

Extract from Francesca Sanvitale's

L'uomo del parco (The Man in the Park)

translation Denise Formica

*Francesca Sanvitale is a contemporary Italian writer whose narratives have been critically well-received both in Italy and in other European countries where they have been translated. She was born in Milan in 1928 and at the age of twelve moved with her family to Florence where she later undertook a degree in Italian Literature, graduating in 1952. She has worked for many years as a journalist, both in print and television and has many other publications – including short stories and essays on a range of contemporary European writers – as well as prestigious literary prizes to her credit. Her first novel *Il cuore borghese* was published in 1972 and her other major novels are, in chronological order, *Madre e figlia* (1980), *L'uomo del parco* (1984), *Verso Paola* (1991), *Il figlio dell'impero* (1993) and *L'ultima casa prima del bosco* (2003). While two of her novels have been translated into English, *L'uomo del parco* has yet to be made available for the Anglo-American market. The following translation of some pages of *L'uomo del parco* characterise Ms. Sanvitale's ongoing narrative project: that reality is always mediated by both history and personal experience.*

L'uomo del parco is divided into four sections. The translated passage is taken from the first of these and exemplifies the postmodernist techniques which characterise Ms. Sanvitale's style. In particular, the excerpt highlights how the writer introduces the notion of plural worlds to represent Giulia's fragmented identity as well as to reflect her own concern that reality can only be constructed retrospectively through the many fragmentary realities of the present. More than anywhere else in the text, the role played by language in the creation of our identities is highlighted as we follow Giulia's interiorised dialogues within the wider framework of a surrealist silence. Through a labyrinth-like textual strategy (both chronologically and metaphorically), the text relates the struggles of the narrated self to emerge from the state of alienation in which she finds herself following her abandonment by her husband Pietro and her subsequent loss of identity.

The translated passage begins in a frozen world – the Enchanted City – part Leningrad and part Rome. Giulia wanders the city parks, lost in an internal mono-

logue of fantasy and delirium, until one day she happens upon Tommaso, a complete stranger who invites her confidence with his reflective, reassuring manner. Establishing communication with him gives Giulia the courage to revisit her personal history and thus begins a journey towards a reconstruction of self and identity, represented metaphorically by the Spring thaw in the physical world. Her attachment to Tommaso has turned into love but these sentiments are not reciprocated. (The translation is published courtesy of Francesca Sanvitale.)

THE ENCHANTED CITY

Emptiness, nothing but emptiness! It pervaded the building where Giulia lived; floor after floor, and on every floor, suites of rooms which gave onto one another – all empty. During the brief summers, the perennially cool sun illuminated them with a wan light. With the September breeze, the dust flew and resettled behind straggling pieces of papers or heaps of old planks. The murmurs of spirits could be heard, pleading to be reborn or to simply come into being. The arrival of autumn saw flurries of dead leaves fall from the branches of the birches and gust inside to slowly moulder with the passage of time.

In that interminable winter, the icicles hanging on the windows transformed the panes into grilles looking over the frozen landscape. Inside, old silks sighed and pale arabesques discoloured around the cornices; cherubs and maidens trembled among garlands of roses in bas-relief. A soft, powdery dust covered them and a gilded thread ran the length of the pale wood. The sun's rays occasionally revealed clouds which appeared to be painted on the walls; they seemed timeless however and not of this world.

The city outside was gloomy, protected by the silence which had settled over it. Sheets of ice concealed the sunken river.

Violent brush strokes of indigo and violet stood out in this vast whiteness: the few arches that the far-reaching bridges extended from one bank to the other. From atop the pillars, stone angels ascended with spread wings, their garments billowing and their arms uplifted as if to control the gales blowing from the North. Their mouths were open and their eyes stared blankly. They were warding off dangers, forewarning the city-dwellers. Those who ventured on foot into the fog, the wind and the ice ran the risk of falling and not rising again, of turning into mounds of bones and flesh where they lay, like dog carcasses.

