



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in  
Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

Tesi di Laurea di traduzione letteraria

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## **Translating Leonard Michaels's New York City**

The rendering of multiculturalism and multilingualism of Leonard Michaels's short stories into Italian translation

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### **Anno Accademico**

2016 / 2017

## **Abstract**

This thesis deals with the translation into Italian of multicultural and multilingual New York City, as portrayed by American writer Leonard Michaels.

The author of this thesis has been concerned with delivering a literary translation of selected passages from *The Collected Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) which could effectively render the cultural and linguistic stratification of his work.

The first chapter provides a brief biography of the author and the historical and literary context in which he lived and published, in order to better frame his work.

The second chapter describes the world of Leonard Michaels's short stories, focusing on his diverse characters, who belong to different cultures and speak different languages, and on New York City, chosen as the environment where these cultures merge to generate a new one. Excerpts from the stories illustrate this complex scene and the techniques employed to describe it.

The third chapter illustrates the translation process of this panorama into Italian language and culture, with a focus on the common traits between Michaels's and the Italian vision of New York which made the translation possible, and on the speech of the characters.

In the fourth chapter, the parallel translation of some short stories is provided.

The final part is devoted to considerations about the work done.

In the appendix, thoughts and opinions on Leonard Michaels's life and work from Jesse Michaels, Leonard's son, are included in the form of a brief interview.

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## Introduction

"But we, being children of the great age of transportation and communication, have contacts with many languages, many faiths, and many nations. We are multicultural. [...] Multicultural people are just like unicultural people. They develop faith and loyalty and patriotism too: faith in science, loyalty to world organization, and patriotism for mankind."

Edward Haskell, *Lance: A Novel about Multicultural Men* (1941)

In the present days, in our era of globalization, instant contact between different people worldwide is possible, and it is constantly sought after and achieved. However, the possibility of contact does not automatically imply the possibility of an effective communication. Since the contents are necessarily created by people of a specific culture, who are influenced by a unique set of characteristics and way of thinking, the message might be encoded by a system which belongs uniquely to that culture, in effect preventing a different culture to understand its meaning. If the other culture lacks the means to decrypt the culturally codified message, communication becomes impossible, even though contact might happen. For instance, an effective communication between different peoples might be prevented by peculiar cultural identities, traditional elements, and moral values, which might be unknown or alien to the other culture. It is also the case of language, of course, which is one of the human abilities that are most capable of expressing the identity of people and of peoples, and therefore is also one of the most evident differences between peoples. Language

erects barriers that are often difficult to overcome, creating divergencies and conflicts supposedly legitimated by I-don't-understand's.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, now more than ever, a strong will is rising not to tear down, but to overcome these barriers.<sup>2</sup> A torn down barrier implies an unnatural and ugly deletion of differences, the flattening of two distinctive and unique cultural expressions into a single, homogeneous one; to carry on the metaphor, translation is a ladder, one of the means thanks to which one can go over the barrier to partake in the other culture, still maintaining the different realities separate. Now more than ever, translation can provide knowledge of the other; it can allow people to share things from which otherwise they would be excluded; it can bring to a much more common sense of belonging to a whole made of exceptional units, beautifully different one from the other. In order for translation to perform this function, the translator's duty is to not only convert a text from a language to another, but also to act as a mediator between two worlds, to a greater or lesser extent culturally different from each other. For this reason, the cultural elements included in the original text have to be rendered not only in the language, but also in the culture of the public to whom the translation is destined, in such a way that every element – geographical and cultural features, linguistic and social elements – can be firstly expressed in the target language, then grasped, understood, and interiorized by the new audience. A good translator must identify the complexity

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting analysis on the meeting and clash of different languages is carried out by Sherry Simon, who investigates the coexistence of different languages within the urban environment of what she defines as geographically, culturally, and linguistically divided cities, and stresses the risk of this relation to become conflictual. See Simon (2008-2009 : 1-11 and 2012 : XV-XIX; 1-20).

<sup>2</sup> Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics* provides a lively analysis of how bilingual people interact with monolingual people within a monolingual environment, and playfully highlights how this kind of conflict can bring along an opportunity of cultural exchange and growth.

of the original text, its linguistic and cultural stratification, and must express the same complexity in terms that are understandable for the target audience. The abovementioned flattening and simplification are symptoms of a translation which is not necessarily bad, but lacks in exhaustiveness, not voicing everything the original text has to say. We do not claim to be able to provide a perfect translation in this sense, but will operate to full potential keeping this idea in mind, with the goal of doing justice to the original text by expressing all of his complexity and fineness.

Object of this work is the translation of selected passages from *The Collected Stories* by Leonard Michaels, contemporary Jewish-American writer, active from 1969 to 2003. A controversial author of bizarre stories and insightful non-fictional essays, he was quite popular during the early years of his career, being object of both negative and positive criticism. Michaels was then partially forgotten by the American mainstream literary panorama during the Eighties and Nineties, probably because his gruesome depiction of the sexual rampage in the Sixties' America was of little interest to "post AIDS-generation" (Simpson, n.p.<sup>3</sup>). Despite this, his work has always been greatly appreciated by several critics and literature lovers alike, and he is still considered "one of the strongest and most arresting prose talents of his generation."<sup>4</sup> After the publication of *The Collected Stories* and of the volume collecting his non-fiction prose *The Essays of Leonard Michaels*, the author has resumed attracting the attention of critics; many even

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this work, the abbreviation 'n.p.' has been used for in-text quotes of online sources (articles, reviews, and essays) with no page number indication. While the author of the source is stated, the address of the resource is given in the work cited section.

<sup>4</sup> Larry McMurtry, reviewing *The Collected Stories*.

hope for his name to be redeemed and included amongst the great of Jewish-American fiction.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, even after the rerelease of his work on the American and British markets, his name has never shone on the Italian literary market: solely his second novel, *Sylvia* (1992) has only recently been translated and published by Adelphi Edizioni (Milano, 2016) and fairly appreciated by audience and critics.<sup>6</sup>

Our objective is to deliver a possible translation of a part of Leonard Michaels's literary production, and to highlight the peculiarities which can make this author extremely interesting for the Italian audience. The short stories and excerpts we have chosen to render into Italian translation are all set in New York, the author's native city. Despite the fact that the Italian audience is well acquainted with the Big Apple thanks to innumerable representations from a variety of media, the reader of Leonard Michaels's short stories will find an innovative and unusual depiction of the city: through his peculiar sensibility, which will be discussed later on, the author was able to provide a comprehensive view on multicultural and multilingual New York, in which a great variety of different cultures coexist and, sometimes, clash. We will analyze the ways in which these cultures interact and relate to one another, and the literary means with which Leonard Michaels represented these encounters. We have been concerned with delivering a literary translation which could effectively render the style and the linguistic stratification of Michaels's short stories, without levelling down the striking language varieties which color Leonard Michaels's literary world.

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<sup>5</sup> See Simpson (n.p.), Septimus (n.p.), and Bezmogis (2015 : n.p.).

<sup>6</sup> See Pellizzari (n.p.), Turi (n.p.), and Montanaro (n.p.).

The thirteen pieces taken into consideration for our analysis and included in this work belong to different phases of Michaels's career. From Michaels's debut collection, *Going Places*, we have selected excerpts from the stories "City Boy", "Making Changes", "A Green Thought", and the entirety of the stories "The Deal" and "Isaac". From the second collection, *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*, we have selected excerpts from "Murderers", "Eating Out", "Getting Lucky", and "I Would Have Saved Them If I Could". From the collections *To Feel These Things* and *A Girl With A Monkey*, we have selected passages from the stories "Honeymoon" and "Viva La Tropicana". Amongst the previously unreleased pieces, published in *The Collected Stories* as The Nachman Stories, we have chosen to include an excerpt from "Nachman" and the entirety of the story "Cryptology". In the following chapters, we will elaborate on the reasons why these pieces have been relevant for the purposes of our analysis.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters, each one devoted to exploring a different aspect of Leonard Michaels's literary identity. It also shows the process that we have engaged to get in contact with Michaels's sensibility, in order to try and understand his world and effectively convey them into a possible satisfactory Italian translation.

The first chapter will provide a concise biography of the author, in order to better contextualize his activity: we shall explore if and to what extent his Jewish background affected his style and his themes. Considering the themes that drive his prose, we shall contextualize Leonard Michaels's production into what is considered to be the canon for Jewish-American literature.

The second chapter will be an attempt to describe the world of Leonard Michaels's short stories, focusing on the diverse characters, who belong to different cultures and speak different languages. We will also focus on New York City, chosen as the environment where these different cultures meet. We will discuss whether the role of the city in Michaels's vision is that of a melting pot, merging the diverse cultures to create a brand new, shared identity, or if it is seen simply as a battleground where irreconcilable individualities clash. References to the abovementioned stories will be employed to exemplify this complex scene and highlight the techniques used by Michaels to describe it.

The third chapter will illustrate the translation process of this panorama into the Italian language and culture, with a focus on the incredibly variegated speech of the characters. The translation strategies adopted by us to convey Michaels's style will also be explained.

The fourth chapter will be devoted to the results of the research and work conducted: the parallel translation of the short stories and excerpts will be provided.

The final chapter will be devoted to drawing conclusions and voicing considerations about the results of this research.

As first appendix, we will provide two maps of the area of New York City, in which the landmarks and city features mentioned in the stories have been pinpointed. This way, we want to assist the reader in getting a clearer idea of the urban context in which Michaels's characters move, and to locate the area in which the action takes place. As second appendix, a brief interview to Jesse Michaels, Leonard's son, will be provided; Leonard Michaels's life and work,

specifically his spirituality, his connection to cultural minorities, and his relationship with New York City will be addressed.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Leonard Michaels: his life and work**

#### **1.1**

##### **A brief biography**

Leonard Michaels was born in New York City in 1933. His parents were immigrant Polish Jews, who had fled the war to settle on Manhattan's Lower East Side. He was raised in a loving but strict environment, in which economic hardship generated a certain sense of pressure and anxiety. Michaels spoke only Yiddish until the age of five, when he started elementary school – in his autobiographical essays, he recalls that his first introduction to English language and literature came from his mother, who bought a complete set of Charles Dickens fiction and read it for him every day, in the “extraordinary accent” (Michaels in Suplee : n.p.) of a woman who could hardly speak the language.<sup>1</sup>

Leonard Michaels attended the New York High School of Music and Art, wanting to be a painter, but went on to study English Literature at New York University. He received his Bachelor of Arts in 1953, and later got a Master's Degree from the University of Michigan in 1956. Afterwards, he moved to Berkeley to enroll in a Ph.D. program at the University of California, but later resolved to withdraw and dedicate himself entirely to writing.

Once moved back to New York City, he got a teaching job at Paterson State College in New Jersey, and started publishing short stories in literary journals, as

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<sup>1</sup> The entire section of biographical essays in the volume *The Essays of Leonard Michaels* (2009) offers interesting first-hand insight about the author's early life and background culture. In particular, see essays “To Feel These Things” (110-116), “My Father” (132-139), and “My Yiddish” (203-223).

well as on *Playboy* and on *The New Yorker*. During this time, he met and married Sylvia Bloch, with whom he lived a brief and troubled marriage that degenerated into the suicide of the woman in 1963.<sup>2</sup>

After the tragic event, Michaels went back to graduate school and completed his academic studies by earning a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Michigan. This gave him the opportunity to take on a teaching job at the University of California at Davis. In 1969, he published his first collection of short stories, *Going Places*, and later joined the faculty of Berkeley, where he became Professor of English. His second collection of short stories, *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*, was released in 1975. He lived in California with his second wife Priscilla Older and their two sons until 1976, when he divorced her and married his third wife, poet Brenda Hillman, with whom he had a daughter.

Leonard Michaels's first novel, *The Men's Club*, was published in 1981. It was praised by critics and readers alike. The author also wrote the screenplay for the 1986 movie version, which however was not as successful as the original book. His third marriage ended in divorce in the late Eighties.

The author published little over the following years, at least until the Nineties: his second novel *Sylvia* was released in 1992, followed by the collection of essays *To Feel These Things* in the next year. In 1994, Michaels retired from teaching and married Katharine Ogden, with whom he lived between Italy and Berkeley for the last years of his life.

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<sup>2</sup> Leonard Michaels wrote a memoir about his marriage to Bloch and her tragic death. Published for the first time in the 1990 collection *Shuffle*, it was later rewritten and republished in 1992 as the novel *Sylvia*.

The collection *A Girl With A Monkey* was published in 2000, and Michaels was working on new short stories<sup>3</sup> when he died of complications from cancer in 2003.

## 1.2

### ***The Collected Stories***

Object of this analysis is the book *The Collected Stories* by Leonard Michaels, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2008. Editor Katharine Ogden Michaels, who was also the author's fourth wife, gathered in one volume all of Leonard Michaels's short fiction, including the previously unreleased 'Nachman Stories' written in the late Nineties and the early Two Thousands.

The book almost defies formal categorization: some pieces are undoubtedly stories and belong to the category of fiction, but others can be easily classified as historical or philosophical essays. Other short fragments are less easily identifiable, as they appeal to the reader's sensibility and emotion, rather than on sense and logic; these do not tell stories, but appear to fit together in a sort of expressionistic collage.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his career, the themes which propelled Leonard Michaels's writings remained constant: the duality of love and hate as two sides of the same coin, the obsession with sex, madness and depression, and

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<sup>3</sup> These stories were released in *The Collected Stories* for the first time, published as 'The Nachman Stories'.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the line between autobiographical report and fictional narrative is often very blurred in Michaels's production. This is evident if one looks at the features of most of his stories: the setting is the native city of the author; many characters share traits and personality with him; many of the narrated events are based on Michaels's experience. These stories mostly belong to the first and last parts of Michaels's production, and some instances will be presented in the fourth chapter of this thesis. His essays, or what we may call cogitative narrative, which still explicitly draw force and inspiration from Michaels's life or studies, mostly belong to the central phase of his career.

coping with death are *fils rouges* that run throughout the volume, adjusting to situations and assuming varied nuances. Nevertheless, the author adopted different approaches to writing fiction, greatly changing his style and attitude in telling his stories. *The Collected Stories* well exemplifies the above statement, and this section briefly illustrates the most notable shifts and changes. Based on these shifts in style, Michaels's literary career can be divided into three phases: the first phase includes the first and second collections of short stories; the second phase coincides with the collection *Shuffle*; the third phase includes the fiction written from 1993 onward.

The stories from Michaels's bewildering debut collection *Going Places*, originally published in 1969, open the volume. Each piece is a glimpse of contemporary urban existence, and the bizarre situations catapult the reader into Michaels's narrative world. New York City is crudely depicted as a reality where constant upheaval between the dualities that split the world – local and foreigner, man and woman, love and hate, religion and profanity, possession and loss, life and death – influence life. These surreal stories are often permeated by a sense of anxiety which degenerates into obsession, depression, and madness, and heavily influences the style, as we will point out later on. The multiculturality of New York is a significant element in these stories, and the interaction and clash of different cultures and languages emerges as a theme, to which the second chapter of this thesis is dedicated.

The second collection, *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975), besides including deeper philosophical reflection as in "Murderers", deals with the same themes, and addresses them by taking a step in the direction of postmodernism.

Most of the pieces from this second part are fragments held together in a destabilizing and suggestive juxtaposition of images and situations, and this peculiar characteristic has always triggered criticism towards Michaels's writing. With a very *Michaelsian* oxymoron, some defined him as an excellent writer but a terrible storyteller – like a literary craftsman, he carefully polished his stories to find the best word, successfully painting the most vivid images and including the most suggestive rhythms and sounds; at the same time, however, his early stories seem to have no beginning, no developing, and no ending, and to offer no moral and no meaning. To this, Leonard Michaels subtly replied including a typically self-deprecating, but utterly honest statement in his 1981 novel *The Men's Club*:

“Doesn’t matter, [...] I don’t get it either. I could tell other stories that have no point. This often happens to me. I start to talk, thinking there is a point, and then it never arrives. What is it, anyhow, this point? Things happen. You remember. That’s all. If you take a large perspective, you’ll realize there is never a point.”  
(Michaels, 1981 : 69).

An accusation – particularly loathed and strongly rejected by Leonard Michaels – was made by many readers and critics, based on the recurrent theme of eroticism, and on Michaels's depiction of American appetite for and obsession with sex. Beside the fact that male characters in the first two collections (particularly Michaels's recurrent alter-ego, Phillip Liebowitz) operate almost entirely in a sexual context, his representation of women in his stories and in his non-fiction has been referred to as misogynistic. Richard Eder suggests that Michaels, “in fact, he is unable to write of them as women” and portrays them as mere “female opportunities and female provocations” (Eder, n.p.) for the male protagonists. Anatole Broyard, in his savaging review of Leonard Michaels's 1990

collection *Shuffle* on *The New York Times*, described his characters as “adrift” in an empty, emotionless sex, rhetorically wondering, “It’s a failure of imagination, isn’t it, to write about the same thing all the time?” (Broyard, n.p.). However, it is evident for the reader that this is a conscious choice, as Michaels himself admitted in his conversation with Robert Lynch – “I guess in my early stories I was rigorously unsentimental, very much against romanticizing experience; my subject was lust” (Michaels in Lynch, 94-95). Eventually, Michaels resignedly concluded that “almost everything [he wrote was] praised and damned”, sharing some thoughts on his detractors with friend and author David Bezmozgis:

“Often the responses are passionate [...] People get pissed off by things in the stories not because they don’t feel true, but for the opposite reason [...]. Even the sentences, regardless of their meaning, annoy some people because they sound more or less too much achieved, so to speak.”<sup>5</sup>

The central part of *The Collected Stories* and of Leonard Michaels’s career is given by the collection *Shuffle*, which was published in 1990. In these pieces, the presence of New York City as the set for multicultural interaction is not as strong as in previous productions, and we have considered unnecessary to include excerpts from this collection because they would not be pertinent for the purposes of our analysis. *Shuffle* is a rather scattered mixture of varied pieces: some are entries of an autobiographical journal, many seem to be incomplete notes for unwritten stories or essays. It is difficult to even categorize these pieces as narrative and, despite the recurrent themes of love, sex, obsession, and death

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<sup>5</sup> It is extremely interesting to read Leonard Michaels’s own words with regard to his style, his production, and his detractors as well; these can be found in Lynch (94-95), and Bezmozgis (2016 : n.p.). A glimpse of what Michaels’s creative process was like, as described by Leonard’s son Jesse, can be found in Appendix II of this thesis.

being present, the section does not feel cohesive with the rest of the volume, but effectively works as a break before what can be considered as the last part of the collection.

The stories belonging to the section of the volume have been rightly praised as a redeeming comeback for Leonard Michaels's career.<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, we have included some excerpts which will be useful to once again highlight how different cultures interact in Michaels's urban environment, and in general the hectic identity of New York City. While the themes that propel these stories remain the same – love and hate, anxiety, strangeness, life and death – the reader is pleasantly met with a new way of narrating them, both in terms of style (which will be dealt upon later in this thesis) and of emotional maturity. The frantic, dry obsession that characterized Michaels's early production makes way for a more tranquil attitude streaked by a kind of introspective, resigned calmness. The last stories of the volume, grouped under the indication “The Nachman Stories”, are published for the first time in *The Collected Stories*. They are narrated through the eyes of the mathematician Raphael Nachman, who is easily perceived as the complete opposite of Michaels's earlier alter-ego Phillip: it is overtly stated that Nachman's “need for ecstasy was abundantly satisfied” (Michaels, 2008 : 322), and that “he was a strict observer of limits[;] he didn't fool around” (Michaels, 2008 : 370). To the audience, Nachman feels like the new stand-in for an older, more mature Michaels, with whom the reader can easily empathize. Michaels was

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<sup>6</sup>See Lambert (n.p.), Kirsch (n.p.), Lopate (n.p.), and Simpson, (n.p.). Director and writer David Bezmozgis, enthusiastic about the newly captivating narrative style, even resolved to turn the story “Honeymoon” into a movie; sadly, the project did not succeed, but allowed the two authors to get in touch and become friends. See Bezmozgis (2016 : n.p.)

always “experimenting with different ways to tell a story” (Ogden Michaels, in Michaels, 2008 : IX): we can safely state that, in a sense, he was also recounting his own story through great pieces of autobiographical fiction animated by characters bearing similarities with him in their personality, job, passions, or lives.

*The Collected Stories* is a fascinating book, both because it provides a novelized version of the author’s personal life experience, and because it illustrates the literary career of a celebrated artist by testifying his narrative evolution. Most of all, however, it is extremely interesting because it provides a new, multicultural look on a world the reader feels familiar with: Leonard Michaels’s depiction of the varied population of New York City, of today’s society, and of the universal human condition, is destabilizing and utterly enticing, and will be the object of next chapter.

### 1.3

#### **Leonard Michaels within Jewish-American literature**

Many authors and literary critics have voiced their keenness on Leonard Michaels’s writing, and several have expressed the opinion that his work should be included in the corpus of the great Jewish-American fiction. Writer and filmmaker David Bezmozgis, for example, states that Michaels “was part of that great generation of Jewish-American writers” (2015 : n.p.). Writer Mona Simpson even drew a parallel between the Jewish boys on a rooftop in Michaels’s story “Murderers” and the boy from Philip Roth’s *Conversion of The Jews*, referring to the former as a masterpiece that measures up to the latter; she considers that “had [Michaels] been able to work another decade, [...] he’d have seen the

resurrection of his audience and won respect from a new generation, as Philip Roth deservedly has" (n.p.). Daniel Septimus of *The Jerusalem Post* takes a step further, passionately asserting that "Leonard Michaels should never be put on the same pedestal as Philip Roth and Grace Paley, [because] he was unique", and that "he deserves his own" (n.p.). However, we have considered important to investigate how Leonard Michaels's production relates to the Jewish-American literary canon, and, to an extent, to consider if it is legitimate to think that his work should be part of it.

Michaels's work evidently springs from a Jewish cultural background: the linguistic contamination from Yiddish<sup>7</sup> and the references to European Ashkenazi tradition are strong in all of Michaels's production, as we will point out later on. Moreover, almost every piece from *The Collected Stories* involve one or more Jewish characters, obviously moving in a Jewish cultural environment in New York City. With regard to themes, a typically Jewish-American subject than can be detected in Michaels's writings is identity: the characters appear to be facing some kind of struggle with defining their own self. Children of immigrants, much like the author himself was, seem to be blessed with a typically Jewish, protean ability to transform themselves and adapt their identity to the new world.<sup>8</sup> Instances can be found in stories like "City Boy", "Isaac", "Murderers", "Honeymoon", and "Cryptology", from which excerpts have been translated in the fourth chapter of

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<sup>7</sup> In the essay "My Yiddish", included in the collection *The Essays of Leonard Michaels*, the author writes about his relationship with his mother-tongue and the way it affected his writing. This subject will be briefly addressed later in this thesis, in reference to Michaels's peculiar style.

<sup>8</sup> Michaels's characters fortune is varied: some, like Phillip in "City Boy", seem to be able to adapt to the American world; others, like Isaac in the story "Isaac", succumb to the "thousands of misfortunes in New York" (Michales, 2008 : 71).

this thesis. Moreover, some of these characters, such as the protagonists from “Eating Out” and “I Would Have Saved Them If I Could”, even experience a generational contrast: they perceive themselves as different from their parents, who belong to an old generation and are too close to the old world, too involved with tradition and religion, and they actively seek to distance themselves from them.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to notice, however, that these typically Jewish-American *topoi* are not the themes that propel Leonard Michaels’s writing. In fact, Michaels’s core theme appears to be the turmoil caused by love, and “the way men and women seem to be unable to live with or without each other” (Michaels, 2000 : XI). Central features of his production, especially of his first collections, are erotic thirst and romantic obsession – as mentioned before, “[his] subject was lust” (Michaels in Lynch, 94-95). Mania is another fundamental theme of Michaels’s writings: it is meant to be perceived so strongly by the reader that the author allows it to influence his style and to even defy grammatical correctness of the story itself. The page-long, stream of consciousness opening sentence of the story “Crossbones”<sup>10</sup> is a case in point.

The characters’ action and motifs do not revolve around the Jewish themes of identity and of rejection of tradition, but they are propelled and defined by their inextinguishable appetite for sex, desire for love, fits of rage, and ways of coping with death. Putting it simply, even if the characters were not Jewish, the stories

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<sup>9</sup> This attitude mirrors Michaels’s own complicated relationship with Jewishness and religious tradition. See Appendix II (par. 3).

<sup>10</sup> The story “Crossbones”, from the collection *Going Places*, is not included in and translated for this work, because the theme of multicultural New York, object of our analysis, is not present in the story.

would be just as powerful and intense, because the reader feels that their Jewishness is truly incidental. The subjects of the stories are not inherently Jewish, but universal. For this reason, it is legitimate to consider Michaels as not falling completely into the Jewish-American literary canon.

The issue that naturally follows this conclusion is, then, how Leonard Michaels relates to the American canon.<sup>11</sup> It is safe to state that a common theme in the productions belonging to this category is the pastoral idea. American authors, who seem to regard the urban world with suspicion and aversion, push themselves towards the greenery and freedom of suburbia, the countryside, or the wilderness, and away from the soot of the anxious metropolitan area. The city is an extremely vivid presence in their production, and it is described as crowded, loud, dirty, smelly, and downright dangerous.<sup>12</sup>

Michaels's take on the city is very similar, as testified by several excerpts translated in our work and as presented later on. However, he does not regard this environment with aversion, but rather states that "it is life" (Michaels, 2008 : 102). The soot is not denied, but acknowledged and embraced, as the author seems to

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<sup>11</sup> In this thesis, we do not wish to tackle the delicate issue of what should be included in the new American literary canon, so our analysis is based on what has been considered as 'American literature' in the last century. However, an extremely interesting and provocative discussion about this subject can be found in the essay "What Is American Literature? An Overview" in Baym (3-26).

<sup>12</sup> Adversity towards the city is present in the majority of the works included in the American canon. For example, it is well expressed by the Transcendentalist movement in the Nineteenth Century, which saw Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as its most passionate representatives: Emerson's poetic production and Thoreau's *Walden* shaped American Transcendentalist sensibility as strictly anti-modern and advised a reconnection to nature. Later in the Nineteenth Century, Realist writers such as Mark Twain and Henry James declared themselves as disenchanted with the idea of progress and cynically depicted the cultural clashes between social classes in the supposedly modern 'Land of the Free'. In the Twentieth Century, Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* denounced the excesses of the wealthy class living in New York as immoral and empty. In Arthur Miller's play *Death Of A Salesman* the city is referred to as a "trap", while in Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* gray skyscrapers "menace" the green of a park.

experience the “positive magnetic pull” offered by New York to “expats and immigrants, who tended to see potential within the chaos, filth, and crime of the early twentieth-century American city” (Whiting, 692).

A defined classification for Leonard Michaels’s production, therefore, seems to be lacking. He can hardly be considered a Jewish-American writer, because despite dealing with themes tackled within the Jewish-American canon, their significance is not central to his narrative. At the same time, while depicting New York in a typically American way, he does not adhere to the pastoral urge to escape the city that can be perceived within the works of the American canon. It is extremely interesting to notice that Michaels’s writing has characteristics that belong to both the American and the Jewish-American canons, but at the same time it falls outside these classifications. The ambiguity given by Americanness and diversity coexisting in the same context is well represented by Leonard Michaels’s work: it is culturally rooted in the Jewish tradition, but it is developing towards new themes, moving in an exciting and promising environment. This subject will be further investigated in the next chapter, in relation to Michaels’s sensibility in describing New York City.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Leonard Michaels's world: a multicultural and multilingual environment**

As we have already pointed out, the majority of Leonard Michaels's fiction is set in New York City, and it is from it that we have chosen the excerpts for the analysis of this thesis. The unique way in which the author relates to the city and the techniques employed to describe its inhabitants are especially interesting, both from a cultural and from a linguistic point of view.

#### **2.1**

##### **Cultural New York City**

Cities – especially large metropolitan areas – are and have always been multilingual contexts, harboring huge numbers of people possibly belonging to an equally huge variety of different cultures. In these contexts, multiplicity is often considered dangerous, as potential carrier of instability and turmoil: in this case, unity might be sought after through the annihilation of multiplicity, and in particular through the reduction of linguistic diversity to a much more orderly monolingualism. This does not seem to happen in New York City, regarded to as the most multicultural city in the world: an extremely diverse mosaic of cultures co-lives in this city, and individual identity and cultural pride are promoted and cherished.<sup>13</sup> This diversity is alive in Leonard Michaels's short stories: the different

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<sup>13</sup> However, it must be noted that this particular phenomenon takes place in a context in which cultures and languages share the same terrain in an all but egalitarian conversation: the official language is American English, and anything different from the standard is either a variety of English,

cultures are extremely vivid in their individuality, but at the same time the relationships and interactions between these cultures are essential elements in the author's representation of the city. It is also interesting to note that Michaels's depiction is never of a pure, uninfluenced cultural core, but rather of identities generated by the meeting of American culture and a 'foreign' one.<sup>14</sup> Leonard Michaels's New York is a "contact zone"<sup>15</sup>, in which different languages and cultures become entwined nevertheless maintaining specific characteristics of their original matrix.

### **2.1.1 The city of opportunities**

As son Jesse Michaels states<sup>16</sup>, Leonard Michaels's relationship with the city was very complex: born and raised there, he was a "New Yorker in sensibility" and valued his adaptability and New York "street smarts", but he ended up moving to Berkeley to distance himself from New York City as much as possible. He loved the exciting life in the city during the Fifties and appreciated the "gritty vibe" of movies set in New York, but at the same time he remembered with negative

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or incorrect English, or another subordinate language; the prevailing culture is the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant one, and any other culture is a guest, perceived as 'the other' when not downright inferior (see Simon, 2008-2009 : 2-3). For this reason, we wish to highlight the fact that by 'multicultural' we simply mean the coexistence of plural cultures or cultural diversity, much as Nancy Foner does. For a more in-depth overview of New York as a multicultural city, see Foner's essay "How exceptional is New York? Migration and multiculturalism in the empire city."

<sup>14</sup> Examples of this are Ludwig, the German doorman who speaks English with a heavy accent in "City Boy"; Isaac, the Polish immigrant who struggles with English in hostile New York City; the Latino boys from "The Deal", who speak Puerto Rican English and try to make a deal as a fat American businessman would do; all of his Jewish characters, struggling to define their identity in a multicultural world.

<sup>15</sup> We borrow Mary Louise Pratt's definition of "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of [...] racial inequality and conflict" (Pratt, 6).

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix II (par. 1).

feelings the rough experiences that he had to face in the city, including the tragic suicide of his first wife. This conflicted relationship can be perceived in the very way the city is described in his stories, and in the way the city influences his characters' lives.

In "A Green Thought", the narrator firstly describes the squalid area in which he lives, then contemplates the idea of being attacked and horribly killed by thugs: would that happen, it would mean that "the city hate[s] him" (Michaels, 2008 : 75), and he self-deprecatingly accepts and longs for the personified city's hatred. The protagonist of the story "Isaac" has an even more tragic experience when he comes into contact with the city: the opening line of the story states that "he [feels] vulnerable to a thousand misfortunes in New York" (Michaels, 2008 : 71)<sup>17</sup>, foreshadowing his disarming and sudden death. Similarly, as we have already pointed out, the section 'Mackerels' of the story "Eating Out" describes the dreary apartment building in which the protagonists end up moving, embracing its filth and danger and celebrating it as a symptom of "life." (Michaels, 2008 : 102)

Michaels's New York is extremely, almost disgustingly, obsessed with sex, and it is easy to lose sight of a girl in a typical "New York scene" (Michaels, 2008 : 44) – that is a swarming orgy in a "hall clogged with bodies" (Michaels, 2008 : 44) as in the story "Making Changes"; appetite for sex often leads to unfortunate

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<sup>17</sup> It is extremely interesting how the very opening of the story itself is as abrupt as the first "misfortune" that Isaac faces. A sense of dismay is conveyed by the syntactic construction of the opening sentence of the story: it firstly introduces a few characteristics that define the protagonist, but then the action of the story begins unexpectedly as the verb is presented through an asyndetic coordination. The sentence seems to follow the protagonist's thoughts, and the reader is suddenly thrown into an unclear situation that is out of any control, left confused and at the mercy of the events just as much as Isaac is.

events, like little Arnold (from “Murderers”) falling from a rooftop to his death while spying on a rabbi and his wife having a sexual intercourse.

