, to tell the truth, there isn't much to take care of. There's just me, Ada and our son Rino.
"You're vain and full of hang-ups," Ada reproaches me.
I realized I was vain and hung-up a few days ago.
Rino is supposed to be confirmed. In Vigevano Confirmation is the kids' big holiday. On Confirmation morning the Cathedral swarms with them; all dressed to kill. How can I send my son up in front of the bishop, in the midst of all that luxury, in a barely presentable get-up?
I said, "Rino, you can be confirmed next year!"
Rino complied. "I'll tell Father Licodori," he said.
It's evening. The children I give private lessons to left a few minutes ago. The air in the dining room is still teeming with them. There's a fresh ink stain drying on the table.
My table is covered with stains like that. I look at them with satisfaction, maybe because they remind me of work.
My head is full of problems and diagrammed sentences, of numbers and words.
My day's over, I think, opening the window. Four hours of school this morning, another four of tutoring in the afternoon. I've paid my dues to life, I think, like I usually do at this moment. When I've finished work I feel exactly the way you feel after you've paid your taxes.
I'm a man of habit, and by now I'm almost fond of my habits. At this time of evening I always stretch out on the sofa and enjoy my only cigarette of the day.
It's practically a rite I've been repeating every weekday for ten years. Ada brings me a cup of coffee and then I light the cigarette.

I stretch out, but now there's somebody at the door asking for me. I can't stay lying down, can't drink my coffee, can't smoke in peace. I have this disagreeable feeling of annoyance.

Now Father Licodori is sitting across from me.

"The responsibilities toward Rino undertaken before God are most grave," he said, ill at ease but resolute. What he was saying contrasted with his polite tone of voice.

"Next year!"

"Do you realize that if the boy were to die he would end up in Limbo?"

Now his voice becomes pressing. "Do you realize that the grace given him at Baptism is complete only upon Confirmation?"

He looks at me. I lower my eyes all the way down to his shoes. Who knows what his toes are like, I think.

"Why are you not allowing him to be confirmed?"

He stares at me.

"Because... I'm only a State employee," I stammer.

"But Jesus looks at the garment of the soul," he responds, and his voice sounds nasal, pedantic.

"Next year," I repeat mechanically.

"Think it over. There's still time!" he answers.
II.

Friday's come. I hate the day; or rather, it's Friday evening I hate. Every evening I go and spend an hour at the Bar and play cards with my friends. On Fridays I can't: Ada always wants to go to the movies and I have to take her.

I thought about our card games as I watched the movie. It was about a woman from the country who runs off to Paris and manages to become the lover of some big shots. During the intermissions Ada looked at me provocatively. The husband of the woman in the movie was a humble clerk; the setting for the provincial scenes resembled Vigevano. The central piazza, all those faces of people who do the same thing every damned day, that somnolent air typical of lower middle-class provincials and those same nuances of presumption and indifference, were all being unveiled in front of me. That bourgeois clerk could have been me. I followed the movie with bated breath, as if it was a thriller. The movie pointed up my defects, my habits, the tar. And Ada's stifled ambitions.

I felt her look piercing the darkness of the theatre.

"That's you," her eyes seemed to say.

"And that's you," my look answered her.

By the third reel I couldn't take it anymore. "Let's go," I told her.

"No," she said.
The conclusion of the movie was obvious. The wife is unfaithful to the husband, who just goes on in his provincial habits. I thought I felt a premonition. "This movie is a warning," a voice inside told me.

I looked at Ada, and her by now amorphous face, neither ugly nor beautiful, reassured me.

'I have to get rid of these habits,' I thought, as we left the theatre.

Ada wanted to go through the Piazza on the way home. "It's quicker this way," I said, pointing to the street. "The Piazza," she insisted.

At that time of night the Piazza looked like the one in the movie. Not from an architectural point of view, of course, but its atmosphere. At the Caffè Sociale a bunch of small-time industrialists were slouched in the small easy-chairs with a satisfied and beatific air. A big industrialist was sitting at a nearby table with a flunky-worker beside him. Both of them looked pleased at being seen together: the industrialist seemed to want to show his attachment to the workers; and the worker seemed satisfied, as if the wealth and power of the industrialist reflected on him. Ada pointed out a fellow walking along the arcade.

"He's set up a shoe factory. He's a year younger than you!" she said enigmatically. "He was a factory worker," she went on. "He had a go at it and now he earns twenty million a year!"
"I wasn't aware he told you all his business," I answered through clenched teeth. 

She smiled smugly. "I read it in the Vigevano Informatore: under the Vanoni annual statement of income!"

Farther ahead she pointed out another fellow. "See that guy over there? He's a year older than you and he's set up two shoe factories. He's got an Alfa Romeo!"

We sat down at the Principe Bar. Beside us Pallavicino, the reporter from the Informatore, was holding forth to a dozen workers.

"This Piazza is going downhill!" he was shouting. "But I was telling the mayor, I was telling him: four painters to give it a nice coat of white and it'd come out fantastic. I'm gonna write an article about it."

"He's six years younger than you and makes two hundred a month," Ada told me.

While we were drinking our coffee, a custom-built Alfa Romeo drove up. A small-time industrialist and his wife got out. Both of them nice and fat; that flaccid, soft kind of fatness. The wife must have been wearing about twenty kilos of gold what with bracelets rings necklaces and brooches; he at least half as much. They had this haughty way of walking.

"That guy worked in a factory till last year," Ada said to me, "and so did she," she added in a loud harsh voice.

"Don't let them hear you!" I murmured.
The two of them were right behind us. "And now they have their chauffeur bring 'em so they can show off in the Piazza. You'd think they were the only people around with a custom-built car!" she shouted.

The two left. They got back into the car calmly. First they opened the car doors, then they put in their left leg, then they sat down, then they drew the other one in, closed the car doors and the Alfa Romeo drove off.

"Try and control yourself," I said to Ada.

Pallavicino, the reporter, was still going at it. "I'm telling you, Vigevano is worth two hundred Parises. What've they got in Paris that we haven't got in Vigevano? In Paris there's the Piazza Pigalle, in Vigevano we've got the Piazza Ducal; in Paris there's the Seine, in Vigevano there's the Tisin; in Paris there's the Eiffel Tower, so here we've got the Bramant Tower," he was saying. The big bell in the tower struck midnight. The colored neon signs of the bars flickered damply.

"Let's go home!" I said.

She jumped to her feet. "Bastard city!" she said through her teeth. "Let's go, that's all we ..." she went on.

"You don't say: that's all," the reporter interrupted her. "You say: that's detergent!"

Seeing as he was waiting for the question, I said, "Detergent?"
"Righto! Isn't 'All' a detergent?" Pallavicino answered, bellowing with laughter.

I walked along, brushing against massive bolted doors, closed windows. From the walls oozed sounds of hammering, of machinery running.

"We're going home to sleep!" said Ada.

Her tone of voice was harsh. I didn't answer her, feeling she was just waiting for the right word to burst into a rage.

"But we'll never own either a car or a house..."

"We've got enough to eat," I said, offended.

She laughed with her usual maternal smile. "Before I married you my girlfriends used to be jealous; they used to say, 'Ada's marrying a schoolteacher!' Now they're saying, 'Poor Ada... She married a schoolteacher!'"

I looked at the moon pouring its yellow light over everything; there was a green halo around it. "You're making a big thing out of it!" I told her. "Think of the people listening to us going by; they probably think we're two lovers!"

"The moon's going to your head!" Ada grunted.

In the bedroom Ada lingered in front of the mirror, looking at herself.

"Don't you think I look a little like Ingrid Bergman?" she asked me.

"There really is a certain resemblance!" I said.

She smiled at herself, then became serious again, then
assumed a dramatic expression. "What the heck do you think you're doing?" I said, thinking: that'll teach her to show me, one after another, all the guys who own factories at my age.

She looked at me with hatred. She undressed and left just her underthings on. An undershirt covered with patches, with one red sleeve and the other blue, and lengthened with another scrap of wool. A pair of my undershorts, altered for her. In that state, she kept promenading to and fro in front of me.

"Just think if I was to feel ill when I was out somewhere!" she said suddenly with a nervous laugh. "Or if one of us ended up in the hospital!"

She started walking back and forth again.

"It must be two months since I've taken a bath," she said sarcastically.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I hope I do get sick when I'm out sometime. That way they'll see what kind of hygiene there is at Schoolteacher Mombelli's house!"

"One can be poor but clean," I said.

She laughed. "The maxims of the little schoolteacher! One can be poor but clean," she repeated, imitating my voice.

Then she took all her underthings out of a drawer: a pile of rags; mended, threadbare stuff.

"Mine're worse," I murmured.

One by one she uttered every obscene vulgar word possible.
I kept quiet. She started yelling. She shook me. "I'm dirty! I'm filthy! Here you go, Sweetie, this is for you!" she repeated.

Here we go again....

III.

Rino had a fever this morning. The thermometer showed 40. I kept seeing his flushed face and feverish eyes in front of me while I sipped my coffee at the Bar.

"What can you tell me about beach skittles?" my colleague Amiconi asked me. He pulled some of his students' reports out of his briefcase, picked one and read, "'...I was playing with beach skittles in the sand.... If the beach skittle gets buried you say: in the sand; if it stays on top then you can say: on the sand....'"

"I don't know anything about beach skittles," I answered.

"What'll the principal say? He's bound to get me on it...."

Amiconi was still worried as we walked towards the school. Our colleague Filippi was with us too. "Still getting it up?" he was saying again. "As long as you can get it up, you're A-O.K.!

I rubbed a hand across my eyes, almost as if to dispel Rino's face.
"Something the matter?" Filippi asked. "Family, huh? Well, you've got your family to support and I've got my Fiat Topolino to support. See this shirt? Cost me ten thousand lire. See these shoes? Ten thousand. See this tie? Three thousand..."

I went to Rino's teacher to explain his absence. She looked at me indignantly, "I've been an educator for forty years; forty years of my life dedicated to the mission of education. Forty excellents on teaching evaluations from twelve different principals. I would like just one thing before I retire: for a student of mine to embrace the priesthood. A flower from my greenhouse in the seminary; for Jesus! It seemed as if your Rino wanted to give me that satisfaction."

She looked at me and frowned. "I'm treating you with familiarity because you're young enough to have been a student of mine, and I'm telling you: beware of the curse of God hanging over your son's head! Beware; Rino's sick, is he? An omen! It's a warning!"

I've always been indifferent as far as religion's concerned. I only go to Mass on holidays because it's one of my habits.

Standing outside my classroom waiting for the kids, I thought about the Grace of God. About Father Licodori. About Limbo. Recollections of Dante tossed around in my mind: Limbo, the unbaptized babies...

It wasn't so much the melodramatic words of Rino's teacher
that gave rise to this voiceless terror, as it was Don Licodori's calm words, that kept repeating themselves over and over again in my head.

"The beach skittle gets buried, so you say: in the sand," Amiconi was saying again. "Did you hear the radio this morning?" he asked me after a while.

Amiconi recounted the story he'd told me yesterday, the day before yesterday, last year, two years ago, three years ago. I knew he wasn't addressing me but himself.

"The Tenth Committee of the Office of Education," he began, "is drafting a bill: all teachers who have forty-two years of excellent-rated service plus three years of service in a combat zone can retire at the last point total of group A level VII. I'm waiting for them to get the law passed before I leave...."

He should have retired three years ago, and he's still living for the day they pass that law. I got rid of Amiconi and went over and buttonholed our colleague Peschetti, who was musing over the *Gazzetta dello Sport*.

"D'ya hear?" he says.

"What?"

"An Australian did the hundred meters in ten point one six. This guy's a phenomenon!" He showed me the picture of the phenomenon. "And a Canadian did the two hundred in twenty-three point five...."

The bell rang: the hours of lessons were starting. I'd left Rino with a temperature of 40; now what?
I sat up there at my desk while the kids raised hell. Rino's teacher appeared right in the middle of it and lifted her thin, bony hands. "The hand of God!" she said with a frightened look.

"Quiet!" I yelled at the kids. I gave a couple of good ones to the first kid within reach, and a tense silence immediately settled over the classroom.

"Hands on your desks!" I yelled. I checked their fingernails one by one. One of the kids stank of perfume, but he was an industrialist's son so I couldn't take it out on him. The class dummy had dirty hands.

"Disgusting! Disgusting!" I yelled. "Let's see underneath now!" The boy lifted up his smock to disclose an undershirt dirty and patched and smelly enough to make you throw up.

"Yuck!!" the kids started yelling.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Fine! Just fine!" I looked at the boy's eyes and was shaken. They were intense and moist with tears. I wanted to be left alone to think about Rino.

"Take out your ruled notebooks! Number from one to a thousand in tenths!" I ordered. While they wrote, I snuck a look at the kid I'd mortified. He smiled at me with almost benevolent forgiveness.

He who humiliates is humiliated, I thought, thinking about home. The doctor must be there now. He'll see Rino's blanket and sheets, and the attic where he sleeps.
I walked to and fro in the classroom, from my desk to the wall back to my desk. 'I'll have him be confirmed,' I thought, feeling remorse for having opposed it. 'Yuh, I'll have him confirmed.'

I couldn't wait to get home. I kept looking at the clock. Three more hours to go. Sixty, a hundred and twenty, a hundred and eighty minutes.

Two kids started screaming. One had poked his pen nearly into the other one's eye. Beside myself, I slapped one of them across the face with the back of my hand. I hit the victim.

I walked back and forth for another thirty minutes, then decided to go ask the principal for a half hour's leave. Someone knocked at the door. It was the principal.

"What are you all doing?" he asked the pupils.

"Counting from one to a thousand in tenths," the head of the class answered, as usual.

"My son's sick. Could I go home for half an hour?" I asked.

The principal looked at me and shook his head. "I would like to tell you an anecdote, Mr. Mombelli. When we were still a teacher, it happened that our father was dying. We went to school as usual and forgot that our father was dying. And why? Because, my dear man, we do not bring our personal problems into the classroom. Just think, Mr. Mombelli, of the missionaries; remember that ours is a mission. Let us see your class-register, Mr. Mombelli!"
He leafed through the register and ran his hands through his hair.

"Mr. Mombelli, pay attention to your loops! The i must touch the line above it; the f must touch both the line above and the line below; the d on the other hand is the only one that should not touch the line above but should end just below it at the same height as the t....Ah ha! Not a single one done right! Look at this: your b is higher than your i; your g is lower than your f. Excuse us, Mr. Mombelli, but the register is an official document."

I looked down at his shoes thinking, 'He has toes too.'

"We regret having to criticize you. Oh, how much we should like to tell you: very good! very good! but.... You see, Mr. Mombelli, don't think of us as what we are. You mustn't think of us as a superior, but as a co-worker. We are a co-worker of the teachers. If you have some pedagogical question, if you have a difficult pupil, let us know: ask us for advice, for an explanation. Just think, Mr. Mombelli, we took the certification examination for principals at twenty-five. There were thirty thousand of us at the written. Three hundred of us were admitted to the orals. Three of us were given positions. We were third in line; but the first two were war veterans with gold medals. And you realize that a gold medal is worth fifty points...."

Visibly self-satisfied, he rubbed his hands and looked at me. I know I'm no good at bluffing. I've got the kind of
eyes that immediately betray that voiceless grudge or rage that you feel towards somebody all puffed-up with self-satisfaction. So then I think of this guy washing his feet or sitting on the toilet or being scared when a dog barks at him, and that way I restore my internal equilibrium.

"What lesson have you prepared for this morning, Mr. Mombelli?"

"A lesson on....Christopher Columbus!" I said. I had the kids open their books and began to explain.

"But this is a book lesson! Away with the bookish!" the principal shouted. "Active school! Living school! Dramatize, Mr. Mombelli, dramatize! Stand up, pupils....you're the crew! You be Christopher Columbus," he said to one of the boys. "Your teacher will be the sailor who watches for land....Mr. Mombelli, go to the window....Don't you have a telescope?"

"No, as a matter of fact."

"No matter. Ontogenesis repeats phylogensis. The child has enough imagination to be able to substitute in his thoughts the concept of glasses with the concept of a telescope."

"So my glasses will be the telescope?"

"Exactly."

Pretty soon the whole class was railing against the boy who was playing Christopher Columbus.
"We're sick of sailing!" one yelled.
"We want to go home!" yelled another.
"Calm down, crew! Calm down, crew!" Columbus yelled.
"I left my wife, my kids; what about my kids?"
"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
"We'll never get to America in this direction!"
"To the Indies!" the principal shouted.
"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
"We're thirsty!"
"We're hungry!"
"Put him in irons, in irons, in irons, in irons – Columbus in irons!"
"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
"You've been telling us 'calm down, crew' for three years!"
"Four months," the principal corrected.
"You've been telling us 'calm down, crew' for four months!"
The principal busied himself with one pupil after another, telling them to yell out the names of their ships.
"We on the Pinta are tired!"
"We on the Santa Maria are exhausted!"
"We on the Nina can't stand it any more!"
"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
"Put Columbus to death! Put him to death! To death! To death! To death!"
"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
The principal went over to a boy, "Tell Columbus about your city!"

"I'm from Torino a city with more than 600,000 inhabitants in the heart of the Piedmont where the Po River that rises on Monviso flows it has tributaries to the right and to the left and flows into the Adriatic Sea where it forms a wide delta...."

"Calm down, crew, calm down!"
The principal motioned to me to shout.
"Land! Land!" I shouted.
"Really?!" Columbus yelled.
"Land! Land!" I repeated.
"Land land land land land land land land land!"
"Three cheers for Columbus!" the principal shouted.
"Three cheers for Columbus!" the crew shouted.

"Now," the principal said, "for a rest from what we call in pedagogy individualized collectivism (I am well aware that these two terms would seem to clash like a 'do' played with a 'ti'): individualized collectivism, as I was saying, and now a bit of fun. Children! You all like Barilla spaghetti, right?"

The kids looked at each other.

"Why, of course! With Barilla spaghetti it's always Sunday and on Sunday there's no school!"

Then he asked, "Who can tell me the name of a hibernating animal? Your teacher must have explained to you about animals that hibernate?"
He looked at me. "You have explained it to them, correct?"
"Actually, I haven't gotten there yet....we're still on the dog," I said.
"Mr. Mombelli, try and catch up," he whispered to me.
"Well! Let's go on to religion: you, tell me - what was Jesus' first miracle?"
"The wedding at Cana," the boy he'd called on answered.
"No!" the principal said.
An inquisitive silence followed. The pupils looked at me. Then the head of the class said, "The teacher told us so."
"The wedding at Cana was not a miracle of Jesus," the principal said.

The class dummy spoke up. "The first miracle of Jesus took place at the wedding at Cana."
"Good!" the principal said. "At the wedding at Cana; not the wedding at Cana! Now let's try this one: is Italian a monosyllabic or polysyllabic language?"
"Polysyllabic!" the class dummy said, taking a shot in the dark.

The principal was pleased. "That boy's father hasn't wasted his seed. That seed will yield him seventy times seven!" he said. He had the boy show him his notebook, and on the third page changed his mind. "Good heavens! His loops are like his teacher's....how can we stand for such writing?....on top of that, not a single dotted i!....Mr. Mombelli, see that they dot their i's...."
"I'll see that he dots his i's from here on," I said.

"Henceforth, Mr. Mombelli. Not from here on: henceforth," he corrected me. "See to it that you do."

When he left there was an hour yet to go.

"Let's go out in the courtyard for recess," I said. In the courtyard while the kids were playing, I thought about home.

"Mr. Mombelli, have them play Catch," the principal said.

"How do you play it?"

"Mr. Mombelli! You don't know how to play Catch?! And you've gotten to your fourth pay increase of point total 271?...

Come to the library and we'll give you a book on games!"

He picked up the ball and threw it to a pupil who in turn threw it back to him.

"See, Mr. Mombelli, how you play Catch?"

"Ballie Ballie!
Where have you been?
I've been to Grandma's!
What have you seen?
A nice little chick!
Show it to me quick!
Here it is!"

"Do you see, Mr. Mombelli, how one plays Catch?....

Come now, Mr. Mombelli, play Catch...."

Finally, I got home. Rino was playing quietly, completely over his temperature.
I've been trying to convince Ada for three days now not to go work in a factory.

"The gas man comes and I have to lock myself in the house and pretend I don't hear him. The electricity guy comes and I have to do the same thing! The doctor was here and obviously he saw what kind of a place...."

For two whole nights she stayed up late, pacing the room in her rags. Later, when it struck three o'clock, I woke her up. She gave herself to me half asleep. "Don't I disgust you?"

"Why, do I disgust you?"

"You do it to humiliate me," she said.

"Ada, dignity is like a crust of tar we have on us. You're trying to peel some off, and my skin comes off with it. Ada, you can't go work!"

"Work is ennobling," she said in a nasal voice, trying to imitate me.

"Ada, I've managed to make both ends meet so far. Ada, don't humiliate me. My wife in a factory--no, Ada! Promise me?"

"No!"

"Promise me, Ada!"

"If you really want, but you'll be sorry!"

I was reassured by the promise, but uneasy about the threat. "You'll be sorry," she'd said.
Two days later I found the industrialist, the father of my perfumed student, waiting for me outside my classroom.

"Sir, your woman, she came and asked me for fifty bills. Me, I gave'em to her. I know how it is – a porter gets more than you guys. But listen, Mr. Mombelli, either you quit failing my kid or there might be trouble if I told the principal."

My wife had gone and asked him for fifty thousand lire. It felt like twenty, one hundred hands were peeling me, skinning me.

"I didn't know about it!" I mumbled.

"Me, I got an idea you sent her, Mr. Mombelli, and now you're tryin' to play dumb! O.K. But we could skip the hand-out at Easter, you know.... Bye now, Sir!"

In class I called the boy, the industrialist's son, up to my desk. "Bring me all your workbooks!" I said. "Here, you had a four on this one. I'll cross out the four and put a ten...Five...cross out the five: ten... Did you do your homework? I'm not even going to look at it: I'm giving you ten. Tell your father!"

The principal's here again. "We wanted to see if you've been watching your loops in the class-register," he said. Meanwhile he looks at the boy's workbook and sees a four crossed out and a ten underneath.

"Mr. Mombelli: I'm amazed that you have gotten to the end of point total 271! I...We are truly astonished. This proves that you know neither the value of a four nor of a ten!"
The thought that Ada had gone to ask for money was crushing me.

"Teacher, what do we do?" the head of the class asked.

"Composition!"

"We did one yesterday."

"And we'll do one today too." I dictated the title of a composition and said, "Now listen: write slowly, slowly! I want to see at least six pages. And no smart-aleck tricks like writing big and beginning new paragraphs all the time. Watch your loops!"

My colleague Amiconi came and got me. "The principal's gone!" We hung around in the corridor. Me, Amiconi and our colleagues Cipollone and Pagliani.

"It's almost Easter," Pagliani said. "I've been making 'em sing Vola, Colomba all morning!"

Cipollone burst out, "What a feast last night! Oh boy, I had the best gnocchi! What I need is some chicory coffee. Chicory really hits the spot!"

"What's that Tenth Committee waiting for to get that bill done?" Amiconi muttered.

Then our colleague Filippi came out. "Getting it up? Oh boy, am I horny!"

"Oh, shut up, you and your horniness," Amiconi said.

"It's all in your head!"

"What do you mean it's all in my head?" Filippi yelled, furious. Then he pulled out a handkerchief and showed us where
it had a lipstick stain on it and not just lipstick. "See that? And you've got the nerve to tell me it's all in my head!"

Amiconi called to the janitor. "Go tell my wife I want minestrone for lunch—without cheese."

"No way," the janitor answered calmly sitting there reading his paper, without raising his eyes.

"You bum of a janitor!" Amiconi yelled. "You have to present him with a written request! Bum!"

We caught sight of the principal's silhouette at the far end of the corridor. Pandemonium. All colleagues disappeared instantly. Except for Amiconi who twisted his ankle running...

"Oh! Ow! O-ow!" he moaned as the principal went up to him.

"What's happened, Amiconi?" he asked.

"I was just going to the library and I twisted my ankle and fell down on the floor," Amiconi said leaning against the wall with his foot cradled in his hands.

"Well! I'd like to see you fall down on the air!" the principal laughed.

"One of my students asked me what Diaspora means," Amiconi said.

The principal became serious. "Was that question the result of a momentary caprice on the pupil's part or was it truly an internal necessity?"

"An internal necessity," Amiconi said, putting weight on his foot.
"Diaspora..." the principal reflected. "Diaspora... has something to do with the Jews... and with seed as well... Diaspora... hm! My memory... we'll go look it up."

Going back into the classroom I heard a chorus of trebles rising from Pagliani's room: "Fly, white dove, fly..."

Ada went to work in a factory. "I've doubled my lessons," I told her.

"I'm pregnant," she answered me.
My coffee went down the wrong way. "What?"
"I'm pregnant," she repeated.
I'd heard right. She looked at me defiantly.
"I've made both ends meet for three long enough. I can do it for four," I said.

Ada gave me a fierce look. "Are we going to support the baby on the family allowance?" she snarled.

"Ada, don't go work in a factory! I'll do twice as much work, I'll look for another job; just don't go!" I begged her.

"The factory isn't exactly a brothel," she said.

"I know that... Ada, I'll give private lessons at night too instead."

"Don't be stubborn; you think I wouldn't like to stay at home and play the 'Signora'? You think I'm going there to amuse myself? You don't think it's a sacrifice? Good God!" she screamed.

Her outburst left me mortified.

"Factory worker!" I said with disgust.
She lowered her head.

"Worker!" I repeated nastily.

"None of my friends are workers certainly," she said, drawing the words out, sucking them with her lips, and my face with her eyes. "But they have husbands who..." she gestured with her hand. "Not like me, poor thing!"

She gets up an hour before me every morning. I hear her leave.

"Considering how much you do, you could at least put the pasta on," she tells me every day at noon. And so the kitchen work falls to me. "Why are you making such a face?" she says. "There's nothing wrong with it."

I know there's nothing wrong with it, but I feel like my dignity is being compromised.

"Go get the vegetables," she tells me. So, for the sake of peace and quiet, I go. I'm getting used to it now.

V.

There was a teachers' meeting today. Our colleague Pisquani, head of the S.N.O.O.Z.E. union was about to leave for Rome to confer with an undersecretary. Next to him was our colleague Pagliani, head of the S.N.E.E.Z.E. union, ready for a fight.
"Let's give the floor to Mr. Pisquani, head of the S.N.O.O.Z.E.," the principal said.

"My dear colleagues! Ladies and gentlemen! I am about to leave for Rome where I shall be received by the Undersecretary of Education, the Honorable Ettore Badaloni. I have some connections with the Undersecretary because I did my military service with a cousin of his. Yes, I know, my dear colleagues, you talk talk talk but when it comes to tackling someone important, it always falls to me. Last year I was the one who approached the superintendent of schools."

The principal coughed.

"....our distinguished superintendent of schools three times. I approached the chief administrative officer five times...My dear colleagues, I'll share with you what I'm going to present to the honorable Undersecretary of Education: The elementary schoolteachers I am representing want, first of all: to receive tenure at point total 202 and not at 229! Second: to stay at point total 202 not eighteen but nine years. To increase the salary brackets within a point total from four to twenty with doubled pay increases. To be at point total 325 from the ninth year of teaching service rather than, as presently, from the nineteenth year; and then to follow it with point total 432, which would be comparable to the point total of a Group A, level VIII office worker doing overtime. Furthermore, I request that pensions be granted after ten years of service providing the teacher has ten excellents
on teaching evaluations."

A colleague got up. "I say it should be eight excellents and two very goods."

"I'll accept that: eight excellents and two very goods. Then I'll ask for fourteen months' pay and for our special reduced railroad fare to be lowered another 31%. Furthermore, I'll ask them to study the bill I've drafted: that a bonus of at least ten years' service be granted to elementary schoolteachers who saw combat in Africa from June 10, 1940 to September 27, 1943..."

"What about my having fought in Russia?" a colleague shouted.

"Furthermore, I'll ask of the Honorable Ettore Badaloni that the salaries of those at point total 229 be raised 33.1%. And all the others 43.17%. Ladies and gentlemen, I invite you to join S.N.O.O.Z.E.!!"

"That's blackmail!" Pagliani yelled. "Join S.N.E.E.Z.E. instead!"

"Quieta non movere et mota quietare!" the principal said, calming them. "Let's give the floor to Mr. Pagliani of S.N.E.E.Z.E. now."

"Colleagues! In the space of a few years your salaries have doubled, thanks to the efforts of S.N.E.E.Z.E. Those of you who have families: in a few months dependents' allowances will go up two hundred lire for wives and three hundred for each child. This partial success is due to S.N.E.E.Z.E.,
which had asked for an increase of three thousand lire. At least we got something."

"I want the Tenth Committee to approve that bill..." Amiconi shouted.

"S.N.O.O.Z.E. is against that bill!" Pisquani yelled. "S.N.E.E.Z.E. backs it!"

Amiconi got up, went to the middle of the room, pulled out a membership card and tore it up. "I'm joining S.N.E.E.Z.E.," he said.

"Remember, S.N.E.E.Z.E. is trying to saddle us with civil service ratings!" Pagliani yelled. "You're darn right! So we can get a 3.2% salary increase!"

"Instead S.N.O.O.Z.E. is fighting to stop us from being included in those ratings. That way we'll be able to get raises just for us! Three cheers for S.N.O.O.Z.E.!!"

"Three cheers for S.N.E.E.Z.E. Down with S.N.O.O.Z.E.!!"

"Down with S.N.E.E.Z.E.!! Three cheers for S.N.O.O.Z.E.!!"

"Pisquani, find out where that bill stands now: go tell the Tenth Committee to get a move on!" Amiconi yelled.

The principal stood up.

"We are not materialists. Now that we have dealt with and discussed the financial aspect, let us elevate our thoughts for a moment. Let us talk about the children."

One of the women teachers stood up. "Mr. Principal, the father of one of our pupils came to us wanting us to exempt
his son from religious training! We felt cold shivers run down our spine. We said, 'Think it over well.' We felt that he was thinking it over. Our faith was annihilated when he said, 'I've thought it over!' We remained intransigent.

"You trampled on Article Two of the Constitution!" Pisquani yelled. "What about freedom of religion?"

"We happen to inculcate religion!" she shouted. "Our task is to inculcate religion. And if you don't agree, change jobs...pardon, missions..."

The principal duly noted the occurrence, then said, "The town council has appropriated one hundred thousand lire for school expenses. We could dispose of them as we wish, but first, democratically, we would like to hear your opinions."

A colleague at point total 325 salary bracket #4 on her thirteenth pay increase got up. "Gentlemen, I propose we use the sum for a door. It's demeaning for the teachers to have to go in and out the same door as the janitors. Let's have a door made for them."

Another colleague, at point total 271, said, "My desk is too low. And I don't have a coatrack..." The principal duly noted.

"I think we should buy slippers for the janitors," a colleague at point total 202 overtime said. "When they go by in the corridor, their footsteps disturb my teacher-pupil rapport!" The principal duly noted.
"The janitors need doors, not slippers!" the 325 yelled.
Amiconi got up. "Mr. Principal, ladies and gentlemen! After forty-six years of service and forty-six excellents, the great sovereign of Antioch has named me Commendatore!"
Everyone applauded. The principal, as he stated, wanted personally to shake his hand.

"And that's not all! The Office of Education has decorated me with a gold medal for educational merit," Amiconi said. After having held up and read the commendatory scroll he said, "The gold medal costs one hundred thousand lire. Not that it's of any importance to me, but to you, my dear colleagues, it should be of great importance to have in the midst of you a gold medalist."

