

Wash Your Hands

By Alain Elkann

He sat at his desk looking at the framed photographs before him: his father, his grandmother, his children, a friend, and his grandfather.

He'd been trapped in the house in London for a week as he was almost seventy, and they'd said that anyone over the age of seventy had to stay home.

He had photographs of his children. They had always been the most important thing to him.

The virus was quickly spreading throughout the world causing ever greater fear, like an oil slick expanding with no end in sight. How many people would die? How many people that he knew?

Would he die? Did he fear dying?

Not really because he knew the virus was spreading but he didn't know if he'd already been infected, if he was about to be, or what he would do if it happened.

He had many different emotions. Firstly, he was closed in the house as dictated by the law, because he was of a certain age. What's more, his daughter had said, "I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you." The virus was more dangerous for older people with weaker immune systems.

What was he doing at home? Waiting for the epidemic to end, waiting to fall ill? No. He was reading, making telephone calls, seeing very few people – the same few who would come see him, washing their hands as soon as they entered the house, using disinfectant gel though that was

beginning to be difficult to procure even if he had a chemist friend who would set some aside for him, though he feared his reserves would run out.

He had a lot of time to think. Think about what? Different issues but, most of all, he wondered if he'd done anything meaningful in his life. If he'd worked hard enough or if he'd been too afraid to say certain things or open himself up to risks that were too great. Writing is a dangerous profession because words remain. Had he wasted too many days of his life? Surrounded by his books and photos, he didn't know how to answer. He had just finished reading a novel by Michel Houellebecq, one of the most interesting writers of his generation not just because of how he talks about, in an exceptionally subjective way, society and the world he lives in, but because he is a philosopher, a prophet, a narcissist, a cynic, a romantic, and a pessimist aware of his intelligence and his success.

Anna was reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, only two pages every two days, because she had to respond to constant messages from Italy. She is dyslexic so she got confused with all of the names and nicknames. In Italy, some were worried while others pretended not to be. Schools and offices were closing, trade shows and conferences had been cancelled. Theatres had closed, as had cinemas and dance halls. Doctors gave vague answers. They said the virus wasn't serious, unlike previous ones, but there was no effective way to stop people from being infected and no vaccine. They suggested people wash their hands with antibacterial soap or disinfectant gel. They said that masks weren't necessary, except to protect others from being infected. In France, they were

suggesting wearing gloves so as to not touch doorknobs, taps, and railings. People were told not to touch their nose or mouth, and to certainly not rub their eyes. But these precautions were not necessarily useful because it wasn't clear how the virus was spread. This information was based on experience with previous epidemics.

Everyone was reacting in his or her own way. Anna was not worried, she hated worrying about anything remotely having to do with health.

It had all started in Wuhan, a city in the middle of China that most people had never heard of. In a matter of mere weeks, China had cut itself off from the world and had come to a halt. Travel was forbidden, people were ordered to work from home, and emergency hospitals were built in record time.

In the west, they began to say things like: "They eat disgusting foods, wild animals, and their hygiene conditions are scandalous." Business relationships stopped, the luxury-goods industry – which had been focused on Chinese consumers – saw sales come to a halt overnight and they closed their boutiques. Industrial factories began to have problems because it was hard to get spare parts, and so on.

How long would this illness last? As long as a flu or not even as long as a simple flu because it wasn't one, or was it? They announced the number of cases, and the number of deaths, on the news every day. They would say, "Only the elderly," but then it came out that younger people were dying too. They said "Only the elderly" because the elderly could not get care.

A few weeks before, Anna had gone to Rome to see the Valadier exhibition at the Villa Borghese museum with one of her nephews, who played the piano well and who got scared every time he saw an Asian person. After a few days, her nephew had gone on holiday to the mountains, but then that area became a “red zone” so when he returned to Rome he had to stay home for fourteen days in quarantine, though paradoxically his parents didn’t.

Anna was in London because her flight had been cancelled, so she was at home with him and bustled about the house, reading and responding to messages. Anna was receiving news that her assistant in Milano returned to work, with disinfectant, rubber gloves, and a mask, but then she gave up and no longer came, and that the concierge in her building found a reason to have someone replace him at work every day, but he was a notorious hypochondriac, and building residents had often enjoyed his tales of fears and phobias.

The economic situation in the world was precarious, and not just for China, because everything had stopped. Some of his friends who worked in tourism were worried because everything was at a standstill and planes and trains, hotels and restaurants were empty. What consequences would the ever expanding epidemic have, as it took over hospitals and means of communication?

The message continued to be: wash your hands or, in the UK, call 111 if you had a fever or cough.

He thought about how it was different during the war, when people would go down into bomb shelters. Bombings happened mostly at night and lasted for a limited amount of time, and sirens warned of the impending danger. Of course there was fear during the war, and many people died,

but this was different. The virus was a hidden danger without a schedule, that could hit anyone any time in any place, in a sneaky way. Nobody was truly safe from it until a vaccine was found.

Some people had started to console themselves by looking for common-sense explanations, such as: "We needn't worry. It is already mid-March and summer will be here soon." They said this because, typically, viruses die with heat, but it wasn't clear whether this coronavirus would die off with the heat. Anyway, summer was three months away and when it was summer in Europe or America or Asia, it would be winter in other countries, and viruses, much like swallows, migrate elsewhere. Then, when they have finally found a vaccine and this pandemic is over, a new virus can very well come along that we are not prepared for. This raises a big question. In what kind of world are we going to live? Are we going to change our habits and ways of being? Are we going to be more respectful of our planet?

As he sat at his desk, he thought that it was necessary to try to learn from everything that was happening, because afterwards, even if it wasn't clear what life would be like after, many things would change. One of his grandsons, aged 12, had said on the telephone, "Maybe people will pay more attention to personal hygiene."

At the end of the day, the lesson was: man thinks he is able to control the world, but he can't, because unexpected things always happen, which turn everything upside down. As Job rightfully said, "Man plans, God laughs." Not just in terms of storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and avalanches, but viruses as well. You can throw yourself into doing business exclusively with China,

but then if China becomes the source of a terrible disease that devastates the system it calls everything into question. There was nothing new in all of this, the famous ebbs and flows of history that the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico spoke about in the Age of Enlightenment. His friend Professor Claudio Rugafiori says that he doesn't believe at all in Giambattista Vico's ebbs and flows.

Looking at a photograph of his dear friend Aharon Appelfeld that sat on his desk, he thought about the fact that he'd died the year before in Tel Aviv. He could no longer call him and ask after his health or how things were going in Israel. Given that he had an Italian passport, he wouldn't have been able to go to Israel anyway, because Italians were no longer allowed to enter the country. Flights from Italy had been cancelled. He suddenly had great nostalgia for Jerusalem. When would he be able to return to teach in Jerusalem, to see his friends, to walk in the streets listening to the sound of bells, the voice of the muezzin calling to prayer, and Orthodox Jews going to the wall, pilgrims carrying the cross along the Via Dolorosa, Jerusalemites coming out of the mosques on Friday?

Anna wanted to return to Italy and go to the mountains to join her children. She dreamt about snow, mountains, her childhood, her youth, and when her children were little and things were all simpler. A collective existence, a positive time that seemed over now. Phone calls from Italy were ever more troubling. He and Anna would say little things to each other like, "Did you use the hand sanitizer?" or "Did you wash your hands?"

“Do you think that we need to wash our hands after touching the newspapers?”

“Maybe. They say you shouldn’t touch your face, your nose, and especially not scratch your eyes.”

“My eyes have never itched so much.”

“Are you agitated?”

Staying at home was bizarre, melancholy, and, at times, hyperactive, sometimes making one frenzied.

Dr. Purkit, an Ayurvedic practitioner, who was in India, had written to buy black pepper and cloves and steep them in hot water or tea. He also recommended a tea that he was personally bringing back from India upon his return.

A friend telephoned from New York to say that the virus was about to explode in America, and that would be a disaster. He was also worried about his own health.

“Why?”

“Because they found a tumour, which is not dangerous at my age. It can be kept under control without surgery. But I’m really upset that our trip to Israel for your birthday was cancelled because I was really looking forward to it.”

“Yes, me too. I was actually wondering when I would be able to return to Jerusalem.”

“Let’s hope soon.”

The Italian ambassador in Tel Aviv said, “The situation is a bit tense. In Israel, they are saying not to touch the mezuzah, not to shake hands, not to go to the cinema, to stay away from others and,

most of all, to wash your hands. There are many elderly people in Israel and many survivors of the concentration camps. It is a great responsibility. There aren't enough medical facilities and things aren't fully under control. There's a sense of agitation. Flights have stopped, hotels are empty. I don't know what will happen. I've just returned from Rome, and I have a week of quarantine here in the embassy. We had to repatriate 1,500 people in two days."

In Italy, the death rate was around three per cent. The number of cases was decreasing in China now, as they'd managed to contain it. In Italy, the curve was still going up, way up. The more widespread it became, the more difficult it was to treat. Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland, Austria and England also had a growing number of cases... He looked at the stock market indices, which seemed to be going crazy as they continuously went up and down without reason, like a seesaw or rollercoaster.

It was amazing to see how people accepted that the world was slowing down, coming to a stop, and even pollution was decreasing. The strange thing was that aside from washing one's hands and taking vitamins to boost the immune system, nobody knew what else to do. Doctors were not reassuring, and they seemed lost. Did we need to stay home or could we leave? But leave for where? Many people were wondering this. What should one do? Where to stay? Where to go? Suddenly, for different reasons, there were fears of going, fears of leaving, fears of losing work, fears of losing anything, fears of losing one's life.

He was unsettled. He couldn't write, and Anna was worried, reading, telephoning, and speaking to her daughter. Should they go to Italy? He didn't know what to do. He would have liked to have been an artist and to draw. Shortly before closing himself up in the house, he'd seen an exhibition of Picasso's drawings. The drawings he did as a young man were extraordinary – his lines, the movement of the body, the acrobats, the misery, the women, friends. If he knew how to draw, he would have drawn flowers, he would have copied photographs of his grandparents and details of portraits. Instead, to distract himself, he was playing chess on WhatsApp with a friend. He and Anna had begun to cook together. They mostly ate soups, chicken, avocado, and salads. A former boxer that worked for him kindly bought provisions for them, leaving them outside the door, but somehow the things he bought were never exactly what he'd asked for. Staying at home was enough to drive one mad.

A friend had said, "Go where it is warm. Don't go to the mountains. The virus dies with the heat. Here we are freezing, and it is two below zero at night. The restaurants are empty, the museums closed. The cinemas and theatres are closed. It has all stopped but perhaps something new will come out of all of that fear."

Anna continued to read but she was worried. They spoke of many things: gossip, life, memories, fears, friends, work, politics. He needed to continue washing his hands and talking on the telephone. What kind of solution could he find to such an unprecedented situation? This flu, which wasn't even necessarily deadly, had grown in such an exponential way, and the media had built it

up to be an absolute danger. The word “pandemic” began to be used by many. In England, for three years the media had only talked about Brexit. Brexit was the most used word that, in a certain sense, defined England, but, for a few days now, the word Brexit no longer seemed to exist. It was no longer spoken, and all you heard was “corona virus” and “wash your hands”. Television programmes attempted to explain and help understand this virus that many people knew little about, and they demonstrated the proper way to wash one’s hands with soap and water. They showed images of people all over the world wearing masks, but it was difficult to find them, and there was a doubt if they were necessary.

Queen Elizabeth was criticized for wearing gloves during an investiture ceremony where she received a new ambassador. If the Queen wore gloves, it meant the danger was real. The day after, she was seen at another ceremony without gloves, and other members of the royal family were also seen out shaking hands and smiling, even taking buses. There was an invisible war to be fought, but some effects were devastating. His sister-in-law, who had a furniture and fabric store in Milan, no longer had any customers. Her clients from all over the world had cancelled their orders. Every evening, the television news, the newspapers, and news agencies would announce the number of new cases and number of dead. While the United States was about to be hit or had already been hit, China claimed that the number of cases there was going down, that there were fewer infected. Could it be true? Dictatorships in situations like these are not obliged to tell what is really happening and can enforce whatever measures they want.

Cases began increasing exponentially all over the world, more than 100,000. Italy was in a panic, and that fear slowly began to spread. He was more fearful than usual. He wanted to write, but he was busy changing plans, following the ups and downs of the stock market, and reading Houellebecq sporadically, which alternately entertained and bored him. He also took time to speak with his friend Paolo, an artist who was doing well in Athens. He painted all day and was involved in a romantic relationship that was both real and imaginary but that was moving forward. It was like a slow courtship over many years, with ups and downs. It was as if they didn't have the courage to change things, and they took turns pursuing one another. Now she was working in the hospital. She was a doctor and it was almost impossible for them to see each other. But perhaps they liked things to be difficult and slowly drawn out. In the meantime, he worked on his paintings, listened to the radio, spoke on the telephone, sent emails, looked at Instagram, and watched Netflix.

In the meantime, they had closed, isolated, Lombardy and a large swath of northern Italy. Anna suffered from the fact that her children were far away. She spoke with them by phone every day. Her daughter was in Milan, where cases were increasing by the minute. In Lombardy and there were a growing number of deaths. People were continuously saying that the hospital system was on the verge of collapse. The word "collapse" was heard again and again. Everywhere, in Europe and the United States, there was a growing sense of unease, diffidence, uncertainty, fear, fear of falling ill and not being able to get care, fear of the economic disaster that was exploding

throughout the world, fear of a situation that doctors did not know how to control or predict, putting people in quarantine. People were distrustful of others. You couldn't touch or kiss, as nobody was sure who had the virus.

Professor Claudio Rugafiori, who had been holed up in his library in Varallo Pombia for years, was worried most of all about the financial disaster and, especially, about the failure of democracies. He mentioned Putin, Erdogan, and Trump, today's strong men. He also mentioned that a journalist friend had told him on the phone, "We need a dictatorship here." Alarming words. It was dramatic to read that seventy per cent of the Italian population could be infected and that nobody knew when the "peak" would come. They began to be more fearful of a horrible, unfair death, with no care and no real treatment. "You need to stay where you are, at home," said the newspapers and politicians. And this is what he and Anna did.

Carlos was still coming to clean the house once a week. "Is he dangerous?" he wondered with Anna. "If he takes the underground and goes all around, is he dangerous?" There was a young man in Italy that they'd seen two weeks before that, for three days, had had a cough, sore throat, and a slight fever. He'd gone to see his doctor who had told him to stay home five days to see if symptoms persisted. Tests were in short supply.

It was said that, in Italy, priority was being given to those under the age of sixty when it came to getting hospital care, so all of those over the age of sixty were in danger. It was truly a horrible time for him. He began to feel targeted. It was strange how things could change so unexpectedly.

Up until a few weeks before, given that he was about to turn seventy, he began to fear Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, cancer, a heart attack or diabetes. While these were all serious diseases, they were well-known and there were modern treatment options available that kept the mortality rate low. But this corona virus was new, indefinable, insidious, unknown, and who knew when there would be a vaccine.

How much time would they have to stay trapped at home? The more time he spent at home, the lazier he felt and the less he wanted to go out. He could see the street from the window. It was cold and rainy. They said the virus would be weaker in summer, but would that hold true? A travel agent said, "For now, the safest destination is South America. However, there are two cases in Brazil and the summer is about to come to an end."