The fog came in from the swamps and it was said that, in time gone by, the Great Sovereign had decided to build his residence here for the very reason that the place was so ghastly, as if to demonstrate to God and to Nature, his determination to do all that was humanly possible, and even more, to subjugate the creatures and things which belonged to him.

In a single season, a multitude of serfs constructed bridges and buildings and perished. The dome of the cathedral shone brighter than the sun because thousands of artisans climbed to the top to spread the gold compound which was to last until the end of the world. Fatally poisoned, they rolled off the sides and crashed to the ground while others waited, ready to be hauled up onto the scaffolding, higher and higher towards their execution.

Phantasmagorical colonnades, towers, domes, palaces and bridges grew inexorably, much like the spasm of that tortured mind that, in conceiving such architecture, had inexorably disregarded the regulations governing the other cities of the world.

Condemned to be united with his dream come true, like some incredible woman that we can only bring to life in stone, the Great Sovereign took savage delight in traversing his city in a pearl-studded sleigh drawn by black horses. His slender whip snaked across her and betwixt her as, like a man possessed, he struck again and again in a frenzied rapture of solitude and possession.

In the azure palace, the salons and the galleries were full of gifts sent to him by the mighty: a gold-enamelled peacock that screeched in a golden cage; engraved crowns and sceptres of precious metals; silver pitchers and candelabras as tall as horses; decorated carriages; ivory thrones; and exquisitely beautiful Madonnas painted by Italian artists.

The thought of crossing that royal threshold was terrifying – as if being blinded was the price of so great an honour – and this dread persisted long after the death of the Great Sovereign.

He himself instilled fear because behind him loomed apocalyptic visions and monsters. His huge body was over two metres in height yet balanced on ballerina-like feet. Legend had it that he could stand upright only if he wore shoes and boots crafted by his own hands, his only means of disguising this perverse weakness.

The courtiers' palaces were endless, the grand boulevards were sumptuous and admirable but by far the city's most sublime feature were its parks.

With every season dew dripped from the grottoes and bushes, crystallising into iridescent droplets in the morning light. The branches of the age-old trees bowed under the weight of the snow.

With the onset of the intense cold the gestures of the statues along the paths and byways seemed enigmatic yet practical. Sometimes hands pressed against a body, sometimes they were uplifted with palms forward, shielding a face or, yet again, closed across a heart. Immobilised on their countenances was a desire to flee or, perhaps, the beguiling vision of

something never before witnessed.

The naked bodies of the women with tumescent pubes and arching backs were draped by garments which the imprudence caused by bewilderment or anguish had allowed to slip – women taken alive and imprisoned in marble. The men, too, were the same: heavy cloaks, high foreheads unencumbered by hair which had been twisted back, haughty mouths hungry for breath.

Walking in the midst of such an enchanted people, it was possible to imagine that the houses were inhabited by others like them, frozen at that moment in time when something which defied description had appeared.

In squares and streets, canals and palaces, on bridges swept by the terrifying whistling of the wind and around the lugubrious fort which concealed the prison cells and the torture chambers, it was whispered that the inhabitants of the sublime frozen city were endowed with a knowledge denied to other human beings, that something terrible was locked inside those concealed hearts, in the marble and the gold.

Giulia slept and woke in a time that knew no measure.

More than anything else, she slept and in her torpor she was seized by incomprehensible deliriums. If she opened her eyes, the illusions were still there, murmuring, yet not encroaching on the rational part of her mind. They were her companions. On rising, she was unable to distinguish whether it was dusk or daybreak because the luminosity that filtered through the windows was always the same.

She stared at the milky shadows and said to herself “What a winter!” Then she leaned her forehead against the windowpane and told herself things that had never happened; she gave herself childish chores: “That’s a good girl, try to do this and this” – and meekly performed them.

On her bedroom wall there was a pastel depicting a stretch of dark, rough sea and overhead a seagull in flight. An arching, transparent sky was infused with a yellowish hue given off by the hidden sun.

Giulia let herself be engulfed by the space between the two convex arcs, between sky and water, together with the seagull. In order to experience the sea, she needed only to drift between the two colours.