At the same time, however, New York City is where anything can happen – even receiving a handjob from an unknown stranger on a crowded subway train, as happens to the narrator of “Getting Lucky”, who is so empowered by the event that he feels “beatified, [...] proud to be a New Yorker” (Michaels, 2008 : 113). Or one could follow Nachman’s steps in the story “Cryptology” and decide to embark on a mysterious and surreal experience in order to take part in “New York’s endemic adventurousness” (Michaels, 2008 : 396). In the story, awkward Nachman from tranquil California seems to lose control over the situation and starts feeling extremely uncomfortable, but, eventually, the most prominent social feature of the city – that “nobody gives a shit about anybody” (Michaels, 2008 : 396) – is able to soothe him, allowing to “[become] peaceful and free in his thoughts” (Michaels, 2008 : 402). New York, really, can be a “style” (Michaels, 2008 : 12) that allows a dynamic kid like Phillip Liebowitz in “City Boy” to handle a situation as difficult as getting caught by the rabbi during a sexual intercourse with his daughter, running away naked, and later finding out he had caused the rabbi a heart attack. Leonard Michaels’s New York is adventure, dynamism, an attitude.

### **2.1.2 Jewish culture and Latin culture**

The New York City of the Fifties, as described by Michaels, is also a lively center of Latin culture: as testified by the stories “Honeymoon” and “Viva La Tropicana”, of which a translation of two excerpts will follow. The author as a

young man was keen on Latin music<sup>18</sup>, and the city hosted the best mambo and salsa scene in the world outside Cuba. It is extremely interesting to note the strong similarity that the narrator (and of course the author) feels between Yiddish and Latin rhythms:

“We understood the feelings of the words, not the words. We called Latin music ‘Jewish.’ The wailing melodies were reminiscent of Hebraic and Arabic chanting [...]. A fusion music, conflating Europe and Africa. In mambo, Spanish passion throbs to Nigerian syncopation. In Yiddish, the German, Hebrew, Spanish, Polish and English words are assimilated to a culture and a system of sound.” (Michaels, 2008 : 235)

The connection is established through a sort of poetic glottology, which also highlights the relationship between two of the main cultural minorities in New York. This passage is indicative of New York multicultural identity, but it also serves as a perfect example of the author’s characteristic representation of the city.

Raphael Nachman, Michaels’s alter-ego in his late fiction, abandons his native city New York in order to live a calmer, less chaotic life in California, much as the author himself had done. However, in the story “Cryptology”, which is the last one in *The Collected Stories* and is perceived as a sort of spiritual testament, he travels back to New York, where a haunting bossa nova is able to “caress Nachman’s heart” (Michaels, 2008 : 403) and lull him into a rare peace of mind. This romantic and nostalgic conclusion seems to revive the conflict in Leonard Michaels’s relationship with New York City, and reminds the reader of the

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix II (par. 1). Also in the stories “Murderers” and “Cryptology”, Latin music has a prominent role in the story, and is felt as inherently belonging to New York City.

rhetorical question spelled out in “Reflection Of A Wild Kid” – “How in God’s name can anyone live outside New York?” (Michaels, 2008 : 129)

### **2.1.3 Jewish culture and American culture**

The interaction between the Jewish and the American cultures, on the other hand, does not seem to be as peaceful. As we have mentioned before, Leonard Michaels’s sensibility is the sensibility of the immigrant, of the non-American who faces the city of possibilities in an amazed bewilderment.

Jewish comedian from New York City Lenny Bruce (1925-1966) tried to comically answer the master question asked to and by Jews dealing with Americanization – “What is Jewish?”<sup>19</sup> With self-conscious, snarky humor, he identified as goyish (i.e. non-Jewish, sometimes considered as a derogatory term) anything belonging to the prevailing culture in America – the white, American-Saxon, Protestant one. Conversely, he called Jewish anything belonging to a minority, including Catholics, Italians, black cherry soda (against the goyish lime soda) and pumpernickel (against the “very goyish” white bread); even who lives in direct contact with multiculturality is Jewish, according to him – “If you live in New York, you’re Jewish.” (Bruce, n.p.)

By reading Bruce’s monologue, then, it is evident that ‘Jewish’ does not correspond to anything fixed and cannot be considered as an immobile identity: it is rather the sensibility of those who do not prevail, of those who do not fit in a category, and are in search of their place in the world. It is clear that Leonard

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<sup>19</sup> See Baum (n.p.) and the text of Bruce’s monologue “Jewish and goyish”.

Michaels's sensibility runs alongside Lenny Bruce's reasoning, and can really be defined as a Jewish sensibility.

As we have already seen, though, Michaels's writing is also strongly influenced by his Jewish cultural background, but at the same time he resented it and tried to distance himself from it. The generational conflict between immigrant parents and first generation Jewish American children, extensively addressed by Jewish American literature, gets representation in Michaels's fiction as well: two powerful examples are the vignettes 'Crabs' from "Eating Out" and 'Black Bread, Butter, Onion' from "I Would Have Saved Them If I Could"<sup>20</sup>. In the first vignette, the surly protagonist rejects his parents' traditions by refusing to attend to a bar mitzvah, and even hatefully ridicules Hebrew referring to it as "jungle talk" (Michaels, 2008 : 105) compared to English. In the second vignette, the protagonist pokes fun of his father's regressive mentality: the man cannot sleep well, because he is absurdly frightened by "murderous assailants" (Michaels, 2008 : 152) from his nightmares, while the boy sleeps "like a baby" (Michaels, 2008 : 152) because he knows that the mafia-controlled neighborhood is a safe place in America. The protagonist proudly calls himself a "native American kid" (Michaels, 2008 : 152), but does so while eating a bialy<sup>21</sup> and expertly describing the process as if it were a ritual. This is a beautiful and powerful metaphor for a

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<sup>20</sup> These two stories are collections of brief sections, or vignettes. Each section has a title, and each story is self-contained. In this thesis, we have provided the translation of two vignettes from "Eating Out", 'Mackerel' and 'Crabs', and one vignette from "I Would Have Saved Them If I Could", 'Black Bread, Butter, Onion'.

<sup>21</sup> A bialy is a bread bun, typical of Polish Ashkenazi tradition.

hybrid identity still rooted in European Jewish traditions and therefore not completely assimilated into the American one.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.2

### Linguistic New York City

From a linguistic standpoint, Leonard Michaels's New Yorkers exist in a condition of diglossia, defined by Ferguson as a situation in which "two distinct languages are used side by side throughout a speech community, each with a clearly defined role" (Ferguson, 1959 : 233): since they belong to linguistic minorities, their native language (presumably spoken in the private sphere) has an influence on the second language which they have to speak in the public sphere, in order to relate to the American community and to the other minor communities. Michaels's New York is therefore a world in which different and separated instances of diglossia meet and coexist, creating a unique cluster of interacting living languages.

#### 2.2.1 Language interaction in New York

Sometimes, these entities are separated by a linguistic barrier that seems insuperable, despite the will or necessity to overcome it: the communication is impossible when Nachman "[listens] so hard [to a Polish man speaking] that he [becomes] dizzy with anticipation, as if at any moment he would understand"

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<sup>22</sup> It is curious how modern migrants sometimes describe themselves as "half of one identity, half of another, and half of an additional something else" (Sommer, 2004 : 48). This description seems to be extremely fitting for the characters of *The Collected Stories* and, to an extent, to Leonard Michaels himself.

(Michaels, 2008 : 324), or even when Isaac, Yiddish native speaker, futilely “[risks] English” (Michaels, 2008 : 71) to communicate with an Italian who speaks English with a heavy accent. Other times, the encounter of two cultures generates a conflict that is moved on a linguistic level<sup>23</sup>: ‘city boy’ Phillip manifests his aversion towards German doorman Ludwig mocking him for his heavy accent and loathingly asking him “How come you never learned to talk American, baby?” (Michaels, 2008 : 17). Still other times, the different languages coexist peacefully and interact in a natural way: Puerto Rican children negotiate the restitution of a glove with the American protagonist of the story “The Deal”, and the Jewish characters of “Honeymoon” naturally include Yiddish words and slurs in their interactions in English.

### **2.2.2 Leonard Michaels’s heteroglossia**

What is most notable and appreciable of Leonard Michaels’s representation of languages is that he provides each of them with its natural voice, relating them the way they are spoken and perceived, representing different accents and oral styles. The linguistic multidimensionality of New York is not flattened, and the interaction is represented as a whole, like a swarming mosaic.

This particular stylistic choice in representing the speech style of his characters is identifiable as the Bakhtian heteroglossia. According to Bakhtin’s analysis, in the novel occurs the coexistence of different types of speech, namely the speech of the authorial figure, the speech of the narrator, and the speech of

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<sup>23</sup> As Sommer highlights, language difference segments a population into majority and minorities, which become organized in a racial hierarchy with the majority at the top and the minorities below it. See Sommer (6).

the characters, all of them originating from the author. This coexistence generates a conflict within the narrative of the author, who has to effectively take on “another’s speech in another’s language” (Bakhtin, 324) when giving life to a character’s identity. What Michaels does, other than split his voice into the different speeches of the authorial figure, narrator, and characters, is making his own voice even more nuanced when he speaks through the characters: to do so, he takes on several tones, accents, and even languages, in the literary effort to interpret different identities and represent the encounters between different cultures.

The result is what might be referred to as perfect New York stories, or ‘Jewish’ stories, as Lenny Bruce would define them. These pieces are, of course, utterly interesting both on a cultural and a linguistic point of view, and this unique stratification will be further investigated in the next chapter, together with the process of its rendition into the Italian translation.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Translation strategies**

After illustrating the world of Leonard Michaels and drawing conclusions on what kind of sensibility shaped his striking and controversial depiction of New York City, this thesis presents some possible processes through which this narrative universe and this peculiar style can be rendered into Italian.

#### **3.1**

##### **Cultural aspects of translation**

From a cultural standpoint, the procedure does not seem to be too difficult, because the Italian audience is already familiar with representations of New York, even very different from one another.

It is impossible to name all the works in which the city is included as a setting or even as a fundamental symbolic element, but we cannot help but mention some among the most influential works which shaped the idea of New York City for today's Italian public. Keeping the list limited to literature, many classics revolve around the themes with which Michaels dealt. *Washington Square* by Henry James (1880) realistically depicts the quirks and contrasts of American bourgeois society, moving in an area descripted by Michaels himself. Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is an extremely popular representation and critic of the extravagant city life driven by passion and excesses. The celebrated 1934 novel *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth voices the social condition of immigrants in a Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side in the early Twentieth Century. The readers

of *The Catcher In The Rye* (J.D. Salinger, 1951) experience the mixed feelings of alienation and exhilaration stirred by New York in young Holden.

As a matter of fact, the depiction of the city that belongs to the Italian collective imaginary is that of ‘City of Opportunities’, which coincides with Leonard Michaels’s portrayal, as we have already pointed out. This representation of New York City was shaped in European conscience by the testimonies of European immigrants, who landed on Ellis Island and were faced with the city’s chaos full of occasions. Even European artists and intellectuals, when visiting New York for the first time halfway through the last century, recounted their amazement in beholding its colossal architecture and raw liveliness: Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his memoir “New York in 1941”, recognized the source of its charm in the fact that in the city everything seemed possible; Salvador Dalí compared American skyscrapers to Egyptian pyramids, exalting their grandiosity as monuments to democracy and liberty.<sup>24</sup>

Italian writers and authors have been equally struck by New York’s multicultural fascination, and looked at it through the same typically European sensibility. Only to cite some testimonies, Elio Vittorini, for example, described the city on the one hand as “a new place where one’s ancestral neurosis can be wreaked”, and on the other hand as “a kind of new fabled Orient, [where] man appears exquisitely unique from time to time, Filipino or Chinese or Slavic or Kurdish, to be substantially the same” (Vittorini : 150, our translation). Giorgio Bassani, after visiting the United States, declared to feel close to Italian immigrants

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<sup>24</sup> See Whiting (690-692).

living in New York ghettos, because they reminded him of the condition in which European Jews lived during the preceding years.

It is really not difficult for the Italian audience to relate to Michaels's depiction of the city, which, even streaked with grotesque elements that make the stories unique, is portrayed through a familiar kind of sensibility.

## 3.2

### Linguistic aspects of translation

From a linguistic standpoint, the translation has not been as simple. This section will be devoted to the description of the translation strategies adopted to effectively render Leonard Michaels's own writing style, as well as the linguistic stratification of his stories.

#### 3.2.1 Verbal jazz

As far as the style is concerned, it is necessary to share a remark on Michaels's language. As already pointed out, *The Collected Stories* collects the whole corpus of his short fiction, from the stories written and published at the very beginning of his career in 1969, to the sadly incomplete series that he was working on when he died in 2003. For this reason, as one would expect, a substantial shift in style can be detected at a certain point of Michaels's life. His acclaimed first two collections, *Going Places* (1969) and *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975) are written in nervy and fast sentences and often tell realistic stories in which, however, the plot take on irrational turns. Sometimes, they lack a narrative with a beginning and conclusion, and are simply a verbal depiction of

obsession with no reasoning or explanation accompanying them: this is because their sense derives mostly from emotion rather than from logic. In the words of Michaels himself: “My writing tends to be terse and quick, usually about urban types and the kinds of psychological violence they inflict upon each other. I have no philosophical or political messages” (Michaels in Lynch : 88). Borrowing the term used by Josh Lambert<sup>25</sup>, we define Leonard Michaels’s style as a verbal jazz, because of the similarities between his prose and a jazz performance. Besides researching the word which suits best in each context for its meaning, the author is also concerned with creating evocative clusters of sounds in suggestive rhythms, which can effectively stir emotion within the reader. In effect, Michaels’s prose relies on the mechanics of musical composition – repetition, juxtaposition, counterpoint. The written word is the instrument through which Michaels engages a strong interaction with his audience, relying not so much on logic and reasoning as on sensorial faculty and feeling.

As one might expect, this particularly rhythmic and musical style poses a problem when translating it into Italian, given by the fact that English and Italian have different prosody and sentence structure; moreover, Italian tends to be much wordier than English, so the rendition of Michaels’s terse prose might result into a text that seems meagre and emotionally dry.

A good instance of this sometimes problematic rendition is Leonard Michaels’s early style characterized by a frequent use of sentences chopped up in extremely brief periods.<sup>26</sup> In the Italian prose, such sentences, while sometimes

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<sup>25</sup> See Lambert (n.p.)

<sup>26</sup> According to Michaels, most of these chopped up sentences were vestiges of “Yiddish terseness seizing an English equivalent” (Michaels, 2009 : 218).

being extremely effective in isolating a certain concept and highlighting its importance in the text or simulating a character's thinking process, are sometimes perceived as lacking of something and sound inopportunely unnatural; in translating Leonard Michaels's stories, we have been concerned with maintaining the delicate balance between respecting the original text and adapting it to the Italian ear and logic, with the result of keeping most of the nominal sentences while merging some to adjacent ones. In the story "City Boy", for example, we find two clusters of extremely brief sentences, which set a very fast and hammering rhythm to the prose:

"But all right. We needed a new beginning. Everyone does." (Michaels, 2008 : 12)

"I was learning every second. I was a city boy. No innocent shitkicker from Jersey." (Michaels, 2008 : 12)

The first sentence imitates the protagonist's rapid and terse thoughts that crowd his mind one after the other, after he and his girlfriend get caught in the middle of a sexual intercourse by her father. The second sentence is clearly chunked up into separate periods to give relevance to the middle one, which also provides the title for the short story. The rendition of these two sentences into the Italian translation has been tackled in two different ways: while in the first instance the periods have been merged into one, achieving a more natural utterance of the protagonist's thoughts, the second sentence was maintained separated in order to reproduce the original solemnity of the protagonist's confident statement.

"Pazienza, dovevamo ricominciare d'accapo; capita a tutti."

"Accumulavo esperienza ogni secondo. Ero un ragazzo di città. Non uno spalamerda ingenuo del New Jersey."

In the story “Murderers”, we find an instance of nominal sentence, a phrase with no verbal cluster purposefully used to create a certain effect, common in many of Leonard Michaels’s early pieces. When the narrator is looking at the rabbi’s wife in a state of awe, he describes her as

“A human theme in which nothing begat anything [...].” (Michaels, 2008 : 96).

The absence of the verb ‘to be’ well conveys a sense of stillness, as if the boy were admiring a work of art or beholding a sacred manifestation. Even if a period with no verb cluster does sound unnatural in Italian, we chose to maintain the nominal sentence to imitate the incisiveness of the descriptive flash:

“Un tema umano in cui il nulla generava qualsiasi cosa [...].”

As one shuffles through the pages of the book, this kind of verbal jazz is found in more and more compositions from the Seventies and 1990, at least until what can be considered the last section of *The Collected Stories*. Starting from the 1993 collection *To Feel These Things*, Michaels’s prose seems to relax, abandoning the experimental feel of the early years and embracing the standard conventions of realist fiction. The most notable feature of these pieces is a new richness in terms of development of the plot and emotional detail: the reader becomes involved in a captivating narrative that is often built on suspense. This is the case of stories like “A Girl With A Monkey”, or the hard-boiled noir “Viva La Tropicana”, or even the weird and absorbing “Cryptology”. Translating excerpts from these stories has been less problematic, because the style is indeed almost standard: all concepts are in plain sight, masterfully put together in a smooth, balanced flow that the reader easily and pleasantly follows – no decrypting, no untangling has been necessary when rendering them into Italian.

### **3.2.2 Translating New York City**

When dealing with the rendition of cultural references, we have had to keep in mind the new audience to which the published translation would be addressed to, namely the Italian public. As already pointed out, New York is already well-known thanks to the numerous previous representations in art and media, so the names of many landmarks that can be found in Michaels's short stories definitely ring a bell. Conversely, other landmarks mentioned in the stories might be less known by the Italian reader, and the rendition into Italian translation has been carried out differently.

Good examples of this can be found, for example, in the story "Murderers". The narrator mentions several elements with which the average Italian person is familiar, and which are known to be linked to the myth of New York City:

"The Brooklyn Navy Yard with destroyers and aircraft carriers, the Statue of Liberty putting the sky to the torch, the dull remote skyscrapers of Wall Street, and the Empire State Building were among the wonders we dominated" (Michaels, 2008 : 96)

Given their popularity even in the Italian collective imaginary, we have considered unnecessary to provide further information about these famous landmarks, and the rendition of the passage has been carried out as a simple linguistic translation:

"Il cantiere navale di Brooklyn con le sue cacciatorpediniere e portaerei, la Statua della Libertà che cercava di dare fuoco al cielo, i monotonì grattacieli di Wall Street in lontananza e l'Empire State Building erano tra le meraviglie che dominavamo."

Similarly, despite not being as well-known as the abovementioned landmarks, the city features mentioned in "Murderers" (Henry Street and Cherry Street), and in

the section ‘Black Bread, Butter, Onion’ in the story “I Would Have Saved Them If I Could” (Grand Street, Essex and Clinton Street, Sheridan Square; the Greenwich Village and SoHo), have been rendered into Italian translation without any further specification. We have considered a more in-depth specification to be unnecessary, since the names alone are sufficient for the reader to build an approximate mental image of the setting, albeit not geographically precise, and do convey the feeling of the American environment. This is also the case for the places mentioned in the story “Viva La Tropicana”, namely Fifth-third Street (translated as “Cinquantatreesima Strada”) and Broadway.<sup>27</sup>

Besides these instances, the author mentions several other features of the city, with which the average Italian reader might not be as familiar, and implies a deeper meaning to the reference. This is the case of George Washington Bridge in the story “Murderers”. To make this reference understandable to a larger audience, we have chosen to explain in a footnote the implications of the mention: an Italian might not be aware of the location of George Washington Bridge, connecting New York to New Jersey, and of the “smug, annoyed superiority”<sup>28</sup> with which some New Yorkers relate to New Jersians, meaningful to the narrator’s statement. Similarly, in the story *Cryptology*, the places mentioned help connotate the identity of the described New York which clashes with the protagonist’s personality: the features of the Fifth Avenue (translated with “Quinta Strada”) and Chelsea, thanks to a footnote, are explained to be two of the symbols of wealthy

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<sup>27</sup> The exact locations of these urban features, however, can be seen in the map provided in Appendix I. The places mentioned have been pinpointed in order for the reader to better visualize the environment in which the stories take place.

<sup>28</sup> This tone is described by Leonard Michaels as a “Manhattan theme” in the short story “Getting Lucky”, from the 1975 collection *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*. See Michaels, 2008 : 115.

New York, in which the protagonist implicitly feels out of place. The Californian elements of Santa Barbara and U.C.L.A., also mentioned in the story, might not be as well-known as New York landmarks, so have been explained in a footnote as well.

In other cases, we chose to make explicit the full names of the landmarks, in order for the Italian audience to have an idea of what kind of landmark the narrator is talking about: in “Murderers”, “the Polo Grounds” has become “lo stadio Polo Grounds”, Far Rockaway has become “il quartiere di Far Rockaway”, Battery has become “Battery Park”.

In some of the stories, there are some units of measurement mentioned – miles, inches, feet, gallons – that have been converted into the Italian equivalent – “chilometri”, “centimetri”, “metri”, “litri”. Some of the conversions were actually not necessary for the Italian audience to imagine the order of magnitude of the measurement, but for others they were fundamental in order for the reader to get a precise idea of what is being described. Therefore, all the measurement have been converted for the sake of consistency.

### **3.2.3 Translating otherness**

The most interesting and challenging process while dealing with the translation of Leonard Michaels’s short stories has probably been the rendition of different accents and speech styles into Italian. As already mentioned, a great number of Michaels’s characters are foreigners or have foreign origins: this often results in characters speaking broken English with a heavy accent, or using foreign words while speaking English. These dialogues are written with an incorrect

spelling which is meant to mimic a stereotypical oral style corresponding to a specific mother tongue. Conveying an oral style in a written dialogue is often problematic, because languages spoken with an accent do not have a codified written form and tend to be interpreted subjectively, depending on the person who is listening to them. This difficulty is evident from some of the stories: it is sometimes hard for the reader to figure out the actual accent in which the lines are pronounced, based only on the way the words are spelt or by the way they are grammatically misused. However, Michaels's skillful portrayal of the characters gives more elements thanks to which the reader can correctly interpret the unusual form of speech – names, context, background story, physical descriptions.

### **3.2.3.1 German**

The first story in which this depiction of otherness can be detected is "City Boy", included in this thesis – the protagonist interacts with a character of German origins (clues about his nationality are given also through his name, Ludwig, and his physical description, stating that he looks like an etching by the German artist Albrecht Dürer) who speaks a broken English with a heavy accent. His accent is interestingly conveyed through an incorrect spelling of the words:

"I vun say sumding. Yur bisniss vot you do. But vy you mek her miserable?

Nod led her slip. She has beks unter her eyes." (Michaels, 2008 : 13)

This is the written form of the way in which a speaker with a German accent would supposedly pronounce the sentence "I want [to] say something. [It's] your business what you do. But why [do] you make her miserable? Not let her sleep. She has bags under her eyes."

As said before, a written form of a German-sounding English is not codified, so what is found in the story is the graphic rendition of this speaking style as perceived by an American listener, represented through the phonological rules of English so that the American reader (for whom the story is originally intended) is able to reconstruct the sounds the German speaker would make when pronouncing the words. Despite the accuracy and consistency of this representation being debatable, the pronunciation one would expect from a German speaker does emerge from the line, as shown in the table below.

The stereotypical harshness of the language was represented by turning voiced consonants /g/ and /d/ into their voiceless versions /k/ and /t/ (examples 4 and 5), and by making vowels shorter and less nuanced (examples 6 and 7); some typically German phonetic rules were applied to the reading of the English words, hence the American ‘w’, normally read as /w/, was changed into a ‘v’ to imitate the German pronunciation of the same letter ‘w’ as /v/ (examples 1, 2, and 3); also, the spelling of the word ‘under’ as ‘unter’ might be intended as a direct influence of foreign vocabulary into English.

Word	American pronunciation	Stereotypical German pronunciation	Michaels's rendition	American pronunciation of the rendition
(1) Want	/want/	/vant/	vun	/vʌn/
(2) What	/wʌt/	/vat/	vot	/vʌt/
(3) Why	/waɪ/	/vai/	vy	/vai/
(4) Bags	/bægz/	/beks/	beks	/beks/
(5) Under	/'ʌndər/	/'untə/	unter	/'ʌntər/
(6) Make	/meɪk/	/mæk/	mek	/mek/
(7) Sleep	/sli:p/	/slip/	slip	/slɪp/

As can be seen by looking at the third and fifth columns of the table, which indicate respectively a pronunciation of the words with a stereotypical German accent and the American pronunciation of Leonard Michaels's spelling of the same words, the representation seems quite accurate.<sup>29</sup>

As for the translation into Italian, we have followed the same reasoning: the original sentence has been translated into Italian, then read with a stereotypical German accent or as one would expect a German person to pronounce Italian, and then spelt using Italian phonological rules to represent the sounds produced by the German speaker.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the line has been translated as follows:

“Folio tire una coza. Afari tuoi coza fai. Ma perché la fai difentare trizte? Non fai tormire lei. Ha porze sotto li ochi.”

as an imitation of a German person saying the sentences “Voglio dire una cosa. [Sono] affari tuoi [quello che] fai. Ma perché la [rendi] triste? Non [la] fai dormire. Ha [le] borse sotto gli occhi” in a broken Italian. Once again, the stereotypical harshness of the language has been represented by turning voiced consonants /d/ and /b/ into their voiceless versions /t/ and /p/ (examples 1, 2, 3, and 4,); some typically German phonetic rules have been applied to the reading of the Italian words, hence the Italian ‘v’, normally read as /v/, has been changed into a ‘f’ to imitate the German pronunciation of the same letter ‘v’ as /f/ (examples 2 and 5);

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<sup>29</sup> It has to be kept in mind that this rendition portrays a German accent as perceived by American ears – speakers of different languages might not perceive the accent the same way, and might therefore spell the words different if they had to graphically render it.

<sup>30</sup> The Italian public is familiar with the way Italian sounds when spoken with a foreign accent, thanks to its representation provided by media, such as dubbed cinema and television, where foreign accents are being portrayed more and more. This applies to the German accent and to the Spanish accent, referenced in a few paragraphs.

similarly, typically Italian sound /ʌ/, which is often hard for foreigners to pronounce, has been dropped and changed into a much more foreign-friendly /l/ (examples 5 and 6), and double consonants sounds have been reduced to single consonant sounds (examples 7 and 8).

Word	Italian pronunciation	Stereotypical German pronunciation	Rendition into Italian	Italian pronunciation of the rendition
(1) Dire	/'dire/	/'tire/	tire	/'tire/
(2) Diventare	/diven'tare/	/tifen'tare/	tifentare	/tifen'tare/
(3) Dormire	/dor'mire/	/tor'mire/	tormire	/tor'mire/
(4) Borse	/'borse/	/'pordze/	porze	/'pordze/
(5) Voglio	/'vɔʎʎo/	/'folio/	folio	/'fɔlio/
(6) Gli	/ʎi/	/li/	li	/li/
(7) Affari	/af'fari/	/a'fari/	afari	/a'fari/
(8) Occhi	/'ɔkki/	/'oki/	ochi	/'oki/

As far as grammatical and lexical correctness is concerned, in the original text it can be noted that the character does not speak correct English: Ludwig does not use the preposition ‘to’ after the verb ‘want’, he drops ‘it is’ in the second sentence, and omits the auxiliary verb ‘do’ in building the question. These language mistakes have been rendered into the Italian translation by dropping verb ‘sono’ in the second sentence, and using personal pronoun subject ‘lei’ instead of personal pronoun object ‘la’; a certain lexical clumsiness in some expressions has been added by choosing very simple and basic words, in order for the sentence to sound realistic when spoken by a foreigner with a low level of fluency (for example, the register of the verb ‘rendere’ has been lowered to ‘far diventare’, which also

contributes in making the Italian audience perceive the expression as awkwardly uttered.)

### **3.2.3.2 Yiddish**

A similar language stratification can be found in the story “Isaac”, included in this thesis. The piece, as has been said, is the narration of Isaac’s first contact with New York as an immigrating Polish Jew. The audience deduces his nationality not because it is explicitly spelt out, but by a few details in the text, carefully included for the reader to reconstruct his identity (for example, the name of another character is Cracow), and because Poland is often included in Leonard Michaels’s work, in a certain biographical nostalgia; the reader understands that the protagonist is a Jew because it is stated that he is a “Talmudic scholar, Master of Cabala”; the fact that Isaac is not confident with English is conveyed by the fact that he interacts with a secondary character and does not understand what he is told. Given these premises, when Isaac speaks out for the first time saying

“I falled on dot ice, tenk you.” (Michaels, 2008 : 71)

it becomes clear that Isaac is a Yiddish speaker and that he speaks a broken English with such accent. Since Yiddish is a Germanic language based on High German and fusing elements of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic and Romance languages, its harsh sounds may sound very similar to German to the Italian ear. Hence, the sentence “I [fell] on [that] ice, [thank] you.” was transcribed following the same phonological reasoning used to transcribe Ludwig’s words in “City Boy”: besides simplifying the vowel /æ/ to either /a/ or /ɛ/ (examples 1 and 2), dental fricative sounds /ð/ and /θ/, with which German is unfamiliar, were simplified respectively

to dental sounds /d/ (example 1) and /t/ (example 2); moreover, a grammatical error can be found in the verb conjugation.

Word	American pronunciation	Stereotypical Yiddish pronunciation	Michaels's rendition	American pronunciation of Michaels's rendition
(1) That	/ðæt/	/dat/	dot	/dot/
(2) Thank	/θæŋk/	/tan̩k/	tenk	/tɛŋk/

For these reasons, when translating the story into Italian, the Yiddish accent has been interpreted with a spelling similar to the German one, following the method described before: the labio-velar approximant /w/ has been changed into the labiodental fricative /v/ (example 1 of the table below) because German simply lacks the sound /w/<sup>31</sup>, and voiced velar /g/ has been changed to its voiceless version /k/ (example 2 and 3); to render the grammatical error in conjugating the *passato prossimo* form of the verb 'cadere' (i.e. 'sono caduto'), the auxiliary verb 'sono' has been changed to the incorrect auxiliary verb 'ho'. The full sentence into Italian translation has been rendered as such:

"Ho caduto su qvel chiaccio, crazie."

Word	Italian pronunciation	Stereotypical Yiddish pronunciation	Rendition into Italian	Italian pronunciation of the rendition
(1) Quel	/kwel/	/kvel/	qvel	/kvel/
(2) Ghiaccio	/'gjat.tʃo/	/'kjat.tʃo/	chiaccio	/'kjat.tʃo/
(3) Grazie	/'grat.tsje/	/'krat.tsje/	crazie	/'krat.tsje/

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<sup>31</sup> See Bohn and Best, 2011 : 109-28.

Some lexical awkwardness can be detected in this story, too, for example when Isaac expresses his thanks: instead of a neutral ‘thank you’, the Pole says “Appreciate”, maybe as a distortion of the expression ‘I appreciate it’, which however would perhaps be of a too formal register for the situation; this was translated literally with “Apprezzo.”, instead of ‘grazie’ or ‘lo apprezzo’, which makes the expression sound incorrect and out of place to the Italian reader.

### **3.2.3.3 Italian**

In the same story, the abovementioned secondary character, who actually appears only in the form of a voice that Isaac hears after falling in the street and while not being able to move, addresses the distressed protagonist in an all but friendly utterance:

“What’s-a-matta, fuckhead, too much vino?” (Michaels, 2008 : 71)

The reader is lead to interpret his accent as Italian because of the transcription of the word ‘the’ and the sound /ər/ in the word ‘matter’ with the letter ‘a’, probably as a reference to a stereotypical Italian accent, and of course because he uses the Italian word ‘vino’, which is very well-known in the English language, while speaking English.

