THE APRIL RIVER

Martino Bertoni returns home.
April 1946: a country to rebuild,
a secret to uncover.



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The Bridge in the Water

The driver braked before the bend. The truck jolted and Martino's backpack slid against his feet. Damp air came in through the open window; until a little while ago it had carried the smell of freshly turned earth, now it smelled of water.

"You have to get out here."

Martino picked up his backpack. The strap had got under one of his shoes, and he had to bend down to free it. The driver kept his hands on the steering wheel, waiting. Beyond the glass, the road ended against the sky.

"Can't we get through?"

The man pointed ahead with his chin.

"Look."

Martino opened the door. The running board was high, and before letting himself down, he felt with the toe of his foot. He touched grass, then earth. He turned to close the door, pressing twice to make the lock catch. Only then did he look at the river.

All that remained of the bridge entrance was the low wall beside the road. Beyond it there was nothing left for the eye to rest on: you had to lower your gaze to the water and then raise it again, to the opposite bank, where the road began once more. Two pieces of arch showed above the surface between them. The current uncovered them and covered them again, leaving a pale streak of foam on the stone.

They had told him the bridge had been blown up. He had nodded that time, without asking questions. Now he searched with his eyes for the parapet on the side where he used to stop as a boy, the stretch of paving worn smooth by wheels. He couldn't place them in the water.

"The Germans," the driver said. "Before they left."

Martino adjusted the strap on his shoulder.

The engine missed a beat now and then. The man kept it going with his foot and leaned towards the door.

"You have to get to the other side?"

“I’m from over there.”

The driver looked back at the interrupted road. Then he nodded, as if that answer was enough for everything else too.

“You’ll find mud.”

“I can see that.”

“Not here. Further on.”

Martino nodded. He could have thanked him straightaway; instead, he waited for the man to turn the steering wheel. He moved away from the flattened grass, making room for him to manoeuvre, and raised a hand. The driver answered without looking at him. The truck backed up, straightened along the embankment and set off along the road they had come by.

Martino stood still until he could see it. The wheels left a fine dust on the potholes, which quickly settled in the damp air. When the truck disappeared behind the bend, the noise lasted a little longer. Beneath it, the sound of the water could be made out. Then there was nothing but that.

He set his backpack down between his feet. On his shoulder, freed of the weight, the strap’s pressure remained. There was no one for him to follow and no one had told him to wait; nonetheless, he waited. He became aware of what he was doing only when a gust of wind pushed the fabric of his trousers against his legs.

In the autumn of ’43, when they had taken him away to Germany, he had still tried to find out the time, the stops, how much longer there was to go. Later he had stopped. What remained of all that waiting was the way he stood: feet just slightly apart, hands empty, weight shifted from one leg to the other before the pain came. He did it there too, on the embankment of his village.

He bent to pick up his backpack.

The river was wider than he remembered. The snow melting in the mountains must have been swelling it for days: the water reached the grass and kept the lower blades bent. Where it met the remains of the bridge it gathered into tight lines, then spread out, brown, as far as the opposite bank. There were no workers or piles of stones to be seen. Almost a year had passed since the end of the war, and the road entrance still led nowhere.

A little further downstream, beside the old landing, there was a boat. The rope ran from the bow to a post driven into the bank. A man sat at the far end, his hat pulled down and his arm resting on his knee. The little smoke from his cigarette came apart in front of his face.

Martino looked for the path down. At first he couldn't find it, because the grass had covered it; he recognised it by a fold in the ground, a lower line cutting across the slope. He put his foot sideways and tested whether it would hold. The earth gave way just a little beneath his heel.

A few steps away there were poppies. One had a bent stem and its flower turned towards the ground; the others stood upright in the grass, shaken by the same wind. Martino stopped without lowering his backpack. He couldn't remember the last time he had looked at one up close. There might have been some in Germany. He wouldn't have known.

He waited for the bent flower to stop moving. Beneath the red edge he could see the black of the petals gathered at the centre. Then he started down again, choosing the places where the earth showed through. The grass brushed against his trousers and water seeped into the seams of his shoes. Further down, the old man was still smoking. He hadn't turned his head yet.

At the bottom of the slope, the path opened onto the gravel. Martino took the last few steps more quickly, carried along by the incline, and stopped near the post. The taut rope creaked each time the boat moved a foot away from the bank. On its return, the edge struck a flat stone and made a dull thud.

The old man turned his head. Beneath his straw hat his forehead was dark, crossed by lighter wrinkles. The brim was broken, and a few strands brushed his ear. He looked at the backpack, then at Martino's shoes; finally, he looked at his face.

"Could you take me over?"

The old man took the cigarette from his lips.

"It costs twenty lire."

Martino let the backpack slide down to the crook of his elbow so he could search his pocket. There was no need to count, but he did it anyway, keeping the coins safe in his fist. He had counted them before getting on the truck. He knew their weight.

"Ten. I don't have any more."

The old man put the cigarette back in his mouth and held out his hand. Martino hesitated for another moment.

"Will that do?"

The man opened his fingers wider.

“If you’ve got ten, give me ten.”

He took them without moving from the bench. With his thumb he slid them across his palm, one over the other, accompanying the count with a movement of his lips. Then he put them in his shirt pocket and passed his open hand over it.

Martino stayed beside the post. The empty pocket clung to his leg. There was no one else on the bank; he looked towards the road almost to make sure they weren’t supposed to wait for someone. The old man made no move to set off. He had rested his arm on his knee again and was studying him, cigarette between two fingers.

Martino kept his face raised. His beard had grown for days, and he could feel the skin pulling over his cheekbone, where the wind had dried it out. He felt like running a hand over his badly cut hair, but left his arm where it was.

“Bertoni,” said the old man.

It didn’t sound like a question. Martino nodded.

“The younger one.”

“Martino.”

The man moved his head just slightly, repeating the name without a sound. His eyes returned to the scar above Martino’s eyebrow, then moved down to his cheeks. Martino waited.

“I thought you were dead.”

A louder sound came from the river. The water had hit the side and the boat had shifted, pulling on the rope. The old man glanced at it, as he would have if they’d been talking about the weather.

“I’m here,” said Martino.

“Eh.”

The old man took his last drag on the cigarette. He looked at the tip, then put it out by pressing it against the wood. He had to keep at it so the tobacco wouldn’t stay lit. When he was done, he leaned towards the rope.

Martino didn’t ask him who else thought he was dead. The answer had already reached the village, passed from one door to another while he was still on his way back. There, beside the post, there was no one who needed to be told. The old man was loosening the knot with his fingernails

and holding the boat steady with his foot.

“Get in at the front. Not on the edge.”

Martino put his backpack in the bow, then leaned on it to climb in. The boat tilted. He stopped with one foot still on the gravel until the old man pulled it closer. Once inside, he went to sit on the indicated bench. He held the backpack between his knees, the two straps facing him.

Beneath his fingers, the wood had a soft surface, smoothed by use. Where the old man’s hand passed less often, raised splinters and dark clumps of tar remained. The smell rose mostly from the bottom: old, damp tar, and something fishy the river couldn’t wash away. There was a trickle of water between two planks. Martino put his sole over it so the backpack wouldn’t touch it.

The old man gathered the rope into broad loops. Then he stood, helping himself with one hand on his knee. He remained bent for a moment before straightening his back; he took the long oar and pushed it against the gravel.

The hull barely moved.

Martino started to get up.

“Stay where you are.”

The old man shifted the oar’s position, planted one foot and pushed again. This time the bottom scraped over the stones for a long while. Water slipped between the bank and the boat, first in a narrow strip, then wide enough that Martino could no longer step across it. He sat back down properly.

The bow turned. For a while it seemed they were heading towards where the river ran fastest; the old man dipped the blade and held it there, resisting with the weight of his body. The boat changed its tilt and set off across the river.

Martino watched the post recede. Seen from the water, it was lower, just a piece of wood driven into the mud. Behind it, the path was lost at once in the grass. He thought again of the place where he had waited after the truck left: from the boat, it was already impossible to make out.

Now that it no longer touched bottom, the oar moved without a sound. The old man dipped it on the same side and let the water press against the blade; then he lifted it, shifted it a little and began again. The work showed in his shoulders, not his hands. Martino watched them for a while. With each adjustment, the bank ahead changed position behind the old man’s hat.

A long branch passed beside the bow. Clumps of grass still clung to it, and it turned slowly, showing first its dark bark, then its broken wood. Martino drew one hand back from the side, though the branch was too far away to hit him.

“Where are you coming from?”

The old man said it without turning around. Martino waited until he had lifted the oar.

“Germany.”

“All the way here with that?”

He gestured towards the embankment, towards the truck that was no longer there.

“The last bit. Before that, the train, as far as Bolzano. Then however I could.”

“Walking.”

“Sometimes.”

The old man nodded and went back to his work. He didn’t ask how long it had taken. Martino spread his fingers on the wood. He had prepared himself to reconstruct the journey, to give the names in the right order, to explain the stretches he couldn’t explain even to himself. Those few words were enough.

The boat entered an area of stronger current. The surface of the water was all streaked; in some places it seemed still, but the straw passing over it hurried away. Martino watched the bank to make sure they were moving forward. Poplars grew along that side in an almost unbroken row. At one end, where the trees opened up, a house without a roof appeared.

The inside of the upper floor was visible. A beam remained propped at an angle, black against the sky; lower down, a stretch of plaster still held the colour of a room. In front of the house, a man was pushing a wheelbarrow. He stopped when he saw them and stood with his arms extended over the handles. Then he took one hand off and raised it.

The old man answered by raising two fingers. Martino didn’t move. Before he could decide whether that greeting included him too, the boat had already passed by. He watched the roofless wall for a little while longer, until the brim of the old man’s hat hid it from view.

“Are they waiting for you at home?”

“They don’t know anything.”

“Your father doesn’t know?”

Martino shook his head.

The old man pressed down on the oar. The wood made a short sound against the oarlock.

“Maybe that’s better.”

He said nothing more. Martino watched the line of his shoulders beneath his shirt. He could have asked what he meant, whether it was better for him or for his father. Instead, he bent to adjust the backpack, which had shifted between his knees.

Further out, a barrel was passing. It was lying on its side and turning slowly, with one hoop emerging from the water and then disappearing. Martino followed it until the old man blocked it from view too. When the oar came back into the air, a few drops fell onto the bench.

In October, before he was taken away, the drops had landed on his face.

They were in a borrowed boat and couldn’t see the banks. Nando had lifted the oar too high, laughing, and water had gone everywhere. Martino had protested more loudly than necessary. He still remembered the wet jacket across his knees and the way he tried to keep his feet in the middle of the bottom, away from the sides.

The fog covered the river to within a few feet of the boat. It was impossible to know whether they were moving: a patch of water disappeared in front and an identical one appeared behind. Nando rowed in jerks. Between strokes he turned towards Martino and laughed at his face, or at something his face had put him in mind of.

“You can look at me all you want,” Martino had told him. “Just keep rowing.”

His brother had put the oar down again. But he was still laughing, and the blade had gone in crooked, bringing more water inside. Martino had pulled his feet back. Then Nando had stopped altogether.

The boat had been left at the mercy of the current. There wasn’t even that clumsy movement any more to show that someone was taking them somewhere. Martino had stretched out a hand towards the oar; Nando had kept it out of his reach, still watching him.

“Now you find the bank.”

Martino had turned around. There was the same fog on every side. He had heard his brother

laugh louder and, when he turned to look at him again, he had started laughing too. He had laughed, holding on to the bench, his knees pressed together, still waiting for Nando to take up the oar again.

The old man scraped the wood against the side. Martino looked up.

The poplars were ahead. The bank was clear; he could make out the tufts of grass separated from the earth that had slumped away. There was no fog and no one sitting beside him. He moved his hands from the bench to the backpack straps. He had gripped the wood for so long that a line remained on his palm.

He looked at it and ran his thumb over it. He waited for the mark to return to the colour of his skin. The old man kept moving the oar, and Martino counted two strokes, then a third, before he was able to look at him again.

“Nando,” he said.

The old man didn’t turn around. The blade plunged and disappeared into the muddy water. For a few moments Martino thought he had spoken too softly; he could still feel the name in his mouth, but didn’t know whether it had reached the stern.

“My brother,” he added.

“I know who he is.”

The old man lifted the oar. Water dripped from the tip, leaving a series of dark spots on the bottom. Now the boat was moving almost straight and the current no longer pulled it as it had before.

Martino waited. The old man was looking towards the bank, not at him. A blackbird was moving among the lower branches of the poplars; he could hear it, but couldn’t see it. He lowered his gaze to the stretch of water between his shoes and the side.

“He went up into the mountains,” the old man said at last. “In ’44.”

“I knew that.”

The old man nodded, but it didn’t seem as if that assent was leading to any more words. He turned the oar just a little, let it slide along the side of the hull and wiped his wet fingers on his trousers.

“And after that?”

Martino had asked in the same voice he had used to ask the price. He realised this and straightened on the bench.

The old man lifted the oar until the blade was completely out of the water. He looked at its edge, where the wood had lost its colour. The boat continued on its own.

“Your father will be there.”

“I wanted to hear it from you.”

“You can ask your father.”

The sound had changed on that side. The broad river remained behind the stern, while ahead, beneath the trees, the water moved in slow folds. Martino heard the blackbird again, closer this time. He realised he was waiting for that call to end too.

“It’s not for me to say,” the old man said.

Martino looked at the shirt pocket where his coins had gone. A diagonal crease remained in the fabric. A little while ago that man had agreed to take him across without asking him anything; now he held the oar raised and waited for him to stop.

“All right.”

The old man dipped the blade again.

“It’s hard, Bertoni.”

Martino looked up.

“I know him.”

“You’ll talk.”

He didn’t answer. The bank was so close that he could make out the stones beneath the surface. The old man felt for one with the oar, tested the bottom and pushed. The hull turned slowly, presenting its bow to the gravel shore. Martino loosened his fingers on the backpack straps.

He had prepared himself to recognise faces, streets, a door. He hadn’t thought he would have to wait for his father to learn something about his brother. He tried to imagine the question in front of him, standing, with no river to cover his voice. He stopped before finding the words.

The boat struck the gravel. The blow travelled from the soles of his feet to his knees. The old man set down the oar and moved to the bow, keeping low so as not to unbalance the hull. Martino drew his legs back to let him pass.

The man rolled up his trousers and stepped into the water. It came up to just below his knees. He grabbed the bow and walked backwards, stopping at every step to get a better grip. The boat scraped over the stones with a long rasp. When the old man let go, it stayed still.

“Now.”

Martino lifted his backpack. He put one hand on the side, shifted his weight and felt for the bottom with his foot. Water immediately came through the gap in his sole. Cold, it slipped beneath his toes; as he set down his other foot too, he felt his heel getting wet.

He stayed in the water for a moment to give the old man room to return to the boat. A stone rolled beneath one shoe and he had to shift his footing. He waited for the mud stirred up by his step to disperse. He found a wider stone, tested it with the tip of his foot and shifted his weight onto it, holding the backpack high against his side. Then he reached the dry gravel, where a little water ran out of the broken leather of his shoes with each step.