She was alone; there was no-one else in her life. When sleep overtook her she made peace with her dreams. She whispered “My darling” with nothing and no-one in mind. Moreover, her dreams continued even if she awoke, she continued to watch them unfold.

Time moved forward and backward at will and the phantasms which shrouded her days, the unique scenes which passed before her eyes, in part protected her heart from the spell which had caused the world to become ice-bound.

Looking out through the frosted window one day, she thought she saw a shadow moving behind a similarly clouded window directly opposite hers.

The shadow came and went; it came closer only to disappear back into the room.

She wished for it to be a man and in an instant she instinctively knew that it was, indeed, a man. She thought she could distinguish his features and clothes. His long wavy hair was brushed backwards; he was dressed in a white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck.

The man was turned sideways, as if he were posing for photo identification or a drawing of his face. At these times, he appeared to be looking at something that she could not see or listening to somebody. Other times he paced the room, silhouetted by a wavering light that made him seem a shadow thrown by a magic lantern.

But more often than not, and for varying periods of time, he stood stock still and stared at her with the same fixedness with which she stared at him. Then Giulia's mind became completely blank; the silence of her surroundings was replaced by the hush of two human beings whose eyes had locked together. The distance between them vanished and when, with a sudden start, she became aware of the spell she was under and moved away from the window, she felt certain that she had brushed against him.

Afraid of these baffling emotions which she felt, she concocted "the stranger game." To pass the time when he didn't appear, she invented questions: was he tall? thin or fat? young or old? was he alone? where did he go when he went walking? And, of course, the question which caused her the greatest anguish: did he see her as she saw him?

She began to venture out. She accustomed herself to watching his building.

When the cold failed to force her back inside her apartment, she went as far as the canals, the boulevards, the squares, walking at random, forced on by her own anxiety. From the riverbank, she contemplated the golden dome and the tragic fort, but she found only the reflection of her own despair. The indigo and pink reflections on the ice made her eyes brim with heartrending delight and the wind which lifted her hems and teased the combs from her hair was no different from the wind which billowed under the marble garments of the angels on the bridge and raised their arms. Like those ecstatic virgins of bygone days, she too would have liked to run through the city, buffeted by both reason and passion.

Emboldened and cautiously retracing her steps, she walked in increasingly widening circles. She ventured into areas where she had never before dared to go; to the very walls of the fort and to the imperial parks, scattered throughout the city. Her one fixed desire was to chance upon the stranger

and to recognise him.

Every time she went out his windows were in darkness. The glass reflected the clouds. She tried to establish some pattern in his movements but without success. The candle was burning and she imagined a love being consummated over there in a hidden alcove. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the two bodies entwined but in her heart of hearts she was sure that he lived alone and that he watched her: that his days were full of thoughts of her just as her days were filled with him.

Seized by an irrational anxiety, she rushed from one place to another. At times the stranger seemed very real, at other times an illusion. Meanwhile, something extraordinary was happening: once the delirium, the confused images had ceased, she fell asleep quickly and dreamt of herself in a black dress, her dark hair caught at the nape with a series of little combs, her mantle trimmed with fur. It was a duplicate of Giulia, however, a tiny foetus-like duplicate, adrift in a space without dimensions, folded in a white, astral womb.

It was a strange dream. So too was the spasmodic desire which accompanied it: to transmogrify, through sheer will-power, this tiny woman until she was an exact match for Giulia herself and they could become a single individual. But the tiny Giulia was distant and elusive.

Her mind became a hub of unappeased and frenzied desires which she found impossible to reconcile. All that she saw was new and she wanted it to be hers forever, just as she had with the stranger's behaviour. The colours, the sounds and the spaces of the city were so wondrous that she would have liked to re-create them in some enchanted theatre for her eyes and her memory to enjoy. She wanted to name and remember everything: stretches of road, shapes of plants, decorations on buildings.

Her desire to duplicate external reality and make it her own exercised a peculiar power over her, like that of a promise extracted in return for a favour. With this in mind, she began to list and describe what she had seen during the day in a small notebook, shaking with helpless rage when she was unable to capture every detail.