The nationality of this character poses a big problem when translating his utterance into Italian: of course, an Italian accent and an Italian word used in an English sentence and context stand out to the American public, especially because the two languages are side by side; however, when the language of the sentence and of the context are changed into Italian, the Italian accent and word simply become unified with the text, and the two separate linguistic dimensions are lost. This does not seem an acceptable option, given Leonard Michaels’s desire to

represent the cultural stratification of New York City. To tackle this problem, changing the nationality and accent of the character seems like a too strong intervention on the original text, other than a direct and unfair modification of the identity of the person. For this reason, we have resolved to maintain the character's Italian nationality and accent while shifting it into a regional variety of Italian, obtaining a linguistic stratification given by the contrast between standard Italian and regional Italian rather than standard American English and American English spoken with an Italian accent. To choose the variety of Italian that should be represented, have considered the history of Italian immigration to America, keeping in mind the question "What Italian accent would be most likely to be found in New York City in the period when the story is set?" Since it deals with a Polish man's first days in New York, and since an Italian (whose mother tongue is Italian, otherwise the use of an Italian word in the sentence would not make sense) is also involved, one can hypothesize that the story might be set before the Twenties, when emigration from Europe was massive<sup>32</sup>. Statistically, emigrating Italians from the South generally preferred the United States, whereas emigrants from the North of Italy favored Latin America.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, we have decided to add dimension to the character's cultural identity by portraying him as a Sicilian, since among these accents it is probably the most iconic and identifiable by an Italian reader. To render the Sicilian accent, the expression "Cchi fu?", meaning

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<sup>32</sup> As Foner reports, over two million Central Europeans, mainly Catholics and Jews, immigrated between 1880 and 1924; indeed, Jewish and Italian immigrants and their children made up over two-fifths of the population of New York by 1924. See Foner (1000-1002).

<sup>33</sup> Between 1876 and 1930, out of the 5 million Italian immigrants in the United States, fourth-fifths were from the South, representing such regions as Calabria, Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, and Sicily. See Molnar (n.p.) and Tirabassi (n.p.).

“What happened?” or “What’s the matter?”, has been considered enough known by the Italian general public to be used. Similarly, rather than with a literal translation into Italian, the final question “Too much vino?” has been rendered with a Sicilian expression “Si ‘mbriacu?”, meaning “Are you drunk?”. To make sure the utterance is clear enough, however, its translation into standard Italian has been also provided in a footnote. The full sentence into Italian translation has been rendered as such:

“Cchi fu, coglione, si ‘mbriacu?”

In contrast with the written rendition of English spoken with a German and a Yiddish accent, Michaels’s transcription of English spoken with an Italian accent lacks grammatical errors, so these were avoided in Italian translation as well.

### **3.2.3.4 Puerto Rican English**

A slightly different reasoning and process have been followed when dealing with the rendition into Italian of another oral style, the Puerto Rican one, which can be found in the story “The Deal”. When reading the story, it appears clear that some of the protagonists, a gang of boys hanging around in the street, are Spanish-speakers: the first hints are some of the boys’ names, Francisco Lopez, Francisco Pacheco, and Tito. Latinos of several nationalities are present in New York City, especially in Manhattan’s East Harlem area known as Barrio (Spanish word for ‘neighborhood’), where the story presumably takes place. The largest groups are Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, and Colombians, which however differ markedly in terms of racial, economic, and educational background: Puerto Ricans are the most disadvantaged group of all, with the highest percent of persons who live below the poverty level and the lowest labor force participation rate. In fact,

including Puerto Ricans in a story set in New York might imply a general negative subtext of disadvantaged cultural and economic condition and criminal association, since generally speaking, the Puerto Ricans are on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder in New York City in terms of income and education, and they generally belong to lower-working class, and are therefore the Latino group more discriminated against.<sup>34</sup>

The peak of Puerto Rican migration to New York City, known as 'The Great Migration', happened the Fifties, when Puerto Ricans with limited U.S. citizenship<sup>35</sup> were able to travel to the mainland by plane. This growth of Latino population is subtly addressed in the story with the sentence "As if the neighborhood hadn't changed one bit." (Michaels, 2008 : 34)<sup>36</sup>

In his 1973 study about the language spoken by second generation Puerto Ricans aged from thirteen to eighteen years old, whose profile accidentally corresponds to the boys' in Michaels's story, Walt Wolfram states that such a crew represents a fairly 'typical' group of teen-age males from the area of East Harlem. According to Wolfram, many young Puerto Ricans participate fully in the 'street culture', spending time in the streets among groups of peers organized as gangs, with a head and subordinates. As far as language is concerned, Wolfram states that it is safe to generalize that Puerto Ricans in Harlem and other centers of concentration in the city use both English and Spanish, because the very integration of the neighborhood does not encourage Spanish monolingualism;

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<sup>34</sup> See Zentella (1095) and Wolfram (9-23).

<sup>35</sup> Limited U.S. citizenship was granted to Puerto Rican citizens by Jones-Shafroth Act in 1917.

<sup>36</sup> All of the references to the text in the following paragraph are taken from the same story, from page 35 to page 41.

moreover, some may use Spanish among Puerto Ricans, but they do not use it when non-Spanish-speaking people are around, unless they want to tease or anger the non-Spanish-speaking, which is precisely what happens in the story.<sup>37</sup>

It is interesting to note that the nationality of the boys is not revealed by Michaels through an attempt at transcribing the way they pronounce the English words (as it was for Ludwig's and Isaac's), but rather by using a specific variety of English, namely the New York Puerto Rican English, which is an established speaking style belonging to the community and its grammar rules are therefore codified. This makes it much less problematic to identify the peculiarities of this speaking style and include them in a text. In the story, the boys often drop the verb 'to be' ("His name Francisco Lopez", "My name Francisco Pacheco", "You scared?"), use the pronoun 'you' instead of the possessive adjective 'your' ("Shut you mouth", "You name is shit", "Here you lousy glove"), avoid auxiliary verbs in building questions ("You think I have you glove?", "You tell her I got the glove?", "What kind of glove you want?", "What you give me?", "What she give you?", "You got no manners?", "Where I go?", "You give me something?") or verb tenses ("I seen you name on the mailbox"), and use double negative incorrectly ("I didn't tell nothing", "I don't want no kiss") – these grammatical errors are actually linguistic features of Puerto Rican English, detected by Wolfram. The only attempt to imitate their accent through the incorrect spelling of a word is the woman's last name, Carlyle, spelt as "Calile" probably as an imitation of the tendency of Puerto Rican English to drop letters, even if other letters than 'r' are usually dropped, according to Wolfram.

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<sup>37</sup> Again, see Wolfram (112-145).

As far as the translation of Puerto Rican English into Italian is concerned, the grammatical differences between English and Italian imply that the same type of grammatical errors cannot occur: double negative is often used in spoken in Italian and widely accepted, verb tenses and sentence construction behave differently, and it is unlikely for a foreign person speaking Italian to systematically drop the verb ‘essere’, or however this would not sound convincing as a Spanish person speaking Italian. Consequently, other than simplifying the most complex verb tenses, like the subjunctive, to a present tense and maintaining a certain lexical clumsiness in some expressions, it was necessary for the Italian translation to include other typologies of mistakes, which had to be mistakes that could make these boys sound believable as Puerto Ricans.

Considering the lack of a codified Puerto Rican Italian, and considering similarities of sentence structure and vocabulary between Spanish and Italian, which make it likely for a speaker of either language to suffer from linguistic interference, we have chosen to portray the Puerto Rican speaking style as an accent, following the same method used for *City Boy* and *Isaac*. Hence, the Italian words that are similar to their Spanish equivalent have been spelt mimicking a possible Spanish pronunciation. In some cases, this method has resulted in words that look like hybrid of Italian and Spanish:

Italian word	Spanish word	Puerto Rican pronunciation of the Spanish word	Rendition into Italian translation	Italian pronunciation of the rendition
Signorina	señorita	/seño'rita/	segnorina	/seño'rina/

Other times, this has resulted in what may look like Spanish words being spelt out in the translation (“el”, “nombre”, “mierda”, “como”, “por”, “donde”), but this is

not the case: these are merely the transcriptions of the sounds a Puerto Rican person would possibly produce when pronouncing the Italian word incorrectly, which happen to coincide with the Puerto Rican versions of the same word, so they are not written in italics. The situation becomes even clearer when looking at the word expressing the number twenty-five.

Italian word	Spanish word	Puerto Rican pronunciation of the Spanish word	Rendition into Italian translation	Italian pronunciation of the rendition
Merda	Mierda	/'mjerda/	mierda	/'mjerda/
Venticinque	veinticinco	/beinti'sinko/	beintisinco	/beinti'sinko/

It is worth mentioning the rendition of the woman's name which was spelt incorrectly when pronounced by the boys: whereas in the original text the sounds produced by a Puerto Rican when saying 'Carlyle' were transcribed by following the phonological rules of American English, in the translation they have been transcribed by following the phonological rules of Italian. Hence:

Word	Puerto Rican pronunciation	Michael's rendition of the word	Rendition into Italian translation	Italian pronunciation of the rendition
Carlyle	/kar'lai̯l/	Calile	Carlail	/kar'lai̯l/

On the contrary, the only Spanish word used in the original text, "Vaya", has been maintained and written in italics.

A particularly interesting point of consideration is offered by the song the gang starts singing when mocking the woman: in the original text, the initial line "The number is ten dollars" becomes "Ten dol-lar iss t'nomma", and is sung together with "Twany fyiv not d'nummer, [...] na t'nomma" ("Twenty-five [is] not the number"). The words pronounced by the kids, which were before spelt

properly albeit not being always grammatically correct, are now spelt wrong and have become almost incomprehensible. This is because the boys have become so absorbed by their song that they fully embrace their Puerto Rican accent and speaking style, with “the beat feeding on itself pulverizing words, smearing them into liquid submission.” (Michaels, 2008 : 38) It has been possible to partially render this unintelligibility into Italian translation only by spelling the Spanish word for ‘twenty-five’ (‘veinticinco’) the way a Puerto Rican would pronounce it but following Italian spelling rules (see the respective table above), because the words sung by the boys, even pronounced with a very strong Spanish accent, would still be intelligible by an Italian listener.

Following the abovementioned translation strategies, we tried to convey accents and speaking styles that could sound convincingly German, Yiddish, or Puerto Rican to the ears of an Italian reader, to whom this translation is addressed.

## Chapter 4

### Excerpts from *The Collected Stories* and translation

Excerpt from “City Boy” from *Going Places* (1969)

“The Deal” from *Going Places* (1969)

Excerpt from “Making Changes” from *Going Places* (1969)

“Isaac” from *Going Places* (1969)

Excerpt from “A Green Thought” from *Going Places* (1969)

“Murderers” from *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975)

Excerpts from “Eating Out” from *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975)

Excerpt from “Getting Lucky” from *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975)

Excerpts from “I Would Have Saved Them If I Could” from *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (1975)

Excerpt from “Honeymoon” from *To Feel These Things* (1993)

Excerpt from “Viva La Tropicana” from *A Girl With A Monkey* (2000)

Excerpt from “Nachman” from The Nachman Stories

“Cryptology” from The Nachman Stories

## **City Boy**

[...] I had made a bad impression. There was no other way to see it. But all right. We needed a new beginning. Everyone does. Yet how few of us know when it arrives. Mr. Cohen had never spoken to me before; this was a breakthrough. There had been a false element in our relationship. It was wiped out. I wouldn't kid myself with the idea that he had nothing to say. I'd had enough of his silent treatment. It was worth being naked to see how mercilessly I could think. I had his number. Mrs. Cohen's, too. I was learning every second. I was a city boy. No innocent shit kicker from Jersey. I was the A train, the Fifth Avenue bus. I could be a cop. My name was Phillip, my style New York City. I poked the elevator button with my toe. It rang in the lobby, waking Ludwig. He'd come for me, rotten with sleep. Not the first time. He always took me down, walked me through the lobby and let me out on the avenue. Wires began tugging him up the shaft. I moved back, conscious of my genitals hanging upside down. Absurd consideration; we were both men one way or another. There were social distinctions enforced by his uniform, but they would vanish at the sight of me. "The unaccommodated thing

## Ragazzo di città

[...] Avevo fatto una brutta impressione. Non c'era altro modo di vedere la cosa. Pazienza, dovevamo ricominciare daccapo; capita a tutti. E, tuttavia, solo pochi si rendono conto di quando quel momento arriva. Il signor Cohen non mi aveva mai rivolto la parola prima; avevamo fatto un passo avanti. Fino ad allora c'era stato un elemento di falsità nel nostro rapporto. Era appena stato cancellato. Non mi ero illuso del fatto che non avesse niente da dire. Ne avevo avuto abbastanza del suo giochetto del silenzio. Valeva la pena essere nudo anche solo per vedere il modo spietato in cui riuscivo a ragionare. Avevo il suo numero e anche quello della signora Cohen. Accumulavo esperienza di secondo in secondo. Ero un ragazzo di città. Non uno spalamerda ingenuo del New Jersey. Io ero la Linea A della metro, l'autobus della Fifth Avenue.<sup>38</sup> Avrei potuto essere uno sbirro. Il mio nome era Phillip, il mio stile New York City. Colpii il pulsante dell'ascensore con il dito del piede e il campanello suonò nell'atrio, svegliando Ludwig. Sarebbe venuto a prendermi, morto di sonno. Non sarebbe stata la prima volta. Mi portava sempre al piano terra, mi accompagnava attraverso l'atrio e mi apriva la porta sulla strada. I cavi iniziarono a trascinarlo lungo il vano ascensore. Mi spostai indietro, consapevole del fatto che i miei genitali stessero penzolando sottosopra. Una considerazione assurda: eravamo entrambi uomini, in un modo o nell'altro. C'erano delle differenze sociali imposte dalla sua uniforme, ma sarebbero svanite non appena mi avesse visto. "La cosa in sé, senza i fronzoli del vestito." "Via,

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<sup>38</sup> Two of the most iconic means of public transportation in New York City. The 'A train', still functioning today, serves one of the main and most chaotic subway lines, which stretches through the city from north to south. By 'Fifth Avenue bus', the author means a bus of the Fifth Avenue Coach Company, which served a vast area of New York from 1896 to 1954.

itself." "Off ye lendings!" The greatest play is about a naked man. A picture of Lear came to me, naked, racing through the wheat. I could be cool. I thought of Ludwig's uniform, hat, whipcord collar. It signified his authority. Perhaps he would be annoyed, in his authority, by the sight of me naked. Few people woke him at such hours. Worse, I never tipped him. Could I have been so indifferent month after month? In a crisis you discover everything. Then it's too late. Know yourself, indeed. You need a crisis every day. I refused to think about it. I sent my mind after objects. It returned with the chairs, settee, table and chandelier. Where were my clothes? I sent it along the rug. It found buttons, eagles stamped in brass. I recognized them as the buttons on Ludwig's coat. Eagles, beaks like knives, shrieking for tips. Fuck'm, I thought. Who's Ludwig? A big coat, a whistle, white gloves and a General MacArthur hat. I could understand him completely. He couldn't begin to understand me. A naked man is mysterious. But aside from that, what did he know? I dated Veronica Cohen and went home late. Did he know I was out of work? That I lived in a slum downtown? Of course not.

ciarpame in prestito al mio corpo!”<sup>39</sup> Il più grande dramma teatrale parla di un uomo nudo. Mi venne in mente l’immagine di Lear che, nudo, corre attraverso il grano. Avrei potuto essere un fico. Pensai all’uniforme di Ludwig, al suo cappello e al suo colletto rigido. Rappresentavano la sua autorità. Forse, dall’alto della sua autorità, si sarebbe infastidito alla vista di me nudo. Poche persone lo svegliavano a quelle ore. E, peggio ancora, non gli davo mai la mancia. Come avevo potuto essere così insensibile, mese dopo mese? Durante una crisi, scopri tutto. Poi è troppo tardi. Conosci te stesso, sul serio. Si avrebbe bisogno di una crisi ogni giorno. Mi rifiutai di pensarci. Mandai la mente a rincorrere gli oggetti; mi riportò le sedie, il sofà, il tavolo e il candeliere. Dov’erano i miei vestiti? Cercai di visualizzare il tappeto. Scorsi dei bottoni, aquile impresse nell’ottone. Li riconobbi come i bottoni sul cappotto di Ludwig. Aquile, becchi come coltelli, che strillavano reclamando di mance. Che vadano a ‘fanculo, pensai. Chi era Ludwig? Un gran cappotto, un fischietto, guanti bianchi, un cappello da Generale MacArthur.<sup>40</sup> Lo capivo pienamente, ma lui non si avvicinava neanche a capire me. Un uomo nudo è misterioso. Ma a parte quello, che ne sapeva lui? Uscivo con Veronica Cohen e andavo a casa tardi. Sapeva che ero disoccupato? Che vivevo nei bassifondi in periferia? Ovviamente no.

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<sup>39</sup> “The unaccommodated thing itself.” “Off ye lendings!”. The author is quoting, albeit inaccurately, King Lear, from the homonymous tragedy by William Shakespeare – the original line recites “Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!” In the play, the protagonist reaches the conclusion that clothing is nothing more than an artificial social convention that corrupts the natural human condition, and gets rid of his clothes.

<sup>40</sup> General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) was famous for his distinctive Philippine Army Field Marshal’s cap: a gilded trim was added above the visor of a classic army cap, despite any modification to military headgear being prohibited.

Possibly under his hat was a filthy mind. He imagined Veronica and I might be having sexual intercourse. He resented it. Not that he hoped for the privilege himself, in his coat and soldier hat, but he had a proprietary interest in the building and its residents. I came from another world. The other world against which Ludwig defended the residents. Wasn't I like a burglar sneaking out late, making him my accomplice? I undermined his authority, his dedication. He despised me. It was obvious. But no one thinks such thoughts. It made me laugh to think them. My genitals jumped. The elevator door slid open. He didn't say a word. I padded inside like a seal. The door slid shut. Instantly, I was ashamed of myself, thinking as I had about him. I had no right. A better man than I. His profile was an etching by Dürer. Good peasant stock. How had he fallen to such work? Existence precedes essence. At the controls, silent, enduring, he gave me strength for the street. Perhaps the sun would be up, birds in the air. The door slid open. Ludwig walked ahead of me through the lobby. He needed new heels. The door of the lobby was half a ton of glass, encased in iron vines and leaves. Not too much for Ludwig. He turned, looked down into my eyes. I watched his lips move.

Probabilmente, sotto quel suo cappello, c'era una mente perversa. Immaginava che io e Veronica avessimo rapporti sessuali. Gli dava fastidio. Non che lui sperasse di avere lo stesso privilegio, con quel suo cappotto e il suo cappello da soldato, ma nutriva un profondo interesse nei confronti del palazzo e dei suoi residenti. Io venivo da un altro mondo. *Quell'altro mondo* contro il quale Ludwig proteggeva i condomini. Non ero forse come uno scassinatore che usciva di soppiatto a tarda notte, rendendo lui mio complice? Io compromettevo la sua autorità, la sua dedizione. Mi disprezzava. Era ovvio. Ma nessuno si fa questi problemi. Pensarci mi fece ridere e i miei genitali sobbalzarono. Le porte dell'ascensore si aprirono scorrendo. Lui non disse una parola. Io salii, arrancando come una foca. Le porte si richiusero. Immediatamente, mi vergognai di me stesso ad aver pensato quelle cose di lui. Non ne avevo alcun diritto. Un uomo migliore di me. Il suo profilo era un'acquaforte di Dürer<sup>41</sup>. Buona razza contadina. Come era finito a fare un lavoro del genere? L'esistenza precede l'essenza.<sup>42</sup> In piedi vicino ai pulsanti, silenzioso, stoico, mi diede il coraggio di uscire in strada. Forse il sole sarebbe stato già alto, gli uccelli nel cielo. Le porte si riaprirono. Ludwig attraversò l'atrio camminando davanti a me. Aveva bisogno di tacchi nuovi. La porta dell'atrio era una mezza tonnellata di vetro rivestito di foglie e rampicanti di ferro. Non era troppo pesante per Ludwig. Lui si girò e guardò in basso per incontrare i miei occhi. Io guardai le sue labbra muoversi.

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<sup>41</sup> Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) was a German painter, engraver, and essayist, considered the highest representative of the German Renaissance.

<sup>42</sup> Central argument of existentialist philosophy, which debunks traditional philosophy (see note 6) by stating that man's existence is to be considered more important of his essence, because the individual possesses no intrinsic value. The concept is expressed by Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, but was spelled out by Jean-Paul Sartre in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" in 1945.

"I vun say sumding. Yur bisniss vot you do. Bud vy you mek her miserable?

Nod led her slip. She has beks unter her eyes."

Ludwig had feelings. They spoke to mine. Beneath the uniform, a man. Essence precedes existence. Even rotten with sleep, thick, dry bags under his eyes, he saw, he sympathized. The discretion demanded by his job forbade anything tangible, a sweater, a hat. "Ludwig," I whispered, "you're all right." It didn't matter if he heard me. He knew I said something. He knew it was something nice. He grinned, tugged the door open with both hands. I slapped out onto the avenue. I saw no one, dropped to my feet and glanced back through the door. Perhaps for the last time. I lingered, indulged a little melancholy. Ludwig walked to a couch in the rear of the lobby. He took off his coat, rolled it into a pillow and lay down. I had never stayed to see him do that before, but always rushed off to the subway. As if I were indifferent to the life of the building. Indeed, like a burglar. I seized the valuables and fled to the subway. I stayed another moment, watching good Ludwig, so I could hate myself. He assumed the modest, saintly posture of sleep. One leg here, the other there. His good head on his coat. A big arm across his stomach, the hand between his hips. He made a fist and punched up and down.

[...]

The door opened. I nodded to Ludwig. What did he know about life and death? Give him a uniform and a quiet lobby — that's life and death.

“Folio tire una coza. Afari tuoi coza fai. Ma perché la fai difentare trizte?

Non fai tormire lei. Ha porze sotto li ochi.”

Ludwig provava dei sentimenti. Parlavano ai miei. Sotto l'uniforme, un uomo. L'essenza precede l'esistenza.<sup>43</sup> Anche stanco morto, con pesanti, aride occhiaie, lui vedeva e comprendeva. La discrezione richiesta dal suo lavoro proibiva qualsiasi cosa di tangibile, un maglione, un berretto. “Ludwig,” sussurrai, “sei un tipo in gamba.” Non importava se non mi aveva sentito. Sapeva che avevo detto qualcosa e sapeva che era qualcosa di positivo. Fece una smorfia simile a un sorriso e aprì la porta con tirandola con entrambe le mani. Mi catapultai fuori in strada. Non vidi nessuno, rimisi i piedi per terra e diedi un'occhiata alle mie spalle, oltre la porta. Forse per l'ultima volta. Indugiai, concedendomi un po' di malinconia. Ludwig si diresse verso un divano in fondo all'atrio; si tolse il cappotto, lo arrotolò a mo' di cuscino, e si stese. Non ero mai rimasto abbastanza a lungo da vederglielo fare, ero sempre corso verso la metropolitana. Come se fossi indifferente alla vita del palazzo. Proprio come un ladro, arraffavo gli oggetti di valore e scappavo verso la metro. Rimasi un altro secondo a guardare il buon Ludwig, così da potermi odiare. Assunse l'umile, beata postura del sonno. Una gamba qui, l'altra lì. La sua santa testa sul cappotto. Un grosso braccio sulla pancia, la mano in mezzo alle anche. Chiuse le dita in un pugno e iniziò ad agitarlo su e giù.

[...]

La porta si aprì. Feci un cenno a Ludwig. Che ne sapeva lui della vita e della morte?

Gli bastavano un'uniforme e un atrio tranquillo – quello era la vita e la morte.

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<sup>43</sup> Traditional philosophical reasoning, which states that the essence of an object is immutable and more important than its mere existence.

In the elevator he took the controls. "Always got a hand on the controls, eh, Ludwig?"

Veronica smiled in a feeble, grateful way. She liked to see me get along with the help. Ludwig said, "Dots right."

"Ludwig has been our doorman for years, Phillip. Ever since I was a little girl."

"Wow," I said.

"Dots right."

The door slid open. Veronica said, "Thank you, Ludwig." I said, "Thank you, Ludwig."

"Vulcum."

"Vulcum? You mean 'welcome'? Hey, Ludwig, how long you been in this country?"

Veronica was driving her key into the door.

"How come you never learned to talk American, baby?"

"Phillip, come here."

"I'm saying something to Ludwig."

"Come here right now."

"I have to go, Ludwig."

"Vulcum."

[...]

In ascensore, premette lui i pulsanti. “Sempre con le mani impegnate, eh, Ludwig?”<sup>44</sup>

Veronica fece un sorriso debole e riconoscente. Le piaceva vedermi andare d'accordo con i domestici. Ludwig disse, “Ezatto.”

“Ludwig è il nostro portiere da anni, Phillip. Fin da quando ero bambina.”

“Wow,” dissi.

“Ezatto.”

Le porte si aprirono. Veronica disse, “Grazie, Ludwig.” Io dissi, “Grazie, Ludwig.”

“Preco.”

“Preco? Intendi ‘prego’? Ehi, Ludwig, da quanto sei in questo paese?”

Veronica stava infilando la chiave nella serratura.

“Com’è che non hai mai imparato a parlare da americano, bello?”

“Phillip, vieni qui.”

“Sto dicendo una cosa a Ludwig.”

“Vieni qui, subito.”

“Devo andare, Ludwig.”

“Preco.”

[...]

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<sup>44</sup> “Always got a hand on the controls, eh, Ludwig?”. The protagonist’s snarky remark is a subtle reference to what the doorman was seen doing when he was left alone in the lobby. To a literal translation, we preferred a freer translation which could sound as ambiguous as the original expression.

## The Deal

TWENTY WERE JAMMED TOGETHER ON THE STOOP; tiers of heads made one central head, and the wings rested along the banisters: a raggedy monster of boys studying her approach. Her white face and legs. She passed without looking, poked her sunglasses against the bridge of her nose, and tucked her bag between her arm and ribs. She carried it at her hip like a rifle stock. On her spine forty eyes hung like poison berries. Bone dissolved beneath her lank beige silk, and the damp circle of her belt cut her in half. Independent legs struck toward the points of her shoes. Her breasts lifted and rode the air like porpoises. She would cross to the grocery as usual, buy cigarettes, then cross back despite their eyes. As if the neighborhood hadn't changed one bit. She slipped the bag forward to crack it against her belly and pluck out keys and change. In the gesture she was home from work. Her keys jangled in the sun as if they opened everything and the air received her. The monster, watching, saw the glove fall away.

Pigeons looped down to whirl between buildings, and a ten-wheel truck came slowly up the street. As it passed she emerged from the grocery, then stood at the curb opposite the faces. She glanced along the street where she had crossed it. No glove. Tar reticulated between the cobbles. A braid of murky water ran

## L'accordo

ERANO IN VENTI, INCASTRATI UNO CON L'ALTRO SULLA GRADINATA; file di teste componevano un'unica testa centrale, e le ali erano posate lungo la ringhiera: un logoro mostro di ragazzini che la studiava mentre lei si avvicinava. La faccia e le gambe bianche. Li superò senza guardarli, si sistemò gli occhiali da sole sul naso e strinse la borsa tra il braccio e il costato. La portava sul fianco come il calcio di un fucile. Attaccati alla sua schiena, quaranta occhi pendevano come bacche velenose. Le ossa si dissolvevano sotto la liscia seta beige, e il cerchio umido della cintura la tagliava a metà. Gambe indipendenti si slanciavano verso le punte delle sue scarpe. I suoi seni si sollevavano e cavalcavano l'aria come delfini. Come al solito, avrebbe attraversato la strada fino alla drogheria, avrebbe comprato le sigarette, poi sarebbe tornata indietro a dispetto dei loro sguardi. Come se il quartiere non fosse cambiato di una virgola.<sup>45</sup> Fece scivolare la borsa in avanti, sulla pancia, per aprirla con uno schiocco ed estrarre le chiavi e degli spiccioli. Quel gesto segnava la fine della sua giornata lavorativa. Le chiavi tintinnarono al sole come se aprissero ogni cosa e l'aria la accogliesse. Il mostro, mentre la fissava, vide cadere il guanto.

Dei piccioni planavano in circoli tra gli edifici e un camion rimorchio risaliva lentamente la strada. Mentre passava, lei riemerse dalla drogheria e si fermò sul marciapiede davanti alle facce, dalla parte opposta della carreggiata. Diede un'occhiata alla strada nel punto in cui aveva attraversato. Niente guanto. Il bitume creava un reticolato tra il pietrisco dell'asfalto. Un rivolo di acqua torbida

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<sup>45</sup> After several waves of Puerto Rican immigration to New York City (especially the Great Migration in around the Fifties), Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem were deeply influenced by the Hispanic presence, both culturally and socially, and racial discrimination towards Puerto Ricans became extremely heavy. The narrator's remark might have a subtly racist tone and might be voicing the thoughts of the female protagonist, who is clearly wealthier than the boys.

against the curb, twisting bits of flotsam toward the drain. She took off her sunglasses, dropped them with her keys into the bag, then stepped off the curb toward the faces. Addressing them with a high, friendly voice, she said, "Did you guys see a glove? I dropped it a moment ago."

The small ones squinted up at her from the bottom step. On the middle steps sat boys fourteen or fifteen years old. The oldest ones made the wings. Dandies and introverts, they sprawled, as if with a common corruption in their bones. In the center, his eyes level with hers, a boy waited for her attention in the matter of gloves. To his right sat a very thin boy with a pocked face. A narrow-brimmed hat tipped toward his nose and shaded the continuous activity of his eyes. She spoke to the green eyes of the boy in the center and held up the glove she had: "Like this."

Teeth appeared below the hat, then everywhere as the boys laughed. Did she hold up a fish? Green eyes said, "Hello, Miss Calile."

She looked around at the faces, then laughed with them at her surprise. "You know my name?"

"I see it on the mailbox," said the hat. "He can't read. I see it."

"My name is Duke Francisco," said the illiterate.

"My name is Abbe Carlyle," she said to him.

scorreva lungo il cordolo, rigirando sporcizia galleggiante verso il tombino. Si tolse gli occhiali da sole, li fece cadere nella borsa insieme alle chiavi e abbandonò il marciapiede puntando verso le facce. Rivolgendosi a loro con voce squillante e amichevole, disse, “Ragazzi, avete visto un guanto? Mi è caduto un attimo fa.”

Quelli più piccoletti, dal gradino più basso, strizzarono gli occhi in sua direzione. Sui gradini centrali, erano seduti ragazzi di quattordici o quindici anni. I più grandi erano le ali. Fighi<sup>46</sup> e di poche parole, se ne stavano lì spaparanzati, come se una qualche corruzione nelle ossa li rendesse simili. Al centro, gli occhi all'altezza dei suoi, uno di loro aspettava che lei gli dedicasse attenzione riguardo al guanto. Alla sua destra sedeva un ragazzino molto magro con la faccia butterata. Un cappello a tesa stretta, inclinato verso il naso, nascondeva l'incessante attività dei suoi occhi. Lei parlò con gli occhi verdi del ragazzino in centro e mostrò il guanto che le rimaneva: “Come questo.”

Dei denti apparirono sotto il cappello, poi ovunque, quando i bambini risero. Stava forse mostrando un pesce? Occhi verdi disse, “Ciao, signorina Carlail.”

Guardò una faccia dopo l'altra e rise con loro della propria sorpresa. “Sai come mi chiamo?”

“Lo visto sulla cassetta della posta,” disse il cappello. “Lui non sa leggere. Io lo vedo.”

“Io mi chiamo Duca Francisco,” disse l'illetterato.

“Io sono Abbe Carlyle,” rispose lei.

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<sup>46</sup> *Dandies*. According to Treccani, a dandy is an individual “caratterizzato da forme di individualismo, di ironico distacco dalla realtà, di rifiuto nei confronti della mediocrità borghese”. This description might seem suitable for the boys, but the dandy of the Italian collective imagination is necessarily concerned with cultivating a classy exteriority and has a sophisticated dress sense. For this reason, the literal translation could not be maintained; we preferred using an adjective that could better describe the boys' attitude, other than be attributed to a classic dandy.

The hat smirked. "His name Francisco Lopez."

Green eyes turned to the hat. "Shut you mouth, baby. I tell her my name, not you."

"His name Francisco Lopez," the hat repeated.

She saw pocks and teeth, the thin oily face, and the hat, as he spoke again, nicely to her: "My name Francisco Pacheco, the Prince. I seen you name on the mailbox."

"Did either of you..."

"You name is shit," said green eyes to the hat.

"My name is Tito." A small one on the bottom step looked up for the effect of his name. She looked down at him. "I am Tito," he said.