The old man picked up the oar again and laid it on the bottom, making sure it didn’t stick out. He bent to gather the rope. Up close, Martino could see the marks the collar had left on his neck, lighter than the exposed skin.

“Thank you,” Martino said.

“You paid.”

“Only ten.”

The man pulled the rope towards the post.

“You had ten.”

Martino nodded. He watched him as he looped the rope around the wood, tightened it and prepared another loop. He felt like helping him, but the old man’s hands had already finished. There was nothing to hold.

He put both straps over his shoulders. He adjusted the right one, which had twisted, and took a few steps on the gravel. When he turned around, the old man was still by the post, watching to see whether the knot held against the boat’s pull.

Martino raised a hand slightly. The man answered with his chin. Behind him, the water flowed past without stopping at the landing; further away, a strip of straw had gathered against a branch and came loose just as Martino turned to look for the path again.

The path began behind a clump of flattened grass. Martino went in slowly. On the gravel he could put his feet down however he liked; on the sloping earth, he had to choose where to put them. The open sole bent against the clods and let in mud. After a few steps, his toes no longer felt the cold of the water, only the weight of his wet sock.

He climbed, watching the ground close by. A section of the slope had slipped and the path narrowed: he put his hand on the grass, found earth beneath the roots and pulled himself up. The backpack slid off one shoulder. He didn't put it back in place until the ground became less steep.

He stopped halfway up, where a small rise made it possible to stand with both feet level. From below came the sound of the rope against the side of the boat. The old man had sat down and was doing something with his hands, perhaps looking for his tobacco. Martino couldn't make it out. He looked at the place where he had paid and the place where he had got out: now they were visible on the same side of the river, joined by a strip of gravel.

He caught his breath without opening his mouth. He didn't want to reach the top panting. He had walked farther in the previous days, with fewer stops, yet he had to wait for the pulse in his neck to slow. He pulled his collar open with two fingers. There was a rough seam rubbing against his skin, always in the same spot.

From there he still couldn't see the village. He could see only the sky above the ridge and, to one side, part of the row of poplars. Martino watched their tops bend. Then he adjusted his backpack and covered the last stretch.

At the top, the wind hit him in the chest. The road ran along the embankment, with two pale ruts and grass in the middle. On the other side, a narrower lane sloped down towards the fields. Martino recognised it before he could see where it ended: there was the bend it made to follow the edge of a field, then it straightened out again all the way to the canal.

The village lay beyond the still water, among the poplars. He hadn't seen it during the crossing, hidden by the bank and the trees. Now he could follow the rooftops, one after another, from the lowest one near the fields to the church. Some had lighter tiles; on others, hollows could be made out which, from that distance, might have been shadows. He looked for the bell tower and for a moment he looked too high.

It ended lower down.

He lowered his eyes to the remaining top, flat and dark against the sky. He tried to reconstruct the point with its roof, the shape that had allowed him, as a child, to find his way back from the fields. He managed it for only an instant. The cut edge of the wall remained there, and each time it made him start counting the houses again.

He started from the church. The first, the second; at the third, he stopped.

The roof of his house was lower than the one next door. From where he stood he couldn't see the courtyard, but he could see the chimney. A thin thread of smoke came out of it, rising straight for a little while before the wind bent it. At times it disappeared against a pale wall, became visible again above the roof tiles and came apart.

Martino let his arms fall. Throughout the journey he had had something to hold on to: a strap, a door, the edge of a bench. Now his hands rested open against his trousers as he watched that little thread of smoke.

Someone had lit the fire. They had taken the wood, stirred the ashes, blown where they needed to. His mother might be nearby, bent over, her apron pulled to one side. He didn't see her standing there waiting for him, but occupied with a task that had to be finished. He tried to call to her without a sound. His mouth didn't move.

He shifted his gaze to the fields. His father might still be outside. From that distance, people couldn't be made out, but Martino searched all the same, pausing over the darker patches of earth. His father's hat came to mind, the way he took it off when he went in, holding it by the brim with two fingers. Would he still have the same hat? The question seemed foolish to him; he looked back at the chimney.

The smoke continued to come out. No one knew that he was watching it. His mother might turn towards the window just then and see nothing, because the embankment was far away and he stood still among the grass. He took half a step forward, then stopped before the slope began.

The old man's words came back to him without his voice: his father would be there. Martino moved his jaw, as if to rid himself of a taste. He looked again at the houses on either side of his own. They too had an entrance, a hidden courtyard, someone inside. He didn't know where to begin thinking about the people. But he could recognise the rooftops and follow the canal water as far as it disappeared among the trees.

The light had lowered. It struck the walls from one side and left the other in shadow. There were

still poppies in the grass near the path, but Martino didn't bend down to look at them. He followed the road with his eyes as far as the bend, then from the bend to the canal. He travelled along it that way once, without moving.

A distant bell began to ring. He didn't count. He simply waited for the chimes to stop, while a gust of wind chilled his feet inside his shoes.

He pulled up the left strap. He took hold of the right one near his shoulder and gripped it tightly. Before moving, he looked back at the chimney: the wind had changed direction and now the smoke stretched out over the neighbouring roof.

Martino put his foot at the beginning of the path. He tested the earth with his heel, shifted his weight forward and began to descend towards home.

The House by the Canal

The descent tugged at his knees. Martino kept his body leaning slightly back, searching with the soles of his shoes for places where the grass left the earth bare. When he reached level ground, he loosened his grip on the strap. His fingers stayed curled, and he had to straighten them against his trousers.

The road followed the canal. Water had collected in the cart ruts, and he walked along the hard strip at the edge, brushing the wet stalks aside with his legs. With each step, his sock tightened beneath his foot. He tried lifting his toes inside his shoe, then stopped. From where he was, he could no longer see the chimney: the poplars cut off his view, and beyond the trunks only pieces of wall appeared.

He reached the little brick bridge. It had no parapets. As a child he used to run across it along the edge; now he placed his feet in the middle and stopped to look at the water below. It was almost still. A blade of grass caught between two bricks trembled without managing to break free. Martino followed the canal with his eyes as far as it passed behind the houses, then raised his gaze to his own.

The kitchen window was dark. He still could not see the door.

He lingered on the little bridge longer than necessary. No one was coming up behind him, and no one was asking him to clear the way. He shifted the rucksack to his other shoulder and started walking again.

When he rounded the corner of the wall, he saw the cart. Its shafts were raised, and one wheel was sunk into the courtyard earth. Under the portico, the scythe hung beside the pitchfork; the hoe leaned with its blade pointing down, and its handle bore a long, smooth patch. He recognised it by that patch. He reached out a hand slightly, without touching it. Higher up, a straw hat hung from a beam. Its brim was bent against the wood, and he could not see inside it.

He went around the wheel so the rucksack would not strike the hub. The courtyard seemed narrow to him. He did not remember ever having to watch out for all those things on his way from the road to the door.

Beside the doorway stood a bucket, and a little piece of leaf floated on its water. The door was ajar. From the opening came the sound of a ladle, two quick taps and then a long pause. Martino waited for them to repeat. The second tap came more softly than the first.

He took a strap off his shoulder. Put it back on. He could have pushed the door with his hand, as he had done every day before leaving; instead, his eyes sought the knocker, which he had never used. His sole stuck to the ground when he lifted his foot, making a small smack.

The ladle fell silent.

Martino watched the crack. The door moved inward, revealing first a hand, then his mother's apron. She stayed for a moment behind the doorframe. Her fingers were still gathered in the fabric, as if she had dried her hands without finishing.

She said nothing. She lifted her chin to look him in the face.

He slipped the rucksack off and lowered it to the ground, but at the last moment the strap slipped from his grasp. The bottom struck the courtyard and folded to one side. Martino lowered his eyes to the bundle; when he raised them again, his mother had brought a hand to her mouth.

“Mother.”

She stepped down. She stopped so close that he could feel the warmth of the kitchen held in her clothes. She took his arms just above the elbows. She squeezed one, then the other. Her fingers met the bone at once beneath his sleeve.

Martino let his hands hang at his sides. He looked at the parting in her hair, the white spot from which it grew, thinner than before. His mother gave one of his arms a slight shake, not to push him away.

“It’s you.”

“Yes, Mother.”

She did not take her hands away. She moved her thumb over the seam of his jacket and held it there, still. Martino heard his own breath make an inappropriate sound and pressed his lips together.

“We didn’t know anything anymore,” she said.

He nodded. He had no answer that could belong in that courtyard, between the cart wheel and the bucket. Even saying where he had come from seemed to mean beginning too far back.

His mother let go of one arm to take his chin. She turned his face towards the light, looked at the scar above his eyebrow and passed over it without touching it. Then she placed both hands on his

cheeks. They were rough hands; their warmth lingered on his skin even after she lowered them.

Martino rested his own hands on her shoulders. Beneath her apron he felt thin fabric and, underneath, the hardness of her bones. He had to bend to stay close to her. She touched his collar again, straightening it where it had caught under the strap. A bubbling sound came from the kitchen.

His mother turned her head towards the doorway. She quickly ran her wrist under one eye, then pointed at the rucksack.

“Don’t leave it in the dirt.”

Martino bent to pick it up. The strap slipped once, and his mother made a gesture to help him; he had already caught it. He waited for her to go back up the step and followed her.

He had to duck slightly as he passed beneath the lintel. His mother’s apron brushed the doorframe. Once inside, he stayed by the door until his eyes could make out the table in the dark.

His mother pointed to the corner beside the stairs. Martino set the rucksack upright there, with its back against the wall, then went back into the room with his hands hanging free at his sides. He still did not know what to do with them. The woman was already at the fire, lifting the pot lid with the edge of her apron.

The smell of beans came with the steam. There was onion, and beneath the onion, the smell of wood burning slowly. Martino swallowed. Until then, he had felt mostly his feet and his shoulder; now his stomach tightened and his mouth filled with saliva.

“Sit down,” his mother said.

He looked at the window. The remaining light drew a rectangle on the floor that did not reach the table.

“Father?”

“He’s still out.”

His mother dipped the ladle. He did not move.

“There’s time before he comes. This is ready.”

Martino pulled his chair back. Its legs scraped the stone just as they had long ago, with the left one catching. He lifted it slightly to set it straight and sat down between the wall and his mother’s

place. He had made the movement without choosing; only when his elbow was beside the plaster did he realise where he had sat.

The woman brought him a full bowl. She held it by the edges, her fingers covered by the cloth, and set it down in front of him, shifting it slightly so it would not wobble on the table. She went back to the cupboard to get the bread.

Martino looked at the blackened hook above the fire, the chain with its two thickest links, the shelf where the kitchen things stood. The cupboard lid was still raised slightly on one side. Above it, the Virgin's blue veil was easier to make out than her face. A small picture was tucked into the frame that he did not remember: he could see only one pale corner and a raised hand. He followed the edge of the frame with his eyes, then looked back at his bowl.

His mother set the bread on his right and placed the spoon beside it.

"It's hot."

Martino brought his hands close to the earthenware. He waited until she had turned away again before tasting it. The first spoonful burned his tongue; he swallowed it anyway. He let the second cool, his hand suspended. A drop fell on the rim, and he caught it before it ran down.

His mother went to the window. She straightened the cloth folded on the sill and stood looking outside for a few moments. Beside her wrist, the marks recording their growth appeared on the wall.

The highest lines were Martino's. He recognised his last one by the slant of the stroke, made when he could not keep his head still against the wall. There were numbers beside them, faded where a hand had rubbed the plaster. Lower down he saw other, shorter marks that he did not remember. He narrowed his eyes to make out the dates, but his mother moved, and the wall fell back into shadow.

He lowered his spoon into the soup.

To his left, on the other side of the table, the chair beside his father's place was empty. Nothing had been set on it. His mother's chair had the sewing basket beside it, his father's was pushed a little farther back; Nando's chair stood straight, its seat tucked beneath the table. Martino could see only the backrest and the two rear legs.

He moved the bread to make room for his hand. He could not set it where he wanted, so he put it back in the same place.

His mother made a noise with the lid. She adjusted it twice, trying to fit it into place. Then she asked if there was enough soup.

Martino nodded before he had swallowed.

She asked nothing else. She took a bowl from the shelf, wiped it with a cloth and left it beside the fire. The gestures were the same as always, but more time passed between them. Martino saw her stop with the cloth in her hand and look towards him; when he raised his face, she bent over the wood.

He could have asked her about his brother without even forming a whole sentence. All he had to do was gesture towards that chair. Instead, he looked at the bottom of his bowl, where the spoon had opened a strip among the beans. He covered it with broth.

The sound of wheels passed outside. Martino turned towards the door; the noise receded along the canal. His mother continued folding the cloth, one edge over another, until only a small square remained.

He finished slowly. He used the bread to scrape the dry part of the bowl and stopped before the last bite. His mother looked at the spoon resting there and signalled to him to finish.

Martino obeyed. Then he put his hands under the table and clasped them between his knees. In the window, the glass now reflected the fire; the courtyard beyond was no longer easy to make out. They waited like that, each in his place, until they heard a footstep stop against the outside wall.

Something struck the plaster, then slid a short way. Martino recognised the sound of a tool being leaned against the wall. His mother pushed a piece of wood under the pot and guided it with the poker until the flame caught it. She did not look at the door.

His father came in with one hand on the doorframe. He took off his hat before crossing the threshold completely; when he saw Martino, he stopped the foot he was bringing forward.

He stood up too quickly. The chair struck the wall.

“Father.”

The man stood with his hat at waist height. The brim bent beneath his thumb and straightened again when he loosened his grip. He looked first at his son’s face, then at the rest of him, down to his shoes. Martino kept his feet still on the floor. He could feel a sock bunched beneath the arch of his foot and resisted the urge to adjust it.

His father's hair was white at the temples. There was dry earth on his jacket, especially over the right shoulder; one edge of his shirt stuck out beneath his waistcoat. Martino looked at his hands. The joints of his fingers were thicker, and the skin between the knuckles seemed looser. A small dark crack ran across his thumb.

His father let go of the doorframe. He took two steps and set his hat on the table, beyond the tablecloth.

"You've come back."

"Yes."

The man pulled the chair at the head of the table towards him.

"Good."

Martino waited, still standing. He watched his father settle his knees beneath the tabletop and move the hat so it would not catch a drop of water left on the wood. Only then did he sit down too.

His mother brought a bowl and set it in front of her husband. She explained nothing to him. She went back to the fire to fill her own, then took Martino's.

"A little more," she said.

He did not answer. She poured him less than the first time and handed the bowl back. She put down the ladle, sat beside the fire and gathered her apron over her knees.

His father broke the bread with both hands. He left the larger piece beside his bowl and dipped the other in the broth. He held it there until it was soft, then scooped it up with his spoon. Martino followed the gesture to his mouth and lowered his eyes before his father could notice.

Above them, a fly kept striking the glass of the lamp. Each time it started again with a short buzz, disappeared into the shadow and returned to hit the same spot. His mother lifted her head slightly, then went on eating.

Martino searched for a way to sit that would let him see his father without turning around. Before he left, he would not have needed to look at him so much: hearing him move his spoon would have been enough to know whether he was tired or annoyed. Now every pause could mean something different. He waited for a question about the journey, the rucksack, why he had not written. His father scooped up a bean left against the rim and brought it to his mouth.