A young colleague, probably at point total 271 salary bracket #3, got up, waving a book. "This is my first volume of poetry!"

"Read some of them!" came from all sides.

The youth acted coy, then said, "I shall read: "Prelude to the Wedding Night"."

"For pity's sake! For pity's sake!" the women yelled. A few at the last point total plugged their ears.

"Careful now," the principal said, looking significantly at the youth's Catholic Action badge.

He read "Prelude to the Wedding Night" and then, encouraged by the benevolent comments, went on to another poem.
The principal congratulated the poet-colleague. "Your poetry is precious as a diamond, and, like the diamond, has its facets of preciosity."

The youth thanked him and said, "The printer's asked me for one hundred thousand lire to print a thousand copies. So...."

Pisquani got up and interrupted him.

"Poetry is irrelevant these days!" he yelled.

"Sir, how dare you..." the principal shouted.

"I am a leftist intellectual! I'm telling you, science has defeated faith!" Pisquani shouted even louder.

There was pandemonium among the women. A couple at the last point total fainted. Those at the middle point total were, to say the least!, indignant. "Our colleague must apologize!"

"Quieta non movere et mota quietare!" the principal shouted. "Mr. Pisquani, what you have just said at this meeting will go directly onto your personal record!"

Pisquani ran his hand over his face as everyone stared at him. The room buzzed: "...personal record! On his personal record!"

"Colleagues, I was a faithful, devout man. But it wasn't me who deserted the church. It was the church that deserted me! Let me put my case to you. My personal case. A very particular case. I...."
"Quieta non movere et mota quietare!" the principal interrupted him.

"...I just meant I've written a book entitled A Bit of Cosmic Science which would be much more relevant than our colleague's poetry!" Pisquani said.

The principal duly noted.

Rino's teacher got up. "Mr. Pisquani..."

"If you please, Miss," the principal said, "you must direct your question to us and we in turn will direct it to your colleague Pisquani."

"Mr. Principal, could you please ask Mr. Pisquani whether it is true that he has done everything in his power to dissuade a pupil of his from entering the seminary and embracing the mission of missions?"

"Yes, and I'm proud of it!" yelled Pisquani.

Rino's teacher burst into tears. "I've been working for forty years! Forty years without succeeding in sending a pupil to the seminary...and I...feel like my...mission has been useless!"

Her tears moved everyone a bit. "There are no words to express our profound solidarity with you," the principal said.

She began to cry harder, but explained that it was because she was so touched. "Your solidarity, Mr. Principal, is balm to me, balm...!"

It was evening by the time the meeting was finally over. Pisquani and Cipollone and Amiconi and I went to the Bar.
"Listen, Pisquani, go tell the Tenth Committee to get a move on. There're people who've been waiting for three years..."

"I already promised you. And with me a promise is a promise," Pisquani said. "More to the point, how about paying your S.N.O.O.Z.E. dues?"

"If you get the Tenth Committee to..."

"Cough it up!"

"How much is it?" Amiconi asked.

"Contributing members, a thousand lire. Sustaining members, a hundred thousand lire!"

"All right, a thousand lire," said Amiconi, paying his dues and muttering, "S.N.E.E.Z.E. is fairer. Contributing members, five hundred lire; sustaining members, a thousand lire." He watched Pisquani put the thousand-lire bill in his pocket.

I ordered coffees at the bar.

"Wait a minute, who's paying?" Amiconi said.

"It's on me," I said recklessly.

"I want chicory coffee. Ah! Chicory!" said Cipollone.

Another customer near our table wanted coffee too. The waitress, passing his table, gave him his coffee first and then brought us ours.

"Where was she brought up?" Cipollone shouted. "You slut! Who taught you manners? We ordered our coffee first and you served that guy before us!"
"You mean me?" the man said.

"Yes, you! You think I don't know who you are? You think I don't know you're not even in group C?" Cipollone yelled.

The waitress stood there not knowing whether to answer. With one eye she watched the owner of the bar, with the other us and Cipollone.

"Get out of here, slut!" Cipollone shouted. "It's always us middleclass guys that never get any respect. We pay our taxes down to the last lira! We go off to war saying, we shall obey! We're the frigging backbone of Italy!"

"Oh, go piss in your pants!" the waitress snarled.

I picked up a paper and started reading it.

"How can you read the paper in a bar?" Amiconi asked me.

"If I'm not in the bathroom I can't read."

"You too?" Cipollone said. "Would you believe it, whenever I go in the bathroom I take a book! I stay in there five, ten, twenty minutes till my wife comes to see what's wrong..."

"No, not me! I had a little shelf made in the bathroom and I just filled it up with books," Amiconi said. "That way...you'd be surprised how many books I've read in there."

"A shelf! Good idea, I'll have one made too," Cipollone said.

"There're disadvantages," Amiconi said. "My wife stays in there for hours on end."

The principal entered and we all jumped to our feet.
"Good evening, Mr. Principal!"

"At school we are the principal, but outside of it we are Professor Pereghi!" the principal said, sitting down at our table.

"Professor," Amiconi said, "I came across a word I don't know the meaning of. The word is tetraplegy. What does tetraplegy mean?"

The principal said that he couldn't recall right on the spot, but he'd known it once. "My memory is letting me down!" he sighed.

Pisquani said, "Mr....Professor, there's a word that's in the Melzi dictionary but not in the Zingarelli."

"What word is that?" the professor asked.

"Antepgementa," Pisquani said.

"Are you certain it's not in the Zingarelli?" the professor asked.

"Positive."

"Practipedista isn't in the Zingarelli either," said Amiconi.

After having sat there for a moment deep in thought, the professor–principal said, "That's how we'll use the one hundred lire! We'll buy dictionaries!"
VI.

Ada shows me her paycheck at the end of every month, silently. Numbers talk.
I'm humiliated that my wife earns more than I do. "I looked at your pay scales," Ada said. "I earn as much as a teacher at point total 271 salary bracket #4!"
I could give fewer lessons and rest more. But the thought that she's a worker and earns more than me takes more out of me than giving lessons does. She's written I.O.U.'s to get new furniture and some other stuff. The house is changing the way we and our relationship have changed.

Before, when I woke her up in the middle of the night she'd give herself to me gladly. She seemed to like that brusque awakening. Last time, she got mad. "Let me sleep, dammit!" she said. "The shifts have changed and I've got to get up in a few hours!"

That common way of talking, those words like crap, what the hell, who gives a damn? get on my nerves.

"Don't tell anybody you're working in a factory, Ada!" I beg her.

She answers, "What's wrong with working in a factory?"
"It seems like our dignity's being compromised," I respond.
"It's not working that compromises our dignity," she answers pedantically. Her voice sounds ironic, like her face, her smile.
"What must everybody think?" I say. "A teacher with a wife who works in a factory!"

I think myself sincere in my sad-sounding talk, and she comes back right away with, "Well, what about me? What must people who know I'm a teacher's wife think about me?"

"Remember the school is a select environment. You have to pass the certification exams and have studied to be able to get in. It's not like a factory!"

"If it wasn't for me working...." she answers, looking around at all the things she's bought.

"You're petty!"

"You're the one who's petty, not wanting me to earn anything! Not liking it when I earn more than you do!...Or would you rather....?"

She'd struck home. Yes, I'd rather just me work, and wear myself out with lessons; I'd rather have my family go around in rags underneath, have us risk cutting a pretty poor figure if one of us suddenly gets sick, than have my wife go out and work.

And I suffer when Ada says to me, "Give me this! Give me that!" and I have to obey, otherwise she immediately adds, "I've worked ten hours! I've worked twelve hours!", which sounds to me like she's flinging it in my face.

She does a lot of overtime. The thought that she stays away until midnight, one o'clock, makes me constipated. Not
because of her coming home at that hour, but because of the people who see her.

I walk her to her factory taking the long way around through back streets, and then I go pick her up and we go by the Piazza pretending we were at the movies. That's one of my naive ideas. To think you can pretend in a town like Vigevano.

"Saw you with your wife last night. Where'd you go?" Cipollone asked me.

"To the movies," I answered.

Cipollone winked at Filippi. "Liar! We followed you in the car. You went to wait for your wife to come out of the factory!" Filippi said.

"Oh, your wife's a factory worker?" Amiconi asked.

"Rino's studies cost too much," I justified myself.

"Don't make me laugh!" Cipollone retorted.

"He reads a lot, you know! He'll be a Group A," I said triumphantly.

"Time will tell," Amiconi said.

The thought of Rino as a future Group A is the hope that helps me forget the present. The tar. Even if it too is a tarred thought, a tarred hope.

And Ada keeps on working and earning. That money gives me the feeling of its being stolen.

"I've got enough money to buy three suits for Rino," she says to me.

She undresses and lingers in front of the mirror in a silk negligee. A gold watch gleams on her wrist.

"Who gave it to you?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I bought it for myself! Since all the other workers are always showing each other presents their men give 'em, I bought the watch and tell 'em you gave it to me!"

VII.

So Sunday's gone by too. Another useless day about to die; a matter of a few hours. I call it useless but realize I've spent days even more useless than this: days that all together might add up to more than ten years' worth of time.

This morning I got up late. My Sunday habit. Getting up late makes me feel like I'm enjoying Sunday. In fact, all week I long for Sunday just so I can enjoy this habit of getting up late.

I took a walk along the arcades with my wife and Rino, killing time until noon; then we went to Mass. That's the way I spent the first half of Sunday. At home, before dinner, I told myself, "Today I'm not going to go play cards at the Bar."
That's another habit; spending Sunday afternoon playing cards. I knew giving it up would be hard, so to outsmart myself I got undressed and put my slippers on. But when the time came - one thirty, that is - I couldn't help it. Why should I give up my Scoop game, I asked myself. I've worked all week! I got dressed again and went to the Bar.

My Scoop partners are Pallavicino, the reporter, and two other guys. Even though I've played with them every Sunday for years, I couldn't tell you who they are.

Scoop is essential to us. It restores our equilibrium. We swear at each other over bad plays. We accuse our partner of having broken up a pair and thus having made a big mistake, or of having made a big mistake by not breaking up a pair. We defend ourselves against these accusations and try to show what a great play we made, and in turn accuse our partner of not having played scientifically, and so on for the whole wretched Sunday afternoon.

These are the Sundays in my life. Leaving the Bar when the day's over, the Piazza silent and deserted; satisfied with the game, my winnings, or mad because of my losses. Those Sunday card games then become the topic that fills up empty hours during the week....

"I took in a four and a three with a seven and made a build with the one and the six." "I let the seven go around and that way we got a primiera plus 1 point for the seven of diamonds." "I opened and didn't let anybody get a Scoop."
Around five, the reporter gives his seat to somebody else and goes to watch Vigevano play. I think soccer does more for his equilibrium than Scoop does. He devotes a whole page in the paper to soccer. Today I was thinking that soccer does something for the equilibrium of a lot of people. Why do thousands of people go watch others play ball, I asked myself.

There must be some kind of special relationship between man and the game. It must be a different relationship from the one with cards, because nobody has fun watching four guys play cards.

I went to the stadium today too. A gray sky that looked like it wanted to fall on our heads and a crowd of thousands and thousands of people. They were factory and office workers, people who were spending more than a day's pay for those ninety minutes.

I watched the twenty-two players chasing after each other around a ball and passing the ball back and forth, and I just couldn't understand what it was that seemed to bind the crowd to the players, to the ball. The crowd was shouting, cursing; started shouting again, swearing at the referee. I looked at the reporter, who was shaking his head and taking notes.

"It's no good!" he was muttering. "I told the coach to have those two fullbacks pick up the wings. I told him to have the center forward play inside. It's a question of strategy here - dammit, of tactics."
He wanted me to come to the dressing room with him at halftime. "You don't understand anything!" he started yelling at the coach. "If you wanna win, you've got to have the two halfbacks drop to fullback! You've got to play an attacking game! You saw what a cast-iron defense Leffe's got!"

"The team's staying just like it is!" the coach said. "I'm telling you, get rid of that fullback!"
"I'm not getting rid of him!"
"O.K., I'm going to attack you in the paper, then!"

In the second half, Leffe scored a couple of goals against Vigevano. "I told you so!" the reporter yelled happily. His equilibrium was restored. Now he'd go home and draft a whole page-long article; he'd attack the coach, praise some of the players, criticize others, and at the end give his advice for the next match.

I've known him and read him for twenty years; in twenty years he hasn't missed a match or passed up one chance to say his piece. That's equilibrium.

So I've discovered how one individual manages to feel in harmony with himself and the world. But what about all the others?

There, it's striking midnight. Sunday is dead. My question ends up with all the others I've asked myself and haven't been able to answer.
From this Sunday to next, a hundred sixty-eight hours will have to go by, one by one.

VIII.

The hundred sixty-eight hours have gone by. Another Sunday's almost over. What did I do with those hundred sixty-eight hours?

Twenty-five I spent at school. Another twenty-five giving lessons and tutoring, and that makes fifty. About sixty used up sleeping. And the other fifty-eight? A half dozen went for meals, another couple for odds and ends, and my habits used up the other fifty. My half hour at the Bar before going to school, the hour or so at the Bar after dinner, the hour lying down after I finish tutoring, the rest talking to my colleagues and the reporter, until a hundred and sixty-eight hours are used up.

I realize my life is just one long series of squandered hours, of wasted time. But what am I supposed to do?, I wonder. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked an older colleague.

"What are you worrying about?" she answered. "You've got tenure by now."

I'm waiting to just jump from one point total and salary bracket to another automatically, like I always have
up to now; waiting to jump right into retirement, so I can finally recover from this intense life.

Ada spent her hundred and sixty-eight hours differently. At least ninety she spent working. Maybe even more. Last night I wanted to take her to the movies. "I'm tired," she answered.

"We used to go on Friday; now we go on Saturday," I said.
"You'd be better off at the Bar."

At the Bar the reporter was arguing with my colleague Cipollone. "I went by the hospital with my students," Cipollone was saying, "and I told 'em, 'That's the Clinic for Advanced Mental Research.' 'Who's in there?' the kids asked me. 'The mentally retarded,' I answered."

"That's my joke!" Pallavicino yelled. "You stole it!"

The discussion turned to food. "I don't like chicken," Cipollone was saying. "I can't see how anybody can eat it!"

"Oh, but the chicken my mother makes!" Pallavicino answered. "Mm, the chicken my mother makes. She feeds them whole grain. You've never eaten anything like it!"

"So who hasn't eaten grain-fed chicken? The fact is it's disgusting!"

"Well, it wasn't grain-fed chicken then," Pallavicino said.

See: I spent at least three hours just listening to this discussion.
The Piazza was dead. At the usual time, punctually, the custom-built Alfa Romeo drove up with the fat industrialist and his wife. At the Caffè Sociale the same old faces were still hanging around.

The reporter came up to me and said, "I put you in my article."

"Me?"

"Your name'll be in the paper." He pulled out the proof copy of his article, then all the other proofs that make up the paper. "These short articles are called fillers. The first and sixth column articles are called shoulders." He started reading me the sports page:

"Rain rain rain. And we, crazy as we are, off to the match. At one point it looked as if the rain would have liked to destroy our Alfa Romeo Giulietta. Boy, are we crazy. With us was the elementary schoolteacher, Mr. Mombelli, a most sensitive sporting soul. Vigevano lost against Leffe. We had predicted the defeat. The coach has no excuse. We had told him so. If he had listened to us, if he'd switched the two fullbacks with the halfback and the halfback with the left wing, Leffe would've lost. Let the coach take note that our advice is never wrong."

Another hour went by listening to the article. "I don't particularly care about being in the paper," I said. The reporter looked at me in amazement. My words had gone
through his tar like knifethrusts.

"Put me in it!" Cipollone said.

Compared to lots of others, Saturday evening was an interesting one.

IX.

Today's another day. What's new today? The only thing that happened was this. Nanini brought the Corriere della Sera to school. There was an article by Indro Montanelli talking about commendatori and the great sovereign of Antioch. It turned out you could have this title for a few thousand lire; all you had to do was send a money order to two sisters in Aversa.

Nanini was showing the paper to everybody. "So much for Amitoni's merits!" he shouted, waving the pages. The revelation seemed to please everyone. Nanini rubbed his hands, saying, "When Amiconi gets here, there's gonna be quite a performance!"

We were all out in the corridor with the feeling that something strange and interesting was going to happen; something that would get talked about for quite a while. The bell had rung but nobody moved, not even the most zealous women teachers. We were all waiting.
Nanini went up to Amiconi and the air was electrified by our shivers of anticipation. "So, Amiconi, they've made you a commendatore?"

"The great sovereign of Antioch has conceded me that honor," Amiconi answered half embarrassed half triumphant. "By the way, did anyone hear the news, whether the Tenth Committee...."

"The radio didn't say anything!" everybody hastened to inform him.

Nanini looked Amiconi in the face and started winking repeatedly. "Did you know the great sovereign of Antioch has made me a commendatore too?" he said, smirking. "I sent him twenty bills...."

Amiconi turned pale but asked him between his teeth how dared he, and Nanini spread out the paper in front of him. Amiconi looked and turned waxen. "Montanelli, my favorite journalist!" he stammered. Nanini laughed and Amiconi looked around and saw all the teachers watching him. Trembling with nervousness, he snarled at Nanini, "Substitute! At fifty you're still a substitute!" He raised his fists in the air. "Substitute!" he repeated. "Failed at every single certification exam! Well, this year you're not going to get a single hour of substitute teaching from me! I wanted to ask for a couple of months of sick leave, but I'll come to school even if it kills me - substitute!"
Now Nanini turned pale. Amiconi had tears in his eyes. He stared at the headline of the article and the journalist's signature, shaking his head.

"Back me up. I'm a gold medalist. Don't give him a single day of substitution!" Amiconi said.

"That medal comes from Aversa too!" Nanini sneered.

"No, that one comes right from Rome!" Amiconi shouted.

"I'm the only teacher in the Lomellina region with a gold medal - the only one!" He dried his eyes with a handkerchief and went into his classroom.

The women teachers took it out on Nanini. "Are you satisfied now that you've offended a gold medalist? Serves you right...."

Nanini lowered his head without answering.

X.

Toes. On our wedding night I was naked in front of Ada. I thought she was mad at me because we hadn't gone on a honeymoon. The truth was: no money.

But the veil hiding that truth was: love is sacred; why consummate it in hotel beds, where God knows who has slept? I remember I was moved being naked in front of my wife. She was staring at my feet. Staring at my toes.
She was staring at them so strangely I started being ashamed of having feet with toes. She kept on staring at them.

"Are they that interesting?" I asked her.

She nodded yes. "You know why I fell in love with you?"

"Why?"

"Because you never wore sandals; 'cause you always kept your toes hidden!"

"Really?"

"I don't like having been born a woman. But then I think that men have toes and I feel better about my condition."

And she stared at my feet.

"To me, a man who shows his toes isn't much of a man," she said. Her eyes never moved from my feet. "We've been going out for six years. For six years I've been thinking: who knows what his toes are like!"

"Look at them," I said. I felt a pleasant sensation showing them to her. She looked at them thoughtfully.

"But do you think all men have toes? I don't think so. I think some scientists, lots of important men can't possibly have feet with toes, like women. A woman can have toes; she can show her feet - she's a woman. Showing her feet makes up for what morality stops her, prohibits her from showing - but men?"

I felt ill at ease. And since then I've always felt ill at ease when I go to bed. Her eyes were riveted on my feet;
I thought her smile looked pitying. But at the same time, showing my feet to her did give me this strange feeling of pleasure.

"Before you I had a boyfriend," Ada told me. "We were just about to get married. You know why we didn't? Because he'd talk about corns - not calluses on his hands, which I could have taken - but on his feet!"

Men's toes had an enormous power over Ada. Sometimes the paper or some magazine would have pictures of politicians or actors or scientists or big shots barefoot at the ocean, or just photographed without shoes on. She'd cut out the pictures. Or else she'd fix them in her memory so that if one of them was on the radio, then she'd say, "That guy has toes! I've seen 'em myself!"

It ended up that I'd show her my bare feet with the same emotions I felt showing her my member. As a consequence, I started thinking about men's toes too. And started being ashamed of having feet with toes. At school, my explanations of the human body ended at the ankles. I remember one student wrote the words big toe in a composition and I crossed them out. Then I thought that since I'd crossed them out, he might think that I didn't know big toes existed - so I tore up his paper. Ada passed her complex on to me.

If she happened to read a book or a story and the author happened to describe a character's feet, Ada would immediately
say, "This writer has toes!" When she and I went for a walk, in the spring or summer or fall, we'd always happen to come across some man with sandals on, i.e. showing his toes. Ada would stare at them, follow them with her eyes, and when she saw him again - after quite a while - she'd think, 'There're toes inside those shoes.'

When she stared at men's toes, I'd be seized by jealousy. I really was jealous. "Stop looking at men's feet," I begged her.

"I promise," she answered. And, in fact, she did stop, since I'd made her swear to on Rino's head.

"If you knew what torture it is," she'd say to me, "to sense that some man's feet are showing and not be able to look at them. Sometimes I try to make myself look down, but when I remember swearing on Rino's head I can't do it and I stop myself."

She was grateful to me for never wearing sandals, never talking about corns or toes; as if, in short, I didn't have toes; and she was grateful that I showed my feet only to her.

I'd gotten to be ashamed of my feet. If I was in the bedroom getting dressed and Rino came in, I'd immediately hide my extremities. Rino did the same thing. His mother had passed the feeling of shame on to him too. "You can show your feet only to your wife," she'd told him.

Rino always covered up his feet, so much so that I didn't
know what his toes were like. I remembered vaguely when he was little, so I was sure he had toes, having seen them then; but I didn't know what they were like now. And, to tell the truth, I was curious to see my son's feet.

When Amiconi told me, "I've got corns on the soles of my feet!", I looked at him pityingly. Amiconi walked gently, like he was walking on eggs. "My corns! My corns!"

Then the following happened. At one point Amiconi borrowed a basin from the school cleaning lady; he filled it with water, put it under his desk, took his socks off and put his feet in to soak. He was sitting there like that when the principal suddenly arrived. Amiconi pretended he didn't feel well and couldn't stand up, but the principal spied part of a sock under the desk, then saw the whole spectacle. He held his nose. Then he came and called me as a witness. "Open the windows!" he shouted at the students.

Amiconi, with those feet and that face, was quite a sight. "We hope, Mr. Amiconi, that you confine your washing activities to your feet when at school," the principal said.

"Don't put it on my personal record!" Amiconi moaned.

"That is what we will consider doing," the principal answered.

"Please don't, for God's sake!"

"You have a gold medal," the principal said. "It seems to us that you do not quite deserve such an honor."
"Don't ruin my personal record," Amiconi moaned, putting a sock on. Then he explained to me that he had a corn between two toes, and I thought, 'How come he takes it for granted that I have toes too?'

I'm jealous of toes, I thought. I imagine that not all men have toes and I stare at Amiconi's bare foot. Stare and study, like Ada used to do.

XI.

Fight with Ada this morning. She wants to be the one to buy him his Confirmation outfit and so on, and I want to be the one.

"Nothing from you!" I shouted at her.

"Good for nothing little schoolteacher," she answered.

"Factory worker," I told her.

I'd completely worn myself out with all the tutoring, just for that Confirmation. I had three shifts a day: ten kids from two to four, ten from four to six, another ten from six to eight; besides the morning at school. Come eight o'clock I was dead tired. The dining room looked like a school cafeteria after lunch hour, it was so dirty. But at least I had the satisfaction of thinking that Rino'd be confirmed dressed just as elegantly as the son of a big shot, or the son of a Category One worker. On top of that
there was the satisfaction of not asking Ada for anything. The satisfactions of tar.

Every satisfaction, besides the effort, cost me a humiliation too. Humiliations of tar, naturally. I finished school at 12:40. At two the first shift started coming. Before that I had to prepare myself, look over all those things I learned in elementary school that I've taught for nineteen years and never remember.

The principal kept checking up on me. "Why haven't you corrected the pupils' compositions? Why aren't you watching your loops in the class register? You know, Mr. Mombelli, that included in your salary is the item: overtime pay. Now, overtime is the work you must carry out after regular school hours. Do you consider it, sir, moral behavior to receive overtime pay and not do overtime work?" He stared at me the way I usually stare at a student who hasn't done his homework.

"Really, I thought the register was done in beautiful calligraphy," I mumbled.

"Did you say beautiful calligraphy?" the principal said, jumping from one foot to the other like a little devil. "Beautiful calligraphy! Wonderful, Mr. Mombelli: so that's how you've learned Italian. I just wonder what you teach. Beautiful calligraphy! Don't you realize you have stated a contradiction in terms? Calligraphy, from the Greek cale grafia, means cale: beautiful, grafia: writing. Therefore
we deduce that beautiful calligraphy, excuse me!, that calligraphy means beautiful writing. So, beautiful calligraphy means beautiful beautiful writing! A contradiction in terms!"

'Let's see how far my courage goes,' I said to myself. "Sir, it would have been a contradiction in terms, as you say, if I had said ugly calligraphy, which literally means ugly beautiful writing! However, in saying beautiful calligraphy perhaps I made an error, but not a contradiction in terms. Don't you think so?"

Meanwhile, I thought, 'I've got courage.' I was amazed that I'd spoken like that. As I was saying it, I listened to my voice and said to myself, 'Strange!'

"Mr. Mombelli, you realize that if you do not receive an excellent on your teaching evaluation this year you will not move on to the next point total; so weigh your words. We have been to University. We have passed certification examinations where illustrious and fearsome pedagogues decimated us. If we point out the error of a contradiction in terms, rest assured that this error is indeed there. Or do you pretend to know more than we do?"

When I told Ada about this scene, she could hardly believe it — in fact, she didn't believe it. And that pleased me. I felt as if I had quite some courage!

This evening I emptied the drawer with my lesson money and went shopping with Rino. It's the night before
Confirmation. A night-before-the-holiday-feeling in the city created the atmosphere of the holiday itself. The Piazza full of mothers and children, stores full of children and fathers and mothers.

I went to a clothing store in the Piazza with Rino. There was an Air Force costume in the window, with gold buttons, it looked like, and made of a nice sky-blue material.

"Do you like it?" I asked Rino.
"Mm," Rino said.
"I do; a lot!"

The storekeeper said it wasn't worth buying the Air Force costume; that little Rino would be better off having a normal outfit that was fancy enough for holidays too.


When they had him try it on, when I saw Rino in that uniform, I was moved. It looked like it was made especially for him. Not a single wrinkle, not one defect. The pant legs hung perfectly to just above his shoes, and the sky-blue made his face look even paler and his body even more delicate. The gold of the buttons shone in his deep eyes.

I bought the uniform, then we went to the hat store. Rino chose a beautiful Air Force officer's hat; big and round, with a nice stiff peak. Then we went on to the men's outfitters.

"Do you have extremely fine shirts?" I asked.
"We have them, but they cost quite a bit. We have some inexpensive ones that are nice as well."

"I want an extremely fine shirt!" I said.

The clerk brought a shirt out; he said it was extremely fine poplin silk. "Feel it, feel it - what material!" He said it had a stupendous neckband. "Look at that neckband!"

It really was beautiful. "However, there are these too," the clerk said. "Even if they don't have that neckband, they're just as nice."

"I want the one with the neckband," I said.

Besides the shirt, I got Rino a tie too. "This one has absolutely ethereal nuances!" the clerk said.

"Give me the one with the ethereal nuances," I told him.

Then we went to the shoestore. To tell the truth, I could have used some new shoes myself, and there was a pair there that looked like they were made for me. But, I thought, a father has to sacrifice for his children, and I was ashamed to have thought about myself.

We chose a boys' pair that cost as much as two pairs of men's dress shoes. "These shoes come from Bologna!" the salesman said. I was glad they were from Bologna. It was like giving a moral slap in the face to Vigevano, shoe capital of Italy.

"That's included in the price," I mumbled.

"What?" the salesman asked.
"I said they're expensive!"

"Oh, but it's quality merchandise!" And he waved the shoes under my nose. "Like gloves," he said. Rinuccio didn't want to try them on there, which pleased me because that way I wouldn't be forced to see his feet in front of the salesman.

"Your toes'll be comfortable," the salesman said. I noticed a shadow cross Rino's eyes and quickly disappear.

But then, as the salesman wrapped the shoe box for me, I noticed that he was wrapping it in newspaper, when he'd wrapped the client's before me in paper with the store's name on it. And that guy had bought a less expensive pair.

"I've changed my mind! I don't want your shoes!" I said. I grabbed Rino and left.

"But, sir...."

"I said I don't want them...."

Out in the street, Rino asked me, "Why, papa?"

"Because he was going to wrap the box in newspaper," I said. Rino looked at me in a way that irritated me, made me feel ashamed.

We went to another shoestore, where I had to forego giving Vigevano the moral slap in the face.

Rinuccio trotted along in front of me, loaded with packages and parcels, as we went home. 'I've never seen him so happy,' I thought. Meanwhile, I started philosophizing
about money and happiness. Usually happiness makes you think
of money, and money makes you think of happiness. I didn't
have a lira left in my pocket. In about an hour I'd spent
the product of many hours' work. And yet I was happy right
then.

I looked at the people going by; all the male and
female industrialists doing their shopping too, and I
thought, 'You'll see, tomorrow!' and thought how Rino was
the best-looking of all those kids, that rotten bunch of....

I turn the corner and see Rino standing in front of a
family of gypsies who were begging for money. The father
was sitting in a wheel-chair playing the accordion; the
woman had two babies at her breast, and another child,
filthy and half-naked, was lying on the ground. I stopped,
not wanting to see his toes when Rino did.

What have I done?

I saw Rino give all his parcels and packages to that
child then run away.

I found him at the main door of our building.

"What have you done?"

"Papà, I know them; they don't have any wood to keep
warm and they sleep on park benches! At least we can keep
warm and we have things to eat!"

"Did you really give away everything?"

"Yes, papà."

I took his hand in mine, squeezed it and with moist
eyes told him, "Oh, go to hell!"

We managed to save face. Rinuccio was confirmed in the outfit his mother bought him.

XII.

I had another visit from the principal today. I was dictating a problem when he came in.

"Three man-of-wars cross...."

"Mister Mombelli, would you repeat that..."

"Three man-of-wars..."

"Did you say man-of-wars or didn't I hear correctly?"

"I said man-of-wars!"

"You said man-of-wars, did you? Now, Mr. Mombelli, do you say mothers-in-law or mother-in-laws?"

"Mothers-in-law."

"You say mothers-in-law. Well then, why do you say, and teach man-of-wars? Man-of-wars do not exist. Men-of-war exist. The plural of a compound noun is formed by pluralizing the modified word." He gave his usual little smile and went on, "You did not know that one always pluralizes the modified word?"

"Well, actually...."

He gave his little smile again. "Please, Mr. Mombelli, your average Joe may say man-of-wars, as your average Joe is
ignorant; but we, as educated Italians, must say men-of-war. MEN-of-war. Have the pupils erase and re-write it immediately."

I started over again, "Three MEN-of-war...."

When I got to the solution, the principal said, "Have you taught that eight times seven equals fifty-six? Yes.... and you admit it! Mr. Mombelli, eight times seven does not equal, because equal means identical. And eight and seven are not identical to fifty-six just as fifty-six is not identical either to eight or to seven! Erase it immediately! No 'equals': seven times eight space fifty-six. Away with equals, away with equals signs, because equals means.... what does it mean, Mr. Mombelli?"