One day, Anna sobbed desperately.

"What happened?"

"My dog died. It was a golden retriever."

An aunt had called to tell her that the dog was old and ill and they'd had to put it down. Poor dog! Anna had so many memories come to mind. He and Anna lived like sick people, hoping not to get sick. They read, watched Netflix, watched the news, answered messages. It was a life concentrated in a few rooms. The stock markets continued to fall day after day. They wondered what would happen. A Swiss friend had recommended stocking up on whole-wheat pasta because supplies were running low. In England, people were stocking up on toilet paper. An audio message, an

appeal, was sent from Bergamo: “We are on the verge of collapse. We work fifteen hours a day without breaks. Many of us are getting sick. There are no more hospital beds. Make sure your kids don’t get injured. If you have to go to A&E, you may contract the corona virus.”

In the afternoon, Anna had prayed with the rosary over the phone with her siblings. Those who had faith were truly lucky and could hope their prayers would be answered. One son called from Portugal, another from Madrid, and they all shared news in order to feel closer. They all said to stay home and be careful.

For now, Italy was the hardest hit country, but other countries, one after the other, began to take precautions and see the number of cases rising. It was as if people were sleepwalking, in a state of oblivion. It was war, a terrible viral war without soldiers, the enemy threatening them without weapons, invisible and unpredictable. The only real soldiers at war were nurses, doctors, firemen, ambulance crews, policemen and priests of all denominations. One minute, someone was a doctor treating patients and, a few hours later, he was a patient himself. A doctor said, “I spent my life with sick people. It was a choice. Though I’m retired, I’ve decided to return to the hospital because even if corona virus is going round, there are also people dying of heart attacks.”

Incredibly, people were strolling around London, and some still eating out in restaurants. The fact that everything seemed normal, when everything they were reading in the newspapers was not, made for a surreal atmosphere.

10 – 16 March 2020

As time goes by, the number of cases is multiplying all throughout England. The Health Minister tested positive for the coronavirus. The entire government, many members of parliament, and even the queen could have been infected. Spain has closed schools and stopped flights to Italy. The images of Rome, Turin, Florence, and Venice are shocking! Even funerals have been banned. He'd read a long article in *La Stampa* that discussed the differences in how Giono had described cholera in *The Horseman on the Roof* and how Camus had described the plague in *The Plague*.

His brother Nicolàs was in Paris along with his nephew Pier, and for the moment, they were going about their everyday lives almost normally, just like in London. The previous evening in the kitchen, he and Anna had discussed what would happen. German chancellor Angela Merkel said that ninety per cent of Germans would get the illness. British doctors said that ninety per cent of the population would get the illness. In the meantime, Trump, who could potentially have coronavirus himself, denied the seriousness of the situation. He encouraged people to stay calm and was looking for economic solutions and incentives to ease their worries.

China was now being used as the model to follow to contain the pandemic. The Chinese were now "head of the class". There was much discontentment in the air, much criticism of politicians, and a lot of nonsense going around. But the preventative methods were always the same: "wash your hands" and "isolate yourself". With Anna, he discussed how time, the notion of time, had changed. There was no longer any type of schedule to their days. And spring was on its way, the

days were getting longer. Anna was constantly on the telephone with her relatives, parents, and friends. She was anxious, worried, and began to take precautions. He tried to read Houellebecq, but he didn't have much desire. He knew they were entering into war and didn't know how to fight it. He knew that, at his age, he was more vulnerable, that he wouldn't be treated and would die. He couldn't imagine sudden, unexpected death, and he didn't know what to think about what would happen when this epidemic was over. How would they rebuild? He wrote books, typically stories of people, love, torment, and historic moments. He'd always liked unconventional characters, like fascists with no remorse; people who'd been punished by history; women with complex lives; or an entire lost generation that got into drugs while believing in certain ideals, but then their lives took a different direction. His books were always interwoven with eroticism, sex. There was no love, but it was love. The heat of two bodies, flesh seeking flesh, desire for each other, wanting each other. Glances.

They shared the information they'd read, what they'd heard on the telephone. "Collapse", "pandemic", and "wash your hands", were the most used words, beyond "coronavirus" of course. Countries were closing down one after the other, with new restrictions and announcements. Everyone was worried about his own affairs.

He thought about when he'd lived in New York City many years before. He'd lived in a small apartment on 77th Street and 2nd Avenue while he was working on the novel *Rotocalco* as well as correcting the proofs for *Life of Moravia*. At that time, all they talked about on TV were two things:

Hurricane Hugo threatening the Florida coastline, and the fall of the Berlin wall, which impacted Prague, Budapest, and the other capitals that were part of the Soviet empire. The Soviet Union was crumbling, as was communism, and it was all happening so unimaginably fast and with no opposition. It was like Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony*, written in 1913 and published in 1919. At the end, the machine built for torture falls apart; this awful yet meticulous machine is destroyed in minutes, the same way a dictatorship ends, or how a pandemic ends.

Anna had said: "Do you think these situations make relationships stronger or tear them apart?"

"Are you afraid our love will end?"

"No."

What had changed was the way he lived. It wasn't so much that he had to stay home, but it emphasized the fact that he did not know what fate had in store for him. In everyday life, you know you can die or have an accident at any moment, but you don't think about it. Now, all means of information and every phone call were a reminder that you were in danger, that you could be struck down and there was no cure.

The death toll was rising around the world, especially in Italy. Anna's siblings were worried about themselves and about their elderly parents who were in Rome, quarantined in their apartment. Italy's Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, had given a speech that was broadcast simultaneously on all television networks, which of course was necessary, thanking Italians for complying with the

rules and having changed their lifestyles so drastically. Conte also announced that all shops, bars, and restaurants would close.

He was worried because he'd heard that in the United States they were forecasting that up to 150 million would get the coronavirus. If that number was accurate, it was truly frightening. This had, after all, been declared a pandemic, meaning an epidemic that had spread across the world without limits or borders, and nobody knew how to combat it. He was scared to die like this, and was not prepared for it. Nobody was prepared, but some perhaps were more so than others. Anna showed him a video of Bill Gates giving a talk four years before, in which he'd predicted exactly what was happening in that moment. Countries were closing down, one after the other, indefinitely.

They said that it all might end in summer, with the heat, but nobody was sure. There were not enough beds or ventilators in intensive care, not enough hospital personnel, even in the United States where, actually, they were perhaps less prepared than in other places. Anna heard that they had found a cure in Naples, but it wasn't very believable information. He phoned a friend to find out if it was true that a mutual friend had tested positive. His friend got angry, saying he didn't want to talk about these things, he was tired of it all, and that if there weren't enough ventilators or equipment in Italy, it was the fault of the rich for not paying taxes. It was annoying to hear him say something like that, given that his friend lived like a rich man thanks to the rich. At the table, he told Anna, "I hate people who act like bullies or braggarts in these situations. This is a

serious matter!” Anna agreed. She was worried for her children who were scattered all over. Of course, thanks to WhatsApp and other technologies, they could still see each other from afar.

In the evenings, they listened to Minister Conte speak, and to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, France’s President Emmanuel Macron, and U.S. President Donald Trump. Stock markets all over the world were in free fall, with numbers that were at historic lows, and the phone rang or beeped with messages constantly. Anna was increasingly uneasy. In England, where they were, people were saying that the coronavirus would be fought with “tears and blood.” Johnson was trying to channel Churchill, but this was a war without existent enemies. He was saying that the weak would die, adding that those over the age of seventy should stay home for months on end.

He began to feel very uneasy, and, on the phone, his daughter said she was worried that he was staying in England. Italians who could leave were escaping from London on the one Alitalia flight that travelled to Rome daily. There were waiting lists, and infinite queues. Europe and the United States seemed to understand, and were taking drastic measures like closing borders, airports, schools, public places, offices, factories, and train stations. “Stay home and wash your hands.” Even the medicines they said were unnecessary were flying off the shelves and hard to find. The virus had to be contained.

Presidents and dictators were constantly holding press conferences, and the central banks were lowering taxes and providing capital injections. The stock markets were indifferent, and continued to crash like never before. Supermarket shelves had been ransacked. Politicians kept talking, and

the more they said, or the way they phrased things, created further panic. “The pandemic will last until July or August,” said Trump, who had done an about-face in the course of a week, going from saying the virus was nothing serious and that America was untouchable to declaring a national emergency, a sort of state of siege or war, with restrictions.

The television showed empty cities, terrified people, and continued reporting the numbers like in a football match or election. But here they were talking about the infected, the dead, and the recovered. Newspapers and the nightly news covered only the coronavirus, as if it were the plague. No other illness, or the birth of any child, got coverage, because it wasn’t newsworthy; not even fires, murders or robberies were reported on. Human beings were running around like crazed ants, unprepared, shocked, and terrified of this global situation. Even politicians were saying, “Nothing will ever be the same.” All kinds of predictions were being made, and people were planning how to live in lockdown.

Anna said: “Now we need to take action, make plans to go to Italy, to go to the countryside.” He had decided to leave. They had packed their suitcases like refugees, with just a few clothing items, disinfectant, soap, rubber gloves, masks, pasta, rice, parmesan, milk, yogurt, books, reams of paper, notebooks, and vitamins. They scurried to get the last plane. Before leaving, he looked around at his home and his books, and he was almost scared to leave. But once they’d decided, there was no turning back. Who knew how long they would be holed up in the countryside? They had to go into quarantine, stay home, and not see anyone – even their children, who would be

nearby. The shops were still open in London, as well as the restaurants, pubs, newsstands, florists, and the underground. Had they contracted the virus? He didn't know, but they were returning home and would go into quarantine.

17 March 2020, in the countryside

They were in a home they had previously rented during their summer holidays, when they would go to the seaside and visit with friends and relatives. Go out for lunch in local restaurants or plan dinner in each other's homes.

They had landed in Pisa and drove for two hours without stopping because they were cold. The motorway was deserted as was the Via Aurelia, aside from a few trucks. The weather was really nice, and Anna was happy and more at peace to be back in Italy. She had called her elderly parents, and she was finally more relaxed. The house was warm, the fireplace was going, and the television worked. They unpacked their bags and put provisions and disinfectants in the kitchen, and rubber gloves and masks near the entrance. How long would they be there alone without seeing anyone? They didn't know.

What had the French president said on television? That they would need to get used to a different type of life but to not give in to fear, to spend their time reading, working from home, and calling loved ones on the phone. In the meantime, he kept taking his temperature (Anna didn't because she hated anything having to do with illness and medicine) to see if he had a fever, letting out a sigh of relief each time he didn't. They went to bed very tired and a bit agitated that evening, but they woke up to sun the next day. He wanted to stay in bed and read Camus' *The Plague*. Anna was on the phone. She was a bit fearful and sad to still be away from her children. They drank coffee, ate a fortifying porridge, cleaned the floors, and made a few telephone calls. They later

went out for a walk toward the beach. There was nobody around. At one point, he thought he saw someone in the distance walking toward them on the beach, and he told Anna, “You can’t be alone anywhere!” Anna laughed and said, “But we are at least a kilometre away!” He saw people coming closer so he went behind a dune and then returned home. What was the quiet life in the countryside all about? They needed to get used to it, used to living in a world that had stopped and where all of the rules had changed. Life, as Macron had said, “At war.” A war that you couldn’t see, without weapons, ships, airplanes, canons, or tanks. Like all wars, nobody had any idea how and when it would end.

The nature in the countryside, the blue of spring, the fresh air that came off the water, it changed everything. Suddenly, the city seemed like a stressful, claustrophobic place. The editor of his newspaper told him on the phone that the big risk in Italy was that the pandemic would spread to the south where the health-care system was lacking, while the north was working to get the pandemic under control. There was a factory in Bologna that had begun mass producing ventilators. There weren’t enough masks, which were made in India and China, to go around.

His son-in-law called and said the lines at the chemist were long and exhausting. His grandchildren were studying at home, playing, and going for walks. A friend of Anna’s, a charming gentleman who always spoke his mind, called to say they’d made the wrong investments. He said he’d bought a painting, a portrait, and he sent them a photo of it. Anna spoke with her family a lot, talked to friends, and took work calls. Everyone everywhere was worried, and they would list all of the

people they knew who were ill, people who were dying or dead. He read *The Plague*, and it was as if he was experiencing feelings and sensations that were coming true in real life. After all, pandemics all had common roots. The newspaper editor had said that the “Spanish flu” seemed to be defeated at one point, but then it came back, killing more people during the second wave. It would take a year for a vaccine. Many people of means had made large donations to the hospitals, medical staff, and to initiatives focused on prevention.

The sky was a clear blue, and the swallows hadn’t yet made their return. What was on his mind? He thought about how to get through each day, how to keep to the rules and stay disciplined. Everyone said, “You are there, relaxed. You can write,” but he didn’t know what to write about. He was not a philosopher, and he didn’t know how to write a novel. How could he write about the fear of death? How could you describe what the world would be like after the pandemic? That was a theme fit for Houellebecq, and perhaps he was already writing about it. No longer about Muslim France, which is something he’d taken on in the past, but now about France after the coronavirus. His friend Robert who lived in Southampton told him, “The world will never be the same.” So what would it be like? Perhaps Houellebecq was already writing about it. It was strange how everyone had the same sense of fear. Those who lived five to a room were obviously not feeling good about the situation, the poor souls. Those trapped at home for months were going to lose their minds. How did they do it during the war? It was different because they knew who the enemy was. For

the moment, we were becoming both friend and foe of the invisible enemy. The “battle” among nations was perhaps over who would find the vaccine first.

We had all set off on a different kind of great journey. It was like the great deluge, Noah’s Ark. The world had transformed into a sort of humanoid ruining our youth; drugs, alcohol, and start-ups had intoxicated a generation of young people in jeans and t-shirts without rules, boundaries, jumping from network to network and plane to plane all over the world. Restless, disenfranchised youth, unemployed, and worried about the future, obsessed with the Internet, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Italy talked about the “Italian approach” to combatting the virus that was said to be copied the world over. China boasted that it had almost defeated this virus that had spread across the globe. What would happen when things were better in Europe but Africa was hit with Covid 19? Today, everyone was to wash their hands. Though would there still be any soap or gel disinfectant left and what about the masks made in China and India? He wasn’t used to queuing up to buy medicines or basic provisions. The pope prayed to God to stop the epidemic, but he thought about Cardinal Federico in *The Betrothed*. What kind of novel could he write? All stories were “in limbo.” Houellebecq would be able to call his new novel something like *Afterward, Submission, or Apnea*.

As the days went on, nobody knew what fate had in store. The television, the stock market, the newspapers spoke to what was happening. So what was he thinking? Of course, he and Anna were living a privileged existence, but it was a prison-like world, a luxurious one in their case. They

needed to keep busy, have a schedule, mop the floors, wash their hands, wash and disinfect everything, remember to put on gloves and a mask when going out, take their temperatures. One false move, one moment of weakness could be fatal, with that awful virus that was like a threatening presence in a Kafka novel. It was not the plague, was not like a plague, but it was a sort of plague with another name.