His mother moved the bread closer to her husband. He took some more without raising his head.

Nando's chair remained between them, a little apart from his father's. Martino avoided staring at it. In the end, he looked at the spot on the table in front of that place, where the wood had a paler grain. No one set anything down there, not even the bread plate.

His father put down his spoon.

"And the field?"

Martino raised his face. The man was looking towards the window, over his shoulder.

"Which field, Father?"

For a moment his father stayed like that. He ran a finger under his nose and returned to his bowl.

"Never mind. Nothing."

Martino opened his mouth, then drank a sip of water. The glass left a damp circle beneath his palm. He did not know if his father had really asked him a question or if he had carried on aloud with a conversation he was having by himself.

The meal went on. No one passed outside anymore. His father tilted the bowl and drank the last of the broth, holding it with two fingers. His mother finished after him, in a few small mouthfuls. Martino put down his spoon only when he saw that both of them had stopped.

The man stayed seated, his hands resting on either side of the empty bowl. He was no longer looking at his son. He was looking at the light on the backs of his fingers, or at the table; from where he sat, Martino could not tell.

Then his father stood up. His mother started to take the bowl, but he moved it towards the centre before making room for her. He picked up his hat and removed a straw with his fingernail.

At the doorway he stopped, half turned.

"Come with me tomorrow morning. There's hoeing to do in the field."

Martino nodded. His father had already turned his head, and he said yes too, louder than necessary. The man lowered the handle and went out. The courtyard air made the flame flicker; when the door closed, his mother got up to clear the table.

Martino picked up his glass and his father's. He set them side by side, then looked for somewhere

to take them. His mother came with the bowls already stacked and took the glasses from his hands.

“Leave it.”

He stood beside his chair. He watched her bend to pick up the leftover bread and wrap it in the cloth. The woman ran her palm over the table to gather the crumbs; she picked some up between thumb and forefinger and carried them away with the rest. She went back to push her husband’s chair under the table. The one beside it did not need to be moved.

Martino cleared his throat. His mother had her back to him, but for a moment she stopped with her hand above the cupboard.

He could say it now. His father was outside, and she had nothing else to do but put away the bread. Martino looked at the knot of her apron. It was pulled to one side, with one end longer than the other. He followed that end to where it disappeared into the fold of her skirt, and when he looked up again, his mother had already shut the cupboard.

“You’re tired,” she said.

“A little.”

“Wait here.”

She went into the other room. Martino heard a drawer open, then the sound of a box being moved across the wood. He looked at his hands. Dirt from the courtyard remained in the creases of his fingers, picked up when he lifted the rucksack. He rubbed his thumb against his palm without managing to remove it.

His mother returned with a folded cloth and a candle. Before lighting it, she put the cloth on the table, away from the damp glasses. The flame caught slowly; she shielded the wick with her hand and waited for it to stand straight.

“Upstairs is just as it was.”

She handed him the cloth. Martino took it by one corner.

“I changed the bed not long ago,” she added. “I do that even when no one’s there.”

He touched the fold of the fabric with his thumb. He would have liked to say she did not need to explain why she had put the sheets on, but his mother was already looking towards the stairs.

“And you?” he asked.

“Your father sleeps down here. Near the fire.”

“Since when?”

She brought the candle closer so he could take it.

“He says it doesn’t get warm upstairs.”

Martino held the candlestick in his right hand and the cloth in his left. His mother bent to pick up the rucksack in the corner; he stopped her with a gesture and lifted it, slipping just one strap over his shoulder. To manage all that, he had had to give the candle back to her. When she handed it to him again, they looked at each other from close up.

The woman set the cloth on top of his rucksack so it would not fall. Then she stepped away from the first stair.

Martino climbed close to the wall. The shadows of the railing moved ahead of his feet. Halfway up the stairs, he heard his mother open the pot again and scrape its bottom softly; at the landing he could no longer hear her.

Beside the door to the room there was another one. It was low, shut with boards that were still pale. Martino held the light over it. The wood showed the marks of the plane, and a splinter had lifted along the edge. He moved his hand towards it, but the rucksack strap slipped and he had to catch it again. He stood for a moment in front of that door without touching it, then went into his own room.

The candle lit the bed beside the wall. His mother had folded the sheet over the blanket and tucked the corners in neatly; a sharp crease remained in the middle of the pillow. On the other side, the frame of the second bed was bare. The straw mattress, rolled up, stood against the wall beneath a cloth that did not reach the floor.

Martino set the rucksack on the floor and the candle on the straw chair. He moved it at once to a steadier edge, making sure the wax would not fall between the weave. The nail above the chair was empty. All around it, the plaster was a less dark colour, sheltered by something that was no longer there.

He sat on the remade bed. The ropes gave under his weight with a brief creak. He waited, then pressed his heel against his other shoe to take it off. It would not come away. He had to bend down, loosen the stiff lace and pull gently, taking care of the skin on his heel. The sock peeled

away from the sole with a damp sound.

He put his shoes on either side of the chair, their openings facing into the room. He spread his socks over the edge, well away from the candle. When he placed his bare feet on the floor, the cold ran up to his knees.

There was water in the basin. He dipped his hands in and rubbed them together; his knuckles stung. He wet his face without lifting the basin, letting the drops fall between his knees. His mother's cloth was rough and clean. He pressed it to his eyes longer than to the rest of his face.

Then he took off his jacket and folded it over the rucksack. Straightening up, he saw the other bed again. The cloth followed the curve of the straw mattress and fell straight lower down. There was no room for a body among those folds. Martino stood with one hand on his shirt collar, without unbuttoning it, until the sound of the last dishes being put away came from the kitchen.

He went to the window before lying down. The glass reflected the candle and his face, cut in half by the frame. To see outside he had to move to one side and shield his eyes with his hand. Across the canal a low light was burning. The house containing it was invisible, only the rectangle of light, interrupted now and then by something passing inside.

Martino rested two fingers on the windowsill. There was a crack in the wood that he remembered; he traced it with his nail to where it disappeared beneath the frame. Here, when he was a boy, he used to keep his hand while he listened to Nando speak softly, so they would not be heard downstairs. Now he could have used his own voice without waking anyone in the other bed.

He left the sill and went back to the chair. The candle had sunk to one side and made a little pool of wax. Martino looked at the black wick, bent down and blew it out. For a moment the shape of the flame remained before his eyes; then that too disappeared.

He found the bed with one hand. He lifted the blanket and slipped underneath, still wearing his shirt. The cold sheet clung to his legs. He drew his knees towards his chest and waited for his body's warmth to spread. The pillow smelled of soap; when he turned his face, the smell grew stronger, and then he went back to lying on his back.

Downstairs, his mother was still moving something. He heard a chair dragged, a metallic clink and finally the sound of water being poured. He waited for her steps on the stairs. They did not come right away. Instead there was a pause so long that Martino propped himself up on one elbow, thinking he had missed a sound.

His father's footsteps came from the courtyard.

He recognised them by the way they stopped before the step. Then the door scraped against the ground, something was set beside the wall and the door closed again. His father did not speak. Or perhaps he spoke so softly that nothing reached the upper floor. Martino stayed propped on his elbow until his shoulder hurt; he let himself fall back and stretched his arm along his side.

The bed opposite did not creak. There was no other breath in the room to wait for, no body turning over after him. Martino opened his eyes in the dark. He knew the distance between the two beds; he would only have to get down on one side and take a few steps. He did not.

He thought his brother's name without moving his lips.

Nando.

The word made no sound. Downstairs, the house continued to settle. A shutter barely tapped its catch and stayed still.

Martino tried to construct the question he should have asked at the table. In his mind, it always began with something simple, like asking whether someone had already come by or would be back for supper. But he did not know which tense to use. If he had asked where Nando was, his mother would have had to answer with a place. If he had asked what had happened to him, he would have admitted that he was already expecting a different kind of story. He stopped before choosing.

As he turned over, his foot brushed a part of the sheet that was still cold. He pulled it back. His body wanted to sleep, but he kept listening to the sounds, separating those from outside from those rising through the floor.

His father's hands came back to him, open on either side of the bowl. They had not touched him. But he had not gone towards his father either. He had stayed on his own side of the table, waiting, and now he could not remember whether, coming in, his father had moved an arm towards him before taking the chair. He searched his memory of the evening for that movement; the more he searched, the less certain he was that he had seen it.

His mother had squeezed his arms. Her fingers had met bone, and because of that Martino had lowered his eyes. He would have liked to arrive with a different face, in a jacket that fitted him, with something to set on the cupboard besides his rucksack. He had brought only himself. His mother had fed him and shown him the bed that was already made.

The other one had not been made up.

Martino pulled the sheet up to his mouth. For a moment he felt the urge to go downstairs, find his mother before she lay down and tell her that he knew nothing. Nothing, except for those few words he had heard by the river. But he would have had to pass his father, or call him, and then it would not be enough to stand beside the fire. They would have had to sit down again.

He let the sheet slide beneath his chin.

A cough came from downstairs. After it, a piece of wood shifted in the hearth, and the crackling grew louder for a few seconds. Martino looked towards the place where he knew the door was. It was still indistinguishable from the wall.

The wind reached the poplars by the canal. He heard one first, closer to the window, then the others; the rustling died down and began again. Between one gust and the next he thought he could hear the water, but could not tell whether it was the canal or a more distant sound.

He lay on his back until his legs grew warm. Then he turned towards Nando's bed and put one hand beneath his cheek. A faint smell of damp leather came from the chair. He kept his eyes open, listening to the rustling resume outside the window.

Things Left Unsaid

When he opened his eyes, the window was a rectangle just a little less dark than the wall. Martino lifted his head before recognizing the room. His arm was sore beneath the pillow, and his feet were warm. From downstairs came the sound of a vessel being set down on the stone.

He sat up. The sheet on Nando's straw mattress was already distinguishable in the corner; lower down he could see nothing. He felt for his socks on the chair and squeezed them between his hands. The toes were still damp. He put them on anyway, then took his shoes: as the leather dried, it had stiffened, and he had to pull the tongue to get his heel in. He stayed bent over for a long time, his fingers on the laces.

On the stairs he placed one foot at a time close to the wall. His mother had lit the fire and was blowing beneath the pot. At her shadow on the floor Martino stopped; she turned, still holding a small branch in her hand.

"Did you sleep?"

"A little."

His mother put the branch in the fire. She pointed to the lukewarm water and went back to get a bowl. Martino washed by the door, holding his sleeves up with his elbows. The cloth smelled of clean ash. By the time he sat down, the bread had already been cut.

His father's place was empty.

"He's in the field," his mother said, before he could ask.

Martino nodded and broke a slice into the bowl. The warm milk softened the crumb first, then the crust. He ate, gathering with his spoon even the little pieces left along the rim. His mother moved the pot to the higher hook, wiped one hand on her apron, and watched him until he looked up.

"There's more."

"That's enough."

She left the bread on the table.

The hoe was behind the door. Martino took it and tested its weight, with the iron still resting on the ground. On the handle was a lighter patch where the wood had been worn by hands. His

mother looked at his shoes.

“The grass is wet.”

“I know.”

He went out before she could add anything. There was a puddle in the middle of the courtyard and a strip of pale earth beneath the porch. He followed that strip to the road. The shafts of the cart were still raised; as he passed, he kept the hoe handle low so it wouldn’t strike them.

His father was in the field beyond the canal. Martino saw his hat first, disappearing and reappearing above his bent back. He crossed the passage, went down along the edge, and stopped at the beginning of the row. Bertoni raised the iron with a clod attached, shook it, and drove it in again. Only after the third blow did he look at his son.

“Over there.”

Martino went where he had pointed. The earth gave way in dark clumps; beneath the drier crust it was shiny and clung to the iron. He struck twice too close together and got nothing but a hole. He stepped back half a pace, let the hoe fall farther from the toes of his shoes, and pulled it towards himself. The clod turned over whole.

His father moved forward slowly, without turning around. Every so often he bent to pick up a stone and tossed it to the edge. Martino tried to keep pace with him, but the handle slipped in his hands. He had to take off his jacket. He folded it on the dry edge of the field and started again.

After a while he no longer felt cold. Sweat ran between his shoulder blades, while his toes were still damp inside his socks. To his right, his father struck a root, crouched, and freed it with both hands. Martino stopped to help him.

“It’s coming,” Bertoni said.

He pulled again and the root came out with a small snap. His father laid it with the stones, straightened up, holding a hand to his belt, and looked at the work they had done. Martino saw the white hair beneath the brim of his hat. Up close, it was thicker than it had seemed the night before.

The bottle stood in the shade of a bush. Bertoni picked it up, pulled out the stopper with his teeth, and drank. Then he held it out to his son by the neck. Martino had to step closer to take it.

The water tasted of iron. He swallowed a little and handed the bottle back. His dark thumbprint

remained on the glass.

“This earth holds up well,” his father said.

Martino looked at the open clod at his feet.

“It’s still cold underneath.”

“It needs time.”

Bertoni put the stopper back and returned to the row. Martino stood for a moment with his arms at his sides. He had had a question in his mouth, but no precise words for it: how long, who had known, whether anyone had written. Seeing his father bend was enough to make him take hold of the hoe again.

The sun reached the canal. The poplars’ shadows shortened over the turned earth, and with each row Martino found the right place to let the iron fall more easily. His right palm began to burn. He shifted his grip a little without looking at it. When a clod would not break apart, his father struck it from the side; Martino did the same. For a while the irons struck alternately, then together, then apart again.

They returned at noon with their hoes on their shoulders. His father walked ahead, taking care not to let the iron scrape against the trunks along the path. Martino watched his soles, caked with the same earth he carried beneath his own. Once he thought his father slowed down to wait for him. He caught up, but the passage narrowed and he had to let him go ahead.

At the table Bertoni talked about the corn. He said they had to wait, that the earth still lost the day’s warmth at night. His mother passed him the bread and asked if they had finished the side by the canal. Martino said no. He could have said he was out of practice, that his father had worked for two, but he took another spoonful instead.

Between one sentence and the next, the bottoms of the plates could be heard. No bowl had been set beside his father’s. Martino looked at that stretch of table while Bertoni spoke of the seed they had left and the seed they had to get. When his father fell silent, his mother’s eyes rested for a moment on her son.

Martino gathered up the leftover bread. He brushed away the smallest crumbs and set it beside his plate.

After eating, his father went out to the low wall. Martino saw him through the window, his hat on his knees, his hands still on its brim. His mother was washing the bowls. He wiped his sore palm

on his trousers and stayed by the glass until his father put his hat back on.

In the afternoon he took the road towards the houses. Before going out, he stopped beneath the porch and knocked his soles against a stone; the dry earth came off in pieces, but the dirt lodged in the grooves did not. His mother asked him where he was going.

“I’m going for a walk.”

She nodded, without asking him to bring anything.

The first shutters were half open. Behind a window someone moved a chair, and Martino heard its legs scrape across the floor. He walked close to the walls, on the shady side. On one doorway the new limewash ended in an uneven edge; lower down, around the hinge, the wood was still black.

The old woman sat on the threshold with a cat. She followed him with her eyes, then leaned forward so abruptly that the animal jumped into the road.

“Wait. Are you Martino?”

He stopped and took two steps back.