"Equals means....well, equals...that they're equal!"

"You see, you're not paying attention! How can I give you an excellent on your teaching evaluation if you pay no attention to the person delegated to oversee the teachers? Equals means identical. Identical. Repeat, Mr. Mombelli!"

"Equals means identical," I said.

XIII.

This evening I was stretched out on the sofa, cigarette in mouth, as the dining room aired itself out. I was
enjoying my 7:00 habit. I'd just finished the tutoring, finished paying my dues to life.

Ada came over to me. I couldn't see her face, but the way she was walking alarmed me. Ada was nervous. It looked like she wanted to argue. I was almost glad, since our life was flowing along in an apparent calm that hid our indifference and smugness about the bit of well-being we'd managed to attain.

Our marital relations were also a result of this state. A couple of times a week we made love, but our mutual giving of ourselves had gotten to be like a test; an experiment, in short. Subconsciously I wanted to see if my sexual capacities had weakened; if the act wore me out or not. And at the end I'd sigh with relief and really feel pretty satisfied with myself!

Ada was at that age in a woman's life when she isn't young anymore but she isn't old either. She must have been glad that her body still excited me. She was satisfied too when we finished making love; I could see that from lots of little things.

But by now our love and our relations had become mechanical, habitual. Twice a week: always the same days....

Out of bed, life went on as usual, made up of habits, mutual toleration, no jolts, a nice smooth bourgeois life.
"Antonio," Ada said in a deliberately calm voice, "I've had enough of working at the factory."

"I knew it!" I said.

She sat down on the edge of the sofa. "Antonio, you don't know what it means to have a boss standing over you staring at you; you don't know what it means to have women around you who talk like men; you just don't know what it's like!"

"I can imagine."

"Antonio, I've had enough! I've stood it up to now, but I just can't anymore!" She sighed and put her head in her hands. "I mess up a seam and the boss starts swearing at me; I cut it wrong and he starts sounding off again. I don't want to go anymore!"

"Then don't go," I said in relief. It was as if the claws that had been peeling the tar off me had suddenly stopped. "I'm glad, Ada!"

Ada didn't say anything for a minute. Then she said, "Can I ask you a favor? But you have to promise me you'll do it!"

"Go ahead."

"Promise me?"

"Go on!"

"Antonio, my brother and I have it all figured out. Carlo doesn't want to be a factory-worker anymore either. So we were thinking, 'If Antonio quit his job, he'd get
almost seven hundred thousand lire severance pay and we could start making shoes on our own!"

"Is that the favor?" I said through my teeth.

"Antonio, we've got plenty of experience!" She stared at the floor. The proposal had hit me like the unexpected blow from a whip, that you think you can take for a minute and then you start feeling the pain in all its intensity.

"Well?" Ada asked, breaking the silence, that was itself as intense as a blow from a whip.

"Ada, if I quit I lose my right to a pension!"

She smiled irritatingly. She was grinding her teeth, making a noise like fingernails across a blackboard. It made cold shivers run up and down my spine.

"Besides, Ada, I'd lose my independence. I'd have to depend on you two! I mean, what do I do if I'm not teaching anymore? How do I live? Where do I get my money; from you?"

"Exactly!"

"That's exactly what I don't want."

Ada rolled her eyes; I could see she was looking for the right words to get me where it hurt most. "Your salary's just a drop in the bucket; really, Antonio! It's nothing; just a drop!" She started laughing hysterically. "You shouldn't have married a woman like me...."

"Don't be stubborn, please!"
She ground her teeth again. "Would you rather have a wife who works in a factory or a wife who has her own business?"

"But you know I'm no good at business!"

"I am, though! And so's my brother!"

"So I'd be the prince consort?"

XIV.

My brother-in-law, Carlo, came over. He wanted to convince me to quit my job at school. I walked out and wandered around half the town. Then I went to my usual Bar. I sat there for awhile with Cipollone, who was telling me about last night's feast: "What a feast! Antipasto with anchovies, olives, and...four plates of ravioli, a whole loaf of bread, roast duck, an apple: three thousand lire! Including two bottles of Barbera! Geez, I ate so much! Waiter, chicory coffee! Chicory sure hits the spot! Oh boy, does it ever!"

Fed up, I went over to the reporter's table. They'd informed him about a fetus they'd found in a ditch and he was writing a story about the mother. He gave it to me to read. The title was Monstrous Mother. "Do you realize what you've done? I saw a police officer, a man who's never trembled before bandits, tremble at the sight of your child."
I saw an inspector cry! Monstrous mother, what have you done, monstrous mother?! Look at your hands, monstrous mother; do you see that blood? It will haunt you for the rest of your life, monstrous mother, and you will never have peace because your child could have been a man and instead he's gone to live among the angels! But you, monstrous mother, have no idea what angels are. Curse you, monstrous mother!"

The reporter looked at his story with self-satisfaction. 'Now,' I thought, 'I'll pierce your crust of tar.' "Seems like I've already read that somewhere," I said. "You've got it mixed-up: the other one was called Infamous Mother."

"Oh, sorry," I said. A terrible doubt came over me. I raced home, but Ada was in bed, with her swollen stomach. I breathed a sigh of relief.

XV.

The weeks go by; a hundred sixty-eight hours, then another hundred sixty-eight hours. And if it weren't for the little details of school and the Bar and the family, it'd just be a series of exactly identical hours.

Ada's not speaking to me anymore. If she has something to tell me she does it through Rino. I do the same thing. She eats after me at noon, before me in the evening. We
ran into each other at the door and she said, "Pardon me."

"How are things with you, ma'am?"

"Not bad, and you, sir?"

The tar has made us lose our sense of the ridiculous.

This evening I sent my third shift of students home. I told them I wasn't feeling well. It was 6:00 when I went out, 6:00 in the evening. A balmy spring evening, slowly getting dark. The sky was a clear washed-out blue, and the moon stood out, enormous, against it.

I went by the Piazza and all the same old faces almost disgusted me. All those everyday, every evening faces! Those faces I know by heart.

A man goes by and I remember that man when he was a kid. I remember him as a schoolboy. Now he has plenty of white hair, I think as I walk along.

And that old man dragging himself along? I knew him when he was young, good-looking... And that worker going to do her shopping, shabby now; I knew her too — when she was a striking woman of the world.

I walk along as evening softly descends, and the moon rises. Before me stretches Corso Milano, full of bicycles, cars, people moving running rushing around. That moving rushing around running is the meaning of their lives; the meaning of life, I think. And my walking has a meaning too, I think. But I don't know what meaning to give to it.
Maybe because their running leads to something, to some action, whereas my walking is aimless... I think about money. About banknotes, that are worth something because there's gold behind them; if it wasn't for the gold they'd be worthless. That's it - there's something analogous to that in the movement of these people all around me: there's gold behind it, whereas behind my walking there's nothing nothing nothing!

I ask myself if there's a logical connection between these people running and me walking and banknotes, and I figure there's more of a connection there than between my toes and my unborn child.

Thinking along these lines, I stop at a fork in the road and set off towards the country. The people are starting to bother me. Their moving around bothers me; here's the countryside spread out in its green. I look at the meadows pock-marked with buttercups and say out loud, "Meadows pock-marked with buttercups." I like the phrase - meadows pock-marked with buttercups! I like that 'pock-marked'!

I go on walking. I see farmers working, and think about the thoughts a farmer might have while he works. The farmer's barefoot and near him there's a woman, maybe his woman, and it's natural for him to be showing his feet and for her to be seeing them. Maybe she restores her
equilibrium by seeing a man barefoot.

I continue my walk thinking about Rino. Who knows if Rino knows how babies are born; who knows if he knows about those things everybody does their best to hush up, maybe so they can get more pleasure out of finally revealing them? Those forbidden pleasures that, just because they are forbidden, become much more pleasurable.

At Rino's age I already knew lots of those things. And I'd almost be sorry if Rino didn't know them yet. But I'd be more sorry if he did know them. Who knows whether he's wondered why his mother and father sleep apart. Who knows if he's wondered if women are made like men underneath, or what they're made like!

I continue my walk and my thoughts, and take in a deep breath of that air impregnated with hay, stables, grass. I go down a steep slope to the Ticino Valley. I look at the Edison power plant and a schoolboy memory comes back to me: my elementary schoolteacher told us that Hannibal had defeated the Romans right there. And I've repeated the same thing to my students for almost twenty years: "Where the Edison power plant is; that's where Hannibal defeated the Romans!"

I continue my walk....
I'm sitting on a little bridge now. It's an irrigation bridge that rests transversally on its two flanks. The railroad cutting passes under it. I'm up high; my gaze takes in the whole Ticino Valley: river, woods, bridge. If I turn, I can see the houses of Vigevano like dark masses full of luminous holes, and I tell myself: those are windows; behind each light there's someone who, like me, has toes, hands and a brain. I turn again and the countryside spreads out before me. I'm sitting on granite and think, this is granite. I scratch at it with my hands and tell myself, it is granite. This cold is granite-type cold. And I think, I'm alive, I'm awake, I'm here. Here is where I am; not in Arabia but here on this bridge, and I see the Ticino and I see Vigevano and say, I'm here, I'm awake and I'm alive. I think. I think that the things I see, I'm seeing right at this moment. And I tell myself again, Alive! I'm alive and I'm thinking. I think about whether there could be a logical connection between a paper bag and this granite. I suppose there is a connection, that somebody could find it. I mean that somebody could find that there's some connection between a paper bag and granite; but I'm not capable of discovering that connection. And I ask myself, what does a paper bag have to do with
anything? In front of me are plane-trees, ash-trees, elms; a river, road, bridge. Under me is a kind of glen with a pool of water; why did I think of a paper bag and not of one of these things?

The feeling of not being in control of myself came over me again.

Near the railroad cutting there was a path, and on this side of the path a small wood with a hut in the middle of it. A hut built on pilings. Through the window I could see a woman and a man. Probably woodcutters. Now that I take a better look, I see they're the two I came across earlier, the ones that had me thinking about his showing his toes and her working. They really are the same ones. I can see them eating. And he's barefoot. That hut makes me think of the Pile-dwelling Era. I tell myself, what I'm seeing isn't a primer illustration but truly a real hut, a real pile-dwelling.

How many yards are there between the hut and the railroad?

Well, roughly, I'd say a few hundred yards. How many thousands of years are there between the Pile-dwelling Era and the Railroad Era? There it is, in those few hundred yards - mankind's whole journey through thousands of years. The man who built pile-dwellings gave a meaning to his life; like the man who invented the railroad. Each era has its meanings of life. Man built this cutting, this railroad,
this irrigation bridge, that bridge over the Ticino, that
tower I can barely see: Man built all of these things. He
thought, reflected, calculated and gave life to these things!
The same Man who invented point totals, levels, pay increases,
salary brackets; the same Man who's proud of himself not
because he's a man, not because man has made such progress,
but because he belongs to a certain point total, because
he's reached a certain level. I think, I didn't build this
railroad, I haven't invented anything, I enjoy other people's
inventions; and yet I'm happy to be a man because whoever
built these things was a man too, and it seems like I have a
bit of his talent. I think. I belong to the category of men.

But maybe I think this way because I'm in group B;
because I'm at point total 271 salary bracket #4; maybe
that's why I think this way. But if I were at a higher
point total, at a different level, I could be proud of
belonging to, not all of humanity, but that sector of
humanity made up of a few hundred thousand people who've
reached that point total, that level, that salary bracket.
And I think, tar!

I certainly don't want to have Rino become a bricklayer
or a ditchdigger, and yet they're exactly the ones who help
the scientist put his discoveries into effect. I want to
make Rino a Group A office worker. Because I want to see
him proud of belonging to Group A, and I want other people,
when they work with him, to think about him what I think about my superiors when they make me feel their superiority; i.e. you go to the john just like me!

Tar, I think. The tar is suffocating me; I'm one big tar.

Ada tells me, "Quit that job! Come on; nothing ventured, nothing gained!" I don't do it, because the tar keeps me from doing it, because: I'm scared! And I think of myself as a shipwreck victim clinging to a reef in the sea of life, and I keep clinging while around me all of humanity is swimming, trying to reach more comfortable reefs. Or else they're swimming because, considering that they're in the world anyway, it doesn't make sense to cling to a reef and wait for death. Tar. I'm full of tar and fear.

I let life flow along and I flow along with life; we flow along together, until the day I stop. Group B point total 271 fourth pay increase; nineteen years of service.

My eyes go from the hut to the railroad, back to the hut, to the railroad again, once more to the hut; I take in thousands of years in a few seconds.

Would men have invented the railroads, trains, bridges, roads if each of them had had his point total, his salary bracket, his level?

Just think how many men could have created something and didn't, resting on their point totals, their salary brackets, their levels!
I think of Ada. The tar is burning me. Ada was in her own house, and going to the factory must have been quite a sacrifice. Being away from her child and from the house is always a sacrifice for a woman. Ada tells me, "Get a move on! Prove your life is worth something! Get a move on!"

And I keep clinging to the reef, unmoving. I'm scared of drowning in this sea-life where every day lots of people are drowned and lots are born. I don't like the word scared. I say, 'It's not fear; it's caution.' I like that word better; that's more acceptable. It's caution, that's what it is. I'm not young and I'm responsible for raising a child. He still has to study - long years of study; I can't tempt fate and give up now.

This is tar too. I feel like they're fairly valid excuses, but they're still excuses.

'But I educate,' I tell myself.

I touch the granite again and ask myself, 'What connection could there be between this granite and a paper bag?'

XVII.

I don't know how much time's gone by. I know it was still light out before and now it's dark. The moon is enormous, reflected in the water of the Ticino; I know the trees were silent before, now nature is singing; those are
crickets and owls that are singing. Or howling, maybe. I don't know how much time's gone by; maybe an hour, maybe two. But how important can an hour, or two, be compared to thousands of years?

From the hut to the railroad, a hundred yards, thousands of years; two hours of my time: what are two hours?

The woodcutter and his woman are outside the hut now. And I'm here, I'm here alive, sitting on granite; I'm here alive sitting on granite and seeing. I see the woodcutter and his woman and they're naked. They're sitting at the edge of that glen full of water. They're throwing stones into it and for every stone a lugubrious 'gluk' rises from the glen. The woman is lying down; it's the man who's throwing the stones. I see the woman's body and think, it's a woman's body; it's naked. I feel like I have a painting by a great artist in front of me. The woman's naked body emanates a light that fills the forest; her sex is in harmony with the beauty of her whole body. I tell myself, 'This is a painting!'

I'm sorry I didn't look at her closely when I went by them; and I feel petty about having stared at his toes instead.

The painting is still there, and I'm almost scared they'll move. She radiates light; a light that transfigures everything. I think of Ada and see that the difference
between the nakedness of this peasant woman and that of my wife is the difference between a nude painted by a great artist and a nude in a pornographic photo.

The train's going by. Split-second. The air swirls around me, panels of light appear and disappear on the ground, as if the ground itself were a huge panel being turned on and off. I sniff the smell of the train and find it perfumed and pleasant, like the smell of the country.

Now the woman's getting up; and this is another painting by a great artist. She moves. Every movement is a totally new and different pose; another painting; even the nudity of the man is different from the nudity of a naked man; his is the nudity of a painting too.

The man goes behind a tree and she moves close to the hut. The moon shines on her body, illuminating it, but the moonlight is counteracted by the light from her body.

"Eva?" the man calls.

Eva, Eva, of all things! Of course her name has to be Eva, I think. What other name could a woman like this have but Eva?

"Eva?" the man says again.

She's silent. The existence of the hut bothers me at that point. That hut ruins the painting I'm imagining. If it weren't for the hut you could imagine an earthly paradise, the Earthly Paradise. The existence of that hut shifts time by thousands of years.
"Eva?" the man calls.

"Over here!" she answers. Her voice is as luminous as her body. The air is filled with her luminous voice.

Now I can see her go hide behind a tree as he stands where she was before, just like she was standing. She doesn't call out. I wait to hear her voice, but she stays behind that tree. The moonlight shines on her face. I was right not to look at her close up. The way I'm seeing her now is something stupendous. She emanates the same light as the Mona Lisa, but even more intense; I'm looking at a live woman. And I think, I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I'm myself, Antonio Mombelli - and my name sounds sarcastic to me.

"Eva?" he calls.

It's him calling again, calling her.

"Eva?" he calls again. Now he's moaning. She throws stones into the water, and the 'gluk's rise from underground like spoutings from the dead. Gluk. Gluk.

"Eva?" he calls for the third time. I say the third time, but third is an absurdity at this point. We're beyond time and space here; there are thousands of years here, and here I am saying 'the third time'?

She goes to him and he holds her tight. Right now his feet are in the moonlight; he has toes; I can see his toes, but here it's natural and logical for there to be toes; it would be painful to see those feet without toes.
They go into the hut. She lights a candle. Six thousand, seven thousand, eight thousand years led to that much progress: a candle. Just a candle? Not only a candle but a pane of glass as well. That's all: a candle, a pane of glass, and let's even include the scythe gleaming in the candlelight; even though I think that six thousand seven thousand eight thousand years ago there must have already been scythes.

She unrolls a pallet.

Now he's on top of her. Their love is truly earthly paradise love, it's not like mine with Ada....

XVIII.

The atmosphere at home is weighing me down. Ada sits there with her big stomach in the air and a dramatic expression on her face. Her eyes are red. I stopped as I was going into the kitchen. "You don't know what it's like to have a boss!" she was saying to Rino.

When I came in she immediately changed the subject. "That fish weighed three grams, Rino," she was saying. But her eyes were red.

I left the house right away and went to the Piazza. The same old faces wandering around, the same old voices
talking. The reporter was explaining why he considers Panciroli a great player.

I put L'uomo in frac on the jukebox. Modugno's voice resounded down the arcades of the Piazza. I was carried away listening to the song. Then I raise my eyes and see a huge fat guy in front of me, big and round: a round face, a round head, a big round stomach, completely round, like the Michelin tire ad, round and white and red, more red than white, standing there calmly eating a sandwich. His jaws were going up and down; he chomped on and on, his mouth crammed full....

"A dream never dreamed memories of the past a moment of love never to return...."

And this guy eating calmly, blissfully away.

The Piazza was deserted. At the usual hour, right on the dot, here come those two, husband and wife, in their custom-built Alfa Romeo. The reporter keeps on talking. Now he's explaining how sputniks work.

"The scientists say the sputnik'll orbit for about twenty days and then it'll dissolve, but I don't agree with those guys. Waddya bet I'm right?" Then, since nobody wants to bet, he starts explaining how they're made, how they launched them into orbit, and how the things manage to revolve around the earth.

I walk along under the arcades and run into Pisquani,
the leftist intellectual. "Did you see what the Russians did? Launched those sputniks!" He laughs contentedly and rubs his hands, as if he was the one who'd sent them into orbit. I feel that today is Thursday, that this Thursday is like a thousand, ten thousand other Thursdays gone by; that the only difference between this one and the other thousand and ten thousand is the reporter's and Pisquani's babbling.

The Piazza's deserted the way it is every weekday. There's melancholy in the air, the way there always is when the moon's out and it's drizzling, and it's a weekday.

A priest crosses the Piazza. Every night at this time that priest crosses the Piazza. He always crosses the Piazza at this time. When I was little I'd see him at this time; now I see him again at this time. Only his pace has changed, gotten tired. Or maybe it's my eyes that have gotten tired. It must definitely be my eyes that make me see things the way they aren't; or else make me see what it's convenient to see.

I walk towards the other end of the arcade with Pisquani. There are the same old small-time industrialists, the same old big industrialist and the same old flunky-worker sitting there looking at each other, waiting till 11:30 to go home by their respective car and bicycle.

Modugno's voice echoes down the arcades of the Piazza again; L'uomo in frac, again.
"We put it on to get Pallavicino's goat!" a close friend of the reporter tells me. Pallavicino sits there with a disgusted look on his face, mumbling, "Anybody could write a song like that."

But he's pale, really pale. Must be the neon reflection from the PRINCIPE BAR sign.

I go back home. My room's empty. I look out the window at the few lights still on across Vigevano... I hear the shuffling footsteps of a whore, the noise of a car here and there.

The sound of the train reaches me from faraway; a train whistle in the night. I'm crying without realizing it, as rain beats against the windowpanes....

XIX.

I'm living in a state of total tension. I can tell something's about to happen to me. I can tell Ada has a real grudge against me. Sometimes I feel like her stomach is swollen not with a baby, but with rage.

Something is about to happen to me. I don't know what, but I can tell I'm in danger. I can feel the danger getting closer. While I'm teaching I try to think what Ada could do to get back at me.
Go to some student's father and ask for money? She can't do that, I think, first because I only have one rich student and she's already asked his father, and secondly because now that she works and has something in her pocket she knows the value of money and knows that you don't just give it away. Either you donate it, with acknowledgments in the Informatore, or you just don't give it, period.

So, what could she do to get back at me? I say 'get back at me' because the expression lends itself to this childish atmosphere. What could Ada do? She could have an abortion!

I spend every morning at school with all these thoughts in my head. When I get home and see her stomach still swollen, I breathe a sigh of relief. After I've gotten through a day, I breathe a sigh of relief, again. Nothing's happened, I think as I go to sleep.

Before I fall asleep I look at my toes and pretend it's not me looking at them but Ada. I imagine her over there feeling homesick for my toes.
It's happened. What I was afraid of has happened. I get home and find Rino counting money, piles of it.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask.

"It's my tips," he answers.

"Tips?"

"Yeah, tips! I'm a delivery boy."

"You're what?"

"A delivery boy!"

My son's a delivery boy. It's like a dagger stabbing me a thousand times. My son a delivery boy! My son accepting tips, holding out his hand and taking tip money! My son!

"So you take tips?"

"Yes, papa."

I'm on fire. And he looks at me, and I look at the money; change, just like spare change for beggars, lying there on the table. And Ada's sitting on the other side of the table with a satisfied look on her face.

"Who sent you out to be a delivery boy?"

"Mamma!"

"Uh-huh."

"I took these things to one place and then this other place; I did all these errands and so...."

"Vigevano's seen my son running around as a delivery boy!" I snarl.
I look at Ada's face; she's wearing this pitying ironic smile, a smile of satisfaction and pity at the same time.

I grab Rino and my hand strikes his face hard, my feet kick out at him. Rino starts crying and those tears make me hit him harder, kick him harder. I'm hoping Ada will grab him away from me; I keep thinking she'll get between us; no! She sits there watching, looking like she's enjoying it. Her smile is the usual sarcastic mocking one. Maybe she's guessed what I'm thinking and just sits there calmly on purpose.

And I keep on hitting him; I hit him imagining that I'm hitting her. I think a mother should intervene; she should try and save her son; and maybe she thinks so too. And meanwhile she just sits there, indifferent.

I'm relieved when Rino escapes to his room. My hands are burning; I'm exhausted. I look at the coins on the table reflecting the lamplight and feel even more crushed.

"We've lost our dignity," I mumble.

"Rino's going to keep on being a delivery boy," Ada hisses.

"A slave!" I yell. I see the word makes her start. "A slave. A damn slave!" I repeat and see the word hit her like a slap in the face. If I'd called Rino a slave right away, I think, she would have gotten between us for sure.

Now there's silence between us. She looks at me with hate; that look that people have when they'd like to get
revenge but feel impotent and in the wrong.

I can't stand it anymore. I go in the dining room and catch Rino eavesdropping at the door, crying. "If you touch my mother!" he says. It doesn't sound like his voice to me; it sounds like another; like someone else's voice.

I go back in the kitchen. The silence is oppressive. Ada won't get rid of that look on her face, that ironic smile. My hands begin to itch; my fingers start opening and closing. I stare at Ada's neck.... But I'm afraid of Rino. I can still hear his voice in my ears.

"Ada, we may be poor, but we've always had enough to eat. It's hardly necessary to send the boy out to do a humiliating job like that. We've gone through worse times... When I think of Rino going around delivering stuff, holding out his hand for that money, being a damn slave.... What'll people say about us...." I was crying.

When I raised my eyes again I saw that Ada looked confused, mortified. Her eyes glistened, and I thought she was really beautiful right then. She's beautiful when she makes love, when she's suffering and when she's mad. She realized she'd given herself away and tried to cover up with the usual smirk.

"You'll be the ruin of us," she said through her teeth.

I rested my head on my hands. "All right! I'll do whatever you want. What do you want me to do? Quit my job? O.K., I'll quit. And you'll go into business with
your brother; what can I do?"

Ada reached over and stroked my head. "We'll be fine. You'll see how much money we'll have! You'll do the office work, you'll count as much as me and Carlo; even more. Every month we'll divide the money three ways! Antonio!"

My name, when she says it, has always made me shiver with pleasure.

"Antonio!" she repeated intensely.

"I'll do what you want, Ada! The kids'll go their ways; pretty soon we'll be all alone!" I said, stroking her arm.

"You talk about their going their ways just when the other one's about to be born!" she answered.

Ada sat down on my lap. I caressed her thigh. We kissed for a long time.

Then we went to bed. I took a morbid pleasure in showing her my toes, but she wouldn't look at them. She was smiling with that luminous face pregnant women have. As we made love, we could hear Rino sobbing.

The sobs went on. We put our heads under the covers, but the sobs went on....
I went to my colleague Bragaglia to find out what I had to do to quit. Bragaglia's an expert on educational law. He knows everything about the legal status of teachers, from a hundred years ago up to now. I can tell he's pleased with my question.

"Why don't you wait a few years so you can get your pension?" he asks me. "Your pension would be as much as the last salary bracket of the point total you're in, plus a three per cent income tax exemption."

"I've already made up my mind!"

"Well, then you have the right to 654,223 lire severance pay!" he tells me. "Get your resignation form to the superintendent of schools through official channels."

I filled out the form. I have it in front of me; I re-read it every once in a while.

I feel irresponsible. With this form I'm giving up my pension, my salary, my.... How could I ever have thought of quitting my job at school?

I don't have the courage to turn in that form. In fact, I feel unsure of my actions; I don't feel responsible for myself. I tear up the form and feel calmer.

And I think, how could I ever have thought of giving up my independence and putting myself at the disposal of my wife and my brother-in-law? I walk back and forth in the
classroom thinking: responsibility.

I try to find an excuse to give Ada; I've found the excuse. You never know, I'll tell her; I'm responsible for Rino. Rino's got to study; he has to graduate and become a Group A.

At home there's a festive atmosphere. On the table is the porcelain dinner service Ada brings out for special occasions; in the middle a round spot of red, the antipasto. My brother-in-law Carlo is there too.

"I've changed my mind," I say. "I'm not asking for the severance pay."

Ada shrugged her shoulders. "I'll have an abortion," she said coldly.

I felt like I'd already gone through the scene, already lived it.

"That's blackmail!" I said.

Ada shrugged her shoulders again.

"Monstrous mother! Infamous mother!" I said, thinking of the reporter's stories.

"A cowardly action for a cowardly action," she answered.

"I'm not cowardly; I'm cautious!"

"You're cowardly."

"Cautious!"

"Call it cautious."

The words grated: cowardly action. "So I'm a coward?"
"Obviously. What do you call somebody who hasn't
got courage?"

"He could be a coward and he could be cautious!"

Ada shrugged. "I've already told you what you are in
my opinion," she said.

Ada went and put on an old mended dress and was about
to go out. "Where are you going like that?"

"Oh, maybe to beg."

The tar was burning me. My wife going around like
a beggar.

"Besides, I was dressed like this underneath for years!"

"But nobody saw you!"

Ada spit on the floor. "Those flimsy old bourgeois
rationalizations!" she said.

"Ada, stop!"

I filled out the form again thinking, till now I've
clung to the school-reef; now I'll change reefs; I'll cling
to my wife and my brother-in-law.

"Thy will be done," I sighed.

XXII.

I'm outside the Administration Office. I've got the
form in my pocket, but I don't have the courage to open
that door. This morning, foreseeing that I wouldn't have
the courage, I told all my colleagues about my intention to quit.

"So what're you gonna do?" Amiconi asked me.

"Be an industrialist," I answered.

Amiconi and Cipollone both started laughing. "You wanna bet you'll be sorry and end up teaching again!"

The news spread through the corridors. Every other minute some colleague would come ask me if it was true, if the rumors going around really corresponded to the truth. I nodded. They looked at me like I was crazy. Those looks gave me a feeling of pleasure.

"An industrialist?"

"An industrialist!"

Now I was outside the door: I looked at the shiny doorknob; I didn't have the courage to raise my hand and open the door. I stood there motionless, leaning against the wall, and thought: responsibility.

I stared at a tile on the floor. When I raised my eyes I saw all my colleagues watching me wide-eyed.

"Doesn't take long to spend your severance pay and then what?" Amiconi said to me.

Christ, all those eyes looking at me, penetrating me, reading my mind; those faces fixed there steady and unmoving, with an air of suspense like watching an acrobat walk the tightrope without a safety net underneath; they kept on watching me, watching watching watching....
"You better think twice about what you're doing!"

Cipollone was telling me.

I stared at the principal's door and thought, I'm still here; I'm here alive and awake, right here. I read: Administration; I see the door; I see my colleagues and here I am with this piece of paper saying I'm quitting, giving it up; I'm still here, and they're still over there, they're still there, still there.

"Getting it up?" Filippi shouted.

I went back into my classroom. I sat there for half an hour with my head in my hands.

Peschetti came in with the Gazzetta dello Sport. "This guy from Chile - d'ya hear what he did? The thousand in three hundred two point four. What a phenomenon!" I left the classroom. The teachers were still outside the principal's door.

So I thought, Just can't stand the suspense, can you?, and opened the door to the office with my eyes closed. The principal was dumbfounded when I gave him the form.

He read it word for word, then took out his pen and filled in all the missing dots over the i's.

"...when you divide a word the hyphens must never extend into the margin...now that I'm speaking with an industrialist... You never begin a thought with 'but'. Never use 'but' after a period...now why three 'and's in a row? Two are sufficient; you use a comma in place of the
third... These loops; the same old problem...Mr....
industrialist Mombelli..."

He gave me a permit so the school board would advance me the money.

When I went out my colleagues were still standing there looking at me; watching me just like you'd watch an acrobat who's just finished a dangerous number. "I envy you," Nanini said, shaking my hand.

Then I went to the school board office at the town hall. "We are elected by the people in order to serve the people," the treasurer told me, counting out the money. I felt like a pile of tar in front of him.

Ada and Carlo were waiting for me at home. They were pale and tired from the long wait.

"This is the money," I said.

They sat there in amazement. Then Ada said, "You'll see. You won't be sorry..."

XXIII.

I'm working for my wife and brother-in-law. The factory is a little rented room. I help where I can. Besides taking care of the bureaucratic matters, I go home and lock the door, put on my work-clothes and get to work polishing the pairs they send me, getting rid of the ragged edges, putting
them in the boxes.

I'm fine since nobody sees me. I think if somebody was to see me doing it, I'd look pretty ridiculous.

I'm satisfied with myself. I performed an act of courage. I'm grateful to Ada for making me perform this act of courage. I feel like more of a man.

XXIV.

My old colleagues are on vacation. The schools are closed; I go through the Piazza on my bike and see them sitting there at the tables enjoying their vacation. I'm seized with this feeling of superiority. I think, I'm working. I work.

XXV.

My day's intense. I get up at six; about one I finish the first part of my day. The second part starts at two and finishes at eight; at nine the third part starts.