18 March 2020

He watched television, and the news from all over the world was horrifying. The virus was growing, expanding. They were terrified in the United States, the cities were empty. Johnson was finally forced to close schools in England. The British pound plummeted to 1985 levels. The pope prayed in Rome; politicians talked nonstop. In TV, Angela Merkel said that this was the most serious crisis since the end of World War II. It was like they had entered into a sort of apocalypse, a world that was real but that seemed like science fiction.

He watched the television and felt lost. He couldn't see his daughter and grandchildren who were just a few kilometres away. He wondered what it meant when people said everything would be different after this. What would happen to him, his children, and Anna's children? They had all sought refuge in different places and they were being as careful as possible, but what would happen afterward? Would any of them get sick? What would happen if everything stopped for months? He looked out at the fields and the dunes; on the other side of the dunes was the sea, as nature stood still in its cyclical movement. The sun and moon would stay the same as would the stars and trees. Would there be enough food, would the lights go out? There was talk all over about setting up hospitals, transforming hotels into hospitals. Who would have thought the world would be turned upside down like this, that the borders would be closed, that they would all be seized by fear. Some people were saying, "It will be better after. It will be like a resurrection." That was fine, but neither he nor anybody in his generation had ever lived through a situation where

thousands upon thousands fell ill every day and hundreds upon hundreds died. All anyone talked about was this crisis, this illness that was changing the lives of everyone. What about science? What about God?

It was spring, and the countryside was incredibly quiet. They got used to the emptiness and the silence of those days. Nature could finally breathe. There were no cars, trains, or airplanes polluting the air. Silence didn't mean tranquillity. Nobody could truly relax because they didn't know when the world would start back up again. Italy reacted, tried to react. A Swiss friend called and said, "People aren't staying home. It's sunny, and they all want to go out." He had an idea for a book called *A Life on Hold*. But how could he write it?

Alberto Moravia always said, "The secret of life is immobility," but now that everything was at a standstill, what would happen? He was in touch with so many people. They sent messages, tried to encourage one another and make sure everyone was well. There were comparisons to the crisis of 1929, but how would they overcome this?

19 March 2020

It was his daughter-in-law's birthday. She was far away, in a house by the sea with the children and one of his sons. They should have been celebrating. Instead, they were all worried. Another one of his sons was trying to buy masks in China to bring to Italy. His birthday drew near. He would be turning seventy, the fateful age when he would officially be considered old and, therefore, at risk. Turning seventy was a time to think about what he had done in his life and what he would still like to do. He would like to make the most of this "break from normal life" to write something that would remain. But what could a writer write about? To tell a story about the pandemic, he needed to detach himself from it and talk about something else. Linger on a single detail. If he were a painter, he would have done something like Matisse, who painted goldfish in a pond during the war, or like Morandi who painted bottles and vases. He sat in the garden in the sun facing a plant, a large plant. If he were a painter, he would have obsessively painted that plant. Like Monet who painted water lilies or Cézanne who painted the same mountain, Saint Victoire. Repeating the same image. Damian Hirst was to inaugurate an exhibition featuring cherry blossoms, with painting after painting of cherry blossoms. They were now in bloom and nobody was talking about it. The year before, he and Anna had gone to Kyoto, Japan, when the cherry blossoms were in all of their glory. Such a thing of beauty! Now there was silence, complete silence, the kind Cardinal Martini had referenced many times. The silence of Milan's cathedral. Silence was like a prayer for everyone, an undeclared prayer, unspoken, a prayer inside of us.

20 March 2020

Anna spoke to her children on the phone. She was worried about her parents who were holed up at home and were not well. They spoke with various physician friends who were all isolated and concerned. Italy was the country with the most deaths. His brother had taken refuge with his son in their family home in the countryside. They would see each other in the garden while staying a few metres apart. He received phone calls and tried to follow what was going on in the world. Each of his children was in their own shelter. His son in Portugal told him that a palm reader recommended he take care of himself and stay home. That warning scared him. He knew he was at risk. He was scared because he feared he'd end up in the hospital, be unable to get a ventilator, and would die of asphyxiation. His daughter was only a few kilometres away in another house. She was taking care of her children, making sure they studied, and doing housework. Another possible title for the book was *The Wait*, meaning waiting for the end of the epidemic, waiting to get back to normal, free life, or waiting to know if they would fall ill, if they would die.

He had spoken with Sandro Veronesi, a writer friend of his, and they decided to do an interview discussing how they were spending their time. He wondered if Sandro Veronesi was taking notes or if he would write a book after the coronavirus. It was likely that nobody would want to read a book on the epidemic once it was over. Jewish writers who had returned from the concentration camps and written about their experiences and survival, such as Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi, had to wait at least fifteen years to be published and read. After the war, people didn't want to hear

about it because they were too traumatized by what they'd endured. Perhaps, when survivors talked amongst themselves, they would be like the Lebanese, saying things like *avant les événements* (before the events) or *après les événements* (after the events).

He had spoken with a friend in Naples who told him that it was deserted in his neighbourhood. Of course, he didn't know what was happening in the Spanish quarter. He dared not ask him what the Camorra did in these types of situations. Considering everything else was at a standstill, maybe the drug trade was too. Did criminals take a break or did they take advantage of the situation? All of these phone calls reminded him of August holidays: "Where are you? How are you all? What are you doing?" A friend of theirs in Naples was trying to continue with her work. Anna was more relaxed. In Italy, she felt closer to her family even if she couldn't see anyone or go visit her parents. What did he and Anna talk about? They talked about odds and ends and the widest range of things. They told each other about the telephone calls they'd received during the day, they read text messages out loud, and they shared passages from books. They didn't talk much about the virus or about future plans. Would they be able to go to Greece in the summer or not? Would the virus still be around in August? How would people react? After the pandemic, would everyone try to work as much as possible to make up for lost time? Or would they leave on holiday as usual in order to decompress after the mandatory quarantine?

21 March 2020

It was the first day of spring. A silent, horrible spring. He had spoken with Sandro Veronesi who said that the real virus was man and that corona was the antibodies. In other words, man, who believed himself untouchable, was being put in his place by nature. Veronesi didn't have a fever, but he believed that those who did would deal with this period better. He was tired, fearful of getting sick. Anna was on the phone with her family. Her parents had been unwell for many days now. Fortunately, an aunt had found a doctor to come to the house. At this point, doctors were not visiting patients because they were potential vectors of the virus or feared catching it themselves. Two municipal police officers had stopped by in the morning to take pictures of their ID cards and ask them about their comings and goings. Going to the beach was forbidden. Walking the streets was forbidden. Everything was forbidden but not everyone was respecting the restrictions, and it seemed like many people near Monte Argentario were going to the beach. He called Elisabetta Sgarbi and they talked about creating a blog where writers could share their views, but he wasn't sure how to set it up.

22 March 2020

They had been in a state of turmoil since the night before. Anna's parents were increasingly unwell. There were constant phone calls among the siblings, doctors, relatives, and an aunt who knew many doctors and was doing everything she could to see if she could get them tested at home or find out if they could be admitted to hospital, but there were differing opinions. Emergency rooms were dangerous places. Anna's older brother had swiftly taken on the caretaker role and was constantly taking his parents' temperatures and monitoring their blood oxygen levels, to then report back to the family. Late that night, they finally decided to keep them at home, but early the next morning, as her parents' conditions worsened, 999 was called, and an ambulance came to take them to the hospital. After a long wait in the emergency room, they were finally put in a room together.

Nobody in the family could go with them out of the fear that they'd be infected too, and Anna was frantic at the thought of being far away from them, unable to hold their hands, unable to even see them. She was always on the phone, getting updates and sharing them, reassuring her children, consulting with her siblings, and speaking with her parents' closest friends. There was an outpouring of support. You could see how beloved her parents were and how many people were worried about this couple that was now in the hands of doctors and the hospital. They were waiting for news and would jump with a start at every ring of the telephone. Anna was overcome

with profound sadness because she couldn't be with them, so far away at such an awful time. The following morning they found out they had coronavirus and pneumonia.

23 March 2020

It was his birthday, and he was turning seventy. People were writing to him from all over the world. He was sad to have to celebrate a much anticipated, symbolic birthday like this; seven had always been his favourite number.

It was a sad day because Anna's parents were in hospital with coronavirus and pneumonia, and she was distressed to think about them there alone, while she was unable to go see them. She feared her parents would die without her, without seeing them, without holding their hands and looking into their eyes. Anna spoke on the phone to friends, her siblings, and doctors. Yet it was a crazy day. There were strong *tramontana* winds from the north, and the day was filled with well wishes for his 70th birthday via text messages and phone calls, while they were also getting constant contradictory fragments of information about Anna's parents.

They were bombarded with phone calls, emails, and messages. He was exhausted. That birthday far from his children and grandchildren wore him out. All he could do was be thankful and hope to stay healthy. They were saying that there was a cocktail of two medicines that worked if they were taken immediately as soon as the first symptoms appeared, but in France and Italy the medicines were different. This coronavirus was a nightmare! Friends called from the United States where the situation continued to get worse and the security measures taken couldn't stem the panic. It was as if people were both near and far in those days, days that passed as they wondered when this

would all be over. Anna was anxious and felt helpless as she hoped her parents wouldn't die. But she was also preparing for the worst.

The news reported on the death of a writer, Alberto Arbasino, who was famous for his book *Fratelli d'Italia*. He had also written a wonderful book called *Un Paese Senza*. The death of a writer was the death of a free, independent voice.

24 March 2020

It was a long difficult night. Anna had barely slept. She was so incredibly worried about her parents. Things were not improving and the strong *tramontana* winds from the north continued to blow. They spoke on the telephone, they read messages and continued to wait. A friend had written to ask him why he didn't write a book with Renzo Piano. He was tired, experiencing the progression of this illness through Anna's moods and telephone calls. He thought about her parents, how this elderly couple was quite lucky even in such an extreme situation because they were together in the hospital. Their children faced many difficult questions. Would they live? Would they die? Were they prepared? Had they done something wrong? Was there more they could have done? He saw how their grandchildren, Anna's children, were so involved as well. They cried and talked of their suffering. They wanted updates and reassurance.

He had a front-row seat to the death of this very religious Italian family, so full of love, hope, and compassion. He was convinced that the true values in life were health, love, and family – including dear friends – and trying to do everything one could without indolence or fear, without holding back and with no expectations of gratitude.

25 March 2020

Anna tried to call her father who was in the intensive-care unit, possibly dying. She wanted to talk to him one last time, but he never answered. She'd say, "What an absurd, surreal situation, being in quarantine and unable to spend those last moments with him." She thought about how dreadful epidemics were, dying without a funeral, dying as just another sick person, becoming a number among many numbers. He stayed by her side, quiet, and passive. He tried to support her and listen. The coronavirus was something truly awful, something fatal. Even the Prince of Wales had the coronavirus. It was evil and spared nobody. The doctors said, "This is an illness we've only dealt with for fifteen days, and we don't know quite yet how to treat it." The absurd thing was that people were griping about politics, about how the situation was being handled. Anna was truly suffering, unprepared for a situation like this, with her father dying, her mother gravely ill, and her children far away. "Anyone's first instinct would be to be there," she said. But there was the pandemic, and they weren't allowed to leave the house. It was as if they were on another planet, living another life. Nature, the plants, and the blowing wind were the only things that hadn't changed.

During those surreal days Antonio Ricci, the owner of a wonderful garden in Liguria, called and said, "Shall we do something? They say that they've partially closed the public gardens, and that's for the best, but who is taking care of them? Who is watering and pruning the plants? What happened to all of the gardeners?" Worrying about nature was also a must!

Anna was deep in thought, lost in memories. She was devastated. "Waiting for your father to die is a terrible feeling." A girlfriend called and she told her, "Being here without knowing what to do at a time like this is absurd." Waiting for death from afar. Every day was different. He was not in the mood for anything. He stood at the window and watched the trees sway in the wind. He tried to read Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* but couldn't concentrate. He'd read a piece by Grossmann in *Liberation*, but it didn't tell him anything he didn't already know.

27 March 2020

The weather was terrible, cold and windy. It was strange to see the same views, the same plants day after day. He was feeling lazy. He wasn't reading much, and he watched little television because the talk shows, with each person giving his or her opinion, became unbearable. All he could do was read some of Camus' *The Plague*, wash his hands, and eat lemons. But he couldn't really read or write, and his mind was a blank. He spoke with relatives and friends. They were all saying the same things in the United States, France, England, and Spain. They spent a lot of time watching a television series about the Tudors to distract themselves. The worst times of day for him were waking in the morning, and as evening approached. Everyone said this was a good time to write, but that wasn't true. What would he write about? The difficulties, the fears, the doctors dying because they didn't have masks and proper equipment? The cities were empty, deserted, dreadful. Everything was at a standstill. His children had got busy, trying to help, resolve problems, and be responsible. Many people were thinking about what would happen afterward. Many were terrified of the economic consequences, of losing their jobs and not finding new ones.

In Italy, people were saying that Mario Draghi was the right man, the man of providence, the only person able to govern and take on the country's serious economic problems. A journalist friend, a political expert, had told him, "Yes, Draghi, but it will take time. There's too much jealousy, and it won't be easy to dethrone Conte." It was hard to make sense of politics. Many people were worried that the pandemic would threaten democracy. Especially in Italy. A large majority felt that

the parliament was an obstacle to government. There were so many things being said, so many things in the air. People said life would be different, but it wasn't clear how. What about science and technology? Would laws be turned upside down? What would the new rules be? In the meantime, they kept on, day after day, waiting. They waited for news about Anna's parents, waited to see if they would fall ill themselves, and waited for the nightmare to be over. For him, not having his freedom was suffocating. Having to stay in one place, not being able to get in the car or even go see his daughter. There was silence all around except for the wind, which hadn't yet let up. The sky was grey, and it was cold. Should he write a book? He didn't know what to say. The spark had gone out in his imagination, and any story that came to mind seemed pointless.

28 March 2020

The days were repetitive. His nephew Edouard was unwell in Switzerland, but they said it wasn't the coronavirus. The family was a united front. Small everyday things. Two of his grandchildren had lice, and they'd had to cut their hair. He wasn't reading much. Pope Francis gave a very moving blessing in St. Peter's Square. The televised images of him alone walking in the rain made for a dramatic spectacle. He had a long conversation with a former justice minister. They'd talked about how Mario Draghi could be a potential prime minister heading up a technical government, but it was too early to discuss it, and President Mattarella didn't seem ready.

The pandemic continued to spread like wildfire. A doctor friend of his in New York said that he feared the city would collapse. Anna was ever anxious but still very busy. She was so good with her family, especially with her mother, whom she could call in the hospital.

29 March 2020

They had received a call from Fabio, the doctor, and then went for a walk. They walked all the way to the sea but without going on the beach, which was off limits, deserted. It was an unsettling sight. As usual, there were no sounds, no people. He asked her if she was prepared for the potential death of her father, and she said she was, but she added that she wasn't sure how she would react.

Friends from the United States called. Everyone feared poverty, losing jobs, losing everything. There continued to be new cases daily in Italy with an average of 700 deaths per day. He had never lived through anything like this. They were getting information on how to avoid the virus, how to use masks, which masks to buy. Images of deserted cities flashed across the television. That image of the pope alone in a rainy Saint Peter's Square in the dark was truly striking.