“Yes.”

The woman got up, leaning on the doorframe. She took one of his hands between hers and turned it over to look at his face. Martino recognized the small dark spot on her temple, but couldn’t remember her name.

“Well, you’re alive.”

“I arrived yesterday.”

“Your mother. Poor woman.”

She did not finish. She squeezed his fingers again and began telling him about a daughter who had married far away, about a grandson growing up without seeing her. Martino listened. Every so often the old woman paused to look at him, as if she had to check that he was still there. The cat passed behind her feet and went inside.

“My brother used to come here too,” Martino said when she spoke of the boys who ran along the road. “Nando always stopped by.”

The old woman ran her tongue over her lips.

“They have the procession in May. If it doesn’t rain.”

She looked at the sky above the roof across the road and added that the year before, they hadn’t been able to hold it properly. Martino waited for her to return to the sentence she had left unfinished. She bent down to dust the chair with her palm.

“Give my regards to your mother.”

He said he would, and started walking again.

Two men came towards him in front of the shop. One wore a flat cap and had his sleeves rolled above his elbows; the other held a small sack against his chest. They asked him when he had arrived and from where. Martino told them about the train to Bolzano, the trucks. The older man shook his head.

“Your mother said you’d come back. She always said so.”

The one in the flat cap looked at Martino’s shoes, then raised his eyes again.

“You’ll get your strength back now. The air’s good here.”

Martino leaned lightly against the wall. From the shop came the smell of flour and the sound of paper being folded.

“Have you heard anything about Nando?”

The older man lowered the sack. The other turned towards the door, though no voice had come from inside.

“Well,” the old man said.

Martino waited.

The man in the flat cap said it was getting late. He adjusted a sleeve, held out his hand, and let go too soon. The older man nodded goodbye and followed him. For several steps, they did not speak even to each other.

Martino stayed against the wall. He wanted to call them back, repeat the question without letting it end in farewells. He pulled away from the plaster and looked into the shop: a woman was bent over a sack and the shopkeeper was holding the scale’s pan up high. He did not go in.

At the fountain, water fell from the iron spout and made a little foam in the pool. Martino ran his fingers through it. The cold reached his reddened palm at once. On the surface he saw his own forehead, broken up by the falling water; he straightened before the image came together again.

He passed the priest's house and took the path along the canal. Between the hedges the air smelled of new leaves and wet earth. On the little bridge he placed his foot near the edge, where the boards gave less. The wood sank all the same and rose again when he shifted his weight. As a child, he used to do it on purpose, twice, to hear it creak.

The mulberry tree took up more space. A branch reached over the wall and cast a shadow on the stone where they used to sit. Martino walked around it, looking for the place where they had started climbing. Now the first fork was almost level with his chest. He put his hand on the bark and found the notches: short cuts, their edges widened by the growing wood. He ran his thumb over the lowest one. He couldn't remember who had made it.

Once they had argued because Nando had stood on tiptoe. He was sure of that: his brother's voice denying it, the knife held closed in his hand, himself wanting to start over. The rest would not come back to him, neither the year nor who had been right. He kept his thumb in the notch until the roughness hurt.

Beyond the wall he could see the cultivated earth. He left the tree and went around the old stable. The door would not close; he had to shoulder it aside because its bottom scraped the ground. It was cool inside. A strip of light came through a hole in the roof, and in the light he could see the dust his steps had stirred up.

The manger still had smooth patches along its edge where the animals had rubbed against it. At the far end lay some dry, grey hay. Harnesses and straps hung from a beam: one strap reached lower than the others and ended in a rusty buckle. Martino did not touch it. He looked at the floor, at the hardened marks in the earth, then at the pale patch beneath the tear in the roof. No animal stirred at his smell.

He went out, leaving the door as he had found it. On the way back he heard a woman call a child, and the child answer from behind a wall. The old woman was no longer on the road; the chair had been taken inside.

His father was sitting on the low wall. Martino sat a short distance away, in the spot still warmed by the sun. Bertoni moved one foot to make room for him without looking at him.

"The mulberry tree has grown big," Martino said.

His father kept his eyes on the canal.

“Yes.”

From the porch his mother shook out a cloth. The sound carried clearly across the courtyard.

“I didn’t remember it reached over the wall.”

Bertoni picked a thread off his sleeve.

“It’s grown,” he said.

Martino looked at his father’s hands. Soil from the morning was still under his nails. He placed his own hands between his knees and stayed seated.

After dinner, his father picked up his hat and stood by the door.

“Come to the inn with me.”

Martino still had his glass in his hand. He set it down, looked at his mother, who was gathering the plates, and stood up. She drew his plate towards her as well without saying anything. At the entrance Bertoni waited for his son to put on his jacket, then opened the door and let him pass.

A strip of sky could still be seen between the roofs. His father walked on the side by the drainage ditch, watching for the wetter patches; Martino stayed beside him. He couldn’t remember ever going to the inn with him at that hour. As a boy he went in to call him and stopped by the door, his hand still on the handle. Now his father had told him to come along, and there was no one to call home.

The sign above the entrance hung at an angle. Martino stepped aside to let a man come out, buttoning his waistcoat. The man greeted Bertoni and started to walk on, then turned towards his son; but his father had already pushed the door open.

It was warm inside. A bare bulb lit the middle of the room; at the edges the beams blurred into the ceiling. Martino smelled wine, smoke trapped in clothes, and a sharper smell coming from behind the counter. A bench scraped across the floor. The voices died down for a moment, then someone picked up a sentence where he had left off.

The innkeeper wiped his fingers on a cloth and looked at Martino.

“He’s mine,” Bertoni said. “He came back yesterday.”

The man put down the cloth and leaned over the counter. His hand was damp and one finger had a small bandage on it.

“I’m glad. Truly.”

He took two glasses. Martino opened his mouth, then closed it when his father moved the bottle towards himself to pour. He had no money in his pocket. He kept his hands outside his jacket until Bertoni nodded towards the back.

They sat down against the wall. His father took the seat at the end of the bench, the one from which he could see the door. Martino came in from the other side and found himself next to the cold wall. On the table were a knife groove and two pale rings left by glasses. He set his own glass outside the rings.

The bench was too close to the table. To get settled, he had to raise one knee and pull his foot back, taking care not to knock his father’s leg. Bertoni noticed and gave him room. Martino tucked his jacket beneath his thighs, then pulled it out again: he didn’t want to crease it. His father had set his hat beside the bottle, its opening facing up. From where he sat, Martino could see the worn lining and the dark mark around the band where it met the forehead. He moved his glass so a drop of wine wouldn’t reach the felt. His father followed the movement and shifted the hat a couple of inches away.

A large man at a nearby table stopped talking to get a better look at him.

“But it’s Martino. So you’re alive.”

This time they said it laughing. Martino raised his glass and gave a faint smile; the man answered in kind, then went back to the story he had been telling about the horse. The buyer had tried it on the good road, he said, but at the first ditch the beast had stopped dead and there had been no way to make it move. Another man maintained that the horse had understood before its owner who it had ended up with.

They laughed. One corner of his father’s mouth moved slightly. Martino drank and felt the wine warm his stomach. He shifted to get more comfortable, stretching his legs without touching Bertoni’s. For a few minutes he listened only to the stories.

He recognized voices before faces. An old man by the counter kept turning a glass that was almost full. Two men were talking about the price of an animal; one counted on his fingers, the other stopped his hand each time to correct him. Between them was a young man Martino had never seen. He laughed louder than the others, then stopped abruptly, as if waiting for someone to agree

with him.

“In forty-four, when...”

The sentence came from the table behind the large man’s. Martino moved his eyes, not his head. A man with his collar open had raised his hand to accompany the story. The man beside him laid two fingers on his forearm. He did not squeeze; he left them there, speaking so softly that Martino could not make out the words.

The man with his collar open looked towards them. His hand dropped to the table.

“Anyway, it was the same cart,” he said, in a different voice. “They changed the wheel afterwards.”

The man beside him lifted his fingers from his arm and took a drink. The large man cut in, saying that wheel had been rotten even before the war. The voices covered one another again.

Martino looked at his father. Bertoni had one fingernail resting on the rim of his glass and moved it along a short stretch, always in the same place. He had not raised his head. Martino waited for him to look towards the table too; his father picked up his glass and drank.

The sentence about forty-four did not return. The man who had started it took out his tobacco and spread it on the paper, head bowed. The man beside him said something, and he nodded. When he raised his eyes, he fixed them on the door, beyond Martino.

“Do they all do that?” Martino asked.

His father did not answer right away. He ran a finger beneath his nose and shifted slightly away from the table.

“They’ve all been caught up in this.”

Martino remained turned towards him.

“Each in his own way,” Bertoni added.

A glass fell on the other side of the room. It did not break; it rolled onto its side and the innkeeper picked it up, while someone laughed at his neighbour’s broad elbow. His father waited for the noise to die down.

“It’s not that they don’t want to,” he said. “They can’t.”

Martino lowered his eyes to the groove in the wood. He ran his fingertip over it, from the widest

point to where the blade had come out. He could have asked what stopped them from saying a name. He kept his finger still on the edge of the table.

Bertoni pushed the bottle towards him. Martino covered his glass with his hand, and his father put the bottle back.

They stayed a little longer. No one came to sit with them, but more than one person stopped to greet Martino on the way out. He shook their hands and said good evening. When his father stood up, he followed without waiting to be asked. At the door the cold air dried his forehead; behind him, the innkeeper moved the empty bottle and called another customer.

Two days later his mother gave him an empty sack to go to the mill and fetch bran. Martino folded it under his arm. It was early afternoon; the sun on the step was already warm enough for him to take off his jacket, but he picked it up again before going out and draped it over his shoulders.

Since the evening at the inn, he had not asked anything more. At the table his father had gone on talking about work, and he had answered when he had to. Emilio's name had reached him amid other talk: a man outside the shop, convinced Martino already knew, had mentioned him and the mountains; then he had shifted his weight from one foot to the other and stopped. Martino had gathered only this: Emilio had been with Nando. Emilio had come back.

The sack bumped against his hip. He opened it to straighten a corner that had folded in, then folded it more neatly and held it in his left hand. From the canal road, he joined the white road to the mill by passing a ditch. The water was low and beneath a tuft of grass he could see the bottom. He stopped to push a stone out of his shoe with his heel; it wouldn't come out, and he had to bend down and untie the lace.

Sitting on the edge of the road, he looked at the sole. The split opened when he bent it. He picked out the little stone with a fingernail, put his foot back in, and tied the lace tighter. When he stood up, he felt the muscles in his back pull, still sore from the field. He leaned on his knee for a moment, then picked up the sack again.

The road was almost empty. A man was coming towards him from the direction of the mill, hat in hand and a dark jacket over his shoulders. Martino looked at him without slowing down. The man held his left arm close to his body and swung his hat with his right, each step carrying it a little farther forward than his knee. His head was bowed.

He recognized him when he was close enough to see his mouth.

Emilio used to laugh with his mouth wide open. On feast nights it stayed slightly open even while he played the accordion, as if he were about to say something to the person dancing in front of him. Martino had often watched him: the bellows widening, his foot keeping time, his fingers on the buttons. He was older than they were, and the girls called to him from one side of the courtyard to the other. All it took was a nod from Nando for him to start another tune.

Now his mouth was a tight line between two creases. His cheeks had hollowed beneath his cheekbones; his dark beard made the pallor near his ears stand out. His jacket was slipping off one shoulder, and he pulled it up without stopping.

Martino shifted the sack to his other hand. He didn't want to falter when Emilio came up to him. All he had to do was say his brother's name and wait; he had done the same thing outside the shop, but this man had not merely heard about it from someone else.

Emilio raised his head. The hat stopped swinging.

For a moment they both kept going, one towards the other. Then Emilio shortened his stride. He looked Martino in the face, followed his figure down to his shoes, and returned to his eyes. He did not smile, but he stopped. Martino stopped too, leaving more space between them than they needed to shake hands.

"Martino."

He nodded.

"You came back."

"Friday."

Emilio gripped the brim of his hat with both hands. Martino saw his knuckles protruding beneath the skin. One nail was black; the others had dried dirt on them. They were workmen's hands, like his father's, but they never stayed in one place. They moved along the brim, bent it, let it return to its shape.

"I heard," Emilio said.

An insect flew in front of Martino's face. He flicked it away with a movement of his chin. The sun shone on the road behind Emilio, and Martino had to squint to look at him.

"You live here now?"

“On the farm.”

Emilio made a brief gesture towards the canal. His jacket slipped again; this time he did not adjust it. Martino looked at the cloth resting in the bend of his elbow, then at his face. He couldn’t let the conversation end with that gesture. He shifted the sack beneath his arm so he would have a free hand.

“I wanted to ask you...”

Emilio turned his head towards the field. It was a quick movement, before Martino could manage to go on.

“We needed this sun,” he said. “For the wheat.”

The words came out too quickly. Emilio was looking at the green shoots beyond the ditch, but his feet were already turned towards the road. Martino kept his hand open by his side. From the direction of the mill came a brief creak, then it stopped.

“Yes,” he said, without looking at the field.

Emilio tucked his hat under his arm again and held out his right hand.

“I have to go. They’re waiting for me.”

Martino took his hand. It was cool, though the day was warm, and the fingers closed around his only slightly. To hold him back, all Martino had to do was not loosen his grip. He felt the edge of a callus against his palm, reddened from the hoe handle. He searched Emilio’s eyes, but the other man looked at their clasped hands, then at the empty stretch of road beside him.

He let go.

Emilio passed him with a brief nod. His jacket brushed the sack, making it slip. Martino caught it before it fell and turned around. He still wanted to call him; his lips had already moved, but no sound came from his throat.

Emilio was walking towards the village. At first he kept the same short stride, his body bent slightly forward. Then he lengthened his step. He put his hat on and pulled his jacket up with both hands, without slowing down. He did not turn around even where the road bent beside the ditch.

Martino stayed still. The hand that had held Emilio’s was still open; he closed it and felt the sting

in his palm. He looked at the clods beyond the wheat, the low line of poplars. The empty sack hung from his other hand, one corner brushing the dust.

After a while he lifted it. He struck its bottom against his leg once. Emilio's footsteps could no longer be heard on the road.

The Mountain

It took him three days. Each time he reached the fork by the canal, Martino looked down the road beyond the poplars, then took the one home. He did not have to ask where Emilio lived. The farm was the first one after the wooden bridge; he had been there as a boy, and he remembered the spot where you had to step around an exposed root. He only had to keep walking.

On the third day, after lunch, he went to get a sack. He shook it out in the yard, holding it away from his shoes. A fine dust came out and hung in the air for a moment.

“I’m looking for a little fertilizer,” he said to his mother. “They told me at Baldi’s.”

She had cleared the bowls and was holding them nested together against her apron. She looked at the sack, then brushed a loose thread from his elbow. She did not ask when he would be back.

Along the canal, the sun beat down on the dry earth of the road. At the edge, beneath the grass, the mud was still dark. Martino shifted the folded sack from one hand to the other. His right hand no longer burned with every movement, but the spot where the hoe handle had rubbed remained tender; if he pressed his thumb there, he could feel it.