"Did you see my glove, Tito?"

"This is Tomato," he answered, unable to bear her attention. He nudged the boy to his left. Tomato nudged back, stared at the ground.

"I am happy to know you, Tito," she said, "and you, Tomato. Both of you." She looked back up to green eyes and the hat. The hat acknowledged her courtesy. He tilted back to show her his eyes, narrow and black except for bits of white reflected in the corners. His face was thin, hiboned, and fragile. She pitied the riddled skin.

"This guy," he said, pointing his thumb to the right, "is Monkey," and then to the left beyond green eyes, "and this guy is Beans." She nodded to the hat, then

Il cappello fece un sorrisetto. "El suo nombre è Francisco Lopez."

Occhi verdi si girò verso il cappello. "Chiudi tu bocca, bello. Io le dico il mio nome, no tu."

"El suo nombre è Francisco Lopez," ripeté il cappello.

Vide i segni dell'acne e i denti, la faccia untuosa e smunta e il cappello, mentre lui le parlava di nuovo, con gentilezza: "El mio nombre è Francisco Pacheco, el Principe. Io visto el tuo nombre sulla cassetta della posta."

"Qualcuno di voi ha..."

"El tuo nome è mierda," disse occhi verdi al cappello.

"Il mio nome è Tito." Un piccoletto, dal gradino più basso, guardò in alto per vedere l'effetto del suo nome. Lei guardò in basso, verso di lui. "Io sono Tito," ripeté.

"Hai visto il mio guanto, Tito?"

"Questo è Pomodoro," rispose, incapace di sostenere la sua attenzione. Diede un colpetto al bambino alla sua sinistra. Pomodoro restituì la spinta, ma rimase a fissare per terra.

"Sono felice di conoserti, Tito," disse, "e anche te, Pomodoro. Tutti e due." Tornò a guardare occhi verdi e il capello. Il cappello apprezzò la sua gentilezza. Alzò il mento per mostrarle i propri occhi, stretti e neri con riflessi bianchi negli angoli. Il suo viso era magro e fragile, gli zigomi alti. La pelle martoriata le faceva pena.

"Questo qui," disse, indicando con il pollice alla propria destra, "è Scimmia," e poi alla sinistra, oltre occhi verdi, "e quello è Fagioli." Lei fece un cenno al

Monkey, then Beans, measuring the respect she offered, doling it out in split seconds. Only one of them had the glove.

"Well, did any of you guys see my glove?"

Every tier grew still, like birds in a tree waiting for a sign that would move them all at once.

Tito's small dark head snapped forward. She heard the slap an instant late. The body lurched after the head and pitched off the stoop at her feet. She saw green eyes sitting back slowly. Tito gaped up at her from the concrete. A sacrifice to the lady. She stepped back as if rejecting it and frowned at green eyes. He gazed indifferently at Tito, who was up, facing him with coffee-bean fists. Tito screamed, "I tell her you got it, dickhead."

The green eyes swelled in themselves like a light blooming in the ocean. Tito's fists opened, he turned, folded quickly, and sat back into the mass. He began to rub his knees.

"May I have my glove, Francisco?" Her voice was still pleasant and high. She now held her purse in the crook of her arm and pressed it against her side.

Some fop had a thought and giggled in the wings. She glanced up at him immediately. He produced a toothpick. With great delicacy he stuck it into his ear. She looked away. Green eyes again waited for her. A cup of darkness formed in the hollow that crowned his chestbone. His soiled gray polo shirt hooked below it.

cappello, poi a Scimmia, poi a Fagioli, dosando il rispetto che offriva, elargendolo per una frazione di secondo appena. Solo uno di loro aveva il guanto.

“Allora, qualcuno di voi ha visto il mio guanto?”

Ogni fila si fece immobile, come uccelli su un albero che aspettano un segnale per spiccare il volo tutti assieme.

La piccola testa scura di Tito scattò in avanti. Lei udì lo schiaffo con un istante di ritardo. Il bambino barcollò in avanti seguendo la testa e cadde ai suoi piedi, sbalzato dalla scalinata. Abbe vide occhi verdi risistemarsi lentamente. Tito, a bocca aperta, la guardò dal cemento con espressione meravigliata. Un tributo per la signora. Lei fece un passo indietro, come a rifiutarlo, e guardò occhi verdi aggrottando la fronte. Lui fissava Tito con indifferenza, mentre il bambino si era rialzato e lo stava affrontando, alzando i pugni simili a chicchi di caffè. Tito urlò, “Le dico che lo hai preso tu, stronzo!”

Gli occhi verdi si ingrandirono come una luce che sboccia dal fondo dell’oceano. Tito sciolse i pugni, si girò e si ripiegò velocemente su se stesso, tornando a sedersi nella massa. Iniziò a sfregarsi le ginocchia.

“Potrei riavere il mio guanto, Francisco?” La sua voce era ancora gentile e squillante, ma ora teneva la borsa sotto il braccio, pressandola contro il fianco.

Uno dei damerini pensò a qualcosa e ridacchiò dalle ali. Lei gli lanciò subito un’occhiata. Lui tirò fuori uno stuzzicadenti e, con gran raffinatezza, se lo infilò in un orecchio. Abbe distolse lo sguardo. Gli occhi verdi, di nuovo, la stavano aspettando. Una coppa d’ombra si formò nella fossetta che incoronava il suo sterno. Sotto ad essa pendeva la sudicia polo grigia.

"You think I have you glove?" She didn't answer. He stared between his knees, between heads and shoulders to the top of Tito's head. "Hey, Tito, you tell her I got the glove?"

"I didn't tell nothing," muttered Tito, rubbing his knees harder as if they were still bitter from his fall.

"He's full of shit, Miss Calile. I break his head later. What kind of glove you want?"

"This kind," she said wearily, "a white glove like this."

"Too hot." He grinned.

"Yes, too hot, but I need it."

"What for? Too hot." He gave her full green concern.

"It's much too hot, but the glove is mine, mister."

She rested her weight on one leg and wiped her brow with the glove she had. They watched her do it, the smallest of them watched her, and she moved the glove slowly to her brow again and drew it down her cheek and neck. She could think of nothing to say, nothing to do without expressing impatience. Green eyes changed the subject. "You live there." He pointed toward her building.

"That's right."

A wooden front door with a window in it showed part of the shadowy lobby, mailboxes, and a second door. Beyond her building and down the next street were warehouses. Beyond them, the river. A meat truck started toward them from a packing house near the river. It came slowly, bug-eyed with power. The driver saw the lady standing in front of the boys. He yelled as the truck went past. Gears

“Credi che ho el tuo guanto?” Lei non rispose. Lui guardava in basso tra le proprie ginocchia, tra teste e spalle, e fissava la testa di Tito. “Ehi, Tito, le dici che ho el guanto?”

“Io ho detto niente,” balbettò Tito, sfregandosi le ginocchia più forte, come se gli facessero ancora male per la caduta.

“Dice cazzate, signorina Carlail. Gli rompo la testa dopo. Como lo vuoi el guanto?”

“Come questo,” disse lei, annoiata, “un guanto bianco come questo.”

“Troppo caldo.” Ghignò.

“Sì, fa troppo caldo, ma mi serve.”

“Por che? Troppo caldo.” Le mostrò tutta la sua verde preoccupazione.

“Fa troppo caldo, ma il guanto è mio, mister.”

Appoggiò il proprio peso su una gamba e si asciugò la fronte con il guanto che aveva in mano. La guardarono mentre lo faceva, il più piccolo la guardò, e lei si passò di nuovo il guanto sulla fronte e, lentamente, lo trascinò sulla guancia e sul collo. Non le veniva in mente niente da dire o da fare che non tradisse la sua impazienza. Occhi verdi cambiò argomento. “Tu vivi lì.” Indicò il palazzo.

“Esatto.”

Attraverso il vetro del portone di legno, nella penombra dell’ingresso, si intravedevano le cassette delle lettere e una seconda porta. Oltre il suo palazzo, sulla strada parallela, c’erano magazzini. Oltre i magazzini, il fiume. Un camion che trasportava carne, partito da un mattatoio vicino al fiume, si dirigeva verso di loro. Avanzava lentamente, i luminosi occhi sbarrati. L’autista vide la donna vicino ai ragazzini e urlò qualcosa mentre il camion li superava. Le marce latrarono,

yowled, twisting the sound of his voice. She let her strength out abruptly:  
“Give me the glove, Francisco.”

The boy shook his head at the truck, at her lack of civilization. “What you give me?”

That tickled the hat. “*Vaya, baby. What she give you, eh?*” He spoke fast, his tone decorous and filthy.

“All right, baby,” she said fast as the hat, “what do you want?” The question had New York and much man in it. The hat swiveled to the new sound. A man of honor, let him understand the terms. He squinted at her beneath the hat brim.

“Come on, Francisco, make your deal.” She presented brave, beautiful teeth, smiling hard as a skull.

“Tell her, Duke. Make the deal.” The hat lingered on “deal,” grateful to the lady for this word.

The sun shone in his face and the acknowledged duke sat, dull green eyes blank with possibilities. Her question, not “deal,” held him. It had come too hard, too fast. He laughed in contempt of something and glanced around at the wings. They offered nothing. “I want a dollar,” he said.

That seemed obvious to the hat: he sneered, “He wants a dollar.” She had to be stupid not to see it.

distorcendo il suono della sua voce. Abbe, all'improvviso, sbottò bruscamente:  
“Dammi il guanto, Francisco.”

Il ragazzino scosse la testa in direzione del furgone e della mancanza di educazione di lei. “Che me dai?”

La domanda stuzzicò il cappello. “*Vaya*<sup>47</sup>, bello. Che te dà, eh?” Parlò veloce, in tono decoroso e viscido.

“Va bene, bello,” rispose lei, veloce quanto il cappello, “cosa vuoi?” La domanda era impregnata dell'essenza di New York e di determinazione virile. Il cappello si girò, cogliendo il nuovo tono. Un uomo d'onore, gli faceva capire i termini. I suoi occhi si assottigliarono mentre la guardava da sotto la tesa del cappello.

“Avanti, Francisco, facciamo un accordo.” Il sorriso della donna, ampio come quello di un teschio, mostrava denti coraggiosi e perfetti.

“Dille, Duca. Fate un accordo.” Il cappello si soffermò su ‘accordo’, riconoscente alla donna per quella parola.

Il sole gli splendeva in viso e il duca in carica se ne stava seduto, nessuna idea negli opachi occhi verdi. Era la sua domanda a farlo esitare, non la parola ‘accordo’. Era arrivata troppo dura, troppo improvvisa. Rise con sprezzo nei confronti di qualcosa e lanciò occhiate alle ali. Loro non gli suggerirono nulla. “Voglio un dollaro,” disse.

La cosa sembrò ovvia al cappello: ghignò, “Vuole un dollaro.” Doveva proprio essere stupida per non averlo capito prima.

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<sup>47</sup> *Vaya*. Spanish exclamation which can be translated with “Hey”.

"No deal. Twenty-five cents." Her gloves were worth twenty dollars. She had paid ten for them at a sale. At the moment they were worth green eyes's life.

"I want ten dollars," said green eyes, flashing the words like extravagant meaningless things; gloves of his own. He lifted his arms, clasped his hands behind his head, and leaned against the knees behind him. His belly filled with air, the polo shirt rolled out on its curve. He made a fat man doing business. "Ten dollars." Ten fingers popped up behind his head, like grimy spikes. Keeper of the glove, cocky duke of the stoop. The number made him happy: it bothered her. He drummed the spikes against his head: "I wan' you ten dol-lar." Beans caught the beat in his hips and rocked it on the stoop.

"Francisco," she said, hesitated, then said, "dig me, please. You will get twenty-five cents. Now let's have the glove." Her bag snapped open, her fingers hooked, stiffened on the clasp. Monkey leered at her and bongoed his knees with fists. "The number is ten dol-lar." She waited, said nothing. The spikes continued drumming, Monkey rocked his hips, Beans pummeled his knees. The hat sang sadly: "Twany fyiv not d'nummer, not d'nummer, not d'nummer." He made claves of his fingers and palms, tucked, clicked his tongue against the beat. "Twan-ny fyiv — na t'nomma." She watched green eyes. He was quiet now in the center of the stoop, sitting motionless, waiting, as though seconds back in time his mind still touched the question: what did he want? He seemed to wonder, now that he had

“Niente da fare. Venticinque centesimi.” Quei guanti costavano venti dollari. Lei li aveva pagati dieci a una svendita. In quel momento, valevano quanto la vita di occhi verdi.

“Voglio dieci dollari,” disse occhi verdi, sventolando le parole come se fossero strani oggetti senza significato; i suoi guanti. Sollevò le braccia, intrecciò le dita dietro la testa, e si appoggiò alle ginocchia dietro di lui. La sua pancia si riempì d’aria e la sua polo si arrotondò seguendone la curva. Stava interpretando un grasso uomo d'affari. “Dieci dollari.” Dieci dita spuntarono da dietro la sua testa, come punte sudice. Custode del guanto, arrogante duca della gradinata. Era felice di quel numero: l’aveva messa in difficoltà. Si tamburellò le punte sulla testa: “Voglio tuoi dieci dol-lari.” Fagioli colse il ritmo con le anche e iniziò a seguirlo, muovendosi sulla gradinata.

“Francisco,” disse. Esitò, poi riprese, “mettiti nei miei panni. Ti do venticinque centesimi. Adesso dammi il guanto.” La sua borsa si aprì con uno schiocco e le sue dita si arcuarono, irrigidite sul gancio. Scimmia sbirciò nella sua direzione mentre si batteva i pugni sulle ginocchia come se fossero state dei bonghi. “Il numero è dieci dol-lari.” Lei aspettò senza dire niente. Le punte continuarono a tamburellare. Scimmia muoveva le anche, Fagioli si colpiva le ginocchia. Il cappello cantò tristemente: “Beinti sinco no è ‘l numero, no è ‘l numero, no è ‘l numero.” Le dita e i palmi delle mani si trasformarono in clavette e lui teneva il ritmo, schioccando la lingua in controtempo. “Bein-ti sinco – non el numero.” Lei guardò occhi verdi. Se ne stava immobile, seduto al centro della gradinata, in attesa, come se la sua mente fosse qualche secondo indietro nel tempo e stesse ancora accarezzando la domanda: cosa voleva? Sembrava

the formula, what *did* he want? The faces around him, dopey in the music, wondered nothing, grinned at her, nodded, clicked, whined the chorus: "Twany fyiv not t'nomma, twany fyiv not t'nomma."

Her silk blouse stained and stuck flat to her breasts and shoulders. Water chilled her sides.

"Ten dol-lar iss t'nomma."

She spread her feet slightly, taking better possession of the sidewalk and resting on them evenly, the bag held open for green eyes. She could see he didn't want that, but she insisted in her silence he did. Tito spread his little feet and lined the points of his shoes against hers. Tomato noticed the imitation and cackled at the concrete. The music went on, the beat feeding on itself, pulverizing words, smearing them into liquid submission: "Iss t'nomma twany fyiv? Dat iss not t'nomma."

"Twenty-five cents," she said again.

Tito whined, "Gimme twenty-five cents."

"Shut you mouth," said the hat, and turned a grim face to his friend. In the darkness of his eyes there were deals. The music ceased. "Hey, baby, you got no manners? Tell what you want." He spoke in a dreamy voice, as if to a girl.

"I want a kiss," said green eyes.

She glanced down with this at Tito and studied the small shining head. "Tell him to give me my glove, Tito," she said cutely, nervously. The wings shuffled and

ponderare, una volta stabilita l'equazione, che cosa voleva davvero? Le facce intorno a lui, intontite dalla musica, non ponderavano niente, ghignavano in direzione della donna, muovevano la testa a ritmo, cantilenavano la lagna: "Beinti sinco no è 'l numero, beinti sinco no è 'l numero."

La sua camicetta di seta era macchiata di sudore e le stava appiccicata al seno e alle spalle. Acqua le gocciolava giù lungo i fianchi.

"Dies dol-lari è 'l numero."

Divaricò un poco le gambe per dominare maggiormente il marciapiede e distribuì il proprio peso su entrambe, tenendo aperta la borsa sotto gli occhi verdi. Aveva capito che non voleva soldi, ma, stando in silenzio, gli imponeva quella scelta. Tito allargò i piccoli piedi e allineò le punte delle proprie scarpe alle sue. Pomodoro notò il gesto e schiamazzò in direzione del cemento. La musica continuava, il ritmo, alimentandosi da solo, polverizzava le parole, sbavandole in un discorso liquido. "I numero è beinti sinco? Esto no è l'numero."

"Venticinque centesimi," disse di nuovo.

Tito piagnucolò, "Dammi venticinque centesimi."

"Chiudi tu bocca," disse il cappello guardando l'amico in modo truce. C'erano affari nell'oscurità dei suoi occhi. La musica cessò. "Ehi, bello, che modi hai? Dille cosa vuoi." Parlò con una voce sognante, come se si stesse rivolgendo a una ragazza.

"Voglio un bacio," disse occhi verdi.

Al che, Abbe lanciò un'occhiata a Tito e studiò la sua testolina lucida. "Digli di darmi il guanto, Tito," disse nervosamente, forzatamente cortese. Le ali si rimescolarono e guardarono verso il basso, annoiate. Non stava succedendo

looked down bored. Nothing was happening. Twisting backward Tito shouted up to green eyes, "Give her the glove." He twisted front again and crouched over his knees. He shoved Tomato for approval and smiled. Tomato shoved him back, snarled at the concrete, and spit between his feet at a face which had taken shape in the grains.

"I want a kiss," said the boy again.

She sighed, giving another second to helplessness. The sun was low above the river and the street three quarters steeped in shade. Sunlight cut across the building tops where pigeons swept by loosely and fluttered in to pack the stone foliage of the eaves. Her bag snapped shut. Her voice was business: "Come on, Francisco. I'll give you the kiss."

He looked shot among the faces.

"Come on," she said, "it's a deal."

The hat laughed out loud with childish insanity. The others shrieked and jiggled, except for the wings. But they ceased to sprawl, and seemed to be getting bigger, to fill with imminent motion. "Gimme a kiss, gimme a kiss," said the little ones on the lowest step. Green eyes sat with a quiet, open mouth.

"Let's go," she said. "I haven't all day."

"Where I go?"

"That doorway." She pointed to her building and took a step toward it.  
"You know where I live, don't you?"

"I don't want no kiss."

niente. Girandosi indietro, Tito gridò a occhi verdi, "Dalle il guanto." Si girò di nuovo in avanti, abbracciandosi le ginocchia. Diede una spinta a Pomodoro in cerca di approvazione e sorrise. Pomodoro lo spintonò, fece una smorfia verso il marciapiede e sputò tra i suoi piedi, colpendo una faccia che si era formata tra i granelli.

"Voglio un bacio," disse di nuovo il ragazzino.

Lei sospirò, concedendosi un altro secondo di impotenza. Il sole era basso sopra il fiume e la strada, immersa nell'ombra per tre quarti. Raggi di luce fendevano l'aria attraverso le sommità degli edifici, dove i piccioni sfrecciavano e svolazzavano per andare ad affollare il fogliame di pietra dei cornicioni. La borsa si chiuse con uno schiocco. La sua voce aveva autorità imprenditoriale. "Va bene, Francisco. Ti darò un bacio."

Tra le facce, sembrava che gli avessero sparato.

"Dai," disse, "affare fatto."

Il cappello scoppiò in una risata di follia infantile. Gli altri strillarono e ridacchiarono, ad esclusione delle ali. Ma smisero di agitarsi e sembrarono diventare più grossi, per prepararsi a un movimento imminente. "Dammi un bacio, dammi un bacio," dissero i piccoletti sul gradino più basso. Occhi verdi se ne stava fermo, con la bocca silenziosa e aperta.

"Andiamo," disse. "Non ho tutto il giorno."

"Donde vado?"

"Quel portone." Indicò il proprio palazzo e fece un passo in quella direzione. "Sai dove vivo, no?"

"Non voglio un bacio."

"What's the matter now?"

"You scared?" asked the hat. "Hey, Duke, you scared?"

The wings leaned toward the center, where green eyes hugged himself and made a face.

"Look, Mr. Francisco, you made a deal."

"Yeah," said the wings.

"Now come along."

"I'm not scared," he shouted, and stood up among them. He sat down. "I don't want no kiss."

"You're scared?" she said.

"You scared chicken," said the hat.

"Yeah," said the wings. "Hey, punk. Fairy. Hey, Duke Chicken."

"Duke scared," mumbled Tito. Green eyes stood up again. The shoulders below him separated. Tito leaped clear of the stoop and trotted into the street. Green eyes passed through the place he had vacated and stood at her side, his head not so high as her shoulder. She nodded at him, tucked her bag up, and began walking toward her building. A few others stood up on the stoop and the hat started down. She turned. "Just him." Green eyes shuffled after her. The hat stopped on the sidewalk. Someone pushed him forward. He resisted, but called after them, "He's my cousin." She walked on, the boy came slowly after her. They were yelling from the stoop, the hat yelling his special point, "He's my brother." He stepped after them and the others swarmed behind him down the stoop and onto the sidewalk. Tito jumped out of the street and ran alongside the hat.

“Qual è il problema, adesso?”

“Paura?” chiese il cappello. “Ehi, Duca, paura?”

Le ali si sporsero verso il centro, dove occhi verdi si abbracciò con una smorfia.

“Senti, signor Francisco, eravamo d'accordo.”

“Già,” dissero le ali.

“Vieni, dai.”

“Non ho paura,” urlò, e si alzò in mezzo a loro. Si risedette. “Non voglio nessun bacio.”

“Hai paura?” disse lei.

“Pollo pauroso,” disse il cappello.

“Già,” dissero le ali. “Ehi, sfigato! Finocchio! Ehi, Duca Pollo!”

“Duca pauroso,” mormorò Tito. Occhi verdi si alzò di nuovo. Le spalle sotto di lui si separarono. Tito fece un balzo per liberare i gradini e trotterellò in strada. Occhi verdi attraversò il varco che aveva liberato e si avvicinò a lei, la testa che non arrivava neanche alla spalla della donna. Lei gli fece un cenno, imbracciò la borsa, e si incamminò verso l'edificio. Altri ragazzini si alzarono dalla gradinata e il cappello iniziò a seguirli. Lei si girò. “Solo lui.” Occhi verdi teneva il passo trascinando i piedi. Il cappello si fermò sul marciapiede. Qualcuno lo spinse in avanti. Lui oppose resistenza, ma gridò alle loro schiene, “È mio cugino.” Lei non si fermò e il ragazzino le andava dietro lentamente. Gli altri vociavano dalla gradinata, il cappello che gridava le sue ragioni, “È mio fratello.” Partì all'inseguimento e gli altri sciamarono con lui, abbandonando la gradinata e occupando il marciapiede. Tito saltò fuori dalla strada e corse vicino al cappello.

He yelled, "He's got the glove." They all moved down the block, the wings trailing sluggishly, the young ones jostling, punching each other, laughing, shrieking things in Spanish after green eyes and the lady. She heard him, a step behind her. "I give you the glove and take off."

She put her hand out to the side a little. The smaller hand touched hers and took it. "You made a deal."

She tugged him through the doorway into the tight, square lobby. The hand snapped free and he swung by, twisting to face her as if to meet a blow. He put his back against the second door, crouched a little. His hands pressed the sides of his legs. The front door shut slowly and the shadows deepened in the lobby. He crouched lower, his eyes level with her breasts, as she took a step toward him. The hat appeared, a black rock in the door window. Green eyes saw it, straightened up, one hand moving quickly toward his pants pocket. The second and third head, thick dark bulbs, lifted beside the hat in the window. Bodies piled against the door behind her. Green eyes held up the glove. "Here you lousy glove."

She smiled and put out her hand. The hat screamed, "Hey, you made a deal, baby. Hey, you got no manners."

"Don't be scared," she whispered, stepping closer.

The glove lifted toward her and hung in the air between them, gray, languid as smoke. She took it and bent toward his face. "I won't kiss you. Run." The window went black behind her, the lobby solid in darkness, silent but for his breathing, the door breathing against the pressure of the bodies, and the scraping

Gridò, "Ha lui il guanto!" Si mossero tutti lungo l'isolato: le ali li pedinavano pigramente, i più piccoli si spintonavano dandosi pugni, ridendo e strillando cose in spagnolo in direzione di occhi verdi e della donna. Lei lo sentì dire, un passo dietro di lei: "Ti do il guanto e vado via."

Lei sporse un po' la mano di lato. La mano più piccola toccò la sua e la strinse. "Affare fatto."

Lo tirò, attraverso il portone, nello stretto atrio quadrato. La mano si liberò dalla stretta con uno strattone e lui si girò, voltandosi per affrontarla come per incassare un colpo. Appoggiò la schiena alla seconda porta e si chinò un poco. Teneva le braccia strette lungo il corpo. La porta d'ingresso si richiuse lentamente e, nell'atrio, le ombre divennero più scure. Si chinò ancora, i suoi occhi all'altezza dei seni di lei, mentre lei si avvicinava di un passo. Il cappello apparve, un sasso nero nella finestra della porta. Occhi verdi lo vide e si raddrizzò, una mano che schizzava verso la tasca dei propri pantaloni. Una seconda e una terza testa, grossi bulbi neri, emersero accanto al cappello nel riquadro della finestra. I corpi si accatastavano contro la porta dietro di lei. Occhi verdi le porse il guanto. "Tieni el tuo estupido guanto."

Lei sorrise e allungò la mano. Il cappello urlò, "Ehi, avevate un accordo, bella! Ehi, che modi hai?"

"Non avere paura," sussurrò, avvicinandosi.

Il guanto si sollevò verso di lei e rimase sospeso nell'aria tra loro, grigio, languido come fumo. Lei lo afferrò e si sporse verso il suo viso. "Non ti bacio. Corri." La finestra diventò nera dietro di lei e il buio pesto invase l'atrio, silenzioso tranne che per il respiro del ragazzino; la porta respirava per la pressione dei corpi e il

of fingers spread about them like rats in the walls. She felt his shoulder, touched the side of his neck, bent the last inch, and kissed him. White light cut the walls. They tumbled behind it, screams and bright teeth. Spinning to face them she was struck, pitched against green eyes and the second door. He twisted hard, shoved away from her as the faces piled forward popping eyes and lights, their fingers accumulating in the air, coming at her. She raised the bag, brought it down swishing into the faces, and wrenched and twisted to get free of the fingers, screaming against their shrieks, "Stop it, stop it, stop it." The bag sprayed papers and coins, and the sunglasses flew over their heads and cracked against the brass mailboxes. She dropped amid shrieks, "Gimme a kiss, gimme a kiss," squirming down the door onto her knees to get fingers out from under her and she thrust up with the bag into bellies and thighs until a fist banged her mouth. She cursed, flailed at nothing.

There was light in the lobby and leather scraping on concrete as they crashed out the door into the street. She shut her eyes instantly as the fist came again, big as her face. Then she heard running in the street. The lobby was silent. The door shut slowly, the shadows deepened. She could feel the darkness getting thicker. She opened her eyes. Standing in front of her was the hat. He bowed slightly. "I get those guys for you. They got no manners." The hat shook amid the shadows, slowly, sadly.

She pressed the smooth leather of her bag against her cheek where the mouths had kissed it. Then she tested the clasp, snapping it open and shut.

raschiare delle dita si propagava intorno a loro come ratti nei muri. Lei gli toccò la spalla, gli sfiorò il lato del collo, annullò l'ultimo centimetro di distanza tra loro e lo baciò. Una luce bianca tagliò le pareti. Rotolarono dentro con essa, urla e denti luccicanti. Voltandosi per fronteggiarli, venne investita, schiacciata contro occhi verdi e la seconda porta. Lui sguscì via, spingendosi lontano da lei mentre le facce si ammassavano spalancando occhi e luci, le loro dita si accumulavano nell'aria, venendo a prenderla. Lei sollevò la borsa e la riabbassò, agitandola contro le facce, e si contorceva e si divincolava per liberarsi da quelle dita, cercando di sovrastare i loro strilli gridando "Fermi, fermi, fermi." Dalla borsa volarono fogli e monete e gli occhiali da sole vennero catapultati sopra le loro teste e si ruppero contro le cassette della posta d'ottone. La donna cadde sulle ginocchia tra le urla, "Dammi un bacio, dammi un bacio," contorcendosi contro la porta per togliersi di dosso le dita, e con la borsa spingeva per allontanare pance e cosce, finché un pugno non la colpì sulla bocca. Imprecò, agitando il braccio senza colpire nulla.

La luce tornò nell'atrio e ci fu rumore di cuoio che grattava contro il cemento mentre i ragazzini si fiondarono fuori dalla porta, in strada. Serrò gli occhi istantaneamente quando avvertì un nuovo pugno arrivare, grande quanto la sua faccia. Poi sentì dei passi di corsa in strada. L'atrio era silenzioso. La porta si chiuse lentamente, le ombre diventarono più scure. Abbe avvertì il buio farsi più intenso. Aprì gli occhi. Davanti a lei c'era il cappello.

Il ragazzino si inchinò leggermente. "Gliela faccio vedere io a quelli. Non hanno modi." Il cappello scosse la testa nell'oscurità, lentamente, tristemente.

Lei premette il cuoio liscio della borsa contro la propria guancia, dove le bocche l'avevano baciata. Poi controllò che il gancio funzionasse, aprendolo e

The hat shifted his posture and waited. "You hit me," she whispered, and did not look up at him. The hat bent and picked up her keys and the papers. He handed the keys to her, then the papers, and bent again for the coins. She dropped the papers into her bag and stuffed them together in the bottom. "Help me up!" She took his hands and got to her feet without looking at him. As she put the key against the lock of the second door she began to shiver. The key rattled against the slot. "Help me!" The hat leaned over the lock, his long thin fingers squeezing the key. It caught, angled with a click. She pushed him aside. "You give me something? Hey, you give me something?" The door shut on his voice.

chiudendolo con degli schiocchi. Il cappello spostò il peso da un piede all'altro e aspettò. "Mi hai colpita," sussurrò, e non alzò lo sguardo su di lui. Il cappello si piegò e raccolse le chiavi e i fogli. Le porse le chiavi, poi i fogli, e si piegò di nuovo per raccogliere le monete. Lei schiaffò i fogli nella borsa e li schiacciò sul fondo. "Aiutami ad alzarmi!" Gli prese le mani e si alzò in piedi senza guardarlo. Mentre avvicinava la chiave alla toppa della seconda porta, Abbe iniziò a tremare. La chiave tintinnava contro la serratura. "Aiutami!" Il cappello si chinò sulla maniglia, le dita lunghe strinsero la chiave, che si incastrò nella serratura, inclinandosi con uno scatto. Lei lo spinse a lato. "Dammi qualcosa? Ehi, dammi qualcosa?" La porta chiuse fuori la sua voce.

## Making Changes

THE HALL WAS CLOGGED WITH BODIES; none of them hers, but who could be sure? The light was bad, there was too much noise, too much movement. Too many people had been invited. More kept arriving. I liked it, but it was hard to get from one room to another. Conversation was impossible. People had to lean close and shriek. It killed the effect of wit, looking into nostrils, shrieking, "What? What?" But it was a New York scene. I liked it. Except she was missing; virtually torn out of my hands. Cecily. I would have asked people if they had seen her, but I was ashamed to admit I had lost her. I was afraid she was someone's date or inextricably into something. I was afraid she was copulating. She had been dressed, but it was a New York scene. Minutes had passed. I shoved through the hall — hot, dark, squealing with bodies — and looked for her. I shoved into the kitchen and saw just one couple, a lady in a brown tweed suit talking to a short dapper man in spats. She was stout, fiftyish, had fierce eyes. Flat, black as nailheads. Her voice flew around like pots and pans. The man glanced at me, then down as if embarrassed. The lady ignored me. I ignored her and busied around the wet, sloppy counter looking for an unused glass and a bottle of something, as if I wanted a drink. The lady was saying, slam, clang:

"Sexual enlightenment, the keystone of modernity, I dare say, can hardly be considered an atavistic intellectual debauch, Cosmo."

"But the perversions ..."