She wept with fatigue; the task of expressing in writing all that she saw and preserved in her mind was impossible. When this happened, she stopped in the squares and in the streets and, with her pencil, copied the shapes which had struck her most vividly; or else she stood in the parks, where the humidity and cold kept everyone else indoors, amidst the community of statues immobilised in their human gestures.

Until her fingers became purple she continued in her attempts to steal their profiles, the folds in their mantles, the nudity of their breasts and shoulders and if just once she succeeded, she felt close to the stranger be-

cause every effort to welcome and recreate the external world was made in an attempt to welcome him and to bring him closer.

She beckoned to him with her every gesture, with her days and also her nights. She did things which she was ordered to do, without understanding why. She would run to the window; if the stranger was there, she would think that he had been waiting for her. Deep down, she was uncertain if he really existed.

She was seated on a bench bordering a path, engrossed by everything she saw, shifting her gaze to follow the thud of snow falling off branches. She had not even noticed that there was a man seated on the bench opposite, which was strange, because there was little more than a metre between the two.

She was forced to look him straight in the eyes. He too was observing her with an irritating intensity. His pale eyes were wide open and, consequently, his stare seemed a little too penetrating, almost as if this scientific scrutiny were a symptom of some ailment. He was watching others to see who they were but, by the same token, soliciting something for himself.

Giulia looked straight into those clear, unfathomable eyes, the attentive gaze. His beard was auburn and curly, rebellious like his hair. He seemed young, about thirty. His clothes were smart and his cloak was made from a good fabric. Judging from his upper body, she came to the conclusion that he was not very tall. His hands were those of a man who had toiled the land.

"What's your name?" the man asked candidly.

"Giulia," she said.

"Do you live in our city or somewhere faraway?"

"I live here, but I come from faraway," Giulia replied tonelessly.

These words were said without much thought, but they were true. Her past had been lost before the onset of winter and she no longer remembered when it had begun. She felt herself drawn towards the places which lay beyond the great cold where previously she had lived her life and towards the real events that she had probably lived through.

"I, too, live here," said the man, "and come from a much warmer place."

Giulia studied him closer: there was something about him which made him similar to the other inhabitants of the city, something about the despair in his eyes. He was different and exotic, as if he had just sat down here, in the cold, after having travelled across kilometre after kilometre of deathly hot desert. She didn't like him. She was annoyed and upset.

"You," she said, "have no right to be so personal."

The man smiled and nodded.

"You're right. I beg your pardon. I won't do it again."

He pulled out his pipe and began to fill it, oblivious to her presence. Giulia studied his every movement and when smoke began to rise from the pipe, she felt an overwhelming bliss.

"It must be wonderful to smoke a pipe," she murmured enviously.

The man agreed wholeheartedly.

"It is indeed. It is indeed." He concentrated on pulling rhythmically on the pipe, one puff after another.

After some time, the man stood up abruptly, saying "I must go" and Giulia became aware that she had talked incessantly: she had told him things about herself but she was unable to recall what she had said.

Her throat was parched. She was disappointed and upset that he was leaving, that he was abandoning her. She stood up too, bowing slightly. Her impression of him now that he stood erect was quite the opposite of what she had thought when he had been seated. He was not at all fatherly and reassuring: he was, rather, just a sturdy man whose thoughts were focused on his own life, not on casual encounters in snow-covered parks.

Giulia moved in the opposite direction to him, looking for the way home but it proved a difficult task. She pressed her hands together; she searched left and right, but to no avail. She crossed deserted squares, bowed beneath a wind which raised flurries of snowflakes.

This experience was not new to her; the malady of forgetfulness was in her nature. The streets and all senses of direction had become magically and mysteriously twisted, losing all definition until the very moment in which she, at her wit's end, enveloped by fog, fainting and giddy, finally managed to reach home.

When she arrived at the entrance to her building, she was struck by a thought: could the man in the park possibly be the much-longed-for stranger? She raised her eyes to his darkened windows. If it was him, her winter game was over; all hope was lost because she had turned him away.