Looks like the factory's making progress. Carlo and Ada know what they're doing. I'm under them; I'm like Rino, but the fact I earn the same as her doesn't make me feel that sting of mortification. It was worse when I was a
schoolteacher and she was a factory-worker. Now we're like small-time owners.

XXVI.

I'm in on the little factory secrets. Ada told me her brother wanted to keep me in the dark about all the little deals that go on. He thought it was better if I didn't know anything. "You don't know Antonio!" Ada answered him. I felt good about her answer.

XXVII.

An important thing's happened to me. Without realizing it, I've changed three of my nearly twenty-year-old habits. I don't go to the Bar any more in the morning; at 6:00 P.M. I don't smoke my only cigarette of the day stretched out on the sofa; and on Sunday I don't play cards all afternoon any more. The only habit left is taking a walk through the Piazza on Sunday and going to Mass at noon.
XXVIII.

Ada's body gives off this tenacious smell now. It's pleasant. It's not so pleasant when she talks and gestures. She's gotten very manlike.

XXIX.

We've lost another habit, the one of making love twice a week. Now we only do it Saturday night or Sunday morning.

XXX.

I'm afraid the work's distracting Rino from his studies. Luckily it's summer vacation now. Rino passed with good grades and he promised me he'll study. There's still a huge amount of tar stuck on me: I still want him to be a Group A.

XXXI.

I'm losing a lot of tar. Today I faced a creditor and asked him for the money he owes us. It was easier than I
expected. I thought I'd be ashamed but it just seemed like a very normal thing to do.

XXXII.

Ada's worried about the baby being born. According to calculations he should be born right at the most crucial time for the business. She's praying it'll happen ten days earlier, or else ten days later. Ada seems like a different person to me; completely different physically too; even her voice.

XXXIII.

I have the feeling of being satisfied with myself. Tonight I sat down at the Caffe Sociale with some small-time industrialists; the same ones that used to get on my nerves when I was a teacher and I'd see them sitting there satisfied with themselves.
Holiday today. I worked till evening and then went back to the irrigation bridge. On the way I caught a glimpse of Eva and her man working, so I took a different road. I figured a painting seen close-up is always kind of disappointing. I'd rather imagine her the way I saw her from up on the bridge.

I sat on the bridge and saw the railroad with different eyes. The same way I saw the space between the hut and the railroad with different eyes.

I had this feeling of lightness. A pleasant feeling; like the one you have when you're dirty and slide into the water and see the water get dirty and your body clean. That kind of feeling.

Eva likes that kind of feeling too. For her and her man they're not similes for artificial feeling, like they
are for me; but they're real, natural feelings. In fact
this evening I saw Eva and her man roll around naked in the
mud (even covered with mud her body radiated light) and then
plunge into the water in the glen and come out clean and
pure. They were laughing happily, satisfied.

Then they went into the hut and started singing hymns.
Eva's voice is silvery and becomes warm when she sings low
notes; the man's voice is a normal man's voice, fairly deep
maybe. They were singing like I've never heard before.
With a fantastic naturalness: not a bit of effort; nothing.
They were singing....

The roar of a motorboat came from the Ticino, destroying
the harmony. I wish Eva couldn't hear that roar, wish she
could not know that there're motorboats not so far from her.

Now they're making love, Eva and her man. They're lying
on the wooden floor and the sweetness radiating from her face
makes the air sweet as well.

I start thinking I'd better not come and see their
life anymore. I think that right now I'm committing a
crime; appropriating a treasure that doesn't belong to me.

I think of Ada and I'm repulsed by her. I even start
thinking about her dying; I practically delight in thinking
about her dying, that way I could take the woodcutter's
place. I feel envious and spiteful towards him; I'd like
to be the one to live in his place, in that hut, with that
woman.
I'm staring at his toes. It must be wonderful to always live barefoot.

There's a stone near me. I wonder why in the world this stone's here if it wasn't here last time. Somebody brought it here. Somebody's been by here. I feel a hollow kind of jealousy.

I pick up the stone and let it drop into the water of the glen. A dismal 'gluk' rises, gluk gluk gluk: the trees send the echo back and forth.

I see the woman raise her eyes; her look is wonderful. She can't see me; I'm stretched out on the granite.

II.

My son was born. A suspicion was born with him as soon as I saw him: that he's not mine! He has red hair, a head full of red hair, and freckles all over his face. This makes me suspect he's not mine. There aren't any redheads in my family, and not in my wife's either.

I had the baby in my arms, and I looked at my wife and thought I saw the usual ironic smile. It's not mine!, I thought.

"He can't be mine," I said in a small voice.

"Thanks a lot," Ada said.
She's started sleeping in Rino's room again. I don't pick the baby up; I can't stand to hold it; it gives me the feeling of holding an animal. A base feeling.

"And what if it was yours?"

I told Ada to tell me once and for all. "I'd rather know it's not mine than wonder about it," I told her.

"I pity you," she answered.

I can tell I'm pitiable; but it's torture to think I have a son who isn't mine, or who might also be mine.

I went over Ada's life of the last few months. Sure, we've had fights and big ones too; there've been disagreements and a lot worse, and then - now that I think about it - that sudden news, suddenly being pregnant when we'd been going according to that twice-a-week calendar for years; and the red hair. Well, so many things that make me doubt he's mine.

"There's nothing left between us," Ada said. I sit there for hours staring at that viscous head and think, Is it mine? Or is it me who's not in control of my mind any more?

I compare the baby to Rino; they're just the exact opposite. There's not the slightest family resemblance in this redhead. "But where did this little angel come from?"

My wife looks at me sarcastically. "I pity you," she tells me again.
The doubts lasted for a day a night a day a night a day, until the little one died. I had no peace during those nights and days. "Is it mine?" The question hammered at my brain.

I welcomed his death like a liberation, like a joy: the way you welcome the announcement that a disagreeable relative who's installed himself in your house is leaving after a few days. 'I'm happy,' I'd tell myself. And then I'd answer myself, 'Happy because your son died?'

"Now are you satisfied?" Ada asked me.

"Tell me the truth!"

She looked at me with the usual ironic smile. "If it wasn't for Rino I would have already separated from a complete reject like you! Here's the money you loaned us."

She took out the money and scornfully threw it practically in my face. The money fell on the table. There are various ways to humiliate somebody. One of them is not to react to rudeness, especially if it's violent.

"I believe he was my son!" I said dreamily.

She made her eyes glitter fiercely. "It's not necessary, you know! Why don't you just leave! If I was a man and I'd had suspicions like that, I would've left long ago."

Those words were like fists. She realized it.

"Not a single minute.... I would've left immediately if I was in your place!"
I bit my lips till blood came.

III.

My wife started sleeping with me again but there was an abyss between us. We didn't speak to each other; we slept like two friends, period. Every so often I'd have this terrible feeling that I'd rejoiced in my son's death; and I'd tell myself that son wasn't mine.

"Why does he have red hair?" I'd ask myself. I felt petty. I made myself sick; these doubts that were torturing made me sick.

Ada gave my severance pay back to me. I wouldn't take it. So she put it in the bank and opened an account in my name. She put the bankbook in my drawer and so far I've pretended I've never seen it.

It was nighttime and I was pacing the room with my doubts. Ada was lying down staring at the ceiling, at the shadows passing in the street and projected onto the ceiling.

"Ada, if you'd just tell me something; if you'd just ask me why I wonder if I'm the father, Ada, it'd be different. Maybe I'd believe it!"

She gave her usual ironic smile, that became sarcastic, then a sneer and sent off an atrocious stink. She kept on smiling and her smile softened, then repeated itself cruelly
as the stink began to give me a headache.

"Give me a chance to explain. You were in factories; you worked with men; you're a working woman. Try and put yourself in my shoes!"

She kept on smiling without answering. Then she said, "I've already told you what I'd do if I was in your position."

Why didn't I get out of that house? What was it that kept me inside those four walls? I would think it was Rinuccio and then tell myself, Rinuccio's an excuse. It's fear that's holding me back, fear.

"I really look down on you," she said with a pitying melancholy air.

That expression and that face were like two punches in the stomach.

"I really look down on you," she repeated. "I'm leaving. I feel too sorry for you."

And I'm thinking, I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I'm me and I'm pacing this room that smells vaguely of my wife, of that being I've lived with for so many years and don't know. I don't know my wife. My wife, who must know me well if she looks down on me. I look out the window at the streets, the houses and lights, and think about how I'm here, closed in here, still here in this house, with a woman I suspect was unfaithful to me, and I'm still staying here with her, still here with her, under the same roof, while she tells me that if she was in my position she'd leave.
I'm biting one of my fingers and the pain gives me a feeling of pleasure. I sink my teeth into the flesh, feel myself suffering and think, Why did I quit my teaching job? Now see, if I'd still had my job, my salary, I would have left! Yessir, I would have left her! And meanwhile I stay here, still here, still here, still here, here, and I know I'll keep on staying here.

The baby's red head dances before me. In fact I try to make it concrete. I stare at a red light on the scaffolding of a house under construction, stare at it, stare at it; that red is the head of my son who died. Oh Christ, was that head mine, was it mine or wasn't it....

IV.

I've got to restore my equilibrium. I feel like a rag; obviously at the factory I'm dependent on my wife and brother-in-law, who treat me like a stranger or, how good of them, a friend of the family! Obviously my work isn't exactly essential to them.

At home life goes on in solitude. I've got to restore my equilibrium!

I think of the reporter who finds it in the soccer games; when he starts giving advice-orders to the players and the coach. Obviously we restore our equilibrium in
front of people we consider inferior to us. I think of my colleagues. It's not that I consider myself superior to them; they're the ones who consider me superior.

"You've really got guts!" they tell me when I run into them. "You really had nerve!"

Nanini confided in me that various times he was on the point of quitting and he always lost his nerve at the last minute.

"And I'm not the only one!" he told me.

I know of colleagues who dabble in business during their spare time; who'd be glad to be rid of school, but they just don't feel like handing in the form I handed in. Compared to them I'm superior.

I go to the Bar thinking, I'm going to restore my equilibrium, to feel like ME. I see my colleagues around the little tables, killing time. Vacation has given them bored faces, and that makes me feel good. I'm about to restore my equilibrium.

I sit down with them and get the feeling my presence isn't exactly welcome. "Here's the big industrialist!" Cipollone mutters.

Bragaglia wants to know how much severance pay I got. "654,225 lire," I say.

"That can't be!" he says, frowning.

"That's what it was."

"Are you sure?"
To calm him down, I take out the receipt and read it. "That's the exact figure," I say.

"No, you must have gotten 654,223," he says.

"Twenty-five!"

"Then they made a mistake in calculating it," he answers.

"You're right," I tell him. "It's 654,223."

"See?" he says, pleased with himself. "When I say something, I know what I'm talking about...."

"Can I offer you all something to drink?" I ask.

"We don't need charity from you. We've got salaries," Cipollone answers.

Amiconi fumes, "I don't know what the hell that Tenth Committee's waiting for...not yet, not yet!...."

I'm restoring my equilibrium. I feel watched; I can tell my colleagues are thinking of something to get me with. I'm satisfied to be here. Sure enough, Cipollone winks at Pagliani and says, "How's your factory going?"

"I haven't got a factory," I answer humbly.

"Pardon; your firm!" he corrects himself.

"I haven't got a firm," I say.

"So what is it you've got?" Varaldi asks, putting a hand in his pocket.

"I've got a kind of work-shop in partnership with my brother-in-law," I answer.
Varaldi shakes his head and says, "I bet you're sorry you gave up the school!"

"Ha!" I gesture; I can see my gloating face through the glass of cognac and it bothers even me.

"We're on vacation!" Cipollone said.

"Well, considering how much you make...." I answered, starting to get mad.

My colleagues looked at each other. I'd hit them where it hurt. My answers were going through their tar like knifethrusts.

"I bet you don't even get as much as somebody at point total 202!" Amiconi said.

I rubbed my hands. "If somebody at point total 202 wants to come work for me, I'll have him making three thousand a day!"

"So quit showing off, show-off!" Varaldi muttered.

We all got pretty hot under the collar. I ordered another cognac.

"Step on it, Mosco," I said to the waiter.

"Mosco?" Cipollone said. "Why not Leningrad too?" he guffawed happily.

"I'm positive Mombelli makes about as much as a point total 325, but no more!" Bragaglia said.

The principal went by and everybody jumped to their feet; except me - I stretched out my legs.
"He's got to work three months to make what I make in a month," I said. But I felt like it was somebody else talking, not me.

"He's in Group A! He's at point total 478; are you kidding?!" Bragaglia said.

"Besides he's got indemnity," Amiconi muttered.

I drank the cognac, paid with a thousand-lire bill, told the waiter to keep the change and, clicking my tongue, said, "Mere money!"

I really enjoyed the looks on my colleagues' faces.

"But you won't get any pension!" Cipollone muttered.

"I'm not living for a pension!" I answered sharply.

A tense silence followed. The silence of preparing for the next phase of the battle between me and them. I felt superior; I could tell they were feeling inferior; that they wanted to get me.

"Say whatever you want, but I've got my doubts about your earnings. I don't believe a word of it," Amiconi said.

"I never did believe it!" Varaldi said. "You kidding? Obviously he can't come tell us he's sorry he left the school!"

I pulled out a handful of thousand and ten-thousand lire bills. "That enough?"

"Good manners you've got, showing money," Amiconi muttered. "I think your quitting was compulsory.... Can you imagine an educator doing something like that? Waving
his money around!"

Varaldi gave a little smile. "When people do that it's because the money belongs to somebody else!"

"I beg to differ - it's mine," I said.

"Then that means you earn it, uh, somewhat under-handed..." Cipollone said.

I snorted, "If you want to think so, go ahead; if not...."

"But how can you earn that much if you said you haven't got a factory, you haven't got a firm...." Amiconi said. He laughed. "No answer, eh? Got you, got you!"

I snorted condescendingly, "You bet I haven't got a factory or a firm. I've got people working for me all over: four shoemakers who peg my shoes, another four workers who stitch 'em at their house! We just put them in the boxes and that's it...."

"How much could you make on a pair of shoes?" Varaldi said. "A few hundred lire at the most!"

"Eight hundred lire a pair!" I said.

"Oh, come on!"

"Eight hundred lire a pair, I swear to God," I repeated. They felt the blow. After a minute of silence, Cipollone said, "Depends how many you make and how many you sell, though!"

"We make forty dozen a day and sell every one of them," I said with a satisfied smile.
Then, since I was beating them anyway (I could see they were turning white at my words), I added, "And that's not all! I go and buy the leather outside of Vigevano, by taxi; that way I get around customs. And I hide it in a stall; take that into account too!"

Nobody said another word. I'd restored my equilibrium. I swaggered over and bought some packs of Sultano cigarettes; and went back over to my colleagues. I was sorry Varaldi had left.

V.

Sultano cigarettes are long. "I bought them to offer to my clients and the suppliers," I said to my colleagues. "But...go ahead!"

Nobody accepted my cigarettes. I was just about to light one for myself when Cipollone said, "Did you notice, Mombelli, when Varaldi put his hand in his pocket?" His face, his smile put me at a loss. I looked at the other colleagues, who were watching me with the same expression as when I'd been outside the principal's office with the resignation form in my hand.

"Why?"

"So you did notice him put his hand in his pocket?" Cipollone said. "And you saw him..."
"...scratch himself!"

Cipollone burst out laughing.

"What's going on? Tell me!" I said with a sinking feeling.

Cipollone was getting ready to tell me something. In fact, first he crossed his left leg over his right, then uncrossed them and put the right one over the left.

"I must tell you, my dear Mombelli, that an Internal Revenue agent has been around here for a little while. You know what the big Vigevano businessmen are calling him? Do you know it or don't you, the nickname they've given this guy?"

"Well, what are they calling him?!"

"Waiter, a coffee; and make sure it's hot, 'cause I like my coffee hot; if it isn't hot I don't want it; you can just throw it out...."

"What are they calling him?!" I yelled.

Cipollone swallowed. He calmly waited for his coffee, calmly drank the coffee. "It's hot, it's hot," he said to the waiter; then he addressed himself to me. "They're calling him Javert. You know who Javert was? Javert was this tremendous character of Les Miserables. You spell it Javert; you pronounce it zha-ver."

"So what did this Javert do?"

Cipollone laughed. He uncrossed his legs, then crossed the right one over the left again. The other colleagues
were sitting there with their mouths hanging open, their eyes bulging. "This Javert," Cipollone said, "realized he'd never be able to check on a pile of businesses and connections and complications and offices, so he thought: where are all the business deals born and developed and concluded? And this Javert told himself: in the cafes, in the bars! So then what did he do? He had old retired guys or else guys who were about to retire prick up their ears to what people were saying in the bars and cafes. He says: a young guy spending all day in a cafe stands out, but an old man..."

"Go on!"

"...what I'm telling you I know for sure because I was asked if I wanted to do it too..."

"Go on!"

Cipollone swallowed, sighed and said, "These guys listen and report what they hear to Javert. Since doubts have come up sometimes or they've reported things that weren't true, Javert had them all supplied with little pocket tape recorders."

"So Varaldi...."

"Varaldi put his hand in his pocket to scratch the tape recorder," Cipollone said.
VI.

Night. I walk around the bedroom; the air's full of smoke; how many Sultanos have I smoked so far?

I go over the scene in the Piazza; my waving the money around, mortifying my colleagues. So far drives you to this; to this kind of pettyness?

To showing off about what my wife and my brother-in-law make, thanks to their work and their shrewdness? I hear my voice again saying, "I make this, I make that...." I see my colleagues' expressions, their eyes, the color of their faces. Equilibrium, I say to myself, equilibrium.

The frenzy was starting to turn into anger at myself, disgust at my pettyness. I deserve a colleague like Varaldi.

My wife's snoring. I can see the covers go up and down in time with her calm breathing and snoring. Ah! Ah! Ah! I can't stand that breathing any more, so I go in the dining room to smoke another Sultano. Meanwhile I think, Tape recorder. Just when the business is cutting its teeth, I talk, I go hang our dirty laundry out in the Piazza; affairs that aren't just my affairs. My brother-in-law was right to want to keep me in the dark about the little factory deals. If Carlo and Ada find out about it?!

My heart was pounding. I looked up and saw myself reflected in the mirror. That shape with that long cigarette
in its mouth is me; me, that's me. I stared at myself. It looked like somebody caricaturing me.

That long cigarette right then; that shape that looked like me that the mirror was reflecting back to me; that's me, me me me me.

I threw the cigarette down and got up thinking, so then it's not my wife's snoring that's bothering me; it's me that's bothering me! It's me. And I think about how I'm alive; how a minute ago I told the whole Piazza about my affairs, told 'em how smart I am, how much I earn; I really did it; I told 'em everything. I look at myself in the mirror again and see this face of an unbalanced man and I laugh; I laugh because that man went to the Piazza to find his colleagues and restore his equilibrium. So much for your equilibrium.

I go back in the bedroom, slip into bed, try to sleep. But her snoring drives me crazy. I can't stand that snoring any more, that rise and fall of the covers, that calm....

I light another Sultano and start walking around the room again barefoot. I step on the still-lit cigarette butts and the pain seems like fair punishment, the way my mother's slaps used to reward my pranks when I was a kid.

Pranks, I thought. What have I done at my age? Played a prank. The word 'prank' has a stupid ring in my mind; stupid like the face the mirror reflects back to me. There he is: it's the prank man! The man who goes and tells his affairs to his colleagues to humiliate them; the pranks of
a guy who's past forty and going on fifty, the pranks of a
guy who's looking for equilibrium. ...Who wants to get his
equilibrium by destroying other people's. Me me looking at
myself in the mirror, reflected in the pale light from the
street, that's me and I'm alive, I'm here alive and thinking
and talking to myself and saying, "Internal Revenue! Javert!"

And she keeps on snoring, she goes on snoring, and it
sounds like two instruments playing and answering each other;
when she breathes in it's a harsh sound, when she breathes
out it's like a whistle; calmly my Mrs. breathes in breathes
out; serene my Mrs.; my Mrs. who told her brother, "You don't
know Antonio!"

It makes me laugh; she was the one who didn't know her
husband, the one who kept me well-informed about the deals,
the one who's breathing calmly now and sleeping the sleep
of the just. The sleep of the just! The cigarette has
evaporated, it's burning out on the floor, a red dot; red
like the head of the baby I don't know whether is mine or
not; red like that; it's evaporating and giving off a smell
of burnt tobacco that's infesting the air already infested
by the smell of our bodies, by Ada's breathing, her breathing
that's still calm; and the covers go up and down; and I look
at myself in the mirror again and think, that's really me I'm
seeing.

I can't take it any more; I go lock myself in the
bathroom...
VII.

Waking up in the bathroom is a unique feeling! I wake up and can tell I didn't wake up on my own; that somebody's pounding, but I don't realize right away where I am. And then I see the sink and feel my arm ache and think, my arm was resting on the sink and my head was resting on my arm. I get up and realize I was sitting on the toilet bowl, and the morning light tells me I spent the night on that toilet bowl. And meanwhile that fist keeps pounding on the door. I take a step and just about fall; my pants are down. I look at myself in that state, in those surroundings and get a tortured feeling, not from pain but from disgust, and I think, I spent the night in here. And now I remember why I spent the night in here. And that pounding goes on at the door.

I take my time about going to open it because I'm ashamed. A tarred shame, and meanwhile I look around and think that what I'm seeing really is a bathroom, that I slept leaning on the sink, that I spent the night here, and I practically relish all these realizations, like a sadist would relish torture. "I'm here, I'm alive, I'm awake!"

The fist is still pounding. I open the door and see my wife, who lowers her eyes.
I put myself to bed thinking that the bed hasn't been aired yet; that maybe Ada sensed something. She comes back in the room and my breathing becomes anguished. I try to attract her pity.

"You're not feeling well, sir?"

"No, ma'am!"

"I'll give you the thermometer right away."

"You can keep it, ma'am!"

I live in an absurd atmosphere; the woman who calls me 'sir' is the one who married me.

"Put the thermometer in!" she says harshly. I like her rudeness. She looks at me and I feel ashamed of myself.

She's leaned against the headboard and looks at me indulgently. "Antonio, the dead baby was your son. He was really yours; I swear to you on Rino's head that that baby was yours!"

Her voice is sorrowful but restrained; it sounds thick with tears; and that hurts me. "This morning when I saw that you weren't in bed, I can't explain what I felt," she goes on with the same voice, while her eyes darken. I see she has shadows under her eyes, and her eyes are swollen. "I put myself in your shoes, Antonio! If he gets to the point of sleeping in the bathroom, it means he's suffering, poor guy. I'm telling you again: the baby was yours!"
To get rid of the thoughts that are lying in wait I start laughing and say, "And to think I was happy when he died." She gives an understanding smile. "Ada, I just want to say two things; excuse me and forgive me!" I said. My voice sounded false, irritating to me. Ada runs her hand through my hair and tells me, "You excuse me, for having had a son with red hair!"

She takes the thermometer out and looks at it. I feel hot, sweaty; my face must be blazing. She smiles comfortably. "You haven't got anything; it shows thirty-seven something. Normal!"

"But I still don't feel well!" I said, trying to feel a pain somewhere.

"But the thermometer...."

"Which do you believe more, me or the thermometer?" I asked her, and I felt childish right then, after that question.

"You, Antonio," Ada answered. "Stay in bed if you don't feel...."
VIII.

The hours went by slowly. I stayed in bed and thought, Ancestral. I liked the sound of the word: Ancestral. I said it again, Ancestral. Then I thought about my state, about why I was in bed in the middle of the morning, and I shouted in a fit of rage, 'Ancestral!'

I got ready to go talk to Varaldi. While I walked towards school I thought about how I was going to humiliate myself before that man; and, mechanically, I repeated the word Ancestral. Ancestral. Ancestral, that rhymes with conventual. Conventual, that rhymes with ancestral. And at each step I repeated ancestral, conventual, ancestral, conventual.

I went into Varaldi's classroom and got shivers up and down my spine. My colleague was sitting in the middle of the room with a regal air and with a kind of bathrobe on. His students were all sitting around him cross-legged and across from him a boy with a fake beard, glasses, a wig, and a telescope in his hand was staring at the light and saying, "And yet it moves!"

"Galileo, you're at the telescope," Varaldi said.

"Yes, teacher."

"I am the Doge of Venice!"

"Yes, Doge!"
Varaldi called for quiet and then said, "This Sir Galileo says he's made a discovery! What could it be!"

He points to a boy, who stands up and says, "Doge, your most Serene Highness - Galileo Galilei is here!"

"Have him enter at once!" Varaldi answered.

"Your most humble servant," Galileo said with a bow.

"Tell me about your device!"

"My device could be of much use to you, Doge, because it can see far away and can sight sails and ships before others spy them with the naked eye!"

"Meaning," the Doge said, "that we could detect a ship two hours or more before she could detect us?"

"Certainly!"

"I want to try it!"

At this point the students realized that I'd come in.

"Rude good-for-nothing!" Varaldi screamed at me. "Ask permission first, you bum!"

Then he looked at me through the telescope and excused himself. "I thought it was the janitor," he said. The dressing-gown was in his way and I thought he looked sort of ashamed.

"I'm giving an active lesson," he mumbled.

"I noticed!"

"But it's not done yet," he said. "The principal accused me of materialism. So now there's the divine inspiration with God Almighty."
"Uh, excuse me...." I said.

Varaldi looked askance at me. Meanwhile he motioned to Galileo, who had his beard in his hand and was rubbing his chin.

"Your monologue, Galileo!"

Galileo: "The secret of my success? Trying and then trying again. I invited the Doge to look at the ships, because he's interested in ships more than anything else, since we're in a city on the Adriatic and in the middle there's the lagoon. But I want to focus my instrument on the sky! Will my eyes be worthy?"

"On your knees!" Varaldi shouted.

Galileo, on his knees: "Yea, Lord God, preserve my gift of sight! Yea, for I thirst to discover the beauties of thy work. Yea, that I may live forever in divine inspiration with the universe! Yea, that I may see ever higher, ever higher! Yea...."

Doge: "Marvelous! Oh Galileo Galilei, born in Pisa in 1564, you are the founder of modern science!"

At that point a boy hit the light, which swayed back and forth menacingly. "And yet it moves!" Galileo shouted.

"Just a minute, kids!" Varaldi said after I'd grabbed him by the sleeve and repeated that I had to talk to him.

"What are you doing here?" he said, staring at me.

"They told me you....I mean.... Look, Varaldi, that was petty of me yesterday to talk about my affairs, but
you...."

"What about me?"

"They told me you report back...." Meanwhile I stared at him while he stared at me.

"....Is it true?"

"Mombelli, do you realize income tax evasion is a sin? And a grave one too? Decreed by the Pope? ....As a Catholic, I must combat sin and sinners...."

IX.

Carlo and Ada are standing in front of me. My wife is staring at me with this fierce look.

"Antonio, the Internal Revenue guys were here this morning."

"Oh?"

"They knew we make eight hundred lire on a pair of shoes; they knew how many dozens we make a day...."

"Really?"

"They slapped a gigantic fine on us!"

"You're kidding!"

"Antonio, one of us talked!"

Quickly I thought, Better if I don't answer, and looked fixedly at Ada.
"Who talked?" Carlo went on. "We three were the only ones who knew these things."

After a few minutes of painful silence, I said, "It could be Rino."

"Rino didn't know those things," Ada said.

"Then it must be you," I said.

"Would you care to repeat that?"

"Ada, I agree with your husband," Carlo said. "You know, maybe talking to some girlfriend, maybe it just slipped out...."

Ada burst into nervous tears.

"Sorry," Carlo went on, "but I can't believe Antonio could be so thoughtless to go around talking about our affairs."

Ada cried harder; just like a little girl accused of doing something she can't prove she's innocent of.

"A woman I can see," Carlo went on harshly. "Women, you know; women are weak-natured, but a man...."

I suspected that Carlo suspected me and was venting his bitterness this way. He'd probably planned it all. He'd probably planned putting the blame on Ada too.

"What do we do?" I asked, lost in thought.

"What the hell can we do?" Carlo muttered. "We'll just have to turn the thing over to that lawyer Racalmuto and hope for the best!"

"Can we get out of it?"
Carlo didn't answer. He looked at his sister, who was still crying.

"I wasn't the one who talked; I keep my mouth closed; I don't talk; I don't go around telling my business. I mean really, do you think I'm an idiot or something? Only somebody touched in the head would go around blabbing his business here. Me, of all people...."

So then I stared Carlo right in the face with two blazing eyes. "What if you're the one who talked?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You who talk so much!"

Carlo got up, waving his fists at me. I got unexpected help from Ada.

"It could be! You've got this thing about being the boss!"

It took Rino's arrival to cool that red-hot atmosphere. His presence was like a bucket of water on the fire.

"Let's talk about something else," Ada said, drying her eyes.

"Appointment at Racalmuto's office at four," Carlo hissed.

X.

I'm waiting till four to go to Racalmuto's with Ada and Carlo. The three of us have been sitting here in silence
for an hour. Not one of us has said a word in an hour. All three of us stare at the floor and sit here waiting tensely.

It'd be more accurate to say I'm waiting, since the sister suspects first her brother and then me; and Carlo suspects first me and then his sister. I can see the mistrust in their eyes.

And I'm waiting too, and my wait is maybe more awful than theirs. I'm afraid the lawyer's gotten a hold of the tape. I'm afraid they know.

I feel like a convict waiting for the sentence. It could be Racalmuto doesn't have the tape. It could be he has it and isn't saying anything. My head's about to explode from all this conjecturing; I want to go out, go over to Racalmuto's. But I'm afraid all suspicions are directed at me. And besides I'm taking pleasure in this torture.

I sit here motionless while the clock marches on; marches on slow but ruthless, and its ticking fills the room as if it was expressing all the anguish of all three of us put together. Ticktock, ticktock, it keeps going.

I'm sorry Rino left. He went to work, and he's got to do his mother's and his uncle's and his father's share. And I think, Poor Rino, but I feel false right now; I feel like my sympathy is false. The three of us are still sitting here; and not one of us has said a word yet; not one of us moves; we're motionless; we look at each other
silently out of the corner of our eyes, and I think about how if somebody was to see us right now, he'd burst out laughing: husband, wife and brother-in-law motionless, rigid and silent.

Time goes on; the minute-hand goes around slowly but ruthlessly; we wait for four o'clock. At four Ada hopes for an act of justice that will dispel the shadow of suspicion that's thickened around her.

And Carlo; what's Carlo waiting for?

Maybe he's convinced I was the one who talked, but he's keeping quiet. I'm convinced he's convinced it was me.

There, Ada just looked me up and down, just an instant, but I caught it all right. Now Ada's got her head bowed.

I think about how I'm right here and alive, about how that woman is my wife, how I've seen her naked, yes, and I think about how her brother knows I've seen her naked. We're still sitting here. And her brother's staring at the floor and it looks like his lips are moving.

That's it, he's panting. I'm panting too; Ada is too; and we're still sitting here. I feel like breaking the silence but I don't have the courage to break the silence. Obviously if I started yelling 'Ancestral' right now, everything would change. The two of them would jump. Even Carlo would jump; the way the woodcutter jumped when I threw that stone into that pool of water. Carlo would jump just like that.
I should shout 'Ancestral', but I don't. I look at my wife and think about how I desire her right now. The weather's gray outside; smells like rain. When it's like this I always desire my wife. I want her body; I'd like to see her naked right now.

Who knows what she's thinking, I think. I look at the time. Only a few minutes have gone by; the hand is between the three and the four, and closer to the three than it is to the four, and we're sitting here waiting.