A sharp blow came from the poplars. A little way ahead, a man was bending a branch and trimming it with a billhook. With every stroke, a pale chip of wood fell.

“Checco.”

The man let the branch go. It took him a moment to recognize Martino, then he pushed back his hat with his wrist, without opening the hand gripping the billhook.

“Bertoni’s younger son.”

“Yes.”

“I saw you go by the other day. From a distance, I wasn’t sure.”

Martino asked him about the vineyard. Checco said it was still too wet down by the river and some of the plants needed replacing. He also talked about his daughter in Ferrara, who wrote only rarely. His voice had not changed: a little nasal, with the last syllables drawn out. Martino remembered hearing him call from the bank when they were boys swimming.

“And your old man?” Checco asked.

“He’s in the field.”

“Eh. Where else would he be?”

He took up the branch again. Martino could have said goodbye and gone on his way. Instead, he pointed down the road with the sack.

“I’m going to see Emilio.”

The blade stayed raised. Beneath the cut bark, the branch was white and damp. Checco looked at it as if he were choosing where to strike.

“He’s over there,” he said at last.

“I know.”

“A hard worker. Takes good care of what’s his.”

Then he struck twice, leaving less time between the blows than before. Martino said goodbye. For a while, the sound of the water joined the noise of the billhook; then only the water remained.

He walked down the middle of the bridge. Between two boards he could see the canal, a dark strip with a thread of grass being carried by the current. The root was still there on the other side. He stepped over it without stopping.

At the farm he found the gate ajar. A broad patch of lighter tiles covered the roof of the house; beneath the wall, two hoes, a sickle, and an overturned wheelbarrow stood in a row. The yard had been swept right up to the foot of the wall. An old dog, stretched out where the shade began, opened its eyes when Martino pushed the gate, but did not raise its head.

Emilio was working behind the house. In front of him was a pile of branches, and to his right were the bundles already tied. He took them by the cord and laid them in a row, all with the thick ends facing the same way. Martino hung the sack on a gatepost and went over to him.

“Good morning.”

Emilio straightened up. He had a piece of twine between his forefinger and thumb; he wound it around his fingers before holding out his hand. This time the handshake was firm and warm.

“You came all this way.”

“It’s not far.”

Emilio looked behind him, toward the yard.

“Were you looking for someone?”

“You.”

They stood still for a moment. Through Emilio’s open shirt, Martino could see the dark skin on his chest, lighter in the crease of his neck. The man bent down and passed the cord beneath a bundle of branches.

Martino said that the old ferryman had told him about Nando during the crossing. Emilio pulled the two ends tight, bracing a knee against the wood.

“People in the village know.”

“I found out there.”

“You were away.”

The cord tightened around the branches with a little creak. Emilio finished the knot, checked that it held, and grabbed another handful of wood. Martino looked at his hands. The question he had prepared on the way now seemed too long.

“I’ll help you,” he said.

Emilio stopped with the branches under his arm.

“You didn’t come for that.”

“I can do it while I’m here.”

The other man pointed to the pile. He showed him which branches to take first and how to put the short ones in the middle so they would not slip out when the bundle was lifted. Martino squatted down. The earth pulled the fabric of his trousers tight over his knees. He gathered the first branches, knocked them together at the cut ends, and held them tight while Emilio passed him a piece of cord.

The first bundle spread apart in his hands. He had put too many thick branches on one side, and when he tried to pass the cord around them, the thinner ones slipped onto the ground. He picked them up without looking at Emilio. The other man carried on working, but after a while he pushed a forked branch toward him.

“Put this underneath. It’ll hold the others.”

Martino rearranged the bundle. He pressed down with his knee, crossed the ends of the cord, and pulled. A brief stab of pain shot through his right palm. He loosened his fingers and closed them again closer to the knot. This time the bundle stayed compact. Emilio lifted it to test the tie and put it with the others.

The sun warmed their backs. They worked without speaking, the branches dwindling in front of their knees and the twine leaving gray dust in the creases of their fingers. Every so often Emilio stood up to move the row; Martino took the opportunity to stretch one leg. As he went on choosing the wood and holding it together, he stopped searching for the words with which to return to Nando.

Emilio was the first to raise his head. He looked at the wall of the house, where the shadow had moved beyond the wheelbarrow, then wiped his hands on his trousers.

“We could use some water.”

He came back with a pitcher and two tin cups. He set them on the low wall, filled one, and handed it to Martino by the rim. The water wet Martino’s lip, cold; he drank a little at a time so as not to finish it too quickly. Emilio drank in two swallows. A little leaf remained at the bottom of his cup, and he removed it with a finger.

“It was March when we left,” he said.

Martino lowered his cup. Emilio was looking at the spot where water spilled from the pitcher had darkened the stone.

“Forty-four?”

The other man nodded.

“They were taking men to put them to work. At first people said, they’re taking this one, they’re taking that one. After a while, you no longer knew whose turn it would be. Some slept outside, some changed houses. At a certain point, hiding here wasn’t enough.”

He poured himself some more water, but left the cup on the wall.

“There were other people in the mountains. You didn’t really know who they were. You set out, and then someone would send you farther up.”

“Was Nando afraid they’d take him?”

Emilio raised his eyes. A little dirt remained on his forehead, where he had wiped it with his hand.

“No. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

Martino waited.

“For me, it was enough not to climb aboard a truck. He’d decided to go even without that. No one forced him. When I found him on the road, he was already ready.”

Martino drank. He had always thought of the departure as an empty space someone would fill with an explanation: who had come to call him, what they had promised him, how much time he’d had to get ready. Emilio was placing his brother before him, standing on a road, ready, and there was no one beside him.

“How long had you been talking about it?”

“I was the one talking about it. When he told me, he packed his sack.”

Emilio turned the cup in his hands.

“It was raining. We met at dusk. I remember trying to walk along the edge so I wouldn’t step in the ruts. Then I got soaked through and stopped paying attention.”

“What did he have?”

“A blanket. A tin of sardines.”

Martino looked at the pitcher. A fly had landed on its handle.

“I had nothing,” Emilio continued. “I’d gone out as if I were just taking a walk. I was thinking about not being seen, not about what I’d eat. He opened the blanket and let me under it. One end each. To walk, we had to keep the same pace.”

Martino managed to picture his brother’s arm beneath the blanket, his elbow raised to hold it up. Not his face. He tried to remember which blanket they had had at home back then, then gave up: there had been so many, and he had already been away.

“We ate the sardines together,” Emilio said. “Later. You could hardly see anything.”

The dog scratched itself against the wall, and the two men turned their heads. Its paw thumped against the ground a little, then the animal laid its muzzle back down.

“Did your mother tell you?”

“No.”

“Nothing?”

Martino shook his head.

Emilio gathered the cups, slipped one inside the other, and stood holding them. Martino recognized that way of shifting his gaze toward work still to be done. He bent down before Emilio and picked up a bundle of branches.

“What was it like, being up there?” he asked.

Emilio set the cups down beside the pitcher.

“I’ll finish these,” he said. “Then we’ll sit down.”

He squatted down again. He handed Martino the cord and this time waited for him to arrange the bundle before starting on his own.

When they were finished, Martino straightened up, his hands on his thighs. Only a few twigs remained of the loose branches; Emilio gathered them and tucked them into the middle of a bundle. He stopped to check the cords one by one, tugging them with two fingers. Then he pointed to the low wall.

They sat down where the sun no longer reached. The dog came over slowly, dragging one paw just a little. It sniffed Martino’s shoes first, then turned around and dropped down beside Emilio. The man ran two fingers between its ears.

“People think it was all organized,” he said. “One man gave an order and the others followed. Where we were, it kept changing. Someone who knew the way would arrive, and for that day you did as he said. If someone who knew how to read a map showed up, you listened to him.”

Martino picked a sliver of bark off his sleeve.

“Did you know each other?”

“Some of us. You got to know the others after sleeping beside them long enough. But you didn’t always know where they came from. There was Lupo, who was from Modena. Falco was from Bologna. Those were the names they went by. There was no need to know their real ones.”

“For their families.”

“If they caught you, the less you could say, the better.”

The dog pushed its muzzle against his wrist when he stopped scratching it. Emilio went on without looking at it.

“Then there was one who was sixteen. He’d picked Capitano for himself. Just like that, before he even got there. You had to call him that, or he wouldn’t answer. He laughed too, but he wanted that name.”

Martino smiled faintly. It seemed strange to be able to smile while talking about those months. Emilio rubbed his thumb against his forefinger and added:

“Nando stayed Nando.”

“He didn’t want one?”

“He said he already had a name. I explained that it wasn’t a game. He answered me with his first and last name, the whole thing, as if I hadn’t understood the first time.”

Martino lowered his face. He knew that way of his. His brother answered softly when he thought an argument was over; it was afterward, when the others kept insisting, that he would start laughing. Martino did not ask if he had laughed that time too. Emilio was giving him a sentence, and he wanted to keep it just as it was.

“And where did you stay?”

“Wherever we could. A hayloft was good, if you could stay there. Some nights in a cave, others under tarpaulins. We’d huddle together, but our feet stayed frozen. In the morning you had to look at them to know they were still yours.”

Martino shifted his heels beneath the low wall. Emilio looked at his shoes, or perhaps only at the ground in front of them.

“He had a good pair. The only ones, for a while. When someone had to go somewhere and couldn’t do it in the shoes he had, Nando would lend him his.”

“And he went barefoot?”

“He stayed there. He didn’t go far for half a day. But the shoes had to come back; it was a loan. He didn’t joke about that.”

The dog sighed. Emilio leaned down to free a leaf caught in the fur on its neck. Martino watched his fingers search for the leaf without pulling the skin. He pictured his brother undoing his laces, sitting somewhere he had never been. He could not see anything else: only the hands and the shoes set on the ground, waiting for someone to take them.

Emilio talked about food. Flour for polenta, when it came, potatoes, bread hidden by the women in baskets under the eggs. He said they watched every spoonful and meat was rare; taking an animal meant leaving a farmer without one who might already have helped them.

“Who divided it up?” Martino asked.

“Whoever was there. But everyone watched.”

They heard a few blows from a distant field. Emilio waited until they stopped.

“There’s always a sound here,” he said. “You don’t notice it. Listen now: the water. Before that there was the dog. Then someone passes along the road. Up there, no. Sometimes you’d stop and couldn’t hear anything anymore.”

Martino listened to the canal. A continuous rustling came from the other side of the field, so faint that he had not distinguished it until that moment.

“That was the worst,” Emilio continued. “You’d start thinking. About home, about what might have happened. Nando would find things to do. When his shift ended, he’d fix something. Shoes, a piece of roof. He’d go fetch water even when someone else could have gone.”

“He never stopped.”

Emilio shook his head.

“At night he’d listen to the radio, when we managed to pick it up. Then he’d repeat the news to those who were outside. He was careful to get the words right. If he hadn’t understood something, he said he hadn’t understood it.”

The shadow of the wall had stretched beyond their shoes. Martino realized he had his hands clasped tightly between his knees and opened them. A short line from the cord marked his palm. He traced it with a finger, waiting for Emilio to go on.

Emilio looked at Martino’s open hands.

“That’s not what you came to find out.”

Martino raised his face.

“That too.”

“But you want to know what happened after.”

“Yes.”

The dog raised its head when Emilio moved. The man stepped away from the low wall, went over to the tools against the wall, and picked up a hoe. He came back holding it by the handle, the blade skimming the ground. Martino made room for him, but he remained standing.

“It was raining for days at the end of September. We were in a hut above the stream, about twenty of us. We didn’t all sleep in the same place. With that ground under you, even finding a dry spot became work.”

He pressed the blade into the earth. It left a short line in the dust.

“The word had got around. Someone from the village had come up to warn us. He said they’d be coming in force, with dogs.”

“Didn’t you leave?”

“Word got around all the time. You didn’t know how much of it was true. Or who had started the rumor.”

Martino looked at the blade of the hoe. He wanted to take back the question: it was easy to ask it there, sitting safe against the wall. Emilio did not seem to be waiting for anything else from him.

“They were Germans and Fascists. The Germans gave the orders. The others knew the paths. The springs, the houses. They didn’t need to ask who you were: they might have drunk with your father.”

The handle turned between his fingers.

“They were looking for you too,” Martino said.

“Of course.”

He did not say it forcefully. He looked beyond the bundles, where the poplars hid the road.

“They started coming up while it was still night. From below. First we heard the dogs. That’s what you hear, not the men. And once you hear them, you don’t have much time.”

Martino remained seated, his feet planted firmly on the ground.

“One of ours fired a shot to warn us. He was on guard. After that, everything happened at once: the calls, the gunshots. We split up. That’s what you did: they weren’t supposed to find us all in the same place.”

“Where were you?”

“I went down toward the stream. With two others.”

“And him?”

Emilio pulled the blade out of the earth and put it back in the same furrow.

“He took the upper woods. He had a boy with him.”

Martino waited for a name. Emilio shook his head slightly before he could ask.

“I can’t tell you anything more about that. I saw the two of them go up.”

“Did you speak?”

“He looked at me.”

The tip of the hoe struck a stone. Emilio lifted it and held it still.

“I looked at him. Then I turned to go down. I didn’t even shake his hand. We’d been close for months, and I didn’t shake his hand.”

Martino thought of the handshake on the road to the mill, of how Emilio’s fingers had barely closed around his then. Now those fingers gripped the wood until the knuckles turned white. He did not say there had been no time. Emilio knew.

“I stayed in the woods for three days and three nights,” the man continued. “When there was light, I hid under the branches. I walked in the dark, if I could. I didn’t get far. I’d turn back without realizing it, find a spot that seemed familiar, and not know if I’d been there before.”

“Alone?”

“Afterward, yes.”

Martino did not ask about the other two. Emilio ran his tongue over his lip and went on:

“The rain came in through my sleeves. You couldn’t take your hands out to wring them. Once the

dogs came very close. I threw myself into a ditch and pulled up grass, branches, whatever I could find."

He stopped. From the yard came the sound of a vessel being set down on a stone.

"They must have passed within ten meters. I could hear the animals breathing. A man said something in German. Another answered him in Italian. I kept my mouth open so I could breathe without making a sound. I thought about my nose, how it mustn't itch."

Martino took a slow breath. He realized he had been pressing his lips together and parted them.

"Afterward I found a farmhouse. A woman gave me food. She didn't let me into the house; she put me in the stable. Two days. She brought me food and left. I don't know what she risked by keeping me there."

"Then you came back."

"Across the fields, at night. When I saw my mother, I could hardly stand upright. She made me sit down. There was a bowl, I remember that. The rest came later. I slept for two days."

The handle trembled a little. Emilio changed his grip, lowering both hands.

"When I got up, I asked about Nando. He hadn't come back. I asked again. Nothing."

Martino looked at the dog, which had lain down again with its muzzle on its paws. A hen was scratching around behind the house. None of the sounds Emilio had heard were there; there was the dry yard, the old dog, and the pitcher with water still in it. Martino shifted his eyes to the man in front of him.

"From that moment on, I never saw him again," Emilio said. "What I've told you, I saw. About what happened afterward, I can't tell you one thing instead of another."

Martino nodded. The question remained in his mouth, but it was no longer a question to ask him.