His nephew was ill, and the boy's parents were incredibly worried. His daughter called him in the evening, told him about the day, what they'd done, what they'd eaten, and what they were going to eat. They were about to make pizza for dinner.

Daylight savings time had returned, and the days would get longer. He spoke with a friend who worked as an art dealer in London. He told him that the images of those empty squares reminded him of De Chirico's squares. The metaphysical, the surreal had become reality. An Italian doctor friend who lived in New York and worked in the hospital there had told him, "There haven't been any medical advances since the times of Manzoni's plague, the one he wrote about in *The*

Betrothed.” So he told his art merchant friend in London, “You should put images of the Lombard paintings of the seventeenth century, the era of the plague, on your website.” What was the writer’s role? To write and write the way De Chirico painted? To let his imagination sweep him away, to tell stories? He wasn’t able. An Irish friend called from the countryside and said that he was only able to do practical things like organize the house, clean, and work in the garden, but he was unable to read or paint. He played the piano a bit, but he really wasn’t in the mood. Meanwhile, he had begun to think that the pope’s blessing in Saint Peter’s Square was perhaps just a big stunt, for show, and what they should have done was put a large medical tent there where the nuns could tend to the sick. They needed medical care now not prayers. At least that was his opinion, the only critical voice he’d heard in the crowd.

30 March 2020

Monday. The beginning of the week, the reopening of the financial markets. The emails and phone calls increased. The weather was lovely. He had heard that the sun, as a source of vitamin D, helped combat the coronavirus.

David, an English friend who worked with him, kept him abreast of the news in London. Their car had not moved from the car park for fourteen days. One of Anna's aunts who lived nearby brought them a case of wine and an Easter egg. Paolo, who was in Switzerland working on his paintings, said that a blind friend of his in Athens had the virus. He was very sad on the phone. His nephew, who was also in Switzerland, was not well. He still had a fever, and this worried him quite a bit. Switzerland had proportionally more cases than Italy. His brother, who had taken refuge with his family in their shared country home, said that he was starting to do research and think about how they would deal with what came afterward.

1 April 2020

Paolo called and said: “Do you remember when you called me forty-four years ago to tell me that a baby was about to be born?” It was Jaki who today was turning forty four. He was in Turin with his wife and children. It was endearing to think about that newborn who became a shy boy and later a man with many responsibilities and problems. He was proud of how he’d refused to take a salary. He had spoken to him on the phone to wish him happy birthday, and he reminded him that Helen – a large black nanny who would come on Wednesdays and take him to different department stores like Macy’s, Saks, and Bloomingdale’s each week – told him once as they crossed the George Washington Bridge, “Kennedy was a great president because he didn’t take a salary!” What did it mean to have adult children? It meant having faith, knowing they had matured, that they were grown up. Two of his children were parents and had their own families. For Lapo, family was a larger concept of the world, which he embraced in crucial moments. He had a generous spirit and was working to provide face masks to donate to all of the regions of Italy. Though he was in Portugal, he kept in close contact with everyone regularly, including his entire family.

Phone calls and messages continued to arrive. People wanted to know about Anna’s parents’ health and how his nephew was doing in Switzerland. It was a source of comfort in this pandemic that had taken over their everyday lives. They talked about what they were eating, what they were reading, the films they were watching, how the children were. They ate basic meals and did

housework. Their moods continued to go up and down. He wasn't thinking about the future and was living day to day. The weather had been terrible the day before and the mood was heavy. He was also worried about his own health. If he coughed or his breathing was irregular, he feared the worst and got worried. But he tried not to think about it. They drank a glass of Chianti red wine in the evenings to try to cheer themselves up. The afternoons were long and there was not as much news.

The stock markets had gone up a bit only to fall again. In the United States, the White House had announced that, according to calculations, between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans might die.

2 April 2020

Today, he had the sad task of writing that Anna's father had died at the age of ninety five, and that his nephew Edouard had the coronavirus.

Anna's father had been a tall, robust man with kind, curious, smiling eyes. His voice was warm, distinguished, and gentle. She received messages and phone calls all day long, she was strong but exhausted after so many agonizing days. That beloved father who would call and say, "Where are you?", "When will you be here?", and "My dear, where are you?" was gone. He was an elderly man – modern, conservative, open, from another era. He loved technology, engineering, and nature. He loved golf and his golf club because he thought it was a good way to combine nature and sport. He was a deeply religious man. But what defined a good man? The look in his eyes; he was distinguished and smiling yet shy. He was curious and had his own ideas about things. When he had told professor Magrini that morning that Anna's father was dead, they talked a bit about him, about the family. Afterward, professor Magrini, who was a communist, said, "You are lucky to have met a real family, a close Italian family with feelings that run deep. I like real families."

That long, emotional day was ending in a more peaceful manner. His wife had taken the news quite well, as if it were a foregone conclusion. In any case, she had always said that she would not want to die first and leave him alone.

It was amazing how many people had written to express their affection, respect, and love for her father. In his own simple way, he'd been able to surround himself with so much love. His wife said

that, up to the end, they'd gone down to Borgo Pio to have their aperitif: two fresh-squeezed orange juices (she'd have a splash of Campari in hers). Then they found the bar to be too crowded, and they decided to have aperitif at home. From the hospital, she told them about how she was dreaming about a glass of ice-cold white wine and a *tramezzino* sandwich. She always asked them about what they'd eaten or were going to eat when they spoke to her in hospital.

There was a woman (to maintain her privacy, she will be referred to as S.R.) who had begun to take on a special role in Anna's life and in the lives of her family members. She had served as a witness, an advisor. She was a very good person, compassionate, with a good head on her shoulders, highly intelligent. For health reasons, she was mainly bedridden but she would call on the phone. She had become a friend and they talked often on the phone when Anna had gone through an incredibly difficult situation. Then she had become friendly with – also via telephone – her mother and one of her sisters-in-law. They spoke on the phone, talked about the specifics of their everyday lives, how they were feeling, and what was happening. They were always in close contact. She played the role of confidant and defence attorney in various family matters.

5 April 2020

It was partly sunny. There was still so much silence, but the birds – black ones and white ones – had arrived. Many days had passed, but there was nothing new. They were still in the same tunnel with no end in sight. There were still so many phone calls and messages. He managed to read a story by Chekhov and spoke on the phone with Joseph Rykwert, who was celebrating his ninety-fourth birthday that day. He was all alone in London, melancholy. He asked him if the trees were in bloom, and he said, “Yes, there’s a camellia outside my bedroom window.”

“Who is coming to celebrate with you?”

“Nobody.”

“I am sorry.”

“Things could be worse.”

Gianluca, a friend in Turin, called to tell him that the head of the Rivoli Museum had said that Germano Celant was hospitalized in Milan at San Raffaele Hospital and that Michelangelo Pistoletto was in hospital in Biella. He called Pistoletto who answered right away, struggling to breathe due to the respirator. “I’m a bit better. I am slowly improving.”

“How long have you been in hospital?”

“Two weeks.”

“What about Maria?”

“Maria is at home.”

“How did you get the virus?”

“Maybe on a return flight from Mexico.”

Pistoletto was happy to talk to him. He hadn't expected his call.

The day before he'd done a telephone interview with Victoire Bourgois a French artist based in New York though she was currently in Maine. She'd escaped from the city with her husband. She told him that she was reading *War and Peace*, that part of the book that described Moscow when everyone had fled, leaving it empty for Napoleon. He remembered that part very well and the character Pierre, Pierre Bezukhov, that amazing character that was actually Tolstoy himself, though he was also Prince Andrei. He thought about how wonderful it would be during those endless monotonous days – and Tolstoy certainly must have had some of those during the long Russian winters in his country home, Yasnaya Polyana – to be able to craft and write an epic historical novel interwoven with the stories of various families. It was perhaps impossible to be a great writer nowadays. Solzhenitsyn had fancied himself a great writer following in the footsteps of Dostoevsky, but who even remembered Solzhenitsyn's books? Yet great writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev had stood the test of time and were read again and again, generation after generation.

Now that there was this global pandemic, what was his role as a writer? To write. Currently, he was writing in his diary, to have a record of his own experiences. The newspapers informed, offered up warnings, published interviews, and provided statistics. They showed the pandemic from all points of view and followed the evolution of the decisions taken by governments in various countries. They offered advice and encouragement, urging people to take precautions. The pope offered his prayers and words of encouragement. Many intellectuals, doctors, and scientists gave their opinions and expressed a sense of despair. People were talking and writing about what would happen afterward. It was predicted to be an economic apocalypse, a financial disaster, poverty, the loss of jobs. But nobody could give concrete answers. It was like they were grasping at straws, going on hope and common sense. But what would happen after? They just kept saying, "Nothing will ever be the same." Sometimes he forgot to wash his hands or to disinfect groceries or surfaces. A lady friend had told him, "I bought these gorgeous strawberries but then I had to leave them in the sun for three hours. What a nuisance!" Worry, anxiety, illness, death, solidarity, and even minor nuisances were the order of the day.

Late night 5 April, early morning 6 April 2020

He was agitated and dejected. He'd come to realize that all forms of communication, messages, phone calls, emails, television, Instagram and all the rest were dangerous and harmful. The death of Anna's father had not given her or her siblings a moment's peace. They were overwhelmed with texts, emails, and WhatsApp messages to which they felt obligated to respond immediately. A never-ending avalanche, expressing respect and fondness for Anna's father, came down upon them from the telephone, never a moment's silence or time for a private prayer. It was as if everything had to be fast, public, shared. He was frightened by the speed and violence with which news travelled, in such an anxiety-inducing, intrusive way.

That evening they prepared to watch Queen Elizabeth's speech at 9 p.m. on SkyTv. Throughout her entire reign, she had only addressed the British nation five times outside of her Christmas Day message. It had been announced that she would give a speech and the entire world was expected to tune in. This long-serving queen, now quite advanced in age, in isolation with her husband at Windsor Castle, was to address the commonwealth. The queen appeared on television right on time wearing a blue-ish green dress, two strands of pearls, a brooch with a blue stone, and a touch of lipstick. She sat next to a desk bearing a simple pot of flowers and spoke very directly, offering words of thanks, encouragement, and comfort. She asked the British people – those working on the front lines as well as those quarantined at home – to stay calm and to accept the rules necessary to combat the coronavirus. Her speech was serious, commanding, dynamic,

compassionate, and flawless. A speech given by a sovereign with the tone that one would expect from a sovereign. Then all of the television networks debated the importance of her words, mentioning how composed the queen was; but that all soon faded into the background because news broke that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had been diagnosed with the coronavirus ten days before, had been rushed from 10 Downing Street to hospital. The prime minister was in intensive care. It was unclear whether more announcements would be made overnight or if Boris Johnson's condition would still be the big news the next morning.

This is what he meant by violence: a world affected by a respiratory-illness pandemic, that, metaphorically speaking, travelled at airspeed, causing a sense of collective anxiety that didn't allow anyone to breathe easy.

7 April 2020

It was a sunny day, warmer and less windy. Anna's father had been buried that morning in Rome in the family tomb at the Campo Verano cemetery. Anna's siblings and nieces and nephews were there but she could not go due to the travel restrictions. Her mother was also unable to go because she was still positive for the virus. Today, she had been moved to a Marriot hotel that was being used by the hospital as a place to bring patients who were better but hadn't fully recovered.

In London, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was still in intensive care, and the entire country was waiting with bated breath for an update on his condition. He was actually quite sorry that Johnson was being punished so harshly for his "bullying" attitude during the early days of the coronavirus crisis.

It was a gorgeous day. A dog barked in the distance but, as always, the only sound they really heard was the wind. A light wind, not too cold. But spring was slow to bloom, as if it were in a state of hibernation along with their lives.

His family was planning its Seder, the ceremonial dinner Jews held during Passover, for 8 p.m. the next night. Giorgio and Lapo were busy with preparations. Ginevra had announced that she'd successfully made a cheese soufflé the day before. Anna wondered if a local fishmonger, recommended by her aunt, would deliver clams. She really wanted to make spaghetti with clams.

The phone was ringing less. Margherita had called from Moncalieri. She was the housekeeper, caretaker, and cook who had lived there for years with her son and lover, a truck driver who only came on weekends and stayed closed up in the house. None of us had ever seen him, but, as Giorgio said, that was only fitting because he had never helped Margherita in any way. However, Margherita had called to notify him that, sadly, she was quitting and wanted to leave. She wanted a job that gave her more freedom, allowing her to move in with her boyfriend. It was a strange time to quit a job, but such is life. Things big and small were happening. The world was facing a crisis, an unknown war that it had never battled before.

9 April 2020

The previous evening, his family had held its Seder over Zoom: grandchildren, children, siblings, daughters-in-law, brothers-in-law. It was strange but nice. It felt like they were all united and close. Maybe even closer than before.

The news seemed to have stabilized. Perhaps things were slightly improving. Trump was saying that there would be improvement by Easter, but everyone knew that was not true.

Lapo had launched a radio programme, an aid campaign with the Red Cross, and said he was writing an illustrated children's book with Elisabetta Sgarbi. Jaki had written a letter to shareholders. It was long, exhaustive, and carefully considered, showing seriousness, great commitment, and professional pride.

Boris Johnson was still ill.

10 April 2020

Yesterday, he'd conducted a long interview with Paola Severino. They'd spoken about the situation in Italy, how the wheels of bureaucracy turned slowly, the judiciary, what might happen after the coronavirus, and what kinds of urgent matters they would face. Paola Severino was an intelligent woman and – a rarity in Italy – impartial.

Yesterday afternoon, he'd had a sort of bartering session with a neighbour. He had bought them some sole fillets to eat on Good Friday because he figured they wouldn't be able to get to the

fishmonger's, and, in exchange, they'd brought over two masks with valves, which were quite hard to find at that point. Anna's friend, S.R., had said she would send masks by mail.

Lapo had launched a mask campaign in the newspapers and the media, with photos of famous footballers, athletes, actors, and personalities. It was an act of generosity to encourage people to take precautions and use masks. The proceeds were to go to the Red Cross. The entire world was now forced to wear masks but not like during Venice's Carnival, which, ironically, had been cancelled.

Boris Johnson was out of intensive care, and it was presumed he would soon be back on the job. Hopefully, what he had gone through would make him be a bit more cautious.

People were preparing for Easter, but it was unclear what it would be like. He was not in the best of spirits, and he looked around and thought, "They've extended the lockdown until 4 May but will they then extend it again? Will we have more freedom?" It was not at all clear.

11 April 2020

The new decree allowed for bookshops, stationers, and children's clothing shops to open the following Tuesday. A friend of his told him that all of Carlo Feltrinelli's bookshops, with 2,500 employees, were closed. *Mamma mia!*

It was almost spring. The leaves were starting to appear on the trees and wildflowers were turning the fields around the house yellow. One of Anna's sons came by with a friend to say hello. Carlo, a friend of his in Portugal, said, "The strangest things turn out really well for me in this period."

"Like what?"

"For example, I play the guitar."

"Well, you've always worked in music."

"I no longer work in music."

"Do you cook?"

"Not much. Only when I feel like it."