And none of us says anything. And all three of us feel like our heads are exploding. Even the brother and sister, who've got their heads in their hands now.

"All that work for nothing...." Carlo mutters.

Ada tightens her lips; her eyes glitter with vengeance. She looks at me. "So this morning I found you in...." she mutters. I motion to her to be quiet; I'm ashamed of her telling her brother. She smiles ironically. She makes a megaphone of her hand. "For you," she murmurs, mimicking a Bronx cheer.

And I think, I'm here, I'm alive, I'm awake. And I don't know whether I feel like a convict waiting for the sentence, or a child waiting to be punished. And I think about how I'm almost fifty.

We're still waiting. Obviously if I yelled 'Ancestral' right now, things would change for me. Yelling 'Ancestral' could be a strategic move.
What kind of a face would Ada make when she heard me yell the word? How would Carlo react? And me? I'd repeat 'Ancestral', that rhymes with 'conventual'. I'd repeat it. It's a strategic move; I think it over again and it sounds to me like an excellent move. How can you trust somebody who yells disjointed things? And I feel strangely satisfied; I've found the logical connection between my position and the word 'Ancestral'. That word is my defense.

But I can't find the connection between paper bags and granite and the railroad and Eva's hut! Why don't I shout 'Ancestral'?

They'll think I'm crazy, so then even if Racalmuto has them listen to the recording of what I said, they certainly can't look down on me. You can't look down on somebody who's crazy. They're afraid to look down on somebody who's crazy. They're afraid Almighty God will make them crazy too! And I'd get out of cutting a poor figure over having told my affairs to everybody.

I feel like yelling and I don't yell; I just sit here; I can feel that I'm alive, that I'm breathing; I can feel my head reverberate as if thoughts were things that move around and bump into each other like things. And I'm still sitting here and I think about how I'm me, about how that woman with clothes on over there opposite me is my wife and how I've seen her naked. About how she's been with me for scads of years, that woman. I think, If I hadn't married
her, if I saw her now for the first time, would I marry her?

I think I wouldn't marry her. Not that she's ugly. I know women who are a lot worse at her age; I wouldn't marry her because.... I don't know why. Maybe I would even marry her. Maybe it would be her who wouldn't want me. I look at my brother-in-law's shoes and think about how he has toes, how Ada's seen them. I remember once I wanted to ask her what his toes were like but I was embarrassed.

I'm still debating whether to yell the word 'Ancestral'. Or else the word 'conventual'. But I sit here motionless, silent thinking, I'm alive right now. And we're still sitting here.

Now I'm going to yell 'Ancestral'!

I don't have the courage to yell 'Ancestral'. I let the time go by. I think that whatever will be will be. I start thinking about Varaldi.

Now I'm going to yell 'Ancestral!' for sure.

I didn't yell it. I stare at the hand of the clock that's getting closer to the four and the other one that's getting closer to the twelve. And I think, I'm here and it's about to be four, and I think how I'm a convict waiting for the sentence. But then I shake my head and think how I'm a pupil waiting to be punished.

The hands are getting closer. It's a matter of minutes now. Ada and Carlo can tell it's a matter of minutes too. They're getting ready to get up.
I stifle the yell 'Ancestral!' in my throat.
There, they've both gotten up.
They're getting ready to go. I've gotten up too and all three of us are looking at each other. Each of us looks sure of himself.
I look sure of myself too.
I clamp my mouth shut so I won't yell 'Ancestral'.

XI.

We're in Racalmuto's law office. The lawyer's behind his desk; he's looking at a voluminous bundle of pages full of fine fine print and shouting, "But.... But Christ descended from the cross! But... But... But the cross is empty!" Then he stares at us with a possessed look and says, "You must leave here with divine sparks!" And he echoes himself, "With divine sparks!"

He gets up. "This is a book that was dictated to me by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tze! Do you know who Lao Tze is? ...You don't know who Lao Tze is! Obviously! You're just shoemakers!" he says, staring at me.

He must have seen that I'm full of tar. "You're good people!" he goes on, still looking at me. He rubs a hand across his face. "My philosopher friend is right! Mankind needs a universal language! In other words, a language
understood by everybody!"

He pounds a fist on the desk. "It's not enough to abolish barriers; it's not enough to abolish customs declarations. What we need is one language!"

I feel fine and I sit here listening to him with my mouth open. I'm hoping he'll go on; time's going by and that's fine with me.

"Words can't do it! We have to abolish words. Those conventional things we call words! Yes! Abolish them! Kill all languages. We have to understand each other with numbers! Numbers will replace words. If, instead of calling this pen a pen we called it, for example, thirteen! Everybody knows that thirteen means pen. That eighteen means picture. That fifty means clock. That would be the universal language the philosopher Lao Tze wants to see!

"Sir, we agree with you," Carlo said, "but we came about that matter; you know...."

Racalmuto was a thousand miles away from that matter. He sat there lost in thought for a couple of minutes, staring at the pages and muttering, "Yes! We need number language! Mankind never understood each other with words; numbers can bring about the miracle of universal communion! Spaghetti equals twenty-one. Rice equals twenty-two. Rose equals fifteen...." He stares at us a second and his face looks disconsolate. "You're good people!" he repeats, and stares at me again.
Then he stares at Ada.

Then he stares at Carlo.

"There's not much we can do about that matter. One of you three blurted out all your affairs in the Piazza," he said.

Automatically I stared at Carlo, who stared at me and together we stared at Ada. The lawyer went over to a bookshelf and took down a tape recorder and a tape. "I've got the proof that one of you talked right here. I can exclude its being the lady."

Ada let out a sigh as if she'd had a brick lifted off her stomach.

"One of you two talked," Racalmuto went on. "Whose voice is this?"

My body broke out in a cold sweat but my blood felt hot. Calmly Racalmuto set up the tape recorder; then: tac, a click. The room was filled with a voice so identical to mine it scared me.

"Then that means you earn it, uh, somewhat underhanded... If you want to think so go ahead, if not. But how can you earn that much if you said you haven't got a factory, you haven't got a firm. I've got people working for me all over four shoemakers who peg my shoes...."

My wife's and my brother-in-law's eyes were fixed on me. I looked for a way out in Racalmuto, but he was sitting there thinking about a universal language. I stared at those two
reels turning slowly, ruthlessly; the tape running on ruthlessly and my voice, my voice again, vibrating metallically in the air, "Eight hundred lire a pair Oh, come on Eight hundred lire a pair, I swear to God Depends how many you make a day and how many you sell, though Forty dozen a day and sell every one of them...."

The tape went on running, slowly, implacable. Four eyes staring at me.

XII.

I'm learning to take solitude. It's a painful solitude, since I live with a woman and a boy; and they're the ones who make me feel alone.

I'm not allowed in the work-shop any more. Like I suspected, the work I did was hardly necessary. Ada and her brother take care of getting it done in their spare time. Painful solitude, I was saying before. But maybe it's not really solitude. It's the knowledge of being useless; realizing the work you did till now was useless. That's what it is, not the solitude.

Every day Ada gives me a small amount for my personal expenses. I spend the day standing by the window watching life in the streets. Watching the people moving, running, making deals, and here I am watching stiffly and thinking about how I'm excluded from that game.
I'm in the same mood as when I was a kid and i'd be excluded from the games the other kids were caught up in and I'd stand there watching them play. That's what the people look like to me from up here at the window; like old kids playing.

I think about having tightened my belt for almost twenty years just to end up standing inertly by a window, end up having Ada hand me so much every day. I stand here watching the street. I know that at about three the shadow of the buildings starts lengthening to almost the middle of the street; that after three it passes the middle and slips on, darkening the whole street and climbing up on the buildings opposite.

I think that even if I'm useless right now, at least my life hasn't been useless. Ada and Carlo are working thanks to my severance pay. And I spend hours proving to myself that my life hasn't been useless; and I almost convince myself. I know that every hour and every half-hour the big bell in the tower rings; it rings the time that goes by in hours and half-hours; and I'm still standing here at the window watching, maybe staring at an old woman and trying to imagine her your, trying to imagine her as a girl. Who knows what kind of a life she's had?, I think.
I think God Almighty divided mankind into two categories; useful mankind and useless mankind. But that thought bothers me so I replace it with another one. I think about how Vigevano's churches take on a rosy color at dusk. I realize that's another useless thought, and my mind starts wandering. I think about how I'm not standing here inertly by the window staring at the shadow while it climbs up the buildings, but how I'm Antonio Mombelli, i.e. Fausto Coppi's most dreaded rival. Better yet; Coppi is my most dreaded rival. I'm a cyclist, Super Champion; I'm the human rocket. I take off on the first leg of the Tour and win it over Coppi by three hours; I win the second one by six. I win the whole thing. In the mountains I go uphill sitting on the seat, pedaling elegantly; on the downhill I go down so fast I don't have to pedal on the next uphill. I've started out twenty-four hours behind Coppi and Bartali, and I still keep on winning.

They don't want me racing any more. The bike manufacturers have declared relentless war on me, but I keep on racing. Milano - Sanremo. I take off at the starting-gun and fly; my legs are going like pistons. My sponsor's car is following behind me. I get a race going with the car: a hundred, hundred-twenty, hundred, hundred-twenty, till I pass it. I blow a tire about fifty times and get to Sanremo three hours ahead of my rivals who, they tell me, are still on the outskirts of Milano.
I turn around and go back to Milano. I meet Coppi and Bartali and friends pedaling towards Sanremo. In Milano I have them give me the starting-gun again and I catch up to the cyclists. From there I take off again for Sanremo, and win first and second that way – with a four hour lead.

I see the shadow that's climbed up the buildings opposite; I hear the factory whistles blow. The workers pouring out into the streets; darkness falling; the first stars shining. Buses go by full of workers going home to all the little towns, and I think, I've been standing here since five. I got up at eleven.

I hear the big bell in the tower strike the time. I've gotten through another day.

XIII.

I keep sleeping. Long naps that fill up the whole afternoon and get me to evening. I kill time.

After I'd killed the whole afternoon today too, I went to the irrigation bridge.

There was a disappointment in store for me. The hut's not there anymore. Disappeared.

I thought hard of Eva, of where she could be.

After dinner I took a little walk and then went to bed.
I've figured out I sleep more than sixteen hours a day. I feel ashamed in front of Rino.

"I'm old," I mutter. "I'm run down," I tell myself.

During the hours when I'm not sleeping; i.e. when I'm living, I have the feeling of not being completely in control of my brain. I spend too many hours thinking about being the champion, a bigger champion than Coppi and Bartali, about challenging all the champions in the world, about beating every one of them. And for hours and hours I imagine being a runner.

The days keep on going by and I think the best thing would be to occupy my mind with something complex and unpleasant. Complex so it'll occupy my mind completely; and unpleasant to make the thing interesting.

They've announced the annual certification exams. Why not take them?

Of course at my age taking an exam is painful, but I can't spend my whole life standing by a window looking at the shadow slip slowly across the street and climb up the buildings opposite. And feeling the days go by, and thinking about being world cycling champion.

So I've decided to start studying for the exam.
I'm taking two courses. One course to get half a point towards renewal of certification. It's called the Africa Course. It's held at the teachers' college and they teach you what you're supposed to do if you get bitten by a tsetse fly or by some kind of snake. And how you cure children with tropical diseases.

It's a preparatory course for the certification exams. It's all young women teachers and a few romantic-faced young men taking the course. Nanini and I are the oldies in there.

A woman pedagogy professor gives the lessons. "My dear teachers, tell yourselves that the young child is not a vase to be filled...." the professor began.

"....but a vase to be emptied!" Nanini guffawed.

The professor got angry. "....but a hearth to be lit," she said. "I am not surprised, Nanini, that you are still a substitute when everyone else your age is at the last point total!" she snapped.

Nanini looked her up and down. She was an old spinster. They stared at each other for a minute with fanatic eyes, then, staring at her body, Nanini said, "That which nature creates, man preserves!"

"I wish to remind you that you're speaking to a Group A!" she shouted. "And that I entered Group A at twenty; do you
understand?"

Then she went on explaining. "A fourth-grade lesson on iron," she said. "How would you explain iron?" she asked a young woman.

"I'd see what the textbook says," the woman answered.

"Oh!" the professor shouted disgustedly. "The book! The bookish again! To teach a lesson on iron we start by taking the class to a miner's house!"

"Impossible," Nanini shouted. "There aren't any miners in Vigevano!"

The professor collected herself after being at a loss for a second. "Well, when you take your field trips, choose places where there are miners!"

A woman teacher who must have had more years than points and was there to keep up to date on her culture stood up and said, "It's not true there are no miners in Vigevano. There was one. And I went there with my class. If you knew what came out of that ungodly mouth...."

"In front of the children?" the professor asked, scandalized.

"No, in back of them!" Nanini laughed.

The professor gritted her teeth and went on explaining, "The teacher will humbly let the miner take his place and explain what a mine is like, what their work is like, how they live.... Then we shall put a piece of iron in each pupil's hand and tell them, this iron comes from the mine."
And right there you have a nice lesson with iron as the main topic. You will then display other minerals and point out the difference between iron and some other mineral, such as...."

"Salt," Nanini shouted.

The professor shook her index finger at him.

"Substitute! Substitute!" she chanted the way kids go, "Nya, nya! Nya, nya!"

"We will have them find words which come from the Latin root of iron, ferrum, such as ferrite, ferrous, ferroconcrete, ferrotype - and there you have the grammar lesson. Then we will explain that the most common last name in Italy is Ferrari - and there you have a history lesson. And why is Ferrari the most common last name in Italy? Well, because last names are nicknames handed down through time, which originated during the Middle Ages when there were various workers' guilds, and since iron was worked everywhere, there's your explanation for so many Ferraris. And there you have your lesson on the Middle Ages."

"I'll have the Ferrari orchestra come play!" Nanini smirked. "There you have your lesson on music too!" He started whistling the Ferrari orchestra's theme song.

Incredible turmoil... Whistling in a teachers' college classroom - God forbid!....

"Here is a geography lesson on iron. We will arrange for a kind of stage in the classroom and have the children
act out scenes such as this. The teacher will have prepared the dialogue for the scenes."

The professor motioned and two little girls appeared. "Here is an example of Active School." The little girls started reciting.

First girl: How are you, Mrs. Ferri?
Second girl: Very well, Mrs. Ferrari, and you?
The professor interrupted. "As you can see, our main topic touches upon good manners as well..." The little girls started reciting again.

First girl: I haven't seen your husband for quite a while.
Second girl: My husband's in Belgium, which is bordered on the north by...on the south by...on the east by...on the west by..., and specifically in the capital Brussels, a city with three million inhabitants...

"In Belgium?"
"He's a miner. And he wrote me this letter."
At this point the little girl reads a fifteen-page letter on mines, the mining industry and statistics about coal exportation and consumption...

"I never knew there was a country called Belgium."
"You didn't?"
The little girl takes the other girl's hand, shows her where it is on the wall map and explains, "Belgium has twelve million inhabitants, it's a monarchy; i.e. the one
who rules in Belgium is the king; and it owns the Belgian Congo in Africa, which is called Belgian because it belongs to Belgium...."

"And here you could fit in a fine lesson on the Belgian Congo," the professor said.

When the scene was over, a university professor spoke on Manzoni. Or rather, on the gems of Manzoni. In The Betrothed, in the fifth chapter, he describes don Rodrigo's house. When Father Cristoforo arrives for the famous conversation, Manzoni uses the expression "small but elegant palace." Don Rodrigo's "small but elegant palace." When Brother Cristoforo leaves, chapter six, he turns his back not upon the "small but elegant palace", no! But upon the "wild beast's den"!

He talked for two hours about the difference between small but elegant palace and wild beast's den.

"And just think," the professor said, "that in the first and second editions of The Betrothed; i.e. Fermo and Lucia and Betrothed, Manzoni had again used small but elegant palace rather than wild beast's den!"

"The Lord enlightened him!" a woman teacher at point total 271 murmured.

Then a pedagogist spoke in favor of the purification of the language. "Who wants to join the association which proposes to purify the Italian language?" he asked. "Association members will fight within the school all Gallicisms,
barbarisms, Anglicisms that are corrupting the most beautiful language in the world!"

XV.

I'm still going to those lessons. I'm like a fish out of water in the middle of all this youth just out of high school. Luckily there's Nanini who's a few years older than me, so I take comfort in that. Just like he takes comfort seeing me.

XVI.

"At my age I have to tackle another certification exam!" Nanini sighs. And he laughs; a mellow, enjoyable laugh. "I'm a grandfather and I'm tackling another exam!"

We keep on going to the preparatory lessons. The pedagogy professor's corrected a theme of mine. She has it in her hand. I can tell everybody's looking at that theme paper; I can see it's marked up here and there. "Let's innovate the school," I hear her say. "Let's not call them themes any longer; let's call them compositions." The professor goes into a systematic discussion of the difference between the theme and the composition.
"Composition is a more harmonious word! It fits the composing spirit better. Composing, from the Latin componere: therefore, it is more precise, more Italian to call them compositions."

She calls on me and hands me my composition. "Mr. Mombelli, learn your grammar.... In Italian one does not say 'have they got', but 'do they have'!

I feel everybody's eyes on me. "Everyone uses 'have they got' instead of 'do they have' nowadays," I murmur.

The professor gives an understanding smile. "That is a liberty which poets, writers, journalists, and Group A's may take. But you, Mr. Mombelli, please use 'do they have'...."

This morning I took the certification exam. You had to draw lots for a subject and then give a lesson on it, or else hold a conversation/conference on a topic you'd drawn lots for.

After I'd considered it for a minute, I decided to choose the conversation/conference.

I drew a slip of paper out of the box. The topic was "The art of effective speaking."

They put me in a classroom with some other teachers. I had bookshelves full of books at my disposal. And three hours' time.

I spent the three hours consulting texts and books and prepared the following conference which I gave before the
"Oh pure and gracious-sounding tongue!" Thus speaks Alfieri of our language, for sweetness of sounds and of syllables renders the mother tongue yet more melodious. Spoken well, the language sounds in our ears as a fair melody, a beautiful harmony.

Sadly, however, save in Tuscany, the mother tongue is not spoken well. As De Amicis says so sagaciously, it is none other than music badly played.

In order to speak the language well, one must study it devotedly, following the example of the learned persons of Tuscany, especially of Firenze, and further taking into account the Roman pronunciation of the effective speaker. The saying is correct: Tuscan words on Roman lips.

But one must be careful not to ape either the Tuscans or the Romans. Heaven forbid! One would lapse into the affected and ridiculous.

Our language, then, is fair poetry and exquisite music on the lips of correct speakers; and we, if we wish to glory in being Italian with a capital I, must learn well the art of this poetry, this music, in order that our words may be well-received by those who listen to us; for the beauty of discourse occasions infinite good to mankind.

Discourse allures, moves, cheers, consoles. It is the most powerful and efficient means to educate our soul with its emotions and its affections. With its likings and benevolences, which are inestimable forces most capable of penetrating, by means of an immediate intuition, occult and healing truths, for the true education of the heart, which is the source of all good and the cure for all ills.

Ooooooh! The education of the heart is everything in life! Oooooh! It alone renews the world. Remakes human nature. Gives us once more divine beauty and renders us truly happy.

Yes! Yes! On the wings of love and faith it leads us, never failing, to eternal beatitude.

The most powerful means, then, and the most efficient instrument to educate our heart and to revive its divine beauty is the word.

Thus it is our SACRED DUTY TO LEARN TO SPEAK OUR FAIR TONGUE EFFECTIVELY; especially those of us who are not Tuscan.
In order, then, to achieve such a noble purpose, I must outline for you several MOST IMPORTANT rules concerning the necessity and importance of READING, RECITING AND DECLAIMING WELL. Three extremely interesting things to be performed in all the schools, if not every day - as we do at our school - at least! at least! at least twice a week.

Yes, gentlemen! For we are deeply convinced that in order to learn to SPEAK EFFECTIVELY, one must first learn to READ EFFECTIVELY, then to RECITE EFFECTIVELY, and finally to DECLARE EFFECTIVELY; from which, as the blossom from the flower, will necessarily spring beautiful pronunciation and the harmony of speech.

We shall allow ourselves to call to your attention and reflection several rules which will be very useful, or rather, essential, in becoming an effective reader, reciter and declarer, and finally, an effective speaker.

Read! Declaim! Recite! Let us analyze each of these actions in both their strict and liberal meanings.

Let us see for a moment what read means. To read means to glance over with one's eyes that which is written or printed in order to come to know its content; either silently or pronouncing the words with a certain amount of emphasis in order to make them public; that is, to make them known to others.

Now let us see what recite means. To recite is to say by heart and aloud a dramatic or indeed a literary composition, as do actors on the stage.

Now let us see what declaim means. Declamation is the art of reciting, in a more emphatic tone, speeches, poems, dialogues and so on, in public! Accompanying them with the appropriate gestures.

The declamation of the ancients was under the patronage of the goddess Polinnia, one of the nine muses who were protectresses of the arts and the sciences, and who was depicted crowned with gems. Depicted as a magnificent woman, dressed modestly in white, her right hand in the act of gesturing, and in her left a scroll upon which was written: SUADERE, Suadere, which means to persuade; that is, to convince the listeners.

One thing to learn, then, is the art of reading effectively, in a clear tone, letting the harmony of the words and the shading of the ideas be heard, in order to have them, when need be, ready! Clear! Ample! Well-ordered! both in speaking and in writing.

Never tolerate haste in reading; and pay great attention to pronunciation, intonation and accents. Make the tonic accents heard; make heard as well the stresses used by those effective speakers who, with fine! distinct! clear! syllabification, know how to use their voice in a natural tone, beautifully varied according to the sentiments they wish to express, giving spirit to the words, just as an
expert musician gives life to the notes, in accordance with the sentiments - sweet! pleasant! sad! or vehement! - by which he is stricken, knowing how to color them with modulations in order to delight those who listen.

Now we will speak about the voice. The voice, depending on the sentiments which stir it is said to be: SILVERY, GOLDEN, BRAZEN, HUSKY. For the voice is capable of expressing the BEAUTIFUL in its varied and manifold forms.

The silvery voice is fresh, joyous, gentle, serene. It is used in jocular or COMIC compositions, where one is describing handsomeness, grace, charm, loveliness, the gracefulness of the Beautiful.

The golden voice is clear, grand, majestic. It is used in compositions where that which stands out is the majesty and the greatness of the SUBLIME, precise and dynamic Beautiful.

The brazen voice is harsh, resonant, or indeed deep and awesome, or indeed sepulchral and majestic. It is used in descriptions where that which stands out is desperation and in which one wishes to express the TRAGICALLY BEAUTIFUL.

The husky voice is funereal, dark, mysterious. It is used in compositions where those things which stand out are oppression, dejection and mystery and in which one wishes to express the DREADFUL BEAUTIFUL.

One must not forget that there are at times compositions in which that which stands out is the diversity of sentiments, and which therefore require careful study and repeated practice in order to be able to express them BEAUTIFULLY through the diversity of the voices. Which produces a harmony so beautiful that it enraptures the listeners, enabling them to savour, through wondrous interlacement, the beautiful in all its forms: COMIC, TRAGIC, SUBLIME, DREADFUL, in harmonic diversity.

Varietas delectat.

Yet, however, in the use of the voices we must keep to the SILVERY and GOLDEN, expressing with them the threefold vision of the true, the beautiful and the good in which the soul is appeased, takes delight and rejoices. And this we must do by ever enticing or cheering or moving in order to instruct our most beautiful faculties with serene and magnanimous thoughts, sentiments and affections, expressed with a clear, warm, vigorous, tender, exquisite, affectionate word; a word all life, intelligence and love. "Which moves exhorting of the soul to: sigh."

Now let us see what one who reads, recites or declaims must do. Those who must read in public, recite or declaim, have need of untiring practice aloud of VOWELS, CONSONANTS, SYLLABLES and WORDS which they do not pronounce as well as they should.

For only with practice can one succeed in correcting
incorrect pronunciation stemming from structural defects or faulty habits.

This we have been doing for years in our teaching. One notices errors in cadence and pronunciation in every region in Italy. The most common alterations are in the pronunciation of the vowels e, o, u. Of the consonants s, sc, z. Of double consonants, which very few persons pronounce fully.

One must observe, furthermore, the distinction between the two ways of pronouncing e and o; with the open or with the closed sound. s and z; hard or soft sound.

In nearly all of our Italy, and on our islands, persons have difficulty pronouncing e and o well. Grammar rules are of little help. In this specific case, naturally. Here what is called for is practice and effective teachers who know how to teach the correct pronunciation of e and o – open or closed – according to Tuscan usage.

We, when we teach our pupils to read, make use of the Petrocchi dictionary, which indicates with tonic accents the correct pronunciation of the words.

I have now come to PUNCTUATION.

What is punctuation? Punctuation is guide and comfort to the reader, reciter or declaimer who must punctuate through cadence that which the writer has punctuated with his pen.

However, as more than a few authors are sparing of commas, and many printers are stingy of them, a good reader or reciter or declaimer must be liberal in adding commas, or rather making many pauses, and must distinguish even the slightest logical completion, without forgetting the other pauses indicated by the semicolon, the colon, the question mark, the exclamation point and the period.

Every one of them pauses which, as rests, are an integral part of the address, coming as they do under the jurisdiction of eurhythm, or rhythm if you wish, as do rests in music – melody, harmony. For effective speaking is no other than a hidden melody whose successive rhythm is what reveals the harmony of the words, sentences and paragraphs, which must form a discourse perfect in all its parts; that is, order.

What does order consist of? Order consists of this: UNITY IN DIVERSITY. Unity in diversity, which is what the entire essence of the beautiful consists of.

When one speaks, then, or recites or declaims or sings, pauses are necessary. As we said before...as we said previously, such pauses are veritable rests which give due coloring to the discourse and render it as musical as possible with naturalness, judgement and art.

The comma indicates a pause of one second.
The semicolon indicates a pause of two seconds.
The colon indicates a pause of three seconds.
The question mark and exclamation point indicate a pause of four or five - but no more - seconds, as called for. The period varies from seven to ten seconds depending upon the internal particularities of the composition one is reading.

Let us now talk about ellipses. These indicate a more or less long pause indicating a - excuse me for repeating myself - SUSPENSION WHICH IS TO MAKE THOSE LISTENING THINK OR INDEED REFLECT.

Let us give an example: "Oh! If you knew...what woes...what anxieties...what suffering...what misery...what pain!"

In short, all of these indications are part of rhythm or eurhythmmy, a law of order inherent in man which, in helping us to accent words, sees that they are pronounced beautifully IN TIME, WITH FEELING, METER AND MEASURE.

And it is here that the orator's skillfulness lies. When in his words there is judgement, wisdom and art; as, for example, in these verses of Dante:

To such a quiet, such a beautiful
Life of the citizen, to such a safe
Community, and to so sweet an inn,
Did Mary give me, with loud cries invoked.

We have now come to gestures. Let us try to agree upon the meaning of the word gestures.

By gestures one means those actions and movements - especially of the head and of the hands - which give assistance, force and expression to words. At times gestures may be a lively manifestation of the concept in themselves.

Few gestures are needed in order to declaim effectively. But those which one does use must be natural, spontaneous, rounded and gracefully delivered. They must not precede the words to which they refer, but be simultaneous with them. Save when they are of such a nature as to visibly present the concept to the eyes of one's listeners, even before it is heralded in words.

A gesture of the hand must begin below the chest, and the arm must be extended gracefully. Not to its full length. But somewhat bent, and fairly close to one's side. Ordinarily the hands must not be lifted above the head. They must not stop before the face, nor before the chest, and neither should enter the other's province.

When the teacher goes to the rostrum to recite or when he calls a pupil to the rostrum to read, make note of this: he must walk at a modest pace. Let his arms hang. Hang, I say! Not to be confused with swing. Hang. Have an unconstrained air, without bowing his head.

Once he has reached the rostrum or indeed the stage or is behind a desk, the reader or reciter or declaimer will take a small polite bow to his audience.
If someone of authority is present in the audience, the reader or reciter or declaimer will focus his eyes directly on that person's face.

Do not keep your eyes lowered to the floor. Only the inexperienced keep their eyes on the floor.

Then bow first to the right, then to the left, and finally direct your gaze graciously upon all.

In announcing the title of the composition, the reciter will incline his head somewhat towards the audience.

If there is no title, he will immediately assume the desired position.

He will hold the pages of the composition always in his left hand in order to keep the right hand free and to make the appropriate gestures.

If he is using the pages, when saying the title and the first line he will keep his eyes not on the page but on the audience.

And begin with a smile. Thus. In order to incline the hearts to listen with benevolent attention to our words; words which must be rich in a palatable wisdom necessarily possessed by us in abundance.

For the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart.

If the declainer is alone on the rostrum, he shall assume a graceful standing position facing the right; i.e. keeping the left foot firm, placing the other so that it will form naturally an open angle with the first; a position which he can vary either by moving the right foot forward or by moving the other back, in accordance with that which he is expressing.

When there are two persons reciting, one must assume the position facing the right, and the other the exact opposite; i.e. the position facing the left.

If, on the other hand, there are three persons declaiming, the third must stand in the middle as if he were alone.

Take care that the body of each interlocutor be turned always towards the assembly; only the head must move, in that it must address itself to the person one is speaking or listening to.

Note that an effective delivery in speaking is one of the most beautiful qualities which we must cultivate in order to captivate the heart of the assembly. It is difficult to say how much the politeness and amiability of words can do to reconcile hearts, says Cicero.

And the Holy Scriptures rightly say, "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb." *Favus mellis composita Verba.*

Everything we have said so far is insignificant and of little worth if we do not observe, when speaking, with exactitude and WISELY; that is, with JUDGEMENT AND ART, the following rules; as well as with GREAT NATURALNESS, whose
teacher is the very nature of the expression of our affections, our thoughts and sentiments - the tangible sign being the word; marvelous revealing vehicle of the DIVINE FOOTNOTE written deep in the soul of all beings, which sings ever with the Poet:

Created me divine Omnipotence,
The highest Wisdom, and the primal Love.

Thus, in reading, reciting, declaiming, sermonizing, teaching, lecturing - in short, in order to learn to speak effectively, politely, amiably; delivering one's words - beautifully with graceful gestures and movements - one must - please excuse me if I outline for greater clarity and exactness:

A. Give greater emphasis to the adjectives and adverbs than to the words which accompany them.
B. Gradually increase and diminish the volume of the voice when words, complements or similar locutions follow each other.
C. Modulate the voice in order to express with it the meaning of certain terms: thus the word soft is pronounced softly. The word slow: slowly. Harsh: harshly. Proud: proudly. And pronounce other words in this way according to the meanings and sounds desired.
D. Pause between subject and verb in order to further attract the attention of the audience.
E. Pause after but when it introduces an adversative or corrective proposition.
F. Place the cadence of the question mark not necessarily always at the end of the proposition, or indeed of the sentence, but upon that word to which one must reply, usually one of the following: where? how? why? when? who? what? Let us take a book and choose at random...

I picked up a book and opened it to a page I'd marked, making it look like it was at random.

...Let us read any old sentence...here we are: "Tonino, are you going into town today?"
This sounds like a common sentence, one of the many which fill our textbooks.... And yet.... "Tonino, are you going into town today?"
If one wants to reply to going, in order to know whether Tonino is going or not, one places the interrogative inflection on the going.
If one wants to know whether Tonino or another is going into town, one places the inflection on the you. And likewise on the today in order to know when he is going into town. One places the inflection on town in order to know
whether Tonino is going into town or elsewhere.