Emilio put the hoe back against the wall. The sun no longer reached the yard, but the new tiles still held a pale light. Martino got up from the low wall. His legs were stiff, and he waited a moment before bending down to pick up the fallen pieces of cord.

"Leave those," Emilio said.

Martino rolled them up anyway and put them on top of a bundle. Then he picked up the sickle, holding it away from his leg, and followed Emilio toward the stable. The other man pointed out a

hook inside. There was just enough light to distinguish the wood of the wall from the iron of the tools. He hung up the sickle, made sure it would not slip, and went back outside.

They carried two baskets under cover. Emilio righted the wheelbarrow, and Martino pushed it through the door, lifting it over the threshold so the wheel would not bang. When he turned around, Emilio was still outside. He was wiping one side of his trousers with a hand, without looking at what he was doing.

"When I came down, nobody wanted to know," he said.

Martino stayed by the doorframe.

"They didn't ask you?"

"Some did. A couple of words. Then they'd talk about something else. The people who saw me coming sometimes turned away. Not everyone, I'm not saying that."

He ran his palm over the wood of the door.

"As long as I was up there, I was up there. Once I came back, they had to look me in the face. Know that one man had come back and another hadn't."

Martino saw his sack hanging from the post. From a distance it looked full, puffed up by the air. One fold hung motionless against the wood.

"You could ask about Nando," he said.

"At first they asked. The answer was that nobody knew. After a while, they stopped."

"But someone knows more than you."

Emilio pulled the door, then slid the bolt into place. He tested it with the back of his hand. Martino waited for him to finish, but the man checked it again, pulling it toward himself.

"There are things I didn't see," he said at last.

"I'm not asking you to make them up."

"I know."

Emilio let go of the bolt and leaned against the door. In the remaining light his face seemed narrower. Martino could see a small crack at the corner of his mouth, which opened when he spoke.

“There are men here who don’t speak to each other anymore. They used to sit at the same table. I’m not talking only about those who went up with the Germans. There were people who stayed at home too. Everyone had to do something, or not do it. When you ask, you never know where it might lead.”

“So then you don’t ask anything.”

Emilio nodded, but he did not seem to agree.

“It becomes a habit. In the end, you don’t know how to begin anymore.”

He went to the low wall to get the pitcher. There was still a little water in the cups; he poured it at the base of the wall, away from the dog. Martino followed him. The bundles now formed one dark heap, and you could no longer tell the knots he had tied from Emilio’s.

“My brother died in Africa,” the man said.

Martino looked up.

“I didn’t know.”

“I heard the news in the mountains. It had happened months earlier.”

He still held the cups in his left hand and the pitcher in his right. He could have put them down, but he did not.

“I thought at least we knew about him. There was a name to write down; you could say where he’d died. Not like…”

He did not finish. He set the vessels on the low wall, one at a time.

“I shouldn’t have told you like that.”

Martino looked at the water spreading between the stones.

“I understand.”

“It’s not something to set beside something else.”

“I understand,” Martino repeated.

A light came on in the house window. Emilio’s wife passed behind the glass with something pale in her hands and bent over the table. Martino could make out her arms arranging the plates. She

did not call out or come to the window. Emilio turned his head toward her and picked up the pitcher.

Martino went to the gate and took the sack off the post. He folded it twice; the hem had caught on a splinter and he had to free it with his fingers. Emilio joined him when he already had his hand on the wood.

“Thanks for the help,” he said.

Martino shook his head.

“I made you lose the afternoon.”

“The bundles are done.”

They looked at each other. This time Emilio did not turn his eyes toward the road. Martino reached out his hand, and the other man took it. The cord had left the same dusty smell on their palms.

“If you talk to your father,” Emilio said before letting him go, “wait until it’s a good time.”

Martino stopped moving.

“What should I ask him?”

Emilio loosened his grip.

“What you came to ask me. But not right away, as soon as you get there. And not with your mother there.”

“What do you know?”

The man kept one hand on the gate. He looked toward the house for a moment, then back at Martino.

“I know as far as the woods. I told you that. For the rest, you have to talk to him.”

Martino wanted to hold him there with another question. Emilio had already pushed the gate between them, without closing it all the way. On the road, the canal was out of sight; he could hear it running beneath the grass.

“Good evening,” Martino said.

Emilio returned the greeting and watched him set off. After a few steps, the latch made a brief sound. Then the man's shoes creaked on the earth of the yard, and those sounds too fell silent.

At the bridge Martino put a hand on the railing. The boards were still warm. He looked at the water through the gap between two planks, but in the shadow he could not make it out. From the other bank came a voice calling someone home.

He resumed walking with the sack under his arm. He had told his mother he was going for fertilizer; he was coming back with his hands dirty from handling wood and the sack empty. All he had to do was mention Emilio to say where he had spent the afternoon. He tried to say that name without speaking, then Nando's.

Earlier, on the road to the mill, he had tried to stop a man who was leaving. Now all that remained to him was a wet blanket, shoes lent out, his brother taking the path up into the woods. Everything stopped where Emilio's gaze had stopped. Beyond that, there was still nothing Martino could see.

The first windows in the village were lit. He could make out the bell tower without its spire and, lower down, the roof of the house by the canal. Martino slowed down. His father would be back from the field; perhaps he was already sitting down, perhaps he was washing his hands. He had to ask him.

Martino unfolded the sack and put it over his shoulder. He held one corner in his fist so it would not slip, and continued toward the houses.

The Father's Story

When he came in, his mother was rinsing the dishes. Martino hung the sack back in its place and washed his hands in the water left in the basin. The dust from the bundles of brushwood came away between his fingers; a thin splinter remained in the pad of one finger, and he had to search for it with his nail.

His father was already at the table. Martino went past him to get the towel, caught the smell of his shirt and the dry earth on his trousers. All he had to do was stop and say where he had been. Instead, he dried his hands and asked if there was anything left to eat.

His mother set the plate in front of him, covered with another plate. His father did not ask him about the fertilizer. While Martino ate, he remained seated with one arm resting on the table; then he got up and went out to attend to his last chore. When the door closed again, Martino still had a piece of bread in his hand.

On Saturday they worked on the fence. One post had tilted and was pulling two rails with it. His father pried out the nails with the hammer; Martino held the wood steady, keeping his fingers away from the iron head. The good nails went into the hat lying on the ground, the others among the clods.

“Could use this one again,” Martino said.

His father picked up the bent nail, set it on a stone, and tapped it gently. He turned it between thumb and forefinger, tapped it again, then handed it back to him.

They dug around the base of the post. Beneath the top layer, the earth was dark and damp. Martino removed it with the spade while his father tested the wood, shaking it after every shovelful. They had worked like this before the war too: one put his strength into it and the other watched to see if it was enough. Now his father had to move aside to give him more room behind him.

“More toward me.”

Martino pushed.

“That’s it. Hold it.”

His father tamped the earth down and beat it with the handle of the spade. Martino kept both hands on the post even when there was no longer any need. He looked at the hat on the ground,

the nails collected in its lining. He felt like saying that he had found work to do at Emilio's, even without fertilizer. He could have started that way, with something small and true.

"You can let go," his father said.

He let go of the post. The wood moved only slightly and stayed upright.

Later, he accompanied his mother to the fountain. She had taken the bucket without calling him; Martino caught up with her and took it from her hand. They walked without hurrying. At the spout, his mother gestured for him to wait, rinsed out the bottom of the bucket, and tossed the water against the edge of the basin.

"You don't need me to come along, then," he said.

"You were already outside."

She straightened her apron. While the bucket filled, they looked at their hands: hers resting one on top of the other, Martino's wet up to the wrists. Someone across the square closed a shutter.

"Has your father finished over there?"

"We put the post back."

His mother nodded. The water reached the brim; Martino pulled the bucket back and poured a little out so he wouldn't get his legs wet on the way home. She watched him do it, then set off for home. She did not ask him why he kept looking back toward the fountain.

In the days that followed, Martino fixed the stable door. It scraped at the bottom, and you had to lift it to close it. He wedged a shim under the board, tightened the iron strap holding the hinge, and tried the door several times. Inside, where the roof was open, small dry things fell down. His father came to look and waited for him to finish.

"It holds now," Martino said.

The man ran his hand over the wood, pulled the door toward him, and let it go. He said nothing else. Martino gathered the tools slowly, one by one, but his father had already gone back into the yard.

On the fourth evening after the visit to the farm, he stayed in the hayloft until late. He moved the old hay from one corner to another, beat the empty sacks against a beam, and waited for the dust to settle. When he could find nothing else to move, he sat on the edge of the boards. A clatter of

dishes came from the kitchen. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and went downstairs.

His mother was putting away the plates.

“Was there any need to spend all that time up there?”

“I moved some things around.”

“They could have stayed where they were.”

Martino remained in the doorway. She put the plate in the cupboard, lining it up with the others, and closed one door. The other stayed open.

“When your grandmother’s husband didn’t want to talk, she would sit down in front of him. She wouldn’t ask him anything else. She just stayed there.”

“And him?”

“Eventually he’d say something.”

His mother closed the other door too. Martino heard his father moving outside, near the main door; she lowered her eyes to the cloth in her hand and went back to drying.

During supper, Martino looked several times at his father’s bowed head. His hair was white at the temples; a vein stood out there when he chewed. He would have liked to see him raise his eyes. When he did, Martino was the one who looked back down at his plate.

In bed, he couldn’t find a comfortable position. He turned toward the wall, then toward the other bed, its bare frame and the straw mattress against the wall. The dark edge of the straw showed beneath the cover. He listened to the canal and the small noises downstairs until those too stopped.

The following evening, he told himself. Not in the field, not while his father already had a job in hand to finish. At the table, after supper. He stayed awake for a long time, one leg outside the covers.

The polenta had formed a thin crust against the cutting board. His mother cut off a piece with the knife and set it beside the leftover cheese. Martino had finished a while ago, but he was still holding his fork. He set it down only when she asked him for his plate.

His father wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked for the tobacco in the jacket hanging on the chair. He spread the paper from the packet on the table, lifted out a pinch, and

began filling his pipe. He gathered the crumbs that fell with his index finger, wasting none of them.

Martino watched him. The night before, he had imagined speaking during that very gesture. Now his father was doing it and he hadn't said a thing.

His mother carried the dishes to the sink. The water made a brief sound; then he heard the cloth pass over the earthenware. Martino got up to pick up the cutting board, but she told him to leave it and came to take it herself. With the knife she scraped the last crumbs onto a plate. She moved unhurriedly, and Martino couldn't stop following her with his eyes.

When everything had been put away, his mother took a small packet of salt from the cupboard and tied the string around it more securely.

"I'm stopping by Santina's," she said. "I'm taking this to her."

His father held the pipe between his lips. He had lit a match, but the flame went out before he brought it to the bowl. He set the charred stick on the edge of the tobacco wrapper.

"Now?"

"I told her I was coming."

His mother put on her shawl. Martino lowered his eyes so she could leave without having to say anything else to him. He heard her stop by the door and for a moment thought she had forgotten something.

"It's damp out," his father said.

"I have my shawl."

The door let in a strip of air. The fire bent the same way, then straightened again. Martino listened to his mother's footsteps recede and the gate close; by the time he could no longer hear them, his father had lit his pipe.

The kerosene lamp was between them, shifted a little toward the wall. The glass had blackened at the top. Martino looked at the dark mark, and meanwhile felt his tongue against his teeth, his mouth dry. He had waited until there was no one else around; now he missed the sound of the water in the sink.

He moved the foot he had tucked under the chair and knocked against a rung. His father looked

up. Martino could have taken a drink, asked for more bread, put his glass back where it had been. He let those possibilities pass and raised his face. His father was still looking at him, smoke drifting in front of his forehead.

“Nando,” he said.

His father held in the smoke. He let it out slowly and remained with the pipe raised, not bringing it back to his mouth.

Martino did not add anything right away. He could feel his hands resting awkwardly on the table, too close together. He separated them.

“Don’t start again,” his father said.

“I haven’t started yet.”

The man lowered the pipe. He looked toward the door his wife had gone out through, then at the plate with the polenta crust.

“You know where he went.”

“I know where he went. I don’t know what happened after.”

His father got up so abruptly that one leg of the chair scraped across the floor. He went to the hearth, shifted an ember with the tip of the poker, and put a piece of firewood on the coals. It wasn’t large; to get it burning, he had to bend down and stir the ash. Martino could see the back of his neck above the collar and the seams of his shirt stretched across his shoulders.

“I went to see Emilio,” he said.

The poker stopped. Then his father put it back in its place.

“The other day?”

“Yes.”

“What did he tell you?”

“The mountains. The sweep. When they split up.”

The man straightened, steadying himself for a moment on the edge of the hearth.

“So he told you.”

“Up to there.”

The wood began to burn at one end. A tongue of flame ran beneath it and lit his father’s shoes.

“And what do you want from me?”

Martino raised his eyes to his back.

“What’s missing.”

For a little while he heard only the fire and a faint scraping under the bench, perhaps an insect in the wood. His father turned around, but did not come back right away. He remained by the hearth, as if the distance to the table were greater than it was.

“Once you’ve heard it, you can’t put it away again.”

“I don’t want to put it away.”

His father ran his thumb over the bowl of the pipe. Ash stained his skin. Martino waited for him to wipe it off, but the man did not.

“You have his way of standing still,” he said.

He returned to his chair, pulled it toward the table, and sat down. He set the pipe in front of him. His fingers closed around one another, then loosened; at last he placed his palms on the wood.

Martino stopped searching for a better question. He only moved the glass, which was hiding one of his father’s hands, and stayed there waiting.

“I didn’t want him to leave,” his father said.

He looked at the place where he had set the pipe. He spoke again before Martino could answer.

“Don’t think we parted on good terms. I told him to stay. The land, his mother. You were already gone, and I kept putting everything that still needed doing in front of him. As if he couldn’t see it.”

Martino felt a twitch in his leg and stretched his foot under the table. By then he knew what Emilio could tell him about Nando’s departure, but he did not know the voice his father used to talk about it. It was not his voice from the fields. Some words seemed to cost him more breath than others.

“We said terrible things to each other. Me, especially. I told him that if he left, it was over between

us. He left."

His father ran two fingers over his lip. Martino looked through the dark window toward the stable door: he couldn't make it out, he could only see the reflection of the lamp.

"In September they told me about the sweep. News from one person, news from another. No one knew where they'd seen anyone, or when. I waited. Then one night I heard a knock at the window."

Martino turned his head toward the window.

"Here?"

His father nodded.

"Just two taps. At first I thought it was the rain, something blown by the wind. Then I heard them again. Your mother was asleep. I got up without calling her."

There was nothing different about the window. In the dark, he could see the edge of the lamp and part of Martino's face, suspended above the windowsill. He looked back at his father.

"It must have been two or three. I didn't check the time. I opened it and found him against the wall, where the water runs down from the gutter. He had one hand over his side. I didn't notice the blood at first: he was soaked all over."

The man stopped and pressed his lips together. No more smoke rose from the bowl of the pipe.

"He called to me. Then I took him under the arm. He managed a few steps inside, then let himself sit down on the bench."

Martino looked at the bench along the wall. At one end his mother's cloth had been left, badly folded. He had seen people sit there to talk about a tool or a debt, children made to wait, his father when he took off his boots. He had never thought of Nando being unable to reach it on his own.