He spoke with Daniele, who was in a rural area outside of New York City, where the situation continued to get worse. Daniele said, "What I miss the most is my freedom." It was true. He also missed the freedom to do the things he liked to do. He was there now like a prisoner in a gilded

cage not knowing how much time was left in his “sentence.” At times, he even got bored with talking on the phone, and he found it exhausting.

The television didn’t work very well in that house, and the news was all about the coronavirus anyway. Italian politics was as unpleasant and contentious as always, partisan and not very good at negotiating with the rest of Europe. How was it possible to live in a country where the politicians all fought while the mafia and other criminal organizations got rich, profiting from the inefficiency and sluggishness of politics and bureaucracy?

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The days followed one after the other. Anna was busy, mainly with family matters and doing things around the house. She never complained. She smiled and had a good attitude about things.

13 April 2020, Easter Monday

He and Anna had spoken to all of their family members the day before to wish them a happy Easter. Then they watched *Domenica In* on Rai1 because Lapo was on the programme, interviewed by Mara Venier about how he was promoting masks featuring the Italian *Tricolore* as a way to support the Red Cross. He did a great job, coming across as charming, sincere, and kind-hearted.

That evening, they watched Fazio's programme, which featured a doctor as well as the secretary general of the CGIL trade union, Maurizio Landini, who praised how Fiat and Ferrari were preparing to reopen their factories. For now, everything had been put off until 4 May, and the so-called "Phase 2" was cause for concern for many.

He had reluctantly gone along with Anna to see her Aunt Patrizia in the afternoon. They'd sat in a circle far from one another (though social distancing was not always respected) and spoke for a while. He tried to offer a simplified explanation of the Hasidim, the Orthodox Jews who could be seen around town with their leather hats, side locks, and beards, while the women wore wigs. It made him feel bad that everyone made fun of them for wearing gloves and masks, but, actually they were required to by law. Carlo, a dear friend of Anna's, was the only one who said, "We need to respect the concerns and phobias of others." He had very much appreciated Carlo's kind, gentlemanly manner. It made him feel like someone supported his supposed over-the-top behaviour when he was actually just following the laws.

What was he thinking that Easter Monday? He thought about how people who made fun of those who decided to wear masks and gloves were not mean-spirited. Their intentions were not cruel. Actually they were kind, but they just wanted the world to be like before, with the same conversations, the same social calendar. It had been nice to see Giulia, Patrizia, Carlo, the other Carlo, Isabelle, and all the young people conversing like in a novel by Tolstoy or a Chekhov story. A bit like in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, where they were all gathered together on a gorgeous summer day and someone suddenly said, "It's going to rain today." The characters in the story looked at him surprised, but then a thunderstorm actually rolled in at the end of the day.

Marco, a friend of his who had called from London, said, "What I miss most is conversations with my friends." Then he added, "Perhaps after, though it isn't like this is really going to be over, people will need less, will behave differently. As I walked along New Bond Street looking in the shop windows, I wondered who would still buy all of these useless things." Marco also said he was trying to work but had a hard time concentrating. He had little motivation. Then they spoke about silence and how they would have to get used to the sounds of their lives before, the hustle and bustle.

The thing that had been bothering him since the night before was that he was living day to day without a schedule, without deadlines, without knowing what would happen. They were waiting for a vaccine as if it were the Second Coming. The experts on the television programmes were

doctors, virologists, and researchers who all said sensible things but they really didn't have a solution.

The soldiers – the people on the front lines – were doctors, nurses, bakers, police officers, fire-fighters, and those working in chemists and supermarkets. They fought the war while everyone else played a passive role, a bit like during the bombings, but there were no shelters now and you couldn't escape, not just because it was forbidden but because you had no idea where to go. His sister, who was in the mountains in Switzerland, no longer felt safe and she didn't know where to go either. The big question was what would happen in summer, in August. Would people go on holiday? And what about those who were considered "old"? Actually, not that long ago – about twenty years before – a person was considered old at the age of sixty five. Now, it was said that old age was after seventy five, which was the "new sixty five". But was any of that really true?

A doctor friend of his who had lived in the United States for many years, wrote to him and asked, "What do you think the world of tomorrow will be like?" He told her that he had to think about it and would respond later. But he was unable to respond because he couldn't imagine what it would be like afterward. Perhaps he couldn't imagine what would happen after because, in his mind, it was scarier than the present. In the present, despite the fact that life had come to a halt for almost everyone, there was a sort of democracy or equality – not so much in terms of quality of life because, unfortunately, many lived in awful conditions of poverty, dismal and oppressive –

but equality in the sense that they all feared dying; death foretold for the elderly and likely death for others.

They were all potential carriers whether they had symptoms or not, and there was this double-edged sense of mistrust and solidarity. There was fear, fear of being infected and not knowing it, which made all of them potentially guilty. A life without freedom was so dreadful, a viral dictatorship had made them all slaves and some of them spies. While there were friends who served as a source of solace and companions in misfortune, they were far away, and could only communicate via an iPhone, computer, or iPad.

Anna didn't appear to be frightened. She made her phone calls. This was just the way she was, the way she had been raised. She didn't show her emotions and never complained. His moods, however, went up and down: fear, dissatisfaction, a feeling of uselessness, frustration, and fatigue interspersed with sudden bursts of domestic activity. He wanted to write a story, a novel, but what kind of story? The story of a family forced to quarantine together? The story of two lovers forced to stay apart? The story of a couple trapped in a small flat with no money, waiting for an unemployment cheque? The story of children who couldn't stand their parents, who were increasingly fearful and waiting for "reconstruction" to begin, though what kind of reconstruction? Would there still be cinemas or new neo-realist novels? Would there be a great sense of euphoria and new dances or music, like the boogie-woogie or rock-and-roll? Maybe he could write a fairy tale, but what kind? The story of a penguin? A bear? A camel? A fish? Was there also hope in fear?

And what exactly was he thinking? He tried to think as little as possible, to not ponder the human condition or wonder if what was happening was some kind of divine punishment.

14 April 2020

A busy day. The bookshops had opened after Easter, which was excellent news for those who loved and respected books. Anna had many family matters to take care of. At least the skies were clear, the waves were breaking on the beach, and the scent of the sea was strong. Night was falling. The day had flown by, though nothing in particular had happened. Well, there was a phone call with Barbara Palombelli for Lapo, and another with Beatrice Masini to discuss the Premio Strega and to catch up with one another. Housework. They'd finally fixed the antenna on the television!

He drank a vodka to cheer himself up. He hadn't read anything or watched the news.

Coronavirus was still in their midst, but you couldn't see it. Were things better? Worse? Nobody knew. It was all anybody could talk about. Should they loosen restrictions or not? That was the big question.

Grazia, a woman from Bologna, had said on the phone, "It's the first time in my life that I'm scared, scared to suffocate to death." Elderly ladies were alone, worried about their children, their grandchildren, and about themselves. Nobody wanted to die. What came after death? There were those who believed, those who didn't believe, those who preferred not to know, those who thought they know, and those who tried prepare themselves, but the truth was – if the truth existed – that nobody knew anything for certain.

15 April 2020

Today was an intense day for everyone, from practical matters to philosophical ones. This pandemic with no cure had taken over their lives and thoughts in every way: from great fear to uncertainty, to terror about dying in general or dying of fear, terror about what would come next. But when would that be? He was seventy years old, and people his age were wondering, "At seventy, does that make me one of those elderly people who have to stay in the house until December?" But it wasn't clear because certain newspapers said sixty-five years old while others said seventy-five years old.

At times, he was profoundly bored. He wanted to go out without a mask or gloves, get in his car, and drive all over the deserted Italy that was only seen on television, as filmed by helicopters. "Enough is enough," he wanted to say, but he didn't because they had to set an example and respect the rules. It wasn't just the fear of catching the virus but of perhaps being an asymptomatic carrier and giving it to others. And the economy. Was everyone worried about the economy? Which factories would close? Which companies would go bankrupt? How many people would be left jobless? In the months before the coronavirus, people talked about how artificial intelligence would steal jobs from many people, however, it was a virus that had been taken to a Chinese city by bats that was infecting and terrorizing the whole world.

Now there were 10,000 deaths in New York, the city where he was born, where two of his children were born, where his parents were married, where he began his career, and where he had written

his first novel, *Il Tuffo*. The New York where he had spent March, where he had walked through the park with his children when they were young and then with his young grandchildren. The New York that was home to many of his friends and the place where he had so, so many memories was now a city under siege, gripped by terror. His friend Fred Seidel had said, “It will never be like it was before! It is strange to see people try to stay two metres away from each other, and they aren’t always successful. Though, other days, you don’t see anybody on the street because nothing is open. Our Café Luxembourg is no longer open. What is going to happen to the Carlyle Hotel and all of the other places?”

16 April 2020

Ginevra's children had settled happily into their routine. Lapo had appeared on various television programmes to promote his charity initiatives with the Red Cross. Ginevra seemed to be in a bad mood. His grandsons Leone and Giacomo sent him messages, and it was such a pleasure, especially when they wrote, "We miss you, granddad." The weather was nice but life was the same: a bit of writing, a bit of television, a bit of messaging, chats with Anna. What more was there? Waiting as always, in anticipation of what would come next because they didn't know if they could make any plans.

There were still so many contrasting opinions about vaccinations, medicines, and treatments. "Wash your hands" continued to be the mantra, and now, they wanted people to wear masks, even if they were more than a metre apart. In the meantime, the days continued on and spring was making inroads. Birds were chirping and little leaves had begun to appear on the trees. They walked down toward the sea every day towards evening. The sea was always different: lots of waves, few waves, soft waves, no waves. The beach, which they could see from behind the dunes or a picket fence, was deserted like in Montale's *Cuttlefish Bones*.

There were a few bamboo reeds, some shells here and there, some wooden planks, and not one person. Just the sound of the waves breaking and, behind the dunes, yellow fields of rapeseed flowers. The sunsets were gorgeous with the Argentario Promontory on the horizon along with the Capalbio Castle.

Friends wrote, and their moods were up and down. Paolo, Nicholas, Daniele, Domenico, David, Dominique; and Mario wrote from New York. Yesterday, Fred Seidel had talked about the walk he had taken alone.

His mood was neither good nor bad. He tried to work, to do chores around the house, to plan interviews, and he read aloud to Anna from a book he'd written entitled *I Soldi Devono Restare in Famiglia*. It had been published by the Primo Levi Center in New York a few years before. Alessandro Cassin had also written. Everyone was in limbo, waiting, hoping they could return to normal life as soon as possible. He wondered if they would be able to go back to Patmos in August. Would they once again see the house they loved, the monastery, the blue waters of the Aegean, the Arion bar, and the little shops in Skala? He wanted to write a novel, a story, but it seemed like he didn't have the right type of notebook or the right pen to do it.

He remembered writing his novels *Piazza Carignano*, *Stella Oceanis*, and *Una Lunga Estate* on a typewriter. Then typewriters disappeared from everyday use, and he was unable to get used to computers, so he would write with a pen or pencil. But that day, he was nostalgic for the clickety-clack of the typewriter. He thought about Alberto Moravia, who would pound away at the typewriter every morning, and Bruce Chatwin who had typed up his novel *The Songlines* on Patmos. Moravia always travelled with his portable typewriter and Indro Montanelli wrote his articles on his trusty Olivetti Lettera 22. Now people had been using computers for years, and there were no longer sturdy typewriter sheets and carbon paper available.

17 April 2020

It was a frenetic morning full of telephone calls, catching up with people here and there. When would things open? When would the government send out stimulus payments? You woke up in the morning in one frame of mind but then there was so much uncertainty.

Carmen Llera Moravia called, saying she was constantly on the go. She was out and about on the streets of Rome wearing an ever changing array of masks. She told him she'd sold the house in Sabaudia, the one designed by Dante Ferretti that Moravia had shared with Pasolini. She sold it because the caretakers were getting old and she never went there anyway.

"You always go to Paris, don't you?" she asked.

"I used to go, but now how could I go anywhere?"

"Do you have a house in Paris?"

"No. You know I hate having property. I stay at the *Hôtel des Saints Pères*."

As Carmen spoke, he began to feel nostalgic for his Paris, the Paris of Saint Germain, Café de Flore, Brasserie Lipp, Rue de Grenelle, Rue de Varenne, Rue du Bac, the *Hôtel de Saint-Simon*, the Chinese restaurant on Boulevard Saint-Germain, the Gallimard bookshop, Boulevard Raspail, the street that led down to Quai Voltaire and those few streets that had been his little village since he was twenty years old. Including Rue de Seine, Rue Jacob, Rue de l'Université, Place Saint-Sulpice, and Rue de Turnon. His mind flashed back to those places, those hotels, those homes, the

Luxembourg Gardens. This was one of many sides of Paris, the city where he knew he'd be buried forever. Perhaps quite soon.

18 April 2020

The weather was terrible, and he was getting bored. He'd talked to the whole family over Zoom. His children were well, as were the grandchildren, and it was a joy to speak to them. But he was getting bored with this repetitive life, where there was nothing new, nothing was certain, and he so tired of the news programmes, newspapers, and talk shows that only focused on the virus. That impossible virus that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and shut the world down! That impossible China that dominated the world in everything. The Chinese consumed our goods and were tourists in our countries; it was necessary to have friendly relations with the Chinese but the viruses came from China, from laboratories or animals. In Korea, ninety people died after Covid 19 made a comeback.

Mario Platero told him that Alex Gregory had died in New York, and he realized he'd known him for fifty years. They'd met for the first time in the airport in Geneva with Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy and Marina Doria. Then he'd seen him many times with Dino Fabbri because they worked on art books together. He had also worked with George Weidenfeld on art books. He saw him many times when he was a young newlywed in New York because Alex worked with his mother-in-law and Zumsteg, a gentleman from Zurich who owned – actually, his mother owned – the famous Kronenhalle restaurant. One night, Alex had a cocktail party in his small apartment on Fifth Avenue, and that's where his five-year relationship with Diane had begun. Then he saw Alex again in his new flat in New York. John Richardson was there as well, and they'd talked about Picasso

and Lucian Freud. He had clear memories of him strolling up and down Madison Avenue in a double-breasted camel coat. He had a flat on Boulevard Saint Germain in Paris as well. Alex's parents, Grisha and Lydia Gregory, had moved to New York during the war because of racial persecution, which was also the case with Alexander and Tatiana Liberman. It was said that there was a great rivalry between Lydia Gregory and Tatiana Liberman because they both wanted to be Majakovskij's lover. Alexander Liberman was a sculptor, but he was also an artistic director for many years for various Condé Nast magazines, including *Vogue*, *House & Garden*, and *Vanity Fair*. He had assigned work to the likes of Diana Vreeland, Tina Brown, John Richardson, the Avedons, Newton, Lebowitz, and many others.

The last time he'd seen Alex Gregory was at a birthday dinner for Prosper Assouline in New York. He was in poor health with Parkinson's disease, but he had actually died of Covid 19. It appeared he'd caught it from a man who helped him around the house. His death marked the end of an era – so many names and people, a lifestyle that was a mix of money, society, art, gossip, and French and English spoken as if they were the same language. Though he knew that Alex's parents, Grisha and Lydia, spoke Russian to one another and would spend their evenings drinking tea from a samovar.