One must distinguish carefully among the three cadences of the voice: the ordinary or comma cadence. The suspensive or semicolon cadence, a cadence which one uses in the middle of suspensive or comparative sentences. The final or full stop cadence.

Above all, one must never confuse the question mark with the exclamation point, which one must never make abuse of; that is to say, do not be excessive in its use.

We have created a system of conventional signs for assistance in succeeding in using words well.

We were thinking not only of our own pupils, but of all of those who, possessing a natural loquacity, desire to perfect it in order to become effective speakers. We rejoiced in this didactic discovery of ours and submitted it to the illuminated and illuminating judgement of several colleagues.

We realized that we had hit upon something sound.

This system is for all of those who are beginning to declaim. It is a collection of conventional signs to help them apply the principles and rules which I have expounded upon above.

Here they are.

I went to the black board and with a gesture traced this sign:

"This," I went on, "is called a vertical line...."

"It seems to me that you are not in the correct position facing the right," one of the committee members said.

As a matter of fact....I resumed the position and went on.

The vertical line following a word indicates a pause! not! indicated! by! punctuation! A natural and logical pause which must be made to attract others attention.

Now we have come to the second sign:

I resume the correct standing position and explain.

This sign is called: horizontal line. The horizontal line under a word indicates RAISING OF THE VOICE IN THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE UNDERLINED WORD.
The double vertical line, on the other hand; i.e. this:

means that the proposition which follows must be pronounced in a tone which GRADUALLY RISES OR FALLS as required by the meaning of the proposition itself.

The vertical dotted line:

the vertical dotted line, I repeat, warns one that as the idea in the discourse is changing, so must one change the intonation of one's voice; done for the most part when one is CITING THE WORDS OF OTHERS.

The bracket:

means rapidity in pronouncing the sentence enclosed by it; but not to the point of mumbling or swallowing the words; a rapidity which still allows for a distinct pronunciation of the syllables of each word in the sentence.

The divergent angle:

under the words indicates that they must begin in a moderate tone of voice and end in a loud one.

The convergent angle:

under the words, on the other hand, indicates the opposite; that is, that these words must begin in a loud tone of voice and end in a moderate one.

We have now come to the last sign of our system, or rather, to the last signs of our system:

These signs are called horizontal lines. The horizontal lines, when thus drawn under the words, indicate a gradual increase in volume in the pronunciation of the succession of words.

As an example, I shall show you how a part of the "The Sepulchres" by Foscolo sounds with my system. "The Sepulchres"
is a poem....

"What is 'The Sepulchres'?" the president interrupted.

"An ode in blank hendecasyllables," I corrected myself, and went on.

"The Sepulchres" must be read in a husky voice. Repetita Juvant. Repetition would be of benefit. A husky voice; that is, funereal, dark, mysterious.

All'ombra dei cipressi e dentro l'urne

Confortate di pianto è forse il sonno

Della morte men duro? Ove più il sole

Per me alla terra non fecondi questa

Belle d'erbe famiglia e d'animali

E quando vaghi di lusinghe innanzi

A me non danzeran l'ore future,

Né da te dolce amico, udrò più il verso

E la mesta armonia che lo governa...

In order to read or recite or declaim effectively, the pupils must know the excerpt or passage or poem by heart, having studied it with the conventional signs of our system. They must read it numerous times, first for the meaning, then in accordance with the indicated pauses, tones and cadences. Then the educator will require the pupils to accompany the words with gestures, which together will constitute the eurhythmy.

And finally, declamation - where one must always cultivate the spontaneity of speech, which is the most precious gift possible in order not to lapse into the affected and the ridiculous, which both bore and sicken.
As the great poet Pignatti di Melilli said so well:

Learn, my, son
Arts and reading
Ever, my son,
Comfort - bringing.

The first aim of art being to delight, and the ultimate aim perfection, it is necessary that the artist take inspiration from the rhythm which God placed in the universe, arranging everything with gravity, meter, measure, power and smoothness.

This symmetry is called rhythm; that is, concordance, which in language as well is no other than the order of the parts within the whole; that is, unity in diversity, which, from the beautiful and purely Greek word, we call harmony.

From this stems the order of the words in discourse, which, if spoken in a clear and emphatic voice, is called spoken or declamatory rhythm and is like a hidden chant, which brings delight to those listening.

If the order is measured in the syllables, accents and verses, it is called metrical rhythm or poetic rhythm. Finally, it is called musical rhythm if the voice is more intense, sustained, modulated, even blended with instruments, in order to give origin to melody, in which the diversity of the rhythm is successive; and simultaneous in harmony.

Of this consists that essence of the beautiful which we can express with words.

The universe, then, is a divine music in which radiates occult and perennial, infinitely diverse melody. In an ineffable rhythm, which, interlacing all things of creation from the flower to the sparkling star, stirs them in wondrous harmony in order to make manifest God's infinite glory; this through the word which proceeds from Him as the First, efficient, ideal and ultimate Cause of every beauty created, of which Manzoni speaks so well in these wondrous verses:

Thou who concealst theyself
Our eyes seek to no avail
But the opus of thy hand
Thee as Lord doth unveil.

We have thus come to the end of our talk. An interesting thing to ponder: during the Roman Empire it was the custom to hold public readings, which had become highly renowned in Rome and to which flocked youths, students and scholars.

Could we not do the same today in the respective municipalities of all nations, at least once a month, uniting in a bond of faith and love students, learned men, and scholars? A most noble institution it would be.
And, besides the readings, recitations and declamations, have speeches, conferences and educational deliberations as well, in order to elevate mankind from the infernal abyss of HATE and CAINISM into which it has so miserably fallen? No age has had such need as we have of the EDUCATIONAL CHARISMA OF THE WORD.

THE NUPTIAL BED, THE SCHOOL, THE ALTAR: HAVE NO EDUCATORS.

The true, only, supreme and divine educator has been expelled.

Not love they have these days, but hate
And know not how to educate.

The institution we must create today is essential, vital, supremely beautiful; its initials are A.M.E.N.

What does Amen mean? Amen means: A MONTHLY EDUCATIONAL NECESSITY.

Amen is a truly noble word; indeed: holy; indeed: divine, which means IT IS SO! SO DO I TRUST! SO BE IT! That is, a threefold affirmation of faith, hope and love among those whose hearts are with God; from which springs the most beautiful fruit: BROTHERLY LOVE, which, as the Poet Pignatti di Melilli says so well:

By all earth's peoples must be heard
As law; first, sole and only word.

Supreme law which we must always observe as SINE QUA NON, in order to be truly happy in this so brief life.

When we think that yesterday one was born, today one breathes, tomorrow one shall die, what better joy can we have than the joy of caring about each other, of loving and helping each other re-ci-pro-cal-ly!

This is Christianity: eternal idea and omnipotent educational word, which in its vision of the past, present, and future explains the divine harmony of the universe. Unshaken, indomitable, it overcomes all, prostrates all, surmounts all. Coerced, it triumphs; in struggle, it towers. Oppressed, it emancipates itself; and it is ever queen.

Moreover, it is the perennial source; of that supreme artificer, beauty; and of that supreme guide, goodness. Sovereign in its freedom of great things, it is the unfailing teacher and author of civilization and of progress. Sweet, benign and without envy, without pride, without malice, honest, generous, just, free, cheerful, loving and loved, it shall never fall into nothingness. Forever it lasts and forever guides mankind to its sublime destinies.
The president of the committee shook my hand. Then another member of the committee said, "But school isn't just reading and reciting! Tell us: how, my dear man, would you begin teaching your weights and measures?"

"How? I'd dictate this to the pupils:

A better rule
Cannot be found
A pint's a pound
The world around."

Result of the exam: fifty out of fifty.

Going out I ran into Nanini, who had a half ironic, half enigmatic smile on his face.

"Flunked again," he said with a smirk. "My lesson on the Greater Maple or Sycamore wasn't convincing enough!"
Part Three

I

The new school year's about to begin. It would be my twentieth year here, but actually it's like my first!

I went to school this morning: they were assigning us our students. I was supposed to get, among others, an industrialist's son.

"How about trading him for three craftsman's sons?" Amiconi asked.

"What?"

"You give me the industrialist's son, and I'll give you three craftsman's sons!"

"No way," I said.

Then Cipollone came up to me. "Trade you your industrialist's son for two small-business owner's sons and one...son of a bitch!"
"I'm hanging onto my industrialist's son," I said. Just then Rapiani got there. "I get all the scum;" she yelled. "It's no fair Mombelli gets all the rich kids and I get all the scum!"

"I haven't got any rich kids," I said.

"How many bastards from the Orphanage have you got?"

"Two."

"I've got thirty-two!" she yelled.

"That's your tough luck."

"But you've got fifteen craftsman's sons, one industrialist's son and three businessman's sons; it's not fair; let's go half and half."

"I'm hanging onto my students," I said.

Meanwhile my colleagues were all trading their students: Filippi'd handed over an industrialist's son in exchange for four craftsman's sons; Pagliani'd traded two craftsman's sons for two mama's boys.

"I've got a craftsman's son: I'll trade him for two worker's sons," Cipollone yelled.

"You've got a deal," I said.

"But those are Category Three workers; I mean Category One," he answered.

We looked at our class-registers. I had two Category One worker's sons too. "No take-backs!" Caipllone yelled.

Then we found out his kid wasn't a craftsman's son, but son of a craftsman turned industrialist. Amiconi said so,
pointing to the "Business Notices" column in the Informatore.

"I want him back!" Cipollone yelled.

I smiled this sly dog kind of smile.

"I'll give you a good deal," Amiconi said to him. "How about three sons of you know who's for three worker's sons?"

"What am I supposed to do with sons of you know who's at my age!"

"You don't know how generous those gals are!"

Cipollone came back over to me. "Give me my craftsman/industrialist's son back!"

"No take-backs," I said.

I had three kids from the welfare rolls, i.e. about as poor as you can get. "Who wants these three kids for a backward, idiotic new kid of Italian extraction?" I asked.

Filippi told me not to try and be so smart. "Those kids are registered with the welfare office but they've got T.V.'s! And one's got a station wagon too! Boy, I'm telling you - I've gotten it up in that station wagon all right!"

I traded two kids for one backward, retarded one. "That one's got a sister!" Filippi told me. "You can get it up pretty good!"

Rapiani came back over to me. "What's the story? You haven't got a single poor kid here: either you give me at least ten of yours or I'll tell the principal!"

"God gave them to me, nobody's going to take them away!" I yelled.
Rapiani said she was going to count to three.

"Will you trade?"

"No!"

"Are you gonna trade with me?"

"No!"

"For the last time..."

"My dear little one... no!"

Rapiani yelled and the principal came up. "After all, Sir, is it fair for Mombelli to have thirty well-off kids and me forty badly-off ones?"

"Quieta non movere et mota quietare," the principal said.

The trading was still going on in the corridor.

"I've got the daughter of one of you know who; the mother's only twenty... But at my age, I'd rather have a butcher's son," Amiconi said.

"I've got a butcher's son!" Filippi said.

"Trade?"

"Come on!"

Then Bragaglia said, "I've got an industrialist's son: I'll trade for two worker's sons!"

"Me! Me! Me!" various people shouted.

"Bragaglia, I'll give you two sons of Category One technicians for him!" Cipollone said.

"O.K.!" When they'd traded, Bragaglia started laughing.

"That industrialist is such a miser!"
"Gimme my two technician's sons back!" Cipollone shouted.
There was a kid from the Orphanage, son of Unknown, in my class-register.
"Give him to me?" Amiconi said. "I'll trade you a rich craftsman's son!"
"No!"
"But he's a bastard!" Amiconi said.
"I'm holding onto him! You think I don't know he's the illegitimate kid of a big industrialist?"
I'd gotten myself a good class of lower-, middle- and upper-class kids. I was looking at my register, under "Father's profession." The principal came up.
"Mr. Mombelli, you will hand your class over to my wife. You are going to be at the disposal of the administration."
"All right, Mr. Principal," I said.
"We have been named assistant superintendent!"
"Group A. Point total 3250!" Amiconi muttered.
The assistant superintendent looked at my class-register and shook his head. "Still having trouble with those loops!" he sighed.

II.

For a while now I've suspected that Ada's being unfaithful; for quite a while. The thought of the redheaded baby
hasn't died; it's dormant. Every once in a while it wakes up and tosses around in my mind.

Ada's unfaithful! I'm convinced she's unfaithful. The way she sleeps so serenely, her shining face, tell me she's unfaithful. I think about how I've got the kind of wife I deserve, I've got what I deserve.

But then I wonder if this suspicion is really justified and not just directing my bitterness back at her?

My wife earns much more than I do; three times as much as I do; and I can tell she's satisfied with herself. I'm humiliated that she earns more than me, humiliated that I'm not the head of the household any more: so then I think she's unfaithful.

I spend whole afternoons thinking that while I'm thinking, she's being unfaithful to me. I think almost indifferently of her in the act of giving herself to a man. I think about how I've never been unfaithful to her, and then I can feel the bitterness explode inside me.

Sometimes I think I should lie in wait near the work-shop and shadow my wife; and I think how sooner or later I'll do it. But the days go by, one after another, and I don't.

Why, I think, am I afraid of not acting like a husband whose wife is unfaithful? How does a husband whose wife is unfaithful act?

I know quite a few of them who're acting just like I am now; indifferently, ignoring it.
Then I take refuge in thoughts of Eva. Imagining her body full of light, her harmony, her voice. "Eva!" I hear myself call, and I think, Who knows where Eva is right now.

I spend hours and hours thinking about her, and I think about how by thinking about her I'm being unfaithful to my wife, and that makes me feel really good. 'You're unfaithful in your head?' I say to myself. 'It's not so hard, you know!'

Then I think about Rino, who studies, who behaves at school, who gets good grades, who's first in his class. I see him bent over his books studying and I feel sure of myself. "He'll be a Group A. Better yet - a Group A supervisor."

"What are you going to be when you grow up, Rino?" I ask him.

"I don't know!" he answers with those sad eyes.

And I tell myself Rino isn't enterprising like his Uncle Carlo; he'll want a salary to live on, and I'm glad. A Group A salary, I think.

III.

I went over to Ada's work-shop. "Can I be of any help?" I asked. Brother and sister shook their heads. I expected
that, but I did it to see if I was capable of an act of humility.

"We don't need you," Carlo answered me.

They went back to work and I stood there looking at them. Then some men came in, and brother and sister withdrew and did some business, I assume.

I felt left out of that world of theirs, that life of theirs, that circle I'd created; and I felt dislike for my wife.

"What a beautiful bracelet, ma'am!" one of the businessmen said politely.

"It's a present from my Antonio!" Ada answered with a coquettish smile, putting her arm across my shoulder. I've never given her anything. That bracelet would have cost me ten salaries. And meanwhile I stood there and smiled, played the part she'd suddenly forced on me, thinking, Why don't you shake off all this tar on you? Why don't you shout that you didn't give her anything, that it must be six months since you've mounted her, yes mounted!? Why are you standing here smiling like some idiotic husband?

"You've humiliated me, Mr. Mombelli," the businessman said. "Just think; I never give anything to my wife."

"Shame on you," Ada said sternly, looking at me with lovesick eyes.

So now I wonder: why is she so interested in showing she has a husband who adores her? Why doesn't she say, "I
earned the money for it myself"; why? That should be more of a satisfaction to her.

But there's only one answer to all these why's: that I don't understand who this woman is who's been sleeping next to me for so many years. As a matter of fact, I suspect her of having had a child who wasn't mine, of being unfaithful to me.

The businessman repeats that he's humiliated, that he'll have to remedy by giving some jewelry to his woman; and I look at his head and a shudder goes through my body. That man has red hair! His face is pockmarked with freckles! That man...yes! he looks just like the baby who died....

I look at Ada; I look at him... The way Ada's smiling increases my certainty, and my anguish. One thing I used to reproach Ada about, in my mind, was her standard smile. That she smiled at everybody the same way. I thought a woman's smile should undergo transformations, have different nuances depending on who she's smiling at. It got on my nerves that she smiled at me the same way she smiled at the grocer while she was waiting for her change.

Now I see she has a different smile; her smile has nuances I've never seen in her....her smile lingers on...I see she's really beautiful with that smile, and it seems like she knows she's really beautiful with that smile.

I look at him again: he's got red hair, Ada's son's face; I can feel there's something concrete between them.
I can tell I'm ridiculous, absurd right now. Ada can't afford a bracelet like that with what she makes!

And he looks at it with satisfaction, the way I used to look at a pair of earrings I gave her so many years ago: the same satisfied gleam in his eyes.

"I'll have to give something to my wife too, just like you, Mr. Mombelli!" I hear the businessman say.

IV.

I'm a teacher at the disposal of the administration. My job consists of substituting for teachers who are absent, or else - if they're all present - taking care of bureaucratic affairs in the office.

In the morning my first job is helping my colleague Zarzalli get into school. Zarzalli's legs are getting gangrenous. He's trying to teach two more years so he can get the minimum pension. He's always at home, but he has to be present at least two months a year; or else the year doesn't get counted towards his pension.

Zarzalli comes to school in a taxi. Pisquani and I help him get out. He pays the driver and mutters, "Six hundred to get here, another six hundred to get home! There goes my pay for today!" Together we help him up the stairs and down the corridor, resting after every step.
When we get to his classroom, we help him sit down in his chair. If I'm not busy substituting somebody, I go help him correct or explain or keep order.

"The whole gang's in here!" Zarzalli mutters. "This place is the Shanghai of the Vigevano school system!"

Today when I was helping Zarzalli, Amiconi came in the classroom. His presence irritated Zarzalli. "This guy comes to make fun of me," he mumbled.

Amiconi asked, "Have you heard on the radio whether the Tenth Committee's gotten that bill...."

"The radio didn't say anything," I answered.
"But did you listen to it?" Amiconi pressed.
"No, I didn't listen to it!" I answered wittily.
So Amiconi went to ask some other colleagues. "The radio didn't say a thing," he told me, giving me a dirty look.

During the last hour Zarzalli started feeling sick. "The disease is progressing," he murmured. "It's rotting me away...." He did all he could to contain himself, then burst out crying. "The disease is progressing!.... It hurts like blazes," he murmured.

The kids raising hell, me standing next to him not knowing what to do.

The assistant superintendent came in. "We heard yelling so we came to... What's the matter with you, Zarzalli, what is it? We can't grant you another leave. One hundred and twenty days of absence for reasons of health. Thirty for
family reasons. You've had all the absences due you!"

Zarzalli was sitting there with his mouth open, his eyes bulging. He was groaning mournfully.

"What's the matter, Zarzalli?" the assistant superintendent went on. "If you go home we won't be able to give you your teaching evaluation. The Rules, you know...."

"...I'm staying," Zarzalli said in a whisper. For a minute it looked like he was feeling better, but then he started groaning again.

"Do you know what the Emperor Marcus Aurelius said?" the assistant superintendent asked. "If you suffer, suppress the painful ego and you will have suppressed the pain."

Zarzalli fell back in the chair. "I want to go home!" he cried. His hands pressed his thighs, as if to arrest the disease.

"Zarzalli, we have granted you every possible assistance," the assistant superintendent said. "We have put your fifth-grade class on the ground floor, going against the spirit of the Rules; we have let you sit in an armchair - we who have written a dissertation calling for the abolition of desks, because the teacher must be in contact with the children! A dissertation which gave us fifteen points on the certification examination and won us commendations from three pedagogists. We have granted you the help of a colleague.... We have, against the rules.... Zarzalli, we are talking to you!" he shouted.
Zarzalli lay there looking like he was dead. He opened his eyes. "We are talking to you, Zarzalli... Shall we grant you another teacher?" the assistant superintendent said.

Nanini came in to help. "Life's a real bastard!" he started saying. "I can't wait to have a classroom and he can't wait to leave his!" He kept chewing away at his cigarette. "I came to see if that character Amiconi is leaving; but he's still waiting on that Tenth Committee," he growled.

Then he stared at the kids, who kept on raising a devil of a ruckus. "That fantastic age of innocence! Look.... The age of goodness... Look at that," and meanwhile he watched Zarzalli. "Their hearts are strong-boxes of love... Let us open these strong-boxes... Just look at the goodness of these children...."

Finally the last bell rang. While Pisquani and Nanini are helping Zarzalli put his coat on, Pagliani comes up to me. "Let me help Zarzalli get in the taxi," he says to me.

"I've always helped him!"

"If you give me your place by Zarzalli, I'll give you the philatelic column in the magazine *Hearts On High*."'"

"The philatelic column?"

"That way you can publish articles of yours, and get your name in print!" He looked at me and tried again. "Come on, be a good guy! It's election time and I'm on the ballot, and there's a whole crowd of people outside the
school...see! And besides Pisquani's helping him...."

So I let Pagliani help Zarzalli. They help him all the way out of school, they help him get in the taxi, they look around and see this crowd of people watching them.

Pisquani comes up to me. "Why'd you let Pagliani help Zarzalli?! Hey, whose side are you on, anyway?"

V.

Today I walked all afternoon. Ada came home with a diamond; she said she gave it to herself.  
"You really think...what do you think I am?" I asked her.  
She shrugged her shoulders. "If you want to believe me, go ahead. If not...." Then she started laughing hysterically. "If you think so highly of me, what are you doing here with me?" she shouted, smirking.  
I didn't answer.  
"I'm here because the house is mine. The furniture's mine. Everything here is mine!" she said.  
I thought about it in the early afternoon hours; what the hell I was doing there, and I regretted having my salary: the only valid excuse was out.  
I started thinking about being that great cyclist who pulverizes Coppi, and I realized that thinking like that was like drugs: as dangerous as taking drugs. So I went out and
walked all day, walked around the gray deserted city. A concert of machinery, of pounding hammers reached me from windows and walls and doors, and I walked along thinking about how I was walking without a goal, how I was walking to kill time, i.e. to kill a little of myself.

Eva came to mind. It was a sudden flashing thought. I started thinking about Eva. Who knows where Eva is!

I needed to see that woman, and I thought about her while I walked. See, I'm not walking for nothing; I'm looking for Eva, I thought.

In the stores I could see storekeepers standing there waiting for somebody to come in; That's a job too, I thought. And meanwhile I kept on walking and my feet hurt; I could feel them swollen up in my shoes.

I went by the Piazza and stopped at the Bar. Varaldi was sitting there, all ears for what the clients were saying.

I was dead tired from walking. I flopped down in a chair and played a hand of gin rummy with the reporter. Meanwhile I watched him, and everybody else. It seemed to me that people looked at men whose wives are unfaithful with a strange, kind of steady look; but it looked like they were looking at me indifferently. So I decided they didn't know it yet.

I lingered over my thoughts. Am I really sure Ada's unfaithful to me? So what am I doing in that house? I
thought about how my salary was just barely enough to not die of starvation, but not enough for this tar I have on me.

"I'll stay," I muttered. "I've performed one act of courage in my life, and that's enough."

"Are you discarding or not?" the reporter asked.

I played for a couple of hours, thinking, What do people see in card games?

It's a way just like any other to feel like you're living, existing. To meet somebody else and talk. And feel like you're not alone, maybe. If mankind at some point felt the need to invent cards and games, there must have been a reason for inventing them.

But I think that unfortunately I can't explain these things to myself. And I pick a card and discard, pick a card and discard, pick a card and discard while the minutes go by, the hours keep going by, and here I am sitting across from another man who's waiting for me to discard so he can pick a card, and then me waiting for him to discard so I can pick a card: my turn...your turn...my turn...your turn...
VI.

Six days have gone by. All I've done every afternoon is walk. Now that I think about it, I wasn't walking to look for Eva like I assumed; I was walking so I could catch my wife with that red-headed businessman. Eva was an excuse.

This afternoon I saw my wife come out of the work-shop with the red-headed businessman. I hid behind a courtyard door and heard them go by; in the fog Ada's steps sounded drier and heavier: tac tac tac tac her steps went.

They went right by the door without seeing me. I heard her voice saying, "I don't know how to repay you for your presents!"

"The pleasure's all mine!"

"But you're over-doing it! I don't deserve bracelets and rings," she answered.

Then their voices, like their bodies, dissolved into the fog. I was cold; practically paralyzed. I slapped myself twice and started walking in their direction, thinking of that man with hate. But I couldn't tell whether the hate was due to the fact that he was enjoying my wife or that he had made a fool of me with that present business.

I saw the two of them get into a car. The tail-lights lit up the license plate as the car moved off and I managed to read the number.

Where could they go now?, I thought.
I kept on walking like a robot, without thinking about anything. There was nothing to think about, nothing to be surprised about. After all, I'd just found out something I'd already assumed.

I walked for a couple of hours, thinking about Rino and feeling sorry for him. He doesn't deserve a mother like this; poor Rino!

I realized I must have gone up and down the same street three or four times and I thought, meadows pockmarked with buttercups! If you're smart, find the logical connection there!

I went by a hotel and my eyes went to the license plate of a car. I was dumbfounded: that was the car Ada got into... I read the number over several times and checked it on the notepad where I'd marked it down: it was that car all right. I looked at the province too: it was that one all right! In front of a hotel....

Calmly I went over to the sporting goods store across the street; I looked at the pistols in the window.... There was one fantastic one, with mother-of-pearl grips.

I thought about what I should do. It was obvious I'd have to do something to prove to myself that I was alive, that I was a man whose honor, whose rights had been offended.

I decided to go buy a hammer. I reasoned coldly and calmly. 'Calm and sangfroid,' I told myself, thinking about how you couldn't kill anybody with a hammer.
I got a nice big hammer, thinking, I'll hit him over the head with it a half a dozen times, and went back to the hotel.

Ada's identification card was lying open on the desk; her photograph smiled out at me.

"Two lovers came here!" I said.

The desk clerk looked over at the other employee and said, "Sir, this is a reputable hotel!"

I slipped five big bills to him. "I'd like a room near the one where the lovers are!"

The desk clerk looked at the other employee and said, "You promise me nothing'll happen?"

"Give you my word!" I said. I gave them my identification card; they checked it against Ada's and hesitated.

"You realize this is an awkward situation for us, sir!" the second one said.

I gave him five too, so he gave me the key and said in a low voice, "First floor, room number twelve."

"Thank you!"

"Remember now..."

"Don't worry," I said, feeling strangely contented. I went into room number twelve, thinking, And now what?

I lay in wait behind the door. Suddenly, from the next room, I heard frenzied breathing, cries, that turned into a wheezing sound.

It's her all right, I thought.
The wheezing went on. Ada used to shout during sexual relations; she'd shout with pleasure, like now... Ada used to wheeze... Right now she's naked in bed with a man, enjoying each other, and here I am standing here with a hammer in my hand; here I am standing here and I'm still standing here and I think about how that wheezing is Ada...

The wheezing stopped. There was silence for a minute. I got ready with the hammer in my hand, but then the wheezing started up again... I bit my lips. I was jealous of that man's virility, of his potency...

I should have known it, I thought; Ada's a hot-blooded woman. That thought calmed me down; it was an excuse for me more than for her.

And meanwhile the wheezing went on, and I could hear her greed, I could hear she was enjoying it, again again again again...

I walked around the room; I put my fingers in my ears, but the wheezing still seeped through; it wasn't with my ears that I was hearing that wheezing. My wife, I think. My wife is with a man.

I touched my moldy, shriveled member and laughed in a low voice. 'It's good for peeing and that's it,' I said to myself.

I flung myself on the bed and stared at the rectangle of the window reflected onto the ceiling.
Again... That wheezing again, again... She must really be in love with that man, and he must be in love with her too. The thought pleased me. A tarred pleasure.

Again...

I could feel the tears running, sliding down my cheeks; one reached my lips; it was salty. Time was going by. I could tell by the shadow of the window, that was getting more oblique; and I thought, What are you thinking about? About the logical connection of your position? There was silence from the other room. Now, satisfied and satiated, they'll leave. Or maybe not. They'll lie there holding each other, and Ada'll stare at his toes. That's what they'll do...

The wheezing again...

Right then I didn't hate Ada; I hated the man. I hated his sexual power. And the wheezing kept going on again again again...

The room was getting dark; shadows of the furniture were silhouetted against the walls. I could hear a maid shuffle by in the corridor.

I thought about what the two employees would think, knowing the wife's in room number eleven with her lover and the husband's here in number twelve sprawled on the bed staring into space with a hammer in his hand, not doing anything.

The wheezing went on...
It was an intense wheezing, more intense than before. It reminded me of Ada during the first nights of our marriage. That's how she made love, with this intense wheezing...

He's muttering... I can't tell what he's saying, but I can guess...

It's years since she's enjoyed it like that with me. Since it got to be a habit, her wheezing's gotten less and less alive, less and less natural. Sometimes it seems like she's forcing herself to make those noises...

Again... Again... It keeps going on...

VII.

...There! I hear footsteps in the other room.

I get ready at the door, with the hammer in my hand, and I think that I won't squeeze the handle hard, but I'll hit Ada hard over the head, I'll hit the redhead hard over the head... Right then I felt like an actor; like there were people looking at me, watching the rehearsal. Maybe that was the effect of knowing the employees knew I was there. Five minutes go by and I'm still waiting.

The wheezings have stopped. I think about how they're getting dressed, how she's lingering over getting dressed. Ada used to do that with me too, the first few years.
That with me too sounds strange. With me too... I hear footsteps.

"The grandfather has died," a voice said.

"He just died," another voice said.

I see two nuns and a doctor come out of room number eleven, and glimpse an old man lying on the bed.

"He's d..." The woman broke off, seeing the hammer clutched in my hand.

"A whole afternoon at the point of death!" the doctor said.

I go downstairs. The employees look at me slyly.

Outside, the car was gone.

We'll settle this at home, I think. I hold the hammer tightly under my jacket; I set off for home slowly, relishing my steps. I took a strange kind of pleasure in walking like that, in that interim.

I stopped in front of a newsstand to look at a picture of an actress. Then I went on. A neighbor of ours motioned to me to run to her. "Your wife's in a bad way! We been looking for you everywhere; we been looking from here to Kingdom Come; your wife's in a bad way..."

I ran home. I found Father Licodori wearing an appropriate expression and a doctor shaking his head, and Rino, limp as a rag.

"She wants to speak to you," Father Licodori told me.
Ada was dying. She had a radiant coloring, almost a joyful air, that moved me.

"Antonio...I've always been unfaithful to you... Antonio...always, since the first few days of our marriage... Antonio...the red-headed son is yours. I swear to you... he's yours...Antonio...it's Rino that isn't yours..."

"What?"

"...Really...Rino isn't yours...he isn't yours..."

"Huh?"

She shook her head no. "...No..." she murmured. Her face sank into the pillow; her body gave off a smell...

"Ada?" I shouted.

She opened her eyes. "Rino's not yours!" she said with effort, and her face went hard and cold. A half-ironic, half-sarcastic smile lingered in the air above her.

VIII.

I keep thinking about Eva. And when I'm not thinking about her, I'm thinking about being the rocket-cyclist. That's how I dispel the suspicion Ada left me with. It seems impossible that Rino isn't my son. I try to convince myself that confession was a vendetta on Ada's part; like those letters suicides leave that make the responsibility for their act fall on everybody else. That kind of vendetta.
Life drags on from the twenty-seventh to the twenty-seventh, when I go pick up that column of items that, summed up, make up a salary.