"How badly was he hurt?"

"His side. His shirt was stuck to him. I cut it where it wouldn't come away."

His father lowered one hand along his own body, without indicating a particular side, then brought it back to the table.

“I washed it with water. I put a cloth underneath him and cleaned it as best I could. I’m no doctor. I didn’t know what was inside. He told me to be careful, but he didn’t pull away. I tore a strip from one of my shirts. At least that was clean.”

Martino realized he had gripped the edge of the chair. He opened his fingers and rested them on his thigh. None of the men he had spoken to had seen the wound; it had come to him now, in the kitchen, through his father’s words.

“How long had he been walking?”

“Three days out there. He hid when it was light and came down at night. He’d crossed the river swimming.”

Martino lowered his head. He saw again the water against the side of the boat and the old ferryman’s oar seeking a hold in the current. Then he had to put that image away: it was April when he himself had crossed. He knew nothing of that night in September, except that Nando had arrived at the window soaked through.

“Did he tell you how he got hurt?”

“While escaping. I didn’t make him tell me everything. His teeth were chattering, then they stopped. I put him near the fire. He talked about the ones who’d stayed up there, told me their names. I didn’t know them.”

“And the boy who was with him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

His father shook his head, without trying to add anything. Martino let the question drop. Emilio’s voice reached as far as the woods; his father’s began at the window. In between, Nando had walked and crossed the river, and neither man had been with him.

“Did you tell him to light the fire?”

“No. I lit it.”

Martino bit the inside of his cheek. That wasn’t what he wanted to ask. His father seemed to understand and waited.

“Mother didn’t wake up?”

“No.”

“You could have called her.”

The man stared at his hands.

“I could have.”

The wood in the hearth gave way, and the sound made them both turn. His father shifted slightly in his chair, as if to get up, then stayed where he was.

“I gave him something to drink. A little at a time. He was cold even after I’d taken off his wet clothes. When he began to warm up, he rested his head against the wall.”

Martino followed the wall above the bench with his eyes. There was a small chip in the plaster and a darker shadow near the corner. Nothing told him where Nando had rested his head. His father was speaking more and more quietly; Martino leaned forward to hear him.

“He had come home,” the man said.

He fell silent after those words. Martino waited for the rest, but for a while it did not come.

His father picked up the burnt match and snapped it between his fingers. He put the two pieces on the tobacco wrapper, side by side.

“Meanwhile, I was thinking about who might have seen him.”

Martino did not answer. The flame in the lamp gave a little flicker inside the glass.

“I thought that to get to the wall he’d crossed the yard. Someone might have got up, looked outside. At night, when it’s raining, you hear a noise and go to the window. It doesn’t take much.”

The man spoke toward the table.

“And if they came looking for him, they’d find him here. They wouldn’t ask if he’d arrived an hour ago or a month ago. They’d take me, his mother. The house. I looked at the fire and did these calculations.”

Martino felt the edge of the table against his stomach. He had moved closer without realizing it. He leaned back against the chair and waited.

“Did you tell him to hide?”

His father raised his face.

“I told him he couldn’t stay.”

He did not lower his eyes right away. Martino saw that he was waiting for a word from him, perhaps a gesture. He stayed still.

“I explained that he had to get away before daybreak. Find his people, or somewhere they wouldn’t know who he was. I said it wouldn’t be long, that it would be over soon. As if I knew. I kept repeating it because he wasn’t answering me.”

The bench creaked without anyone touching it. The heat reached only one side of the wood. Martino looked at the cloth folded on the end and had to bring his eyes back to his father.

“What did he say?”

“He asked me for one day.”

His father breathed in through his nose, slowly.

“He wanted to sleep. In a bed, he said. And see his mother when she got up. One day, then he’d go.”

Martino put his hands under the table. The callused skin on his right palm pulled when he bent his fingers.

“And you?”

The man opened his mouth, then closed it. For an instant Martino wished he wouldn’t answer, even though he had already heard.

“I wouldn’t give him that.”

A louder rush of water came from the canal, then immediately returned to the way it had been. His father turned slightly toward the window; when he looked back at Martino, one side of his mouth was drawn tight.

“I kept talking to him about his mother. What would happen to her if they took us all. I was explaining to him, lying there with the bandage on, that he had to think of the others.”

Martino looked at the man’s face and searched for something to say. He could find no sentence that wouldn’t force his father to start over, defend himself, or repeat the same reasons. Nando remained before him, sitting on the bench, being asked to understand.

“Finally he nodded,” his father said. “He didn’t ask me for anything else.”

He ran his hand over his knees. The ash mark on his thumb spread across the fabric of his trousers.

“I packed him a sack. Bread and cheese, the money I had. I took a pair of shoes: his were worse than mine. And a blanket. I put things in it and he watched me. I was in a hurry to fill that sack. When it was ready, I set it by the door.”

Martino lowered his eyes. He would have liked to know how much bread, which shoes, whether Nando had managed to bend down to lace them. He did not ask. His father already had his lips parted to continue.

“Before he went out, he looked toward the room where she slept. I thought he was calling her. Instead, he told me not to let her know anything. I promised I wouldn’t tell her.”

The man let a little time pass.

“It was still dark. I watched him cross the yard. He was going slowly, but I couldn’t help him anymore, not after I’d told him he had to go. I stayed at the door until I could no longer make him out.”

Martino felt a tingling in his toes. He moved them inside his shoes, without making a sound.

“Toward the canal?”

“That way.”

“You don’t know where he meant to go.”

“No.”

His father said that more clearly than he had said anything else. Then he went back to speaking quietly.

“I put the kitchen back in order. I burned the cloth I’d used to wipe up the blood. Not the bandage: he had that on. I put the cloth in the fire and waited until there was nothing left to see. When your mother got up, I was sitting here.”

Martino looked at the hearth. The piece of wood added a little earlier had split along a grain and was glowing from within.

“I waited for news,” his father said. “Someone would come by and tell me they’d taken some boys. The priest would come with names he’d heard. I waited for his name. It wasn’t there. Then I waited for him to come.”

His voice died away. Martino did not help him pick it up again.

“Nothing more ever came,” the man finally said. “No one who’d seen him, not a word from him.”

Martino heard again the name he had spoken at the beginning of the evening. Until then, he had thought that reaching the end of the story would tell him where his brother was. His father had got as far as the door, the dark yard. Beyond that, he had nothing to give him.

The pipe remained between them, beside the two pieces of the match. His father rested a hand on it without picking it up. His other hand stayed open on the table.

Martino waited for his father to take his hand off the pipe. He still had a question, but when he opened his mouth he ran out of breath and had to start again.

“Mother never knew he was here.”

“No.”

“Not even afterward.”

His father shook his head.

Martino turned the glass between his fingers. There was a finger’s depth of water at the bottom; every time he tilted it, the water showed him a clean part of the glass, then covered it again. His mother had gone out so they could talk. Now, beyond the door, an evening continued in which she knew nothing of that kitchen, her soaked son on the bench, her husband packing him a sack.

“She thinks he never came back down,” he said.

“I’ve never told her anything different.”

His father hunched forward a little. Martino thought of his hands at the fence, the nail straightened on the stone, the patience with which he had waited for the post to hold firm. He could not reconcile those hands with the act of setting the sack by the door. They were the same hands, there before him.

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” his father said.

Martino stopped turning the glass.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything.”

The reply had his usual tone, the one he used when a job was done and there was no need to keep testing it. But his father did not get up. He looked at Martino, then looked away and looked back again, as if his son were about to do something he could not stop.

Martino thought of the stretch between the house and the canal. He had walked it with the bucket, with tools, with an empty sack over his shoulder. The first part was open; then you passed close to the tall grass. He realized he was looking for a place to stop Nando and make him turn around. He narrowed his eyes and looked back at the table.

“You’ve been carrying that alone since that night,” he said.

His father did not answer.

“Now I know too.”

The man started to say something, but Martino barely shook his head. He could not promise him it would be different. He could not say he had done the right thing. He stayed with his hand resting on the wood, close enough to his father’s.

His father was the first to move. He took Martino’s fingers, without squeezing them at first. Martino felt the hard skin and the edge of his nail against his thumb; then he closed his hand. For a few moments they remained like that, wrists on the table, arms awkwardly stretched out. His father bowed his head. When they let go, they both kept their hands in the same place for a little while longer.

The man picked up the pipe again. He looked inside it, turned it over, then began folding up the tobacco wrapper. Martino drew his glass toward himself to make room for him.

They heard the gate, then his mother’s footsteps. Martino turned toward the door before it opened. She came in with her shawl drawn up under her chin and the smell of cold air on her clothes. She still had a piece of string between her fingers.

“I found her getting ready for bed,” she said.

Neither of them asked who. His father nodded and put the tobacco in his pocket.

His mother took off her shawl. She looked at the cleared table, the lamp, Martino's glass. She picked up the jug and added water, then poured some for her husband. She stayed beside him until he had drunk.

"Would you like some more?"

"That's enough."

His mother put the jug away. Martino saw that she wasn't looking for anything to do: she had already finished, but she remained standing. Her eyes moved from one to the other without lingering. He held her gaze and she tucked a strand of hair beneath her headscarf.

"Then I'm going," she said.

"Good night," Martino replied.

After she had gone to bed, his father got up. He emptied the pipe into the hearth and pushed the ash among the embers. He paused for a moment with the poker in his hand; then he hung it up and went back for his jacket.

"I'll put out the lamp," Martino said.

His father looked at him, nodded, and went to the bedroll by the fire. Martino heard the rustle of fabric, a muffled cough. He did not turn around. The two pieces of the match were left on the table. He gathered them in his palm and carried them to the hearth.

He stayed crouched until the fire took them. Then he returned to his chair, but did not sit down. A faint cold from the window reached his wrist. He touched the glass with one finger and drew it away almost at once.

Now he knew that Nando had touched that window. He did not know with which hand. He turned toward the bench and took his mother's cloth, folding it more neatly. He set it on the cupboard. The bench was clear.

He turned down the lamp. In the remaining light, the wood showed nothing, only the worn grain and a notch near the edge. Martino sat down facing it, in his own chair, and stayed there. No more sounds came from his father's bedroll. The canal ran outside, behind the dark glass.

The River of April

When he came downstairs the next morning, the bench was already pushed up against the table and his mother was stirring the fire. Martino went outside before having a drink. In the courtyard the shadow reached as far as the gate; only the tops of the poplars were catching the light. He stopped with his hands in his jacket pockets, without looking for anything on the road.

His father joined him a little later. He had put one arm into a sleeve and had the jacket covering his other shoulder. He dressed without hurrying, looking toward the embankment too.

“It’s biting this morning,” he said.

Martino nodded. The cold crept in through his collar, but he did not go back inside.

“Sleep?”

“I slept.”

His father ran his thumb over the bowl of his pipe. He did not light it. They stayed close together until the sound of the lid being set on the pot came from the kitchen. Then Bertoni indicated the canal with his chin: they had to turn the hay on the other bank, and before the heat came they would have to rebuild the garden wall. He said the two things in the same way, without asking whether Martino had other work to do.

“The hay first,” Martino replied.

His father went to get the tools. Neither of them spoke of the night.

At breakfast his mother set bread and a cup of chicory in front of him. She slid the cheese across the table too, then paused to gather with her fingertip the crumbs she had made while cutting it.

“I have to go by Santina’s. Are you coming too?”

Martino looked up.

“When you’re finished,” she added.

“I’ll come.”

His mother gathered the crumbs in her palm and went to the fire. She had cut too much bread for one; Martino took another slice.

In the days that followed, they worked beyond the canal. The hay had held a cold dampness beneath its dry surface. They had to open it up with the pitchfork, lift it without dragging the earth along, and let it fall back loosely. His father advanced from the other end of the strip. When they met, one of them moved aside, and they started again in opposite directions.

The skin on Martino's palm had grown tougher. He still searched for the place on the handle that did not rub, but no longer had to loosen his grip with every stroke. Once he straightened up and saw his father standing still, his pitchfork pointed at the ground. The shirt cut away around Nando's wound came to mind. He lowered his eyes to the hay and set his arms back to work. That day the memory came to him several more times, against his will.

He did not speak of it to his mother. At the table the place beside his father remained empty, and when she passed with the pot Martino moved his own bowl closer to her. The bench in front of the hearth was used to lay out the laundry, to sit on while changing shoes, to rest an armful of firewood. He looked at it every time. There was nothing to remove and nothing to keep in a different way.

On the third day, before they went back inside, his father called him over to the edge of the low field. The light fell almost sideways on the clods, and in the footprints left by the last rain the dark bottom was still visible.

"Next year I'd like to try wheat here."

Martino looked at the ditch.

"If the water comes in from the canal, it stays here."

"I know."

Bertoni scraped the heel of his boot over a crust of earth, bent down, and picked up a little. He rubbed it between his fingers.

"We have to keep the drainage ditch clear. This year we'll do it earlier."

Martino followed the line of the ditch with his eyes, as far as the stand of poplars. Clearing it would take days; then they would have to see where the bank was giving way. His father had already started walking along the edge, but stopped to wait for him.

"From down there?" Martino asked.

"From down there. If you start from here, you'll drag it all back in."

They walked along the edge together. They did nothing else that evening: they looked at the earth and went back with the pitchforks on their shoulders. What stayed with Martino was the way his father had said next year. He had not asked when Martino thought he would leave again. He had not asked him since the day he arrived.

Under the porch they plucked the strands left between the tines of the pitchforks. Martino gathered up a handful and carried it outside; when he came back, his father had one shoe unlaced and was leaning against the post to bend down. He held out his pipe without looking, gripping it by the bowl.

Martino took it. The mouthpiece was smooth, the wood warm where it had been held. He waited until his father had finished, then handed it back.

Bertoni put it between his teeth again, but did not leave the porch.

“That evening, what I told you...”

Martino set down the pitchfork.

His father ran his hand over the rope wound around the post and put it back the way it had been. From the kitchen his mother called that everything was getting cold.

“I heard you,” Martino said quietly.

Bertoni nodded. He took off his hat, struck its brim against his leg, and headed for the house. Martino followed, leaving the tools hanging side by side.

The wind bent the garden supports during the night. In the morning his mother found the canes all leaning the same way; some had come out of the earth, others had given way at the ties. She took a ball of twine from the storeroom and put it in Martino’s hand.

“Here. I’ll straighten them, you tie them.”

The surface of the earth was wet. Where the canes had gone in, the soil came up darker and clung to their fingers. Martino tried to push one in without taking off the old tie, but his mother stopped his wrist.

“Untie it first. Otherwise you’ll pull the plant.”

He bent down again and searched for the knot beneath a leaf. The thread had tightened; it slipped under one of his nails before he managed to loosen it. His mother held the support with

one hand and moved the shoots aside with the other. She waited without telling him to hurry.

They went along one plant at a time. She tested the soil with her foot, changed position, pressed the cane until she felt it was firm. Martino passed the twine around, leaving room for the stem. Every so often his mother tugged at the knot with two fingers to see if it held; when it did not, she showed him, and he tied it again.

“The wall will be put up with Nino,” she said after a while. “Your father spoke to him.”