19 April 2020

As he thought about that life, his mind went back to something that had happened many years before, in New York as he sat in the waiting room of a doctor's office. Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld, who looked exactly like the actor Walter Matthau, had an office on Park Avenue and 72nd Street. As he sat in the waiting room, an older lady in front of him worked on *The New York Times* crossword puzzle. After a short while, an elderly gentleman came through the door. He was tall with smooth white hair and wore a dark coat. The gentleman greeted the woman doing the English-language crossword puzzle in German, and she responded in French, completely ignoring that he was also in the room. An intense conversation ensued, the gentleman speaking German and the lady responding in French. After a few minutes, the German-speaking gentleman was called back by a nurse. Once they were alone in the waiting room, thinking making conversation was the polite thing to do he asked the lady, "Are you French, madame?"

"No, Russian," she responded in an exasperated tone.

Now he was quarantined, and the weather had taken a turn. It was raining outside and the unchanging views made it all the more depressing. They didn't go to the beach and had stayed home to work on various projects. It was a Monday, the beginning of a new week.

20 April 2020

Days passed slowly and quickly, different and the same, and he had filled an entire notebook with diary entries about the time that he and Anna were spending in the same room, in the same house, looking out at the same views, taking the same walk down to the sea and back almost daily. But that routine with Anna doing the laundry, loading the dishwasher, doing the washing up, and cooking while he swept and mopped the floor, helped load the dishwasher, or took out the rubbish – was disrupted by different kinds of days. From the tragic death of Anna's father of coronavirus to the return of Marilù, her mother, after a month in the hospital. She'd left in an ambulance with her husband and returned home alone, accompanied by her older son. Anna's father had been buried without a real funeral. Her children telephoned to tell her what they were doing; her brother, sister, grandchildren, and a few friends called and talked about the minutia of their days.

Anna felt a bit better and had begun to read. Of course her father's death had left a giant void, and it had happened during a pandemic, with the economy at a standstill and young people wondering what they would do afterward. People spoke about "phase two," which was on the horizon, and "phase three," which wasn't exactly a return to normality. Nobody knew when things would go back to normal. There were new cases and deaths every day, and there was no vaccine or any real strategy in place.

Vittorio Sgarbi had reappeared in his life, via telephone. He was always so busy, taking part in television programmes almost every day as a guest, defending art and museums and other causes. Sgarbi wondered why they could go to supermarkets but not to museums. He was right. He had said to the editor-in-chief of the newspaper he wrote for, “Why don’t we ask our readers what they dream of doing when the epidemic is over and what their dreams are?” Many people said they were exercising more, others were sleeping very little and reading. There was too much information coming from all directions on the Internet, on Instagram and WhatsApp. Too many opinions from scientists, doctors, philosophers, and politicians. Too much video, too many interviews.

21 April 2020

It was raining, but they went to visit Ginevra and the children, and later Uberto. He had to work hard to overcome his fear of getting the virus, and he watched as Ginevra happily picked spinach, chicory, lettuce, radishes, artichokes, and fava beans with the children. The children had grown and there was a happy air in the home. Ginevra seemed more relaxed and less stressed. They were cooking, working in the garden, and spending time together. Uberto, on the other hand, seemed a bit lost in that strange village he called home. It was a place of art and culture, with two towers typical of the Maremma area, a wild boar, and hens from Thailand. Uberto seemed lost because, like many young people, he was worried about the future.

His friend Dominique in Paris was also worried. She wondered when she would be able to hug her children and her grandchild. What would life be like afterward? How would people react? She claimed to be in a terrible mood that evening. He tried to offer words of encouragement. Daniele called, from the United States. He was calm but also distressed about what was happening.

Petroleum prices had dropped. There were 788,000 cases of Covid 19 in the United States. Trump had blocked immigration. Stock markets had plummeted on the news of the petroleum prices and because things were so uncertain. "How will we start over again?" they wondered, terrified.

22 April 2020

It was a long night, his mind full of thoughts and dreams. His friend Carlo had called to talk about the current situation and what was happening in the world. Carlo's bosses in Chicago had demanded he slash the salaries of employees in Europe by thirty per cent, but what they didn't understand was that there were workers' unions that made it impossible to make cuts or fire people like in the United States. Talk turned to the need to "tighten the belt" and make lifestyle changes.

He'd also spoken to a dear friend of his from Turin, an accountant, who said it would take at least two years to recover from the crisis. Everything had been at a standstill for a month, and the system was already on the verge of collapse. All sporting and cultural events had been cancelled. But life went on, and you became aware of the little things that you typically didn't do or had overlooked before, such as staying at home and rummaging through the attic, drawers, or old trunks to find photographs, letters, and postcards.

Some people were working via videoconference or over the phone. One barely changed clothes; it was as if any sense of pride in appearance had gone out the window. He only changed clothes in order to be clean. He had arrived at that house, where he'd been for more than a month, with two pencils that were wearing down day after day. Would he no longer be able to get pencils? He hadn't set foot in a shop for almost two months except to buy food or products for cleaning and disinfecting.

But if he wasn't really reading, how was he spending his time? Time was passing, and they watched a movie every evening as a sort of ritual or reward. What was he most worried about? The thought of the so-called "phase two", or, in other words, freedom that was controlled, limited, masked, and gloved. A false sense of freedom full of obstacles and even more fear because it would be easier to catch the virus.

Fingers were being pointed at China. It was believed the Chinese government had tried to cover up the coronavirus. The World Health Organization was also facing harsh criticism. Trump had withdrawn his support for the WHO, and it was said that the organization had been too willing to accept the Chinese government's party line.

Conspiracy theories were now being bandied about and people were trying to predict what would happen afterward. The United States was perhaps the only country able to take on China. On the phone, Anna asked her brother, "Do you think war will break out?"

Meanwhile, in his part of the world, it was raining nonstop. The rapeseed fields were a bright green in the light but turned a violent grey that afternoon. The birds were chirping once again but humans were in a bad way; they were scared. Scared of loss, of illness, of failure, of death. Yet, nature was in all its glory.

Oil prices had plummeted. Cars were parked. Petrol stations were closed. He wanted to begin reading again. He spoke with friends and colleagues. They consoled one another, considering they were all going through the same thing, and tried to imagine what would happen afterward; they'd

hit this giant bump in the road and nobody knew if things would ever be the same. In the meantime, artificial intelligence as well as science and technology continued to make advances, and so the world and tomorrow would be different. He was curious to see what would happen. When the situation improved, he thought about what it might be like to take a long trip, perhaps with his children and grandchildren, to see what had happened in the world.

He sometimes flashed back to other times in his life. He had felt nostalgic for Venice the night before but the sensation quickly passed. He adored Venice in his younger days, and he went many times for a variety of reasons.

He began to respond to a friend who had read a part of his diary published on his blog. She said it was like a list of facts but lacking in profound reflection. She was disappointed reading the diary, though she admitted the translation was good.

He responded that diaries didn't have any rules. It wasn't even like correspondence because though correspondence was free-flowing, if there were questions, one must respond. But that wasn't the case with a diary. It followed the events of the day, with a date, but one could write whatever he wanted. A mood, a view, a phone call. There was no logic to it; it was a choice. You mentioned some things but not everything. Something you liked or didn't like, something that struck you, something that helped you or hurt you, or you could describe a particular episode, a memory, or feeling. A diary could be a confession. You could capture something ordinary, a thought, almost like a photograph. What was important was to write, whether anyone read your

words or not. There was also a certain sense of discretion in writing a diary. Avoiding writing about sex or certain romantic feelings because one had to protect himself from the diary itself, choosing what to write, imposing limits, keeping some things secret, and deciding not to write about certain topics. It was necessary to be impersonal at times. Each diary was like a sketch of a person's life. You couldn't know everything about what someone had done or said, but there are those snippets of what they'd seen, done, thought, desired, whom they had encountered, what they had read... a diary was like a little personal story. A writer wrote a diary knowing that his words were public but his heirs might decide not to publish them, at least not for many years. If the writer were a witness, a diary was his testament, or a part of it. Some people associated diaries with women, but that was truly not the case. Tolstoy kept a diary as did Churchill and many others. All writing was a literary genre: poetry, novels, stories, correspondence, diaries, interviews, articles, newspaper reports, and travel stories. He thought about Stendhal's *Voyages en Italie*, President de Brosses's writings on Italy, and Goethe's *Italian Journey*; or *In Patagonia* by Chatwin, Alberto Moravia's travel books, literature by Paul Morand, and Hemingway's novels. He thought of Voltaire, Pasolini, Conrad, and Cervantes... about the books he'd read and reread. Celine's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* or the books he wrote in the post-war period, his escape from Paris to Denmark. Dante and his *Divine Comedy* also came to mind. And what about biographies? Weren't they like portraits? So many biographies had been written about Caesar and Napoleon, for example. His friend Giordano Bruno Guerri had written and continued to write biographies. They had met when Luigi Barzini Jr.

reviewed his biography of Galeazzo Ciano in *Il Corriere della Sera*. Guerri wrote Ciano's biography like a novel, and, to do so, he'd certainly read Ciano's *Diary*, which Emilio Pucci had transported to safety in Switzerland by bicycle. Of course, some diary entries were brief, but at times they were meandering, and thus, his response to his friend about diaries was long-winded and became a part of the diary itself.

He suddenly felt as if he'd wandered into one of Borges' labyrinths, so it was probably better to stop writing to his friend.

It was getting late, the day was drawing to a close, and it was time to watch the news.

24 April 2020

And there they were again, sitting like statues in the garden, staring out at the same views. The nice weather had returned; it was cool but the sun was warm. In the midst of that apparent calm the world was suffering, people were falling ill, many were dying. That day, a dear friend from Bologna, Giuseppe Gazzoni Frascara, had died. He was a charming, cheerful man who had made a fortune and then lost a fortune. A man from another era, educated at Le Rosey in Switzerland and then at Oxford. He'd met Giuseppe in Paris when he was barely twenty and working in a bank. His boss at the time was an Italo-Colombian named Jean Caracciolo for whom Paris had always been home. Jean's dear friend, Giuseppe Gazzoni Frascara, was younger and would occasionally come to Paris to visit. This is how he'd become friends with Giuseppe as well. They had another friend in common, Luigi d'Urso. Luigi was his roommate at boarding school, and they had remained friends. When Luigi went to Bologna for university, he'd lived for a time in a small guesthouse on the Gazzoni family's property. Another thing they had in common was that they had both spent time over the years on Patmos where Grazia, Giuseppe's wife, had a gorgeous home. They were both friendly with Jannis Strata, the owner of the Arion bar near the port. They'd meet there every morning between 11 a.m. and midday before heading to the beach. Unfortunately, Jannis had died two years before, and Giuseppe had been the one to break the news. The last time he'd seen Giuseppe was actually at the Arion bar on Patmos, the same year Jannis died. Later, when he'd bought a home in Milan, he became better acquainted with one of Giuseppe's daughters, Idarica,

and she always kept him up-to-date on her father. Giuseppe had been in poor health the last few years, and though he had tried to phone him, he never answered. Another friend was gone!

Yesterday, his son Yaki had taken over as president of GEDI, the Espresso – Repubblica Group founded by his uncle Carlo Caracciolo, who had also served as president. The company was an umbrella media group for a variety of publications, including *La Stampa*, *Il Secolo*, various local newspapers, *La Repubblica*, and *L'Espresso*. The new CEO was Maurizio Scanavino, a friend and university classmate of Yaki's, who had worked for years at *La Stampa* and then at *Secolo XIX*. Maurizio Molinari, who had headed up *La Stampa* for four years, was leaving to take over *La Repubblica*, with the aim of modernizing and transforming the newspaper. He had always had a nice, close working relationship with Molinari. This meant Massimo Giannini was taking over as editor-in-chief at *La Stampa*. He knew Giannini by name and sight, and they'd had some friendly, encouraging phone conversations.

Change was always bittersweet, but then you got used to it and life continued on. And he was happy that his son had become a publisher for newspapers and other media outlets because it was something he'd been interested in since he was a teenager. Actually, it was exciting to be on the cutting edge of change in media. Traditional means of communication, such as newspapers, radio, and television, still had their place, but new channels of information were also being explored via the Internet and in other ways.

Anna was still there in the sun reading.

26 April 2020

On that sunny Sunday, they continued reading *Correspondance (1946 – 1959)*, letters that Albert Camus and René Char had sent to one another. A writer and a poet, friends who addressed one another formally while speaking about their lives and choices, their work and their families. So far, there was no mention of romance, of the great love, even epistolary, between Camus and Maria Casarès. Camus was truly a great writer.

Did he even know what a great writer was?

Another friend, Nicola Caracciolo, had died yesterday. He had been one of his wife's two witnesses at their wedding. Nicola was a historian, a journalist, a biographer, a prince, an intellectual, a socialist, and a man who fought for many causes. He had made wonderful documentaries about the fascist era: on Ciano, Mussolini, King Vittorio Emanuele III, Umberto di Savoia, and others. He had an unmistakable way of talking, smoked a cigar, and walked and slept a lot. Nicola was quite the dreamer. The illness and premature death of his son Filippo had been the great tragedy of his life. For him, Nicola was like a grand character in a Russian novel, a true aristocrat and a simple man. He left behind his wife Rossella, his daughter Marella, and his grandchildren.

He'd lost two friends – Giuseppe and Nicola – in two days, two people who had been a part of his life. How sad!

The 25th of April was Liberation Day, celebrating the end of the war. It was a celebration of freedom and a day to honour the partisans. It was the end of the war against the neo-fascists.

President Mattarella, alone and wearing a mask, placed a wreath of flowers at the *Milite Ignoto* (Tomb of the Unknown Soldier). Two soldiers, also wearing masks, stood at attention. It was a dignified display, but he wondered why Mattarella, who so solemnly paid homage to the victory against the Germans, travelled from the *Quirinale* to *Piazza Venezia* in a German automobile. This was the paradox of Italian politics: ministers and presidents used German automobiles!

The day before, Ginevra and Giovanni held an unusual yet sweet commitment ceremony in their vegetable garden. It had been the idea of their children Marella, Giacomo, and Pietro. He couldn't believe that eleven years had passed since Don Vincenzo Paglia married them in a church in Marrakech.

There was excitement in the air as they approached "phase two", which didn't seem to be happening in the same way throughout the world. The newspapers reported that Boris Johnson would make his official return to work after a long absence due to the coronavirus.

But what was going through his mind? He had highs and lows, moments of fear and moments of calm. He watched a very famous film, *The Giant*, with Anna, and they both found it disappointing. He called Tahar Ben Jelloun to say "hello" and tell him that the editor-in-chief of *La Repubblica*, Molinari, had asked after him. He thanked him for introducing him to Molinari and told him that he'd found a photo of him with Sepúlveda, who had recently died, also of the coronavirus. Tahar said he was holed up in his flat in Paris and that his daughter brought him provisions. He only went out, wearing a mask and gloves, to buy bread.

“Are you writing?” he asked Tahar.

“No, you need light to write.”

“Are you reading?”

“A little, I am rereading the classics, Cervantes”.

It was a truly heart-warming conversation.

30 April 2020

He hadn't been writing in his diary because the days felt dull and grey. The day before, he'd learnt that Germano Celant had died of coronavirus, and that wasn't encouraging news.