## Cambiamenti

IL CORRIDOIO ERA INTASATO DI CORPI; nessuno di essi era quello di lei, ma chi poteva esserne sicuro? La luce era scarsa, c'era troppo rumore, troppo movimento. Erano state invitate troppe persone e continuavano ad arrivarne altre. Mi piaceva, ma era difficile spostarsi da una stanza all'altra. Fare conversazione era impossibile. Si era costretti ad appiccicarsi l'un l'altro e a gridare. Uccideva la verve, stare a fissare le narici della gente urlando "Cosa? Cosa?" Ma era una scena newyorkese. Mi piaceva. Tranne per il fatto che lei non c'era; virtualmente strappatami dalle mani. Cecily. Avrei chiesto alle persone se l'avessero vista, ma mi vergognavo di ammettere che l'avevo persa. Avevo paura che fosse la ragazza di qualcuno o che fosse coinvolta in qualche legame indissolubile. Avevo paura che stesse copulando. Prima era vestita, ma era una scena newyorkese. Erano passati interi minuti. Mi feci strada attraverso la sala – calda, buia, urlante di corpi – e la cercai. Mi infilai in cucina e vidi solo una coppia, una donna con un completo di tweed marrone che parlava con un uomo più basso, tutto agghindato, che indossava delle ghette. Lei era corpulenta, sulla cinquantina, e aveva degli occhi feroci. Piatti, neri come teste di chiodi. Le sue parole rimbalzavano per la stanza come se fossero pentole e padelle. L'uomo mi lanciò un'occhiata, poi abbassò lo sguardo come imbarazzato. La donna mi ignorò. Io ignorai lei e mi affaccendai intorno allo squallido bancone bagnato, cercando un bicchiere pulito e una bottiglia di qualcosa, come se volessi un drink. La donna stava parlando, slam, clang:

"La consapevolezza sessuale, la chiave di volta della modernità, oserei dire, difficilmente può essere considerata un'atavica corruzione intellettuale, Cosmo."

"Ma le perversioni..."

“To be sure, the perversions of which we are so richly conscious are the natural inclination, indeed the style, of civilized beings.”

[...]

“Certo, le perversioni delle quali siamo così abbondantemente consapevoli sono l’inclinazione naturale, invero lo stile, degli esseri civilizzati.”

[...]

## **Isaac**

TALMUDIC SCHOLAR, MASTER OF CABALA, Isaac felt vulnerable to a thousand misfortunes in New York, slipped on an icy street, lay on his back, and wouldn't reach for his hat. People walked, traffic screamed, freezing damp sucked through his clothes. He let his eyes fall shut — no hat, no freezing, no slip, no street, no New York, no Isaac — and got a knock against the soles of his shoes. It shook his teeth. His eyes flashed open, darkness spread above him like a predatory tree, a dozen buttons glared, and a sentence flew out, beak and claws, with a quality of moral sophistication indistinguishable from hatred: "What's-a-matta, fuckhead, too much vino?" He'd never heard of vino, but had a feeling for syntax — fuckhead was himself. He said, "Eat pig shit," the cop detected language, me-it became I-thou and the air between them a warm, viable medium. He risked English: "I falled on dot ice, tenk you."

The man in the next bed wasn't alive. Gray as a stone, hanging over the edge of the mattress, the head was grim to consider. But only a fool points out the obvious; Isaac wouldn't tell a nurse. Even so, he couldn't dismiss a head upside

## Isaac

STUDIOSO DEL TALMUD<sup>48</sup>, MAESTRO DELLA CABALA<sup>49</sup>, Isaac si sentiva vulnerabile a mille sventure a New York, scivolò sul cemento ghiacciato e si ritrovò steso sulla schiena, incapace di riprendere il proprio cappello. La gente camminava, il traffico urlava, l'umidità congelata gli filtrava attraverso i vestiti. Lasciò che le palpebre si chiudessero – nessun cappello, niente gelo, nessuna scivolata, nessuna strada, nessuna New York, nessun Isaac – e ricevette un colpo contro le suole delle scarpe. Gli fece serrare i denti. Sbarrò gli occhi, l'oscurità si allargò sopra di lui come un albero rapace, una dozzina di bottoni gli lanciavano occhiate e una frase si alzò in volo, con becco e artigli, con una qualità di raffinatezza morale indistinguibile dall'odio: “Cchi fu, coglione, si ‘mbriacu?”<sup>50</sup> Non sapeva cosa fosse ‘marsala’, ma aveva intuito per la sintassi – con ‘coglione’ si riferiva a lui. Quello disse, “Fottiti,” un'espressione già sentita dai poliziotti, me-esso diventò io-Tu e l'aria tra loro divenne un terreno di comunicazione praticabile e rassicurante. Azzardò in lingua<sup>51</sup>: “Ho caduto su qvel chiaccio, grazie.”

L'uomo nel letto accanto non era vivo. Grigia come la pietra, ciondolante oltre il bordo del materasso, la sua testa era inquietante da guardare. Ma solo un idiota fa notare ciò che è ovvio; non sarebbe stato Isaac a dirlo a un'infermiera.

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<sup>48</sup> One of Judaism sacred books, which collects the written version of the Oral Torah, together with the rabbinic teachings about it and about the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>49</sup> Esoteric school of thought belonging to rabbinic Judaism, which investigates the relationship between the Infinity (which is God before his self-manifestation) and mortal beings.

<sup>50</sup> “What's-a-matta, fuckhead, too much vino?” “Cos’è successo, coglione, sei ubriaco?”.

<sup>51</sup> *He risked English.* The expression is not translatable literally: obviously, it would have been impossible to maintain “Azzardò in inglese”, because the translated dialogue is in Italian; it would have been impossible to translate with “Azzardò in italiano”, which would not make sense in a New York setting, and would be confusing for the reader because of the presence of the Italian character. We chose a periphrasis, so as to avoid spelling out a language.

down, staring at him, and found himself crying. He had traveled thousands of miles to fall down like a fuckhead and lie beside a corpse. Crying loosened muscles. His shoulders began moving. Shoulders moving, he discovered arms moving, and if arms, why not legs? In his left leg moved thunder and lightning. But he sat up and shouted, "Sitting!" A nurse ripped open his pajamas and shoved in a bedpan. "I appreciate," he said, and defecated.

Before dawn he had dressed himself and was in the street. Stumbling, pressing into the dark as if pursued by dogs. More and more he tilted left and thus, beneath horrible pain, felt horrible geometry. His left leg was shorter than his right. He pressed into a phone booth. His sister screamed when she heard his voice. He told her what happened and she screamed, "Don't move." He sat in the booth, fell asleep, there was a knock and his eyes opened. She looked through the glass. "Katya," he said, "like a coffin." She wouldn't discuss the idea. Neither would Chaim, her husband, or Fagel, her husband's sister, or hunchback Yankel, the peddler, who asked where Isaac felt pain. In the back? In the leg? He remembered a fall in which he hurt his knee. Did Isaac's knee hurt? No? Very strange. How did a scholar, he wondered, fall in the street like an animal; but then what's one leg shorter compared to a brain concussion with blood bulging from the eyes? No comparison. Lucky Isaac. Isaac winked, made a little lucky nod, and collapsed. Fagel screamed. Katya screamed. Chaim gave Isaac his umbrella. Isaac pressed it

Tuttavia, non riusciva a ignorare una testa capovolta che lo fissava, e si ritrovò a piangere. Aveva viaggiato per migliaia di chilometri solo per cadere come un coglione e ritrovarsi vicino di letto di un cadavere. Il pianto rilassò i muscoli. Le sue spalle iniziarono a muoversi. Con le spalle che si muovevano, scoprì che anche le braccia si muovevano, e se lo facevano le braccia, perché non le gambe? Nella sua gamba sinistra si agitavano tuoni e fulmini. Ma si sedette e gridò, "Seduto!" Un'infermiera gli aprì il pigiama e gli cacciò sotto una padella. "Apprezzo," disse, e defecò.

Prima dell'alba, si era vestito ed era sceso in strada. Barcollando, trascinandosi nel buio come se fosse braccato da cani. Camminava pendendo sempre di più verso sinistra e quindi, oltre al dolore orribile, percepiva una geometria orribile. La sua gamba sinistra era più corta di quella destra. Si infilò in una cabina telefonica. Sua sorella urlò quando sentì la sua voce. Lui le disse cos'era successo e lei urlò, "Non muoverti!" Si sedette nella cabina, si addormentò, qualcuno bussò e lui aprì gli occhi. Lei lo guardava attraverso il vetro. "Katya," disse, "come una bara." Lei non commentò oltre. Non lo fece nemmeno Chaim, suo marito, o Fagel, sorella di suo marito, o Yankel il gobbo, il venditore ambulante, che chiese dove Isaac avesse male. Alla schiena? Alla gamba? Si ricordava di una caduta in cui si era fatto male al ginocchio. Isaac aveva male al ginocchio? No? Molto strano. Come aveva fatto uno studioso, si chiese, a cadere per strada come un animale; ma tanto cos'era una gamba più corta rispetto a una commozione cerebrale con sangue che schizza dagli occhi? Non c'era paragone. Fortunato! Isaac ammiccò, fece un leggero cenno fortunato con la testa, e crollò. Fagel urlò. Katya urlò. Chaim diede a Isaac il proprio ombrello. Isaac si appoggiò ad esso con

with one hand. The other pressed his sister's arm. They went down the street together — Isaac, Katya, Fagel, Chaim, Yankel. Cracow, the chiropractor, had an office nearby.

To keep his mind off his stumbling torture, Katya told Isaac about Moisse, who wasn't lucky. He came to New York sponsored by a diamond merchant, friend of politicians, bon vivant, famous for witty exegeses of the Talmud. "So?" So as a condition of sponsorship, Moisse promised never to abandon, in New York, any tradition of the faith. He imagined no circumstances in which he might, but married, opened a dry-goods store, and had a son. Circumstances arose in doctor bills. He had to do business on Saturdays. Isaac licked his lips. Chaim punched his chest. Yankel shrugged his hunch. "So?" So it followed like the manifestation in the garden, that the merchant's beard hung in the door one Saturday. — You know what day this is, Moisse? What could he say? Isaac said, "Nothing. What could he say?" Chaim punched, Yankel shrugged. The beard nodded. The mouth hacked up a spittle, the spittle smacked the floor, and the baby son was discovered on the prostrate body of his mother, shrieking like a demon while he ate the second nipple. Now Moisse doesn't do business on Saturday. His worst enemies won't say he isn't a saint.

"You got another story?"

una mano e si aggrappò al braccio di sua sorella con l'altra. Camminarono lungo strada insieme – Isaac, Katya, Fagel, Chaim e Yankel. Cracow, il chiropratico, aveva l'ambulatorio lì vicino.

Per distrarlo dalla sua barcollante tortura, Katya raccontò a Isaac di Moisse, che non era stato fortunato. Era venuto a New York finanziato da un commerciante di diamanti, amico di politici, *viveur*, famoso per le sue argute esege di Talmud. “E allora?” E allora, come condizione di finanziamento, Moisse aveva promesso di non abbandonare mai, una volta a New York, alcuna tradizione della fede. Non gli veniva in mente alcuna circostanza in cui avrebbe potuto farlo, ma si era sposato, aveva aperto una merceria e aveva avuto un figlio. Le circostanze si presentarono con le spese mediche. Era stato costretto a lavorare anche di sabato. Isaac si leccò le labbra. Chaim si colpì il petto con un pugno. Yankel si strinse nelle sue spalle arcuate. “E allora?” E allora la barba del commerciante si presentò alla porta del negozio un sabato, come la manifestazione nel Giardino.<sup>52</sup> – Sai che giorno è, Moisse? Cosa poteva dire? Isaac disse, “Niente. Cosa poteva dire?” Chaim si colpì, Yankel strinse le spalle. La barba annuì. La bocca raccolse della saliva, lo sputo colpì il pavimento, e il bambino fu trovato prostrato sul corpo della madre, mentre strillava come un demone e mordeva il secondo capezzolo. Adesso Moisse non lavora di sabato. Nemmeno i suoi peggiori nemici direbbero che non è un santo.

“Hai un'altra storia?”

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<sup>52</sup> Reference to the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. As God found out about the first men eating the forbidden fruit and stripped them of their privileges, the merchant caught Moisse breaking the promise to never abandon the traditions of the faith, in this case the Shabbat. The metaphor anticipates the terrible consequences of his actions.

"It's the only story I know."

"Tell me again," said Isaac.

Before she finished they were inside an old brownstone, looking up a high, narrow stairway. She tugged at the umbrella, but Isaac only looked, as if they were stairs in a dream. To be looked at, nothing else. What can you do in a dream? She tugged. He fell against a wall. She went up alone and came down with, "Dr. Cracow says." Isaac must walk up and lie facedown on the chiropractor table. Otherwise go away and shrivel. In a week his leg would be a raisin. He could look forward to carrying it in his armpit. Fagel screamed, Chaim punched. They walked up.

Cracow stood suddenly erect, as if, the instant before, he had touched his toes. His fingers were stiff, quivering like the prongs of a rake. He nodded to the table. Isaac dropped onto it as if into an abyss and Cracow pummeled him from neck to tail, humming: "*Muss es sein. Es muss sein*," then said, "Get up." With dreamlike speed they were at the brink of the stairs. A thing whooshed by, cracked, clattered to the landing. "Get it," said Cracow.

Isaac shook his head.

“È l'unica storia che so.”

“Dimmi di nuovo,” disse Isaac.

Prima che lei avesse finito, erano entrati in una vecchia villetta di arenaria rossa<sup>53</sup>, e guardavano verso la cima di un'alta, stretta scala. Katya tirò l'ombrellino, ma Isaac guardava e basta, come se quella scala appartenesse a un sogno. Da guardare e basta, nient'altro. Cosa puoi fare in un sogno? Lei lo strattonò. Lui cadde contro una parete. Lei salì da sola e tornò con un “Il signor Cracow dice.” Isaac deve andare su e stendersi a pancia in giù sul lettino del chiropratico. Altrimenti che vada via e avvizzisca. In una settimana la sua gamba sarebbe diventata un'uvetta. Se la sarebbe potuta portare dietro sotto il braccio. Fagel urlò, Chaim si colpì. Salirono.

Cracow si alzò in piedi all'improvviso, come se, l'istante prima, si fosse toccato la punta dei piedi. Le sue dita erano rigide, tremolanti come i rebbi di un rastrello. Indicò il lettino con il mento. Isaac vi cadde come in un abisso e Cracow lo prese a pugni da capo a piedi, canticchiando “*Muss es sein. Es muss sein,*”<sup>54</sup> poi disse, “Alzati.” Con lentezza onirica arrivarono alle scale. Qualcosa gli fruscò accanto, schioccò e si crepò nell'atterraggio. “Vallo a prendere,” disse Cracow.

Isaac scosse la testa.

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<sup>53</sup> *An old brownstone.* Peculiar kind of building, often found in New York residential neighborhoods, especially in Brooklyn. Typical elements are the façade in brownstone, from which it takes its name, and the stoop connecting the road to the front door, located at the height of the first floor of the building. Since the specific term ‘brownstone’ is not well-known in Italy, we chose to translate it with a periphrasis which would describe the appearance of the house.

<sup>54</sup> “Must it be? It must be!” “Deve essere? Deve esserel!”, reference to Ludwig van Beethoven’s String Quartet no. 16 in F major, op. 135. The last movement of the quartet is entitled “The Difficult Decision”, and the theme “Muß es sein? Es muß sein!” simulates a dialogue about this decision: the first voice is afflicted by doubt and reluctant to act drastically, and the second voice replies with determination and lightness, stating the inevitability to walk the chosen, albeit extreme, path.

"Isaac, get it," said Katya. Chaim said, "Get it." Yankel said, "Get it, get it."

The umbrella was a streak of wood and cloth in another world. Isaac shook his head at the possibility of getting it. Beyond that, not getting it. Shaking his head, he started down. Not with delicate caution, like a man just crippled, but mechanical exactitude, like a man long crippled. Even in the bones of former incarnations, crippled, resigned to a thousand strictures. Cracow hummed, Isaac descended. Every step an accident succeeding an accident in a realm where perfection was grotesque. Cracow said, "No pain?"

Isaac stopped, gazed out; then, carefully, into his own center. Pain? His whole being was a question. It trembled toward yes or no and, like music, yes, very slightly, yes, he felt himself lift and fly above the stairs. Then he settled like dust. Cracow's voice shot through the air: "Six dollars, please." Isaac turned to fly up to him. With four wings clapping he was struck by stairs, smacked by walls, stopped by the ultimate, unyielding floor. He lay on his back. His eyes fell shut. Thumps accumulated down the stairs. Katya screamed. Yankel shrugged, Chaim whispered, "Dead?" Fagel screamed, Cracow said, "Could be dead." Chaim said, "Dead?" Fagel screamed, Katya screamed. "Dead? Dead?" said Yankel. Chaim said, "Not alive," and Yankel said, "Dead." Fagel screamed, screamed, screamed, screamed, screamed.

“Isaac, vallo a prendere,” disse Katya. Chaim disse, “Vallo a prendere.”

Yankel disse, “Vallo a prendere, vallo a prendere.”

L’ombrelllo era una striscia di legno e tessuto in un altro mondo. Isaac, scuotendo la testa, allontanò la possibilità di andare a prenderlo. Oltre a quello, allontanò anche la possibilità di non andare a prenderlo. Scuotendo il capo, iniziò a scendere. Non con la delicata cautela di un uomo appena azzoppato, ma con esattezza meccanica, come un uomo storpio da molto tempo. Anche nelle ossa delle sue precedenti incarnazioni, storpio, rassegnato a mille restrizioni. Cracow canticchiava, Isaac scendeva. Ogni passo un incidente che si susseguiva a un incidente, in un regno dove la perfezione era grottesca. Cracow disse, “Nessun dolore?”

Isaac si fermò, alzò lo sguardo; poi, cautamente, guardò il proprio baricentro. Dolore? Il suo intero essere era in dubbio. Tremava verso un sì o un no e, come musica, sì, molto delicatamente, sì, sentì che si stava sollevando e si vide volare sopra le scale. Poi si posò come polvere. La voce di Cracow fendette l’aria: “Sei dollari, prego.” Isaac si girò per volare verso di lui. Con quattro ali che battevano, venne colpito dalle scale, percosso dalle pareti, fermato dal definitivo, intransigente pavimento. Steso sulla schiena, serrò gli occhi. Rumori ovattati si accumularono in fondo alle scale. Katya urlò. Yankel si strinse nelle spalle, Chaim sussurrò “Morto?” Fagel urlò, Cracow disse, “Potrebbe essere morto.” Chaim disse, “Morto?” Fagel urlò, Katya urlò. “Morto? Morto?” disse Yankel. Chaim disse “Non vivo,” e Yankel disse, “Morto.” Fagel urlò, urlò, urlò, urlò.

## A Green Thought

[...] I'd soon have to walk. Deserted buildings, warehouses, alleys, cats, rats, drunks, unpredictable figments of the municipal dark. City at night, full of wonders, mysteries. Like a god. I could hardly wait to get home, lock the door, lie down, sleep. But I might run into neighborhood kids, get robbed, chopped up, set on fire, pissed on, stuck in a garbage can. That would mean the city hated me. I appreciated its hatred, shared it, wanted to fling out to the speeding tunnel. [...]

## **Un pensiero verde**

[...] Presto avrei dovuto camminare. Edifici abbandonati, magazzini, vicoli, gatti, ratti, ubriaconi, imprevedibili creazioni del buio urbano. La città di notte, piena di meraviglie, di misteri. Come un dio. Non vedeva l'ora di tornare a casa, chiudere a chiave la porta, distendermi, dormire. Ma avrei potuto imbattermi nei teppisti del quartiere, venire rapinato, fatto a pezzi, dato alle fiamme, col piscio di qualcuno addosso, o ficcato in un bidone della spazzatura. Avrebbe voluto dire che la città mi odiava. Apprezzavo il suo odio, lo condividevo, volevo lanciarmi verso il tunnel che sfrecciava a tutta velocità. [...]

## Murderers

WHEN MY UNCLE MOE dropped dead of a heart attack I became expert in the subway system. With a nickel I'd get to Queens, twist and zoom to Coney Island, twist again toward the George Washington Bridge — beyond which was darkness. I wanted proximity to darkness, strangeness. Who doesn't? The poor in spirit, the ignorant and frightened. My family came from Poland, then never went anyplace until they had heart attacks. The consummation of years in one neighborhood: a black Cadillac, corpse inside. We should have buried Uncle Moe where he shuffled away his life, in the kitchen or toilet, under the linoleum, near the coffeepot. Anyhow, they were dropping on Henry Street and Cherry Street. Blue lips. The previous winter it was cousin Charlie, forty-five years old. Moe, Charlie, Sam, Adele — family meant a punch in the chest, fire in the arm. I didn't want to wait for it. I went to Harlem, the Polo Grounds, Far Rockaway, thousands of miles on nickels, mainly underground. Tenements watched me go, day after day, fingering nickels. One afternoon I stopped to grind my heel against the curb. Melvin and Arnold Bloom appeared, then Harold Cohen. Melvin said, "You step in dog shit?" Grinding

## Assassini

QUANDO MIO ZIO MOE fece un infarto e ci restò secco, divenni un esperto della rete metropolitana. Con un nichelino<sup>55</sup> raggiungevo Queens, svoltavo e sfrecciavo verso Coney Island, poi svoltavo ancora verso il ponte George Washington, oltre il quale c'era l'oscurità.<sup>56</sup> Io desideravo sentirmi vicino all'oscurità, a quello che non conoscevo. Chi non lo vorrebbe? I poveri di spirito, gli ignoranti e i timorosi. La mia famiglia era arrivata dalla Polonia, poi nessuno si era più mosso finché non era stato stroncato da un attacco di cuore. La consunzione di una vita chiusa in un solo quartiere: una Cadillac nera con dentro un cadavere. Avremmo dovuto seppellire lo zio Moe dove, per anni, si era trascinato dietro l'esistenza: in cucina, o nel gabinetto, sotto il linoleum, o vicino alla caffettiera. Comunque, cadevano come mosche su Henry Street e su Cherry Street. Le labbra blu. L'inverno precedente era toccato a mio cugino Charlie, quarantacinque anni. Moe, Charlie, Sam, Adele... 'Famiglia' significava un pugno sullo sterno e un fuoco nel braccio. Io non volevo stare lì ad aspettarlo, così andavo ad Harlem, allo stadio Polo Grounds, al quartiere di Far Rockaway; migliaia di chilometri per pochi spiccioli, perlomeno sottoterra. Giorno dopo giorno, i palazzoni mi guardavano andare sfregando nichelini tra le dita. Un pomeriggio, mi fermai a raschiare la suola della scarpa contro il cordolo del marciapiede. Apparvero Melvin e Arnold Bloom, poi anche Harold Cohen. Melvin disse, "Hai pestato una merda di cane?" e io, in risposta, continuai a

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<sup>55</sup> Despite the fact that the word "nickelino", depending on the language, is used to indicate coins of different value (five dollar cents the American one, twenty lira cents the Italian one), we chose a literal translation because it has entered the Italian collective imaginary as an element of overseas culture. "Nickelino" geographically contextualizes the situation immediately.

<sup>56</sup> George Washington Bridge connects Manhattan to New Jersey. The fact that the narrator refers to the latter as "darkness" reflects a typical New York attitude to consider the city as a world of its own, infinitely superior to the neighboring New Jersey.

was my answer. Harold Cohen said, "The rabbi is home. I saw him on Market Street. He was walking fast." Oily Arnold, eleven years old, began to urge: "Let's go up to our roof." The decision waited for me. I considered the roof, the view of industrial Brooklyn, the Battery, ships in the river, bridges, towers, and the rabbi's apartment. "All right," I said. We didn't giggle or look to one another for moral signals. We were running.

The blinds were up and curtains pulled, giving sunlight, wind, birds to the rabbi's apartment — a magnificent metropolitan view. The rabbi and his wife never took it, but in the light and air of summer afternoons, in the eye of gull and pigeon, they were joyous. A bearded young man, and his young pink wife, sacramentally bald. Beard and Baldy, with everything to see, looked at each other. From a water tank on the opposite roof, higher than their windows, we looked at them. In psychoanalysis this is "The Primal Scene." To achieve the primal scene we crossed a ledge six inches wide. A half-inch indentation in the brick gave us fingerholds. We dragged bellies and groins against the brick face to a steel ladder. It went up the side of the building, bolted into brick, and up the side of the water tank to a slanted tin roof which caught the afternoon sun. We sat on that roof like

raschiare. Harold Cohen disse, “Il rabbino è a casa. L’ho visto su Market Street, e camminava veloce.” Quel viscido di Arnold, undici anni, iniziò a insistere: “Saliamo sul tetto!” La decisione era lì ad aspettarmi. Pensai al tetto, alla vista sulla zona industriale di Brooklyn, a Battery Park, alle barche sul fiume, ai ponti e ai palazzi, e all’appartamento del rabbino. “Va bene,” dissi. Nessuno di noi ridacchiò, né cercò nello sguardo degli altri un qualche segnale di moralità. Stavamo già correndo.

Le tapparelle erano alzate e le tende aperte, rendendo partecipe l’appartamento del rabbino del magnifico panorama metropolitano – sole, vento, uccelli. Il rabbino e sua moglie non l’avrebbero mai ammesso, ma in quella luce, nella brezza del pomeriggio estivo, agli occhi dei gabbiani e dei piccioni, apparivano raggianti. Un giovane uomo barbuto e la sua giovane, rosea moglie, calva come imposto dal rituale.<sup>57</sup> Il Barbuto e la Rasata, con le grazie in bella vista, si guardavano; noi, da una cisterna d’acqua sul tetto di fronte, guardavamo loro. In psicanalisi, questa situazione è detta ‘Scena Primaria.’<sup>58</sup> Per vivere la nostra scena primaria, camminammo lungo un cornicione largo quindici centimetri, aggrappandoci con la punta delle dita alle strette fessure tra i mattoni. Strisciando pance e inguini contro la facciata, arrivammo a una scala d’acciaio: imbullonata ai mattoni, si arrampicava sul muro dell’edificio e superava la cisterna, fino a un tetto di lamiera sbilenco che si scaldava sotto il sole pomeridiano. Ci sedemmo su quel

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<sup>57</sup> Among married women following the traditional Jewish law, it was common to shave their hair and use a wig, to observe Jewish Laws on the value of Modesty in clothing.

<sup>58</sup> In psychoanalysis, the Primal Scene is a child’s experience of sexuality through assisting to a sexual intercourse between the father and the mother.

angels, shot through with light, derealized in brilliance. Our sneakers sucked hot slanted metal. Palms and fingers pressed to bone on nailheads.

The Brooklyn Navy Yard with destroyers and aircraft carriers, the Statue of Liberty putting the sky to the torch, the dull remote skyscrapers of Wall Street, and the Empire State Building were among the wonders we dominated. Our view of the holy man and his wife, on their living-room couch and floor, on the bed in their bedroom, could not be improved. Unless we got closer. But fifty feet across the air was right. We heard their phonograph and watched them dancing. We couldn't hear the gratifications or see pimples. We smelled nothing. We didn't want to touch.

For a while I watched them. Then I gazed beyond into shimmering nullity, gray, blue, and green murmuring over rooftops and towers. I had watched them before. I could tantalize myself with this brief ocular perversion, the general cleansing nihil of a view. This was the beginning of philosophy.

tetto come angeli, permeati di luce, derealizzati<sup>59</sup> nel fulgore. Le nostre scarpe si imbevevano del caldo dal metallo; palmi e dita premuti fino all'osso sulle teste di chiodi sporgenti.

Il cantiere navale di Brooklyn con le sue cacciatorpediniere e portaerei, la Statua della Libertà che cercava di dare fuoco al cielo, i monotonì grattacieli di Wall Street in lontananza e l'Empire State Building erano tra le meraviglie che dominavamo, ma la nostra visuale sul religioso e sua moglie, sul loro salotto, divano e pavimento, sul letto nella loro camera, non poteva essere migliore. A meno che non ci fossimo avvicinati. Ma una quindicina di metri in linea d'aria era la distanza ideale: sentivamo il loro fonografo e li vedevamo ballare, ma non riuscivamo a percepire la loro soddisfazione, o a vedere brufoli, né ci arrivava alcun odore. Non volevamo toccare.<sup>60</sup>

Per un po' sono rimasto a guardarli. Poi iniziai a contemplare il nulla luccicante, i mormorii grigi, blu e verdi che fremevano sopra i tetti e i grattacieli. Li avevo guardati altre volte<sup>61</sup>: mi facevo tentare da quella breve perversione oculare, dal *nihil*<sup>62</sup> visivo, totalmente purificante. È stato questo l'inizio della

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<sup>59</sup> Specific term that we chose to maintain in the translation. In psychiatry, derealization is a dissociative symptom that consists in a distorted perception of the outside world, as if it were not real.

<sup>60</sup> The period voices the narrator's train of thought: firstly, he states that the view offered by the position is excellent, then hypothesizes that it might become even better if they got closer; lastly, he changes his mind again, realizing that their distance is ideal because it allows them to enjoy the positive sides of the view without being bothered by small, unpleasant elements, that might spoil the idyll. The apparent incoherence of the three sentences was maintained in the translation.

<sup>61</sup> In the original text, it is unclear whether the narrator refers to the abovementioned synaesthetic elements of the city or to the rabbi and his wife. This ambiguity was maintained in the translation..

<sup>62</sup> In the original text, the author uses the Latin term, probably as a philosophical reference. We chose to maintain the Latin in the translation, so as to make obvious the connection to the nihilist doctrine.

I indulged in ambience, in space like eons. So what if my uncle Moe was dead? I was philosophical and luxurious. I didn't even have to look at the rabbi and his wife. After all, how many times had we dissolved stickball games when the rabbi came home? How many times had we risked shameful discovery, scrambling up the ladder, exposed to their windows — if they looked. We risked life itself to achieve this eminence. I looked at the rabbi and his wife.

Today she was a blonde. Bald didn't mean no wigs. She had ten wigs, ten colors, fifty styles. She looked different, the same, and very good. A human theme in which nothing begat anything and was gorgeous. To me she was the world's lesson. Aryan yellow slipped through pins about her ears. An olive complexion mediated yellow hair and Arabic black eyes. Could one care what she really looked like? What was *really*? The minute you wondered, she looked like something else, in another wig, another style. Without the wigs she was a baldy-bean lady. Today

filosofia. Mi concessi di indugiare nell'aria e nello spazio, come fanno gli eoni.<sup>63</sup>

Mio zio Moe era morto, e allora? Mi sentivo pieno di saggezza filosofica e di lussuria, tanto che non avevo nemmeno bisogno di guardare il rabbino e sua moglie. Dopotutto, quante partite di *stickball*<sup>64</sup> avevamo interrotto, vedendo il rabbino tornare a casa? Quante volte, mentre ci arrampicavamo su per la scala, avevamo corso il vergognoso rischio di essere scoperti davanti alla loro finestra – se solo avessero guardato. Rischiavamo la vita stessa pur di godere di questo privilegio. Adocchiai il rabbino e la moglie.

Quel giorno, lei era una bionda. ‘Calva’ non significava ‘niente parrucche’: ne possedeva dieci, dieci colori, cinquanta pettinature. Con ognuna appariva diversa, la stessa, e bellissima. Un tema umano in cui il nulla generava<sup>65</sup> qualsiasi cosa, ed era splendida. Ai miei occhi, lei era la lezione che il mondo aveva da insegnarmi. Del giallo ariano sfuggiva alle forcine, intorno alle orecchie; una carnagione olivastra conciliava capelli gialli e arabegianti occhi neri. Poteva interessare a qualcuno quale fosse il suo vero aspetto? Cosa significava ‘vero’? Appena ti fermavi a chiedertelo, lei aveva già cambiato aspetto, con un’altra parrucca, con un’altra pettinatura. Senza le parrucche era solo una donna dalla

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<sup>63</sup> Despite the fact that, in plain language, the term “eon” refers to geochronological unity of more than half a billion years, in theology it indicates and emanation of God similar to Neoplatonism’s Empyrean Divinities, or, not as precisely, to Jewish-Christian angels. In a Kabbalistic tradition, the eons are the millenniums that will have to pass by before the coming of the awaited Messianic Age (six after the Creation, to be exact). It is not clear whether the author used the term in reference to an angel or to a millennium, but the expression evokes a personification who dwells in the atmosphere, and was therefore maintained in the translation.

<sup>64</sup> Street game, similar to baseball, played by children in metropolitan areas. We chose to maintain the term in the translation, despite the fact that it is not very well-known, because we could not find a viable alternative which fitted the context.