Martino looked at the fallen stones, piled up toward the boundary. Between two blocks a broad-leafed weed was growing, one that had not been there before he left.

“We have to get the lime.”

“Yes. In the meantime, we can’t leave these like this.”

His mother pointed to the row that remained. A leaf had broken at the edge; she turned it toward the light and let it fall back. Martino picked up the cut twine so it would not get lost in the earth.

“And after?” she asked.

He raised his head.

“After these?”

His mother rubbed a little mud from her palm against the other.

“I mean you. Here.”

Martino lowered his eyes to the ball of twine. The loose end had wound once around his wrist; he unwound it before answering.

“I haven’t decided.”

She took another cane, straightened it, and tested the tip with her hand.

“You’re here today,” she said. “Finish this row.”

She did not say it any louder than the other things. Martino took a step forward and started tying again. The twine slid against his skin, tightened, then held firm. A door slammed somewhere in the house; the wind slipped between the supports and set the leaves moving together.

For a while they did not speak. His mother gathered the weeds she had pulled out in a basket and

crushed them with the back of her hand. Martino noticed that she did not throw away the pieces of twine that were long enough: she wound them around two fingers and put them in the pocket of her apron.

“Your father fixed up the barn,” she said then. “Last year.”

From there they could see part of the roof, the lighter tiles against the blackened ones. Martino followed its edge as far as the gutter.

“Wasn’t there anyone to help him?”

“He said he didn’t need anyone. He went up and down with the tiles.”

She pulled out a long weed. The root came up whole, with a ball of earth attached.

Martino asked whether he had done it while waiting for Nando. The name hung between them while his mother shook the root against the edge of the basket. She did not turn toward the house or look for something else to do.

“Our things were supposed to be kept underneath,” she replied. “When it rained, it rained in there too.”

She set the weed down. Then she added:

“You could have come back too.”

Martino was left with the knot half-made. The twine had begun to saw into his index finger, and he loosened it. His mother did not ask him how he had lived away from home; she only pointed to the next cane, the one he had to hold while she freed the plant still trapped beneath it.

When they had finished, they sat on the part of the wall that was still standing. His mother took a small stone out of her shoe. Martino held the basket between his feet, with the almost-used-up ball of twine resting on the weeds.

She looked at his hands.

“When you were little, you could tell them apart. Yours.”

Martino opened his palm. There were two green streaks on his fingers and earth in the creases.

“Now you have Nando’s,” his mother said.

He turned his hand over and looked at his nails. He did not answer. His mother put her shoe back

on and stayed seated, her knees close together.

She told him about a time Nando had gone to the mill and Martino had waited for him at the gate until he got cold. She had called to him from the doorway, then gone to fetch him; he had clung to a piece of wood and did not want to leave the road.

“I remember the gate,” Martino said.

“You always watched for where he was supposed to come from.”

Now the gate was behind them. Martino heard his mother get up, the sound of her apron being slapped against her legs. She took the ball of twine, leaving him the basket. He stayed a moment longer, watching the knots along the row. One was too low. He went to untie it and tied it higher before gathering the weeds and following his mother into the house.

Two days later he went to get the lime. His father handed him the money under the porch and told him where to leave the cart so it would not block the way. Martino waited for him to add something about the load, but Bertoni had already turned his back to get the shovel.

He left in the afternoon. The cart jolted in the dry ruts of the road; near the canal, one wheel dropped into a hole and the empty boards knocked together. Martino slowed and kept to the edge, where the grass had been flattened by the other carts. When he returned to the middle of the road, he turned to look at the bed. There was nothing that could fall off. He turned to look a second time anyway, out of habit, then kept his eyes ahead.

There were people in the square. Two bicycles were propped against the fountain and a woman was waiting with her container between her feet. They had put up some notices on the wall; a man was reading them with his hat behind his back. Every so often he moved his lips and went back to a line farther up with his finger.

Martino stopped the cart near the shop. A scaffold ran above the house opposite; part of the wall was missing, and from the road you could see the outline of a floor left without a room. Two masons were working at the edge of the opening. The shorter one handed a brick up to the other, then scraped the board holding the mortar. He whistled a few notes, always the same ones, never reaching the end.

The shopkeeper came out, wiping his hands on his apron.

“For Bertoni?”

Martino said yes and repeated what his father had asked for. The man nodded, went back inside,

and called to him from the doorway to come and help. The sacks were on the ground, sheltered from the damp. Martino bent down, took hold of the first one's corners, and waited for the other man to grasp his end. They carried it out like that, taking care with the narrow doorway.

"Farther in," the shopkeeper said beside the bed.

Martino climbed up to pull the sack toward the center. The cloth left a pale mark on the wood. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and felt the dry dust against his lip.

They were arranging the load when a man stopped beside the wheel. He had his hat in his hand and a jacket buttoned up to his neck. Martino recognized his face, but could not find a name for him.

"You're one of the Bertonis."

"Martino."

The man nodded. He looked first at him and then at the shopkeeper, as if to make sure he had not been mistaken.

"Your father hadn't told me anything. They thought you were dead."

Martino let go of the rope he was holding.

"But I came back."

The man smiled faintly, his mouth closed. He stepped aside to let a bicycle pass, then came back beside the cart. He asked about the lime, and Martino told him about the garden wall.

"There's plenty of walls that need rebuilding."

He pointed with his hat at the house with the scaffolding. Just then the mason stopped whistling and called to his companion; all three of them looked up, waiting for a thud that never came. The man put his hat back on, said goodbye, and crossed the square.

Martino paid and counted the change in his palm. He wrapped it in the slip with the bill so as not to mix it up with anything else, though he had no other money in his pockets. The shopkeeper pulled the last rope tight and showed him where to tighten it further. Martino looped it around the sideboard again and tested the load with both hands.

Before leaving, he left the cart standing and went toward the church. He had not decided to go inside. He walked in the shadow of the wall, where the stone held a coldness you could not feel in

the square, and saw the plaque beside the door.

It was lighter than the wall. Its edges were sharp, without moss, and the letters still had dark bottoms. Martino stopped close enough to see the dust left in one of the carvings. He began with the first name and read down slowly.

He knew some of them. One brought to mind a school desk, another a voice calling from the road. For a third, all that came back to him was the back of a head, short hair above a collar: he could not remember when he had seen it. He read the names that meant nothing to him too. When he reached the bottom, he started again, looking for Bertoni before he even looked for Nando.

It was not there.

He shifted to get the reflection of the light off the letters. He read the middle lines again, then the last ones. It was not a letter he had missed. The name had not been carved.

A woman went into the church behind him. He heard the rustle of her skirt and the heavy sound of the door she held so it would not slam. For a moment he could have turned around and asked who had had the stone put up, who had gathered those names. He stayed in front of the letters until the door had closed again.

He had no grave to look for when it came to Nando. He had Emilio's account, his father's, and his mother's hands carefully separating the leaves from the cane. He took off his hat and held it low, not knowing how long to stay. Then he put it back on.

He returned to the cart. The white marks of his fingers were still on the sideboard and the rope; he wiped them away with his palm, but the wood only turned paler. Before moving off, he checked the load once more. From the scaffolding the mason had started whistling again. Martino took the road along the canal and brought the lime home.

The next day he went out on foot, late in the afternoon. His mother was in the kitchen and his father was nowhere to be seen in the courtyard. Martino passed through the gate without calling out. He carried no tools and his hands were free; as he walked, one of them went to his pocket and then came out again, as if he were missing something to hold.

He took the road along the embankment. He had not gone back to the landing place. In the first few days it had seemed close to everything else, so much so that at night he could still hear the water lapping against the hull; now he had to look for the path that went down from the white road. Grass had grown along the edge, and the footsteps of the men had made a wider path a little farther off.

From above he saw the river. The water was still swollen, but it no longer had the solid color it had had on the day he arrived. Near the bank there was a muddy green; in the middle a darker streak flowed. Fewer branches were passing by. The arches of the bridge remained low and broken, and behind one of them a fold in the water formed, opening and closing without a sound.

He went down the new path. Before he reached the mud, he heard hammering on wood and then one voice calling to another. Pale beams had been stacked on the bank. Some were raised off the ground on shorter pieces, their ends still rough from the saw. A rope ran from a post toward a barge. A little farther on another boat was floating, and a low plank landing led to a wooden crane.

Martino stopped to let two men pass, dragging a cable. One was walking backward, watching where the other put his feet. The iron brushed a stone and dragged it along for a few steps. Neither of them looked up at him.

The old man was sitting on the ropes, a little apart. He wore the same straw hat, its brim broken; he had lowered the sound part to shield his eyes. His boat was tied to the landing post.

Martino went up to him and said hello.

The old man raised his face, looked up at him, and narrowed his eyes. Then he pushed his hat back on his head.

“Bertoni. You’re still here.”

“I’m here.”

“How are things at home?”

“We’re working.”

The old man gave a small nod, then looked at Martino’s shoes and raised his eyes to his face again.

“Ten lire,” he said.

Martino smiled faintly.

“They were all I had.”

“I’d figured that out.”

They watched the men near the landing. One held a rope taut against the beam while the other

marked it. It was not enough: the rope was taken away, the mark examined up close, then everything was measured again. Martino moved so his shadow would not fall across the man's hands.

"It'll be quite a while before people can get to the other side," he said.

The old man bent to remove a small stone caught between his foot and his shoe.

"They say a year. Some say two."

"And in the meantime?"

The old man pointed at the boat with his whole hand. The answer made Martino smile again. Since he had come back, it had happened only a few times; he felt the skin of his cheeks pull and passed a finger beneath his nose.

"Afterward, you won't use it anymore?"

"I'll keep it."

"Even when there's a bridge?"

"I'll keep it all the same. It doesn't eat."

He took the tobacco from his pocket and began rolling a cigarette. With the wind almost still, the paper did not move, but he kept sheltering it in the hollow of his hand. Martino watched those large fingers fold over the thin edge and remembered the coins counted in his palm when he had been leaving the other bank.

He could have told him that his father had spoken. The words came to him ready, brief, but he did not say them. The old man had not asked what he had found out and was not looking toward him, waiting for an answer. He lit his cigarette and blew the first smoke out near his knees.

A man called from the water. The old man raised an arm without getting up and pointed to the post behind Martino. The other man understood and went back to the cable. The hammering began again, each blow separated from the next by an even pause.

"Did you know Nando well?" Martino asked.

The old man took the cigarette from his mouth.

"He came through here. Like everyone."

He looked at the river. Martino waited without filling the pause. Beyond the man's hat, he could see the bank he had come from; a road disappeared behind the trees, and he could not see the place where the truck had dropped him off.

"When he had something in his head, he set off," the old man said. "Your brother was like that."

Martino lowered his eyes to the toes of his shoes. He heard in the words a memory of a man, not news he was missing. He did not ask whether the old man had seen Nando the last time, or which way he was going. The old man put the cigarette back between his lips.

Someone near the barge laughed at something Martino had not heard. Then the cable tightened and the voices became more attentive. The old man got up, helping himself with both hands, and went to his boat. Martino made room for him. He stayed among the ropes and beams, watching him untie the line and tie it again around the post.

The old man ran the line through his palm and looked at the knot. The boat moved a little away from the bank, held by the rope, then drifted back to bump against it softly. He planted one foot against the edge to stop it and stayed like that, bent over, until he had finished. Martino moved closer to the water, where he would not block the men's way.

He found a piece of wood dry enough to sit on. From there he could see the bottom of the barge and the soles of the men walking on it. Every step made the boards ring. Farther off, against the current, a line of bubbles dissolved before it reached the broken arch.

He stayed with his elbows on his knees. The sun was sinking beyond the trees, and now the light came in under the old man's hat, showing his unshaven cheek. Martino would have liked to look at him for a long time too, to remember that face exactly; then he looked away, because the man had turned around.

There was no one on the opposite bank. He tried to place Nando there, as on the crossing so many years before. He remembered the stroke of the oar, the body bent forward, a hand letting go. The face would not stay. As soon as he tried to hold it still, the face of a boy he had seen in Germany appeared, then no face at all, only a pale blur above a shirt.

He rubbed his palms on his trousers and looked back at the water. He did not try again straight away. It pained him that he could not remember the eyes, while an unimportant thing, the seam on a sleeve, remained so clear in his mind. The seam might have belonged to another shirt. He could have been the one wearing it.

What he did know was how Nando took him by the wrist when he had to pull him up. His thumb

closed over the bone and the other fingers underneath; it did not hurt, but you could not slip free. Martino clasped his right wrist with his left hand. He stayed like that for a few moments, then let go.

The hammer had stopped. The men set the smaller tools on the ground and began gathering up what could not be left outside. One wound the rope around his elbow and palm; the other picked a piece of bark out of the coils. The old man had sat down again. He was smoking the rest of his cigarette, holding it between two fingers close to his mouth.

Martino had never learned where his brother had ended up. There was no new place to go after the farm and the kitchen. There were still the woods Emilio had told him about, and a road along the canal where his father had watched a figure walk away. He could walk it again, but he would not find a footprint kept for him.

He bent to untie one shoe. A blade of grass had worked its way into the opening in the sole and was pricking his foot; he pulled it out slowly, trying not to break it. Then he retied the laces. He had to get those shoes repaired. Tightening them more was not enough for working in the ditches, and before the rains there would be the low field too.

He looked once more at the opposite bank. Nando's laugh came back to him, not the whole sound, but that moment before he laughed when his brother lowered his chin. This time he did not try to add anything to it. He let it last as long as it lasted and got up.

The old man raised his head as Martino passed him.

"Leaving?"

"I'm going back."

Martino held out his hand. The boatman wiped two fingers on his knee and shook it without getting up. The skin was rough near the nails, warm in his palm. They said goodbye and Martino took the path uphill.

Halfway up he stopped to let a man come down with an empty sack on his shoulder. He looked down at the worksite. The beams cast shadows on the bank; a rolled-up shirt had been left between them. The bridge could not yet be crossed. The old man had gone back to the boat, and a reflection from the water passed over the lower part of his trousers.

Martino went on. He walked along the edge of the white road, avoiding the bigger stones. He thought of the lime under the porch, where it had to be kept dry, and of Nino, who would come

to work on the wall. He could get the stones ready before he arrived. He did not have to wait for his father to ask him.

At the first poplars he heard a cart on the road behind him. He moved aside and stayed in the grass until it passed. A loose end of rope hung over the sideboard and dragged in the dust. He watched the cart move away, then started walking again. He was not going at the same speed: the cart disappeared around the bend, and Martino stayed in the shade for a little longer.

When he saw the house, there was already a light in the kitchen window. His father was under the porch, bent over the tools, looking for something. His mother came out to the threshold, covered her arms with her shawl, and called to her husband. Bertoni straightened up; he was holding an empty bucket. He hung it on a peg before turning toward her.

Martino reached the gate without them hearing him. His mother was the first to see him. She did not ask where he had been; she only moved one foot, leaving the doorway clear.

“I’ll get you some soup.”

“I’m coming,” he replied.

He lifted the gate so the wood would not scrape the earth. He closed it behind him, lowered the latch into the ring, and joined his father in front of the kitchen. They went in together. Before sitting down, Martino went to wash his hands.