Item: regular hours. Item: overtime pay. Item: study allowance. Item: examination allowance. But so what; a man's valid not for what he earns but what he knows. That's a cliche we kick around among colleagues like soccer players kick the ball around. Unfortunately now a new colleague's come, who maintains that a man's valid not for what he knows but what he carries out. His presence is becoming hateful to everybody in the school. Materialist!

"I'm not a materialist; I'm a positivist!" he defends himself.

This morning I gave an active science lesson with the assistant superintendent, who'd come to judge whether I'm qualified for teaching or not, watching.

I divided the class into three groups. The first group was supposed to make the noise well-stressed and loud, of a hatchet against a tree:

Tac pause tac pause tac pause tac pause tac pause.

The second group came in over the first group's noise and blended itself in, imitating the woodcutter's saw:

Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz Zzzzzz
(Drawn-out with no pauses for silence).
The third group came in over the other two, shouting, "Watch out!"

I broke in, "Look up at the imaginary foliage of the tree!" And everybody looked silently at the ceiling.

The third group made, first softly and slowly, then in crescendo until it became a shout, the sound of the tree falling and the trunk cracking.

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crrrrrr crrrrrr crrrrrrrr crrrrrrrrrr crrrrrrrrrrrr
KAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKKKKKKKKK
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"Pay attention to the crescendo and the diminuendo," I said, "and the plot and action. Plot: the great tree on the mountain slowly moves its leaves in the soft breeze."

The pupils got the action going: they rubbed their hands against each other and, simultaneously, with their mouths made the noise of a soft rustling.

"Pay attention! Plot: the sky darkens, and quickly and suddenly the storm nears. First the wind blows harder, shaking the branches."

The kids made megaphones with their hands, making the noise of the wind, in crescendo:

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uuuuuuu uuuuuuuuuuuuuuu UUUUHHUUUHHH
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Half of them went on making the rustling of the leaves, louder and louder: sh sh sh sh sh SH SH SH SH SH sh SH

"Pay attention! Plot: thunder, far away at first, now echoes right over the mountain!" I said.
All the kids, with their hands pressed over their mouths, make the rumbling of thunder.

"Pay attention! Plot: violent rain thrashes the leaves and branches of the great tree."

The kids clap their hands, with their fingers spread apart. Meanwhile with their mouths they make the chik chak of the raindrops on the leaves and trunk. Chik chak, chik chak.

"Plot: the storm passes; a rainbow outlines itself in the newly serene sky."

The kids stretch their arms in the air and trace the half-circle of a rainbow, with an ahhh! of wonder! Ahhhh!

"Pay attention: among the tree's leafy branches the little birds shake their feathers to dry off."

The kids imitate the chattering of the little birds. Cheep cheep cheep cheep cheep.

IX.

My colleague Drivaudi is on her last pay increase of the last point total. She's about to retire. What makes me feel so small in front of her is the fact that she's only a couple of years older than me, and I'm at the first pay increase of the first point total.
"Mombelli, you can't live by yourself," she told me this morning. "Now a woman can live by herself, but a man... Look, Mombelli, I don't want to criticize you, but that shirt collar really....; and if we aren't the first to outwardly respect the temple of education, then how can we expect others to respect us?"

I'm going to scream, I thought. And said, "Right!"

"Mombelli," Drivaudi went on, "you need a wife. Listen to me and you'll be just fine, Mombelli!"

"Right!"

"There's a girl, Mombelli; a girl who's just perfect for your situation! She's five years younger than you. Listen, she's got certification! She's already at point total 222, on the last pay increase! You know how it is: on one salary, one person lives badly; on two salaries, two people live well. Your salaries added up would equal the salary of a principal in his sixth year!"

"Right!"

"Oh, and if you knew what this little teacher's like! Moral, really moral. She goes to Mass every day; she teaches religion; really, a jewel! A jewel, Mombelli, a doll!"

"Really?"

"And the family's well-off. Not enough to be extravagant, but - she's an only daughter, Mombelli! Listen to me. I'm at the last point total. Marry the only daughter! Marry the only daughter! And Rino too; start impressing that principle
on him now when he's still a boy - to marry the only daughter!"

"Yes, yes!"

"Think about it, Mombelli. She's such a dear girl! Just think; she has her own house and the land behind it is a possible building site. Her parents are farmers. They've got four cows, about fifty chickens; and every year they butcher a pig!"

She turned red and went on, "Do you realize how much you'd be getting in December? Two salaries each; that's four salaries...and that's not counting the rest....well?"

"I'll talk to Rino," I said mechanically.

My colleague's face darkened. "No! Kids don't understand these things! What does Rino have to do with it? Besides, if this girl is willing to marry a widower with a son, that means she's... A jewel, Mombelli, I'm telling you; a doll!"

"I heard you!"

She let her gaze fall on my shabby suit, my scuffed shoes. "Do you want to see her picture?" She pulled a picture out of her purse: I saw this big fat face, nice and plump, with a cheerful smile. "A nice big bride! Look at what a nice big bride!"

She winked at me. "Can I set it up? She's an only daughter!"
Teachers' meeting today about after-school activities. The principal/assistant superintendent spoke.

"We are in favor of what is referred to incorrectly as after-school activities, while it would be more precise to say recreational afternoons. However, this useful institution cannot be put into practice as the afternoon is paid for by the students and an article of the Rules (Article Eighteen, to be exact) explains that teachers may not receive sums from the students."

Bragaglia stood up. "But the new legal status no longer mentions this fact..."

"We are still under the old legal status!"

Amiconi stood up. "Has anyone heard whether they've approved the Tenth Committee's bill? ...Not yet?....Oh!"

Bragaglia stood up again. "I propose that the students pay their contributions for the after-school activities..."

"...for the recreational afternoon," the assistant superintendent corrected.

"...for the recreational afternoon to the pupils' benevolent fund, which will then pay the contributions to the teachers!"

The assistant superintendent raised a finger. "We are pleased to acknowledge your juridical subtlety!" he said.
So that's how the recreational afternoons got started. I collect the kids' contributions for the pupils' benevolent fund and pay them in to the fund. Which changes envelopes and gives them back to me.

Nanini takes Amiconi's class for the after-school activities.

"I don't want anybody else teaching my class," Amiconi said, "and I'm going to boycott this recreational afternoon!"

"But Nanini has to make a living too!" the colleagues told him.

Amiconi pressed his lips together angrily. "And of all the classes he has to take mine for these after-school activities? You think I don't remember what he said about my commendation from the great sovereign of Antioch? Boycott!" he started yelling.

While I was teaching my after-school class, Nanini came in and asked me if I knew how to solve the problem Amiconi'd given for homework.

My God, was that problem complicated. Moral of the story: come evening we were still sitting there trying to figure it out.

"And he gave them fifty arithmetic problems and two compositions and a whole paragraph to diagram!" Nanini muttered.

The next day Amiconi started a devil of an uproar. He called the assistant superintendent and said Nanini was
ruining his class, destroying his educational endeavor.

"Nothing is created and nothing is destroyed," the assistant superintendent sentenced.

Amiconi kept on assigning piles of homework and complicated problems. "Boycott!" he yelled. Fewer and fewer kids went to Nanini's after-school class, and news of the dumb teacher spread. "What kinda teacher! He don't even know how to do problems," the pupils' families commented.

Nanini complained to the assistant superintendent, who called Amiconi in and said, "Nanini is on the side of the ungodly. Quieta non movere et mota quietare, Amiconi."

Until one day Nanini was grappling with a problem that couldn't have been more complicated and contorted. "He's boycotted me," he hissed. Then he shouted, "Children: write the following dictation, and watch your loops. It's entitled 'The Will of an Educator.' 'I hope for Amiconi to kick the bucket the minute he draws his first Group A pension check,'" he dictated, articulating.

He looked around ironically, and spit on the floor and then the walls. "There's my love for the school!" he said. Then he hid behind the blackboard and pissed. Then he said, "I've loved the kids the way you could love shit!"

He left with a twisted smile.

A few hours later they found him on the railroad tracks, beyond recognition.
"It was an accident," the assistant superintendent said, and all the colleagues passed the word: accident! "Don't discredit the worthy profession of teaching," the assistant superintendent implored the reporter. Who dedicated one of his little stories to Nanini.

"An accident has cut short the life of the educator Nanini. Janitor! I ask you to do something you cannot do; but, I pray you, janitor, do it. Janitor, when the lessons start, leave the main door of the school open. For Nanini must enter; and it will be the first time that he is late. Yes, Schoolteacher Nanini wants to come see the children he loved so much, the colleagues he so much admired, his principal. Janitor, please, leave the main door open. Nanini wants to return to his wonderful Kingdom: the school!"

XI.

I've met the teacher/only daughter. Her name's Rosa and she's even fatter than the picture suggested. She's got a flaccid body and big breasts. Drivaudi placed my hand on her thigh. "Just feel how solid and robust that is!" she said.

She'd found some excuse to bring her over to my house. Rosa saw the mess we live in and put everything in order. Her presence made me uneasy. Drivaudi explained to me that Rosa had some savings - besides the rest, of course - some
savings she'd accumulated giving private lessons. "She's capable of good hard work," she said.

Rino looked askance at her.

"Wouldn't you like having a second mamma like Rosa?" Drivaudi asked.

His head lowered, Rinuccio said, "I'm not studying anymore!"

"But, Rinuccio!"

"I'm not studying anymore! I don't want that lady," he said stubbornly. He ran to his room.

Drivaudi winked. "Kids!" she said. "When he finds it all settled, then he'll change his mind!"

"I can't risk it," I said. "I want Rino to become a Group A."

They left coldly. At the door Drivaudi said, "Think it over again; Rosa's patient!"

I wasn't enthusiastic about the woman, but we needed a woman in the house. I went and explained that to Rino. It seemed strange to me that I, his father, should have to explain that proposal to him, mortified. "See, Rino, we need a woman! Keeping the house in order takes precious time away from your studying, and the 'order' we keep is something else again!"

Rino lowered his head, "Are you mad, papa?" He hugged me. "I don't want her, papa; I don't want that lady in my house!"
I went out and listened at his door for a minute. I could hear him crying.

Then I went to school. Filippi and Pisquani were discussing whether education is science or art.

"It's science; like medicine, physics, astrology!" one was saying.

"It's art. Like music, painting, sculpture!" the other contradicted him.

They submitted their problem to the assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent said, "Education is a synthesis of science and art!"

"So we're artists and scientists at the same time?" Cipollone asked.

"Of course," Pisquani answered.

We all rubbed our hands, satisfied with ourselves. After some more discussion, another question came up. I.e. whether education arose before prostitution or, vice versa, whether prostitution arose before education.

"Prostitution was born with man," Pagliani said.

"That's not true. Education was born with man, but prostitution was born with woman. And since man was created before woman, it follows that education existed before prostitution!"

Pagliani thought that over while Pisquani played the smart-aleck. Socratic reasoning, he bragged.
"You win, but not for long," Pagliani muttered, mortified. He reacted quickly.

"Pisquani, you know you aren’t leader of the first corridor anymore! Really! They’ve abolished leaders. Now they’re called fiduciaries."

"It can’t be," Pisquani said.

"The new legal status says so."

"I’m leader!"

"Fiduciary! Leaders create hierarchies. You’re a fiduciary, i.e. . . . a man to be trusted..."

"Sutor, non ultra crepidam!" Pisquani snarled.

"Fiduciary! Hm, being a fiduciary with no money around; kind of strange!"

"Will you quit calling me a fiduciary?"

"So why did you say sutor, non ultra crepidam to me?"

The bell rang. The pedagogical coterie was about to begin. The pedagogical coterie was a weekly teachers’ meeting dealing with didactic/pedagogical/philosophical experiences.

Somebody who looked like they were on their second or third pay increase of 229 stood up.

"I’ve been able to prove scientifically the existence of God!" he said.

"Don’t prove the already proven!" an older woman at the other end of the point totals shouted.
"I want to prove it for people who don't believe. They'll believe!" the colleague said. "Here's the proof. I take an atheist who doesn't believe in God..."

"We'd like to see an atheist who does believe in God!" the assistant superintendent interrupted.

"...and I say to this atheist, 'Do you believe two and two are four?' And the atheist answers me, 'By force of circumstances!' So I say, 'If you believe in the number two, then why won't you believe in God?'

He looked around, maybe expecting encouragement, but Cipollone shook his head. "I know a better way!" he said.

"Explain your way for us," the assistant superintendent said.

Cipollone stood up. "What is a drop? Nothing," he started saying. "And what are two drops? Nothing. And three? Nothing! And four, five, six drops; what are they?..."

"...Nothing!" all the colleagues shouted.

"And yet drop upon drop, and you have rivers seas oceans!" Cipollone finished.

"Wait a minute!" Pisquani yelled. "It's not true at all that a drop's a nothing! If we think about how a drop contains a thousand bacteria, we have to agree that a drop's an everything!"

"A nothing!"

"An everything!"
The assistant superintendent intervened. "In medio stat virtus," he said. "A drop is neither a nothing nor an everything! Let us repeat, in medio stat virtus; virtue lies in compromise. A drop..."

"Is a nothing!" Cipollone yelled.

"Is an everything!" Pisquani retorted.

"A drop is neither a nothing nor an everything, but... a drop!" the assistant superintendent said.

The meeting continued. A teacher with a night-school class of young workers gave a report.

"My students," he said with an afflicted air, "are totally hopeless. They take the T.V. by storm when there's boxing. When there's a quiz show. They desert it when there are plays or cultural programs like Professor Cutolo's show. But last Friday I managed to get them to enjoy Euripides' Troades. After the show there was a discussion, directed and led by myself, which was quite fruitful..."

Then another teacher with a night-school class of delivery boys and apprentices stood up. "My students can't wait to turn eighteen so they can go to certain houses..."

The women-teachers turned red. The teacher went on, "...And they're almost all communists!"

"Libera nos, Domine," the women-teachers said in chorus, as if saying their rosary.

"They come to school to pass time, but they're indifferent about culture. We read them, to give an example,
the passage, "Farewell, ye mountains, rising from the waters...."

"...and pointing to the heavens!..." the assistant superintendent finished with a flourish of his hand, as if he were hearing music.

"And yet, I saw with my own eyes students yawning!" the teacher said.

"No?!" a 371 yelled.

"I'm afraid so!" the night-school teacher said desolately. The atmosphere grew sad.

Then one who taught in a tiny hamlet outside of Vigevano spoke up, and started describing the place like this:

"They don't say the Lord's Prayer!..."

"Christ only got as far as Vigevano," the assistant superintendent said.

"If only he had!" a woman-teacher at the last point total retorted. "The banner of the barbarians wouldn't be waving from the Bramant Tower!"

"You're calling the most civilized people in the world barbarians!" Pisquani yelled. "Sir, my colleague has offended my moral sentiments. I appeal to the Constitution!"

"And he's offended my sentiments as a Roman Apostolic Catholic," the last point total retorted.

"Quieta non movere et mota quietare," the assistant superintendent said.
Then the substitutes went on talking about their experiences with the workers', people's and farmers' night-school classes.

The assistant superintendent stood up. "We can understand your state of mind, you who are the dearest hope of the school! But let us not despair! One of your students gave us an answer which moved us. We asked him, 'Why do you come to school?' Do you know what he answered us?"

"What did he answer you?" a chorus of voices asked.

"He gave us an answer which moved us. He answered us, 'I come to school so I can teach my children to read and write'!"

A thoughtful silence followed...

XII.

One of the young night-school teachers said, "Sir, I get three thousand lire a year, during oral exams, for each student who passes. I have twenty students this year and they won't give me permission to examine all of them. I'm asking the union to intervene..."

Pisquani stood up. "S.N.E.E.Z.E. has obtained for you night-school teachers a 30% railroad discount for a thousand kilometers..."
"S.N.O.O.Z.E.,” Pagliani yelled, "has obtained 40% discount for two thousand kilometers!"

"That three thousand lire per student who passes was a S.N.E.E.Z.E. victory," Pisquani yelled. "Before, it was two thousand!"

Pagliani was silent. Pisquani rubbed his hands.

"Now I'll fix you," Pagliani said, looking at the other union leader. "Sir, on behalf of myself and of the union I represent, I ask you a favor. I appeal to your sense of humanity as a husband and a father, besides as an educator! These kids make a lot of sacrifices to teach night-school. Did you all hear? Three thousand lire per student who passes! Now, they do this in order to get enough points to one day be on the permanent staff. Sir, give them all excellents on their evaluations!"

The assistant superintendent put his hands on his head.

"An excellent is worth two points; a very good one and a half; present them with that half point that'll help them become permanent staff," Pagliani went on.

The assistant superintendent stood up. "We understand you state of mind and observe the generosity which has driven you to speak. However, my dear colleagues, if we start giving excellents to these young people, then what shall we give them when they are true educators?"

"This is an affront to our past as educators," a woman at the last point total said. "Either the union leader takes
back that proposal, or we quit the union!"

"Quieta non movere et mota quietare," the assistant superintendent said. "My dear teachers, I would like to inform you that the superintendent of schools will be among us tomorrow!"

Sure enough, the next day we were all in the assembly hall all dressed up applauding the superintendent.

A woman-teacher handed him three articles: "How to Embellish my Mind," "How to Embellish my Heart," "How to Embellish my Soul."

Pisquani presented him with two articles: "A Bit of Cosmic Science" and "Natural Harmony as the Inspiration of Art."


Amiconi gave him a treatise of his: *Messianic Prophecies.*

There was a pile of typewritten and printed pages on the table.

The assistant superintendent gave a talk entitled "Why we have Faith in Mankind." He began, "Let us not despair! An older night-school student gave us an answer which moved us. We asked him, 'Why do you come to school?' Do you know what he answered us? 'I come to school so I can teach my children to read and write.'..."

While the assistant superintendent was talking, I looked at my colleagues. Their faces were all tired and drawn from
the all-nighter. You could tell they'd spent the night overhauling their articles. All morning they'd been calling typists and printers to see if they were done or not. "Watch out for misprints!" they'd yell into the receiver.

Then Amiconi got up and asked the superintendent whether he knew anything about the law he was interested in. "It's been in the Tenth Committee's hands for years!" he said.

The superintendent didn't know anything about it.

Then he visited the classrooms. "I can sense whether the teacher practices active school or not by the way the desks are set up!" he said.

In fact every classroom had some desks facing forward and some sideways; one here, another there; some with the teacher's desk in the middle, some with the blackboard in the middle of the desks; one classroom divided into downtown and suburbs, one into government offices. "How does this government office method work?" the superintendent asked Filippi.

"The class elects its secretaries, without the proportional system and quorums. The Secretary of State takes the bulletins around to the other classrooms. The Secretary of the Interior takes care of discipline, clean-up and watering the flowers. The Secretary of Education makes sure everybody has their pen-points and notebooks and pens. The Secretary of Transportation hands out and collects the notebooks and assignments..."
"And how long is a Secretary in office?" the superintendent asked.

"Physical, civic and moral education. When there's a governmental crisis in Rome, we have another election," Filippi said.

We went into a woman 325's classroom. The room was plastered with signs: Divine inspiration with Jesus. Divine inspiration with our parents. Divine inspiration with our teacher...

Then we went on to the classroom of a colleague who taught in the morning and was a middleman in the afternoon. What was there in that room? Scales, potatoes, carrots, about thirty rubber-stamps, a shelf full of books on pedagogy that I knew he'd bought en masse at a street-stall. Treatises with titles like How to Mold the Young Child. Or else Religion Seen Not as Servile Terror but as Yearning...

Naturally in all of these classrooms some of the desks were on one side, some on the other; with the blackboard either in the middle or flat on the floor.

One colleague had put names on the rows of desks, like streets. Pope Pius XII Street. Saint Giovanni Bosco Street. Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti (Pius IX) Street. "Three times a month I change the street names," the teacher explained, "and it all ties in with what we're studying.

Then we came to the classroom of a teacher on his first pay increase of the first point total. The assistant super-
intendent and all the teachers made faces; they all wrinkled up their noses like they were going into a sewer. The room had three rows of desks, one behind the other. The teacher's desk up front, the blackboard to the right.

"This teacher doesn't have the feel of activism," the assistant superintendent explained, mortified. "He's still on the bookish! But he's young, and I'm of the opinion that we should give credit to youth."

The superintendent nodded. Then he left. The teachers couldn't believe it: on the table in the assembly hall lay the pile of articles he'd forgotten to take with him.

XIII.

Saturday evening. I walk along in the silence of a deserted street. It's drizzling. The shiny asphalt reflects the words and colors of neon signs. Night. There's nobody around but some guy taking tired steps, and I wonder why he's walking and where he could be going. I'm going down a long avenue, and I think about how when I get to the end of the avenue I'll turn around. This silence, I think, made up of lighted windows and massive bolted doors, is a small provincial town silence.

I stare at a lighted window and think about how behind that window, beneath that light there are people. My heels
resound sharply on the sidewalk; I think how those people must hear my footsteps, how they must like being warm inside and thinking that somebody's out walking in the rain.

I stop in front of an automobile showroom. I've never seen it before; it's brand-new. I try to remember what there was before the showroom. I can't remember. Something has happened, something's changed. Vigevano has an automobile dealership. I'm glad. Not about the dealership, but because something's changed. And a little bit about the dealership too.

I continue my walk thinking, something's changed. And it seems strange to be glad, but that dealership gave me a real feeling of joy.

Thinking about these things, I got to the end of the avenue. Farther ahead the road to Novara fades into the darkness. I keep walking. I immerse myself in the darkness and feel completely alone. I look at my shadow, that leaps from the ground at a car's headlights and is cast, long and gigantic, in front of me, then moves to my right at the same speed as the car, and disappears behind me. That shadow is mine.

'But why am I glad they set up an automobile dealership?' I ask myself. My voice sounds strange but pleasant to me; it has a mysterious intensity.

I glimpse a woman's shadow at a gate. She got out of that car. She's standing there like she's waiting for
something.

I walk slower thinking about how, since I've been a widower, I haven't been with a woman. Through the darkness I see it's her, it's Eva.

"What weather!" I say.

"Two thousand in advance," she answers.

"Is your name Eva?"

"Yes, why?"

"Did you live in a hut?"

"So?" Her voice is ungraceful, like she is. "Two thousand in advance, you know!"

She walks in front of me down a path that ends in a courtyard. We go in a door where an old lady's reading cards. She leads me to the back, into a kind of basement.

She undresses with the mechanicalness of a whore; then she stretches out naked on the cot.

Her body doesn't radiate any light; it's the body of a normal naked woman. There's no harmony in those lines. It's like looking at a pornographic picture. As a matter of fact, I think she smells of a lack of cleanliness. But it must be my reaction; it seemed like in the hut she gave off a perfume of flowers.

— I think I must have been the victim of an optical illusion. It wasn't her body that illuminated the woods but the darkness of the woods that gave radiance to her whiteness.
I remembered those scenes that were like paintings by
great artists; and I think about how this is the same woman
naked in front of me, lying here taking pleasure in my seeing
her naked. I touch her sexual parts and feel repulsion.

"Hurry up, come on! Haven't you ever seen one before?"
she yells.

Eva mounts just like a whore. "But are you really
Eva?" I murmur.

"Yes, I'm Eva, dammit!" she yells.

I walk home taking tired steps. I think about Eva all
the way down the avenue. She's changed too, I think. I'm
enveloped in sadness. I've been with Eva, I think; with Eva.

I stop in the light of the automobile showroom and say
to myself, 'Cheer up! They've set up an automobile dealer-
ship!'

XIV.

I'm still affected by Eva.

I spend the afternoon stretched out on the bed thinking,
I saw Eva. I lie there for hours without moving and think
that even lying on a bed without moving is doing something.
I'm not sure that lying on a bed without moving is doing
something, but I think so, and I don't know why I think so,
maybe because it's convenient for me to think that even that
is doing something.

I saw Eva. I have such a strong feeling of having become useless, I didn't even go to school this morning. I stayed in bed thinking, Antonio Mombelli, substitute, point total 202 salary bracket #1, is in bed.

Time went by in anguish. Something had to happen; I was waiting for something to happen and I was afraid it wouldn't happen.

I spent half an hour waiting, thinking, it's not happening. So far nothing's happened.

Then I heard a knock on the door. It was the janitor coming to see how I was.

That was what was supposed to happen. Somebody coming to call me. Somebody having noticed my presence somewhere and taken note of it; somebody having taken an interest in me. And that's what happened. The janitor's come to call me; so that means there's some need of my services.

I went to school thinking, I'm going where duty calls.

The assistant superintendent was on the top step, watch in hand. "Your excuse!" he said. He looked down at me fixedly, from those three steps. I stared at his shoes thinking, You wash your feet too, and I kept on staring at them. I saw the tips of his shoes rise, and thought about how he has toes too.

"Your excuse!" he repeated.

"I wasn't well!" I said.
"We know teachers who are extremely punctual even with a fever. Just as there are direct and indirect taxes, so is there direct and indirect education; and the indirect carries more weight than the direct." He swallowed and went on. "How can you teach punctuality to your students if you are not punctual?... And don't justify yourself to us with that commonplace: 'do as I say and not as I do', because we detest commonplaces, just as we detest those who make use of them!"

He looked at me with a nauseated expression; I couldn't tell whether it was because of me or the commonplace. Then he said, "Mombelli, do you want to rehabilitate yourself? Are you willing to perform an act of humility?"

"In other words?"

"Mombelli, you know you are in a trial period, you're a substitute again; you know you've committed not one, but two offences..."

"Me; two offences?"

"Mombelli, you were seen going to the house of, let us say, a woman of the world, a certain Eva. Now, the rules demand that an educator's personal conduct be an example to mankind..." He smiled, satisfied with himself.

"Mombelli, you have two choices. Either you submit to performing the act of humility, or else we shall put it on your personal record."

"I choose the act of humility," I said.
"Here's fifty lire. Go buy us the paper and a stamp!"
He gave me fifty lire, and I felt humiliated taking it.
"But there are the janitors...." I said faintly.
"Mombelli, we remind you that you are a substitute, that you are not combatting Gallicisms and Anglicisms, that you know nothing about correct loops...."
I went to a bar-tobacconist's to get a twenty-lire stamp.

XV.

As I was buying the stamp at a bar-tobacconist's I heard that the Tenth Committee's bill had been approved.
Amiconi'll be glad, I thought. I bought the paper, and the article about it was on the sixth page. It was the law Amiconi was waiting for all right. I bought three copies; one for the principal, one for me, the other one for Amiconi.
I went back to school in a good mood. I felt like when I was little and was bringing a piece of news that nobody knew yet and that I knew they'd be interested in.
The principal was still on the steps. Giving him the things, I felt humiliated not just because of the errand he'd imposed on me, but because I'd obeyed without reacting. "There are janitors for this!" I said loudly.
"My dear Mr. Mombelli, this is our last year on the administration. We wanted to test your humility!" he said.
It seemed to me he'd wanted to test his ability to command, and that he was satisfied. A teacher went to get stamps and the paper for me, those crafty little eyes seemed to say.

"Do you know, Mr. Mombelli, that poem of Prati's which goes... "a cartload of hay went by, and left a nice smell! May my soul be like that cartload of hay; may it too leave a nice smell!" You know the poem... We will endeavor to leave a nice smell with you too, Mr. Mombelli. We will try to give you a good evaluation. Happy?"

I was about to say thank you to him, but just answered, "Uhm!"

I didn't care about telling the news about the law any more.

"They've approved that law that affects Amiconi!" I said. "Our colleague Amiconi! Let's give each man the title due him!"

"Our colleague Amiconi," I said.

The fact that I knew about the law and he didn't must have irritated him.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Right here!" I answered, opening the paper to page six. "Let's go tell him about it," he said.

That annoyed me. I would rather have given the news to Amiconi by myself.

We went into his classroom and found Amiconi walking
around, on all fours. "...once man walked like this..., then..." He jumped to his feet, "he walked erect, and his first conquest was to look at the sky..."

"Did man have a tail?" he shouted.

"Nooooo!" the kids answered.

The assistant superintendent gestured towards him.

"Just look, what vitality! This is a born educator... They want us to give excellents to the night-school teachers; but then what would we give Amiconi?"

Amiconi was upset when he realized we were in the classroom.

"Good news, Mr. Amiconi! The Tenth Committee's bill..." the assistant superintendent said, breaking off.

"...What?" he said breathlessly.

"...has been approved!" the assistant superintendent shouted.

I saw Amiconi turn white, waxen, convulsed; he took a step, leaned on a desk; fixed his eyes on us, and fell heavily with a dull thud.

The doctor said he'd undergone a violent emotion and his heart just hadn't held up.

"He died in school," the assistant superintendent murmured. "There is no death more beautiful for an educator!"

I looked at the body: I thought about Nanini's wish.
XVI.

"Mr. Mombelli, you will represent us at Mr. Amiconi's funeral," the assistant superintendent said to me. "You will express my grief and condolences to the widow, and give her this card. You will tell her you are there in a representational capacity!"

The word 'representational' must have sounded good to him. In fact, he kept repeating it, and he was repeating it in a particular way, with great relish. "Representational."

"You will tell her - what will you tell Widow Amiconi, Mr. Mombelli?"

"I'll tell her; I'm here in a representational capacity for the principal, Professor Pereghi!"

He shook his head. "I am here in a representational capacity for assistant superintendent/principal/Professor Pereghi; for assistant superintendent..., repeat; I am here in a representational capacity..."

"For assistant superintendent/principal/Professor Pereghi!" I said.

He reflected a minute and said, "Remember that you are not a private citizen but a public official: you represent the school authorities." Word went around in the halls that I was the principal's representative.

"Why is he of all people the representative?" Cipollone complained.
"Of all people he had to choose a 202 to be representative!" Bragaglia muttered.

I waited until Amiconi's casket left his house; and since there weren't many people, I went and called Rino to swell the throng.

The people thinned out on the way from one church to the other. The last ones who were left got as far as the beginning of the road to the cemetery and went home. Behind the hearse were the widow, Rino and me.

I moved closer to the woman and handed her the principal/assistant superintendent's note of condolences.

"After forty-seven years of teaching!" the widow said, looking around her. "He had thousands of students! He always said, 'Every one of my students is a fine person; they're all outstanding citizens; not one has ended up in jail; not one has disgraced himself... Even the ones I failed remember me with affection.' That's what he always said!... And he used to say, 'If every one of my students accompanies me to the cemetery they'll have to have a police escort!...' And you just can't imagine how happy he was when he'd run into some student of his now a grown man who'd recognize him and greet him! 'You see,' he'd tell me, 'a teacher is more than a father...!' He gave everything he had to teaching, everything... He spent his whole life correcting homework and preparing lessons...and he always said, 'I have two families; home and school!' And he'd laugh, 'What
debauchery; two families..."

The weather was gray and damp; a pale mist was rising from the fields; we were walking on a carpet of yellow leaves that covered the road and gave you the feeling of walking on a cushion. It seemed like nature had provided that carpet of leaves just for Amiconi.

After having witnessed the burial, Rino said, "Let's go visit mamma!"

"Some other time," I said.

"Let's go, papa!"

We went to visit Ada. She was buried in the poor people's cemetery: the grave was covered with earth, wet earth... There was this smell coming from that earth. A pungent smell so bad it turned my stomach.

Rino had burst into tears. I stared at Ada's picture on the gravestone. She had that ironic expression she'd always worn on her face when she was angry... in fact, it looked to me like her mouth was moving, like her eyes were taking on that sarcastic expression... Rino kept on crying, and she kept on staring at me with that victorious expression, tinged with pity.

'I certainly won't go cry over your grave,' it seemed like that mouth, those eyes, that stench were saying.