She stumbled through the empty rooms, trembling and nauseous as her tears flowed, and she threw herself upon the bed. In the middle of the night, she ran to the window; the stranger was there staring fixedly before him. Then she allowed herself to be drawn into his imaginary gaze and consoled herself with the hope that tomorrow or the next day she would come to know the truth.

She never met the man with the red beard in the park again. Once more she began walking, whispering to herself and repeating the names of things that she saw, touching and sketching the arching branches of the age-old trees. Occasionally she lifted her face and, staring into the dis-

tance, she straightened her neck like a heron scenting a shift in the breeze. Now, right now, he should have appeared to make her life complete and her happiness seem commonplace. Instead there was the lonely whistle of the wind and the soft sound of freshly falling snow.

Time passed. She forgot him. She didn't seek him out; she had no need for his unsophisticated company.

Stored in her memory was an impression of eyes dilating to reflect hers in a special way and in the process losing some of their own strength and identity.

Surrounded by the beauties of the city, doubled up and squeezing her temples between her fists, she began to sob from sheer loneliness. Her dream had been to transmogrify the tiny woman into her own size but the opposite was happening. When she was awake she would have liked to shrink until she was just like a tiny bird, a pebble. Her spirit likewise had become a sigh which left her on the slightest pretext.

She was absorbed in studying the stranger at his misted window. She automatically transposed the face of the man she had met in the park onto the motionless silhouette.

She began to undress one day to see if such eccentric behaviour would provoke any change. Slowly unbuttoning her dress and revealing her shoulders and breasts, loosening her hair in front of the window, she became aroused herself; her fingers were burning as if the frosted panes were a man's body. Brushing against the window, her nipples had become hard and erect; she dared only graze them lightly with her wrists, keeping her hands away from her body. She continued, however, to roam around the room naked and then, once again, she leant against the window.

Certainly, the stranger looked at her in the same way that she looked at him, as if to possess her completely but without touching her. Even the icy pane made her ecstatic with pleasure. It was as if by black magic everything her skin touched was transformed into an impression of the hand of the man who stood, immobile, in his own room. And so Giulia's torments took a further turn: her desires found no root in reality. In bed she murmured, "My darling," but the man she was calling was not there. In her sleepless vigil, she saw the body of a ghost – her own. Naked, slender and smooth; she wanted to possess that young girl who retreated into nothingness in the face of increasing passion. She thought that this image of herself was the reality she desired and that, in order to reach the stranger, she would first of all, have to possess her.

Her body became a hub of paths; shivers coursed through it. Her skin was at the mercy of invisible cupping glasses straining towards a non-existent body and sexual desire gripped her belly which quivered, empty,

secreted between her knees and her arms.

In her dreams, murky, muddy waters flowed up the steps of a magnificent square in a sun-lit city. These flights of stairs, spread wide like the thighs of a woman making love, struggled upwards towards an obelisk and a church.

There was often a clear blue haze outside. The wind would often cause the melting snow to fall from the trees. The black waters which appeared in her dreams also lay glinting among the ice. The oblique rays of a wan, lifeless sun ventured through the clouds which raced out of sight, only to be replaced by others, leaving behind large and limpid vacuums.

She saw him again, at the same place she had met him before in the park, and she stopped. He took his pipe from his mouth and smiled at her. Giulia casually offered him her hand.

"How are you?" he asked.

He recognised her; his manner was friendly. His beard was a chestnut colour, short and smooth; his deep-set eyes surrounded by full, fleshy cheeks.

Giulia's reply was confident. "I'm well, and you?"

They sat, facing each other, on the two benches bordering the narrow path. Giulia sat stiffly, keeping her hands out of sight. "You're always smoking," she murmured.

He nodded. "It's something I enjoy."

Giulia nodded too. She bowed her head. Then she lifted it again.

"I often dream about water flowing upstream ... and myself."

She dared not add anything else. The man removed his pipe from his mouth and looked at her with astonishment.

"Haven't you noticed that the thaw has come?"