When he tried to sleep at night, he found himself in the solitude of his own thoughts. So many people had died, he felt like the world would be different. He dreamt about his life before and wondered what he would do. The borders were closed, and this made him feel claustrophobic. It was dangerous to return to England, to London, where he had his home, his friends, his work, and his everyday life. He couldn't go to France, Switzerland, the United States, or Jerusalem.

The flow of his life, his usual circuit, had been interrupted, and he didn't even know if he could go to Milan or his house in Moncalieri. Italy was a beautiful country and he often thought that it had everything he'd want to see and visit. His friend Nicholas had asked him to Siena for a few days. But it wasn't possible because he couldn't justify it as a need to reunite with family or a return home. In his night-time thoughts, his life was like a thread, a string of disjointed episodes. He remembered moments, jobs, cities, women, and his children at different ages. He remembered

being in Cortina in August and having breakfast with two friends when Jaki called to tell him that his grandchild had been born, a baby boy who would be called Leone. At night, he thought about the many lives he'd lived, as a child in Turin and then Geneva, Paris, New York, his marriage, the birth of his sons, his return to London, Ginevra's birth. He thought of the many places he'd lived, the university in Geneva, his first job in a bank in Paris, America and the years he worked in a publishing company in New York. Then London, his divorce, Paris, Mondadori's office, his novels, Diane, his life with his children. Then there was Rome, the years of television work, then the ministry years and back to London. New York, Philadelphia, Jerusalem, the university years. And Milan, London, and now this pandemic. Now he was lost in the countryside, alone with Anna, an uncertain future, and his two worn-down pencils. At night, he wondered what life would be like afterward and how many years he had left to live.

3 May 2020

The days were all the same. Ginevra had given him a book to read, *The English Eccentrics*, by Edith Sitwell, but he couldn't find the motivation to start it. They had been there for so many days, days that repeated one after the other with the same little rituals. Vittorio Sgarbi was sending him messages nonstop asking him to sign a letter [for the Italian President Mattarella](#) protesting the government, targeted at Prime Minister Conte, whom many illustrious experts believed was violating the constitution.

He let a lot of things roll off of his back. He didn't want to alarm Anna. He felt old, and the lack of activity was not good for him. He missed being able to go out, a [city](#) life that had been his for so many years, and now he didn't really know where things stood. The next day, 4 May, Italy was loosening restrictions and people would be a bit more free to move around, visiting relatives while taking necessary precautions: washing hands, maintaining a safe distance, and wearing masks. It was impossible to get tested and even antibody blood tests were not readily available. "What a nuisance," his friend would have said. Fortunately, *La Stampa* had published his interview with Peter Marino. Marino wanted to rebel against computers and virtual life. He called for a return to pen and paper, to the workplace, and interpersonal relationships. "Those were the days!" he thought in the midst of his enforced holiday, unable to write and reading very little. He watched a lot of films because they allowed his mind to travel to other places.

Spring had exploded and allergies were on the rise. He would have liked to have been a poet, not have a telephone. It was Sunday. The sky was clear with clouds here and there. Anna worried about her children and work. His children were in their own homes and with own their kids. That was a good thing.

4 May 2020

A day of agitation. Parts of Italy were opening up as they entered “phase two”. “Phase two” was such an unpleasant phrase. It was awful to be there doing nothing, feeling useless and powerless. Of course, one could help others, and it was truly an obligation. He felt ever more anxious, agitated, and nauseated. It was a strange kind of nausea that could either be a symptom of the coronavirus or an extreme reaction to a surreal situation that had begun to weigh on him. Human beings had to face the fact that life was dangerous, unpredictable, unfair, precarious, fragile, and fleeting. But now that included an assault on the nerves and on one’s health, making for a life that was the same day after day. He was a writer, but he found it impossible to write, almost out of a sense of reserve because, until that horrible nightmare was over, it seemed like there was no other story to tell.

The evening before, he had spoken to Anna about the strangeness of the human condition: were they animals or something else? What distinguished them from animals? Because they could write and animals couldn’t? And how were we to really know? What remained was instinct, intuition, awareness, and the subconscious, but animals had those traits as well. He’d always struggled with understanding the human condition. Occasionally, he would stop, stare into the void, and wonder about the point of life, the relationship between himself and his life. It was too overwhelming for some, and they took their own lives.

The sky was blue, and the spring was in all its glory, but his mood was sombre. He felt like a fly trapped under a glass. If only he knew how to paint! He could paint the spring before his eyes. And if only he knew how to play the piano and compose music.

5 May 2020

He had married Cristina in Paris on 5 May 1983 at the *mairie* (city hall) in *Place Saint Sulpice*. The marriage had lasted from May to September and was stormy, full of travels and fierce rows. It was a shame because they'd truly loved one another since they were kids, but then it all went to hell.

On 5 May 1821, Napoleon had died on Saint Helena. On 5 May 2020, he was in Tuscany living through the coronavirus nightmare.

Anna's mother, who was home from the hospital after recovering from the virus, had recently done a new nasal swab as part of a check-up and tested positive again. Nobody could make sense of what was happening.

He had begun writing something that he would tweak later. The characters were George Marx, Billy Marx, and Simon Morrison.

7 May 2020

Ginevra was still in Rome, waiting for the results of her swab.

The weather was nice. He could sense that things were opening up and people were getting used to the idea – like a little reawakening – that the world had begun to turn again.

He knew he had to return to London, but he was putting it off because they were very much behind there. He had begun to write something that was a bit of a mess, and he'd also interviewed [Laurence Graff](#), the king of diamonds. Boredom sometimes got the best of him, and he wished he could eat a chocolate ice cream and take a car trip.

8 May 2020

He'd gone to Tarquinia that morning to do some blood tests; the results would be available the next day.

10 May 2020

It was Sunday. *La Stampa* had published his interview with Jeffrey Sachs.

In the meantime, he was trying to write and prepare himself mentally to leave Capalbio for Moncalieri, and this gave him a bit of anxiety. What would he do in Moncalieri? Would they stay there? Would they return to London? What would happen this summer?

Anna was going mad. She could no longer bear being far from her children and wanted to return to Milan.

He took some comfort in the idea of returning to his books, of looking at photographs, but he was a bit frightened of that large home tied to his family.

12 May 2020

Still in the same place and not in a good mood. Ginevra was sad and anxiety-ridden. Barnabò was in the midst of a crisis, Anna was worried.

The coronavirus continued to have a great impact on their lives, in one way or another. They hadn't found the right cure for it. In Italy, mafia bosses were being set free and sent home. It was truly disturbing.

Silvia, a girl from Milan who had been kidnapped in Mogadishu, was released and returned to Italy. She came off of the plane wearing a typical Muslim hijab, and it was said that she'd converted to Islam. Quite a large ransom had been paid for her release. She arrived to a hero's welcome – the Italian Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs awaited her plane – but the situation quickly turned sour and she was attacked by the press.

He had the strange sensation of wanting to leave [Capalbio](#) and wanting to stay at the same time, and was unable to make a decision.

13 May 2020

He was supposed to leave the next day. The weather was terrible, cold, and they didn't leave the house.

The day before had been intense, with his children dealing with serious matters.

Giorgio and Pietro were leaving Moncalieri, and the house would be ready the next day. Should they go right away or not go at all?

The previous evening, they'd watched the long *Lawrence of Arabia* film. It was slow-paced and really wonderful. But Peter O'Toole was very handsome in the film while Lawrence actually wasn't.

Who was the real Lawrence? The one who died in England in a motorcycle accident or the wonderful, handsome Peter O'Toole, with slightly wild, blue eyes? Was Anna Karenina the way Tolstoy described her in the book or like Greta Garbo in the film?

He was still on the fence: to leave or to stay? A friend had told him she loved to dream, and now he was thinking that reality was like an unpleasant, bothersome interruption to dreams.

14 May 2020

Still in Capalbio until the 18th, then Moncalieri.

16 May 2020

It was raining. These were unhappy days. Body aches, silence at home. Barnabò returned and was in a better mood. He didn't feel well though. He was achy and weak. He didn't know if he was happy to leave or not, but his departure was now inevitable. Time for a new chapter to begin.

19 May 2020, Moncalieri

They'd arrived in Moncalieri, to the old family home, and everything seemed strange. After months away, he was finally home, leafing through books in the library. It was very different from Capalbio. They'd gone from a place with no history to a place that held the entire history of his family.

In those May days, the chirping of the birds was like music, and furtive little squirrels scampered by. The roses were in bloom, and that made him think of his mother, his grandparents, and his childhood. He thought about the many times and many seasons he'd spent in that house in his lifetime. He had conflicting emotions: memories, nostalgia, happy moments, sadness. He thought about the death of his mother and how she'd loved that house with such a passion, those plants and the garden. Her red roses were still there. He looked at photographs, books, notebooks. He thought about himself as a boy in that garden and about his children in that garden when they were little.

Upon his arrival, he felt like that was his mother's home, his grandmother's home, and, after twenty years, he thought about how he missed his mother. He would have liked to have seen her there, waiting for him with a thermos full of lemon iced tea and another one with peach iced tea. He wished she were there sitting there at the table. Now he was there in her place. He bustled about amidst the books as he waited for Lapo who was coming with a new girlfriend.

Lapo arrived later with Joanna and Christian. They were wonderfully cheerful, fresh-faced and happy to be there in the garden with them in Moncalieri.

He continued to look through his books and prepare for an interview with Giuseppe Penone. He'd also reread one of his own books called *Envy*.

Paolo Pejrone had come to see the garden. He offered some advice, and they'd decided to plant a persimmon tree, perhaps an apricot tree and some roses. Paolo was well and said he'd return Saturday.

20 May 2020, Moncalieri

Doctor's appointment today.

He'd done a long interview with Giuseppe Penone, which was really lovely. He'd drawn a dog for him and was going to post it to him, maybe to Milan.

Anna was organizing the house. The weather was beautiful. The birds continued to sing, and it made him think of his mother.

The night before, Giorgio had shown a clip from a television documentary about the Holocaust in which his mother – a virtuous woman, a woman of character who was also sweet – was interviewed by Nicola Caracciolo. But it didn't sound like her voice. Giorgio had said, "Maybe we no longer remember her voice!"

22 May 2020

He'd gone to Milan after three months. On television, Milan had looked deserted during the coronavirus. This was the city where the epidemic had spread. The city Manzoni described in *The Betrothed* during the plague. When he got there, it was as if nothing had ever changed. The stores and coffee shops were open. People walked the streets wearing masks on their faces and staying away from one another. He returned to Moncalieri with Anna later in the day.

24 May 2020

He was back in Moncalieri. That morning, Paolo Pejrone had come over to see the garden and talk about plants, and he also had a lot of stories to tell.

Ginevra's film, *Magari (If Only)*, had been released on RaiPlay two days before. He had made sure to let many friends know, and they'd written him messages of enthusiastic praise. The good news was that Ginevra and Giovanni, as well as all of the kids, did not have the coronavirus. It was nice to think that his daughter was an artist who expressed herself in film, and that she had the courage to put herself out there and make her first movie. She was now working on her second production. She hadn't lost sight of her true passion and had had the courage to make *If Only*.

The next day, he and Anna were going to see his son Yaki, Lavinia, and the children.

He was reading Esther Freud's *Hideous Kinky* about how her mother had taken her and her sister to Morocco when they were children. They had no money, it was the nineteen-seventies.

He had tried writing to the tune of the birdsong in Moncalieri. It seemed like the coronavirus had disappeared. They were always using disinfectants, masks, and respecting safe distances, and even if they had to wash their hands many times per day, it seemed the situation was getting better.

There was even talk about opening the borders in June, and he could potentially return to London via Paris. Over the last decade, London had become his city.

Anna was in the garden, telephoning her children and siblings.

Pietro Beccari, the Chairman and CEO of Dior, had called. He talked about the many difficult months he'd spent alone in the office, with all of the boutiques closed. Now, they'd opened up in Germany, Holland, Korea, and China. He asked him, "How are things going? Are people not in the mood to buy?" Beccari responded, "You'd be surprised. In the cities where we've reopened, people have flocked to the boutiques and are buying. Of course, the tourism and luxury industries still need to wait a while." They hung up, happy to have reconnected. It was a nice feeling to get back in touch with people, a bit like after a war: "*we survived.*" But this wasn't exactly the case with the coronavirus. Nobody knew when it would go away, if it would get weaker, or if another wave was coming.

He'd spoken to Dante Ferretti on the phone, and they had set up a time to do an interview.

He'd also talked to Claudio Rugafiori, who wanted to see Ginevra's film and hear all about Lapo and Yaki. He told him about his idea for a new novel and Rugafiori liked it.

26 May 2020

He was still in Moncalieri, alone. Anna had gone to Milan for work. It was strange not to be together after three months.

He prepared to interview Dante Ferretti that afternoon. The pandemic was always in the air even if people were talking about it less. Now he felt at home in Moncalieri.

He'd seen Yaki, Lavinia, and his grandchildren – Leone, Oceano, and Vita – the day before. They hadn't seen one another for three months, but it was as if they'd always been together or not much time had passed. The children had grown, Yaki seemed relaxed, as did Lavinia. It was wonderful to be back together, talk, discuss what they'd done during the quarantine period, what the children were studying. Leone had him read something he'd written for an exam he needed to pass, and he'd chosen "smoke" as the topic. He expressed himself well, in French as well as in Italian. It was wonderful to feel like he had a family.

Anna was happy to go work in the foundry, but she was worried because there wasn't much to do and she didn't want to have to lay off her employees.

Of course, the strange thing, which he'd written about before, was that feeling of coming back together after a war. But the war wasn't over. There were still many battles taking place, and no peace treaty had been signed. Kids wanted to get together. It was summer, and the weather was nice. People wanted to think the worst was behind them. They wanted a normal life, a quiet life.

Young people wanted to go out in large groups, congregate, get together for drinks, and the authorities were concerned. A friend called and said that he and his son were well, but his daughter and the cleaning lady had had the virus, though they were better now. He said that he was doing well in London and asked when he'd be coming back.

27 May 2020

He met with Massimo Giannini, the new editor-in-chief of *La Stampa*, for the first time. There was nobody at the entrance of the newspaper, just two guards with masks. They called the receptionist who came out, wearing a mask, to get him. The editor-in-chief also wore a mask. They spoke for almost an hour about publishing, newspapers, their careers, Italian politics, and the Italian left, then they said their goodbyes and promised to stay in touch.

Afterward, his son Yaki and the grandchildren had come over. They looked around the garden, the park, and the house. Yaki was happy to walk through the park and garden with his children; it reminded him of his childhood and adolescence. The children were in good spirits and asked questions. Then he went home with them, riding in the car with Leone who asked a thousand questions about Anna, how he'd met her and the kind of work she did.

That afternoon, he read and went back to work on his new book, introducing a new character named Louise. Paolo called from Switzerland, and they spoke of their respective family matters.

He later spoke to Paolo Colombo who was on a train to Paris.

28 May 2020, Milan

He was preparing to interview Thaddaeus Ropac in Milan.

That evening, he and Anna went to dinner at the Liechtensteins. He'd left the books he was reading in Turin.

29 May 2020, Milan

He was preparing to leave for Rome.