Rino kept on crying. I thought about how I'd never gone to visit my father's grave; how I didn't suffer the way I suffered at my mother's death. Rino certainly won't come
cry like this!, I thought angrily, and she kept on smirking from that picture. And the stench was getting more revolting. Rino must certainly be suffering, if he can kiss that earth.

She had the same expression as when she used to say, "I look down on you," when she used to call me "Good for nothing little schoolteacher," when she told me Rino wasn't mine... The same expression. And she's still smirking, still smirking, still there smirking. "Ada, quit it," I said. And she kept on smirking, with this satisfied, victorious expression. She's still smirking, still...

"Quit it, Ada!"

Rino went on sobbing and there she was looking triumphant, still looking at me with that sarcastic smile. And the stench was still getting worse...

"Ada, cut it out!... I told you to cut it out... Ada, cut it out..."

She's still smirking, still there smirking. With the same expression as when she bought herself gold bracelets and said I'd given them to her. "That's right," she said. I'd heard right. She'd really just said, "That's right"

"I've always been unfaithful to you... He's not yours..."

"Cut it out, Ada..."

"Rino's not yours," she said with a fierce sneer.

I stared at the picture. "Rino, you don't know what your mother was like," I said, spitting on the grave.
Rino stared at me. I saw Ada was smiling with a sad expression. The spit was white against the brown earth; I was mirrored in a bubble. 'It's nothing,' Ada's melancholy smile seemed to say.

"What did you do?" Rino said.

I suddenly realized that I was in a cemetery. That icy cold was coming from the marble, from the crosses; there I was over a grave. 'I spit that.' I stared at it and thought, I did that. I looked at Ada again. Still that sad smile that was turning into a sneer.

"What did you do!" Rino said.

He screamed and took off. I was left by myself in front of that picture, in front of that spit, on that earth that stank of decomposing bodies. 'What did you expect?' it seemed like Ada was saying to me.

And around me nothing but silence and cold, and me still here thinking, I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I spat on a grave.

I looked for the last time at Ada, who'd started smiling that sad, melancholy smile again, and left thinking, I've done something!

I walked, head lowered, on the carpet of yellow leaves as evening fell and a sliver of moon appeared among the clouds.

At the bend in the road, the assistant superintendent suddenly appears before me. He must have been there for quite a while, to judge from the rivulets of moisture on his
coat.

"Did you carry out your representational mission?... What did you say to the widow?"

Representational mission! I had a whole mountain of tar standing there in front of me. You cut tar with a knife, I thought. "I told her that Mr. Pereghi had sent me in his place," I said deliberately.

"You said Mr.... But we're Principal/Professor/Assistant Superintendent!" he snarled. "Did you really say Mr...."

I had to prove to myself that I still had a bit of courage.

"I said Mr. Pereghi all right... I forgot the titles!" I said resolutely, firmly.

Pereghi leaned against a wall. "Oh, really? You said Mr.... And here we are making you our representative... Mombelli, we will see about this during the next evaluation period.... We will see about this on your oral exams.... Mister, to me! To me...."

I left him still leaning against the wall. That man's suffering..., I thought.

But in my mind, against a dark background, I kept seeing that spit. I inhaled the stench; it was coming from me!
I was walking back and forth in the bedroom. It was late at night and Rino wasn't home. I'd spent four hours or so thinking about a challenge between me and Coppi. For four hours, minute by minute, I imagined pedaling the last leg of the Tour, and getting to Paris about twelve hours ahead of the big champion.

Then it seemed to me like twelve hours was too much, not for Coppi but for the length of the leg, so I cut it to six hours.

I went for four hours in a state of semiconsciousness, thinking, I'm alive, I'm winning the Tour, Coppi's behind me somewhere!

But after four hours I was exhausted from all that thinking, from that intense and empty daydreaming.

"I spit on a grave!" I said, and my voice made me jump.

I went into Rino's room and the made bed gave me a feeling of anguish. It was past one o'clock; the little boy wasn't in bed. His schoolbooks and his notebooks were on the chest of drawers and behind them, framed, the picture of Ada; the same one that's on her gravestone.

I stared at it with a feeling of fear. 'See? It's a picture!' I said to myself. And I was glad I was still seeing her just like she was, with that appropriate smile. Then, as I kept on staring at it, I realized the smile was
turning into a fierce sneer. I had the distinct impression that it was my imagination that was projecting itself onto the picture and, just like at the cemetery, I was identifying the picture with the sneer of Ada's that I was always seeing in my mind. I clung to that explanation: 'A picture can't change...' But then suddenly it looks like the lips are moving. I really saw her move her lips; I thought, She keeps on moving them. I put the picture down and went back in my room. I'm not in control of my mind anymore, I thought.

In front of me I could see that spit again, whiter than before, against that earth darker than before. 'After all,' I told myself, 'it might have been a wicked thing to do, but to make a fool out of me for so long, to pass God-knows-whose son off as my son, is an even more wicked thing to do!' My reasoning sounded good to me. 'What was I supposed to do? Put flowers on her grave?' I said, raising my voice, as if I was talking to somebody. 'I loved Rino like my son, and it turns out he's not my son. I hated the red-headed baby so much I was glad when he died, and it turns out he is my son... Besides, is it like she said? Are those things all true? She was unfaithful to me, that's for sure...''

I was convinced I'd been justified in spitting.

Meanwhile two o'clock had gone by, and two-thirty and Rino wasn't home; and I thought, So what?; that one's not my son.
"'Cause now it's convenient for you to think he isn't!" I said, and it seemed like neither my voice nor the thought existed.

Why would a boy be running around at this time of night? "He's getting back at his father," I said in the same tone of voice.

Rinuccio, who gives everything to the beggars, who even goes through mystic crises; Rinuccio ought to be able to forgive.

"And if he doesn't forgive you?" I said, still in the same tone of voice. I started breaking out in a cold sweat, while the stench of putrefaction filled my nostrils.

It struck three.

I heard heavy rhythmical steps from the street. It felt like I'd already been in this situation, already lived it, been through it.

"They're coming here," I said coldly, straightening my tie.

A few seconds later they knocked at the door.

It was three policemen. "Are you the father of Rino Mombelli? O.K. Down to the police station," they said.

"But what did he do?" I asked indifferently.

"You'll find out at the station," one of the policemen said, with difficulty.

I shrugged. "You can tell me," I said as we walked along. "I really couldn't care less...he's my wife's son..."
The policeman looked at one of his fellow officers. "As a matter of fact, the boy was running around at night," he said. "We can tell him."

The officers looked at each other doubtfully; then the same one said, "He beat up and robbed an old man..."

"Rino?"

"...and obscene acts with one of them," he went on, pointing to where a notorious homosexual lives. The officers watched me as they talked, and I imagined I was racing the stop-watch with Coppi.

At the station, Rino was sitting across from the police chief, with the homosexual next to him. Rino was barefoot and I couldn't keep my eyes off his toes. He had one foot up in the air, so I could see the bottom of it. The other foot was normal.

There are his toes, I thought, and kept on staring at them. I can see he has toes. Satisfied now?

Rino was showing me his feet defiantly, brazenly. And moving his toes. Right then I was ashamed of seeing his feet in front of strangers. I was humiliated not because I'd ruined the boy with a filthy act, not because of what he'd done, but because of those toes.

The police chief ordered the two accused taken into the next room. Rino showed me his feet for the last time, looked at me and spit on the floor.
When we were alone the chief offered me a cigarette, which I took eagerly, with a feeling of satisfied vanity. The chief looked at me sympathetically. "Buck up! I don't think he'll go to jail. They'll put him in reform school," he said.

I was too depressed to answer. He showed me his toes, I thought.

"They sure left the old man in bad shape," the chief went on. "Tell me about the boy's life, his past."

"Always been a good boy," I said.

"Then why in the world..."

I fell back against the chair. But I couldn't say whether it was the pain of being responsible, or worrying about Rino's future, or because of the toes, or whether it was just a pose...

Then, like waking up from a dream, I found myself in front of my house.

"Here we are," a bureaucratic voice said.

I threw myself on the bed planning to sleep. It was striking five.

XVIII.

I found myself at the station undecided whether to leave or not. Then the train came and I got on. Racalmuto,
the lawyer, was in the compartment. "218!" he said to me.

"435!" I answered.

"543!"

"765," I said.

"765 444 8876 9876!"

"666 987 654 332!" I responded.

Racalmuto looked at me happily. Numbers have replaced words, I thought. I just had a conversation using numbers, I thought, and we understood each other. I looked at the man with admiration, trying to engrave his features in my mind.

The conductor went by, and he was talking in numbers too, rather than words.

I went out in the corridor and saw a whole crowd talking in numbers and understanding each other. 765, 543, 777, 987. That's how the crowd was talking.

It could be, I thought. I could hear them talking in numbers, so it could be. In fact: it is. The train stopped at the little station in Cavaticino, a switch-point in the middle of the woods.

"777!" Racalmuto said.

"No!" I answered.

"777!" he repeated and pointed to some policemen who were scanning everyone's faces. "They're looking for you!" Racalmuto told me.

I pounded my forehead.

"Run!" Racalmuto said. "6184!"
"562," I answered.

I got off at the little station, crossed the tracks and stopped behind the station. I heard a railroad worker say, "I saw a guy running!"

"You kidding?" the other worker said.

"I just saw him right this minute!"

"Should we call the police?"

"Let's not get involved."

"But why would that guy run in the woods?"

"I saw him run in there all right!"

"Are you sure you saw him?"

"Clear as day!"

"Then either he's a robber or a murderer!"

They didn't say anything for a minute. Meanwhile the train left.

"I'm gonna call the police!" one of the workers said.

"No!"

"You saw a guy slink off the train into the woods? And then?"

I took off. I ran for quite a way and then started walking.

I was walking among huge trees, with my feet on boggy ground and a concert of crickets and owls and frogs and crows filling my ears. I was walking in the dark; every once in awhile I'd bump into a tree and think they were about to get me!
I kept on walking while the jackals howled mournfully from among the trees.

"What are you doing, jackals?" I shouted.

"Feeding on dead men's stomachs!" a chorus of jackals answered.

After walking a little more I shouted, "What are you doing, jackals?"

"Feeding on dead men's stomachs!" they howled.

Then I slapped myself a couple of times and woke up. I was lying in the woods with my head resting on the roots of a tree. I could feel the various branchings of the roots digging into my back. I pressed my body against a knotty part, thinking, Trees have toes too. Trees have corns too.

I start walking again, pricking up my ears. Jackals live in Africa, I thought, relieved. And I thought of a short story of Tolstoy's that had made quite an impression on me when I was a boy, and that I always read to my students. It was about a certain Pugaciov who'd been sentenced to about thirty years in prison for having killed a man. The crime had taken place in an inn. In Pugaciov's bag they'd found the blood-stained knife that the victim's throat had been slit with. Pugaciov was doing the thirty years; except that a man came to the prison and confessed to Pugaciov that he was the assassin. "Forgive me, Pugaciov!" "It's God who must forgive you!" Pugaciov answered. The assassin confessed to the crime and the next day they went to free Pugaciov, but Pugaciov
was dead.

I'm Pugaciov! I thought. I pounded a hand against my head and said to myself, 'I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive'; and I could remember perfectly having been in the inn, having found a blood-stained knife in my suitcase; I could remember that in the next room there'd been a dead man with his throat slit. And I took off thinking, I'm like Pugaciov!, and while I ran I was thinking that I would have run away even if they'd accused me of stealing Vigevano's tower. 'Don't kid yourself,' I told myself. 'All the evidence is against you!'

I walked for a long time until I stopped by a tree, exhausted. I was about to lie down, thinking, They won't get me here, - when I felt my feet being swallowed by the earth. And in a few seconds the earth was swallowing my ankles. Quicksand, I thought.

The earth kept on swallowing me; now my knees were going under; then my thighs.

I heard a voice nearby. "Antonio, help me!" It was Ada. She had the red-headed baby in her arms.

"Get on my shoulders," I told her. "And put the baby on yours."

I could taste the pungent taste of the earth in my mouth. Just my eyes were out.

I woke up and said to myself, 'But this is a fairy tale I've told my students hundreds of times!'
I was leaning against a tree, looking up at the branches to see if I could see the little blue bird. When he was little I used to tell Rino there was a little blue bird in the woods and the hunters had killed it. Rino would cry desperately. Now, seeing the little blue bird fluttering around me, I was relieved. I'll tell Rino the little blue bird's alive, I thought.

I started walking again thinking about how I was in the ogre's kingdom. I got off at the ogre's station; this is the ogre's garden; the ogre has a house that's tiny from the outside and huge inside, that house of his. The ogre doesn't want people to come into his kingdom. Nobody leaves the ogre's kingdom alive, I thought, thinking, I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I'm walking. And I thought about how I was walking to go free the fairy that the ogre was keeping captive in his house, tiny from the outside and huge inside. The fairy was being held captive by the ogre, and she had to be freed. The ogre's big and fat; he's got big long nails; the ogre is ugly and the fairy is delicate and refined. And I was walking to go free the fairy.

But where's the ogre's house? "You'll see a faint light!" chirped the little blue bird that was flying above me and spreading a wing over my head.

And I walked, walked, sinking my feet into boggy ground, pulling them out and thinking, There's no quicksand!
Until finally - I saw a faint light. "That's the ogre's house," the little blue bird chirped.

I set off towards that faint light, thinking, The ogre's in there. He's with the blonde fairy. Hurry up...

I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I'm walking. Now I could make out the ogre's house; it was a little tiny house all right; I could see it, I stared at it and said to myself, 'I see it!'

Then I got to it and peeked in the window. I could see a huge big fat guy, old and naked. The ogre. He had big ugly hands, ugly ogre feet, a round hairy stomach, long black hairs on his hairy chest. He was drinking and eating. I could see his jaws moving. The ogre! He was staring with fiery eyes at a little blonde girl with sky-blue eyes - the little fairy.

I'm here, I'm awake, I'm alive, I can touch the ogre's house, I can see the ogre and the fairy; the ogre and the fairy, and I'm in the woods; the ogre and the fairy.

The ogre kept on eating and drinking, making guttural noises. It looks like the fairy is scared, like she's looking at him wildly.

But now the ogre gets up and displays a frightful manhood. The fairy closes her eyes and dances; she dances and meanwhile she starts stripping. The fairy? Now she's naked; the fairy? The fairy all right; and she's enticing the ogre.
I stare at the fairy and recognize her as a two-bit whore; I stare at the ogre and recognize him as a small-time industrialist. I stare at the house and realize it's a shack on the Ticino. "Ah!" I yell at the little blue bird. Those two get scared and open the door. "What the hell do you think you're doing here?" the fairy yells.

The industrialist locks me up in his car.

A little while later we're racing along at an insane speed. The industrialist's driving like a madman. In the back seat, the whore's singing at the top of her lungs. I can see the shadows of trees and houses and houses and trees go across her pale face; and the industrialist keeps driving faster and faster; a hundred-eighty, two hundred, two hundred-twenty, till we get to the bridge over the Ticino; but the bridge doesn't have any railing. The car races along poised on the very edge of the bridge, until I scream and wake up, soaking wet as if I really had fallen into the river.

I look at the time. One minute's gone by.

XIX.

In the morning there was somebody knocking at the door. It was my colleague Drivaudi with Rosa.

"You can't live by yourself," she said. "Come on; just do it!"
I try and act indifferent.

"Everybody knows by now, Mombelli," she tells me.

Rosa was looking at me uneasily, with an unhealthy, ashamed look in her eyes.

"If you marry this girl," Drivaudi went on, "- like I told you before - it's like putting thirty million in the bank."

I think about how this spinster schoolteacher's never seen a man barefoot, and I get up and show my feet so she can see them on top and underneath, like Rino yesterday. They were looking at my feet and I moved my toes and had this erotic feeling.

I've got a son in jail, I think, and I think about feet. But then I think about how he's not my son and I start moving my toes again with relish. And they stand there staring at my toes.

"Don't go to school!" Drivaudi said.

"I am going," I answered.

I looked in the mirror before I went out. I had a white face, a tortured expression that I liked. As I went to school I thought that Rino had planned his revenge so that he'd get me right in my tar. And instead I'd kept the conceited dignity of displaying myself in my almost tragic situation. Seeing the school and all the people in front of it, I felt the way actors must feel when they have to go on stage. Everybody knows, I thought, remembering Drivaudi's words; and I took pleasure in my position. The pupils'
families moved aside as I went by; I felt like I was being watched, followed, and I thought about how right then I must have had the expression artists have. The assistant superintendent shook my hand and said, "Have faith, the way we always have! Your son will be restored to society, to life, to love!"

My colleagues looked at me out of the corner of their eyes. The kids sat quietly at their desks, eyes wide, staring at me, good as gold. I sat there with my hands on my head staring at the top of my desk, but that was a pose too. Every once in a while some colleague would find some excuse to come in.

"I'm ruined," I said to Filippi.

He gestured. "Getting it up? As long as you can get it up, you're all right!"

Then Cipollone came in, "I'm so sorry! Is it really true he killed three people?"

"Come on; three people!"

"I really am sorry. And it was so important to you, for him to become a Group A... I'm really sorry! But I told you; time will tell...and time told...I'm so sorry."

Then the principal/assistant superintendent came in for the evaluation period. "We'll be understanding," he said, "even if you didn't represent us as you should have!" And he started interrogating the kids while I kept on sitting there, depressed.
"Let's see how we're doing with those loops," the assistant superintendent said.

He looked at the class-register and sighed. "Again! Again! We have faith in man, but you test our faith too much! The ñ still higher than the l. My dear man, don't you realize that the l is the highest loop?... And here your f isn't touching either the line above or the one below...and the h is written so badly it looks like a t. I'd read this...we'd read this as a t. Where's the loop?"

He went on to check out whether I was following my lesson-plan. "Let's see the word list!" he said. "Let's use the O.R.E. method!"

"Ore?" I said. "Observe, Reflect, Express."

"Exactly. Now, try and direct a conversation about the nut-tree. Mr. Mombelli, we urge you to make sure the conversation is a fertile spring of linguistic learning, as well as an exercise in wisdom! The nut-tree! Let's set up an outline:

"Where have you seen a nut-tree?"

"How many meters high was it?"

"What was the trunk like?"

"What was the bark like?"

"Which way do the branches go?"

"What were the nut-tree's leaves like? Composite or indented?"

"What are the nut-tree's fruits like?"
"How is the nut-tree like the chestnut-tree?"
"How is the nut-tree different from the chestnut-tree?"
"How many kinds of nut-tree do you know?"
"What kind of soil does the nut-tree grow in?"
"What is its fruit good for?"
"What are its leaves good for?"

"All right, Mr. Mombelli, direct the conversation.

Correct any obscure dialectal expressions; praise the apt and correct expression. Point out the smooth flowing sentence, the suitable use of an adjective. And converse with all of them, even those who would rather be silent because they don't know what to say. There's so much to say about the nut-tree! You see, Mr. Mombelli, it is our duty to cause to spring forth the spark of interest, the persuasive invitation to speak...

And above all remember, not O.R.E. but O.R.E.D. Observation, Reflection, Expression, and Dramatization. Dramatize, Mr. Mombelli; come now, dramatize!"

I began. "Children, the nut-tree is the tree that produces nuts."

Then I started explaining what the nut is. Every once in a while the assistant superintendent would interrupt me, "More drama! More drama!"

At the end of the evaluation period the assistant superintendent told me, "You were not up to the mission of representation we conferred upon you. Transeat, as the Latins said. We promised you we would leave a nice smell. We are
giving you an evaluation of very good, so that you can go on to the second salary bracket of point total 202... Even if we are dissatisfied with your loops!"

XX.

They sent Rino to reform school. I won't hear anything more about him. We're dead to each other.

I keep going day after day, between home and school and long walks. I catch myself stopping in front of little factories, small-time factories, and I think about how the owners leave something behind in the world. The owner dies but the factory remains.

I catch myself reasoning like that in front of those little factories.

So then I think about how I'm the cyclist; a bigger champion than Coppi and Bartoli put together; and I rave down the street. And then I think hard about what somebody who walked by me could think right then.

I've burned everything left from the past. Rino's books, Ada's picture and her clothes. To prove to myself that I'm another man, I've changed my habits or, to be more exact, I've changed the times of my habits.

I stare at my toes and think about how that part of the body's just like any other part, like elbows or knees, or hands.
But I can't get rid of that feeling of shame and modesty. Toes? And I look at them and stare at them, and every once in a while I go to some woman not so much to sleep with her as to show her my toes. But most of them couldn't care less and their indifference gives me a feeling of painful annoyance. Toes.

I spend long hours behind the window pane in the silence of the night, and stare at a star and think about how all over Italy people are seeing that star. And I'm glad to stay awake at night and break the rule that says you sleep at night. But then I throw myself on the bed, and keep my ears open to hear the street noises. I listen to those squealing tires that sound like children's screams; and I fall asleep.

In the morning I go to school, and think about how I'm going there to pay my dues to life. I know I'll see Cipollone, and that he'll be talking about his feasts and about how chicory hits the spot. That Bragaglia'll be talking about legal status. That Filippi'll be talking about getting it up. That Peschetti'll be talking about athletic phenomena. That the assistant superintendent wants me to watch my loops. That there'll be union meetings and pedagogical meetings, and that after six months of school there'll be three of vacation, and then six more of school and then three more of vacation.

I'm at point total 202. I know I'll be there for five years; then I'll go on to point total 229 where I'll be for ten years.
Who knows what point total I'll be at when I die?
Drivaudi winks at me. "A man can't live by himself!"
Rosa looks at me and turns red. She lowers her eyes modestly.
"Just figure it out," Drivaudi tells me. "Two salaries; and five lessons each in the afternoon, at five thousand lire each, that's fifty thousand lire; so there's another salary right there. You've both got the railroad reduction. And she's got a hundred chickens, and the pig they'll butcher; and besides she's a jewel! A jewel! A JEWEL! A doll!"
And she points to my dirty shirt, my old suit, my sloppy shave. "Mombelli, you need a woman!" she tells me.
Last night she came over and told me Rosa's going through a crisis. "It doesn't pay to be honest. Men like fibs better anyway!" she tells me Rosa said.
"How can you live on a 202 salary?" she asked me. She looked at three eggs that were on the buffet. "How much did they cost?"
"Seventy-five."
"Seventy-five lire saved!" she said. "Give me your answer by tomorrow. Because there just might be somebody else who'd take Rosa!" I promised her I'd think it over and give her my answer.
XXI.

I'm in the Piazza. It's 10 P.M.; I'm sitting at the Bar. The reporter has me listen to a story inspired by Rino's situation. "I didn't use names!" he said.

I shrugged. "Everybody knows by now."

He pulled the rough draft of the story out of his briefcase and read, "Inhuman son, ask for mercy! Pray that God have mercy on you. The old man whom you beat up will haunt you; he is ever before you, inhuman son, and he will never leave you in peace, never! Your little brother is among the angels but you will never know what angels are, you inhuman son! Your father cries! Ask for mercy, and for God to have mercy on you. For you do not know what angels are."

"You're a real comfort," I told him.

"You see?" he said and moved off towards the soccer coach's table. Now he was discussing the away game against Leffe.

"We lost the home game against them because you didn't take my advice!" the reporter yelled. "When we play there you've got to have the center forward play wing and the wings play inside..." The coach nodded. "And if you don't do like I'm telling you, I'm gonna attack you in the paper!"

I knew he'd talk until eleven-thirty on the dot.

I walked along the arcades. I saw the big industrialist and the worker at their table. I knew they'd leave at
eleven-thirty.

The custom-built Alfa Romeo of the small-time industrialist and his gold-laden wife drove into the Piazza. I knew they'd get back in the car at eleven-thirty.

The big fat man was in front of the jukebox; I knew he'd order a sandwich at eleven.

I walked along looking at those few bored, indifferent faces. I looked at the Bramante tower and thought about how it's been there for five hundred years, how it may be there for another five hundred years.

I kept on walking and got all the way to the fairgrounds. There were cars parked in front of the schools; young men were haggling with girls and women. I recognized one of them as Eva. I went on walking. I ran into Pagliani in front of the Exposition Hall.

"Did you hear they've raised the dependents' allowances five hundred lire?" he said. "And the latest: our adult education allowance'll probably be lumped together with the salary! The Tenth Committee's studying it."

I knocked on wood.

"I'm not saying to vote for me," Pagliani went on, "but remember that my party..."

"Forget it!" I said.

"Oh, so you're one of those who says it doesn't make any difference too! Do you realize that lately they've abolished taxes on billiards and pianos and draft wagons? They still
have those taxes in Russia, you know!"

Then he gave me some campaign pamphlets. There were pictures of him in three different poses. In the first one he was dressed like a parachutist. "The Combatant," it said underneath. In the second pose he was taking a walk with his family. "The Family Man." In the third he was in his classroom pointing to the map. "The Educator." And on the back his whole curriculum vitae: Top honors on two certification examinations. Secretary and founder of the Vigevano Juniors Soccer Club. Took part, with the Secretary of Commerce, in the opening of the Footwear Show.

"Are you going to vote for me?" he asked.

"I don't know!"

"If I can do anything for you, just let me know now. If I remember right, your classroom's cold; it faces the northwest, right? You want to trade with me? Mine's southeast; lots of light! It's nice and warm; plus the desk is Regency style!

I ran into Pisquani in the Piazza.

"You know, I was talking to the chief administrative officer and the superintendent of schools this morning, just like I'm talking to you right now! So, are you going to vote for me? If I get elected to the town council you can bet your boots they won't be giving the after-school activities to substitutes! And I'll raise the pay to twenty thousand."
Like I was telling you; I already talked to the chief administrative officer and the superintendent this morning! Twenty thousand lire more! Listen, that's ten pay increases from point total 202!"

I sat down at my usual bar.

The fat man was eating a sandwich. I looked at the time; eleven.

The reporter was yelling about the perfect formation for almost positively winning against Leffe. The coach was nodding.

"Let's not take Leffe lightly, for God's sake! Did you see what happened at the home game? You see what happened 'cause you didn't listen to me? Two points given away to Leffe, just like that!"

"Um," the coach said.

"Vigevano this year - if you do like I say - is right up there! Vigevano's like the Madrid Reales! Panciroli inside wing!"

"No!" the coach yelled. "Panciroli right fullback!"

The reporter gave a little smile. "Panciroli inside wing, all right!? Paciroli as inside wing there's hardly anybody that plays like him; nobody's got that speed! As fullback he's a lost cause!"

"I'm selling Panciroli!" the coach said.

"What did you say? Did I hear you right or what? Sell Panciroli? You said you want to sell Panciroli?"
"I want to sell Panciroli. I bought him, I'm gonna sell him!"

"Wait a minute! Listen, the whole team revolves around Panciroli! Panciroli inside wing, obviously. You sell Panciroli and you're throwing away a champion!"

"What a piece," the coach said, pointing at a girl going by.

"Quit changing the subject. Tell me what's going on or I'll write an article that empties the stadium out so fast... Are you gonna tell me exactly what you plan to do with Panciroli?"

"I'm keeping him; satisfied?"

"If I find out there's negotiations for Panciroli, you'll see what I put in the paper!"

The industrialist with the custom-built car and the bejewelled wife just got here. "That car over there doesn't even average a hundred," the coach said.

"A hundred; you kidding? That's an Alfetta!"

"From Vigevano to Bari it doesn't even average a hundred!"

"'Cause of the traffic jams!"

When the Alfa Romeo dispute is over or, rather, suspended, the reporter and the coach take up the dispute about the game against Leffe and about Panciroli again, more violently than before.

It's getting close to eleven-thirty, and both of them are yelling.
The fat man's finished eating his sandwich. He's sprawled out there digesting it. I go over to the jukebox and put on Volare. Modugno's voice pours out into the air.

Now the reporter comes over and asks me if the story's O.K. "It O.K. or isn't it?"

I tell him yes. Same difference; yes or no, he'd publish it anyway.

It strikes eleven-thirty.

The reporter goes off with the coach. The small-time industrialist gets into the custom-built car with his wife, and the car drives off. The big industrialist says good night to the worker; the worker pedals off in one direction, the industrialist drives off in his car in the other direction.

The Piazza Ducale is deserted. The moon is reflected in the stained-glass windows of the Duomo. The waiters yawn in the doorways of the bars. Modugno's voice fades away. Everything is silent.

I think about how it's Monday. I try to remember where I was ten years ago on a Monday of this month. And it strikes me that I was right here, that I'd seen the same people and the same scenes as tonight. Ten years from now?, I think. And I think about how ten years from now I'll be at point total 229 salary bracket #4.

Every once in a while the Piazza's conventual silence is broken by the roar of some car or a motorbike.
The neon signs flicker. The lights go out in a few display windows.

It strikes eleven-thirty again. That big bell's been striking the hours and the half-hours for two hundred years; and some people are hearing it for the first time and some for the last. Why knows when they'll replace that big bell?

I start walking towards home, which'll be as cold and deserted and silent as the Piazza. I look at all the darkened windows, and the few that are still lighted. I think about how I'd like to be invisible so I could go in the houses.

I walk thinking about how I'm walking and how I'm here; how together these houses I see make up Vigevano; how I'm alive, I'm awake, I'm breathing and looking and I'm here, still here, still here.

I look at the cracks in the sidewalk and I say, "They're cracks in the sidewalk." And I get the idea of jumping over them or else going around them. Point total 202.

I hear tires squealing far away. I think about how I would've liked it better to hear that squeal from my house. Point total 202.

I think about how today's over too, how the night's going by, how from Monday you go to Tuesday. And in a few days it'll be Monday again and then Tuesday again. Point total 202.
I think about how the future'll be the same as the past; so many months of school, so many months of vacation. And when there's school I think joyfully about how time's going by and vacation's getting closer. When there's vacation I think joyfully about how it's going by too and another year of school'll be starting. Point total 202.

What'll happen to me tomorrow? I predict I'll get up around eight; that at eight-twenty I'll be at school; that I'll see the same old faces. That I'll say, "Good morning, Mr. Assistant Superintendent," fawningly, just to thank him for the very good on my evaluation. And I'll shut myself in the classroom and repeat the same things I've been repeating and re-repeating for twenty years.

I'm going by the place that used to be Ada's little factory. I touch it. I look at it. I look at that little place and think about how I got it going. I feel a kind of satisfaction, but right away I think about how that act of courage was imposed on me.

'Imposed because I wanted it to be,' I tell myself, and I look at the little factory and think about how maybe my life was wrong but not wasted.

And I think about how I've still got plenty of life ahead of me.

I start walking again, more relieved. Suddenly I think about Rino and get a lump in my throat. So what; I think, He's not my son! The sins of the mothers are revisited
upon the sons.

    I realize I'm hopelessly rhetorical.

    It strikes midnight.

    Every day little things'll happen; new little things all the time, and that'll distinguish one day from the next; I'll fill up my time with little things, besides paying my daily dues to life.

    I'm in bed. I look around me. I think I'll change the room around. I've tried to get rid of everything of Ada and Rino's; I try hard to forget them completely, but then I look at my toes. This toe complex is pathological.

    Tomorrow Drivaudi'll come for my final answer about Rosa. Two point total 202 salaries equal one Group A salary. On one salary, one person lives badly; on two salaries, two people live well. A doll! A jewel! Only daughter, the salary, the pig. Devout, moral, good. A doll! Point total 202! Like having thirty million in the bank.

    While I fall asleep I think about how I'm going to end up getting married!
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