"You're right." She hadn't been aware of it and added, justifying herself and protesting at the same time, "I'm alone though!"

To her shame, her breath seemed to have stamped her words in mid-air. Her features froze in an expression of amazement, her mouth gaped half-open. She had raised her hand and it too hung there, suspended. She quickly lowered it to wipe a tear from her cheek and glanced around. The snow beneath the fir trees lay in the shadows but around the benches, the soil was beginning to appear and a pale sun shimmered on the murky puddles. She had been completely oblivious, she was alone.

He had rested his arms on his knees.

"You're not alone. I'm here."

Giulia began to laugh from embarrassment. Another tear slid quickly down her cheek and fell into her palm.

"What are you saying?" she said irritably, "You're a complete

stranger!”

He had again leaned back against the bench and now he retreated into his shell. Even his eyes became blank and motionless.

Meanwhile Giulia’s mind had become like a room full of fragments, ideas, and incidents, even bodies and heads, juxtaposed together, pieces of an enormous puzzle.

“I’ve just thought of something that I’d like to tell you,” she said confidently, despite herself.

“And I’d like to hear it,” he replied and Giulia began to talk.

The room was damp. The pale reflection of the street lamps filtered through the windows. Here and there, a faint glow illuminated the building across from hers but the stranger’s window was in darkness.

She struck a match and immediately the flame threw the wavering shadow of the candle onto the wall. She opened the trunk full of old forgotten things, some of which she had never ever seen. She thrust her hands inside. She felt a few objects rising to the surface as if from a well. Her hands delved without finding anything and so she probed further and further. She looked: her hands were gone, swallowed up by the contents of the trunk. They ceased to exist until she pulled them back towards the room.

She remained seated on the floor in front of the open trunk. The candle flame sputtered. She ignored that particular fact, allowing herself to be overcome by a sense of anger that twisted her features. Her anger was directed at the man in the park, his blank face, his stocky, thickset body and his coarse clothing.

The window grew dark and Giulia again knelt before the trunk, thrusting her hands down until she grasped a biscuit tin tied with an old string. On the lid, a chubby little girl wearing a velvet cap was surrounded by budding roses.

She pulled out a pile of postcards which she then spread across the floor: there was a statue, a *piazza* in Rome with an obelisk, a village by the sea and the photo of a country house. Then out came a suede pouch and after that, a squashed and battered cardboard box. Then, an old book. On the cover, mounted knights were pictured prancing in front of a castle, lances at the ready.

She studied these objects absent-mindedly. Their meanings pursued each other across her memory and, as soon as she had deciphered them, they fled. Closing the trunk, she abandoned everything on the floor.

When she went out, she was met by the fog and the pale outlines of branches, houses, coaches and the occasional person. There was not a soul either entering or leaving the park. Her bench was vacant, as were the others. There was no sign of the man.

She waited and grew chill. She thought about other things so as not to dwell on her disappointment; she tried to distract her mind while she wandered aimlessly, admiring the statues which she had already admired so many times.

For the first time, the statues did not appeal to her much. A kitten miaowed and emerged a short distance from where she stood, its tiny silhouette outlined against the darkness of a wooded grove. Its ears were straight and pointed, its eyes sparkled and its velvety little paws turned delicately outwards. She approached it with the idea of stroking it or maybe even taking it with her but the kitten vanished.

Even the cat, the only other living thing in the park, ran away from her. She had no wish to allow herself to be carried away by her disappointment. Maybe the man in the park would come. She could neither sketch nor observe her surroundings while she wandered since everything was shrouded in mist, and so she began to muse.

Would she, of all people, be able to explain the meaning of love? How is it that this feeling can defy definition or, once experienced, be forgotten and even dismissed as foolish? What is the difference between loving and not loving? Or between loving a man or a woman rather than a cat or a child or a thing or a house or oneself? Or even a city?

The time passed as she reflected and, although spirits from her past surfaced in her mind, she was unable to evoke love.

It was not vital that her knowledge be complete or eternal. If, in the past, she had experienced love, some trace should surely have remained, even if today she was unaware of it. However, her curiosity remained and she continued to wonder: what is love? What difference would it make to me if I were loved?