<sup>65</sup> *Begat*. Archaic form of the simple past of the verb ‘beget’, “generare”. The author references the biblical expression which can be found in the Genesis. The sentence in the text is a parody of the expression “Nothing begets nothing”, “Il nulla genera nulla”, based on Latin phrase “Ex nihilo nihil fit”.

she was a blonde. Not blonde. A blonde. The phonograph blared and her deep loops flowed Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and then the thing itself, Choo-Choo Lopez. Rumba! One, two-three. One, two-three. The rabbi stepped away to delight in blond imagination. Twirling and individual, he stepped away snapping fingers, going high and light on his toes. A short bearded man, balls apling, cock shuddering like a springboard. Rumba! One, two-three. *Olé! Vaya, Choo-choo!*

*I was on my way to spend some time in Cuba.*

*Stopped off at Miami Beach, la-la.*

*Oh, what a rumba they teach, la-la.*

*Way down in Miami Beach,*

*Oh, what a chroombah they teach, la-la.*

*Way-down-in-Miami-Beach.*

She, on the other hand, was somewhat reserved. A shift in one lush hip was total rumba. He was Mr. Life. She was dancing. He was a naked man. She was what she was in the garment of her soft, essential self. He was snapping, clapping, hopping to the beat. The beat lived in her visible music, her lovely self. Except for the wig.

testa pelata. Quel giorno, era una bionda. Non ‘bionda’, *una* bionda. Mentre il fonografo vociava, i suoi fianchi fluttuavano, accompagnati da Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, e poi la cosa in sé<sup>66</sup>, Choo-Choo Lopez. Rumba! Un, due-tre. Un, due-tre. Il rabbino fece un passo indietro per godersi quella fantasia bionda. Con un giro su sé stesso, ballando da solo, fece un altro passo indietro schioccando le dita, elevandosi sulle dita dei piedi. Un uomo basso e barbuto, con le palle che sobbalzavano, l’uccello che oscillava come un trampolino. Rumba! Un, due-tre.

*Olé! Vaya, Choo-choo!*

*Stavo andando a passare un po’ di tempo a Cuba.*

*Ho fatto tappa a Miami Beach, la-la.*

*Oh, che rumba insegnan lì, la-la.*

*Laggiù a Miami Beach,*

*Oh, che chrumbah insegnan lì, la-la.*

*Laggiù-a-Miami-Beach.<sup>67</sup>*

Lei, invece, era piuttosto riservata. Anche il solo movimento del fianco seducente era pura rumba. Lui era la personificazione della Vita; lei stava ballando. Lui era un uomo nudo; lei era quello che era e indossava soltanto se stessa, morbida, essenziale. Lui stava schioccando le dita, battendo le mani, saltando a ritmo; il ritmo era vivo nella musica visibile di lei, nel suo adorabile essere. Ad eccezione

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<sup>66</sup> *The thing itself.* Clear philosophical reference, which we chose to maintain in the Italian translation.

<sup>67</sup> These lyrics seem to be a rough quote of the song “Miami Beach Rhumba” sung by Xavier Cugat, Spanish composer who introduced several musical rhythms to the United States in the Thirties and Forties. Interesting, a Yiddish version of the song was sung by Seymour Rexite, Polish artist emigrated to the United States in the Twenties.

Also a watchband that desecrated her wrist. But it gave her a bit of the whorish.

She never took it off.

[...]

Arnold squealed oi, squealing rubber. His sneaker heels stabbed tin to stop his slide. Melvin said, “Idiot.” Arnold’s ring hooked a nailhead and the ring and ring finger remained. The hand, the arm, the rest of him, were gone. We rumbled down the ladder. “Oi, oi, oi,” she yelled. In a freak of ecstasy her eyes had rolled and caught us. The rabbi drilled to her quick and she had us. “OI, OI,” she yelled above congas going clop, doom-doom, clop, doom-doom on the way to Cuba. The rabbi flew to the window, a red mouth opening in his beard: “Murderers.” He couldn’t know what he said. Melvin Bloom was crying. My fingers were tearing, bleeding into brick. Harold Cohen, like an adding machine, gibbered the name of God. We moved down the ledge quickly as we dared. Bongos went tocka-ti-tocka, tocka-ti-tocka. The rabbi screamed, “MELVIN BLOOM, PHILLIP LIEBOWITZ, HAROLD COHEN, MELVIN BLOOM,” as if our names, screamed this way, naming us where we hung, smashed us into brick.

Nothing was discussed.

The rabbi used his connections, arrangements were made. We were sent to a camp in New Jersey. We hiked and played volleyball.

della parrucca, e anche del cinturino di un orologio che le profanava il polso. Però le dava quell'aria un po' da puttana. Non se lo toglieva mai.

[...]

Arnold squitti, la gomma squitti. Le suole delle sue scarpe si puntarono sulla lamiera per cercare di non farlo scivolare. Melvin disse, "Idiota." L'anello di Arnold rimase agganciato alla testa di un chiodo, e l'anello e l'anulare rimasero. La mano, il braccio, il resto di lui, erano spariti. Noi ci spintonammo per raggiungere la scala. "Ah, ah, ah," urlava lei. In un guizzo di piacere, aveva roteato gli occhi e ci aveva visti. Il rabbino se la sbatteva veloce e lei ci aveva beccati. "AH, AH," urlava, sovrastando le conga che facevano clop, dum-dum, clop, dum-dum in viaggio verso Cuba. Il rabbino si gettò alla finestra e una bocca rossa si aprì in mezzo alla sua barba: "Assassini." Non poteva essere consapevole di quello che aveva detto. Melvin Bloom piangeva. Le mie dita si stavano lacerando e sanguinavano sui mattoni. Harold Cohen, come una tabulatrice<sup>68</sup>, ripeteva il nome di Dio farfugliando. Ci spostammo lungo il cornicione il più rapidamente possibile. I bonghi facevano tocka-ti-tocka, tocka-ti-tocka. Il rabbino sbraitò, "MELVIN BLOOM, PHILLIP LIEBOWITZ, HAROLD COHEN, MELVIN BLOOM," come se i nostri nomi, urlati in quella maniera, potessero schiantarci contro il muro, lì dove stavamo appesi.

Non ci fu alcuna discussione sull'accaduto.

Il rabbino usò le proprie conoscenze, furono presi degli accordi. Fummo mandati in un riformatorio in New Jersey. Facevamo escursioni in montagna e

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<sup>68</sup> *Adding machine*. Type of mechanical calculator, used to keep the accounts, which elaborates data on punch cards. These machine, while operated, made a repetitive, continuous noise.

One day, apropos of nothing, Melvin came to me and said little Arnold had been made of gold and he, Melvin, of shit. I appreciated the sentiment, but to my mind they were both made of shit. Harold Cohen never again spoke to either of us. The counselors in the camp were World War II veterans, introspective men. Some carried shrapnel in their bodies. One had a metal plate in his head. Whatever you said to them they seemed to be thinking of something else, even when they answered. But step out of line and a plastic lanyard whistled burning notice across your ass.

At night, lying in the bunkhouse, I listened to owls. I'd never before heard that sound, the sound of darkness, blooming, opening inside you like a mouth.

giocavamo a pallavolo. Un giorno, di punto in bianco, Melvin venne da me e mi disse che il piccolo Arnold era stato un bambino d'oro e lui, Melvin, era una merda. Apprezzai il gesto, ma secondo me erano entrambi delle merde. Harold Cohen non parlò più a nessuno dei due. I supervisori del riformatorio erano veterani della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, chiusi in se stessi. Alcuni avevano frammenti di proiettile in corpo; uno aveva una placca metallica in testa. Qualsiasi cosa dicesse loro, sembrava che stessero pensando ad altro, anche quando rispondevano. Ma se sgarravi, un laccio di plastica ti sibilava sul culo come bruciante avvertimento.

Di notte, steso a letto nel dormitorio, ascoltavo i gufi. Non avevo mai sentito quel suono, il suono dell'oscurità, che sbocciava e si apriva dentro di te come una bocca.

## Eating Out

[...]

### MACKEREL

She didn't want to move in because there had been a rape on the third floor. I said, "The guy was a wounded veteran, under observation at Bellevue. We'll live on the fifth floor." It was a Victorian office building, converted to apartments. Seven stories, skinny, gray, filigreed face. No elevators. We climbed an iron stairway. "Wounded veteran," I said. "Predictable." My voice echoed in dingy halls. Linoleum cracked as we walked. Beneath the linoleum was older, drier linoleum. The apartments had wooden office doors with smoked-glass windows. The hall toilets were padlocked; through gaps we could see the bowl, overhead tank, bare bulb dangling. "That stairway is good for the heart and legs," I said. She said, "Disgusting, dangerous building." I said, "You do smell piss in the halls and there has been a rape. The janitor admitted it. But people live here, couples, singles, every sex and race. Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican families. Kids run up and down the stairway. A mackerel-crowded iron stream. Radios, TVs, whining day and night. Not only a piss smell, but pasta, peppers, incense, marijuana. The building is full of life. It's life. Close to the subways, restaurants, movies." She said, "Rapes." I said, "One rape. A wounded man with a steel plate in his head, embittered, driven by undifferentiated needs. The rent is forty dollars a month. To find this place, you understand, I appealed to strangers. From aluminum phone booths, baby, I dialed

## **“A cena fuori”**

[...]

### SARDINE

Lei non voleva trasferirsi lì perché c'era stato uno stupro al terzo piano. Io dissi, “Il tizio era un veterano ferito, sotto osservazione al Bellevue. Noi vivremo al quinto piano.” Il posto era un palazzo di uffici in stile vittoriano, poi convertito in condominio. Sette piani, alto e consunto, grigio, con la facciata filigranata. Senza ascensore. Ci arrampicammo per una scala di ferro. “Un veterano ferito,” dissi. “Prevedibile.” La mia voce risuonò nei corridoi squallidi. Il linoleum si crepava sotto i nostri passi. Sotto il linoleum c'era altro linoleum, più vecchio e più secco. Gli appartamenti, una volta uffici, avevano ancora porte di legno con vetri oscurati. I gabinetti in comune erano chiusi con dei lucchetti; attraverso delle fessure si vedevano la tazza, la cassetta di scarico, la lampadina spoglia che penzolava. “Le scale fanno bene al cuore e alle gambe,” dissi. Lei disse, “È un edificio pericoloso, fa schifo.” Io dissi, “È vero, si sente puzza di piscio nei corridoi e c'è stato uno stupro. Il custode lo ha ammesso. Ma la gente ci vive qui, coppie, single, persone di ogni sesso e razza. Famiglie irlandesi, italiane, portoricane. I bambini corrono su e giù per le scale. Un budello di ferro imbottito di sardine. Radio e TV che si lagnano giorno e notte. Non c'è solo puzza di piscio, ma anche di pasta, peperoni, incenso, marijuana. L'edificio è pieno di vita. È vita. Vicino alla metro, a ristoranti, a cinema.” Lei disse, “Stupri.” Io dissi, “Uno stupro. Un uomo ferito con una placca di metallo in testa, inasprito, spinto da bisogni non meglio specificati. L'affitto è di quaranta dollari al mese. Per trovare questo posto, mi sono affidato a sconosciuti, capisci? Da cabine telefoniche di alluminio, ho composto numeri con le dita blu per il

with ice-blue fingers. It's January in Manhattan. Howling winds come from the rivers." "The rape," she said. I said, "A special and extremely peculiar case. Be logical." Before we finished unpacking, the janitor was stabbed in the head. I said, "A junkie did it. A natural force, a hurricane." She said, "Something is wrong with you. I always felt it instinctively." I said, "I believe I'm not perfect. What do you think is wrong with me?" She said, "It makes me miserable." I said, "No matter how miserable it makes you, say it." She said, "It embarrasses me." I said, "Even if it embarrasses you, say it, be frank. This is America. I'll write it down. Maybe we can sell it and move to a better place." She said, "There's too much." I said, "I'll make a list. Go ahead, leave out nothing. I have a pencil." She said, "Then what?" I said, "Then I'll go to a psychiatrist." She said, "You'll give a distorted account." I said, "I'll make an exact, complete list. See this pencil. It's for making lists. Tell me what to write." She said, "No use." I said, "A junkie did it. Listen to me, bitch, a junkie did it."

[...]

#### CRABS

My mother didn't mention the way things looked and said there was going to be a bar mitzvah. If I came to it, the relatives "could see" and I could meet her old friends from Miami. Their daughter was a college graduate, beautiful, money up the sunny gazoo. Moreover, it was a double-rabbi affair, one for the Hebrew, one for English. "Very classy," she said. I had been to such affairs. A paragraph of Hebrew is followed by a paragraph of English.

freddo, tesoro. Siamo a Manhattan in gennaio, e il vento ulula dai fiumi.” “Lo stupro,” disse lei. Io dissi, “Un caso singolo e decisamente eccezionale. Sii ragionevole.” Prima che finissimo di disfare le valigie, il custode fu pugnalato alla testa. Dissi, “È stato un tossico. Un evento naturale, un uragano.” Lei disse, “C’è qualcosa che non va in te. L’ho sempre saputo, d’istinto.” Io dissi, “Immagino di non essere perfetto. Cosa pensi che non vada in me?” Lei disse, “Ci sto male.” Io dissi, “Al di là di quanto male ti faccia stare, dillo.” Lei disse, “Mi vergogno.” Io dissi, “Anche se ti vergogni, dillo, sii sincera. Questa è l’America. Ne farò un racconto. Forse riusciamo a venderlo e trasferirci in un posto migliore.” Lei disse, “È troppo lungo da dire.” Io dissi, “Faccio una lista. Vai, non tralasciare nulla. Ho una matita.” Lei disse, “E poi?” Io dissi, “E poi vado da uno psichiatra.” Lei disse, “Daresti una versione distorta.” Io dissi, “Faccio una lista precisa e dettagliata. Guarda questa matita. Serve a scrivere liste. Dimmi cosa scrivere.” Lei disse, “Non ne vale la pena.” Io dissi, “È stato un tossico. Ascoltami, stronza, è stato un tossico.”

[...]

#### PIATTOLE

Mia madre non fece parola di com’erano le cose e disse che ci sarebbe stato un bar mitzvah<sup>69</sup>. Se fossi venuto, i parenti “avrebbero potuto vedere” e io avrei potuto incontrare i suoi vecchi amici di Miami. La figlia era laureata, bella, soldi pure su per il suo bel didietro baciato dal sole. Inoltre, era un evento con due rabbini, uno per l’ebraico e uno per l’inglese. “Molto di classe,” disse lei. Ero stato a eventi del genere. Un paragrafo in ebraico era seguito da un paragrafo in inglese.

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<sup>69</sup> Ceremony that celebrates the coming of age of Jewish children, at the age of thirteen years and one day. After this moment, the children are considered able to know right from wrong and become accountable for their actions to the Jewish Law.

The Hebrew sounds like an interruption. Like jungle talk. I hated the organ music, the hidden choirs, the opulent halls. Besides, I had the crabs. I wasn't in the mood for a Miami bitch who probably had gonorrhea. I said, "No." She said, "Where are your values?"

[...]

L'ebraico sembra un'interruzione. Tipo un linguaggio della giungla. Odiavo la musica dell'organo, i cori nascosti, le sale opulente. Tra l'altro, avevo le piattole.

Non ero dell'umore adatto per una zoccola di Miami che probabilmente aveva la gonorrea. Dissi, "No." Lei disse, "Dove sono finiti i tuoi valori?"

[...]

## **Getting Lucky**

[...]

In effect, 8:30 a.m., going to work, crushed, breathing poison in a screaming iron box, Liebowitz was having a beautiful experience. People paid money for this. He could think of no reason not to give it a try. Liebowitz was a native New Yorker, with an invulnerable core of sophistication. He realized suddenly that he felt — beyond pleasure — hip. After so many years in the subway without feeling, or feeling he wasn't feeling, he felt. Getting and spending, he thought. And now he had gotten lucky. He believed he had done nothing to account for it, which was the way it had to be if the experience was miraculous, beautiful, warm, and good. Like the unaccountable sun shining in the advertisement. Or, for that matter, in the sky. Lucky, thrilled, beatified. All of it was assumed with silent, immobilized dignity. He got lucky and floated half blind, delicious, cool, proud to be a New Yorker. [...]

## **Un colpo di fortuna**

[...]

In effetti, alle otto e trenta del mattino, andando al lavoro schiacciato in una scatola di metallo strepitante a respirare veleno, Liebowitz stava vivendo una bella esperienza. La gente pagava per viverla. Non gli veniva in mente alcuna ragione per cui non dovesse provarla anche lui. Liebowitz era un autentico newyorkese, con un inattaccabile fondo di raffinatezza. Si rese conto d'un tratto di sentirsi – oltre che soddisfatto – fico. Dopo tutti quegli anni di viaggi in metropolitana senza provare alcuna emozione, o provando che non ne stava provando, ora ne provava. Guadagno e spesa, pensò. E adesso gli era capitato un colpo di fortuna. Non credeva di aver fatto alcunché per meritarselo, che era esattamente come doveva essere quando si trattava di un'esperienza miracolosa, bella, dolce e piacevole. Come il sole che splendeva ingiustificatamente nelle pubblicità. O, se è per questo, nel cielo. Fortunato, elettrizzato, beatificato. Tutto venne ricevuto con una dignità silenziosa e immobile. Aveva avuto un colpo di fortuna e fluttuava, mezzo acciecato, delizioso, fico, orgoglioso di essere un newyorkese. [...]

## I Would Have Saved Them If I Could

[...]

### BLACK BREAD, BUTTER, ONION

The black bread should be Pechter's, but the firm went out of business, so substitute bialys from the bakery on Grand Street, between Essex and Clinton, on the right heading toward the river, not SoHo. With your thumb, gouge and tear bialys open along the circumference. Butter bialys. Insert onion slices. Do this about 3:00 a.m., at the glass-topped table in my parents' dining room, after a heavy date in Greenwich Village. My parents should be asleep in their bedroom, twenty feet away. Since my father is dead, imagine him. He snores. He cries out against murderous assailants. I could never catch his exact words. Think what scares you most, then eat, eat. *The New York Times*, purchased minutes ago at the kiosk in Sheridan Square, is fresh; it lies beside the plate of bialys. As you eat, you read. Light a cigarette. Coffee, in the gray pot, waits on the stove. Don't let it boil. Occasional street noises — sirens, cats — should penetrate the Venetian blinds and thick, deeply pleated drapes of the living-room windows. The tender, powdery

## Li avrei salvati se avessi potuto

[...]

### PANE NERO, BURRO, CIPOLLA

Il pane nero dovrebbe essere quello di Pechter, ma l'azienda è fallita<sup>70</sup>, quindi sostituiscio con dei bialy<sup>71</sup> del panificio su Grand Street, tra la Essex e la Clinton, sulla destra guardando il fiume, non SoHo<sup>72</sup>. Infila il pollice nel bialy e aprilo seguendone la circonferenza. Imburra il bialy. Inseriscici delle fette di cipolla. Fai tutto ciò intorno alle tre di notte, al tavolo col piano in vetro nella sala da pranzo dei miei genitori, dopo un appuntamento di fuoco nel Greenwich Village. I miei genitori stanno probabilmente dormendo nella loro camera da letto, pochi metri più in là. Dato che mio padre è morto, immaginalo e basta. Russa. Grida contro degli assalitori assetati di sangue. Non sono mai riuscito a distinguere le parole esatte. Pensa a quello che ti spaventa di più, poi mangia, mangia. Il *New York Times*, comprato pochi minuti fa all'edicola in Sheridan Square, è fresco di stampa; è lì, vicino al piatto di bialy. Mentre mangi, leggi. Accendi una sigaretta. Del caffè, nella caffettiera grigia, aspetta sul fornello. Non farlo bollire. Rumori occasionali dalla strada – sirene, gatti – dovrebbero penetrare attraverso le veneziane e i pesanti drappeggi plissettati delle finestre in salotto. La soffice superficie polverosa dei

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<sup>70</sup> The author is referring to Pechter family's bakery, opened in New York in 1888. With "l'azienda è fallita", he is probably referring to the fact that, in 1973, Pechter family and Field family fused their activities, probably closing down their bakeries, and founded the new firm Pechter Field's Bakery (Davidson, 1995).

<sup>71</sup> Leavened bread bun, similar to a bagel, soft and gummy, typical of Polish Ashkenazi Jewish tradition. It is usually eaten with onion, butter, garlic, poppy seeds, or other ingredients. It owes its names to the city of Białystok in Poland.

<sup>72</sup> Thanks to these precise directions, the reader can locate the area mentioned by the author in Manhattan, south from the East Village and south-east from SoHo, and narrow it to a couple of blocks. Interestingly enough, there is currently a bakery in that area, the Doughnut Plant, which however opened in 1994.

surface of the bialys is dented by your fingertips, which bear odors of sex; also butter, onion, dough, tobacco, newsprint, and coffee. The whole city is in your nose, but go outside and eat the last bialy while strolling on Cherry Street. The neighborhood is Mafia-controlled; completely safe. You will be seen from tenement windows and recognized. Smoke another cigarette. Take your time. Your father cries out in his sleep, but he was born in Europe. For a native American kid, there is nothing to worry about. Even if you eat half a dozen bialys, with an onion and coffee, you will sleep like a baby.

[...]

bialy porta le ammaccature lasciate dai tuoi polpastrelli, che odorano di sesso; anche di burro, cipolla, impasto, tabacco, carta di giornale e caffè. Tutta la città è nelle tue narici, ma esci e mangia l'ultimo bialy mentre passeggi su Cherry Street. Il quartiere è in mano alla mafia; completamente sicuro. Sarai visto dalle finestre dei palazzoni e verrai riconosciuto. Fuma un'altra sigaretta. Fai con calma. Tuo padre urla nel sonno, ma lui è nato in Europa. Per un ragazzo nato in America non c'è niente di cui preoccuparsi. Anche se mangi una mezza dozzina di bialy, con una cipolla e caffè, dormirai come un bimbo.

[...]

## Honeymoon

[...]

Latin music was the rage in the early fifties. You would hear the dining-room staff singing in Spanish: rumbas, mambos, cha-cha-chas. We understood the feeling in the words, not the words. We called Latin music “Jewish.” The wailing melodies were reminiscent of Hebraic and Arabic chanting, but we only meant the music was exciting to us. A fusion music, conflating Europe and Africa. In mambo, Spanish passion throbs to Nigerian syncopation. In Yiddish, the German, Hebrew, Spanish, Polish, and English words are assimilated to a culture and a system of sound. The foxtrot and lindy hop we called “American.” They had a touch of Nigeria, too, but compared to mambo or Yiddish, they felt like “Jingle Bells.”

[...]

## Luna di miele

[...]

La musica latina andava molto nei primi anni Cinquanta. Spesso si poteva sentire il personale di sala cantare in spagnolo: rumba, mambo, cha-cha-cha. Noi comprendevamo il sentimento racchiuso nelle parole, non le parole. Chiamavamo la musica latina “ebrea”. Le melodie lamentose ricordavano i canti ebraici e arabi, ma noi intendevamo semplicemente che la musica ci faceva divertire. Una fusione musicale, che univa Europa e Africa. Nel mambo, la passione spagnola pulsava nel ritmo sincopato nigeriano. Nello yiddish, parole tedesche, ebraiche, spagnole, polacche e inglesi sono assimilate a una cultura e a un sistema sonoro. Il fox-trot e il lindy hop<sup>73</sup>, quelli li chiamavamo “americani.” Anche quelli avevano un sentore di Nigeria, ma in confronto al mambo o allo yiddish, ci sembravano “Jingle Bells.”

[...]

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<sup>73</sup> The foxtrot is an American dance in four-four time, and the Lindy hop is an Afro-American dance in an eight-count structure. The author feels a strong contrast between these plain rhythms and Latin music, which is strongly syncopated and rich in backbeats.

## Viva La Tropicana

[...]

The first time I heard mambo, I was in a Chevy Bel Air, driving from Manhattan to Brooklyn with Zev's son, my cousin Chester. [...] As we drove, he flicked on the radio. The D.J., Symphony Sid, began talking to us, his voice full of knowing, in the manner of New York. He said we could catch Tito Puente this Wednesday at the Palladium, home of Latin music, Fifty-third and Broadway. Then Symphony Sid played a tune by Puente called "Ran Kan Kan."

Chester pulled the Chevy to the curb, cut the motor, and turned the volume way up. "You know what this is?" I shrugged, already afraid Chester was about to do something show-offy. He lunged out of the car and began to dance, his alligators flashing on the asphalt. "Cuban mambo," he cried, pressing his right palm to his belly, showing me the source of the music, and how it streams downward through your hips and legs into your feet. He danced as if he had a woman in his arms, or the music itself was a magnificent woman, like Abbe Lane or Rita Hayworth, with mammalian heat and substance, as required by the era. Chester's every motion displayed her with formal yet fiery adoration. His spine was straight, shoulders level, and his head aristocratically erect, the posture of flamenco dancers, but the way he moved was more fluid and had different

## Viva la Tropicana

[...]

La prima volta che sentii il mambo, ero in una Chevrolet Bel Air e stavo andando da Manhattan a Brooklyn con il figlio di Zev, mio cugino Chester. [...] Mentre eravamo per strada, accese la radio. Il DJ, Symphony Sid, iniziò a parlarci, la voce piena di supponenza, alla maniera di New York. Disse che avremmo potuto beccare Tito Puente quel mercoledì al Palladium, patria della musica latina, all'incrocio della Cinquantreesima e Broadway. Poi Symphony Sid fece partire una canzone di Puente intitolata "Ran Kan Kan."

Chester accostò la Chevrolet sul marciapiede, spense il motore, e sparò la radio a tutto volume. "Sai cos'è questo?" Scrollai le spalle, temendo già che Chester avrebbe fatto qualcosa per mettersi in mostra. Balzò giù dall'auto e iniziò a ballare, i suoi alligatori<sup>74</sup> che lampeggiavano sull'asfalto. "Mambo cubano," gridò, premendosi il palmo della mano destra sulla pancia, indicandomi la fonte della musica e mostrandomi come ti scorre verso il basso, nelle anche e nelle gambe, fino ai piedi. Ballava come se avesse avuto una donna tra le braccia, o come se la musica stessa fosse una donna magnifica, tipo Abbe Lane e Rita Hayworth, con calore e fisicità animale, come si apprezzava all'epoca. Ogni movimento di Chester la metteva in mostra con solenne, e tuttavia ardente, adorazione. La sua spina dorsale era dritta, in linea con le spalle, e la sua testa aristocraticamente eretta, il portamento dei ballerini di flamenco, ma il modo in cui si muoveva era più fluido

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<sup>74</sup> Metonymy for Chester's shoes, made from alligator leather.

hesitations. “This is Cuba, baby. *Ritmo caliente.*” He looked very macho. I could see why girls liked him.

[...]

ed eseguiva esitazioni<sup>75</sup> differenti. “Questa è Cuba, baby. *Ritmo caliente.*” Mi sembrò molto macho. Era evidente il perché piacesse alle ragazze.

[...]

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<sup>75</sup> *Hesitations.* In dancing, a hesitation is a halt on the standing foot in between steps, with the moving foot suspended in the air or slowly dragged.

## Nachman

[...]

Marie spoke to the man again. He seemed to liven as he answered, as if this was an opportunity he longed for, his words like rocks tumbling from the crater of his chest. He made gestures with his thick hands to emphasize what he said. His face, which was a broad bone with small blue eyes and a wide mobile mouth, took on different expressions, each swiftly replacing the last. There was so much motion in his features that Nachman wasn't sure what the man looked like, only that it was a big face with small animalish blue eyes and a thick nose with burst capillaries along its length. He was full of talk, full of memories. They seemed to lift from within and push behind his eyes, as if they intended to burst through and be seen.

Nachman waited and watched, his heart thudding palpably. He listened so hard that he became dizzy with anticipation, as if at any moment he would understand Polish and know what the man was saying. Nachman hesitated to make a sound. He didn't dare ask Marie to tell him anything until the man said as much as he wanted. Marie finally turned to Nachman and said, "We should go now."

"But what did he tell you?"

[...]

## Nachman

[...]

Marie si rivolse nuovamente all'uomo. Lui sembrò ravvivarsi mentre rispondeva, come se quella fosse un'opportunità che aveva atteso a lungo; le parole rotolavano fuori dal cratere del suo petto come rocce. Gesticolava con le sue grandi mani per enfatizzare quello che diceva. Il suo viso, che era un grande osso con piccoli occhi azzurri e un'ampia, mobile bocca, assumeva espressioni diverse, ognuna che sostituiva prontamente la precedente. I suoi tratti si muovevano tanto che Nachman non era sicuro di sapere che aspetto avesse l'uomo, solo che era una grande faccia con piccoli occhi azzurri e animaleschi e un grosso naso ricoperto di capillari rotti. L'uomo era pieno di parole, pieno di ricordi. Sembravano innalzarsi dentro di lui e spingere da dietro i suoi occhi, come se volessero schizzare fuori ed essere visti.

Nachman aspettò e rimase a guardare, il cuore che batteva all'impazzata. Ascoltava così intensamente che l'aspettativa gli stava facendo venire le vertigini, come se da un momento all'altro potesse iniziare a capire il polacco e sapere cosa stesse dicendo l'uomo. Nachman esitò ad aprir bocca. Non osò chiedere a Marie di dirgli qualcosa finché lui non avesse detto tutto quello che voleva. Alla fine, Marie si girò verso Nachman e disse, "Dovremmo andare ora."

"Ma cosa ti ha detto?"

[...]

## Cryptology

NACHMAN HAD ARRIVED IN NEW YORK the previous evening, and was walking along Fifth Avenue when she came up behind him, calling, "Nachman, Nachman, is that you?" He looked back and saw a woman shining with happiness, for which he, apparently, was responsible. His mere existence had turned on her lights. Nachman kissed her on both cheeks, and then they stood chatting at the corner of Forty-second Street, the millions passing with the minutes. When Nachman parted from her, he was holding her business card and the key to her apartment in Chelsea, having promised to join her and her husband for dinner that evening.

"If you arrive before us, just wait in the apartment," she had said. "It's been so many years, Nachman. I'm Helen Ferris now. Do you know my husband, Benjamin Strong Ferris? He's a lawyer. Also a name in computer science and cryptology. I assume you're in New York for the cryptology conference. Benjamin goes there to find geniuses like you for his company."

"As a matter of fact..." Nachman had said, but she was still talking.  
"It would be wonderful if we could have a drink, just you and me, and remember the old days, but I have to run. There'll be time to talk later. I can't tell you how glad I am that we ran into each other. Actually, Nachman, I followed you for about five blocks. I couldn't believe it was you. Benjamin will be so delighted. He's heard me talk about you so often. Should I cook, or should we have dinner out? Oh, let's decide later."

## Crittologia

NACHMAN ERA ARRIVATO A NEW YORK la sera prima e stava camminando lungo la Quinta Strada<sup>76</sup> quando lei lo raggiunse, chiamandolo, "Nachman, Nachman, sei tu?" Lui si voltò e vide una donna radiosa di felicità, di cui lui, apparentemente, era responsabile. La sua mera esistenza l'aveva fatta risplendere. Nachman la baciò sulle guance, poi stettero a chiacchierare all'angolo con la Quarantaduesima, milioni che passavano insieme ai minuti. Quando Nachman si separò da lei, aveva in mano il suo biglietto da visita e la chiave del suo appartamento a Chelsea<sup>77</sup>, avendole promesso che si sarebbe unito a lei e al marito per cena quella sera.

"Se arrivi prima di noi, aspettaci pure in casa," aveva detto. "Quanti anni sono passati, Nachman! Sono Helen Ferris, adesso. Conosci mio marito, Benjamin Strong Ferris? È un avvocato. È anche un nome dell'informatica e della crittologia. Immagino tu sia a New York per la conferenza di crittologia. Benjamin ci va per trovare geni come te per la sua azienda."

"In realtà..." Nachman aveva detto, ma lei stava ancora parlando.

"Sarebbe meraviglioso se riuscissimo a bere qualcosa, solo io e te, e ricordare i vecchi tempi, ma devo scappare. Avremo tempo di parlare più tardi. Non puoi capire quanto sono contenta che ci siamo incontrati. In effetti, Nachman, ti ho seguito per quasi cinque isolati. Non riuscivo a credere che fossi tu. Benjamin ne sarà così felice. Gli ho parlato tanto di te. Cucino io o andiamo a mangiare fuori? Dai, decidiamo più tardi."