That evening Giorgio had come to see him and seemed to be doing well.

A friend of his from Turin, an antiques dealer, had taken him to see a small desk, and he liked it because it was small and minimalist, perfect for writing. Giorgio was on his way, and he felt like reading Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*, or maybe something else like Stendhal's *Rome, Naples, and Florence*. He'd also found a book D. H. Lawrence wrote about Italy.

Ottone had arrived. The young man, Anna's youngest child, talked about his studies, the cinema, and his time spent in Bellagio. Professor Magrini hadn't come because he had to race to Policlinico where a friend of his had been diagnosed with pneumonia. She possibly had the coronavirus.

He was leaving for Rome, to stay at the Hotel Locarno, and then he'd go back to Capalbio. He didn't want to stay in the city because the atmosphere was unpleasant. All of the coffee bars and shops made you use hand sanitizer and masks. It was real life but surreal, everything like before but nothing like before. Thaddaeus Ropac was optimistic about the art markets making a comeback. Collectors – who were so used to buying, trading, visiting exhibitions and fairs, galleries and auctions – were getting antsy. Ropac was putting on an exhibition in Salzburg in the summer. An Anselm Kiefer show in July. He said that artists had been very focused during the pandemic, working alone in their studios, not travelling and with no distractions. It was different for a writer.

The Plague, Camus' novel that was wildly popular during the pandemic, was not necessarily his best work.

1 June 2020, Capalbio

He'd spent a few days in Rome. There wasn't much traffic, and you could drive around day or night and always find parking. Everyone wore masks. He'd seen his friend Andrea, and they'd spoken about newspapers and politics. He had lunch at Dino's house, and they talked about the Tirelli costume makers who were all out of work, living off of redundancy funds. They spoke about their lives, like the friends they were.

They went to Marilù's to celebrate Anna's birthday, and her brothers and sisters-in-law were there. The day after, they went to a restaurant, Il Bolognese, for the first time, in Piazza del Popolo. It felt strange and was crowded. In the afternoon, he went to the editorial offices of *La Repubblica* to see Maurizio Molinari, the new editor-in-chief who had previously been his editor at *La Stampa*. They spoke about the newspaper and the new GEDI editorial group. Molinari asked him if he might want to do an online feature on books. He seemed to be doing well in his new editor-in-chief role. The morning of the 1st, he'd gone to Via della Conciliazione to interview Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia about topics like poverty, the role of religion and prayer, and on racism and other important matters. They hadn't seen one another for a long time, and it was nice to reconnect. He returned to Capalbio in the evening, to yet another house, which was a strange feeling; he felt a bit out of sorts. Then he went to dinner with Ginevra, Giovanni, and his

grandchildren, a warm, loving atmosphere. They spoke about everything, and the children were really getting big.

2 June 2020, Capalbio

He'd opened the house back up.

He left for Rome to do an interview and go to the commemorative mass for Anna's father, Gaetano, who had died of the coronavirus two months before.

Before going to sleep, he read a few pages on Etruscan Italy written by D. H. Lawrence.

It was strange to be in Capalbio, in another house, very similar but different. He spoke to Carol on the telephone and she was not doing well. She was in Cannes having a very difficult time. He was supposed to have returned to Rome in the evening with Ottone, but Ottone was possibly coming the day after instead.

3 June 2020

He returned home alone and tried to tidy up. He had an idea for a new book, but he needed to correct *Inghe*, which was still a first draft.

The weather was wonderful. Claudio Rugafiori had taken a fall, and he was in pain but hadn't broken anything. He suggested he reread Dostoevsky's *The Raw Youth* or *Notes from Underground* to understand how to resolve the issue of the first and third person.

It was strange to get back to normal life while wearing masks and gloves. It was unclear when they'd be able to travel, when quarantine would end, when they could get together with people normally. They were stuck between limbo and normality. People had begun to make tentative plans, to spend a bit of money and to start going back into stores.

Daniele called from the United States and painted a disastrous picture. What was happening there was terrifying: the racially-motivated violence, Trump quoting the bible and railing against gun control. Trump had managed to bring out the worst in a country that was both loved and hated.

What would happen to the world? This is what everyone was wondering. Everything had been at a standstill for three months. Rocco Forte, who owned many hotels, said that all of his properties were closed and hadn't earned a cent in three months. This had never happened. Many jobs were protected by various redundancy funds and other forms of aid. But how long could it last? In the meantime, the mafia had certainly made the most of the situation, by offering to bail people out.

But what would it want in exchange? It wasn't clear what was happening in Italy, but the country's politics were a disaster. The picture was bleak and sad on both the left and right, and the television programmes were only making the terrible climate of fear worse. This could only lead to violence and very dangerous situations. Before, all anyone discussed was the coronavirus, and now, talk had turned to the economy, poverty, dire circumstances, and unemployment.

Today, Anna was coming with Ottone and her other children. Ginevra had gone to Rome for a few days.

Wash Your Hands

by Alain Elkann

8 June 2020, Capalbio

They had been celebrating Giorgio's seventieth birthday for the last few days. Some of the people who gathered to honour him wore masks while others didn't. They hadn't seen one another for more than two months, and they spoke about what they'd done during the pandemic, made small talk about this and that, "So, you were saying..."

Allegra and Roberto had come up from Naples and were buzzy and cheerful. They came with two wonderful gifts: Allegra brought two dogs she'd embroidered herself, and Roberto brought a custom-made umbrella from Naples. Cousins Ernesto and Arturo had also come for Giorgio, from Turin, along with children, grandchildren, and friends.

He'd spent a long time on the phone the night before with Leone to correct a final thesis paper that needed to be turned in today.

It was the beginning of a strange week. It was like being on holiday after many days trapped in the house. Everything was now open, but the only difference was that people were wearing masks.

He felt a bit sad, a bit useless. That pseudo-normal life, which was not at all normal, had him feeling off kilter. He couldn't even think about what was happening in the United States. It was very well possible that the agitation in the air could lead to the defeat of populists in the United States and Europe. He couldn't imagine Trump being re-elected president. He had certainly ruined the reputation of the United States in recent years.

He knew that what he was writing was all over the place, but it just went to show that he was uneasy, not at peace. He tried to write and correct *Inghe*, the novel he'd finished in a single draft before leaving London. He was also working on another novel that was tentatively entitled // *funambolo (The Tightrope Walker)*.

14 June 2020

Today was his mother's birthday. She would have been ninety-eight. He thought about her every so often but not quite enough. She'd left the house in Moncalieri to him and Giorgio, and they tried to maintain it as best as they could, though it was often a source of contention. Despite that, he and Giorgio were close, as were their children, and that was the most important thing.

Summer had arrived in Capalbio and neighbours of all ages were entirely too social, as if they felt the need to get together and celebrate after a war. Unfortunately, the war wasn't over, and that sense of euphoria could very well lead to a return of the virus because nobody was taking precautions.

He tried to work, but he was distracted, ill at ease because this situation had turned his life upside down. He needed and wanted to return to his home in London, but he didn't want to have to quarantine when he arrived, so he waited. He was tired of that semi-holiday state, of not knowing what would happen. There was a sense of discontentment he could not shake. He wasn't reading much and had little desire to read. It wasn't good for his mental state to be around a lot of people who weren't wearing masks and who had decided to live their lives normally. This is why he wasn't able to write in his diary. It seemed like there wasn't much to say.

Marco Brambilla had come by a few days before. They didn't speak very much, chatting about the same old things: what went through their minds during the coronavirus, their fears, their projects, the uncertainty of the future.

16 June 2020, Capalbio

Giulio Giorello had died due to complications from the coronavirus, that insidious bastard of a disease that had killed friends and left so much damage in its wake around the world. He wanted to scream, "Enough!" So many people were gone: Giulio Giorello, Germano Celant, Nicola Caracciolo, Gaetano Rebecchini, and Giuseppe Gazzoni, just to name a few great Italians struck down by the coronavirus. It was all too sad.

He'd voted that day for Sandro Veronesi's *Il Colibrì* for the Strega Prize. It was a shame that he won for a second time, but that was *the* book, and there wasn't much competition. However, Veronesi was a true writer. Volponi had also won the Strega Prize twice so there was a precedent. Having said that, there was actually one keen competitor named Carofiglio, though he was a magistrate and not strictly a writer like Sandro was.

There were a lot of young people at the house. Giacomo was there for two days, and this made him happy. They were all in the dining room studying online.

The day before, there'd been the board meeting for the LAPS Foundation. Lapo had done a great job, explaining his project brilliantly. The various board members all made interesting speeches. Afterward, he'd participated in an email query session with students from Cornell University who were currently studying his novel *I soldi devono restare in famiglia*. They asked him questions about how he wrote, about Italian Jews, Jewish writers, and the relationship between Jews from the diaspora and Israeli Jews. It had been interesting.

He'd later spoken with Beatrice Masini to talk about his book *Una giornata*, which was to come out in the autumn.

The weather was beautiful, but he spent the morning working. Then he went out for a bit with his grandson Giacomo who had a lot of fun driving the golf cart. They went to the beach and took a walk and Giacomo knew the names of all of the birds and many other things. They stopped to look out at the sea and walked through a big field of sunflowers – such amazing flowers – as they returned home. The nature in the Mediterranean was truly a wonderful thing. While on the beach, he'd read a few pages of Thomas Mann's diary from 1933 to 1939.

Mann travelled a lot, took a lot of pills, and complained of stomach-aches and nervous conditions. He'd seen Huxley in America and the director Lubitsch. He spoke of the horrors of Hitler's Germany and how weak Mussolini was.

Roberto and Allegra were to arrive that evening. Despite the cheerful atmosphere in the house with so many young people, he continued to think about poor Giulio Giorello.

17 June 2020

They were still being given ambiguous, contrasting information about the coronavirus. China, England, the United States, Germany. What a nightmare!

Tomorrow, he was heading to Moncalieri and then perhaps to Switzerland for some doctors' appointments and to see his grandchildren.

He was trying to correct *Inghe*, and he'd taken a break from writing about the characters Viky and Simon in *Il funambolo* for a few days. But he felt like he might get back to them in the afternoon.

Marco Delogu was to come visit in the afternoon. Delogu was in the running to head up the Istituto di Cultura in New York. He would certainly do a good job. Finotti had called him to tell him he was also one of the three candidates up for the job. The final decision would be taken by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was currently Di Maio...!

He had been taking half of a tranquilizer pill every day because he was feeling a bit melancholy, especially in the morning. Everything was seemingly normal but that wasn't really the case. This bothersome pandemic was always there in the background. He asked David if he'd begun to go back out in London, and he said no; there were two-hundred new deaths. Life continued on in a sense but was still on hold. The only thing that had changed is that he'd begun to see people again, had begun to talk about other things. He continued reading Thomas Mann's diaries, and that interested him because he spoke about his daily life.

Lapo was in Lisbon and very busy with his foundation, but he didn't feel completely at peace.

20 June 2020

It was the first day of summer. The longest and saddest day because the days would now begin getting shorter. He was in Moncalieri with Anna. He'd seen Jaki, Lavinia, and the children. They'd bought a new dog. He hadn't done anything special that day, and he still had moments of sadness.

22 June 2020

It was a Monday. He began preparing for some small trips. He didn't know what was making him feel so down, but he was unable to work so he focused on small practical matters. He'd organized all of his books and notebooks the day before in the Moncalieri house. Anna helped him quite a bit as she always did. It would take another lifetime to get through all of the books he wanted to read: Freud, Camus, the French Revolution, Mann's diaries and books, Canetti's *Auto da Fè*. But he couldn't concentrate. He was constantly anxious about the coronavirus that was all around them, preventing them from being able to fully relax, forcing them to proceed with caution in returning to normal life.

26 June 2020

He had finally returned to Capalbio after trips to Moncalieri, Geneva, and Milan. In a strange way, Capalbio had sort of become their home after the pandemic. He'd taken care of various family and practical matters during his trips, and had gone to the dentist. He read a little, did an interview, wrote a few pages for the new project focused on Viky and Simon, and he'd almost finished with *Inghe*, the novel he was correcting.

Summer had arrived in Capalbio, bringing heat and mosquitoes with it, and the wheat in front of the house was growing, making for amazing views.

He saw Brigitte in Geneva, and it was a warm, sweet encounter. She seemed to be in fine form, and they'd talked about family matters. The grandchildren were with them in Moncalieri and Turin, and Anna was struck by how much they knew and their stories and opinions.

Lapo was in Spain, continuously immersed in his charity initiatives. But he was to return to Italy on 30 June. He seemed very busy and was still with Joan.

When they'd returned to Capalbio the night before, they'd run into Giuliano and Salma, whom he hadn't seen in a long time, in a restaurant. It was a pleasure to see them again.

The new director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in New York was to be chosen any day now. He had several friends in the running. May the best one win!

Yet New York seemed so far away. Upon their return to Capalbio, he'd spoken with Anna about the strange adventure they'd had over those months and they were still in the midst of it, still

experiencing the after effects and sense of unease. The coronavirus would go down in the history books. Nobody knew how long it would last or what form it would take, so they continued to live in this pseudo-home with constant uncertainty. There were new outbreaks of the infection here and there. Some countries were seeing the virus return in a big way. The economy was a disaster because the uncertainty had paralyzed many things and changed everyone's lives. They'd all become used to living isolated from one another, a virtual life tied to the computer and with relationships conducted over the phone. What would life be like afterward? How would young people be able to study? What world would they live in? Would there be other wars? Other illnesses? Would Trump finally be voted out? He shuddered to think about Trump continuing to be in charge of the American military. What was certain is that people were talking, trying to understand, young people were losing jobs and trying to find another one or cobble together work. The coronavirus had brought the world to a halt. A world at a standstill, forced to reflect, to rethink its models, to look to nature. There had also been some horrible racist episodes in the United States, but, unfortunately, that was nothing new. What was new is that they didn't know what would happen. Would things be like before? Different than before? Would the world be better or worse?

His friend Patrick had written, "Heaven or hell?" Who knew! The one thing that was certain, was that they'd all understood just how insignificant they were when faced with the power of nature.

The weather was beautiful, an incredibly clear day. He could hear the birds, the sky was bright blue, the wheat fields yellow, and beyond that, the dunes, the sea.

Anna was making a big effort to get back on track with work, to take care of her children and her family. Ginevra was about to tour Italy to present her film "*If Only*" in theatres in Turin, Milan, Parma, Modena, and Bologna...

He hoped he'd be able to go to Milan in early July for a public conference, an evening event with Amos Gitai during the Milanesiana festival to talk about the death of Rabin. He was also to meet with Beatrice in Milan to talk about preparations for the launch of his novel *Una giornata*. Then he hoped to go Paris and London to see what was left of his previous life, his house, the daily routine that he'd become accustomed to these last few years. Was it possible to get back to the same life with a sense of good cheer and optimism, with a vaccine on the horizon, or would everything be different?

So, for the moment, this diary will take a hiatus, to see what happens over the summer. The long Capalbio chapter, which began in March and finished in early July, is coming to a close. There sits a house in a big field near a small village that was the centre of the world for months, our world, our work, and our personal relationships. It was an unexpected time, extraordinary, humane, and different, a time in which nature saved us. Nature, the sun, the air, and the wind gave us the energy to continue on day after day.