Two young people appeared from out of the fog. The girl had long, blond, wavy hair that framed her face and cascaded down her back. The boy's features were child-like: he had a rosy, beardless complexion, full, fleshy lips and eyes that were locked into hers.

They had stopped and were standing together; they had drawn close to each other but did not embrace, almost as if just being near was enough to make them oblivious to the world around them, to winter, to Giulia whose every step brought her closer so that she would soon brush by them. They gazed at each other, unable to look away, one remove from reality, in the

wings of a theatre where the mysterious delights of intimacy had taken centre stage.

The boy took the girl's hand. Giulia stopped and stared at the two hands which were the only sign of life round about. The kitten miaowed but she did not turn her head, captivated, almost shocked by what she was witnessing.

The fingers of the girl's hand rested lightly on the back of his, pressing delicately against his skin while the other, somersaulted sweetly like a dolphin in his cupped palm. Their palms then pressed together, their fingers entwined and their joined hands throbbed in unison.

She took her eyes away. She recognised the signs of mutual attraction, of the familiarity between their bodies; she was intruding on their privacy and she felt ashamed of her own desires. "Never again," she resolved instantly.

The fog was damp and the man was not in the park. She went home. He had abandoned her and was not interested in what she had to say.

A dull pain which she could not explain forced her, sobbing, to her bed. She rebelled with all her strength; she was alone then, friendless, with no-one to whom she could confide her thoughts, alone and orphaned. There would never again be anyone to console her. How could she have thought that the man might have felt the need to see her again? Nothing that she imagined was true.

She staggered. She leaned against the window. The stranger was not there. She stared at the pipe on the small table; she had lost her desire to smoke. Her body ached as did her neck and hands: her throat hurt. She preferred to sob because at least she could hear the sound of her tears. Maybe he had gone for a walk somewhere else just to avoid meeting her. She had to go back to the odd, distant behaviour that she had abandoned.

She rushed to the window and waited; the fog vanished as the evening lights came on, the moon and the stars appeared and a light shone in the stranger's window. A shadow crossed backwards and forwards. It was him, he was there. Seeing him released the tension in her body and relieved her of the disappointment she had felt at not meeting the man in the park. She thought he was looking at her. A feeling of jubilant elation, of revenge, turned into unbridled euphoria. This was love; on the other side of the empty street, he too, was likely gripped by a similar passion.

Like the blaze of a fire, this euphoria died away and a great heaviness fell on her heart. She stared at the things which lay strewn on the ground. She lay down on the bed. It would be better if she never got up again. She attempted sleep. When it was summoned, it came to her like a faithful but toadying servant, a devil at her beck and call. Come it did, and kept her for

who knows how long. Upon opening her eyes, she became aware of excruciating pains shooting through her neck and her legs. She was unable to get up.

Outside, the day was clear with an opaque sun glazing the roofs. She tried to stand up. The room spun and she could hear whistling and thumping noises in her head. Her eyes could barely make out the things around her. Although she was hungry she could not get her bearings. She went back to bed and lay motionless.

She saw the park, the empty bench, the cat with the glittering eyes, the seated man and the shadow of the stranger at the window opposite. She focused her thoughts on him. This shadow was the only real thing in her life. She lay in this delirium for hours, her eyes fixed on vague outlines, points and stars.

After a while she got up to eat and afterwards, picked up the box tied with string. She put it on the table. Night had fallen and she lit the candlestick.

She knew that box so well; it had been kept in one of her mother's drawers. She untied the string and found masses of letters inside. The stamps were faded and the addresses were testimony to a nomadic life: warm climes and cold. Her father's handwriting, sharp and elongated, had a devilish flourish to it and the envelopes bore dates of years long gone, when she had been merely a child. Some sheets had no envelope and had been written by her mother, in a large, clear, round hand, typical of a well-brought-up young girl.

She did not stop to consider those who had been her soon-hated parents. The sheets of fine paper came to her like mysterious documents of a fantastic reality where the dead and the living mingled together and exchanged roles: times that she had not witnessed.