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<sup>76</sup> Main avenue in Manhattan and the most famous shopping area of the city, one of the symbols of wealthy New York.

<sup>77</sup> Neighborhood in Manhattan. It is mostly residential, but it is famous for being one of the centers of artistic life in New York, and for being ethnically and culturally diverse.

When she had stopped talking, Nachman said he didn't know the name Benjamin Strong Ferris, and he didn't consider himself a genius. "I'm a good mathematician," he added. "Good is rare enough."

Helen Ferris smiled with affectionate understanding, as if his modesty amused her, but there was also something more. She seemed to believe a special bond existed between them. While Nachman's every word nourished her smile, her dark brown eyes bloomed with sensual anticipation, as if at any moment Nachman might do something very pleasing. To disguise his ignorance — what special bond was there between them? — Nachman became expansive, even somewhat confessional.

He told Helen Ferris that he was indeed in New York for the cryptology conference; he'd been invited to a job interview by a representative of the Delphic Corporation. But whoever had invited him hadn't given his name.

Helen Ferris obviously took great pleasure in listening to Nachman, and yet, in the center of her rapt, almost delirious focus, Nachman saw a curious blank spot, as if she were not conversing so much as savoring. Her brown eyes devoured his, and her smile suggested a rictus in its unrelieved tension and shape. This intensity, and her alarming red lipstick, made Nachman think she wanted to eat him. A smile is a primitive expression, he supposed, carried in the genes, the reflexive anticipation of a meal — not necessarily of people, but who knows the ancestral

Quando smise di parlare, Nachman disse che non conosceva il nome di Benjamin Strong Ferris, e che non si considerava un genio. "Sono un bravo matematico," aggiunse. "Bravo è già abbastanza raro."

Helen Ferris sorrise, affettuosamente comprensiva, come se la modestia la divertisse, ma c'era anche qualcosa di più. Sembrava credere che esistesse un legame speciale tra loro. Mentre ogni parola di Nachman alimentava il suo sorriso, nei suoi occhi scuri sbocciava un'anticipazione sensuale, come se Nachman potesse fare qualcosa di molto piacevole da un momento all'altro. Per dissimulare la propria ignoranza – che legame speciale c'era tra loro? – Nachman diventò espansivo, addirittura confidenziale.

Disse a Helen Ferris che in effetti si trovava a New York per la conferenza di crittologia; era stato invitato a un colloquio di lavoro da un rappresentante della Delphic Corporation. Ma chiunque fosse che l'aveva invitato non gli aveva lasciato il proprio nome.

Helen Ferris, ovviamente, provò un immenso piacere nell'ascoltare ogni parola pronunciata da Nachman, e tuttavia, al centro della sua concentrazione assorta e quasi delirante, Nachman vide uno strano spazio vuoto, come se lei non stesse né conversando né tantomeno assaporando le parole. Gli occhi castani della donna divoravano i suoi e il suo sorriso nascondeva una smorfia forzata nella forma e tensione repressa. Quell'intensità e quel suo inquietante rossetto rosso fecero pensare a Nachman che volesse mangiarlo. Il sorriso è un'espressione primitiva, supponeva, perpetrata attraverso i geni, il riflesso incondizionato della pregustazione di un pasto – non necessariamente a base di persone, ma chissà

diet? Nachman smiled in response, but felt no desire to eat her.

"So the person who invited you didn't give his name?" she prompted.

She'd repeated the information, presumably, to hold Nachman a moment longer and give him a chance to say something more. Her devouring smile made him nervous, and he astonished himself by talking like a man making a police report, obsessed with facts.

"The letter was signed by a secretary. Abigail Stokes. She just gave me the name of the hotel and a date and time for the interview. To tell the truth, I didn't really come to New York because of the interview — I wanted to visit my father, who lives in Brooklyn. I haven't seen him in years. And since Delphic was paying for my plane ticket and hotel room, why not? The interview was set for one o'clock this afternoon, and I figured they were taking me to lunch, but nobody was there to meet me. No one at the hotel desk had heard of the Delphic Corporation, and my room had been paid for by someone whose name they weren't free to disclose."

He paused after his recitation of the facts, then gave her a last little personal tidbit to chew on. "So, since then I've been walking around feeling a bit ... I don't know what. Weirdly disappointed."

"It is weird," said Helen Ferris. "But why feel disappointed? You got a free trip to New York. How clever of you! The airline ticket was prepaid?"

com'era la dieta ancestrale? Nachman sorrideva di rimando, ma non provava alcun desiderio di mangiarla.

“Quindi la persona che ti ha invitato non ti ha lasciato il suo nome?” sollecitò lei. Aveva ripetuto l’informazione, presumibilmente, per trattenere Nachman un momento in più e dargli l’opportunità di dire qualcos’altro. Il suo sorriso vorace lo innervosiva, e si stupì di se stesso quando si accorse di parlare come qualcuno che faceva un verbale alla polizia, ossessionato dagli avvenimenti.

“La lettera era firmata da una segretaria. Abigail Stokes. Mi ha solo scritto il nome dell’hotel e il giorno e l’ora del colloquio. A dire la verità, non è che volessi proprio venire a New York per il colloquio – volevo venire a trovare mio padre, che vive a Brooklyn. Non lo vedo da anni. E dato che la Delphic avrebbe pagato il biglietto aereo e la camera d’albergo, perché no? Il colloquio era fissato per oggi pomeriggio all’una e immaginavo che mi avrebbero portato a pranzo, ma non c’era nessuno all’appuntamento. Nessuno alla reception dell’hotel aveva mai sentito parlare della Delphic Corporation e la mia camera era stata pagata da qualcuno di cui non potevano rivelare il nome.”

Fece una pausa dopo aver recitato i fatti, poi le fornì un ultimo particolare personale da considerare. “Quindi, da lì sono andato un po’ in giro, abbastanza... Non saprei. Stranamente deluso.”

“È strano, in effetti,” disse Helen Ferris. “Ma perché sentirsi delusi? Ti sei fatto un viaggetto a New York gratis. Sei stato furbo! Il biglietto aereo era prepagato?”

"If I had to put down one cent to fly three thousand miles and meet a nameless person, I wouldn't be here," said Nachman, with indignation. "I hate to travel, but I showed up for the interview. The other party didn't."

"I see. You were hurt. You're sure there was no other name at the bottom of the letter? It didn't say something like 'Abigail Stokes for Joe Schmo'?"

Nachman wondered fleetingly if Helen Ferris thought he was an idiot.

"No Joe Schmo. Somebody anonymous wanted to interview me for a job. I have a job. I'm not looking for another one. But I agreed to come. Why not? I figured I might even learn about cryptology, an exciting field. A good mathematician could make a lot of money fooling with codes."

"But that's not like you. Would you really have considered taking the job?"

"I guess not, though it might be fun to be a millionaire. I fancied myself buying things like a dishwasher, but I don't work for money. You know what I mean. My salary check pays my bills. I work like most people, not to waste my life."

“Se avessi dovuto spendere un solo centesimo per volare tremila miglia e incontrare una persona senza nome, non sarei qui,” disse Nachman, indignato.

“Odio viaggiare, ma mi sono presentato al colloquio. L’altra parte non l’ha fatto.”

“Ho capito. Ti sei offeso. Sei sicuro che non ci fosse nessun’altro nome in calce alla lettera? Non c’era scritto qualcosa tipo ‘Abigail Stokes per conto di Pinco Pallino<sup>78</sup>?’”

Nachman si chiese di sfuggita se Helen Ferris lo considerasse un idiota.

“Nessun Pinco Pallino. Qualcuno di anonimo voleva farmi un colloquio. Io ce l’ho un lavoro. Non ne sto cercando un altro. Ma ho accettato di venire. Perché no? Ho pensato che avrei anche potuto imparare qualcosa sulla crittologia, una scienza entusiasmante. Un buon matematico potrebbe fare un sacco di soldi smanettando con i codici.”

“Ma non è da te. Avresti davvero preso in considerazione di accettare lavoro?”

“Credo di no, anche se sarebbe divertente essere milionario. Mi piacerebbe comprarmi cose come una lavastoviglie, ma non lavoro per i soldi. Sai cosa intendo. Con il mio stipendio arrivo a fine mese. Lavoro come la maggior parte delle persone, per non sprecare la mia vita.”

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<sup>78</sup> *Joe Schmo*. Invented name used in the United States to refer to a generic man, or one without a name. Being a Jewish pejorative variation of the more neutral ‘John Doe’, we chose to render the sarcastic note of the name with the expression “Pinco Pallino”, often used to downplay the relevance of the person to whom it is referred.

Nachman had begun to relax into his subject. "Have you been to Santa Monica? That's where I live. On the beach you see people with nice bodies and no jobs. Also no brains. Life is too short to waste a minute getting a sunburn. I've never even taken a vacation. I don't know why anybody would want to. Anyhow, as I said, I wanted to visit my father. This was an opportunity. Expenses paid by the Delphic mystery man."

"You don't own a dishwasher?" Helen Ferris asked, giggling. "That's also mysterious. I bet I know what happened. Delphic sent out a form letter signed by Abigail Stokes. The letter went to a hundred mathematicians like you. A few of them accepted the invitation and came to New York. Before you arrived, Delphic decided to hire one of these. So you no longer existed as far as they were concerned. They simply forgot about you."

"But they paid for my ticket and hotel room."

"Just the cost of doing business. You feel disappointed, but it isn't the least bit personal. You mean nothing to them."

"I'm meaningless?" This was the one clear thought that emerged from her pelting of words.

"Not to me," Helen Ferris said. Was she teasing him? Or was she right?

Nachman aveva iniziato a rilassarsi sull'argomento. "Sei mai stata a Santa Monica<sup>79</sup>? Io vivo lì. Sulla spiaggia si vedono persone con bei fisici e senza lavoro. E anche senza cervello. La vita è troppo corta per sprecare anche un solo minuto ad arrostirsi al sole. Non mi sono mai preso delle ferie. Non ho idea del perché qualcuno dovrebbe farlo. Ad ogni modo, come ho detto, volevo venire a trovare mio padre. Questa era un'occasione buona. Le spese coperte dall'uomo misterioso della Delphic."

"Non hai una lavastoviglie?" chiese Helen Ferris, ridacchiando. "Anche questo è misterioso. Scommetto di sapere cos'è successo. La Delphic ha inviato una lettera standard firmata da Abigail Stokes. La lettera è arrivata ad altri cento matematici come te. Alcuni di loro hanno accettato l'invito e sono venuti a New York. Prima che tu arrivassi, la Delphic ha deciso di assumere uno di loro. Quindi, per quanto li riguardava, tu non esistevi più. Si sono semplicemente dimenticati di te."

"Ma mi hanno pagato il biglietto e la camera."

"Il costo degli affari. Sei deluso, ma non è assolutamente nulla di personale. Non conti niente per loro."

"Sono insignificante?" Era questa l'unica conclusione chiara che emergeva dal suo fiume di parole.

"Non per me," disse Helen Ferris. Lo stava prendendo in giro? O aveva ragione?

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<sup>79</sup> One of the counties of metropolitan city of Los Angeles. It is a popular tourist destination, renowned for its beaches.

"I've got to go," she said, touching his chest lightly. "I'm so excited. We'll have fun tonight."

When they parted, Nachman wondered how long it had been since he'd last seen Helen Ferris. He also wondered who, exactly, was Helen Ferris?

She remembered him so well. She had called out his name in the street. How could he say, "Who are you?" Another man might have been able to say it. Not Nachman. In a few hours, she would expect him to show up and meet her husband. The prospect of joining strangers for dinner had something adventurous about it, even devilish and appropriate to New York. Nachman didn't know anyone in the city who was as friendly as his old friend Helen Ferris, whoever she was. Any moment it would come to him. Her wide cheekbones and dark, roundish, somewhat fleshy face, with its maternally sexy brown eyes, looked Semitic, maybe a little Asian, but she might just as easily be Mexican or Puerto Rican. He'd known women who looked like her, but remembered none named Helen. She was quite attractive, though a little scary. You'd think he'd remember her for that reason. Had she noticed his confusion? People can tell if you recognize them or not. They see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice. If she knew Nachman didn't recognize her, then she was complicit in his failure to admit it. Oh well, Nachman would get the question out of the way when he saw her again. It would be more embarrassing later than it would have been a few minutes ago, but he would show up for dinner

“Devo andare,” disse lei, sfiorandogli il petto. “Sono così emozionata. Ci divertiremo stasera.”

Quando si separarono, Nachman si chiese quanto tempo era passato dall’ultima volta che aveva visto Helen Ferris. Si chiese anche chi, esattamente, era Helen Ferris?

Lei se lo ricordava così bene. Lo aveva chiamato per nome in mezzo alla strada. Come avrebbe potuto dire, “Chi sei?” Qualcun altro sarebbe riuscito a farlo. Non Nachman. Lei si aspettava che lui si presentasse all’appartamento qualche ora dopo, e che incontrasse suo marito. L’idea di unirsi a cena con degli estranei aveva un che di avventuroso, perfino diabolico, e adatto a New York. Nachman non conosceva nessuno in quella città che fosse amichevole quanto la sua vecchia amica Helen Ferris, chiunque fosse. Se lo sarebbe ricordato da un momento all’altro. I suoi zigomi ampi e il suo viso scuro, tondeggiante e alquanto carnoso, con i suoi occhi castani materni e sensuali, sembravano semitici, forse un po’ asiatici, ma avrebbe benissimo potuto essere messicana o portoricana. Aveva conosciuto donne che le assomigliavano, ma non si ricordava di nessuna che si chiamasse Helen. Era piuttosto attraente, anche se un po’ inquietante. Sarebbe stato normale che lui se la fosse ricordata per quella ragione. Aveva notato il suo disorientamento? Le persone si accorgono se li riconosci o meno. Lo capiscono dallo sguardo, dalla voce. Se lei aveva capito che Nachman non l’aveva riconosciuta, allora era stata complice del suo fallimento nell’ammetterlo. Vabbè, Nachman avrebbe trovato risposta alla domanda quando l’avrebbe rivista. A quel punto sarebbe stato più imbarazzate rispetto a pochi minuti prima, ma si sarebbe

and confess. The key to Helen Ferris's apartment was in his pants pocket. Her card was in his wallet. It said Helen Ferris, Editorial Consultant, but it told him nothing about who she was.

Dinner was still a few hours away. Nachman continued walking aimlessly, trying to remember. How do you try to remember? You make yourself passive, receptive, available. If it comes it comes. A strange kind of trying. He wondered if there had been a clue to her identity in what she'd said. Unfortunately, Nachman had done most of the talking. The look in Helen Ferris's eyes and her red smile came to him; nothing else. She refused to step from the shadows of his mind.

The late-October weather felt summery, but as the afternoon wore on, Nachman detected a quality in the breeze that was too poignant for summer, had too fine an edge. Another year was almost over. Nachman liked the poignancy, could almost see it in the changing light. The sun would soon be lower in the sky. Shadows would grow longer. Darkness and cold would invade the streets and challenge people's energy, give steel to their thoughts. Nachman felt as if he were walking heroically into the heart of the drama, the adventure of the city, and not just because of the season. Helen Ferris was part of New York's endemic adventurousness. The crowds, the traffic, the buildings, the changing weather, the city's infinite complexity, its unknowability — who could comprehend it? Nachman felt exhilarated. From a certain point of view, there was even adventure in being

presentato a cena e avrebbe confessato. La chiave dell'appartamento di Helen Ferris era nella tasca dei suoi pantaloni. Il suo biglietto da visita era nel portafogli. C'era scritto 'Helen Ferris, Consulente Editoriale', ma non gli diceva nulla su chi fosse lei.

Alla cena mancava ancora qualche ora. Nachman continuò a camminare senza meta, cercando di ricordare. Com'è che si cerca di ricordare? Ti rendi passivo, recettivo, disponibile. Se arriva, arriva. Uno strano tipo di tentativo. Si chiese se ci fosse un indizio per ricostruire la sua identità in quello che aveva detto. Sfortunatamente, era stato Nachman a parlare di più. Gli venivano in mente lo sguardo negli occhi di Helen Ferris e il suo sorriso rosso; nient'altro. La donna si rifiutava di farsi avanti dalle ombre della sua memoria.

A ottobre inoltrato, il clima sembrava estivo, ma man mano che le ore pomeridiane passavano, Nachman percepiva una certa qualità nella brezza, troppo penetrante per l'estate, con un filo troppo tagliente. Un altro anno era quasi passato. A Nachman piaceva quell'intensità, riusciva quasi a vederla nella luce cangiante. Il sole sarebbe presto stato più basso nel cielo. Le ombre si sarebbero allungate. L'oscurità e il freddo avrebbero invaso le strade e messo alla prova la vitalità della gente, riempiendo d'acciaio i loro pensieri. Nachman si sentì come se si stesse addentrando eroicamente nel cuore dello spettacolo, nell'avventura della città, e non solo per via della stagione. Helen Ferris faceva parte dell'avventurosità endemica di New York. Le folle, il traffico, i palazzi, i cambiamenti del clima, l'infinita complessità della città, la sua imprevedibilità – chi mai avrebbe potuto comprenderla? Nachman si sentì euforico. Da un certo punto di vista, anche il fatto che gli avessero dato buca alla conferenza di crittologia era

stood up at the cryptology conference. Invited, all expenses paid, to come three thousand miles, only to find nobody who gives a damn whether you came or not. No explanation, no apology. Not even a note at the hotel desk. This couldn't have happened in small-time towns like London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo. That's what made New York great. Nobody gives a shit about anybody.

The truth is that Nachman was enraged. He had smiled as he talked to Helen Ferris. He hadn't let her see his anger. She might have thought he was angry at her.

Nachman then chuckled to himself, and shook his head ruefully, as if he required a moment of private ironic theater. His mood became philosophical. After all, he was morally compromised. He'd agreed to the interview in bad faith. He had no intention of changing jobs and had wanted only to visit his father. In fact, he had planned to go directly from the airport to his father's apartment, but when he phoned — once from the plane, then, again, from the airport — nobody had answered. His father was old and forgetful. He might have gone out. He might even have left town to visit relatives in Connecticut. So Nachman had taken a cab to the hotel. He'd visit his father tomorrow, if the old guy answered the goddamn phone. If not, he'd fly back to California, feeling he'd wasted his time.

As for the sense of adventure, the weather and all that, it was a fantasy, a kind of lie. Nachman had been trying to give value to his trip. He could kid himself only so long before self-contempt made him see things as they were. Only a fool

un'avventura. Invitato, tutte le spese coperte, fare tremila miglia solo per realizzare che a nessuno fregava se si fosse presentato o meno. Nessuna spiegazione, nessuna scusa. Neanche un messaggio alla reception dell'hotel. Una cosa del genere non sarebbe mai successa in una piccola città come Londra, Parigi, Roma, Berlino o Tokyo. Ecco cosa rendeva grandiosa New York. A nessuno fregava un cazzo di nessuno.

La verità era che Nachman era infuriato. Aveva sorriso mentre parlava con Helen Ferris. Non aveva lasciato che lei vedesse la sua rabbia. Avrebbe potuto pensare che fosse arrabbiato con lei.

Nachman poi ridacchiò tra sé e sé e scosse la testa mestamente, come se gli servisse un momento di ironia teatrale privata. Si sentì molto filosofico. Dopotutto, era moralmente compromesso. Aveva accettato di partecipare al colloquio in malafede. Non aveva alcuna intenzione di cambiare lavoro e voleva solo andare a trovare il padre. In effetti, il suo piano era quello di andare dall'aeroporto direttamente all'appartamento del padre, ma quando aveva telefonato – una volta dall'aereo, poi, di nuovo, dall'aeroporto – nessuno aveva risposto. Suo padre era anziano e smemorato. Probabilmente era uscito. Magari era perfino andato fuori città a visitare i parenti in Connecticut. Quindi Nachman aveva raggiunto l'hotel in taxi. Sarebbe andato a trovare suo padre il giorno dopo, se il vecchio avesse risposto al dannato telefono. Altrimenti, sarebbe tornato in California, sentendo di aver sprecato il proprio tempo.

Per quanto riguardava il suo spirito avventuroso, il clima e tutto il resto, era una fantasia, una specie di bugia. Nachman aveva cercato di dare un valore al suo viaggio. Era riuscito a prendersi in giro solo fino a quando il disprezzo nei propri

would accept an invitation to meet somebody who had no name. Nachman was a fool. That was now an established fact. Good. He felt much better.

A few hours later, Nachman entered a building in Chelsea. The doorman, who had been given Nachman's name, said, "Go right up. Apartment 14-B." The elevator was brightened by three half-mirrored walls. Nachman could see himself from head to waist in triplicate. Three half-Nachmans made him feel less, rather than more, visible. The reflections seemed mental rather than physical, mere versions of himself. He felt suddenly claustrophobic, as if the elevator were overcrowded.

Below the mirrors, there was a walnut-stained surface embossed with carved flowers. A brass strip marked the place where the wood met the gray industrial-carpeted floor. The elevator door was two panels of brown enameled steel. They slid separately, one behind the other. Nachman studied the light fixture directly above his head. A fat bulb glowed through a bowl of cloudy glass that was subtly textured with incisions radiating from the center. The elevator spoke for the building, thought Nachman — a confusion of materials suggesting luxurious waste. It carried him slowly to the fourteenth floor, then stopped with a jerk. Nachman had the familiar sensation of a lightness in his belly and lead in his feet.

confronti non gli aveva fatto vedere le cose come stavano. Solo un idiota avrebbe accettato un invito per incontrare qualcuno che non aveva neanche un nome. Nachman era un idiota. A quel punto, quello era un dato di fatto. Bene. Si sentiva molto meglio.

Qualche ora dopo, Nachman entrò in un palazzo a Chelsea. Il portiere, a cui era stato dato il nome di Nachman, disse, "Salga pure. Appartamento 14-B." L'ascensore era illuminato da tre specchi che coprivano per metà le pareti. Nachman poteva vedersi dalla testa alla vita, triplicato. Tre mezzi Nachman lo fecero sentire meno, piuttosto che più, visibile. I riflessi sembravano mentali, più che fisici, pure versioni di se stesso. Si sentì improvvisamente claustrofobico, come se l'ascensore fosse troppo affollato.

Sotto gli specchi, la superficie tinta noce era decorata con fiori incisi. Una fascia di ottone marcava il punto in cui il legno incontrava la moquette sintetica grigia. Le porte dell'ascensore erano due pannelli di acciaio smaltato marrone. Si aprivano scivolando separatamente, una dietro l'altra. Nachman studiò la plafoniera che stava direttamente sopra la sua testa. Una grossa lampadina brillava attraverso una mezza boccia di vetro opaco, impercettibilmente decorata da incisioni che si irradiavano dal centro. L'ascensore parlava per l'intero palazzo, pensò Nachman – un'accozzaglia di materiali che suggeriva un lussuoso sperpero. Lo portò lentamente fino al quattordicesimo piano, poi si fermò con un sobbalzo. Nachman provava la familiare sensazione di leggerezza nello stomaco e piombo nei piedi.

Nothing about Helen Ferris had come to him. Nachman supposed he must have known her when he was a graduate student at U.C.L.A. He'd had quite a few acquaintances then, men and women with whom he'd since lost touch. There had been parties where he'd fallen into intense and transitory intimacy with people to whom he'd only nodded as they passed on campus later, avoiding eye contact. Wait a minute. Hadn't he once left a party with a dark girl who had been too drunk to drive? Hadn't he driven her in her white Jaguar to her parents' house in Beverly Hills? Hadn't they ... what? The elevator doors opened. No, her name was Dolores. She looked nothing like Helen Ferris. The elevator doors slid shut behind him, and the elevator descended, taking Dolores to oblivion.

There were four apartment doors, two on either side of the hall, which was carpeted in the same way as the elevator and was stunningly silent. Dim lights, set in elaborate brass sconces, trailed along the walls. Nachman found the door marked 14-B. He looked at a brass-rimmed eyehole as he pressed the black nipple-like bell. He heard a muffled gong inside the apartment. He waited. Nobody answered. He pressed the bell again and waited. Nobody answered. The key worked. The door opened into a large room.

"Hello," said Nachman, careful not to shriek. "Anybody home?" No one responded. He stepped inside, shut the door, and realized that he wasn't alone. An odor of perfumed soap lay on the air, which was faintly moist and warm. He heard water running and glanced at what he guessed was a bathroom door. It was

Non gli era venuto in mente niente su Helen Ferris. Nachman immaginò di averla conosciuta quando era un laureando alla U.C.L.A.<sup>80</sup> All'epoca aveva avuto abbastanza conoscenti, uomini e donne con cui aveva perso i contatti. C'erano state feste durante le quali si era abbandonato a intensa quanto transitoria intimità con persone a cui poi aveva rivolto solo un cenno del capo se le incontrava per il campus, evitando di guardarle negli occhi. Aspetta un secondo. Una volta non aveva lasciato una festa con una ragazza scura troppo ubriaca per guidare? Non l'aveva accompagnata a casa dei genitori a Beverly Hills, guidando la sua Jaguar bianca? Non avevano... Cosa? Le porte dell'ascensore si aprirono. No, si chiamava Dolores e non assomigliava assolutamente a Helen Ferris. Le porte si chiusero scorrendo dietro di lui e l'ascensore scese, riportando Dolores nell'oblio.

C'erano le porte di quattro appartamenti, due su ogni lato della sala, che era rivestita di moquette come l'ascensore ed era incredibilmente silenziosa. Luci soffuse, sistamate in elaborate applique di ottone, segnavano un percorso sulle parenti. Nachman trovò la porta contrassegnata con 14-B. Guardò lo spioncino orlato di ottone mentre premette il campanello nero che sembrava un capezzolo. Udì un gong ovattato dentro all'appartamento. Aspettò. Nessuno rispose. Suonò ancora il campanello e aspettò. Nessuno rispose. La chiave funzionava. La porta si aprì su un'ampia stanza.

"Permesso," disse Nachman, attento a non alzare troppo la voce. "C'è qualcuno in casa?" Nessuno rispose. Entrò, chiuse la porta e si rese conto di non essere solo. Un'essenza di sapone profumato era sospesa nell'aria, che era leggermente umida e tiepida. Sentì dell'acqua scorrere e lanciò un'occhiata verso

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<sup>80</sup> Acronym of *University of California, Los Angeles*.

partly open. Someone was taking a shower and had heard nothing because of the noise of the running water. Nachman was reluctant to shout. People taking a shower feel defenseless and are easily frightened.

Nachman stood in the large room. It was maybe forty by twenty feet, with a gleaming maple floor. No rugs. A bar counter separated a kitchen area from the rest of the room. Furniture was clustered in the middle, floating in space. A glass-topped coffee table was set lengthwise between two red sofas, with black chairs at either end. Nachman noticed an imposing desk against a wall, and a library table carrying stacks of papers. The room had tall windows that looked across the avenue toward the windows of other buildings. Near the farthest wall there was a dresser and a bed with night tables and reading lamps. To the right of the bed a spiral stair led to an opening in the ceiling, apparently the second floor of the apartment. A suitcase was on the bed. It sat in the middle of a bulky white comforter that had been flung back, revealing silky cobalt blue sheets. At the foot of the bed was a large television on a wheeled aluminum stand that held magazines on a shelf above the wheels. In the ceiling there were two rows of track lights.

Who was in the shower? Helen or Benjamin Ferris? In answer to his question, Nachman heard voices. They were amplified in the largely hollow space of the room, as in the barrel of a drum. The man's voice was emotionally neutral. The woman's voice was strained, higher pitched. It was Helen Ferris. "I'm not finished. Why don't you get out and let me finish."

quella che presumeva essere la porta del bagno. Era socchiusa. Qualcuno si stava facendo la doccia e non aveva sentito nulla a causa del rumore dell'acqua. Nachman era riluttante a gridare. Le persone si sentono indifese, mentre si fanno la doccia, e si spaventano facilmente.

Nachman stette in piedi nell'ampia stanza. Sarà stata dodici metri per nove, con uno splendente parquet di legno d'acero. Senza tappeti. Un bancone separava la zona cucina dal resto della stanza. I mobili erano raggruppati nel centro e galleggiavano nello spazio. Un tavolino col piano in vetro era sistemato per il senso della lunghezza tra due divani rossi, con sedie nere a entrambe le estremità. Contro una parete, Nachman notò un'imponente scrivania e un tavolo con pile di fogli. La stanza aveva alte finestre che si affacciavano sulla strada, verso le finestre degli altri palazzi. Accanto al muro più lontano c'erano un comò e un letto, con comodini e lampade da lettura. Alla destra del letto una scala a chiocciola conduceva a un'apertura nel soffitto, evidentemente il secondo piano dell'appartamento. C'era una valigia sul letto. Era posata al centro di un ingombrante piumone che era stato spostato e rivelava lenzuola di seta blu cobalto. Ai piedi del letto c'era un grande televisore su un mobile di alluminio, che ospitava delle riviste riposte su un ripiano sopra le ruote. Sul soffitto c'erano due file di faretti.

Chi c'era nella doccia? Helen o Benjamin Ferris? In risposta alla sua domanda, Nachman sentì delle voci. Erano amplificate dall'ampio spazio vuoto della stanza, come dal fusto di un tamburo. La voce dell'uomo era emotivamente neutra. La voce della donna era tesa, più acuta. Era Helen Ferris. "Non ho finito. Perché non vai fuori e mi lasci finire?"

They are showering together, Nachman realized.

"I don't want to have to talk to him alone."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. You can talk to him until I come out. Fix him a drink.

Turn on the TV and watch the ball game. Men like sports. You won't even have to talk to him. Be nice for once in your fucking life."

"Hey hey, hey. *I'm* supposed to be nice? Like *I* invited the schmuck to the apartment? I'll pick up the check at dinner, baby, but that's where it ends. This is your affair."

"Don't start with the affair business. He's not my type."

"You have types?"

"I'm nice to your friends, Benjamin, even when they bore me to death."

"Friend? You said he didn't even recognize you."

"So what? He's drift. Not your average New York cocksmit, like some persons I could name. I'll remind him who I am at dinner."

"I'll be sitting there, for Christ's sake. He'll die."

"He won't know I told you anything. Besides, he probably doesn't remember that, either. He's practically certifiable. I think his fly was unzipped."

"Don't make me jealous."

Helen Ferris laughed.

Benjamin Ferris went on: "What's the guy's name? Nachman?"

"What's wrong with Nachman?"

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it."

Stavano facendo la doccia insieme, Nachman capì.

“Non voglio dovergli parlare da solo.”

“Dai, Cristo. Parlagli finché non esco. Preparagli un drink. Accendi la TV e guardate una partita. Agli uomini piace lo sport. Non dovrà neanche parlargli. Cazzo, sii gentile per una volta nella vita.”

“Ehi, ehi, ehi. *Io* dovrei essere gentile? Come se *io* avessi invitato qui quel fesso? Io mi prendo l’assegno a cena, tesoro, ma finisce lì. È il *tuo* amante.”

“Non iniziare con la storia dell’amante. Non è il mio tipo.”

“Perché, hai un tipo?”

“Io sono gentile con i tuoi amici, Benjamin, anche quando mi annoiano a morte.”

“Amico? Hai detto che non ti ha neanche riconosciuta.”

“E allora? È tonto. Non è il classico cazzo di New York, come qualcuno di mia conoscenza. Gli ricorderò chi sono a cena.”

“Non vedo l’ora, Cristo. Ci resta secco.”

“Non saprà mai che te l’ho raccontato. Tra l’altro, probabilmente non si ricorda neanche di quello. È praticamente un demente. Credo che avesse anche la patta aperta.

“Così mi fai ingelosire.”

Helen Ferris rise.

Benjamin Ferris continuò: “Com’è che si chiama? Nachman?”

“Cos’ha che non va il suo nome?”

“Non ho detto che ha qualcosa che non va.”

"It's your tone. You think Ferris is so beautiful? People are always saying, 'Like the Ferris wheel?' It bores me."