She turned the wax-sealed envelopes over in her hands, unable to come to make sense of this miracle. The past was waiting to be reborn into the present. This sorcery had been cunningly contrived by her mother who had stuck the torn edges back together and sealed them before she died. "Be very careful!" admonished those envelopes closed so scrupulously, "here lies ..."

Giulia's hand froze. In the darkness illuminated by the flickering flames she saw two old, ghostly enemies, her parents, whose only wish was to drain her of all her feelings, all her past. She was aware of their presence, but she could not feel her own. Two lovers, like the young couple she had met in the park. Love was everywhere...

She was surprised to discover that the morning was crystal clear. The sky was bright, the cold air motionless. The sun's rays were dazzling, reflecting brilliant hues off the snow. The rainbow had stolen away from the sky and roamed amongst the city's buildings.

Once in the street, her body was seized by a vitality which left her breathless. Brief but intense bouts of dizziness hit her as the blood raced to her cheeks. Her heartbeat was regular and then it stopped and her life hung in the balance, or it beat so frantically that she could feel it pounding in her neck, her temples and her wrists.

She looked at her hands; they were trembling for no reason. She walked fitfully, running when she felt exhilarated or when the physical need seized her, then stopping, hit by a depressing weakness which reduced her to tears. She couldn't decide where her walk should take her and, anyway, she was in a state not unlike the madness often described in some types of old-fashioned poems.

She was amazed to realise that people had returned to the deserted city. Everyone had come out of the formerly silent and dark houses and people were bustling about, nonchalantly chatting to each other. The air was full of bells tinkling, horses neighing and children playing.

She reached the Winter Palace and saw streams of people trudging pathways through the snow which covered that immense, unfillable space. They had reclaimed that terrifying expanse and she was walking with them; she no was different to them.

She turned towards the river. Maybe she would catch a glimpse of some skaters.

When she looked over the parapet she realised that nature had prepared something better. Floes of ice were being swept by swirling, foaming vortices under the pillars of the bridge. The sun shone on the statues of the angels, whose arms were raised triumphantly over the amazing spectacle.

So this was the thaw! It was impossible to express, impossible to describe without imagining a maelstrom which suddenly possesses our bodies and pulsating and spinning within, makes us feel hot and cold at the same time: that makes us roll like boulders down a mountain, wetting us, drying us, drowning us in light only to plunge us into the deepest recesses of frozen gorges.

White whales warred, shouldering each other aside, as the current carried them under the arches, successive pods forming in their wake. Cracks resounded as the floes splintered. Once a crevice appeared a vortex of water quickly followed, gushing up from the chasm as another block of ice floated away. It was like the terrifying noise of trees as they crash

groaning to the ground. Fire, not ice, caused age-old trunks to burn and explode.

Surrounded by the ice's crackling and crashing and the roaring of the eddying waters, Giulia watched the stationary, inanimate sheets become movement, abyss, life itself. Beauty lay in the fact that everything was changing, was being renewed in the world's melting-pot.

She wept. Hot tears ran down her cheeks and she trembled, feeling humbled. Others were pointing towards the river. The bells rang out. Dear God! Even the blood in her veins was thawing, pulsating. The sun had penetrated her body. She felt ill and frail. Finally, she understood what had happened. What she was feeling was love.

She thought of him. She remembered him standing at her door and the moment in which he had hesitated and, looking at her, had said: "It's two o'clock!" That was the instant, that was the moment when she should have stood up on tip-toe and gathered him to her in a passionless embrace. She should have held him close until everything she felt as she stood before the river overflowed into him. And he, too, would have discovered the same passion.

Her open hands stretched out towards the water like miniature oars, bulkheads of her frailty, a poor defence against the emotions which tormented her. She had always loved him. The stranger appeared on the other side of the window and left immediately. The shadow had become a man in flesh and blood.

Did her love her, though? Every moment of every day of her life, her every action, her every thought and her every fantasy would continue to revolve around this question.

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