Nachman walked past the bathroom, crossing the thirty feet or so to the television set. He put the key on top of the TV. He'd heard enough. He was leaving. As he drew his hand away, the key fell to the floor. It had stuck to his fingertips, which were slightly damp. So were his palms. He was perspiring. The key made a sharp clink when it hit the floor. Nachman bent quickly to retrieve it, as if to undo the noise. If they had heard the key, they knew he was in the apartment. He couldn't leave. He would have to confront them. No. He would shout hello, pretend he'd just arrived. They would pretend that they didn't know he'd heard them talking about him. Every word the three of them said would be a lie. He put the key back on the television, and it remained there as he drew his hand away.

He'd never before overheard people talking about him. It was unnerving. He'd been radically objectified, like an insensate rock, while his soul floated in the air. A general hurt spread within his chest and began to seep like a poison throughout his body. He couldn't think clearly. It was hard to breathe. Again Nachman felt an impulse to leave, but he couldn't simply walk back to the door. If they heard the door shut behind him, they'd feel terrible, knowing Nachman had heard them. Why should he care? Nachman cared.

The open suitcase on the bed was large and old-fashioned, made of yellow

“È il tono. Pensi che Ferris suoni tanto bene? La gente dice sempre ‘Come quello della ruota panoramica?’<sup>81</sup> Che noia.”

Nachman superò il bagno, attraversando i nove metri che lo separavano dal televisore. Mise la chiave sopra la TV. Aveva sentito abbastanza. Se ne sarebbe andato. Mentre ritirava la mano, la chiave cadde sul pavimento. Gli era rimasta appiccicata ai polpastrelli, che erano leggermente umidi, come i palmi. Stava sudando. La chiave tintinnò nitidamente quando toccò il pavimento. Nachman si piegò velocemente per recuperarla, come per cancellare il rumore. Se avevano sentito la chiave, sapevano che lui era nell’appartamento. Non poteva andarsene. Gli toccava affrontarli. No. Avrebbe potuto gridare permesso, fingere di essere appena arrivato. Loro avrebbero finto di non sapere che li aveva sentiti parlare di lui. Ogni parola che loro tre avrebbero detto sarebbe stata una bugia. Rimise la chiave sul televisore ed essa rimase lì mentre lui ritirava la mano.

Non gli era mai capitato prima di origliare delle persone parlare di lui. Era snervante. Era stato trattato come un oggetto, come un sasso stupido, mentre la sua anima galleggiava in aria. Un dolore diffuso si propagò nel suo petto e iniziò a penetrare come veleno in tutto il suo corpo. Non riusciva a pensare lucidamente. Respirava a fatica. Nachman sentì di nuovo l’impulso di andarsene, ma non poteva semplicemente tornare verso porta. Se avessero sentito la porta chiudersi dietro di lui, si sarebbero sentiti terribilmente in colpa, sapendo che Nachman li aveva sentiti. Perché avrebbe dovuto importargli? A Nachman importava.

La valigia aperta sul letto era grande e vecchio stile, in cuoio giallo come

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<sup>81</sup> Reference to George Washington Gale Ferris Jr (1856-1896), an American engineer who designed the wheel ride of the World’s Columbia Exposition of Chicago in 1893. That wheel became so iconic that the term “Ferris wheel” has been used since then to identify this kind of ride.

leather like a beautiful Gladstone, with straps and metal corners. Looking at the suitcase, Nachman felt as if he were doing something, not merely suffering. What he saw in the suitcase told him that Helen and Benjamin were packing for a trip.

How nice. They did things together — showered, traveled, bickered, and said vile things about people who had never done them any harm. Their conjugal solidarity was daunting.

If Nachman had stayed in California, he'd have gone to work in his office at the Institute of Mathematics and never heard himself described as a drift man who walks about with his fly unzipped. Nothing she had said was true, but she had said it. She actually said it. We were all going to die, but Helen Ferris had to kill people.

The voices persisted, but Nachman focused on the suitcase and tried not to listen. Shirts, underwear, dresses, trousers, and tennis shoes lay in a confused pile, and a stack of papers had been tossed on top. Nachman admired the indifference with which the expensive-looking clothes had been flung into the suitcase. He saw passports and airline-ticket envelopes among the papers and reached out to open them. His hands were shaking. His heart swelled as he intruded upon the privacy of strangers. How could he do this?

Before he'd engaged the question, he felt a soft pressure against his lower leg. He looked down and saw an exceptionally fat Siamese cat. It must have hidden under the bed, frightened of Nachman, but then decided he was no threat and

quello di una magnifica borsa Gladstone<sup>82</sup>, con cinghie e angoli in metallo. Guardando la valigia, Nachman si sentì come se stesse facendo qualcosa, non semplicemente soffrendo. Quello che vide nella valigia gli suggerì che Helen e Benjamin stavano preparando i bagagli per un viaggio. Che carini. Facevano cose insieme – la doccia, i viaggi, bisticciavano e dicevano cose ignobili su persone che non avevano mai fatto loro del male. La loro solidarietà coniugale era preoccupante.

Se Nachman fosse rimasto in California, sarebbe andato al lavoro nel suo ufficio all'Istituto di Matematica e non si sarebbe mai sentito descrivere come un tonto che va in giro con la patta aperta. Niente di quello che lei aveva detto era vero, ma l'aveva detto. L'aveva detto davvero. Prima o poi saremo tutti morti, ma Helen Ferris doveva andarsene in giro ad ammazzare le persone.

Le voci continuarono, ma Nachman si concentrò sulla valigia e cercò di non ascoltarle. Camicie, biancheria, vestiti, pantaloni e delle scarpe da tennis erano accatastati alla rinfusa e vi era stata buttata sopra una pila di fogli. Nachman ammirò l'indifferenza con la quale vestiti apparentemente costosi erano stati gettati nella valigia. Tra le carte, vide dei passaporti e delle buste di biglietti aerei e allungò una mano per aprirle. Gli tremavano le mani. Il suo cuore si gonfiava mentre invadeva la privacy di due estranei. Come poteva fare una cosa del genere?

Prima di poter affrontare la questione, avvertì una leggera pressione contro il proprio stinco. Guardò in basso e vide un gatto siamese eccezionalmente grasso. Probabilmente si era nascosto sotto il letto, spaventato da Nachman, ma

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<sup>82</sup> Small bag made of rigid leather, produced for the first time in England at the end of the Nineteenth Century. It owes its name to English Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898).

emerged to brush against his leg. The cat leaped onto the bed and stepped into the suitcase, settling on top of the papers, as if it knew that Nachman had been about to look at them. The cat wanted Nachman's attention. Nachman stroked its back. A fat purring friend came to comfort and console him. While he stroked the cat with one hand, he tried to lift the corners of the papers with the other.

There were no rugs or drapes in the room, nothing to absorb the voices, and the moisture in the air only sharpened them. Nachman wasn't listening, but then, abruptly, the water noise ceased.

"He's had a hard time," Helen Ferris said. "He flew across the country to meet someone at the conference and he was stood up. I felt sorry for him."

"If I were stood up, I wouldn't tell anyone. Word gets around. People think you're a schmuck."

"He tried to be cheerful, but I could tell he was furious. The minute I said hello, he started venting like a maniac."

Helen Ferris's voice changed, becoming husky and teasing.

"Tell me, Benjamin," she said.

"What?"

"That I am beautiful."

"Come here."

She laughed. "No, no, no."

poi aveva deciso che non era una minaccia ed era riemerso per strusciarsi contro la sua gamba. Il gatto balzò sul letto ed entrò nella valigia, accomodandosi sui fogli, come se sapesse che Nachman stava per leggerli. Il gatto voleva l'attenzione di Nachman. Nachman gli accarezzò la schiena. Un grasso amico era arrivato per offrirgli le proprie fusa come conforto e consolazione. Mentre accarezzava il gatto con una mano, con l'altra cercò di sollevare gli angoli delle carte.

Non c'erano tappeti o tende nella stanza, niente che potesse assorbire le voci, e l'umidità dell'aria non faceva altro che acuirle. Nachman non stava ascoltando, ma poi, improvvisamente, lo scroscio dell'acqua cessò.

"Ha avuto una brutta giornata," disse Helen Ferris. "Ha attraversato tutto il paese per incontrare qualcuno alla conferenza e gli hanno dato buca. Mi è dispiaciuto per lui."

"Se dessero buca a me, non lo direi a nessuno. Le voci girano. La gente poi ti crede un fesso."

"Cercava di mostrarsi allegro, ma si vedeva che era furioso. Appena l'ho salutato ha iniziato a sfogarsi come un matto."

La voce di Helen Ferris cambiò, diventando roca e stuzzicante.

"Dimmelo, Benjamin," disse.

"Cosa?"

"Che sono bella."

"Vieni qui."

Lei rise. "No, no, no."

Nachman glanced toward the bathroom door. He imagined Helen Ferris's dark-brown hair, cut level with her chin, now a wet black shining cap about her eyes and cheeks. Her mouth, free of lipstick, was softened and bloated by hot water. Nachman thought she'd look better without lipstick. He remembered her motherly sexy eyes. Barefoot, she was maybe five two. She stood as high as his chest. She had wide hips. Did she have large breasts?

She squealed. The note was pitched so high that Nachman thought — terrified — that she had entered the room and was staring at him with shock and revulsion.

He shut the suitcase instantly. On the cat. It thrashed against the leather. Instead of flipping the case open, Nachman pressed the lid down harder, as if to hide the evidence. Not too hard, not hurting the cat, but thus, unintentionally, Nachman gave it time to piss.

When he realized that he was alone and hadn't been seen, he opened the case. The cat sped across the blue silk sheet and leapt onto the maple floor, trailing turds of fear. It vanished behind the bar in the kitchen area, and Nachman saw that it had deposited about a gallon of liquid in the suitcase. Letters and legal papers had softened and wrinkled, edges curling as urine attacked their fibers. Trapped in the suitcase, the cat had spun beneath Nachman's hands, hosing in all directions.

In the elevator, Nachman kept his eyes on the doors and didn't glance at the mirrored walls. He didn't want to see his reflection. In a spasm of superstitious dread, Nachman thought that if he saw it he might be obliged to leave it behind.

Nachman lanciò un'occhiata alla porta del bagno. Immaginò i capelli scuri di Helen Ferris, lunghi fino al mento, diventati un cappuccio nero scintillante d'acqua che le ricopriva le guance e gli occhi. La sua bocca, libera dal rossetto, era ammorbidente e gonfiata dall'acqua calda. Nachman pensò che probabilmente stava meglio senza rossetto. Ricordò i suoi occhi materni e sensuali. Scalza, probabilmente non raggiungeva il metro e sessanta. Gli arrivava al petto. Aveva fianchi larghi. Aveva molto seno?

Lei squittì. Il suono fu così acuto che Nachman pensò – terrorizzato – che fosse entrata nella stanza e lo stesse fissando sconvolta e disgustata.

Serrò subito la valigia. Con dentro il gatto. Si agitava contro il cuoio. Invece di aprire la valigia, Nachman premette il coperchio più forte, come a nascondere una prova. Non così forte da ferire il gatto, ma in quel modo, senza volerlo, gli diede il tempo di pisciare.

Quando si rese conto di essere solo e di non essere stato visto, riaprì la valigia. Il gatto schizzò fuori sulle lenzuola di seta blu e balzò sul pavimento di acero, lasciandosi dietro escrementi di paura. Sparì dietro il bancone nella zona cucina, e Nachman notò che aveva depositato qualcosa come quattro litri di liquido nella valigia. Lettere e documenti legali si erano ammorbidenti e spiegazzati, e i bordi si arricciavano mentre l'urina attaccava le fibre. Intrappolato nella valigia, il gatto aveva si era rigirato sotto le mani di Nachman, spruzzando in ogni direzione.

In ascensore, Nachman mantenne gli occhi fissi sulle porte e non guardò affatto le parenti a specchio. Non voleva vedere il proprio riflesso. In uno spasmo di terrore superstizioso, Nachman pensò che se l'avesse visto sarebbe stato

He wanted to get entirely out of the building, taking himself and his reflection far away from the Ferris couple, particularly the naked, squealing Helen Ferris. The Ferrises had taken something from him, torn a hole in his existence. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the doorman nod. Nachman went by with no acknowledgment and was immediately outside in the anonymous street. He wanted no human recognitions, however minimal, as he headed downtown. Strangers passed like ghostly shapes in the night. Nachman walked mindlessly, block after block until, gradually, he stopped feeling devastated and, in the cool nighttime air of the city, recovered the good simplicity of being himself. "A fool," he said, "but mine own."

He thought about finding a restaurant and having dinner. But he decided he wasn't hungry and continued walking. In Washington Square Park, Nachman came to an empty bench and sat down. The paths were shadowed by trees, through which lamplight shone brokenly. He couldn't make out the features of passersby, and assumed that he was more or less invisible to them, too. Alone, unknown, unseen, he became deeply peaceful and free in his thoughts.

He thought about Helen Ferris. Her smile, which Nachman had read as anticipation, he now understood had meant something different, like expectation. Nachman had been expected to light up just as she had, but he'd failed to recognize her. He was no longer the person he had been. A part of his life was gone.

obbligato a lasciarlo lì. Voleva abbandonare il palazzo completamente, portando se stesso e la propria immagine lontano dai coniugi Ferris, in particolare dalla nuda e squittente Helen Ferris. I Ferris gli avevano portato via qualcosa, avevano scavato un buco nella sua esistenza. Con la coda dell'occhio vide il portiere salutarlo con un cenno del capo. Nachman tirò dritto senza rispondere e fu subito fuori, sull'anonima strada. Non voleva alcuna interazione umana, nemmeno minima, mentre si dirigeva verso il centro. Estranei gli passavano vicino come forme spettrali nella notte. Nachman camminava come un automa, isolato dopo isolato, finché, a poco a poco, non smise di sentirsi sconvolto e, nell'aria fresca della notte cittadina, recuperò la piacevole semplicità di essere se stesso. "Un idiota," disse, "ma me stesso."

Pensò di cercare un ristorante e cenare. Ma decise di non essere affamato e continuò a camminare. A Washington Square Park, Nachman arrivò a una panchina libera e si sedette. Gli alberi gettavano ombre sui selciati, la luce dei lampioni che brillava frammentaria tra le foglie. Non riusciva a distinguere i lineamenti dei passanti, e immaginò di essere, allo stesso modo, più o meno invisibile ai loro occhi. Solo, sconosciuto, invisibile, i suoi pensieri divennero pacifici e liberi.

Pensò a Helen Ferris. Il suo sorriso, che Nachman aveva interpretato come trepidante, ormai capiva che era qualcosa di diverso, forse speranzoso. Lei sperava che lui si sarebbe acceso proprio come si era accesa lei, ma lui non l'aveva riconosciuta. Non era più l'uomo che era stato prima. Una parte della sua vita era andata.

She'd given him her card, though God knows what she thought of him now. Perhaps she believed Nachman, not the cat, had pissed in her suitcase. He could phone her tomorrow, or perhaps the following day from California, and explain what had happened. He could ask her to tell him her maiden name. If he finally remembered who she was, he might then be enriched by memories of himself. Memories are far superior to photographs, for example, which are good only for nostalgia, not understanding. But did Nachman want those memories? The Nachman he no longer remembered was certainly himself. After all, who else could it be?

It's been said the unexamined life isn't worth living. Nachman wasn't against examining his life, but then what was a life? The day before yesterday he'd been in California, and tomorrow he could be almost anywhere on the globe. He could change his name, learn a new language, start a new existence. He could go to an exotic place, get married, have children of various colors and surprising features. It was easy enough. People did it all the time. He could herd yaks in Mongolia, or be a slave trader in Sudan. It took no courage to consult a travel agent. Such metaphysicians were in the phone book. "Get me a flight to Mongolia," said Nachman to himself. "One way."

But Nachman wasn't adventurous. He had no passion for change. As for "a life," it was what you read about in newspaper obituaries. The history of a person come and gone. Nachman would return to California and think only about

Lei gli aveva dato il suo biglietto da visita, ma Dio solo sapeva cosa avrebbe pensato di lui dopo quella sera. Forse credeva che fosse stato Nachman, non il gatto, a pisciare nella sua valigia. Avrebbe potuto telefonarle il giorno dopo, o il giorno dopo ancora dalla California, e spiegare cos'era successo. Avrebbe potuto chiederle di dirgli il suo nome da nubile. Se si fosse ricordato chi era, allora forse si sarebbe arricchito di ricordi di se stesso. I ricordi sono molto migliori delle fotografie, ad esempio, che sono buone solo per la nostalgia, non per la comprensione. Ma Nachman li voleva quei ricordi? Il Nachman che lui non ricordava più era certamente lui stesso. Dopotutto, chi altro poteva essere?

Si dice che la vita senza ricerca non è degna di essere vissuta.<sup>83</sup> Nachman non era contrario a ricercare qualcosa nella vita, ma d'altronde, cos'era una vita? Due giorni prima era in California, il giorno dopo avrebbe potuto essere praticamente ovunque nel mondo. Avrebbe potuto cambiare nome, imparare una nuova lingua, iniziare una nuova esistenza. Avrebbe potuto andare in un posto esotico, sposarsi, avere figli di vari colori e lineamenti sorprendenti. Era piuttosto facile. La gente lo faceva di continuo. Avrebbe potuto allevare yak in Mongolia, o essere un mercante di schiavi in Sudan. Non ci voleva alcun coraggio a consultare un agente di viaggi. Questi metafisici si trovavano nell'elenco telefonico. "Mi prenoti un volo per la Mongolia," disse Nachman a se stesso. "Di sola andata."

Ma Nachman non era avventuroso. Non provava alcuna passione nei confronti del cambiamento. E 'una vita' era quella di cui leggevi nei necrologi sui giornali. La storia di una persona che è venuta e se n'è andata. Nachman sarebbe

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<sup>83</sup> Aphorism attributed to Socrates, quoted by Plato in his *Apology of Socrates*.

mathematics. Numbers have no history. For history something has to disappear. Numbers remain. Just wondering about Mongolia, with its bleak and freezing plains, made him homesick. He yearned for his office and his desk and the window that looked out on the shining Pacific. He'd never gone swimming in the prodigious, restless, teeming, alluring thing, but he loved the changing light on its surface and the sounds it made in the darkness. He didn't yearn for its embrace.

On a bench nearby, partly obscured by shadows, a man began playing a guitar. The tune was a bossa nova, haunting, something like a blues, only more finely nuanced and not at all macho. The rhythm was subtly engaging and it seemed to caress Nachman's heart. He thought again about phoning Helen Ferris. He'd apologize, certainly, for not waiting until she and her husband came out of the bathroom. Vaguely, he supposed that they might have a lot to say to him. His thoughts became still more vague as they surrendered to the bossa nova, and soon he wasn't thinking at all, only following the tune. It made a lovely, sinuous shape, and then made it again and again, always a little differently and yet always the same, as the rhythm carried its exquisite sadness toward infinity.

tornato in California e avrebbe pensato solo alla matematica. I numeri non hanno storia. Secondo la storia, le cose sono destinate a scomparire. I numeri rimangono. Solo pensare alla Mongolia, con le sue pianure gelide e desolate, gli fece venire nostalgia di casa. Agognava il suo ufficio e la sua scrivania e la finestra che si affacciava sul Pacifico luccicante. Non era mai andato a nuotare in quella cosa prodigiosa, irrequieta, fertile, attraente, ma adorava la luce cangiante sulla sua superficie e i suoni che produceva nell'oscurità. Non bramava il suo abbraccio.

Su una panchina vicino, parzialmente oscurato dalle ombre, un uomo iniziò a suonare la chitarra. La canzone era una bossa nova<sup>84</sup>, ossessionante, qualcosa di simile al blues, solo ricca di sfumature più fini e decisamente non da duri. Il ritmo era subdolamente accattivante e sembrava accarezzare il cuore di Nachman. Prese di nuovo in considerazione l'idea di telefonare a Helen Ferris. Si sarebbe scusato, ovviamente, per non aver aspettato che lei e suo marito uscissero dal bagno. Ebbe la vaga idea che avessero molte cose da dirgli. I suoi pensieri si fecero ancora più vaghi mentre si arrendevano alla bossa nova, e ben presto non stava più pensando, solo seguendo la melodia. Creava una forma sinuosa e incantevole, e poi lo faceva ancora, e ancora, sempre un po' diversa e tuttavia sempre uguale, mentre il ritmo trasportava la sua squisita tristezza verso l'infinito.

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<sup>84</sup> Music genre of Brazilian origins, bringing together the rhythm of samba and the North-American sounds of blues and jazz chords.

## Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis has been to provide the ladder thanks to which the reader can overcome the multiple walls erected by the several, different languages and cultures present in Leonard Michaels's short stories without tearing them down. As can be noted, the strategies described in the previous chapters have allowed us to convey a literary text which can be read and understood by the Italian public, still maintaining all the peculiarities of the portrayed cultures.

For this purpose, mentioning points of contact between Leonard Michaels's representation of New York City and the city as portrayed in the Italian collective imagination has been fundamental, and we have done so in the first part of chapter three. Even more important has been the fact of identifying the divergent points in these representations, in order to draw them closer to the cultural background of the Italian audience. As we have pointed out in the same chapter, Leonard Michaels shows areas and aspects of New York with which the Italian reader might not be familiar, and our task has been that of explaining them, making them understandable and meaningful by translating them into the Italian language and culture.

Especially as far as the linguistic representation has been concerned, we believe we have been successful in maintaining the linguistic stratification of the stories, as originally portrayed by the author. Sadly, the general tendency of linguistic adaptation in the Italian literary (and, generally, mediatic) market is to flatten down multiplicity into standard Italian, in order to avoid a caricatural mocking effect that is supposedly necessarily implied in representing an oral style

different from the standard.<sup>85</sup> This widespread practice, however, implies that the translation misses the opportunity to adequately and fully render the characters' identities and peculiarities. We believe that our work has been successful in conveying the different oral styles to be encountered in New York City without degenerating into caricature, which would be far from the intent of the original text.

Translating Leonard Michaels's short stories has not been a simple task – the rendering has been challenging, but at the same time extremely engaging and interesting. Despite the obvious difficulties to be met within literary translation, we have attempted to do justice to the original work, and to adequately render the style and sensibility through which New York City was portrayed in a unique, destabilizing, and crude way.

*The Collected Stories* is a valuable volume, which can provide the reader who approaches Leonard Michaels's work for the first time with an overview of his career, his shifts in style and themes, his way of portraying a world full of conflicts and contradictions. The volume testifies the literary evolution of a great American author who has been unfairly overlooked by the Italian literary panorama, as already pointed out in the introduction.

We have tried to find and highlight the contact between Michaels's and Italian perceptions on various topics, which we had hypothesized, as a demonstration this author deserves more official translation into Italian. The fact that Leonard Michaels appeals to the same sensibility, deals with universals

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<sup>85</sup> See Fusari, (4-7).

themes, and illustrates a familiar world in an unusual, subverting, and enticing way, makes him worthy of being known and appreciated by the Italian audience as well.

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## Appendix I

### City features mentioned in the stories

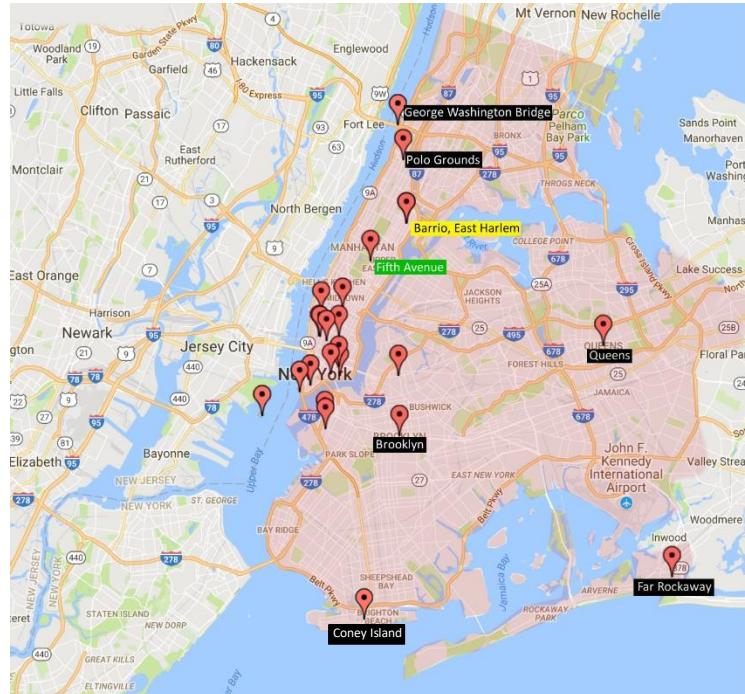


Figure 1: New York highlighted in red, and part of New Jersey

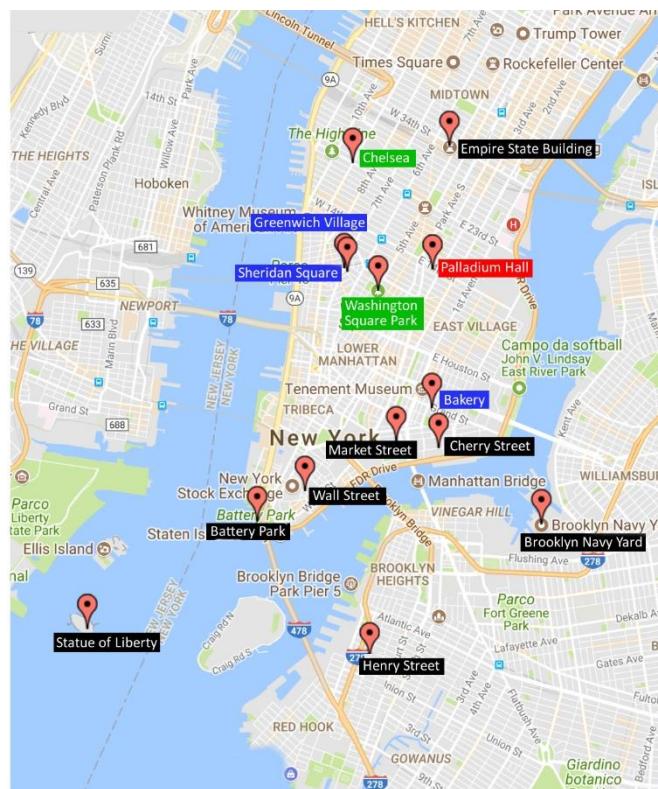


Figure 2: Parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn

Yellow: *The Deal*  
Black: *Murderers*  
Blue: *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*  
Red: *Viva La Tropicana*  
Green: *Cryptology*

## **Appendix II**

### **Interview: Jesse Michaels about Leonard Michaels**

Jesse Michaels, Leonard's son, is a musician and songwriter, painter and illustrator, Bachelor of Arts graduate and writer himself. He agreed to share with us some thoughts and opinions about Leonard Michaels's life and work, specifically about his relationship with New York City, his connection to cultural minorities, and his spirituality. This appendix includes the interview that we conducted on 7 December 2017 and his insightful answers.

**New York City has a great relevance in your father's short stories: it is not only the setting of most of his early work, but it seems to be also a fundamental element of the narration, influencing the life and attitude of his characters. But what about him? Did the New York City environment play a particular role in his life, in shaping his identity? How did Leonard Michaels feel about New York?**

My father's relationship with the city was very complex. He loved / hated it. For example, he often talked about how he moved to Berkeley to get to the farthest point on the map away from New York City. At the same time, he talked about how the 1950s in New York were very exciting. I think there is some stuff about that in his book of essays. As a young man he loved Latin music, and the mambo / salsa scene in NY at that time was the best in the world outside of Cuba. Also, he is inherently a New Yorker in sensibility and retained his East Coast street smarts and Jewish intellectual style until he died.

Even though in many ways he hated the city, when I was a kid I remember him appreciating the gritty New York vibe of movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The French*

*Connection*, and *Serpico*. It struck a spark of recognition in him. I think many of his more negative feelings about the city came from his high-pressure upbringing. His parents were very loving people, but they were also fairly poor immigrants from Poland who had just fled the war and there was a lot of anxiety at all times. The guilt and worry and pressure were oppressive to him. He learned to be a high energy New York kind of kid, even playing college basketball at NYU, but at heart he was an artist and a sensitive soul so the slower vibe of Berkeley (and later Italy) suited him better. So, if I had to sum the whole thing up I would say he appreciated the intense cultural excitement of New York in the 1950s but ultimately life in the city was not for him and he had many difficult experiences such as a complicated upbringing and the suicide of his first wife, that made him want to run as far away as he could.

**In each of these stories, there seems to be one or more characters who are part of a "minority" as opposed to the "American" environment in which they are set. This includes either foreign immigrants living in the US, possibly struggling with the language, or those who have been traditionally considered social minorities because of their culture, namely Jewish people. Was this simply a representation of the environment he lived in, or was this a conscious choice? Do you think he felt a particular connection to these minorities - possibly being Jewish himself - and wanted to give them a voice, and represent their world specifically?**

I think that my father's sole intention was to create characters that were interesting and colorful. His process was largely subconscious, so I am not sure

what the role of “intention” would be. In other words, he would sit and write for hours, agonizing over each sentence and what came up would come up.

Because he grew up in New York and largely in the environment of working class jobs and the cultural atmosphere of the lower East side in the 1950s, it is likely that he had a lot of exposure to a variety of people. I think many of these characters were simply based on actual experience. He drew a lot from life and simply wrote about whatever had energy and emotional interest to him.

He was very influenced by Isaac Babel, Chekov, Saul Bellow, Flannery O’Connor, Kafka and Shakespeare, all of whom wrote about people that stood out from mainstream society in one way or another. One might say that ALL authors write about people who stand out from mainstream society, but this is not really true - Tolstoy, Carver, Updike and Richard Yates for example tend to examine the lives of “ordinary people.” My father liked weirdos, extreme characters, hotheads and oddball intellectuals.

**Speaking of Jewish identity - how strongly did your father feel it? Was he much in touch with the religious aspects, or was it more like a cultural background to him?**

In one sense, Jewish identity was very important to my father. In the list of authors above, most of them were Jewish. His family obviously and most of his friends were Jewish. He was very culturally Jewish in his interest in ideas, his ironic sense of humor, and for his often fiery argumentative style. In other words, he was known for having very strong and often difficult opinions and not always being delicate about voicing them. I suppose this characteristic is as much one of

anybody who is one generation removed from old world Europe as it is particularly Jewish (i.e. lots of second-generation immigrants – Italians, Irish people, Puerto Ricans – were known for being fiery New Yorkers). Anyway, he was very Jewish identified culturally.

On the other hand, he resented Jewish identity in some ways and tried to distance himself from it. As a child, when I went to New York with him, he would often make fun of the Orthodox Jews. For example, he found their observance of religious law absurd and embarrassing. The elevator in my grandmother's building had a separate elevator that was not controlled by buttons, so it would automatically stop on every floor on Saturdays. This was so the Orthodox Jews would not have to push any buttons on the Shabbat because it was seen as breaking ecclesiastical law. My father thought this was pointless and embarrassing. When my grandmother insisted on him participating in holiday rituals he would do so sarcastically. He resented what he saw as Orthodox Jewish alienation from mainstream society and he felt that it invited antisemitism. Not that he blamed Jews for antisemitism, more that he felt it was self-defeating and superstitious to follow rules and rituals that were bizarre to the rest of the world because it was like asking for trouble.

Even so, a lot of his writing is very affectionate and sympathetic even to Orthodox Jews, so really the only way to answer this overall question would be to say: he definitely had a strong sense of cultural Jewishness, but he thought much of the religious traditionalism of Orthodoxy was outdated and pointless.

**Later in his life, he moved to Italy and lived here for several years. Do you know what made him choose Italy? Did he feel at home here, in our "small-time cities" (his words, from "Cryptology") away from New York or California?**

In the late 90's, my father married a woman who was an American who had lived in Italy for many years. She was part of a partnership that owned several refurbished villas in Italy. They would build up houses from piles of stones and then rent them as vacation shares and share the equity. This woman's – her name is Katharine Michaels – job was to deal with all the insane bureaucracy and manage these property renovations. Her lifestyle was that she would travel back-and-forth between America and Italy a few times a year although she was in Italy the larger percentage of the time. My father ended up tagging along with her and when they were in America they would live at his house in Berkeley.

He loved everything about Italy. He loved the people, the food, the countryside, the arts and culture and the slower lifestyle. He felt very much at home in Italy and the last seven years of his life were his happiest. My father was a great lover of the arts, including the classical and baroque and Renaissance arts so of course the Italian museums and many historical sites were of great interest to him.